

Review Article

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The 80th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: An Attempt at a Summary

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Abstract: The review discusses the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising's celebrations in Poland.

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April 19, 2023 marked the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In Poland's many cities, special celebrations were held to commemorate the largest armed Jewish revolt during the Second World War. As Holocaust literature researcher Jacek Leociak writes: "On 19 April 1943, when the uprising broke out, it was already perfectly clear that deportations from the ghetto were not really deportations to the east. [...] It was about avoiding the »Umschlagplatz« [concentration point] by any means possible" (Leociak 2023, 40). In April 1943, there were still about 50,000 Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, the vast majority of whom were civilians. There were only few prepared for the fight – about 750 Jewish fighters half a thousand from the Jewish Combat Organisation and 250 from the Jewish Military Union.

The experiences of the Second World War are an essential component of the Polish collective memory, which is formulated at state level and connected to various memory practices. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is the most famous act of Jewish resistance in occupied Poland (Libionka 2023, 23); however, in today's Poland, as noted by historian Jan Grabowski, we are confronted with the fact that, contrary to Polish wartime mythology, Warsaw's Jews died alone and forgotten in 1943 (Grabowski 2018). Anti-Semitism had an impact on Europeans' attitudes during the Holocaust, and the Poles were no exception (Kijek 2023, 52). Therefore, the 80th anniversary this year was also another test for the framework of Polish memory and its politics of history.

The scale at which the anniversary of the outbreak is celebrated may create an impression that the uprising has been a prominent and commemorated Polish

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historical event. On the other hand, an analysis of the anniversary programmes shows that the memory of the Second World War in today's Poland is a disputed area, with many entities battling each other at the symbolic level; exemplified by the case of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, too (Czapliński 2005, 417). The fight over the collective memory is dominated by two main camps. In the context of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the first is represented by a series of initiatives commemorating the history of the ghetto inhabitants, addressing a growing group of audience, and/or offering nuanced knowledge about the uprising. It would be impossible to list here all the publications prepared specially for the anniversary, as well as the initiatives undertaken by various institutions across Poland. I believe that they should be seen as a clear response to the words of publicist, social activist, and Holocaust survivor Marian Turski (1926-) who, on January 27, 2020, in KL Auschwitz-Birkenau, appealed to the public to follow the “Thou Shalt Not Be Indifferent” directive. Nevertheless, I would like to mention here the activities of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the leading Polish museum dedicated to the history of Jews in Poland.

POLIN has prepared a series of events related to the anniversary that is being held throughout the year (see POLIN 2023). The museum has already inaugurated a temporary exhibition titled *Around Us a Sea of Fire. The Fate of Jewish Civilians During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (concept: Barbara Engelking), which presents the revolt not from the fighters' perspective, but rather of the civilians' who hid in bunkers and lairs, silently resisting the German occupier. The museum has also organised numerous meetings and artistic activities, concerts, scientific conferences, and educational workshops about the ghetto. The socio-educational Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Campaign, which POLIN has been organising for 11 years, involves volunteers handing out paper daffodils in the streets to remind passer-by of the Uprising as an act of resistance to the criminal ideology; for the first time in history it was also organised in six Polish cities: Warsaw, Białystok, Krakow, Lublin, Łódź and Wrocław.

The anniversary is also commemorated by a publication: *Kwestia charakteru. Bojowniczk z getta warszawskiego* [“A Matter of Character: Women Fighters from the Warsaw Ghetto,”] (Wołowicz 2023), a book prepared by a collective of women researchers, writers, artists and activists, edited by Sylwia Chutnik and Monika Sznajderman. Published jointly by Czarne Publishing House and the POLIN Museum, the book is dedicated to the heroines of the uprising, women fighters and activists, whose names only have been known so far. It presents portraits of extraordinary women whose involvement in the ghetto uprising took many different forms. The introduction to the publication was written by Zuzanna Hertzberg, an interdisciplinary artist, activist¹ and researcher, as well as the author of another

¹ Artivism – is a portmanteau word combining art and activism, which refers to artists fighting for social change.

anniversary-focused exhibition: *Women Fighters. An Affective Archive*. It is a visual story presenting the twentieth-century Jewish activism and using women's experiences as a basis for building a new, affective archive. The experience of women involved in the uprising is an important topic in the conceptualisation of this year's anniversary events.

The other side of the symbolic "battle" over the Polish memory of the uprising is embodied by representatives of the Polish government and many public officials. The main state ceremony was organised in front of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw (located next to the POLIN Museum) and attended by President of Poland, Andrzej Duda; President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier; and President of Israel, Isaac Herzog. In their speeches, representatives of the Polish government alternated between recalling the Polish-Jewish cooperation and mass aid provided to Jews by Poles and mentioning expected compensations for Jewish victims. The anniversary of the ghetto uprising became an opportunity for the Polish notables to uphold the traditional self-stereotype of the Poles as the greatest victims and heroes of the Second World War.²

In addition, official ceremonies attended by representatives of state institutions were also held in other Polish cities. In Wrocław, I participated in both, the events organised by local Jewish non-governmental institutions (Urban Memory Foundation, OP ENHEIM Foundation, Bente Kahan Foundation, and Żydoteka Foundation) in cooperation with The Taube Department of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław, and in celebrations organized by the local Jewish community. On April 19, a ceremony involving official speeches, laying flowers and lighting candles took place at the Monument to the Heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto. The speakers included not only representatives of the municipal authorities, but also Kamil Dworaczek, director of the Wrocław branch of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes Against the Polish Nation (a government agency established in 1998). In his speech, Dworaczek also referred to, among other things, the joint (Polish–Jewish) fight against the German occupier.

The appropriation of the Jewish memory of the Holocaust is not a new phenomenon in Poland, and it regularly surfaces in the politics of history pursued by the current government. However, no one seemed to expect that the ghetto uprising commemoration would give rise to open attacks and accusations on Barbara Engelking, director of the Polish Center of Holocaust Research at the Institute of

2 See e.g. Duda 2023. Despite the earlier announcements to this effect, the Warsaw Ghetto Museum did not open on the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the uprising. The decision to create this museum was adopted in November 2017 by Piotr Gliński, Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and the Museum itself was formally incorporated in 2018. To this day, the Museum has not been officially opened and no permanent exhibitions have been created. The opening date was postponed.

Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, in reaction to her words in the TV programme *Kropka nad i* [Final Touch]. On April 19, 2023, presenting the concept of the afore-mentioned exhibition titled *Around Us a Sea of Fire*, Engelking talked about the fear, hope, sense of loneliness, agency and passivity experienced by the Jewish civilians according to their written accounts (Engelking 2023). She also talked about the complexity of Jewish-Polish relations, about the aid provided and also its lack, about friendship and betrayal, and about many aspects of the Jewish fate she has been studying for many years. Engelking's statements and the facts she presented drew politicians' harsh criticism. The Minister of Education and Science, Przemysław Czarnek, when asked about her speech, called it "a lie" and "hog-wash" and spoke of "anti-Polish statements" and "insulting Poles", especially regarding the aid provided to Jews by Poles (see e.g. Telewizja Republika 2023). Czarnek threatened to introduce cuts and remove support from the institutions spreading "pseudo-historical statements" operating within the Polish Academy of Sciences, the research units that have long been a thorn in the side of the current government (Kielar 2023). He also emphasised that he had "commissioned a very extensive inter-university study as part of the National Programme for the Development of the Humanities in order to demonstrate, community by community, the involvement of Polish society in saving Jews during the Holocaust" (Czarnek 2023).

As noted by sociologist and social psychologist Michał Bilewicz, the anniversary celebrations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising clearly showed that secondary anti-Semitism, which amounts to distorting and concealing the history of the Holocaust, is alive and well in Poland (Bilewicz 2023). The campaign against Barbara Engelking revealed the importance of the conservation of remembrance of the past, reliable historical education and state support for Holocaust researchers. Rescuing Jews was not common among Poles, and glorifying the heroism of those who saved Jews and presenting it as a mass action, contrary to the scientific findings, means the politicisation and ideologization of history.

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