

## Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

Last attempt at resistance of Nazi deportations by the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto. The uprising broke out on Passover Eve, April 19, 1943, and lasted until mid-May.

By the spring of 1942, reports had confirmed that the Nazis were conducting a campaign to exterminate all of European Jewry. Within the Warsaw Ghetto, members of the Jewish underground – mainly members of the Zionist youth movements- decided that they needed to take action by establishing an effective defense organization. This became a reality on a small-scale during the summer of 1942, in the midst of a two-month long wave of deportations to Treblinka. The Jewish Fighting Organization (*Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*, ZOB) was created on July 28, consisting of the members of only three Zionist movements. At that time, the ZOB was powerless to stop the deportations, which finally ended in mid-September, leaving only 55,000--60,000 Jews in the Ghetto.

Altogether, some 300,000 Jews had been deported, including older people and children. The survivors of the *aktion* were mainly young people who blamed themselves for not having saved their families by standing up to the Nazis. These strong feelings spurred many of the underground groups to join the ZOB. Ultimately, the only Zionist movement that did not join the ZOB was the Revisionists, which created its own fighting organization called the Jewish Military Union (*Zydowski Zwiazek Wojskowy*, ZZW). ZOB members began preparations for a serious confrontation with the Nazis in the case of more deportations. They made contact with the Polish Home Army, which recognized the new resistance organization and sent it a small number of weapons.

On January 18, 1943 the Germans initiated the second wave of deportations from the Ghetto, called the "January *Aktion*." The ZOB, which had not yet finished preparing for battle, assumed that this *aktion* was to be the final deportation of Warsaw's Jews. The two units that had weapons attacked the Germans on the streets of the Ghetto. Mordecai Anielewicz led the ZOB fighters, of which many were killed. The *aktion* was halted after four days only.

The Jews in the Ghetto- both the underground and civilians- saw this as a victory for the ZOB, whose resistance seemed to have been the cause of an early end to the deportations.

This new feeling of strength galvanized the ZOB. Under Anielewicz's leadership, the group spent three months intensely preparing for the final battle against the Germans. Twenty-two fighting units were formed, each one representing a different youth movement. In all, the ZOB consisted of 500 fighters, while the ZZW had another 200--250 fighters. More members could have been recruited, but the ZOB did not make an effort to do so because there were not enough weapons to go around. Its own fighters had just a few pistols and automatic weapons. The ZOB had learned two important lessons from the events in January: they needed to be on constant alert, because the Germans could take them by surprise again, and they themselves had to surprise the Germans with attacks launched from strong positions within the Ghetto. Thus, they spent their time training, obtaining weapons, and mapping out a strategy for the Ghetto's defense.

The civilian population of the Ghetto also prepared itself for the next wave of deportations. They saw the events during the "January *Aktion*" as proof that Jewish resistance could derail the Germans. They also believed that an uprising within the Ghetto could provoke rebellion throughout Poland, creating serious problems for the Nazis. Thus, the civilians cooperated with the underground fighters by preparing underground bunkers and hiding places for themselves where they could survive even if they were cut off from each other during the fighting.

On April 18, 1943, the fighters received information that the final liquidation of the Ghetto was to begin the next day. By the time the Germans marched into the Ghetto on the morning of April 19, the entire Jewish population was ready and waiting. The German troops did not find one Jew on the streets; they had all taken to their bunkers and hiding places. Then the fighting began. That first day, the Germans were forced to retreat from the Ghetto.

The Ghetto fighters fought the Germans face to face for several days. After each encounter, the Jewish fighters withdrew via the rooftops; the Germans were thus unable to strike at them, nor could they uncover the Jews hidden

inside bunkers. The Germans next decided to burn the Ghetto, building by building. The fighters then had to retreat to the bunkers and carry out scattered attacks.

The Germans continued their search for the Jewish fighters by burning out the bunkers. This proved to be much more difficult than the Nazis had planned: every day, SS and police leader Juergen Stroop reported that his troops had conquered the underground fighters, only to report the next day that there was no end in sight to the fighting. However, the Jewish fighters did not have enough arms to hold out for much longer. They fought desperately and heroically, but their small cache of weapons was no match for the German war machine.

By May 8, most of the ZOB fighters had retreated to their headquarters bunker at 18 Mila Street. The bunker fell to the Germans that day, and ZOB commander Anielewicz and many of his fighters and commanders perished. ZOB members had not made plans for a retreat from the Ghetto; they simply planned to go on fighting until the last man had fallen. However, several dozen fighters managed to escape with the help of ZOB members on the Polish side of the Ghetto who led them through the city's sewer system.

On May 16 Stroop reported that the fighting was over, and that 56,065 Jews had been destroyed. However, even after that date there were still hundreds of Jews hidden in the Ghetto's underground bunkers. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had been the first uprising of an urban population in occupied Europe. (see also Resistance, Jewish, Jewish Fighting Organization, Warsaw, and Jewish Military Union, Warsaw.)