

## Article 5

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### Dr Andrzej Slawinski, Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and The Polish Home Army – Questions and Answers

In 1940 nearly 500,000 Polish Jews were herded into a sealed off part of Warsaw by the real rulers of occupied Poland - the German Police and SS. The inhabitants of the Ghetto existed under conditions of indescribable squalor, with hunger and disease taking their daily toll.

In 1942 the SS commenced their programme of "Resettlement of the Warsaw Jews to the work camps in the East". By the end of 1942 there were only about 70,000 left in the Ghetto.

On obtaining convincing evidence from the Polish Underground that deportations were in fact to the death camps, the Jewish Combat Organisation (ZOB - Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa) decided to put up a fight against the SS and Police attempting to liquidate the Ghetto.

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**Q.:** Did Warsaw Ghetto Fights have any chance of success?

**A.:** Not in a military sense. It was a heroic act of defiance but in essence a suicidal one. This was a situation frequently encountered in Nazi occupied Poland: when facing certain death many members of the resistance opted for dying in combat. In the words of one of the leaders of the uprising, Marek Edelman: "The uprising was doomed to fail. It was more a symbolic gesture to make the world recognise us." (1)

**Q.:** The Polish Nation did not rise to help the Ghetto Fighters. Why?

**A.:** A national uprising is only possible when a liberating army is approaching the site of the intended armed action (and even then not always so, as exemplified by the fiasco of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944!). Under any other circumstances it would amount to a futile and costly gesture. It must also be remembered that the Poles themselves were under occupation, with major restrictions put up on them by the enemy occupiers.

**Q.:** Was the Warsaw Garrison of the Home Army, consisting at the time of several thousand members, capable of offering help to the Ghetto Fighters?

**A.:** A military intervention was not possible for reasons stated in the answer to the previous question, but also because at the end 1942 and at the beginning of 1943 the Warsaw Home Army Garrison was virtually unarmed.

**Q.:** How can a resistance organization be of any use if it is not armed?

**A.:**The Partisan Units of the Home Army operating in the forests of Eastern Poland were reasonably well armed, albeit with light weapons only. The units in large cities, such as Warsaw, were preparing for possible future national uprising. For their weapon training frequently the same single pistol, one rifle or one submachine gun was used to train dozens or even hundreds of soldiers. There were only few weapons available. One small unit used for special armed actions was well equipped with weapons, but many thousands remained unarmed. It was envisaged that when the time for an uprising came, weapons would be obtained from parachute drops by the allies.

**Q.:**Could the Warsaw Home Army help the Ghetto Fighters in any other way

**A.:**Yes, by supplying them with weapons. However there were severe limitations to this course of action. To quote Marek Edelman again: "The resistance movement of the Poles was just beginning at the time (1942). There was nothing unusual in the fact that our efforts to obtain arms and ammunition ...encountered major difficulties." **(2)**

**Q.:** Did the Home Army supply the Ghetto Fighters with weapons?

**A.:**There was a reluctance by GHQ Home Army to provide arms to the Warsaw Ghetto due to the fact that there were so few arms, and that providing the Ghetto from the meagre supplies would diminish further the armed potential of the Home Army without enabling the Jewish insurgents to be successful.

An accurate picture can be obtained from someone who was there and was one of the leaders. Marek Edelman states:" At the end of December (1942) we received our first transport of weapons from the Home Army. It wasn't much - there were only ten pistols in the whole transport - but it enabled us to prepare for our first major action". **(3)**

"At the end of January (1943) we received 50 larger pistols and 55 hand grenades from the Home Army Command". **(4)**

"By now (March 1943) every partisan was equipped, on average, with one pistol (and ten to fifteen rounds for it) four or five hand grenades, four or five Molotov cocktails. Two or three rifles were assigned to each 'area'. There was just one machine gun in the entire Ghetto". **(5)**

Apart from help given to the Jewish Combat Organisation (ZOB) by the Home Army, another Warsaw Ghetto resistance group, The Jewish Military Union (ZZW), obtained supplies of arms, ammunition and explosives from two Polish organisations linked to the Home Army: the Security Corps (KB) and the Polish People's Independence Action (PLAN). Some supplies were also sent by the communist People's Guard (GL).

**Q.:** Was this help effective?

**A.:** The Ghetto Fighters certainly needed more weapons and ammunition. However taking into account scarcity of weapons in the Home Army and the great difficulties and danger involved in transporting them through Warsaw and into the Ghetto (by then completely sealed off by German Police and their Lithuanian auxiliaries) the efforts of the Home Army to help the Jewish insurgents should be regarded as creditable. The effectiveness of this help was summarized by M. Edelman: "... be German casualties: more than one thousand were killed or wounded and tremendous material losses were suffered by the German war production enterprises that were set on fire and destroyed by the Jewish Resistance Organization". **(6)**

Although theirs was in the main a lone fight, the Ghetto insurgents were given help, perhaps of a more symbolic nature, through several combat actions at the Ghetto during the Uprising initiated by the Home Army and Peoples' Guard. Both of these organisations eventually undertook several successful rescue missions of the surviving Ghetto fighters.

In the past there have been conflicting reports of the extent of help given to the Jewish insurgents by the Home Army. Marek Edelman's account stands out as factual and objective and should be regarded as reliable.

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**Footnotes:**

1. Marek Edelman, *The The Ghetto Fights*, Bookmark, London 1990, p. 28
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.* p. 69
4. *Ibid.* p. 71
5. *Ibid.* pp. 73-74
6. *Ibid.* p. 94

*Andrzej Sławinski, London*