A comment on The Pianist

Alex Steiner
22 February 2003

I enjoyed reading Fred Mazelis's review of *The Pianist*. My reaction was similar to that of the reviewer. I found the movie very moving because it told the story of the destruction of the Jews of Warsaw pretty much the way it happened without the noxious Hollywood melodrama that Spielberg employed in *Schindler's List*. Perhaps because I am also a Polish Jew—one whose parents survived the Holocaust—I particularly appreciated Polanski's efforts to depict the complexity of Polish society—that it included elements of historical anti-Semitism as well as a modern secular European culture that rejected such backwardness. This depiction contrasts with the one-dimensional anti-Polish stereotype of the congenital anti-Semite one sometimes encounters in Zionist circles (not dissimilar to the view of Germans as all equally accomplices of Hitler a la Goldhagen) as well as the equally false image of the heroic Poles propagated by Polish nationalists.

I was also struck by the relative absence of a political perspective and wondered if this was due to Szpilman's memoir—which I have not read—or Polanski's artistic direction. Polanski's should certainly be given credit for depicting the Jews of Warsaw not as simply apolitical victims or contrariwise as (apolitical) heroes, but as real men and women whose class relations and political sympathies are expressed in their behavior during the Nazi scourge. Confirmation of the complex web of contradictory tendencies among Polish Jews is available from any number of sources, but one that I just happened to find is from the book *Fighting Warsaw*, by Stefan Korbonski (Minerva Press, 1956). The author was a leader of the Polish Underground Government in Warsaw during the war, and although he later became a spokesman for the anticommunist Assembly of Captive European Nations, his memoirs from the war period are very credible. He recounts how he met an old lawyer colleague who was then in the Jewish ghetto. This took place in the one venue where Jews and Poles were still allowed to mingle in Warsaw, in the District Court in Leszno that had a separate entrance from the Jewish side and another one from the "Aryan" side. He set out there in the hope of getting some news from the ghetto and by chance found his old friend Rozenstat who told him the following:

"Imagine our life with its two extremes! On the one hand, a group of fanatical chauvinists, who say that for the first time in a thousand years the Jews have regained something in the nature of independence, with their own government and territory, though under the protection of a foreign power. They rejoice in the Ghetto self-government and in the institutions run by the Jews, and they imagine they are nearer a Jewish State. On the other hand, scum of the worst kind are coming to the surface who think realistically and anticipate a speedy end. The Jewish police would sell their fathers and mothers to the Germans to survive, and to have a chance of saving their skins. Between the two extremes are the mass of resigned and wretched people, who are daily dying in their hundreds from hunger and disease."

One giant blind spot in the movie and I suppose in the memoirs of Szpilman as well (though it is easy to see why Szpilman would be reticent to discuss the role of the Red Army in his memoir written in Soviet-occupied Poland in 1946) was the deafening silence in regard to the role of the Soviet Army as the Uprising ensued. As Szpilman's experiences during the Warsaw Uprising cover the last and most dramatic part of the movie, it struck me immediately that we are told nothing of the political and historical context within which this heroic and tragic event unfolded. From the film we know nothing about the reasons for the Uprising, its timing, the role of the Soviet Army at the time of the rising, or much of anything else. Of course we cannot criticize Szpilman for this, as he was recounting events from a perspective of the enforced isolation of a desperate fugitive from the Nazi authorities. But we might have expected a bit more from Polanski's reenactment of Szpilman's story.

The Uprising was in the first place encouraged by radio broadcasts emanating from Moscow. The timing of the Uprising coincided with the approach of the Red Army. When the Uprising began, in July of 1944, Soviet troops were on the other side of the Vistula River no more than a few miles from the heart of the fighting. But Stalin was above all fearful that that armed Polish masses that had initially routed the Nazis would enflame Soviet soldiers with the spirit of revolution. He therefore gave orders to the Army to cease hostilities against the Nazis, allowing the latter enough time to recuperate and mass their forces for a deadly counterstrike at the badly outnumbered and outgunned Polish partisans. Stalin was no doubt also looking ahead to the future Soviet occupation of Poland. A homegrown and militant partisan movement was an obstacle that had to be removed. The vicious cynic that he was, Stalin welcomed the opportunity to allow Hitler to do his dirty work for him by destroying the Polish partisan movement prior to a Soviet occupation of Warsaw.

Furthermore, the Polish Stalinists played practically no role in the Uprising. They were in any case a tiny part of the underground movement, having been discredited in the early days of the war by Stalin's alliance with Hitler in the period 1939-1941. Prior to the war, Stalin gave Hitler a present by dissolving the Polish Communist Party. It was only reconstituted as the Polish Workers Party following Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. During the period of the Stalin-Hitler pact, Soviet authorities closely cooperated with the Nazis and readily supplied the latter with intelligence against the Polish underground movement. Korbonski, in his memoirs, also relates one of the most shameful acts carried out by Stalin in this period—the forcible transfer of thousands of German Communists who had taken refuge in the Soviet Union into the waiting hands of their Nazi executioners. He writes that the Polish underground learned from informers among Polish prison guards:

"The Gestapo are using Polish prisons to house transports of prisoners en route from Russia to Germany. These people, who talk German, are trying to establish contacts with the outside world; they say they are German Communists who escaped to Russia after Hitler came to power. Now the Soviets are handing them over to Hitler"

Even though Korbonski was an anticommunist, he at first did not believe these reports. He writes:

"I knew through our underground intelligence that close cooperation existed between the NKVD and the Gestapo, inter alia with regard to the exchange of information and evidenced concerning the Polish underground, which led to arrests; but that Communists should hand over to Hitler their fellow Communists I could not believe.... After the war many documents were brought to light confirming the truth of that

© World Socialist Web Site

monstrous iniquity. A few German Communists who, like Margarete Buber, miraculously survived the hell of German concentration camps, have written books in which they fully confirm the facts."

Even after Hitler broke the nonaggression pact and invaded the Soviet Union, the Stalinists continued to sabotage the underground partisan movement. After the Katyn massacre (an infamous atrocity in which the cream of the Polish officer corps were assassinated by Stalin) was discovered and denounced by the Polish government-in-exile, the Soviet Union broke off all relations with the Polish underground. The same deadly methods employed in Spain (during the Spanish Civil War) were imported into Poland—the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, had infiltrated agents into Warsaw who were responsible for liquidating key members of the Polish underground. Korbonski relates the following incident:

"One day, my eighteen-year-old contact-girl, Ela ... was sent to the hideout of the 'Cripple', a member of the Intelligence Service of the Government Plenipotentiary's office in Poznan Street, and vanished without a trace; just as, with one exception, everybody else vanished who went there on that day. The one who came back told us later that after knocking in the prearranged way, the door opened and she found herself facing several civilians armed with revolvers, who took her into the room where the 'Cripple', Ela, and several other people were being detained. To her amazement, the civilians were not Germans, and the man who cross-examined her spoke to his companions in Russian. She succeeded, cleverly, in explaining away her visit to the house.... All the others, including my contact Ela, and the 'Cripple', disappeared forever; they were most probably taken out of town and murdered. Subsequent investigations revealed that this action was carried out by the Russian NKVD at a moment when our struggle against the common German enemy was at its highest peak."

These crimes, as terrible as they were, pale in comparison to the enormity of the betrayal enacted by Stalin during the Warsaw Uprising. The Soviet Army sat for a period of weeks and did nothing while the Nazis routed the Polish partisans and then burned every square inch of Warsaw following in the footsteps of the destruction of Carthage by the Romans. Korbonski relates how at one point early in the Uprising, a Soviet intelligence official sought to assist the partisans:

"An early sensation was the arrival of a Captain of the Soviet Intelligence Service, Constantin Kalugin, who reported to the High Command of the Rising. On August 5 he sent, via London, a telegram to Stalin asking for help. I also read his appeal (on the underground radio) to German units formed of Soviet soldiers who were taken prisoners-of-war, urging them not to take part in the fighting against the Rising under threat of death. The telegram Kalugin sent to Stalin received no reply, and when he swam across the Vistula towards the end of the Rising and reached Rokossowski (a Russian Marshal in command of the advancing Soviet army), all trace of him was lost. He probably paid with his life for that telegram in which he seemed to oppose Stalin's plans."

Korbonski further relates how at one point the Soviet air force dropped supplies to the partisans, but this was purely a propaganda stunt to impress the allies in London and Washington. Their supplies were dropped without parachutes and simply were crushed beyond recognition when they hit the ground, making them completely useless.

He sums up his judgment of the role of the Soviet Army in the following words:

"The Warsaw Rising is often described as the most heroic episode of the last war. The Soviets conduct during the Rising, on the other hand, should be branded as the greatest crime of the war, a worse crime even than Katyn, for two hundred thousand men, women and children paid for it with their lives."

A final verdict on the Warsaw Uprising was proclaimed in the journal of the international Trotskyist movement, the*Fourth International*. In the August 1944 issue, the editors wrote:

"As the Red Army approached the gates of Warsaw, the embattled workers gave renewed evidence of this irrepressible determination. Despite five years of bloody Nazi repression, they have arisen again with arms in hand to challenge the oppressor. In an unequal battle, with bare hands so to speak, they seized one section of the city after another. The German forces of occupation were struck with panic and began to evacuate, in the expectation that the assault of the Red Army would be coordinated with the revolt from within. But instead of increasing in intensity, the attack of the Red Army was brought to a standstill. The Nazi military took renewed heart. The heroic workers of Warsaw are being left to battle alone."

"By this latest treachery, the Kremlin oligarchy is underlining and emphasizing the counterrevolutionary role it means to play in Poland. Taking a page out of the tactics of Anglo-American imperialism in Italy, the Stalinist bureaucracy leaves the insurgent proletariat to be crushed by the retreating Nazis. It attempts to cover up this latest betrayal by throwing sand in the eyes of the masses of the world who are eagerly following the struggle. After first denying the very existence of the revolt in the city, and then pooh-poohing it as a mere machination of Polish reactionaries to embarrass the Red Army, it is now issuing statements through the press agency Tass to the effect that the London 'government-in-exile' is alone responsible for the isolation of the embattled workers of Warsaw...

"At the gates of Warsaw, Stalin is being forced to appear in his whole reactionary nakedness before the entire world...

"By his own action Stalin has taught the masses of Poland that they can expect only a stab in the back from the counterrevolutionary gang in the Kremlin."

I recall this nearly forgotten page out of the Second World War not to denigrate Polanski's achievement, which I think is considerable. Yet our enthusiasm for Polanski's (and Szpilman's) artistry and honesty should not be permitted to help us once more forget what happened. We still have not seen a depiction of these events that can deal honestly with the real history.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site