Sixty-five years since the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Harvey Thompson
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This week marks 65 years since the uprising by the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto against the attempt by the Nazis to transport the remaining Jewish population of the Polish capital to the Treblinka death camp.

Below we repost the article by Harvey Thompson written on the 60th anniversary of the uprising.

As on previous such anniversaries, this imperishable episode in the struggle against fascism was marked this year by official ceremonies in which the leading participants shared far more in common with those who razed the ghetto than those who resisted.

Hosting the ceremonies in Warsaw Tuesday was Polish President Lech Kaczynski, whose political career, along with that of his twin brother and former prime minister Jaroslav, has been closely bound up with the support of openly anti-Semitic organizations.

The guest of honor was Israeli President Shimon Peres, who has presided over the brutal collective punishment of 1.5 million Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, sealed off by the Israeli military, denied adequate food, water and fuel and subjected to repeated air strikes and armed incursions that have killed and wounded hundreds of men, women and children.

Peres used his presence at the commemoration to praise Israel's ties to the Polish government, describing it as a "strategic relationship." Indeed, Warsaw has concluded major arms deals with Israel involving missiles, armored vehicles and unmanned drones, which have been used by Polish forces participating in the US-NATO war in Afghanistan.

Also attending as a representative of the US government was Washington's Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, an official intimately involved in the Bush administration's adoption of torture as a state policy.

Alongside this official ceremony, Marek Edelman, a surviving commander of the young Jewish fighters who resisted the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto, recalled their struggle. "We knew that the struggle was doomed, but it showed the world that there is resistance against the Nazis, that you can fight the Nazis," he told the Associated Press. "It was worth it, even at the price of the fighters' lives."

People "have to be educated from childhood, from kindergarten, that there should be no hatred," he said. "They have to be shown that all people are the same, that skin color, race, religion don't matter. We have only one life and we must not murder each other. We see the sun only once."

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"... The decline of capitalism has suspended the Jews between heaven and earth." [1]

The Warsaw Ghetto uprising during World War II was a seminal experience for European Jewry, as well as for millions throughout the occupied continent, and occurred at a crucial turning point in the war.

By the end of 1940, the Nazi SS had rounded up around 450,000 Jews in the Polish capital of Warsaw and sealed them off from the rest of the city behind a high perimeter brick wall, 10 feet high and 11 miles long. The designated area, which was no more than two-and-a-half miles long and a mile wide and contained the medieval ghetto, previously housed just 160,000 people.

The Jews in the ghetto were forced to live in chronic overcrowding, with many families inhabiting a single house. Food was also scarce for the population of nearly half a million. At least 100,000 tried to survive on no more than a bowl of soup a day, often boiled from straw. The sanitation system soon collapsed, and disease became rampant. By March 1942, it is estimated that around 5,000 people were dying each month from disease and malnutrition. Anyone attempting to leave the enclosure was shot on sight. The only employment was in the armament factories.

In the summer of 1942, the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, ordered that the Jews be "resettled"—the termed employed by official Nazi propaganda to describe the mass transportation to the gas chambers—in this case to Treblinka.

By early 1943 there were only 60,000 left in the ghetto. The rest had either perished through starvation and disease or had already been transported to their deaths.

When Himmler discovered that 60,000 Jews still survived inside the ghetto he ordered that the final "resettlement" be completed by February 15. But by this stage, there had been dramatic setbacks for the Nazi war machine on the eastern front. The heavy defeat of the German Army outside Stalingrad and the consequent retreats throughout southern Russia, combined with the severe Russian winter, placed an enormous strain on the transportation facilities of the Third Reich. Himmler's orders would have to wait.

In the intervening months, news from the outside world was beginning to filter into the Jewish ghettos (in total, the Nazis established 356 ghettos in Poland, the Soviet Union, the Baltic States, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary before the end of the war), and the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto started to learn of the real fate of their "resettled" loved ones. This led many to conclude that resistance must be mounted at all costs. Moreover, news of the military defeats of the German Army to the east also held out the imminent possibility of liberation by the advancing Red Army.

Intelligence of Hitler's *Final Solution* had already reached the West, but the official position in both London and Washington was to play down the reports. On April 19, 1943—the same day as the Nazi troops entered the Warsaw Ghetto—British and American delegates began a 12-day conference at an exclusive resort on the island of Bermuda, supposedly to consider what the two powers could do to help the Jews of Europe. Very little, they concluded.

Despite having much in common with Jewish ghettos elsewhere, the Warsaw ghetto had significant differences that help explain its eventual ability to produce a concerted resistance.

The ghettos throughout the Reich territory were administered by a Judenrat (Jewish council), which acted as a steady source of informants and active collaborators for the Nazi authorities. With the deportations and terminal decline of the populations of the ghettos, the Judenrat system

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eventually collapsed, as many of its members too began to perish. With no recognizable internal organization to replace it, this created an almost complete atomization within the dwindling ghettos.

But in Warsaw, home to the largest Jewish community in Europe, there was an undercurrent of political organizations that managed to survive. This diverse, but persistent heritage is roughly outlined by one historical study covering the years between the coming to power of the Nazis and the end of the war:

"In Warsaw, the Polish capital and centre of all Polish underground organizations, some of the established Jewish parties continued to maintain a Jewish political presence despite the decimation of their ranks. A handful of surviving veteran leaders of the central committees of the Bund, General Zionists and both Right and Left Labor Zionists, living on the 'Aryan' side under false identities, carried on. They had the responsibilities to sustain their parties and render whatever assistance could be given to the beleaguered Jews in the territory that had made up Poland." [2]

Out of various political parties and youth organizations in the ghetto, several combat groups were formed. The most prominent was ZOB (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa/Jewish Combat Organization) that was later joined by the Bund and Jewish Communist workers of the PPR (Polish Workers Party—the reconstituted Stalinist Polish Communist Party which had been dissolved by Stalin in 1939 to accommodate his temporary pact with Hitler). ZOB put out leaflets refuting Nazi propaganda, as well as directing much of the fighting during the crucial weeks.

"The mimeograph machine and the gun became the tools of leadership, the means by which the ZKK [political arm of ZOB] and ZOB established their legitimacy. ZOB's leaflets furnished the ghetto Jews with an interpretation of the events they were witness to, explaining and uncovering German duplicity and trickery. They helped the populace to evolve a unified response to their predicament, as defined by ZOB. ZOB's guns executed Jewish traitors and Gestapo agents, thus enforcing its authority in the ghetto and demonstrating unequivocally that it had become the ghetto's defender against its internal and external enemies." [3]

In January 1943, following a military incursion into the ghetto by Nazi forces (known as the Aktion), which came under fire from ZOB fighters, the Warsaw ghetto was much reduced in size by the authorities. It now comprised an area of 1,000 by 300 yards (roughly the same dimensions in meters). The survivors of the ghetto knew they didn't have much time. They hurriedly set about constructing fortified positions in the sewers, cellars and vaults which honeycombed the entire ghetto. The embattled Jews had few armaments, mainly pistols and rifles, homemade grenades and a collection of machine guns smuggled in from the armaments factories.

By April it was decided that the Warsaw ghetto would be cleared out in a "special action" lasting three days. As it happened it took four weeks and constituted the first and most significant full-scale act of armed resistance by the Jews against the Nazi regime.

On April 19, 1943, under SS General Juergen Stroop, some 5,000 troops—half of them from the regular Army and Waffen-SS, the rest SS police reinforced by 335 Lithuanian militia and Polish police—entered the ghetto armed with tanks, artillery, flame throwers and dynamite squads.

Stroop, who was tried in a Polish court after the war and hanged on the site of the ghetto, left behind a comprehensive 75-page illustrated report on the military action entitled *The Warsaw Ghetto Is No More*. Looking past its crazed anti-Semitic language, it is possible to discern the fierce resistance that the Jews put up against a far greater armed force.

"Hardly had the operation begun than we ran into strong concerted fire by the Jews and the bandits. The tank and two armoured cars were pelted with Molotov cocktails.... Owing to this enemy counterattack we had to withdraw...

"About 1730 hours we encountered very strong resistance from one block of buildings, including machine-gun fire. A special raiding party defeated the enemy but could not catch the resisters. The Jews and criminals resisted from base to base and escaped at the last moment ... Our losses in the first attack: 12 men."

The operation continued much like this for days. The poorly equipped defenders of the ghetto were forced to continually give ground before the might of the tanks and artillery, but they kept up their resistance. To an officer like Stroop the defiance of his adversaries seemed beyond comprehension.

"Within a few days it became apparent that the Jews no longer had any intention to resettle involuntarily, but were determined to resist evacuation.... Whereas it had been possible during the first days to catch considerable numbers of Jews, who are cowards by nature, it became more and more difficult during the second half of the operation to capture the bandits and Jews. Over and over again new battle groups consisting of 20 to 30 Jewish men, accompanied by a corresponding number of women, kindled new resistance." [4]

As the ferocity of the Nazi forces increased, the inhabitants of the ghetto continued to fight heroically, although many expected the end to come soon. This desperate determination to fight on despite massive odds and the general feeling of hopelessness is tragically conveyed in a passage from the memoirs of Jack Klajman, who was aged 11 years at the time of the uprising and amazingly survived.

"Over those next couple of days, the ghetto transformed into an ugly war zone. The Germans became particularly vicious. Pregnant women were tortured, and mothers had their babies snatched from their arms and had to watch as soldiers saved bullets by bashing the children's heads against the wall. The tide was starting seriously to turn against us. We were dying by the hundreds, but at least many of those victims left this earth with smiles on their faces, proud of their ability to resist." [5]

When it became clear that the operation would not be ended as quickly as anticipated, Stroop was informed by an impatient Himmler to take more drastic measures to "comb out" the ghetto. Some of the Nazi soldiers were also being picked off by snipers and fell victim to booby-trapped buildings. Stroop took the decision to set the buildings of the ghetto on fire. In his report, he describes how the defenders fought on, evading capture by Nazi troops at all costs.

"The Jews stayed in the burning buildings until because of fear of being burned alive they jumped down from the upper stories.... With their bones broken, they still tried to crawl across the street into buildings, which had not yet been set on fire.... Despite the danger of being burned alive the Jews and bandits often preferred to return into the flames rather than risk being caught by us." [6]

In the dying stages of the rebellion, the embattled fighters took to the sewers. Stroop's forces tried to flush them out by flooding the mains, but the resisters managed to stop the water supply. The troops then dropped smoke bombs into the sewers through the manholes.

On May 8, Nazi troops surrounded the hideout of ZOB headquarters. After the surrender of the civilians in the bunker, the fighters committed mass suicide rather than fall into the hands of the Nazis. Among them was the prominent ZOB leader Mordecai Anielewicz.

As the Warsaw ghetto was being crushed, the Nazi propaganda machine went into full swing. The Nazis sought to appeal to the baser instincts, fears and insecurities of the Warsaw population, as well as to send a clear message across the city: resistance is futile, and all those involved will be dealt with severely.

Among many Nazi leaders, a hatred of Marxism converged with a pathological loathing for the Jews, whom they saw as its physical representatives. This combination was frequently expressed in fascist propaganda. According to an observation by one respected historian, the

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Nazis had a “tendency to point to the ghetto as the central base of the Communists in Warsaw and the source of security disturbances throughout the city.” [7]

The following is a public address to the inhabitants of Warsaw, published on May 13, 1943 by the fascist governor of the Warsaw District, Dr. L. Fischer.

“Lately, a number of murderous assaults have been perpetrated in Warsaw... All these Communist hooligans have found refuge in the former Jewish residential quarter of Warsaw, where they receive generous help and full backing. Thus the Jewish residential quarter has become a nest of all the followers of the Bolshevik ideology, who try to sow disquiet among the population by any means possible. The former residential quarter is steadily being destroyed, and together with it go the hopes of the Communists. Anyone who continues to deceive himself that the bloody regime of the Bolsheviks will yet arise in this country is making a grave error. Right now it is everyone’s duty to prevent the Communist agents and the Jews from carrying out their provocations. Any Jew or Bolshevik who is still free today is the most dangerous enemy of the people.” [8]

The ghetto was eventually liquidated on May 16. As a symbol of their victory, the Nazis blew up the Warsaw synagogue.

In his final battle report, Stroop cited the killing or capture of 56,065 individuals. Around 20,000 were killed in the former ghetto. Most of the rest were transported to Treblinka. The official German losses were put at 16 dead and 90 wounded. The actual figure, believed to be much higher, was suppressed in order to placate Himmler.

Although the Jewish fighters waged a courageous struggle, the final outcome of the mismatched battle of the Warsaw ghetto was never in any doubt. Abandoned by the governments of the Western Alliance and isolated by the Kremlin’s suppression of independent political action by the working class of Europe, the Ghetto Jews were left to fight and die alone. For many, their desperate resistance flowed from a realization that to submit meant certain death anyway. Others, such as Anielewicz, had concluded that their heroic deaths would inspire future resistance. As one writer put it, the fighters in the ghetto were “those victims who knew that they might not overcome their enemies but refused to suppress their recognition of what they were undergoing or deny their lack of hope while they resisted being overcome by despair and anguish.” [9]

From an immediate standpoint, the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto did little more than momentarily inconvenience the Nazi occupation. But its legacy proved to be hugely inspirational. All across Europe, the news from Warsaw galvanized large swathes of the population to resist the Nazis: the inmates of labour camps and ghettos, partisans along the Eastern Front, even in the death camps of Sobibor and Treblinka.

The anniversary of this historical event is an occasion for the remaining survivors of the Holocaust to remember their fallen comrades and loved ones. It will also compel younger generations to ask how and why such things ever came to pass. The many commemorations, exhibitions, and memorials will no doubt stimulate interest in the study of the main issues of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most significant of the many public commemorations to take place around the world was that held in the Polish capital of Warsaw itself. It heralded a week of remembrances throughout the end of March, which many people travelled to from all corners of the globe. Around 80 percent of Jews across the world can still trace their roots back to Poland.

Despite the solemn character of this occasion, however, it was evident that the authorities were far less interested in the lessons that these events contain than they were in cultivating certain international relations. This was apparent during the state visit of Israeli President Moshe Kacaw’s to Poland beginning on March 22.

The Polish government, fresh from having committed troops to the US-led conquest of Iraq—the only European nation, with the exception of Britain, to do so—is using every occasion to prove its subservience to Washington. This also means cementing ties with Washington’s chief ally in the Middle East, Israel.

Kacaw met with Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski to discuss closer political and military ties between the two states. These discussions came only days after Poland had signed a major contract to purchase military hardware from the US as opposed to the European Union.

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