

**Warsaw 1944**  
**Day of Destruction: August 1, 1944**

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**The Athenaeum Society**  
**February 5, 2021**

There are many important dates in history, which is one of the reasons people do not like history. But I am not in such a group. The easy dates all of us history buffs know are 1066; December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941; September 11, 2001- which now just goes by 9/11. But I have chosen to write about a date which is not so familiar, August 1, 1944. I think it is worth remembering and hope to convince you as well.

What happened on that date? Obviously, this occurred during WW2. And that date is doubly meaningful in that context. While this paper is not about Anne Frank, her last diary entry was on August 1, 1944 (she and her family were discovered and arrested August 4, 1944). This paper is about what began on that date 740 miles away from Anne who was in Amsterdam. So we must move to Warsaw, where the Warsaw Uprising began on August 1, 1944.

As an aside, I like to put things for myself into some geographical perspective. Amsterdam to Warsaw is about 740 miles. Hopkinsville to Minneapolis is about 780 miles. Berlin to Warsaw is 356 miles and

Hopkinsville to Chicago is about 370 miles. Warsaw to Moscow is again about 780 miles [Minsk, capital of Belarus, is 340 miles from Warsaw].

Another preliminary note should also point out another event that the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 is sometimes confused with: the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943. The latter, from April to May 1943, was a desperate act of resistance by the Jews forced into the Warsaw ghetto against their oppressors. By the way, that is on my list of Atheneum paper ideas, but I have no idea if it is appropriate to reserve a topic in our organization. But I will say this, I wanted to present on that topic because I had written a paper about it back in high school for my English teacher at HHS, Danny Gilkey. As he is no longer a member, I suppose the topic is free for anyone.

But back to Warsaw, August 1944. It was the largest city between Berlin and Moscow. It sits on the banks of one of Europe's great rivers, the Vistula. On the left bank is Warsaw proper. On the right bank is the town of Praga (incorporated into Warsaw in 1791). Think like the cities of Buda and Pest – on the left and right banks of the Danube in Hungary.

Warsaw had about 900,000 inhabitants in the summer of 1944. Contrast with its pre-war population of 1.2 million (400,000 of whom were Jews). The city was well-suited for urban combat and an uprising, which you will see helped to allow underground resistance fighters carry the fight for 63 days – August 1, 1944 to October 2, 1944. Contrast this with the Battle of the

Budge. The largest battle ever fought by the US Army lasted about 40 days. The results were vastly different however, as you shall see.

Warsaw was an old city with only a few main roads in its inner city, limiting the Germans' range of fire and fields of activity. There were also many crooked streets allowing small groups of resistance to hold off larger German forces. There were many cellars allowing escape and surprise attack.

A brief summary of incidents leading to 8-1-44 will help to understand the decision made to launch the uprising. As we all should know, WW2 started with Hitler's Germany invading Poland on September 1, 1939. The Poles actually fought gallantly but were an inferior army to the Germans. Forget the myth about Polish cavalry charging German tanks. Poles did engage in cavalry charges against German infantry units to some immediate effect but were in places then counter-attacked by armor.

But the Germans invaded only 9 days after the Hitler Stalin Pact of August 23, 1939, which pledged non-aggression between the two regimes and secretly agreed to divide Poland between them. The secret was pretty much out in the open when the Red Army crossed the Polish frontier on September 17, 1939.

Germany incorporated the western part of Poland into Germany, administered Central Poland under an entity called the General Government and the Soviet Union took eastern Poland. This all changed, of course, on

6-22-1941 when Hitler invaded the USSR. How would you like to be in position of fleeing the Gestapo for the NKVD(precursor of KGB) or vice-versa.

Poland's experience under the Nazis was of deportations, mass shootings, arrests and incarceration; and of course, the beginning of the implementation of the Holocaust – which is not the subject of this paper, but of course inescapably pervades Poland during this period. So German behavior certainly encouraged resistance. (I know that's an incredible understatement.). But Poland also had a long history of underground resistance – it had been divided among Germany, Russia and Austro-Hungary and had ceased to exist as a separate nation from 1795-1918. This third partition of Poland occurred in 1795, after a certain General Kosciuszko returned from somewhere still flush with revolutionary fervor and launched a failed uprising. Poles under Russian dominion rebelled in 1830-31 and against Austro-Hungary in 1846 and '48. They were able to obtain independence following the WW1 defeats of all three of their then occupiers.

In discussing the 1944 uprising, we will almost exclusively focus on the resistance group called the “AK”. This is from the Polish “Armia Krajowa” meaning Home Army. So when I say “AK” I am not talking about the AK-47. There were other resistance groups – Jewish, communist and right - wing; but the decision to launch the uprising was by the AK, affiliated with the Polish government-in-exile in London. The other groups did fight in the uprising.

But once Germany invaded the USSR, it took over former Soviet occupied Poland. The USSR was now allied with Great Britain, which dropped about 600 tons of supplies to the AK during the war. Again compare this with about 10x that amount Great Britain sent to the Greek resistance; and 10,500 tons to the French. So the immediate enemy of the AK was Nazi Germany, but remember if you are Polish you can never take your eye off the East.

Now let's more closely approach August 1, 1944. The tide of the war had certainly changed as had plans by the Polish underground/AK. These had gone from conducting an uprising even if Hitler had defeated Stalin (I don't see how that would have happened) to simply remaining underground if the Soviets defeated the Germans. The AK did not in the end choose that course for Warsaw.

On August 1, the western allies were on the verge of liberating Paris (which occurred August 25, 1944). So they were too far away to help. The Red Army, however, was very close.

I know this skips a lot of the war on the eastern front but by this time we have had the famous victories of the Soviets at Stalingrad and Kursk. The Red Army had launched the Belorussian Strategic Offensive ("Operation Bagration") which lasted from 6-23-1944 to 08-19-1944. This offensive occurred on a front from the Baltics to Hungary. This campaign is often overlooked in the west but this may have been the largest defeat of the German Army in one campaign in history- 500,000 German casualties. It was in the face of this massive Soviet

assault that the AK had to decide what to do, rise against the Germans or not. In Vilnius, now the capital of Lithuania, AK units (strong Polish ethnic presence there) attacked the retreating Germans. The AK cooperated with the Soviets but were disarmed by them after defeat of the Germans. This was repeated in other cities conquered by the Red Army in Lublin (Poland) and Lwow (Lviv in Ukraine) – cooperate then be disarmed.

Now we approach the crucial time of decision. Initially, an uprising in Warsaw was considered too dangerous. The city was too big to capture without help, the Germans were too strong, and there were too many civilians. The uprising was to be timed with Germans defeated militarily and their morale at home undermined. Well, they were being defeated by the Red Army, massively so. And on July 20, 1944 morale at home for the Germans seemed fragile when the Stauffenberg Plot unsuccessfully tried to assassinate Hitler. In light of this and in order to show the Poles' willingness to fight and gain respect with the Western Allies in the post-war political settlement, on 7-21-44 the decision was made to begin final preparations to begin the Uprising. The decision was not unanimous.

But the day, in a move with some portent, Polish communists issued a manifesto stating they were the legitimate government, not the London government-in-exile, supported by the AK.

On July 29 and 30 Moscow's Polish language radio announced Soviet troops were a few dozen kilometers SE of Warsaw (12 KM =7.5 miles). On July

30 in Warsaw one could hear sounds of battle to the east. This was probably the sound of the beginning of the Battle of Radzymin, about 20 miles NE of Warsaw, which also started on August 1, 1944. We will return to that battle in a few minutes.

The AK wanted to start their uprising about 12 hours before the expected Soviet assault on the city. But German troops which had been seen withdrawing stopped doing so. German reinforcements marched through Warsaw. Germans asked for 100,000 residents to come out and work to fortify the city. Hardly any showed up. The AK was already mobilizing.

The Warsaw uprising began at 5:00 p.m. on August 1<sup>st</sup>. The AK Commander General Tadeusz "Bar" Komorowski gave the order. (Based in part on the mistaken report that Soviet tanks had captured some eastern Warsaw suburbs and were already on the west bank of the Vistula, in Praga. But why not have waited until it was confirmed that the Soviets had captured Praga?)

Much to the detriment of the uprising, four German panzer divisions were still between the Red Army and the eastern suburbs of Warsaw (Praga) across the Vistula. They were able to stop the Soviet 3<sup>rd</sup> Tank Corps near Radzymin, as noted just about 20 miles from Warsaw. The Soviets there went into defensive positions.

At the beginning of the uprising, the rebels about about 20,000 fighters, not all of whom could mobilize or were even armed. There were about

13-20,000 German troops in Warsaw. But they were expecting an uprising. They were in fortified positions with armor plate, artillery, tanks and planes.

The initial Polish attacks, against a central airport, police headquarters and the palace of the council of ministers, all failed. The rebels did capture the Prudential Insurance building, then the tallest in Warsaw. It was later all but destroyed. A warehouse with food and German uniforms also was captured. 50-100 Hungarian Jews were freed as well. The resistance occupied residential blocks and streets but the Germans had telephone and teleprinter communication.

On August 2<sup>nd</sup> another airport attack failed but the rebels took the post office and a prison, along with 2 Panther tanks. On August 3, the main office of the German civilian authorities was captured. A counterattacking German tank column drove several hundred civilians ahead of them as human shields, a tactic that would be repeated. The Jewish Fighting Organization was in the battle ["ZOB"] and the communist RPR.

German reinforcements were brought in, including the notorious SS Dirlewanger Brigade. Full of convicted criminals (including murderers and rapists), SS probationers from other units, anti-communist and ethnic Germans from the East, this unit was designed to terrorize and pillage. They had been used to fight partisans behind the lines and would go to a village and kill all inhabitants if they could. Another unit sent to fight the uprising was the SS Rona Bridge, which consisted of former Red Army soldiers. More Army

and SS units came in, so by August 5<sup>th</sup>, German troops strength had about doubled. Himmler and Hitler saw this as a chance to kill the rebels and civilians and raze the city This was consistent with Nazi genocidal policy of eventually reducing Warsaw in size and scope which it had already planned to do if victorious in the war.

In one part of Warsaw, called Wola, on 8-5-and 8-6, between 30-60,000 men, women and children were killed by the Germans, including the Dirlewanger Brigade. One of its commanders complained they had less ammunition than prisoners. Word of this encouraged the rebels to fight harder.

But as the battle raged where were the Soviets? On August 3, the Polish prime minister (Mikolajczyk) from the London government -in-exile (the remnant of pre-war Poland's anti-communist government) was in Moscow and met Stalin. The P.M. had gotten word of the uprising that morning. Stalin gave the impression he did not know about it but wanted the prime minister to recognize the Polish Communist Committee for the purpose of determining Poland's post war government. He discounted the rebels as having no tanks, artillery or air force (of course not, the Red Army had those). Stalin knew the rebels were almost entirely anti-soviet. Stalin was given plans on August 8 to renew the offensive (following the Soviet set back at Radzymin ) by August 25. It has long been assumed Stalin ordered the Red Army to halt so the Germans could finish off the Polish rebels. Remember, the Germans had held for the time being east of Warsaw. But Stalin's formal decision during this time period is not known because the records are missing. But not missing in the sense of

the building where they were housed burned or something like that. Missing in the sense that in Russia the archives for example under “Stalin and the Warsaw Uprising” there are no documents from August 8 to September 16, 1944.

We do know on August 16<sup>th</sup> Stalin told Churchill the uprising was a “foolish adventure.” There would be no great offensive on Warsaw at the moment by the Red Army. This seems to have been a political calculation based on the turn of events. If the Soviets could have overrun Warsaw why wouldn't they have done so? But they were halted, the Uprising had begun and there was heavy fighting. Why get involved if you don't have to and you get some benefit could have been the cold reasoning of Stalin. Stalin was always going to confront the AK. He was never going to give in to its demands. But he did not halt the Soviet advance just for that purpose. The Germans did. If the Soviets could have overrun Warsaw as Germans retreated why not do so and then disarm the AK as they had done in other cities? But once the uprising started, why intervene in the urban battle? He knew how that could go for an attacker (see Stalingrad). It seems he took advantage of the timing of his forces temporarily halting outside Warsaw to let his enemy kill his enemy.

The British did send RAF crews, including Polish ones, from Italy, to make air drops over Warsaw. In August, they made 170 flights (29 planes and 26 crew were lost). The U.S. also offered to drop supplies but the Soviets had to allow them to land in Ukraine which had been done in previous missions.

Stalin refused initially (a decision later reversed). A flight of US B-17's finally dropped supplies over Warsaw on September 18.

But the fight continued in Warsaw. The most bitter fighting since Stalingrad according to Himmler. The rebels fought in cemeteries, but were pushed out by the Germans. Germans used remote-controlled minitanks called a Goliath. These were filled with explosives and detonated. In the close quarters of the old city, rebels would move from the ground floor to cellars to courtyards in the next house, while Germans who stayed in the streets drew the ire of their commander. Each building was like a fortress so they had to be taken. German airplanes destroyed building after building. Eventually, fighters and civilians retreated to the city center downtown via the sewer system. About 5,000 rebels and 25-35,000 citizens were killed in the old city.

To give you an idea of what the citizens/inhabitants faced, know that the Germans turned off the water supply on August 4<sup>th</sup>. Poles had to dig wells wherever they could. They built 108 of them. Perhaps the rebels biggest victory was capturing the phone company and on August 20<sup>th</sup> they captured 115 Germans.

On August 2, British and Americans had recognized the rebels as regular Polish armed forces, to try to put some brakes on Germans abusing them when captured. The Germans did recognize them as such when surrender negotiations began on Sept. 2 and later when the actual surrender occurred. The surrender documents acknowledged this and they were given POW status.

Poles took around 2,000 prisoners in all. SS and eastern troops were usually tried and shot. 300 German POWS were returned at the Polish surrender in downtown Warsaw. German general von dem Bach stated the Poles fought like heroes. On September 4, the Prudential Building burned. On September 8, a Red Cross truce allowed 5,000 inhabitants to leave. On September 9, Soviet fighters were seen for the first time over the city. German Stukas, good for bombing the city, would not fight them.

On September 10, Stalin finally agreed to let America B-17s land in his territory after dropping supplies in Warsaw. But the first such mission did not go until September 18. Of 1,284 supply cannisters dropped, only 228 made it to the rebels. Ironically, this helped stall surrender discussions as it merely gave the Poles false hope, as had the sight of Soviet fighters over the city.

Not all of the troops with the Red Army sat idly by. On Sept. 11 some troops under Red Army command tried to cross the Vistula into Warsaw proper. These were soldiers of the Polish First Army under General Berling. They had been raised from Polish soldiers captured by the Soviets in 1939 who later agreed to fight the Nazis. In September some of them made radio contact with the rebels. They made crossings of the river into Warsaw, about 450 men on September 16<sup>th</sup> and 900 on September 17<sup>th</sup>. They were beaten by German counter-attacks. These troops attempted further crossings but sustained about 5,000 casualties. By September 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Germans controlled the west bank of the Vistula.

The Poles finally surrendered October 2. The rebels (including communists) were given POW status. Civilian authorities were given immunity. But the city was to be evacuated. About 15,000 rebels were taken prisoner (remember many of them were unarmed).

In all about 200,000 civilians are estimated to have died and about 15,000 rebels in the Uprising. To emphasize how staggering this number is compare it to 400,000 US military deaths in all of WW2). There were an estimated about 2,000 – 17,000 German casualties)

The city was ordered razed by Himmler. But in good Nazi fashion, they removed anything of value they could find, golds, furs, even clocks and artwork. Of course, Germans burned libraries, the last on January 16, 1945, and withdrew from Warsaw. This was the day before the Red Army and Polish Army renewed its offensive.

The Germans were not able to destroy every building and they didn't force out everyone. An estimated 400-1,000 people, known as "Warsaw Robinsons" after Robison Crusoe, lived amidst the rubble and destruction. If you've seen the movie "the Pianist" that is what is depicted in that film.

The big question: was it worth it? Given the obvious human lives lost, not to mention the destruction of a city, the obvious answer is "No." Were the fighters brave and the citizens resolute, yes. Did they show spirit and fight heroically/yes but again at what cost? General Anders, head of Polish troops

with the Western Allies in Italy, thought the AK leaders should be prosecuted for the decision to launch the Uprising.

But if the AK hadn't been destroyed, did this just delay another bloodbath, which would have been inflicted by the Soviets? Would the rebels have risen later against the Red Army immediately after the war? Would Poland have risen in 1956 instead of Hungary or in 1968 instead of Czechoslovakia? Would they have tried the route of a creating a peaceful trade union called Solidarity? Questions that cannot be answered from a tragedy not many remember.

#### SOURCES

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3. Battle of Radzymin, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Radzymin\\_\(1944\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Radzymin_(1944)).