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1 August - 3 October: Warsaw Uprising

Directly after Warsaw had capitulated in 1939, clandestine structures began to appear also known as the Polish Underground State. All of them were subjected to the authority of the Polish government in exile. A Government Delegate for Poland was appointed, in charge of armed forces, Polish clandestine courts and political parties.



Already in besieged Warsaw, the Service for Poland's Victory was set up, transformed in November into the Union of Armed Struggle and in February 1942 into the Home Army (AK) with General Stefan Rowecki 'Grot' at the helm. In late 1942, the AK had around 200,000 soldiers and was the largest clandestine military organisation in Europe. The AK conducted armed actions: breaking out prisoners, detonating strategic structures, shooting at German posts and executing war criminals convicted by Polish courts. In retaliation, the Germans performed public executions of defenceless civilians and prisoners. The AK's main task was to get ready for the regular fight of Polish troops when the international situation allowed for hoping that the Allied forces might win.



The Polish Underground State also organised underground education (the Germans banned education at levels above primary and in such schools Polish history, geography or language were not taught). During the occupation, underground educational meetings of secondary schools and universities took place. Clandestine state examinations were taken and passed: final secondary-school examination and those for university students. Professors jeopardised their own lives and those of their family members. Polish architects, urban planners and engineers worked on plans for the reconstruction of the country after the war. The Polish Underground State issued clandestine press, printed Polish literature banned by the Germans and organised cultural and religious events. Although such activities carried death penalty, Polish intelligentsia fought a heroic battle to uphold the Polish spirit in the young.

In January 1944, the AK announced Operation Tempest, a diversion action at the back of the withdrawing German army aimed at taking over posts abandoned by the Germans before the Red Army and stepping forward as the legitimate host of the land. What mattered to the Poles was not to give the Russians a pretext for putting their own people in local centres of power and not allow them to introduce Soviet communist authority on the occupied territories. Initially, Warsaw was outside the scope of the action, yet as the Red Army was moving inside Poland, the decision was made to stage an armed

uprising in the capital. The AK wanted to liberate it itself before the Soviets arrived. Given the plans of Stalin, who wanted to incorporate Poland into the USSR as yet another republic, the Polish government wanted to strengthen Poland's position as an independent country in post-war negotiations.

The Warsaw Uprising broke out on 1 August 1944 and lasted 63 days. The Poles were virtually alone in their combat, as a few airdrops of arms, medication and food performed by the Allies were not enough to help much in the bloody fight waged by the capital. Stalin decided not to support the Poles in any way whatsoever and simply waited until Warsaw bled out fighting the Germans.

The AK began its fight for Warsaw with circa 40,000 soldiers for whom basically all was missing: weapons, ammunition and food. The AK troops were supported by soldiers of the National Armed Forces and the People's Army (AL). Despite heroic fights, the uprising was doomed to fail given that the Germans engaged significant numbers of their troops. Around 20,000 soldiers died. Hitler decided to punish the city, condemning it to total destruction and its inhabitants to death. In a huge massacre of civilians in the Warsaw quarter of Wola in the few first days of the uprising, a few dozen thousand civilians were murdered, including women, children, the elderly and hospital patients. Over two months of fights in the capital, around 200,000 civilians died. After the fall of the uprising, Warsaw dwellers were resettled, with thousands going to labour and concentration camps, where they also died in great numbers because of the living conditions. The Germans took from the empty city all they could use. Any remnants of Polish culture were fiercely destroyed. The still remaining tenement houses were burnt one by one, in an attempt to also annihilate the historical tissue of the city. Left-bank Warsaw practically ceased to exist.

The history of the Warsaw Uprising is primarily a dramatic history of young Polish soldiers, who after five years of German occupation fought so fiercely that it even met with astonishment and respect of German commanders. At the same time, given the tragic outcome of the uprising, the decision to launch it is one of the mostly debated historical themes in twentieth-century Polish history.

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References: