

Reetta Humalajoki  
Viksu-kilpailutyö

To what extent is it fair to say that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 was doomed to fail?

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Reetta Humalajoki  
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## Tiivistelmä

Maassa, jota Natsihallitus oli sortanut neljä vuotta, Varsovan ghetto kansannousu ei ollut aloittajiensa silmissä tapa kumota natsien valta missään vaiheessa. Kun natsien 'lopullinen ratkaisu juutalaisongelmaan' selvisi, toisen taistelujärjestön jäsenten ainoana päämääränä oli kuolla kunniallisesti.

Jopa tämän tavoitteen saavuttamisessa oli useita ongelmia kohdattavana. Niihin mukaan lukeutuivat gheton juutalaisten täydellinen eristyneisyys muusta maailmasta, puolalaisten ja liittoutuneiden haluttomuus auttaa juutalaisia ja jopa itse juutalaisten epärointi ennen kansannousun alkua. Kuitenkin salakuljetusmenetelmien, vastarintajärjestöjen jäsenten arjalaiselle puolelle piilottamisen ja mustassa pörssissä kaupankäymisen kautta järjestöt onnistuivat aseistautumaan. Tätä edesauttoi natsien valvonnan heikkous ja suoranaiset virheet. Ghettojen välinen yhteys pidettiin merkityksellisesti yllä sanansaattajien avulla.

Saksalaisten militaristisen valmennuksen, joukkojen ja varusteiden synnyttämän yliotteen vuoksi mittavampi menestys vaikutti hyvin pitkälti mahdottomalta. Juutalaisilla oli kuitenkin strateginen etu gheton sisäisessä taistelussa ja he käyttivät sokkeloisia katuja, ennalta rakennettuja bunkkereita ja laajaa viemäriverkostoa hyväkseen kaikin mahdollisin tavoin. Osittain sen vuoksi, että natsit aliarvioivat juutalaisten päättäväisyyttä ja kykyä ja toisaalta myös saksalaisjoukkojen taktisten virheiden takia, juutalaiset onnistuivat kuitenkin saavuttamaan monia päämääriään ja jopa ajamaan natsijoukot pois ghetosta.

Vaikka Varsovan ghetto kansannousu lopulta nujerrettiin, se jätti pysyvän jäljen paitsi juutalaisten mentaliteettiin myös yleiseen kansainväliseen yhteisöön yhtenä esimerkkinä tarkoituksen löytämisestä toivottomassa tilanteessa.

Abstract

In a country oppressed by the Nazi regime for 4 years, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 was never seen by its instigators as a means of overthrowing Nazi rule. Once the Nazi 'final solution to the Jewish problem' became clear, the aims of the fighters in one of the two fighting organizations involved were only to die with honour. In this essay, I used various memoirs of victims and books by historians I was able to determine that the Uprising was to an extent, not completely doomed to fail.

Even in doing so many difficulties had to be managed. These included the isolation of the Jews within the ghetto, the lack of aid and the hesitation of the Jews themselves to fight. Yet through systems of smuggling and trading in the black market, the organizations managed to arm themselves. This was helped by the fallibility of Nazi surveillance and general mistakes. Contact between ghettos around Poland was vital. By comparing the Uprising to the Vilna Ghetto and other situations, one can see the importance of mass support and the lack of hope of survival.

Due to the insurmountable upper-hand that the Germans held, any great success was seemingly to a vast extent impossible. Yet the Jews had the strategic benefits of fighting in the ghetto and utilized its previously constructed bunkers and the vast sewage system to their full extent. Partially thanks to the Nazi underestimation of Jewish determination and capabilities and several tactical errors, the Jewish fighters did succeed in many aims and even managed to drive Nazi troops out of the ghetto.

Though ultimately crushed, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising left a lasting imprint on not only Jewish mentalities but also the general international community, standing as an example of finding meaning in a hopeless situation.

## Introduction

To what extent is it fair to say that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 was doomed to fail?

The nature of Nazi rule over the countries it had conquered is well known in modern history. The treatment and segregation of Jews into ghettos and mass deportations to concentration and work camps is today known to have been an important part of the Nazi plan. “Going to the slaughter like sheep” is a common phrase used to describe the behaviour of the Jews at the time of the expulsion. German authorities could hardly imagine any form of resistance to their actions. Yet in April 1943, Jewish people remaining in the Warsaw ghetto area resisted violently and drove German forces to retreat, after 5 years of submission, without any hope of success. This was the first arranged resistance to take place in a Jewish ghetto- most other ghettos, for example that of Cracow, had been emptied two months before in March. The Jewish resistance in Warsaw managed to hold on for an entire month before the ghetto was finally destroyed. By the end of May 1943 all buildings down to the very synagogue were reduced to rubble.<sup>1</sup> In what sense is it fair to say that this battle was doomed to fail?

My aim in this essay is to show that though there was no hope of the Jews winning the battle in the Warsaw Ghetto, that the Jewish fighters did to some extent have hope of succeeding in their aims for the Uprising. In order to do so, I will consider the aims of both sides of the struggle and the methods used by them in preparation for and during the Uprising. In this I will use a number of primary sources, including memoirs of participants and documents from the time of the battle. A comparison between the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and like events will be assessed by the use of analytic, secondary sources including books by historians and research works.

## Body of text

### **German plans in the Warsaw Ghetto**

The attitude of the Nazis towards the Jews was evident straight from the beginning of the German occupation of Poland in September 1939. Various decrees directed primarily against the Jewish population and finally the establishment of a restricted Ghetto area surrounded by walls hinted towards the true plans of the Germans. Yet the actual “solution to the Jewish problem” was still unclear even to most Nazi party members until deportations were put into action in 1941.<sup>2</sup> Only

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<sup>1</sup> pictures (from website [www1.yadvashem.org/exhibitions/warsaw\\_ghetto/home\\_warsaw](http://www1.yadvashem.org/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto/home_warsaw)) included in Appendices

<sup>2</sup> Until then it was a common assumption by officials that the Jews would be deported to an area outside the German General Government, for example Madagascar; Israel Gutman, Resistance- The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, United

later did it become clear that the purpose of the aforementioned actions was to finally liquidate the entire Jewish population, information which was strictly confidential. The final stage of the plan was in action in April 1943, when the Jews arranged a rebellion.<sup>3</sup>

### **Establishment and Aims of Fighting Organizations**

When studying the aims of the Jewish Uprising, it is important to understand its background. The many previously existing Jewish youth groups in Warsaw became a key element to the birth of resistance. The members of these organizations were all young and energetic in their passive resistance to the Nazis.<sup>4</sup> Two main fighting organizations were established from these groups, the Jewish Fighting Organization and the Jewish Fighting Union. These two groups remained ideologically separated and the Uprising broke out before lasting agreements about working together could be made.

The Jewish Fighting Organization<sup>5</sup>, was established in a meeting of Zionist youth groups<sup>6</sup>, A document from the Yad Vashem<sup>7</sup> archives written by a member of the Jewish Fighting Organization's military staff outlined the aims of the organization in this way:

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States, Mariner Books, 1994, pg. 74 – This source is a book by Israel Gutman, a professor emeritus of Jewish history at Hebrew University. Having also worked as a director of the research centre at Israel's national Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem, Gutman had access to extremely valuable primary sources associated with not only Jewish resistance across the German occupied areas, but also dealing specifically with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The book is of considerable value due to this reason, as well as the fact that it is an in-depth and analytical study of the Uprising. Some limitations must be taken in to account, including that though not personally involved in the Uprising, Gutman is a Jewish survivor of three concentration camps and does have a personal, emotional connection to the events and thus has a subjective viewpoint of the happenings.

<sup>3</sup> ID

<sup>4</sup> Secret underground publications urged youths not to show any sign of respect to the Nazis, even in the form of tipping ones hat; Dan Kurzman, *Varsovan geton kansannousu*, transl. *The Bravest Battle*, Finland, Art House, 2005 (original first published in 1976) pg. 27 – This source is a partially fictional account of the events of the Uprising. Dan Kurzman, a former foreign news correspondent to the Washington Post interviewed a long list of both Jews and Poles involved in the Uprising, as well as investigating archives across Poland and Israel. The result is a very in-depth account of the events that took place in the form of continual prose, which makes the reliability somewhat questionable. Considerable presumptions are made in describing the actual thoughts of people, such as General Stroop, who cannot have possibly been interviewed, which limits the use of the book. At times it may be difficult to discriminate between fact and fiction. Another limitation is the timing of the book; it was first published in the 70s and has not been updated in any way to accommodate any new research or findings on the topic. On the other hand, at this point of time the memories of those interviewed may have been clearer, though still considerably subjective in view. Yet this is still a considerably valuable source for historians in understanding the course of events and organization of the Uprising, as well as the attitude of the Jewish fighters at the time.

<sup>5</sup> this was also known as ZOB, for *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*

<sup>6</sup> Hashomer Hatzair, Dror and Akiva, on July 28th, 1942. The leader became Mordechai Anielewicz, a young and well-known aggressor to both the Nazis and the Jewish police.

<sup>7</sup> Yad Vashem or the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority is an organization with the task of studying and documenting the Holocaust, established and located in Israel.

“...(1) *That the Jewish Fighting Organization has been established in order to prepare the defence of the Warsaw ghetto; (2) In order to teach a lesson to the Jewish Police, the Werkschutz,<sup>8</sup> the managers of the "shops"<sup>9</sup> and all kinds of informers.*”<sup>10</sup>

At no point was it the goal or even the slightest hope of the Jewish Fighting Organization to totally defeat the Nazis or to take over the Warsaw Ghetto. It was crucial to the organization of the rebellion that there was absolutely no hope of survival.<sup>11</sup> The only possible end was death- through battle, not submission.<sup>12</sup> This ideology grew to the extent of having no plans of salvation in the form of escape routes from the ghetto.

The plans and background of the Jewish Fighting Union, a significantly smaller organization, were slightly different. Little documentation of the Jewish Fighting Union exists, most of which is unreliable and contradictory, but it is clear that the members had planned a route of escape.<sup>13</sup> Therefore it would seem that these fighters did not see the Uprising as a way of choosing ones death, but as a means to carry out other plans.<sup>14</sup> The Jewish Fighting Union had evolved from a revisionist Zionist youth group called Betar, which aimed towards establishing a Jewish state, using violent or even terrorist means in doing so.<sup>15</sup>

### **Unwillingness of Jews to Resist**

But before the organizations could create any truly effective opposition, there was a major problem to confront, namely the attitudes of the Jewish civilians to the situation. The unwillingness of the Jews themselves to stand up and fight the Germans is perhaps one of the more puzzling phenomena of ghettos across the German occupied areas. It has been claimed that the eventual enthusiasm for resistance that spread in the Warsaw Ghetto was unique in magnitude, which explains why resistance was rare even in other ghettos with underground activity, like Vilna<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> guards of the ghetto factories and other work places

<sup>9</sup> a code name used by the resistance movement for German enterprises.

<sup>10</sup> “Aims of the Jewish Fighting Organization”, 1942, document written by a member of the Jewish Fighting Organization’s military staff; Gutman pg. 153

<sup>11</sup> Gutman, pg. 150

<sup>12</sup> Gutman, pg. 104;

<sup>13</sup> Kurzman, pg. 120

<sup>14</sup> Some evidence has been found to support the claim that the Union intended to escape to the woods and continue as partisan fighters.

<sup>15</sup> Kurzman, pg. 55

<sup>16</sup> Gutman, pg. 187; I will draw a deeper comparison of the two ghettos later on in the essay.

Collective responsibility, the theory that Germans applied to punish hundreds of Jews for the actions of only a few, was one of the main reasons for the timidity of Jews to resist the German commands in the early days of the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>17</sup> It was widely believed that through submission some few Jews would manage to hold out to the end of the Second World War, but any sort of staged resistance would be the suicide of all.<sup>18</sup>

No one could have guessed at the vastness of Nazi plans until Jews managed to gain information on what was really going on at the camp in Treblinka. Here the networked connections upheld by youth organizations around ghettos within Poland were vital to the spread of information across occupied areas.<sup>19</sup> In this way the information of what was really going on in the camps became widely known. Only then did the atmosphere in the ghetto begin to change and become more favourable towards resistance. With no hope of actually overcoming the Nazi hold, the Jews remaining in the ghetto were left with nothing to lose. From this realization came the slogan announced by the Jewish Fighting Organization in placards in January 1943: *“We should all be ready to die as human beings.”*<sup>20</sup>

The changing attitude was finally solidified with the Jewish Fighting Organizations successful assassination of various Jewish police officials<sup>21</sup> and in the first instance of armed resistance, which took place on January 18<sup>th</sup> of the year of the Uprising. At that time the Germans made their first attempt to carry out the final deportations from the ghetto.<sup>22</sup> To the utter surprise of the German officers, Jews struck back.<sup>23</sup> As a result the Nazi troops had to postpone deportations. It was due to

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<sup>17</sup> this is well illustrated in the films “Uprising” (directed by John Avnet) and “The Pianist” (directed by Roman Polanski). The purpose of both films is mainly to entertain, but also inform viewers about a historic event. The value of these films to the study of the Uprising is limited by the many liberties on the facts taken by the directors, but is useful in understanding the atmosphere of the Warsaw Ghetto and the fear felt by the Jews. Especially “The Pianist”, which utilizes actual Nazi film footage from the ghetto, creates a very accurate setting.

<sup>18</sup> Gutman, pg. 150; Kurzman pg. 29

<sup>19</sup> These were upheld mostly with the use of female messengers known as mekashroth, meaning “runners”. These proved very important in the purchase of weaponry to the ghetto as well as for maintaining the flow of information throughout the occupied area. “The Girl Couriers of the Underground Movement”, excerpt from book by Emanuel Ringelblum, from the Jewish Virtual Library

<sup>20</sup> Gutman pg. 176; document “Call to Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto”, January 1943, announcement issued by the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Ghetto

<sup>21</sup> Gutman, pg. 170

<sup>22</sup> IBID, pg. 182

<sup>23</sup> “They opened fire and threw several hand grenades, killing about twenty Germans.” – Bernard Goldstein, Five Years in the Warsaw Ghetto (The Stars Bear Witness), transl., Canada, AK Press/Nabat, 2005, pg. 154 – This primary source is the memoirs of Bernard Goldstein, a prominent member of the Bund at the time of the Uprising. Situated on the Aryan side of the ghetto during the actual fighting, this source delivers an accurate account of how the Uprising was organized and what part the political parties especially played in it. It is unclear at what point of time the text was actually written, but the part played by the translator and editor, Leonard Shatzkin, must be taken into account. This limits the value of the source, considering some meaning may have been lost in the editing and translating process.

the seeming success of this battle that Jewish civilians finally took the fighters seriously and even rejoiced in their plans.<sup>24</sup>

### **Contact with the International Community**

Of course merely gaining clear aims and some organization isn't enough to guarantee the success of a plan of action. There was little reason for the fighters to be optimistic. First and foremost in hindering the resistance was the isolation of the ghetto Jews- they were granted next to no help from the outside world.<sup>25</sup>

In the early days of the German occupation, both Jews and Poles alike relied on the Allies as their primary hope of salvation. Maintaining contact with organizations abroad and with the Polish government-in-exile, which was based in London was a task that existing political parties took on. Little help was granted. In the end the Jewish representative to of the government-in-exile, Shmuel Zygelbojm set himself on fire in front of the Houses of Parliament in protest of the inaction. He left behind a letter, stating:

*“The responsibility for the crime of murdering the entire Jewish population of Poland falls first and foremost on the murderers themselves, but indirectly, this responsibility also falls on all of mankind, the nations and the governments of the Allies, who have until now made no real efforts to stop the crime.”*<sup>26</sup>

This in essence is an accurate description of the attitude of Allied governments towards the Jewish fighters of Warsaw. It was another function of the various pre-existent political parties<sup>27</sup>, to keep up contact with Jewish communities outside the Warsaw area. Few, but important money transmissions were passed on to the Jewish resistance from the international Jewish community.<sup>28</sup>

### **Cooperation of the Poles and the Polish Underground**

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<sup>24</sup> ID

<sup>25</sup> Gutman, pg. 242

<sup>26</sup> as quoted in ID

<sup>27</sup> for example the General Jewish Socialist Labour Union, more familiarly known as the Bund

<sup>28</sup> It is apparent that up until 1941 the Bund managed to arrange several money transmissions to the ghetto from the United States with varying success. After the beginning of the deportations even this became impossible. Surprisingly, before the beginning of the Uprising, connections between Jews in hiding on the Aryan side and the Jewish communities of Allied countries were established with further vigour.; Goldstein, pg. 202

*“According to the Communist plan, the ghetto was to have been used as a spur for an uprising at too early a time, which the PPR [the Polish Underground Communist Party] is seeking to bring about. There were Communist printing presses for a long time in the ghetto, there were arms depots and Communist staff groups, and from there Soviet officers directed diversionary actions.*

*In view of this fact, we may evaluate the Jewish resistance as a positive element, for it caused the premature liquidation of one of the armed positions of the Communists...”<sup>29</sup>*

This extract from a bulletin released by the Polish Underground Press on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943, after the end of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, has little foundation in truth, but illustrates the attitude of Poles towards the Jews well.<sup>30</sup> When considering its nature, it isn't surprising that the Jewish Fighting Organization received very little help even from the Polish underground anti-fascist movements. Little weaponry was granted to them, usually just small firearms such as pistols.<sup>31</sup> There were two main arguments used to explain this lack of assistance. Firstly Polish underground movements claimed that the Jews weren't capable of organizing effective resistance and any material help would go to waste. Another commonly given excuse was that the timing of the uprising didn't suit the Polish plans for resistance, which stated that rebellion would be arranged towards the end of the war, not in the midst of it.<sup>32</sup> It would be unfair to say that no military help came from the Aryan side of Warsaw, as the Jewish Fighting Union did manage to claim more than the necessary amount of weaponry to fight<sup>33</sup>, though assistance on a broader scale did not occur.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “Ghetto Resistance Seen Correctly” – Polish Underground Press, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Bulletin of AK intelligence group Ajenca A.

<sup>30</sup> Gutman, pg. 216

<sup>31</sup> “Warsaw Jews Request Arms from Polish Underground”, March 13, 1943, letter from Jewish Fighting Organization leader to members of the Polish Underground

<sup>32</sup> Rachel L. Einwohner, *Opportunity, Honor, and Action in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943*, 2003, Purdue University – this source is an extensive study was conducted by Rachel L. Einwohner, a professor of Sociology at Purdue University. Its purpose is to study social movement emergence utilizing the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as an example. It is a considerably valuable source as an analytic, in-depth study of psychological factors affecting the Warsaw Uprising fighters. The writer has used a considerable amount of both primary sources such as diaries and memoirs as well as a number of historical and psychological works, making it an up-to-date research study. The value is limited by the length- all matters are discussed in a mere 23 pages and so cannot be relied on as a source for accurate depiction of the events, as stated in the essay itself.; Gutman, pg. 173

<sup>33</sup> The Jewish Fighting Union, unlike its counterpart, maintained strong connections with one of the secondary military branches of the Polish underground, which was lead by Henry Iwanski. Thanks to this relationship the Jewish Fighting Union never had a lack of arms. In comparison, some Polish underground organizations, for example the AK, the Polish Home Army, did help secure some arms for the Jewish Fighting Organization. Yet this was only in the form of about 10 pistols at a time, some that didn't even work.

<sup>34</sup> Gutman, pg. 155

There is reason to believe that a much bigger issue was to play behind this unwillingness to assist the Jews- the history of deep-rooted anti-Semitism in Poland. The Jewish population did not have the same national rights as any other Pole, so many considered themselves separate from Polish citizens.<sup>35</sup> In addition, there was a widespread belief in Warsaw that all Jews were Communists and had ties with the Soviet Union. This trend was not unique to Poland and may be used to explain the unwillingness of European peoples and even of Allied governments to assist the Poles. For example in Hungary during the deportations in 1944, little sympathy was granted to the Jews.<sup>36</sup>

During the pre-war years the socialist Bund gained much popularity among the Jewish community by promoting the rights of the Jewish everyman. Thus the Polish underground Communist Party, the PPR was more inclined to help the Jews.<sup>37</sup> Also, PPR plans to aid the struggling Soviet Army coincided with the timing of the ghetto uprising.<sup>38</sup> Yet here the PPR made a miscalculation, wrongly assuming they had the support of the Soviet Union, when in fact no help was ever received from them.<sup>39</sup> The ghetto itself was inhabited by many Jews that had fled the Soviet pogroms and knew the anti-Semitic views of Stalin, so the Jewish underground did not expect help from the Soviets.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Means and Importance of Smuggling**

Therefore the Jewish fighters had to secure themselves otherwise. Smugglers on both sides of the ghetto wall were very important, as the rationing grew stricter. Through types of smuggling organizations, involving hundreds of people, some Poles and Jews even financially benefited from the struggle.<sup>41</sup> These smuggling organizations were a fact of daily life all over German occupied areas, even in places ghettos had not been established, like Belchatow.<sup>42</sup> Some members of the

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<sup>35</sup> the Jews had their own culture, areas and traditions outside the framework of daily life in Poland. Many, especially those supporting Zionism, didn't even consider themselves Polish.

<sup>36</sup> "Gendarmes, Policemen, Functionaries and the Jews - New Findings on the Behavior of Hungarian Authorities During the Holocaust", essay by Judit Molnár of the University of Szeged, describes how in the early 1900s anti-Semitism virtually became a policy of the Hungarian government as well as the manner in which the Hungarian civilian population gained private apartments and the utilization of synagogues for their own means- evidence to support the claim of anti-Semitism being a decisive factor in the treatment of Jews in Hungary during the Holocaust.

<sup>37</sup> Gutman, pg. 110

<sup>38</sup> the PPR supported the idea of quick guerrilla attacks against the Nazis, to distract away from the eastern front and the consequently alleviate the Soviet Army.

<sup>39</sup> IBID, pg. 114

<sup>40</sup> Gutman, pg. 32

<sup>41</sup> during the early years of the ghetto a clear upper-class existed separate from the starving masses, to whom smugglers could sell food and luxuries at prices considerably higher than on the Aryan side of the ghetto walls; Gutman, pg. 92

<sup>42</sup> "The History of the Jewish People of Belchatow", Dr. Ph. Friedman, essay from the website <http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/Belchatow/bel019.html>; Belchatow, a small Polish village had a thriving blackmarket co-operation between some Poles, Jews and even people of German origin, while most Jews starved. In contrast to the situation in Warsaw, these transactions were mostly to do with manufactured goods and money, not food.

Jewish Fighting Organization managed to hide on the Aryan side and from there buy weaponry in the black market.<sup>43</sup> The majority of help received in the ghetto was through these transactions, not as a result of any charitable assistance from the Aryan side. Successful smuggling in all of its different forms required communication between the Jews hiding in the Aryan side of Warsaw and the black market, from which they could purchase needed equipment. In order to do so, once the Jewish Fighting Organization had consolidated its authority in the Warsaw Ghetto, a tax was placed on all inhabitants to secure funds for this transaction.<sup>44</sup>

Though on a whole Nazi observation of the Jews was strict, it was not infallible. It has even been argued that the Nazis allowed smuggling organizations to keep active by not imposing collective punishment on smugglers, as it kept the Jews from starving out too quickly.<sup>45</sup> In any case, a constant watch on the Jews could not be kept and at times the Nazi officers made serious miscalculations. During the months before the Uprising, most professional smugglers had been deported from the ghetto and so other forms of smuggling became vital- this time for weaponry alongside food.<sup>46</sup> For example, Jewish labour groups were regularly lead out of the ghetto to different parts of Warsaw to work, which allowed for contact with Poles<sup>47</sup>; some even managed to purchase vital materials for the resistance when the guards' backs were turned.<sup>48</sup> Sometimes even official permission from Nazi officers to purchase food for the ghetto inhabitants was given, through which Jews also managed to smuggle various items into the ghetto. In his memoirs, the famous composer and pianist, Wldayslaw Szpilman, an inhabitant of the ghetto until January 1943, describes one of the methods with which arms were smuggled across the wall:

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<sup>43</sup> This is well described by Bernard Goldstein in his memoirs: *“Buying arms was very difficult and dangerous. Nevertheless, little by little, driven to take great risks by the desperate feeling that we were working against time, we managed to achieve some success... We bought stolen arms from guards at army dumps, from German soldiers, from Poles who worked in arms factories. With restless hysteria, we explored every avenue, tracked down every lead, knowing that the end was close and that we must be ready.”*; Goldstein, pg. 152

<sup>44</sup> Goldstein, pg. 155

<sup>45</sup> Gutman, pg. 90

<sup>46</sup> IBID, 163

<sup>47</sup> ID; Wladyslaw Szpilman; *The Pianist – The Extraordinary Story of One Man’s Survival in Warsaw, 1939-45*; transl. transl. Śmierć Miasta (Death of a City); Great Britain; Phoenix; 2003 (original first published in 1946); pg. 126 – this source is the memoirs of the pianist and composer Wladyslaw Szpilman, who escaped the ghetto to the Aryan side just months before the Uprising. The book was written just months after the end of WWII and so it has been stated that Szpilman was very likely still in a state of shock. This can be seen in his style of writing, which seems almost emotionless and clear in detail. A source like this would be of considerable value to any historian studying the atmosphere and daily life of a Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto, but has some limitations in studying this particular subject. The concentration is on personal events and so only mentions the organization of the Uprising in passing, as Szpilman was not particularly involved in it.

<sup>48</sup> Gutman, pg. 90

*“...the ghetto underground organizations stepped up their activities. My group was involved too. Majorek, who delivered sacks of potatoes to our group from the city daily, smuggled in ammunition underneath the potatoes. We shared it out between us and brought it into the ghetto hidden up our trouser legs.”*<sup>49</sup>

With so much traffic going on between the Aryan side of the wall and the ghetto, there was little difficulty in managing to escape. The problem was finding refuge on the outside. Polish blackmailers, labelled “schmaltzovniks”, made a career out of seeking out and blackmailing Jews in hiding.<sup>50</sup> This was a phenomenon that appeared both in ghettos across Poland and all over German occupied areas. Money was always an asset in escaping from the ghetto. Both Ukrainian soldiers in the Nazi army and Polish citizens were easily bribed by the right sum of money, though sometimes they would turn in the Jewish escapees anyway.

The Jewish fighters could only really rely on themselves. From the first instance of resistance until the beginning of the Uprising, constant preparations were being made underground. Without the assurance of weaponry to rely on, members of the Jewish Fighting Organization soon became experts in home-made bomb building with smuggled materials.<sup>51</sup> Common arms during the Uprising consisted of home-made hand grenades and Molotov cocktails.<sup>52</sup>

### **Initial German Failures**

When comparing the military situations of the Jewish fighters to that of the German army, few would trust to hope for anything more than a short-lived struggle. The Jewish combatant groups were made up of a few hundred untrained, starved, scarcely armed civilians, while the Germans had over 2,000 trained soldiers with the most modern machine guns, tanks and other military equipment at their immediate disposal.<sup>53</sup> Yet on April 19<sup>th</sup>, Jewish fighting units forced the German troops to withdraw from the ghetto.<sup>54</sup> This victory could not be achieved solely on Jewish successes, but German mistakes in tactics and weaknesses in situation must also be considered.

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<sup>49</sup> Szpilman, pg. 126; a very similar description of the means with which workers outside the ghetto walls smuggled food into the ghetto is also described in Gutman, pg. 90

<sup>50</sup> There were carefully planned organizations behind this type of blackmail. Plans were devised to ensnare vulnerable Jews by playing up the hope of a hiding place on the Aryan side only to demand all the Jews' belongings and maybe even turn them in to the Gestapo. More simple forms of blackmail were pulling the trousers of men suspected as Jews and demanding their money.; Einwohner, pg. 10; Goldstein, pg. 148

<sup>51</sup> These bomb-builders were considerably inventive and even experimented with various substances from the factories.; Gutman, pg. 153

<sup>52</sup> IBID, pg. 204

<sup>53</sup> Kurzman, pg. 109

<sup>54</sup> ID

The first major mistake made by the Germans was on the first day of the Uprising, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1943. The leader of Nazi action in the ghetto, at the time Colonel Ferdinand von Sammern-Frankeneegg, vastly underestimated the Jewish fighters. Probably powered by the Nazi ideology of Jews as weak cowards, von Sammern-Frankeneegg assumed he could wipe out the ghetto in a mere three days, by simply marching in troops and armoured cars.<sup>55</sup> This estimation was overtly optimistic- clearing the ghetto included moving 16,000 Jewish workers along with the equipment and materials of the factories all over the ghetto.<sup>56</sup> In a matter of hours he was dismissed and SS General Jürgen Stroop took his place. But the retreat had already upped Jewish morale, well illustrated by Mordechai Anielewicz, a Jewish Fighting Organization leader, in a letter to fighters on the Aryan side:

*“Something occurred that is beyond our wildest dreams. The Germans withdrew from the ghetto twice. One of our companies held out for 40 minutes, and the second for more than six hours.”<sup>57</sup>*

### **Strategic Importance of the Ghetto Layout**

A big factor in Jewish successes was their position in the ghetto. In the structure, layout and architecture of the narrow streets, the Jewish fighters had a significant strategic advantage. A decisive factor in battle was the construction of bunkers<sup>58</sup> - shelters well-equipped to hide in for long periods of time<sup>59</sup>. A place in a bunker was a commodity that every Jew tried to secure for themselves<sup>60</sup>.

Many of the Germans involved in ghetto life were the owners of factories, which employed Jews. After the mass deportations the Jews remaining in the ghetto were mostly young, able-bodied and trained workers.<sup>61</sup> Many Nazis saw this group as an important work force and could not accept their deportation.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> IBID, pg. 92

<sup>56</sup> Gutman, pg. 210

<sup>57</sup> IBID, pg. 207

<sup>58</sup> These bunkers were usually dug under the cellars of buildings or arranged in abandoned attics, always well hidden. Construction was conducted in secret, primarily at night. Smaller hiding places were built in between walls and passage from one shelter to another was secured by digging tunnels.

<sup>59</sup> Goldstein, pg. 159; Gutman, pg. 196

<sup>60</sup> Seeking out these hiding places became important to secure Nazi victory; usually once found gas would be pumped into the bunkers, either forcing the people in hiding to try to escape or killing them.; Gutman, pg. 236, 240

<sup>61</sup> According to SS sources, 300 000 out of one million skilled workers in the German occupied area were Jewish.; Gutman, pg. 191

<sup>62</sup> For example the commander of the Wehrmacht forces in the General Government, General Curt Ludwig von Gienanth, sent a letter to Himmler criticizing the command to continue the deportations. He soon found himself out of work.; Gutman, pg. 191

The placement of the factories and equipment in the ghetto slowed Nazi plans of destruction, granting the Jewish fighters time.<sup>63</sup> It was not until it became apparent that more decisive methods were needed to extinguish the Uprising that Himmler agreed to let Stroop ignore the claims of factory owners.<sup>64</sup> Subsequently almost all the buildings of the ghetto were systematically set on fire.<sup>65</sup> This was the turning point at which the Jewish fighters were at a loss for hope<sup>66</sup>, though already having surpassed their aims.<sup>67</sup>

In this way the Ghetto was reduced to rubble. At this time members of the Jewish Fighting Organization lacking the means to continue fighting were forced to change plans and attempt escape through the sewers, mostly unsuccessfully<sup>68</sup>.

### **Warsaw in Comparison to Vilna**

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the biggest and most successful rebellion against Nazi actions by any Jewish community across Europe. In understanding why resistance in Warsaw worked out like it did, it is very useful to compare it to other ghettos that had underground activity. As previously mentioned, the fighters in the ghetto of Vilna<sup>69</sup> were the first to call for mass resistance in all of the German occupied areas.<sup>70</sup>

The battle in Vilna bore striking resemblance to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which took place only 3 months before.<sup>71</sup> The uprising in Vilna was short-lived<sup>72</sup> and unsuccessful compared to that

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<sup>63</sup> In the early days of the Uprising, Stroop was ordered to be careful of damaging the factories and materials stored within them.

<sup>64</sup> Kurzman, pg. 154; "Himmler Orders the Destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto", February 16, 1943, report by Himmler

<sup>65</sup> In his reports of what he called the Grossaktion, Stroop included detailed and often exaggerated descriptions of such raids: "*Not infrequently, the Jews stayed in the burning buildings until, because of the heat and the fear of being burned alive they preferred to jump down from the upper stories... With their bones broken, they still tried to crawl across the street...*" - "The Stroop Report: The Warsaw Ghetto Is No More", 1943, the full report on the destruction of the ghetto by SS General Jürgen Stroop, -

<sup>66</sup> Escape from the burning buildings was impossible- many jumped out to their deaths. Pictures of this (from website [www1.yadvashem.org/exhibitions/warsaw\\_ghetto/home\\_warsaw](http://www1.yadvashem.org/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto/home_warsaw)) included in Appendices. The situation in bunkers also became unbearably hot and airless.

<sup>67</sup> "The Last Letter from Mordechai Anielewicz", April 23, 1943, letter written by Jewish Fighting Organization leader; Gutman, pg. 226

<sup>68</sup> One successful escape of Jewish Fighting Organization members was accomplished this way, but most attempts were foiled by Nazis. ; Kurzman, pg. 283, 293 & 324; German Battle Diary, April 20th, 1943, excerpt from a report sent by the SS and Police Leader (*SS- und Polizeifuehrer*) in the Warsaw District.

<sup>69</sup> A city near the Eastern Front, presently the capitol of Lithuania.

<sup>70</sup> In the lines: "Let us not go as sheep to the slaughter!...Resist! To the last breath." the call to resistance in the Vilna Ghetto bears striking resemblance to that released in the Warsaw Ghetto a year later.; "Jewish Pioneer Youth Group in Vilna Calls for Resistance"; January 1, 1942; Gutman pg. 104

<sup>71</sup> Gutman, pg. 104

of Warsaw. The reason for this seems to be a lack of mass support, which the fighters in Vilna failed to gain.<sup>73</sup> Still, some similarities are striking. In both situations youth groups instigated the resistance and took responsibility for its organization, again only managing large-scale resistance once the ghetto was already on the verge of extinction.<sup>74</sup> This brings support to the claim made by Jewish historian Israel Gutman, stating that in a like situation for resistance to gain popularity there could be no hope of survival.<sup>75</sup> In this light, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was not doomed to fail to the extent of the resistance movement in Vilna.<sup>76</sup>

### **The Rise of Resistance in a Hopeless Situation**

Accepting that there was no hope of survival explains why the resistance movement in the Warsaw Ghetto succeeded in convincing the masses to disobey Nazi orders, but it does not explain why so many chose to die fighting. In this circumstance the mind-set of the Jews in German occupied areas is comparable to that of any person living in an oppressive situation.<sup>77</sup> A similar situation can be found in the slave rebellions of North America in the early 1800s.<sup>78</sup> In both cases, victims were denounced as “sub-human”, bereft of respect, so unsurprisingly accounts of both members of the Uprising and slave rebellions bear the same sort of defiance and will to regain honour.<sup>79</sup>

The want of honour and dignity are a vital factor in any instance of resistance to oppression.<sup>80</sup> In the accounts of Warsaw Ghetto fighters there is no hope of military success to be found, but these two words appear everywhere.<sup>81</sup> The role of honour as a motivational agenda, combined with the realization that death was inevitable, is very important to understanding the rise and outcome of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.<sup>82</sup>

### Conclusions

Seeing as the aim of the Jewish Fighting Organization was only to resist the Nazis as best they could and die with honour rather than passively, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943 was to an

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<sup>72</sup> It lasted merely 23 days, from the 1st of September 1943 to the 23rd.

<sup>73</sup> At the time in Vilna, the masses admired the young resistance fighters, but did not themselves see reason to join in the battle.; Gutman, pg. 187

<sup>74</sup> IBID, pg. 104

<sup>75</sup> IBID, pg. 150

<sup>76</sup> ID

<sup>77</sup> Einwohner, pg. 16

<sup>78</sup> website <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/DIASPORA/REBEL.HTM>

<sup>79</sup> ID; Einwohner, pg. 15

<sup>80</sup> ID

<sup>81</sup> For example, see the call to resistance quoted on pg. 6 of this essay

<sup>82</sup> Einwohner, pg. 16

extent not utterly doomed to fail. The fighters had the situational upper-hand in the ghetto, in which the Nazis had several investments that they were hesitant to squander immediately. The narrow streets of the ghetto, especially once sufficient bunkers had been constructed by the Jews, was almost an ideal area to stage an uprising. Through bribery and various clever smuggling operations the resistance movement was able to even arm itself and powered by early German failures and underestimation of the rebels, opportunities were found. The strongest asset of the Jews, as is usual in revolts against oppression, was their need to regain dignity and acknowledgement that death was inevitable, eliminating inhibitions and fears of armed resistance. In the light of these factors achieving the aims of the Jewish Fighting Organization was indeed not hopeless.

Any chance of greater success, for instance further maiming the German troops and the possible aims of the Jewish Fighting Union were to a great extent doomed to fail. This was largely due to the attitude towards the resistance of Allied governments and Polish underground movements, in which it has been claimed that anti-Semitism played a part. This coupled with the simple fact of the superiority of the German troops in means of training and equipment, it is obvious that in the long run there was no beating the Germans, even while the Axis forces were being defeated in North Africa.

The importance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is clear. As the first effective armed Jewish opposition to the Nazis, it encouraged other Jews to end the passivity and stand up for themselves, like in Vilna and the Treblinka concentration camp, where plans of resistance were born after the end of the Warsaw Uprising.<sup>83</sup> It has also been said that the Uprising finally erased the common stereotyping of the Jewish population as passive. Today the Uprising stands as an example of finding hope and purpose in a situation where survival is no longer an option.

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<sup>83</sup> Here where so many Jews had been massacred, the search for weaponry and planning of armed resistance began after information of the outcome of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had reached the camp, again when the camp was already near extinction. The revolt had little success; Gutman, pg. 255

Appendices



*Remains of a building shelled in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*



*Jew found in a bunker during the Uprising, surrounded by rubble*



*A Jewish woman escapes attempts to escape a burning building*



*Fire was the main method of destruction during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*

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