

In the Warsaw Ghetto, 1943

“A fight for dignity, for our freedom and yours.”

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Seventy years ago, on 19 April 1943, on the eve of the Jewish Passover, the final line-up of male and female Jewish activists, bottled up inside the Warsaw Ghetto, unleashed an uprising. The noxious fiction that “the Jews were shipped off to the camps like sheep to the slaughter” is part and parcel of the blatant bad faith peddled by anti-semitic propaganda. What Jews of both sexes still left in Europe were caught in a trap right across the continent which was under the Nazi yoke for five years.

The chances of escape were slim. Of going into hiding or blending in with the rest of the population not that much better, especially as a number of governments were under the Nazi jackboot and the native-born population at best, in most instances, indifferent or indeed hostile to the fate of local Jews.

As for resisting, that required weapons. And yet, the number of Jews, male and female, who were committed militarily to the '39-'45 conflict was definitely among the highest in terms of the overall population. We know about the resistance operations mounted by the communist-leaning FTP-MOI in France, the partisans in occupied Russian territory or in Poland, but, in a more anonymous fashion, hundreds of thousands of male and female Jews signed on with the regular armies of the Allies – be they Russian, American or British – with a large contingent coming from Palestine or within the ranks of the Free French forces.

In the context of the huge battle fought out in every corner of the globe, the Warsaw Uprising stands incontrovertibly as the most heroic and most popular symbol because it was entirely improbable. In fact, a handful of male and female resisters, poorly armed and trapped in one district in the heart of Warsaw, cut off from the outside world by high walls, but driven by bloody-mindedness, hatred and courage stood up to the Reich's “great” army for a month.

In his memoirs, Marek Edelman, one of the few fighters to escape, offers this description of the situation: “There was nothing unexpected about the defence of the ghetto. It was the logical outcome of four years of resistance by the population that had been bottled up in inhuman conditions, humiliated, scorned and, in accordance with the victors' ideology, treated as sub-humans. Despite these dramatic conditions, the ghetto inhabitants had, insofar as they were able, organized their lives in accordance with the highest European values.

“When the criminal power of the occupier denied them all entitlement to education, culture, a life of the mind and life itself, which is to say death with dignity, they created clandestine universities, schools, societies and a press. The upshot of all these actions, which would fuel the resistance against anything threatening the right to a worthwhile life was the uprising. The latter being the last means of repudiating the inhuman living and dying conditions, a final blow struck at the barbarism and on behalf of the preservation of dignity. “

The situation inside the ghetto

On 12 October 1940, the Nazis decided to cram the Jews from Warsaw and surrounding areas into the city centre and to erect a perimeter wall around it in order to thwart any escape. Thus, 380,000 Jews (men, women and children) ended up living in inhuman conditions pending removal to the concentration and death camps. Starvation, epidemics and joblessness were the daily lot of a Jewish population humiliated by the Nazi occupier. The latter had rustled up a “Jewish Council” (*Judenrat*) to oversee the organization and policing of the ghetto.

From 22 July 1942 onwards, these “collaborators” were required to “supply” the Jews bound for the Treblinka death camp located a hundred kilometres from Warsaw. The president of the Judenrat, Adam Czerniakow, could not stomach delivering his people to their deaths and committed suicide that very day. Meanwhile, a social life was conjured up: offering assistance to the neediest, with housing committees, child protection, clandestine schools, etc.

The Uprising Unleashed

The deportation began within days. In all, some 300,000 Jews were to be shipped out, mainly to Treblinka, where they were exterminated. On 2 December 1942, the progressive organizations, the Bund¹, the left-wing Zionists from Hashomer Hatzair, the Poale Zion or the He’halutz, as well as the communists and trade unionists decided to set aside their differences to establish one umbrella fighting organization – the Jewish Fighting Organization (JFO [or ZOB]). The Zionist right joined the actual insurrection off its own bat but with little in the way of coordination with the JFO. It is estimated that at some point of another a thousand ghetto fighters took part in the fighting against the Nazis.

At the time of the second tranche of deportations that started in January 1943, the aim being to liquidate the ghetto, the armed organization started up. A group of resisters saw off the Nazi troops who showed up to collect their quota of deportees. Startled by the liveliness of the self-defence actions, the Nazis held off until April before having another go. The male and female resisters were very young and they were aware that they had their backs to the wall but chose, as the old saying has it “to die on their feet rather than live on their knees”. With solid support from solidarity structures, they managed to secure the support of the population, now down to 50,000, in mounting their deadly fight-back.

The resistance availed of those few months of respite to fortify the ghetto. The male and female fighters established numerous strongpoints known as bunkers, knocking walls through in buildings in order to establish rat-runs and digging in in the basements. Their arms were few and bought with gold from a Polish resistance little disposed to cooperate with them. Something over one hundred pistols, about ten carbines, a few sub-machineguns, 600 grenades and 15 kilos of plastic explosive were amassed as well as home-made Molotov cocktails. Therefore, they needed to rely on the element of surprise in capturing weapons from an over-endowed enemy.

Fighting in every building

On 19 April 1943, the Wehrmacht, overly sure of its superiority, unleashed its assault by entering the ghetto through its main gate. The decision of the JFO’s 5-strong leadership², gave the signal for the uprising. Within three days they had seen off the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht was then replaced by elite Waffen-SS troops, 2,000 of them plus Panzers. It took the latter several weeks to eradicate all resistance. The fighting was ferocious, but, one by one, the SS, using

¹ The Bund was the main, specifically Jewish labour organization, launched in Vilnius in 1897 and embracing workers from Poland, Lithuania and Russia.

² The commander-in-chief was Mordechai Anielewicz from Hashomer Hatzair; Marek Edelman from the Bund was second-in-command; Yitzhak Zuckerman from the Hehalutz scout movement, Hersz Berlinski from the left-wing Poale Zion and Michal Rojzenfeld from the Communist Party also served on the leadership.

flame-throwers and tank shells, mopped up every pocket of resistance inside the buildings. Once captured, those buildings were immediately demolished. The male and female resisters committee suicide for the most part in order to avoid capture.

Surviving fighters belonging to the workers' organizations still managed to celebrate the 1st of May to the strains of the 'Internationale': "The same powerful message rang out simultaneously around the globe. But never has the 'Internationale' been sung in such tragic conditions, in a place where a people is dying and has not yet finished dying. Those words and that song, echoing from the smoking ruins, bear witness to the socialist youth's fight in the ghetto and, in the face of death, refuses to forget them."

On 16 May 1943, the demolition of the Grand Synagogue on Tlomackie Street set the seal on the Nazis' victory. However, the heroic gesture of these male and female Jewish fighters left an indelible impression on every mind. The SS units executed 7,000 inhabitants, male or female, over the course of the uprising. About 7,000 perished in the flames and razing of the buildings. The Nazis deported the remaining 30,000–50,000 Jews to Treblinka and to the Poniatowa, Trawniki and Maidanek camps in Poland.

A handful of the male and female fighters managed to escape via the sewers. Major Marek Edelman from the Bund, who was one of them, was to lay out all of what happened during the uprising in his writings about his life. We should remember also that in other eastern European ghettos, popular rebellion was hatched and occasionally erupted. Less well known than Warsaw, radical elements of the Jewish proletariat stirred up revolts in Vilna, Mir, Lachva, Kremenets, Czestochowa, Nesvizh, Sosnowiec, Tarnow and Bialystok.

Anarchists in the ghetto

Little known fact: some Jewish anarchists took part in the resistance from the Warsaw ghetto. There was a review published there, entitled *The Voice of Liberty*. Franka Hoffman-Zgodzinska, who was a member of the Polish Anarchist Federation, helped publish that newspaper. Certain male and female anarchists managed to get out of the ghetto before it was levelled: Pawel Lew Marek, Bronisława Rolosniec-Frydman and Pawel Rogalski, to name but three. Halina Lew, who in the 1930s was active in a group of activist Warsaw Jewish anarchists, was not so fortunate. She perished in the ghetto. The Polish libertarian Bernard Konrad-Swierczynski acted as a courier/contact between the ghetto and the outside world. He had slipped inside to deliver food, clothing and correspondence.

Against all totalitarianism

Powerful though the symbolism of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising may have been, the institutionalization, indeed, exploitation of it by the media and historians in lots of countries, let us never forget that it was, above all else, popular. In the view of *Alternative libertaire*, that glorious feat can never be dissevered from the Jewish proletariat's involvement in the fight against totalitarianism in all its forms ... in Russia against the tsarist autocracy in 1905 and 1917, in Bulgaria from the 1920s onwards, in 1936, fighting alongside the Spanish people against the Francoist armies, and against Nazism, but also, in the case of its more enlightened members, against the Bolshevik terror that led Stalin's anti-semitic purges.

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