

“Our struggle will not be forgotten!” The first armed uprising against the Germans in the Warsaw Ghetto

On 18 January 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto saw the first instance of combat between members of the Jewish underground resistance and the Germans. This act of resistance was caused by the announcement of yet another deportation of the Ghetto residents to the Treblinka death camp. As a result of the clashes that continued for several days of January, the deportations of Jews living in the Ghetto temporarily ceased. The fighters also gained time to prepare for a larger military operation.

The state of the Warsaw Ghetto after the so-called “Grossaktion”

Between 22 July and 21 September 1942, the Germans deported 280,000 people from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Treblinka death camp as part of the Grossaktion. The overcrowded prison, which housed hundreds of thousands of Jews, was becoming increasingly more deserted with each passing day. Additionally, after the end of the deportations, the area of the so-called Jewish residential quarter was severely limited as well. The area south of the Leszno street (except for the Többens shop located at the Prosta street) was excluded from the ghetto. By the time the deportation transports from the Umschlagplatz stopped, the remaining Ghetto residents primarily included young people still capable of working. They were mainly workers employed in the so-called “shops” (German workshops and production plants) and Judenrat employees, as well as those who managed to hide in the Ghetto. The Grossaktion ended on the Yom Kippur holiday. In Judaism, it is a time of repentance and reconciliation. In 1942, this day became especially tragic.

The loss of loved ones and drastic changes in the daily life caused by the deportations also affected the activities of the Jewish Combat Organisation (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa – ŻOB), established on 28 July 1942. The leaders of ŻOB – Josef Kapłan and Samuel Breslaw – were both killed in Treblinka. Mordechai Tenenbaum made his way to Białystok, intending to organise a resistance movement there. It was already a common belief that another deportation action was merely a matter of time. Thus, the idea of armed resistance against the Germans was rapidly gaining ground.

The members of both ŻOB and the Jewish Military Union (Żydowski Związek Wojskowy – ŻZW), established by the former Jewish soldiers of the Polish Army, were preparing for an uprising. Both organisations attempted to train fighters and obtain weapons outside the Ghetto, and even manufactured improvised explosives in workshops inside it.

The Jews are shooting at us!

In early January 1943, an inspection was carried out in the Warsaw Ghetto. It determined that there were still about 50,000 Jews inside the Ghetto – with nearly 8,000 of them residing there illegally. Upon learning that there were still so many Jews left, Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer SS, became enraged.

-I am astonished that my orders concerning the Jews are not being followed – he wrote in a letter to Friedrich Krüger, commander of the SS and police in the General Government. In response, the SS and police commander of the Warsaw district, SS-Oberführer Ferdinand von Sammern-Frankenegg, proposed to deport Jews who, in his opinion, were no longer capable of working. Their deportation to the Treblinka death camp was scheduled for 15 January 1943. There were also plans to move the shops, along with all their workers, outside of Warsaw – to the Trawniki and Poniatowa camps.

ŻOB and ŻZW responded by publishing proclamations addressed to the ghetto inhabitants to remind them of the grim fate of all those deported to the Treblinka death camp. They also urged people not to believe the assurances about Jews working in camps “in the East”, which were

spread by the German propaganda. People – who often had nothing left to lose as their loved ones had already been deported – were called on to fight. A meeting of the ŻOB command staff aimed at drawing up defence plans was scheduled for January 17, however, it never materialised.

According to survivors' accounts, the Monday of 18 January 1943 was a sunny, albeit frosty day. The temperature reached as low as -20 degrees Celsius. Nonetheless, the weather did not stop the Germans from implementing their ruthless plans. In the very morning of that day, the Ghetto was surrounded by German troops supported by auxiliary formations consisting mainly of Latvians and Ukrainians. All Jews working outside the Ghetto were prevented from leaving it. The streets became deserted as people panicked in fear of deportation, being well-aware of the consequences of other such operations. People rushed to the hideouts they had prepared beforehand.

At first, the Germans intended to deport only those who lived in the ghetto without the proper documents; however, once it became obvious that it was impossible, they simply apprehended anyone they could get their hands on – regardless of whether the given person had a certificate confirming that they were a shop worker or not. To complete their deportation quota, the Germans also liquidated the hospital at the Gęsia street. The patients were deported to the Treblinka death camp.

Despite their insufficient combat readiness, the Jewish underground fighters were forced to respond rapidly. The fighters had few weapons available, including guerrilla munitions such as Molotov cocktails. Additionally, the ŻOB command staff were scattered around various locations and away from their headquarters, so there was no chance to make a joint decision to attack the Germans. The first ones to engage were the members of the Hashomer Hatzair, residing near 61 Miła street. They were led by Mordechai Anielewicz. He ordered the fighters to mix in with the crowd of people being led to the Stawki street, where the Umschlagplatz was located. They attacked the Germans at the intersection of the Zamenhofa and Niska streets. Cywia Lubetkin recalled it as follows: – At first, the Germans were surprised. They became confused and lost control of the situation. We could hear them shouting: “The Jews are shooting at us!”. Several German soldiers were shot dead. More groups of fighters joined the battle afterwards. They

attacked the German troops near the Zamenhofa, Mila and Franciszkańska streets. Izrael Kanał organised self-defence efforts at the Schultz's shop. Icchak Cukierman, the man in charge of the operation at the Zamenhofa street, tried to contact Anielewicz. However, this turned out to be impossible. His unit was captured by the Germans. Anielewicz managed to take a gun away from one of the German soldiers. Some Jews living in a nearby shelter came to his rescue. He remained with them in hiding for three days, having no idea about what was going on outside. Once he had left the shelter, he contacted Cukierman, who took refuge in a building at 58 Zamenhofa street along with his troops.

Many fighters perished during the four days of combat. Nearly 1200 civilians were also killed in the streets of the Ghetto. The Jewish losses also include about 5,000 people deported to the Treblinka death camp. The casualties among the Germans included about a dozen dead and several dozen wounded. Regardless, the fight proved successful to some degree, as the deportations ceased on 21 January.

The impact of the January clashes

The Jews' resistance to the January deportations took the Germans completely by surprise. Nonetheless, this only reinforced their conviction that the final liquidation of the Ghetto was a necessity. Himmler issued the relevant order on 16 February 1943. The Germans sought a compromise between the need to ensure a sufficient number of forced labourers (who worked at the Walter C. Többens factory and other facilities) and the ongoing liquidation operation. Himmler's proposal included moving the vital workshops from the Ghetto to a town near Lublin. All remaining Jews deemed unfit for work were to be deported to a death camp. It was up to the owners of shops – such as the Többens – to convince the workers to leave. Naturally, Jews were distrustful of any such proposals. Among those pleading for people to remain in Warsaw were the rabbis, who took an appropriate stance at a meeting chaired by Menachem Ziemba. Armed resistance organisations displayed the same attitude. Regardless, many Jews gave in to the persuasion and were transported to the Poniatowa and Trawniki camps.

The January clashes and the deportations to the Treblinka death camp that took place at the

time also resulted in increased support for the plan to organise an open rebellion. By this point, the Jews who remained in the Ghetto realised that their fate was already sealed. Remembering the results of their submission to the Germans' orders during the deportation in the previous summer, they knew that continued compliance with their demands is pointless. Efforts were made throughout the ghetto to prepare munitions, purchase weapons, train youth fighters, build hideouts and gather the much-needed food. It is worth noting that people who were not members of underground groups also participated in these preparations. A network of tunnels was build throughout the entire Ghetto area. The Jews' focus on n armed struggle is also evidenced by the fact that even the Judenrat – whose role at the time was virtually only symbolic – also subordinated itself to the Jewish Combat Organisation.

Being perfectly aware that the January clashes were only a prelude to an all-out battle against the Germans, on their final day Paweł Frenkel – commander of the ŻZW – addressed several of his fellow fighters gathered in ŻZW's headquarters at 7 Muranowska street. He encouraged them to continue fighting, saying: Once it begins, our struggle will not be forgotten, no matter how long it lasts! [...] Children living in the future Jewish state will learn about us, and for them, we will be model heroes [...] The murderers have already noticed this. The Germans' morale is weakening. Today, they will leave us alone to better prepare for further liquidation. We will fight with guns in our hands, and in this fight, most of us shall fall. This prediction came true three months later when the final liquidation of the Ghetto began. Its date, 19 April, was by no means an accident – it was a peculiar birthday “present” for Adolf Hitler. Having nothing left to lose, the Jews began to take up arms against the Germans. It was the beginning of the very first major urban uprising in occupied Europe. Still, it must not be forgotten that the prologue to these events was the fighting in January 1943.

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