

Article 18

Roger Moorhouse, The German View of the Warsaw Rising 1944

When the Warsaw Rising broke at 5.00 pm on 1 August 1944, the German response was grimly predictable. It was summed up by Heinrich Himmler, who wrote to Hitler informing him of events and stating that "the action of the Poles is a blessing. We shall finish them off...Warsaw will be liquidated, and this city...capital of a nation... that has blocked our path to the east for 700 years...will cease to exist."

By 1944, Poland had earned itself a special place in the Nazi 'World View' or *Weltanschauung*. Heir to a long tradition of rivalry with its western neighbour, it had resisted German pressure in 1939, forcing Hitler into the general conflict that he had hoped to avoid. And, as if to compound the negative image held in Berlin, it was also home to Europe's largest concentration of Jews.

Accordingly, the occupation regime in Poland was especially savage. Poland was to be wiped from the map. Its territory was to be divided up. Its population sorted and sifted along crude racial lines and shunted into the rump 'General Government' centred in the 'ancient German city of Krakau'. Some would be slated for annihilation, those that survived would be turned into a semi-educated caste of slaves to serve their new German masters. In contrast to almost every other occupied nation, the Poles attracted no overtures for collaboration from Berlin. Even as the Germans cast around for the last crop of 'volunteers' for their 'anti-Bolshevik crusade' they refused to consider the creation of a Polish Waffen-SS division. They had few such scruples elsewhere.

Warsaw, too, aroused German ire. As the capital of the Second Republic, it was symbolic of the proud defiance of 1939. As one of the main centres of Polish Jewry, it was symbolic of a rich Jewish tradition. Accordingly, it too was also earmarked for radical reorganisation. In plans devised in 1940, Warsaw's geographical area was to be reduced by one tenth, whilst its population was to fall by a quarter, with the shortfall to be made up by an influx of German settlers. At the same time it was to be systematically reduced to the status of a secondary provincial city. Capital status, along with resistance to Germany, would be consigned to memory.

Blinded by their propaganda and their twisted worldview, therefore, the Nazis were unable to see the Polish nation as anything other than a collection of recalcitrants, recidivists and bandits. And they viewed the events unfolding in Warsaw in August 1944 as vivid proof of that fact. Thus, it came as no surprise when the forces initially called in to quell the Rising were those renowned for their expertise in so-called 'anti-partisan' warfare. At their head was SS-General Erich von dem Bach, a veteran of SS dirty work, who had previously been commander of anti-partisan warfare on the eastern front. Under his charge were two units that had achieved notoriety even amongst their Nazi contemporaries: the Dirlwanger Brigade, which was drawn from convicted criminals and led by a pederast, and the Kaminski Brigade, a motley group of ex-Soviet citizens and deserters. These two brigades already had some of the most bestial operations of the war to their name. They would cover themselves in further ignominy in Warsaw.

The German military campaign in Warsaw can initially be characterised, from the Nazi point of view at least, as the extermination of so many 'vermin'. This was most literally the case in the example of the 'anti-partisan' units, which began to move through the western suburbs of Wola and Ochota in early August. Utilising the skills that they had learned in numerous "anti-partisan" sweeps on the Eastern Front, they set fire to buildings and massacred every man, woman and child they encountered.

Elsewhere in the city, German forces initially displayed a complacency in their dealing with the Poles, which bordered on arrogance. The policy adopted was twofold. The artillery and *Luftwaffe* would pound insurgent positions, after which a frontal ground assault would be launched. It was intended as a demonstration of overwhelming firepower and superior military hardware that would cow the lightly-armed insurgents and force a submission with minimum loss of (German) life. In the event, it did neither.

The insurgents were not cowed. They did not surrender, and, what is more, their positions often withstood German attack, whilst the aerial bombardments merely created the ideal environment for urban guerrilla warfare. Insurgent units would melt away in the face of superior force and regroup to attack elsewhere. Positions lost in the day would be retaken by stealth at night. Snipers lurked unseen in the shadows, picking off the unwary. Barricades would be boobytrapped; petrol bombs would rain down from upper storeys. German forces on the ground, if not their superiors, soon realised that they were facing an enemy that was as inventive as it was deadly. A campaign that had been billed as a simple mopping-up of ill-armed and ill-trained 'bandits' was growing (in the German mind) into something far more substantial. A modicum of respect for the Polish fighters began to creep into official and unofficial correspondence. Comparisons were even made with Stalingrad.

By the end of the first month of the Rising, therefore, the Germans realised that their previous tactic was not bearing fruit. The policy of the 'anti-partisan' style extermination was only swelling the insurgent forces and stiffening their resolve. Von dem Bach decided that he would have to resort to negotiation, and, with that, came a necessity to acknowledge that his enemy was deserving of some respect. After lengthy talks, the Polish 'bandits' would be accorded every dignity. They would be recognised as Allied combatants, entitled to the same treatment on surrender as western POWs. There were to be no reprisals against civilians and no ill-treatment of captives. On the whole, these conditions would be kept.

Whilst the negotiations continued, however, the fighting dragged on for almost another month. For some German soldiers, it brought with it uncomfortable truths. One noted that "it is sad but true, but they have fought better than us." Another was profoundly disillusioned: "it has become clear to me", he wrote, "that we are not the nation that embodies strength, nationalism and a sense of sacrifice." He added: "The Poles have shown qualities that we cannot."

As the Rising finally drew to a close in early October, and the exhausted and half-starved insurgents gathered to surrender their weapons and march into captivity, many German soldiers saw their opponents face to face for the first time. They could not but be impressed. Some wrote home detailing the "noble bearing" of the Polish fighters, and contrasting the image of men marching smartly in close order with the propaganda stereotype of the rabble of 'bandits' and 'partisans'. Others wrote with admiration of their "exemplary" and "unbowed patriotism." Those that witnessed the Polish surrender would scarcely be able to forget it.

But the greatest compliment, perhaps, came from the General Reinhard Gehlen, head of the office *Fremde Heere Ost* (Foreign Armies East), which supplied intelligence information on Germany's eastern enemies. Gehlen had made numerous studies of the Polish Home Army and would have been well aware of the course of the Rising in Warsaw. In the early spring of 1945, he was called to Berlin to brief those responsible for creating *Werwolf*: a German underground organisation to carry on the fight following the expected Allied occupation of Germany. He was asked what form he thought *Werwolf* should take. He replied that it would do very well to copy the Polish Home Army.

Two months after the end of the Rising, a campaign arm-shield was instituted for those German troops who had fought in its suppression. It was to be awarded to all those who had spent at least seven days of combat in the city, sustained a wound or served 28 days in a supply capacity. The shield was put into production, but an Allied air raid destroyed all the machinery and finished examples, and it was never presented. Its design, however, was telling. Bearing the legend "Warschau 1944", it featured a German eagle, with a swastika across its chest, choking a coiled snake in its talons. The Poles had earned much admiration in Warsaw, but, officially at least, they were still a nation of vipers.

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Further reading:

- [1] Quoted in Noakes & Pridham (Eds.), *Nazism 1919-45, Vol. III, Exeter, 1988, p996.*
- [2] Heinrich Stechbarth, *diary entry, 4th October, 1944.*
- [3] Peter Stolten, *letter from Warsaw, 5th October, 1944.*
- [4] Peter Stolten, *letter from Warsaw, 6th October, 1944.*
- [5] *The Service: The Memoirs of General Reinhard Gehlen, New York, 1972.*