

THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR

WWII 80 YEARS AFTER

WARSAW



**THE FIRST YEAR
AFTER THE WAR**



Educational materials & historical sources

Olga Lebedeva (ENRS)



THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR



Olga Lebedeva (ENRS)

This educational material consists of six photographs with descriptions of selected phenomena illustrating the return to everyday life after the Second World War in Warsaw, Poland. It also includes several simple activities that can be carried out with students aged 13 to 18.

Educational goals. Students will:

- Learn about the social circumstances accompanying the end of the Second World War
- Reflect on the long-term consequences of the war
- Analyse historical photographs

This lesson is part of a series dedicated to various cities, towns, and countries in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR

Olga Lebedeva (ENRS)



Introduction

The Second World War in Europe ended on 8 May 1945, with the signing of Germany's unconditional surrender. For many inhabitants of Warsaw, the war ended earlier, between January and February, when the German army, under pressure from the Red Army, withdrew from Polish territories. The presence of Soviet troops and the strengthened position of the communists enabled the gradual introduction of political change in the country. Yet for many inhabitants, it was not politics but everyday life that mattered most. Returning to normal life became the priority. People went back to abandoned homes – if they still existed – or sought a new place to live in other parts of the country. Temporary shelters were organised, shops, workshops and service points reopened. The drive to restore basic stability was, for many, the only available form of regaining control over their own fate after years of chaos and violence.

Warsaw

Warsaw had a unique experience: it was almost completely destroyed in 1944 and had to regain its vitality despite the devastation, while also facing the growing pressure of the new communist authorities. At the same time, the experience of Warsaw's inhabitants can be seen as universal: like people in other cities, towns and villages, in Poland and abroad, they sought to return to normal life and rebuild their world from the ruins.

THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR



May 8, 1945. The sun set. In the west, the evening glow burned. A quiet, warm May evening came. From the meadows came the monotonous croaking of frogs. Suddenly the silence was broken by a violent salvo of guns somewhere at the airfield. One, two, ten... And salvos followed salvos, then again single shots. Rifles and machine guns fired, as well as flare guns and anti-aircraft guns. And across the sky flew multicolored missiles, like glowing, colorful stars. From time to time the luminous arms of a searchlight embraced our surroundings.

It was for us an unforgettable sight, as if the end of the world. For we were experiencing unforgettable moments. The world was informed of Germany's surrender. After long battles the bloody thug Hitler and his "Fritzes" were defeated.

Eugenia Gojawska,
Year 7, primary school¹

In the above-quoted recollection by Eugenia, the end of the war was recorded not through great political decisions, but through the emotions, sounds, and images of that May evening. It was precisely such personal experiences that became the starting point for a return to everyday life, rather than grand slogans or systemic changes.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**

**WWII 80 YEARS
AFTER**

Photo: Archeology of Photography Foundation
© Chomętowscy / FAF

Passers-by against the backdrop of a wooden kiosk with advertisements for cosmetic services at Three Crosses Square. In the background, tenement houses on Nowy Świat Street in Warsaw are visible (1945).



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**



In the photo we see a makeshift wooden kiosk with a sign offering manicures and pedicures, standing against the backdrop of the ruins of Warsaw. The contrast between the destroyed surroundings and the cosmetic services can be read as grotesque, but at the same time symbolic. It shows that even in a world of rubble, there was a need to look after oneself and to preserve remnants of everyday life. The photo emphasises that reconstruction began not only with walls, but also with daily rituals that provided a sense of continuity and hope.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**



Photo: Karol Szczeciński / East News

Woman with child among the ruins of Warsaw, the
return of the first inhabitants to the capital, 1945.



THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR



In the ruined city, life went on. Living among ruins, people tried to lead normal daily lives. In the foreground of this photo we see a child in a playpen. Next to it sits an older woman, probably the grandmother, mending clothes. Behind them, against the backdrop of ruined buildings, clothes are drying on a line.

People often made clothes from whatever they had at hand. Coats and skirts were made from blankets, dresses from curtains, and yarn was unraveled from old sweaters to knit new ones. It was also common to repurpose military uniforms or parachutes into civilian clothes, since parachute silk was excellent for making dresses or underwear. Such garments often looked unusual, but they gave people a sense of normalcy and allowed them to feel at least somewhat elegant, even in a world of ruins.

The photo shows the paradox of postwar life, when the ordinary activities took place in completely extraordinary surroundings. A playpen with a child and an elderly woman mending clothes are symbols of the continuation of family roles and care for daily life. The drying laundry shows that even among ruins, one had to care for hygiene and the rhythm of household life. It is an image of a return to normalcy, but under conditions that emphasise how deeply the destruction of war had affected everyone's lives.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**



Photo: Zofia Chomętowska, 1945
© Chomętowscy / FAF

'Three Crosses Square – Mrs Z. Potocka's café' – caption by Zofia Chomętowska. Zofia Potocka's café in a wooden shack at Three Crosses Square in Warsaw. In the background, on the left, the ruins of the Institute for the Deaf and Blind and other buildings on Prusa Street.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**



The photo shows Zofia Potocka's makeshift café, housed in a wooden barrack at Three Crosses Square in postwar Warsaw. Such temporary establishments were a substitute for the social life in a city destroyed by war. In the background, on the left, one can see the ruins of the Institute for the Deaf and Blind, as well as destroyed tenement houses on Prusa Street. Potocka's café was more than just a food point. It also served as luggage storage, a letter drop box and, most importantly, a contact point for families searching for each other.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**

**WWII 80 YEARS
AFTER**

Photo: Zofia Chomętowska, 1945
© Chomętowscy / FAF

Women by the remnants of a barricade on the corner of Marszałkowska Street and Wilcza Street. A watchmaker's advertisement on what appears to be an overturned tram.



THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR



During the Warsaw Uprising, most shops, marketplaces and wholesale outlets were destroyed. With the population returning to the ruined city, trade started up again, although it was accompanied by great organisational chaos. There was practically no supply infrastructure, and prices for goods were set arbitrarily.

In postwar Warsaw, the bazaar played a key role in the revival of trade in the city. The Polish writer Leopold Tyrmand (1920–1985) called them 'the hatchery of fashion and elegance' because, despite poverty and chaos, they were where meetings, negotiations and the circulation of often unique goods took place.

The market for craft services – such as watchmaking, tailoring or shoemaking workshops – were often the only available source of repairs and usable goods. Despite the destruction and lack of materials, many craftsmen quickly returned to work in these improvised conditions, providing basic services and supporting the reconstruction of the local economy.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**

**WWII 80 YEARS
AFTER**

Photo: Zofia Chomętowska,
📷 Chomętowscy / FAF

'Śniadeckich Street, my photography shop' – caption by Zofia Chomętowska. The photography shop and studio under the name CiF (Chomętowska and Falkowski) was located at 18 Śniadeckich Street.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**



During the Second World War, Warsaw was almost completely destroyed by German forces. The northwestern part of Śródmieście, which included the former Jewish ghetto, suffered particularly having been razed to the ground by the Germans after the 1943 uprising.

There was an extreme housing shortage – out of 654,000 habitable rooms, about 140,000 remained usable. The reconstruction of Warsaw had begun even before the war officially ended, in February 1945. In that same year, 1,280 rooms were restored to use. In later years, however, the reconstruction process slowed down, primarily due to the adoption of the Decree on Municipalisation, under which Warsaw's land was declared state property.

The above photo shows the ruins of a building on Śniadeckich Street, which before the war housed, among others, Zofia Chomętowska's photographic studio.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**



Photo: Karol Szczeciński / EAST NEWS

Everyday life in Warsaw rising from the rubble, view of Puławska Street, 1948.



**THE FIRST
YEAR
AFTER
THE WAR**



It took many years to rebuild the destroyed city of Warsaw. Even in a 1948 photo we see a Warsaw family eating a meal in an apartment on Grażyny 3 Street, where a wall is still missing. Only in 1948, with the creation of the Workers' Housing Estate Bureau, did the construction of new housing accelerate. It was not until 15 years after the end of the war that the number of residential rooms matched prewar levels, which shows the scale of destruction and the difficulties of reconstruction.

EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS



Exercise 1: Visual source analyse.

Students work in small groups, each focusing on one photograph. They describe what they see, identify traces of war and attempts to return to normal life, and present their conclusions to the class.

Exercise 2: Visual source analyse.

Students first describe what they see in the photograph focusing only on visible details and possible emotions. Only afterwards does the teacher reveal the historical commentary so they can compare their interpretation with the actual context.

Exercise 3: Historical empathy exercise.

Students write a short diary entry from the perspective of someone in one of the photos (e.g. the woman with the child among the ruins or the owner of the makeshift café).



EXERCISES FOR STUDENTS



Exercise 4: Discussion and reflection.

Use open-ended questions such as: Can people feel hope in a ruined city?

How was material reconstruction different from moral or social reconstruction?

Exercise 5: Project assignment.

Students can design a presentation (e.g. in PowerPoint) or short film titled The First Year After the War in My Town using local sources and/or family stories.

THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR



Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

THE FIRST YEAR AFTER THE WAR



Bibliography:

- Archive of the Pilecki Institute, Records of Terror, Eugenia Goławska, Essay.
- Chmielewski, M. and M. Szczypiorska, 'Could Warsaw Have Been Rebuilt Differently – An Alternative History of the City', Quarterly of Architecture and Urban Planning, no. 1/2015.
- Zborowska, A., 'Bazaars and Found Objects: Thing Culture in Post-war Poland', Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture, vol. 21, issue 4: The Look of Austerity, 2017.

Author: Olga Lebedeva, PhD
Proofreading: Caroline Brook Johnson
Coordination and proofreading: Urszula Bijoś
Consultant: Prof. Ewelina Szpak

