

“Bombs on Polish Ground” – The Fate of Warsaw and its inhabitants during World War II

1. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE GERMAN AIR RAIDS IN SEPTEMBER 1939

In the early morning hours of September 1st 1939, German bombers took off from air bases near the border to Poland and headed towards the inner districts of the neighbouring state. The first bombs on Polish soil were launched on the small Polish city of Wielun near Breslau by the German Luftwaffe. Like Wielun, about 160 Polish cities and towns were partially or totally destroyed during the so called *Polish Campaign* which marked the beginning of World War II.¹

German planes also showed up on the sky over Warsaw on September 1st. But the first German attacks on Warsaw didn't cause major damage. It was not until September 10th that the German *Luftwaffe* [Air Force] intensified its raids against the Polish capital under the code name *Aktion Wasserkante*. Then and in the following three weeks, the Polish metropolis witnessed an unprecedented terror from the sky: “A bloody Sunday. 17 air raids [...]. Praga is ablaze [...] Above the crowded Grochów Alley German planes chase in an altitude of 100 meters and take refugees [...] under MP fire. [...] The corpses of men and horses lie in the streets until the evening, because every minute a new attack is run.”² On that very day, the water supply in Praga – the Warsaw district seated on the Eastern bank of the river Wisła – collapsed, the next day 170 destroyed houses were reported from there. On September 13th, 250 burning spots were noted on the whole city area. Two days later, the German artillery joined the bombers in their destructive task. On September 23rd, water and energy supply broke down completely. The fate of Warsaw was sealed when one day later the Germans rode the most intense attack that the city chronic refers to as *Infernal Sunday*. Facing lack of food and water and the danger of epidemics, the defenders of Warsaw ceased arms on September 27th. Approximately 20.000 civilians had been killed during the bombings.³

¹ Czesław Łuczak, *Polityka ludnościowa i ekonomiczna hitlerowskich Niemiec w okupowanej Polsce*, Poznań 1979, p. 115.

² Tomasz Szarota, *Die Luftangriffe auf Warschau im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, in: *Acta Poloniae Historica* 69, 1994, p. 122.

³ Hans-Jürgen Bömelburg / Bogdan Musiał, *Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Polen 1939-1945*, in: Klaus Ziemer / Włodzimierz Borodziej, *Deutsch-Polnische Beziehungen 1939 – 1945 – 1949*, Osnabrück 2000, p. 99.

The population of Warsaw in general remained relatively calm and quickly adapted to the chaos caused by the heavy attacks and the loss of tens of thousands of lives. The daily raids were taken by the majority with fatalism. When from 13th September on the cemeteries couldn't absorb any more bodies, the victims of the German bombings were buried in the city parks. "We [Americans] fail words for the perseverance and the silent heroism of the civil population", the filmmaker Julien Bryan wrote in the *Kurjer Warszawski* [The Warsaw Messenger]. "We are impressed by your sense of humour, by your endurance. One would assume that your spirit would brake under the endless German air raids. [...] The more the enemy is afflicting you, the less yielding is your attitude." Nevertheless, the experience of air raids generally was traumatizing: "Hell was above us. Plane after plane are nose-diving above our heads. And every time we assume that this time it's us. Your heartbeat stops in the expectation of death", Halina Regulska noted on September 24th. The next day, an anonymous writer described what appeared to him as the endless bombing by thousands of German airplanes: "Incendiary bombs outside the windows [...]. All windows of our house explode. [...] We don't care anymore, we are indifferent. A bomb will certainly hit our house anyhow, where's the difference if [it happens] 5 minutes earlier or later. If it only happened. If there only would be an end!"⁴

Hundreds of tons of explosive and incendiary bombs had been dropped on the Polish capital and caused major damage not only on military bases and means of supply, but also within densely populated quarters. The German units entering the city in the next days faced a ghostlike scenario: "Whilst we were driving [through the city] I have not seen a single house where not at least the windows have been smashed", a German soldier wrote on October 6th. But the population, he noted, already adapted to the new situation: Easement about the end of the bombardments reigned amongst those who had survived them. Everywhere the people were queuing for bread that was distributed in provisionally established supply stores. Here and there people sold water that they had managed to extract from the ground with quickly established pumps.⁵

⁴ Warszawskie notatki z września 1939 r., in: Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego 79, 1969, pp. 104-105.

⁵ „Regimentsnachrichtenzug des IR 94 im Polenfeldzug”, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau, Msg2/2924, p. 28.

Different from the development in most of the other parts of the country, the Polish civil Government in Warsaw, headed by the city president Stefan Starzyński, fulfilled its tasks until the detachment by German authorities at the end of September. The Polish military organized actions of civil city defence like the erection of barricades or the digging of trenches. The population of Warsaw reacted in two seemingly contradicting ways towards the heavy air raids and artillery fire. On the one hand, it bowed to the inevitable and adapted extraordinarily quick to the extreme situation. On the other hand, it was terrified and paralyzed by this new experience of terror. The sudden German attack took the Polish society by surprise and left it in agony.⁶ The abysmal hate for the German occupants that was common among the Polish civil population during World War II evolved from the German terror that accompanied the Polish Campaign from the very beginning.

2. LIFE AND DEATH IN A DAMAGED CITY

With the abolition of Polish administration, the Warsawians became second class citizens in their home town and had no official backing in their interests. Immediately after the capitulation, they privately put major effort into fixing demolished roofs and smashed windows provisionally.⁷ But the German occupants were not too interested in rebuilding the destroyed houses since their aim was anyhow to reduce the former Polish capital into a minor city with a German face and no political significance. Thus, no major housing projects were initiated during the years of occupation. The so called *General Government* – the German occupied Polish territories that were not annexed to the German *Reich* – from October 1939 on was ruled from Warsaw but from Kraków which had been merely harmed during the German invasion.

The attitude of the German occupants did not ease the situation of the population in Warsaw. Robberies and plunder by German soldiers were reported during the first weeks of occupation in the damaged city. Flats were squatted by the *Wehrmacht* [Army], driving families out of their homes without supplying them with alternative places to stay. In total, the city lost 10 % of its housing space in the course of *Aktion Wasserkante*, 30 % had suffered damages.⁸ The already desperate housing situation in late autumn 1939 was acerbated by the fact that

⁶ Jacek Andrzej Młynarczyk, Die zerissene Nation. Die polnische Gesellschaft unter deutscher und sowjetischer Herrschaft 1939-1941, in: Klaus-Michael Mallmann / Bogdan Musial, Genesis des Genozids. Polen 1939-1941, Darmstadt 2004, p. 145.

⁷ Tomasz Szarota, Warschau unter dem Hakenkreuz. Leben und Alltag im besetzten Warschau, 1.10.1939 bis 31.7.1947, p. 158.

⁸ Barbara Ratyńska, Ludność i gospodarka Warszawy i okręgu pod okupacją hitlerowską, Warsaw 1982, p. 152.

thousands of refugees from the countryside roamed in the streets of Warsaw. 1,3 million people tried to survive the harsh winter 1939/40 within the city borders. An unspecified yet significant number of them were forced to take shelter in asylums, cellars, and even staircases.⁹

In addition to the difficult housing situation during the first year of occupation, the Germans from October 1940 on began to divide the city in Jewish and non-Jewish quarters. The Jewish citizens – leaving behind them virtually all their belongings – were forced to move to the district defined as the Warsaw *Ghetto*. During the months of October and November 1940, an enormous population exchange took place within the city borders: 113.000 Poles and 130.000 Jews had to leave their former homes and to move from respectively to the Ghetto district. This new Jewish quarter covered a space of about 403 hectare – housing space *and* public places together – and had to accommodate more than 400.000 persons, giving a ratio of 10 square meters per persons *in total*. The loss of houses during the German bombardment on Warsaw was counteracted within the Ghetto as well as on the so called *Aryan* side [the city areas outside the Ghetto borders] by a constantly growing number of rooms, which was achieved by dividing bigger rooms into several smaller units.

While the number of the total population on the *Aryan* side remained more or less stable during the first years of occupation, the number of people living within the Ghetto borders changed between 1940 and 1943 drastically: Hundreds of Thousands of them were deported to the extermination camp Treblinka near Warsaw, whereas thousands of Jews from Western Europe were deported to the Warsaw Ghetto. Anyhow, the process of industrial killing decimated the numbers of Ghetto inhabitants constantly, culminating in the execution of the last remaining Jewish fighters in the aftermath of the desperate and unsuccessful Ghetto uprising in 1943. The Germans literally seized the Ghetto buildings to the ground, leaving a deserted area which covered between 12 and 15 % of the city centre. The liquidation of more than 300.000 former inhabitants thus had no impact on the housing situation of the remaining Polish citizens of Warsaw. The situation of the people living outside the Ghetto borders was unsure as well. 32.000 of them were shot in public or secret until July 1944.¹⁰ Others were expelled from their homes to make room for Germans from the *Reich* or ethnic Germans. In summer 1942, every month 1000 to 1200 families had to vacate their flats.¹¹ In autumn 1943,

⁹ Szarota (cf. footnote 7), pp. 154-155.

¹⁰ Bömelburg / Musial (cf. footnote 3), p. 99.

¹¹ Szarota (cf. footnote 7), p. 155.

the German Governor of the district Warsaw, Ludwig Fischer, ordered that flats with three rooms had to be occupied with at least five (Polish) persons, flats with four rooms should accommodate seven persons etc.¹² During the Warsaw national uprising in 1944 and shortly after its oppression, the Germans killed about 16.000 Polish fighters and between 150.000 and 180.000 civilians, expelled most of the survivors and destroyed another 30 % of the city systematically with flame-throwers and explosive charges.¹³

Life in Warsaw under the German occupation from the very beginning was overshadowed by the severe destructions caused by the air raids in September 1939. The remaining housing space was arbitrarily distributed or detracted by the German administration, the space for Jews and Poles was continuously reduced by expulsion and destruction. Despite the overall frustration and resignation in the face of the catastrophe, the Polish society managed to sustain its spirit by organizing a large underground resistance against the occupying forces – including the establishment of an underground university and an underground army. The piteous material situation, though, and especially the desperate housing situation, could not be eluded. The numbers of rooms and of inhabitants in Warsaw were figures which could not be altered by subversive activities. The only way of surviving was to try to adapt as well as possible to the deteriorating circumstances up to the virtually annihilation of the city at the end of the war. The overall destructing of Warsaw under German occupation amounted to 80 % of its pre-war status.¹⁴ Out of 1,3 Million former inhabitants, 850.000 had been killed, 400.000 of them within the city borders.

3. THE RECOVERING OF THE CITY AFTER THE WAR

When the Red Army entered Warsaw in January 1945, the place didn't resemble in any way the proud Polish capital from before the war. Only 162.000 people lived in the rubbles of the destructed city which was cut off from water and electricity again.¹⁵ The others had been killed, evacuated or had flown the ghost town. The first task after the liberation was the clearing of the city. Warsaw was covered by estimated 20 million cubic meters of rubbles¹⁶, about a quarter million corpses were spread all over the city area and had to be buried in improvised mass graves.¹⁷ In spring 1945, the streets and the remaining buildings were

¹² Ibid., p. 156.

¹³ Bömelburg / Musial (cf. footnote 3), pp. 99-100.

¹⁴ Ratyńska (cf. footnote 8), p. 153.

¹⁵ Adolf Ciborowski, Warschau. Zerstörung und Wiederaufbau der Stadt, Warsaw 1969, p. 64.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 66.

systematically cleared out, electricity and water supply were reinstalled, houses were mended, and the first new houses were erected in the southern suburbs.

Life in the first years of reconstruction was focused on the streets. Field kitchens for the starving population were installed. Queuing for goods became an integral part of every day life. The new installed communist administration had to fight constantly against crime, prostitution, alcoholism and the spreading of epidemics in the city. Beneath the most pressing issues of surviving, cultural life began to grow again. The Warsaw University and some schools were reopened already in 1945, improvised street theatres entertained the physically and mentally exhausted inhabitants.¹⁸ In 1947 more than half a million people populated the Polish capital again. But it was not until the end of the 1960ies, more than twenty years after the end of World War II, that Warsaw reached its pre-war population and housing capacities, due to the activities of the *Biuro Odbudowy Stolicy* [Office for the Rebuilding of the Capital] and private initiatives. The meticulous reconstruction of the Old Town – like the Ghetto district in 1943, it had been completely wiped out during and after the 1944 national uprising – in late 18th century style became a symbol of the overcoming as well of the material as of the psychological damages caused by the experience of German destruction and occupation. Nevertheless, the scars that World War II left behind in the city's face are still visible today.

¹⁸ Ibid.