

## ■ The Warsaw Uprising of 1944

At 5pm on August 1, 1944 (at the so-called “W” hour), the Home Army launched its uprising against the German occupier in the Polish capital of Warsaw. Suppressed after 63 days of heroic fighting, the Warsaw Uprising has since developed a nearly cult following in Poland. A debate on the decision to go ahead with the Uprising, which has been ongoing since 1944 amidst intense emotions, cannot obscure the tragedy of the insurgents and especially the tragic fates that befell the city’s civilian population. This may well have been the most harrowing experience that Poles lived through during the Second World War. In any case, the desire to retaliate against the occupier after the 1767 days that elapsed between the time the Germans first invaded the city and the time the uprising broke out is fully understandable.

Nobody questions the glory earned by the insurgents who for two grueling months fought a lone battle for the city’s liberation, while - from as early as mid-September - the Red Army stood idly by on the right bank of the Vistula River, the Soviet Headquarters long obstructing all aid, even in the form of Allied air raids to support the insurgents. To this day, the sheer extent of the crimes and atrocities committed by the German occupiers in the process of quashing the Uprising is terrifying.

The outbreak of the Uprising gave Hitler an excuse to obliterate the city. Although the insurgents (whose numbers peaked at 40,000) succeeded in taking over most of the city within days despite being poorly armed, by August 5 the Germans took the initiative and began to gradually push the insurgents out of one neighborhood after another.

From day one, the Germans showed utmost brutality suppressing the Uprising, turning their greatest fury against the civilian population. An estimated 150-170 thousand Warsaw residents perished at the hands of the Germans during that time. Earlier estimates held the death toll to have reached as high as 200,000. The slaughter of the Warsaw district of Wola, which lasted but a few days and which saw the Germans brutally murder ca. 50-60 thousand in the early August of 1944, may well be the most horrific episode of the Warsaw tragedy. German atrocities against the insurgents and the civilian population were committed while conquering the successive resisting districts of Warsaw, and especially the Old Town (the last Old Town defenders fled to the Śródmieście district via the city’s sewer network). Not even the wounded or hospital patients were spared, the people seeking refuge in churches were also murdered.

After the insurgents capitulated and the remaining civilians were evacuated from the ruins of Warsaw (approx. 500,000, 165,000 of whom ended up as forced laborers in the Reich while some transported off to concentration camps), special German units (Sprengkommandos) began to systematically demolish the city’s buildings. Although completely irrational for the war effort, this action is another example of the ferocity



with which the German occupiers engaged in the annihilation of Warsaw. An estimated 80% or so of the city's buildings were destroyed, 90% of which were a historic building stock. The Polish culture irretrievably lost numerous works of art as well as some of its archives and book collections.

It is hard to argue with the statement by former President Lech Kaczyński in a letter to the attendees of a 2007 scientific conference, which read that all this made the Warsaw Uprising “the most painful and difficult part of history and one constantly present in reflections on Polish-German relations in the 20th century”.

All this notwithstanding, the Warsaw Uprising remains poorly known in Germany, even though the German historian Hanns von Krannhals (who, by the way, was also a former member of the NSDAP and an anti-Polish propagandist during the war) published in Germany in 1962 a thorough study of the military aspects of the Warsaw Uprising. The fact of the matter is that the study mainly attracted the interest of experts. Poland was outraged at the career of “the Wola executioner” SS-Gruppenführer Heinz Reinefarth, who became mayor of the city of Westerland in 1951-1967 and member of the Schleswig-Holstein Landtag in 1958-1967, and who was never held accountable for his crimes. It was not until 2014 that Westerland's Landtag and City Council expressed regret over this fact.

For decades, many Germans thought of the Warsaw Uprising as merely an episode in the history of World War II that was not unlike many others. In 1994, Poles were disconcerted to hear the statement of the then federal president Roman Herzog who - ahead of his arrival in Poland for a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Uprising - confused the Warsaw Uprising with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. In the following years, other leading German politicians (Chancellor Gerhard Schröder on the 60th anniversary and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas in 2019) visited Poland for anniversary celebrations. The speeches they delivered to mark the occasion were listened to attentively in Poland. Despite prior commitments, the effort to erect a memorial to the Polish victims of the war and the German occupation in Berlin (the so-called Polendekmal) continues to run into hurdles and spark controversy, causing much bewilderment and even dismay in Poland.

Written by Prof. dr hab. Stanisław Zerko