

The Jewish and Polish Underground in Warsaw During World War II

Introduction: Warsaw and the Beginnings of World War II

Warsaw has been called “the Jewish metropolis” of Europe – and of the world – for many reasons. Historically, it has been home to the highest population of Jews in Europe, as was certainly the case at the outset of World War II; the 1931 census recorded 352,659 Jews, representing 30 percent of the population of Warsaw¹. Just 14 years later, at the end of World War II, only two percent of Warsaw’s Jewish population remained alive – ninety-eight percent of them had been killed or had otherwise perished during the Nazi occupation.² Under Nazi occupation, the German occupiers formed “Jewish councils” that they made responsible the “welfare of the Jewish people.” Those between the ages of 14 and 60 were forced to work and, between 1940 and 1942, between 15,000 and 20,000 people from Warsaw were deported to labor camps.³ The deportations only constituted one part of Germans’ aims to exploit and exterminate the Jewish population. Another portion of their aim was to “isolate the entire Jewish population in specified cities,” which culminated the formation of the Warsaw ghetto.⁴ The speed at which the Warsaw ghetto was formed was astonishing; following the 2 October 1940 directive that led to its formation, 410,000 Jews were sent to the Jewish quarter – the ghetto – by 15 November.⁵ The living conditions in the Warsaw ghetto were miserable compared to the rest of Warsaw. Following the 2 October 1940 directive, Warsaw Jews had to choose between following the law and entering the ghetto or remaining outside of it illegally. At this point, very few people, and certainly almost none of the Jews in Warsaw, were aware of Himmler’s “final solution” or that

Germany planned to kill, hold captive, or enslave Jews, dissenters, and other minorities across Europe.

The Jewish and Polish underground fighting organizations proved to be essential in informing Polish citizens and global governments of Nazi atrocities and mass extermination of Jews in Poland, especially in Warsaw. Most importantly, these organizations played a crucial role in forming active military resistance to the German occupiers from within the Warsaw ghetto. Their actions inspired similar resistance movements across Poland. From across the political and religious spectrum underground resistance movements took up arms against the German occupiers and promoted resistance at all costs.

The World's Initial Reaction

The miserable living conditions in the Warsaw ghetto, the forced labor camps for Jewish men and women of working age, the mistreatment, mass shootings, and the extermination of Jews in Poland did not go unnoticed. From an early stage in the war, the Polish underground press published reports of mass shootings, forced labor, and the exploitation and extermination of the Jewish people, but many Jews did not believe such reports at the time.⁶ The United States, the United Kingdom, France, and much of the rest of the world's governments were aware of Germany's extermination of Jews, especially in Poland, but never acted until it was too late. As the *Bund's* World Coordinating Committee secretary Dr. Emanuel Scherer said twenty years after the war:

"today . . . it is perfectly clear that . . . the democratic and more humanitarian countries could have restrained the Nazis . . . During this period . . . between the first mass slaughter in Chelmno and the creation of the Warsaw ghetto . . . feasible acts of effective help were possible. But no

such steps were taken. Thus the non-Jewish world shares the burden of responsibility for the fate of six million Jews.”⁷

Despite the public’s initial disbelief, the underground press and underground political organizations ultimately had a strong influence on public opinion, military strategy, and Jews’ escape from capture and their continued hiding throughout the course of the war.

The Underground Networks

In Warsaw, there were many underground publications and organizations that informed the public and formed active resistance to the Nazi occupiers. There were more than 1000 secret underground publications that circulated. Very few of these were regularly published, however; only 17 periodicals were published regularly.⁸ The underground publications served primarily to inform Jews, sympathetic Poles, and the international community of the atrocities committed by the Nazis and to encourage men and women to join the fight against the Nazi regime. When they aided Jews in escaping from the ghetto of Warsaw, it was primarily the Jews with the most direct or indirect connections, whether through friends, family, or social or political groups, that were fortunate enough to receive help.⁹ Many Jews with no outside contacts were left to either coordinate their own escape, bribe their way out, or meet other Jews who would receive outside help.

The underground resistance organizations were from across the political spectrum; from the socialist *Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (ŻOB), or Jewish Fighting Organization, to the Home Army-linked *Żydowski Związek Wojskowy* (ŻZW), or Jewish Military Association, which had been established by groups on the political right. There were Zionist-Socialist, democratic and progressive, Communist, and Orthodox religious groups. Although there were dozens of

political groups which organized resistance to the Nazi occupiers in Poland and which often cooperated with one another, their resistance was not always coordinated with each other, and overall there was no mass active opposition. The Polish underground, then, was united in protest but not coordinated in resistance.

As Leon Feiner, chairman of the *Bund* Central Committee wrote in a private letter to London, the reasons for the lack of mass active opposition were:

“...(1) the illusions maintained by the enemy; (2) the officials and members of the Council are anxious that there should be no opposition so that they can save themselves; (3) the collective responsibility of the Jews – the fear that all might perish – is a tragic dilemma; (4) consciousness of the lack of response from abroad; (5) a lack of hope in help from beyond the walls.”¹⁰

We can see, then, that many council members were wary of any kind of resistance; Jewish and non-Jewish leaders alike wanted to avoid small-scale resistance to avoid facing the consequences themselves. It was in the self-interest of Jewish police, for example, to follow orders without protest to prevent their own deaths. Perhaps a less powerful motivator than self-interest but influential nonetheless was the desire to preserve the Jewish nation. Attempting to resistance was to take a great risk; successful resistance could save countless people, but failed resistance would result in brutal retaliation from the Nazi forces. The lack of response from abroad or even from their neighbors beyond the wall resulted in the loss of hope in their capability to form a successful resistance movement; without outside help, the imprisoned Jewish civilians had a very small chance of success and a high chance of death. The lack of response from abroad was perhaps the strongest source of the lack of hope in the Warsaw ghetto

and in Poland in general, as was expressed by Catholic writer Zofia Kossak-Szczucka in a leaflet titled “Protest” from the underground conservative Catholic *Front Odrodzenia Polski*:

“ . . . The world surveys this iniquity, more horrifying than anything in history, and is silent . . . Neither England nor America raises its voice . . . Polish political allies of the Jews confine themselves to journalism . . . ”¹¹

Unfortunately, she continued to say:

“ . . . We are not able to confront the German murderers actively; we can do nothing, save no one – but we protest from the bottom of our hearts which are overcome with compassion, outrage, and horror. . . ”

Here, it seems that Kossak-Szczucka was trying to convince both herself and her fellow Catholic Poles that they had no power in order to make them comfortable with their complacency. This type of thinking, on a mass scale, was partially responsible for the lack of mass active resistance of millions of Poles and their Jewish brethren in the ghetto. People, understandably, felt powerless. The Leadership of Civil Combat (*KWC*), the representative of the Polish government in exile in London, made similar claims that further commended themselves for protesting instead of encouraging active resistance:

“ . . . Unable to combat this actively, the KWC protests against the crime committed against the Jews in the name of the whole Polish society. . . ”¹²

Active Resistance: The Primary Organizations

Many organizations in the underground were not satisfied with thinking that they could make no difference and set out to form organized militant resistance. The *ZKN* (the Jewish

National Committee) was established, uniting *Po'alei Tsion*, *He-haluts*, as well as some Zionist/socialist youth organizations. The socialist *Bund* and *ZKN* began to work with one another following the formation of the Coordinating Committee of the *ZKN* and the *Bund*. On 2 December 1942, the Jewish Fighting Organization (*ZOB*) was established and was directed by the Coordinating Committee of the *ZKN* and the *Bund*; the Revisionist Zionists and members of the Polish *Betar* set up their own *Żydowski Związek Wojskowy* (Jewish Military Union, *ŻZW*); and so began Jewish/Polish active, armed resistance to the Germans.

The Bund

The socialist *Bund* was one of the most influential underground organizations, and was responsible for much of the communication to the outside world, resistance propaganda in Warsaw, and military action taken within the Warsaw ghetto. They were one of the few organization that had the opportunity to speak directly with the Polish government in exile as well as government officials from the United States and United Kingdom, including Churchill and Roosevelt.¹³ *Szturm*, the *Bund's* underground paper, in response to the 2 July, 1942 arrest and murder of 110 people from the Warsaw ghetto by the German police, published its renewed determination to continue its resistance to the German occupiers:

“ . . . from this day on we shall double our efforts to resist Nazi law. We do not fear punishment, for we have nothing to lose now, and everything to gain.”¹⁴

The Jewish underground took similar stances. All members of the Jewish and Polish undergrounds knew that they had little chance of defeating any German forces, but, notably, this was not their ultimate goal. They knew that the Germans had more soldiers, more training, more

guns, more money, and more power than they could feasibly oppose, but they had nothing left to lose, and that made them dangerous to the Germans.

The *Bund* used its connections to send valuable information to world governments. In May 1942, they sent two letters from Warsaw to London that would eventually be used to produce English-language propaganda to inform Americans and Britons of the situation that Jews faced in Warsaw and Poland:

*“A detailed report by Leon Feiner, the Bund’s principal liaison with the Polish underground, was . . . dispatched to London in May 1942. This report . . . was transmitted to the Polish government-in-exile and to others in Britain and in the United States.”*¹⁵

It is difficult to estimate the effects that the *Bund* had in the resistance movement. Although the United Kingdom and United States were extremely reluctant to take any action to stop the genocide of Jews in Poland, without the *Bund*’s stream of information it is likely that they would have hesitated even longer than they did. More than collect and send detailed information, however, the *Bund* played a central role in coordinating military resistance by assisting in reaching out to the *Armia Krajowa*’s Commander-in-Chief and the Polish Government Delegation to receive recognition the *ZOB* as a paramilitary organization. The *ZKN* and *ZOB* (Jewish underground) wanted to form an agreement with the Polish resistance to coordinate actions. They reached out to the Polish underground only after failing to receive assistance from the communists or Polish socialist groups.¹⁶

The Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB)

To discuss the *Bund* is, necessarily, to discuss the *ZOB*. In November of 1942, the Government Delegation and the Commander-in-Chief of the *AK* approved *ZOB* as a paramilitary

organization after much hesitation and help from the *Bund* and *ZKN's* Coordinating Committee.¹⁷ After this, the *ZOB* had access to military training, weapons supplies, and were “instructed in methods of urban warfare” and were taught techniques that they could use to attack German vehicles with explosives. Although this training was essential to the underground’s fight against the Germans, they knew that they did not have the numbers to overtake German forces. Despite this, members of the *ZOB* were ready to give their lives before they would surrender to the Germans.

In early January 1943, 8000 Jews in the Warsaw ghetto were to be sent to concentration camps. The *ZOB* urged the Jews in the ghetto to resist:

*“Do not go quietly to your deaths . . . Defend yourselves . . . do not let them take you without resistance. . . Fight.”*¹⁸

As a direct consequence of the *ZOB's* resistance and how they inspired others to resist, the Germans ceased the “evacuation” after taking 6,500 people from the ghetto instead of the initial 8,000. 1,500 people were temporarily saved as a result.

The Jewish Military Association (ZZW)

The political ideology driving the *ZZW* was much different than the socialist-bound *Bund* or Zionist/Socialist groups. The extreme divergence of political ideologies by resistance groups in the ghetto proved to be a significant barrier to coordinated resistance.

*“. . . because of differences of opinion . . . were unable to reach an agreement on active self-defense in the ghetto. . .”*¹⁹

Furthermore, the role of the ZZW in Warsaw has been traditionally downplayed since the communist government of Poland, after the war, chose to emphasize the actions of the *ZOB* and *Bund*, organizations which were more closely tied to their political ideologies.²⁰ ZZW had much better relations with the *AK*, as many of its members had military backgrounds from the inter-war period. This made it much easier for the ZZW to get weapon from the *AK* and the Polish underground, while the *ZOB* was met with suspicion due to its ties with far-left parties. The ZZW was much better trained:

*“ . . . the ZOB was composed of highly idealistic, politically oriented youngsters with almost no previous military experience . . . their acquisition of arms was complicated by the Polish Underground Army’s wariness of the leftist elements within their ranks. In contrast to the ZZW’s strategy of meeting the Germans head-on, the strategy of the ZOB was to ambush the German forces and then retreat to bunkers for safety . . . ”*²¹

The Role of the Underground Press

Following that small victory – if it can be called that – in the Warsaw ghetto, the *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, the *AK*’s primary journalistic mouthpiece, reported that the German police, SS, and Jewish police experienced dozens of losses.²² This led to a change of mentality in the ghetto; no one expected to save many lives, but they now rallied around the Jewish fighting organizations and started resisting in larger numbers. The *Biuletyn*’s influence in increasing the morale of the fighters and the onlookers across Poland cannot be overstated. Its reporting on the Warsaw ghetto uprising was key to inspiring others across Poland to resist. The *Bund*, the *ZOB*, and others also distributed flyers and pamphlets within and outside of the ghetto to recruit fighters and gain the moral, financial, and physical assistance from people who wanted to help in the fight against the Germans.

Conclusions

The Jewish underground resistance, with much help from the Polish underground, played a crucial role in saving thousands of Warsaw Jews — and Poles — during the Nazi occupation. It did this through small-scale organized resistance, military strategies, terrorist attacks, and propaganda campaigns. The underground political, military, and journalist networks in Warsaw during World War II were vital to the survival and escape of thousands of Jews — and Poles — and were a primary source of information to the Polish government-in-exile and the Allied powers. Most of the evidence indicates that the underground resistance groups on both sides of the political spectrum were not primarily seeking to save Jews but rather were determined not to die without putting up a fight. From their small numbers, they knew they would not win, but they showed courage despite their disadvantage. The Germans knew that their numbers were small and that their influence was little, and so did not expect the persistence or relatively good training of ghetto resistance fighters. In this way, the resistance fighters turned their disadvantage into an advantage to the best of their ability. *ZZW*, *ZOB*, and *Bund* fighters worked together despite their differing political ideologies in order to protect the Jewish nation and defeat the German forces. Although their impact was not massive, and could have been much more extensive if their political differences did not obstruct their coordination of self-defense, they achieved a level of success that no one expected in occupied Poland.

Without the underground networks of Jews and Poles working together, many more lives would have been lost. While many organizations in the underground did not seek to help Jews and instead attempted to provide armed resistance, they were successful in inspiring others in ghettos around Poland to resist. It is difficult to estimate the influence that the Jewish and Polish underground's actions and successes in Warsaw had on the outcome of the war itself and on

Jewish communities during and after the war, but we know that Jews in Warsaw and around Poland and the world were inspired by the actions of those fighters and activists in the Warsaw ghetto.

¹ Bartoszewski, Władysław. "The Martyrdom and Struggle of the Jews in Warsaw Under German Occupation, 1939-43," in *The Jews in Warsaw: A History*. ed. Władysław Bartoszewski and Antony Polonsky. 312. B. Blackwell in association with the Institute for Polish-Jewish Studies, Oxford, 1991.

² Paulsson, Gunnar S. *Secret City: the Hidden Jews of Warsaw, 1940-1945*. 1-2. Yale University Press, 2002.

³ Bartoszewski, 313.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 314.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. 332.

⁸ Zimmerman, Joshua D. "17 The Polish Underground Press and the Jews: The Holocaust in the Pages of the Home Army's Biuletyn Informacyjny, 1940-1943." Warsaw. *The Jewish Metropolis* (n.d.): 435-466.

⁹ Paulsson, 5.

¹⁰ "Letter from the *Bund* in Poland to Szmul Zygielbojm . . .", in W. Bartoszewski and Z. Lewin (eds), *Righteous among Nations: How Poles Helped the Jews 1939-1945* (London, 1969), document 77, pp. 719-28.

¹¹ Bartoszewski, 325.

¹² Ibid. 326.

¹³ Ibid. 331.

¹⁴ Ibid. 317.

¹⁵ Blatman, Daniel. 2010. *Bund*. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund> (accessed May 6, 2018). It is unknown if this article sourced the same letter as the one in endnote 10.

¹⁶ Arens, Moshe. "The Jewish Military Organization (ZZW) in the Warsaw Ghetto." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 2 (2005): 201-25.

¹⁷ Bartoszewski, 335.

¹⁸ Ibid. 336.

¹⁹ Ibid. 333.

²⁰ Kacperek, Krzysztof. *Kanadyjska Fundacja Dziedzictwa Polsko-Żydowskiego - ŻYDOWSKI ZWIĄZEK WOJSKOWY*. http://polish-jewish-heritage.org/Pol/listopad_zwiazek.html.

²¹ Arens, 215.

²² Bartoszewski, 336.