



19.04.1943

Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto

One of the main premises of Hitler's Nazi ideology was racism. Since 1933 when Hitler came to power, German propaganda was proclaiming the existence of 'superhumans,' the 'master race' or in other words 'Aryans' and 'subhumans' – all those who should serve Aryans or vanish from the face of the earth. Hitler hated Jews most and since the beginning of his official appearances obsessively repeated that they should be 'eliminated.' In German propaganda, even terms for genocide sounded as if they did not refer to crime: the 'final solution to the Jewish question,' or a 'harvest festival.' The word 'Jew' was always written in lower case, although it denoted a nation, not a confession. In 1938, an anti-Jewish pogrom took place in Germany known as the 'Crystal Night (of Broken Glass).'

After the outbreak of the war, Germany from the very beginning implemented its plan to annihilate Jews. In 1939, compulsory labour was introduced for all Jews, who also had to wear an armband with David's star. The first ghettos were set up: separate quarters where Jews were ordered to settle while all the others to move out. In occupied Polish territories, the Germans set up more than 400 ghettos, also with Jews resettled from other occupied European countries. Since 1940, ghettos were ultimately closed with the residents unable to get out outside, get food and, most frequently, to work. The hundreds of thousands who were squeezed into very limited space were hungry and died in appalling conditions. There were epidemic outbreaks, a fact meticulously used by the Germans for propaganda purposes, in order to scare off those who helped Jews.



Poland was the only European country where assisting Jews carried the death penalty for the helper and their entire family. That is why hiding refugees from ghettos or families who decided not to enter closed quarters voluntarily meant jeopardising one's own life, one's family or often the whole building or house. Still, thousands of Poles decided to take such a risk unable to passively observe the tragic lot of their old friends, neighbours or defenceless women and children. Polish Catholic nuns saved the lives of around 1,200 Jewish children hiding them in convents. On the other hand, there were fear-stricken Poles afraid to do anything as well as those who benefited from the tragedy of the Jews by taking over their property or – in the worst-case scenario – reported Jews to Germans.

Hitler decided that forced labour and concentration camps would be built on Polish territory. First of all,

around three million Jews lived in Poland and, secondly, the Germans wanted to erase the traces of their crimes over time. In 1942, they began to systematically deport Jews to camps located in Poland: Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, Bełżec, Sobibór and Chełmno nad Nerem. They started to implement the decisions of the Wannsee conference of January 1942 concerning the 'final solution to the Jewish question' or the annihilation of the entire nation. Jews were initially informed that they were going to work and ordered to take their belongings with them. This was meant to make the SS rich through the valuable items families took on their journey. In camps, inmates were locked up in chambers under the pretext of a bath, murdered with gas and their corpses were incinerated in crematoria. The unspeakable tragedy of millions could not even be believed by Jews themselves who doubted the rumours that once taken from the ghetto they would meet certain death.

In 1942, a representative of the Polish clandestine authorities and Home Army (AK) officer Jan Karski (Kozielewski) entered the Warsaw ghetto in order to confirm news about the situation of the people confined in it. He wrote down accounts of Jewish activists from clandestine organisations on the basis of which he drafted a report on the extermination of the Jewish nation, forwarded by the Polish émigré government to the Allies. Western countries, including the USA, did nothing to prevent the genocide of European Jews.

As the situation was hopeless, young representatives of the Jewish resistance movement in the Warsaw ghetto decided to stage an armed uprising against the oppressors. In July 1942, they set up the Jewish Combat Organisation (ŻOB) whose leaders included Mordechaj Anielewicz, Icchak Cukierman, Hersz Berliński, Michał Rosenfeld, Johanan Mogenstern, Abraham Sznajdmil, and Marek Edelman. Assisted by the AK, they smuggled a few dozen arms, some ammunition and grenades into the ghetto. The underground activists themselves prepared several thousands of bottles with ignition fluid. When the Germans entered the ghetto intending to remove another batch of people, the Jewish insurgents opened fire.

Fights in the Warsaw ghetto lasted from 19 April to 16 May 1943, with around 1,000 young people involved. There were around 2,000 soldiers from regular German army units against them. The heroic battle of the insurgents was doomed to fail. First and foremost, they wanted to die fighting, not in gas chambers. In the last days of the uprising, the Germans surrounded the bunker at 18, ul. Miła, where members of the ŻOB gathered. In the circumstances, the fighters decided to take their own lives.

On the last day of the pacification of the ghetto, the Germans exploded the Great Synagogue at ul. Tłomackie. Then they burnt the entire empty quarter to the ground destroying it house after house, until the former ghetto was just a huge sea of rubble. The Jews who managed to hide or flee the hell of the ghetto often joined Polish guerrilla units. Many (around 2,000) fought later in the Warsaw Uprising. During the Second World War, the Germans murdered around five to six million European Jews, including around three million Polish citizens. Nevertheless, it is impossible to give any exact estimates.

Translated by Mikołaj Sekrecki, Proofread by Dr. Ian Copestake


Anna Buchner



References:

POLAND > CHAPTER 18 > page 2 / 2 > 1943 19 April Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto