

“Three Days, not Longer.” The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

In January 1943, in connection with the plans of the Germans to deport a group of Jews considered no longer fit for work to the extermination camp in Treblinka, the first armed uprising of members of the Jewish resistance movement took place. It was a kind of prelude to the events that took place several weeks later, in mid-April 1943. At that time, an uprising broke out in the ghetto. It was the first urban uprising and the largest armed uprising of the Jewish population during World War II.



The Truth about Treblinka

In the period from 22 July to 21 September 1942, the Germans carried out the so-called Great Action, deporting from the Warsaw Ghetto to the extermination camp in Treblinka, and murdering, approx. 300,000 Jews. When it was over, approximately 60,000 people remained in the ghetto, mainly those who were still able to work. In the shops, they made various products, which were then sent to the Third Reich. The area of the ghetto was significantly reduced. Szymon Rogoziński, one of the survivors, emphasised: "By the time we became aware of what was happening in Treblinka, we had already lost faith. After that, everyone could believe that he or she would survive. However, at the same time, there was the fear that actions of individuals could be destructive to everybody. And then, the idea of armed resistance began to form."

On 28 July 1942 in the Warsaw Ghetto, the foundations of the Jewish Combat Organisation (ŻOB) were established. By December 1942, it had its final shape. The organisation was created by young people who were involved in three other organisations: Ha-Shomer Ha-Cair, Dror and Agudat Ha-Noar Ha-Iwri "Akiba". Their intention was to fight the occupier, although they were aware that they had no chance to defeat the German SS units. The founding members of the Jewish Combat Organisation were, among others, Mordechaj Anielewicz, Icchak Cukierman, Cywia Lubetkin, Mordechaj Tenenbaum, Arje Wilner and Józef Kapłan. Both men and women were involved in the underground activities. In the autumn of 1942, members of the Bund, Poale Zion and communists, joined the organisation. There was also another armed organisation in the ghetto, which got significantly involved in the April uprising – the Jewish Military Union (ŻZW). It was formed by people associated with Betar circles and Zionist revisionists. The head of the union was Paweł Frenkel. The Jewish Military Union brought together Jewish officers, non-commissioned officers of the Polish Army and representatives of the Jewish intelligentsia. By April 1943, there were approximately 200 members of the organisation.

On 18 January 1943, the first armed uprising against the occupier took place in the Warsaw Ghetto. The announcement of another deportation action from the ghetto to the extermination camp at Treblinka led to a fight. Having deported approximately 5,000 people, the Germans stopped the deportations. The events of January 1943 made it clear to the Jewish fighters, the

members of the Jewish Combat Organisation and the Jewish Military Union, that the Germans were going to liquidate the ghetto and start the deportation action again sooner or later. Therefore, over the following weeks, they prepared for an armed fight. Maintaining the principles of conspiracy, they trained young people, organised weapon and prepared places where they could hide away, the so-called bunkers. Civilians were also asked to get involved in the construction of shelters and underground tunnels. The Holocaust researchers have discovered over 80 bunkers and shelters in the ghetto. According to German sources, there were over 600 of them.

The Last Pesach

It was spring 1943. The Jews expected the Germans to start deporting the people employed in the shops soon. The young and healthy individuals were to be sent to labour camps near Lublin, while the rest were to die in the extermination camp in Treblinka. A few days before Pesach, in mid-April 1943, information was received about the concentration of German forces, which meant that the action would start soon. Cywia Lubetkin recalled: "That night, before the outbreak of the uprising, on 19 April, we were having our poor meal until two o'clock. While we were talking and making plans, a comrade came in, whose pale face meant that something had happened. He approached the table and calmly said: a moment ago a message was received from the Aryan side that the ghetto would be surrounded later that night and that the Germans would start attacking at six o'clock in the morning. Even though we had been preparing for that moment and waiting for it — we all turned pale". Knowing the plans of the occupier, on the eve of Pesach, the fighters not only mobilised their forces and prepared the final details of the operation but also tried to warn the civilian population and encourage the ghetto inhabitants to hide away.

At dawn on 19 April 1943, the Germans initiated the action. The German military (Wehrmacht), SS and police units, as well as auxiliary Ukrainian and Latvian formations, were led by Oberführer Ferdinand von Sammern-Frankeneegg, the SS and police commander for the Warsaw district. Armed with rifles, automatic pistols, light and heavy machine guns, flame throwers and even armoured cars and tanks, they started to liquidate the ghetto. They entered the area of the so-

called Jewish district: from the south, along Nalewki Street, and from the intersection of Gęsia Street (today Anielewiczka Street) and Zamenhofa Street. They gathered considerable forces and weapons, although they assumed that the action would last no longer than three days. It was to be a present for the Führer on his birthday. Unexpectedly; however, they encountered strong resistance from Jewish fighters. David Wdowinski, a member of the Jewish Military Union recalled: "During that night, both Jewish combat organisations understood what that meant and all their members and armed Jews got mobilised. We organised guards. We were ready". They predicted which way the Germans would enter the ghetto, so they were prepared to defend those places. Thus, the largest armed rebellion of the Jewish population during the Second World War and the largest urban uprising at that time began.

The Stroop Report

The first battles, led by the units of the Jewish Combat Organisation, took place on Gęsia Street and at the intersection of Zamenhofa and Miła streets. The surprise attack forced the Germans to leave the ghetto. Later on that day, in the afternoon, they returned led by SS-Gruppenführer Jürgen Stroop. He managed the ghetto pacification operation until its very end. An extensive report with the meaningful title "Es gibt keinen jüdischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!" (The Jewish residential district in Warsaw no longer exists!), signed by him, made it possible to follow, day by day, the fights that took place in the ghetto. The report; however, takes into account the perspective of the perpetrators, obviously. In addition to daily reports, it describes, among other things, the weapon of the Jews and their way of preparation for the fight. According to Stroop, they mainly had weapon prepared by themselves: "The Jews had everything at their disposal there – from chemicals to make explosives to elements of military uniforms and armaments". The report also contained information about a network of bunkers that formed an underground city, of which the Germans had been unaware: "The Jews hid in sewers and specially arranged bunkers. In the first days of the fight, it was assumed that there were only single bunkers; however, in the course of the operation, it became clear that there was an organised system of cellars, bunkers and passages in the ghetto. Every passageway and bunker was connected to the sewage system. This enabled the Jews to move freely underground". There were sanitary facilities, places to sleep for several people and food supplies to make it possible to survive for up

to several months.

The Battle of Muranów Square

The fights in the ghetto went on for several weeks. The fighters attacked the Germans from hiding, using, e.g., grenades and throwing Molotov cocktails at them. The largest battle of the uprising, the Battle of Muranów Square, lasted from 19 to 22 April 1943. The area around that square, which no longer exists, was defeated mainly by members of the Jewish Military Union. The fighters shot at the German troops using machine guns. Knowing the battlefield well, and frequently changing their shooting positions, they managed to escape the Germans who attacked them. A symbol of those events is the image of two flags that appears in the reports: a Polish red-and-white flag and a Jewish blue-and-white one, flying on the roof of a tenement house at 7/9 Muranowska Street, on the corner of Muranów Square. It is assumed that the flags appeared already in the first days of the fights in the ghetto. They were also mentioned in the Stroop Report but in the context of collecting the flags by the German troops. While hiding in the "Kryzia" shelter on Grójecka Street, Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in 1944: "The trophies in the form of those banners were proudly displayed by the Germans at the headquarters of the Order Police and they were proud that they managed to collect them". The Germans gained an advantage in the fight after they brought a tank to Muranów Square. Some of the fighters left the ghetto. Already on the so-called Aryan side, many of them got exposed as a result of denunciations and were murdered. The fighting for Muranów Square took place again from 27 to 29 April. Members of the Jewish Combat Organisation and the Jewish Military Union also fought fiercely in the area of the shops. The fights in the so-called brush factory located at Świętojerska, Wałowa, Franciszkańska and Bonifraterska streets went down in the history. The Jewish Combat Organisation was led by Marek Edelman, and the Jewish Military Union – by Chaim Łopata. Under the pressure of a heavy attack with the use of Molotov cocktails and grenades, the Germans even proposed a ceasefire and safe transfer of the workers of the shop to the labour camps in Poniatowa and Trawniki. However the proposal was rejected. Members of the Jewish Combat Organisation also fought in the central ghetto at Miła Street, in Toebbens and Schultz's shops near Leszno Street (present Solidarności Street).

“Militant groups of 20 to 30 or more Jewish teenagers at the age of 18 to 25 continued to appear, always accompanied by some women, stirring up resistance” – wrote Stroop in his report. The fighters tried to stay armed to the end and would rather commit suicide than become prisoners. In search of outbreaks of resistance and people hiding away, the Germans systematically combed street by street, tenement by tenement. They left the corpses of civilians and the ashes of burned buildings behind them. Marek Edelman recalled: “Thousands of people died in the flames. The smell of burning bodies made you choke. Charred corpses lay on the balconies of houses, on window frames, on unburned stone steps. [...] Hundreds of people committed suicide by jumping from the third or fourth floors. In that way, mothers saved their children from being burnt alive”. Those jumping from balconies and windows of burning buildings were called “paratroopers” by the Germans. In the following days, fights were taking place over buildings and even over individual bunkers. On 8 May, the Germans discovered a shelter in which the headquarters of the Jewish Combat Organisation were located, at Miła Street 18, where Mordechaj Anielewicz stayed. He was not taken alive, some of his comrades were killed with the use of gas released by the Germans into the bunker, few managed to escape.

According to the Germans the uprising ended on 16 May 1943; on that day, Stroop managed, after several unsuccessful attempts, to blow up the Great Synagogue in Tłomackie Street (this is where the Blue Skyscraper is located today); however, armed fights continued over the following days. Most of the ghetto buildings were blown up or burnt down, and the whole area was razed to the ground. According to Jürgen Stroop Report, there were approximately 56,000 Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto during the uprising. Nearly 7 thousand of them were murdered by the Germans on the spot, and almost 7,000 were taken to the Treblinka extermination camp. Approximately 6,000 Jews died during the fights. Almost 36,000 of those who remained were deported to labour and concentration camps located on the territory of the General Government.

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