

Sample Term Paper

HIST 3309: 20th Century World

(Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm writing this off the top of my head and not checking my facts. They are essentially as laid out in this paper, but the sources are imaginary—just to illustrate how to document a scholarly paper.)

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Could Have Succeeded:

But Would It Have Mattered?

One of the most horrifying realities of World War II surrounded the genocide of millions of people the Axis Powers deemed inferior. Of those, the best known group was Jewish. Every nation in Europe that fell under Axis control had some Jewish citizens, and millions of these people were arrested, detained, and eventually executed, worked, or starved to death. Poland's Jews were the most numerous group outside of Germany itself and, from the beginning of the war, suffered under Nazi rule. Initially confined to ghettos in major cities, the Jewish population was systematically deported to concentration camps and exterminated. When Jews failed to report for deportation

in sufficient numbers, the Germans decided to demolish the ghettos in every city, the largest of which was in Warsaw. In the spring of 1943, some Jews in the Warsaw ghetto elected to resist militantly, and they held the German Army at bay for weeks longer than Poland itself had held out against the invaders in 1939. The ghetto uprising failed for a number of reasons, but it could have succeeded if different decisions had been made sooner and if the outside world had been willing to help.¹

When the Germans decided to construct the Warsaw ghetto, the city held more than a million Jews. Through the passage of laws and military decrees, the Germans forced Jews who lived outside the Jewish area in Warsaw to move behind walls and barbed wire fences into a ghetto. Short of jobs, housing, food, medical care, police and fire protection, the Jewish population dwindled over the course of the next several years to less than half its original number. Thousands starved to death, were worked to death, or were simply executed where they stood to keep others in line. Thousands of people surrendered voluntarily to be deported to what the Germans styled "labor camps" to the east.² Unfortunately for them, most of these people found themselves in a gas chamber instead of a workshop. People in the ghetto heard rumors of mass extermination but did

not believe those rumors could be true; after all, this was the twentieth century. Their thirst for life was so great that they resisted the demands of younger, more militant Jews and refused to use what aid money filtered in to buy weapons. The Joint Jewish Organization appealed to the world outside of Poland for help, and millions of dollars poured into the country through back-channels. However, much of this money was funneled into the hands of the Polish Home Army because it was actually fighting a guerrilla war against the Nazis and had access to outside sources of money. Jews inside the ghetto had to rely on whatever source was available to serve as a conduit for the funds; sometimes the conduit simply kept the money for some other purpose.³

In the face of Nazi determination to eliminate the ghetto altogether, the uprising began shortly before Easter in 1943 when various groups inside the walls resisted the Germans with whatever weapons came to hand. They had numerous homemade weapons that were forerunners of the improvised explosive devices seen in later conflicts. Their arsenal included Molotov cocktails, exploding mines filled with nails and screws, rifles, handguns, and what observers described as "individual initiative" on the part of fighters who charged tanks armed with nothing.⁴ The

Jewish population fled to the sewers and to underground bunkers or took to the heights and fought from the rooftops with whatever weapons they could find. For forty-four days, they resisted Nazi attempts to burn them out and kill them all. Appeals for help from the outside went mostly unheeded, and the Polish Home Army sat and allowed the ghetto to be destroyed. Ironically, less than a year later, the Home Army launched a rebellion against the Germans and was itself slaughtered while the Russians sat and watched. After forty-four days, the uprising was crushed, the ghetto lay in ashes, its great synagogue destroyed, its population dead or deported.⁵

The Warsaw ghetto uprising could have succeeded if different decisions had been made sooner and if the outside world had intervened on the Jews' behalf. As it turned out, one of the major reasons the uprising failed was because of lack of weapons and organized resistance. The money which could have been used to purchase guns and ammunition was used instead to operate soup kitchens and feed orphans. This was certainly a noble, humanitarian act; and it bought a little extra time for the most defenseless among them. The leadership underestimated the determination of the Nazis to wipe Jews off the face of the earth. Had they understood that nothing short of fierce,

military resistance was going to defeat their enemies, they might well have begun earlier to acquire and stockpile weapons while they could. By the time they redirected their funds to weapons acquisition, the orphans had already been deported and executed; and thousands more of their fellow Jews would die from lack of a way to defend themselves. Part of the reason the Warsaw ghetto fell, then, was that the people who lived there could not believe the Nazis really meant to exterminate them. They made preparations to resist too late.⁶

Part of the reason the rising failed was divided leadership that struggled to develop a cohesive plan. Some in leadership positions believed the only workable idea was to flee the ghetto for the countryside and to launch whatever guerrilla attacks were possible. Others argued that they could not abandon children, women, and old people to the Nazis and must stay inside the ghetto and hide. Still others adopted a "go for broke" attitude to attack anytime a German came into the ghetto and simply live with the inevitable retaliation. A cohesive fighting plan might well have been a unifier that would have convinced still more people to fight rather than hide.⁷

Part of the reason the Warsaw ghetto fell when it could have fought on was that enough outside help did not

materialize. A few Polish nationals crossed the barbed wire and joined the effort inside the ghetto because the Jews were actually fighting the Nazis when most Poles had instead given up and accommodated their conquerors. A handful of patriots was not enough. If masses of Poles had joined the Jews fighting the invader in an urban terrorism campaign, the result might well have been very different.⁸

Another part of the reason the Warsaw Ghetto uprising failed was that Poles could not set aside their anti-Semitism long enough to realize that the real enemy was the German conqueror. Anti-Semitism was alive and flourishing in Poland for centuries before the country was invaded in 1939. Jews struggled against discrimination in their own country by fellow Poles. Race hatred was so strong during the war that few Poles lifted a finger to help. Many Jews who managed to escape the ghetto found themselves with nowhere to go because the Polish population turned them in to curry favor with the Nazis or to gain extra food or other goodies. Had all Poles stood together, they could have done some serious damage to the Nazi war machine.⁹

And the Warsaw Ghetto uprising failed because of a lack of help from the outside. If the Allied Powers had been in a position to bomb Warsaw—or the rails leading to the death camps—that might well have given the Nazis enough

grief that they would have given up on demolishing the ghetto. Unfortunately for the Jews in Warsaw, the Allies were too far away; too concerned with winning the war the fastest possible way; stretched too thin in terms of resources; and, some would charge, too racist themselves to be of any help to the Jews in Warsaw.¹⁰

With an earlier awareness of how desperate their plight would become without weapons to defend themselves, the Jews in the Ghetto might have held out even longer against the Nazis. The knowledge that a group of Jews inside the ghetto was effectively combating the Nazis in Warsaw might well have inspired Polish nationalists to forget their anti-Semitism and link up with their fellow Poles who were giving the Nazis a bloody nose. More help from other Poles could well have tied the Nazis down in the Warsaw area. That would have made it more difficult for them to spare men for the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union and might well have forced them to abandon their plans to exterminate all Polish Jews because they themselves simply did not have the manpower for the task.

Given the timing on it, however, even if the Jews inside the Warsaw ghetto had been able to hold on longer, it would have made little difference to the millions who had already been exterminated. More of Warsaw's Jews might

have survived the Holocaust, but millions of their co-religionists were already doomed anyway. The timing of the uprising was forced on the Jews in Warsaw, but in the spring 1943, too much of the war was still going the Axis Powers' way. Germany, Italy and Japan were a long way from defeated. The uprising proved to be an inspiring episode for people who were down-trodden and revealed that the human spirit longs for freedom and will resist tyranny and attempts to snuff it out. The uprising was at least a symbol of people standing up and saying "no" to an oppressor, even though it meant their death in the process.

¹Ambrose Kelly, *World War II* (Richmond: Time-Life, 2002), pp. 15-25.

² Stephen Pierce, *The Camps: Nazi Policy and the Holocaust* (Princeton: Prentice-Hall, 1999), p. 34.

³ Andrei Androfski, *My Years Against the Nazis* (Warsaw: Saul Lebowitz Press, 1948), p. 10 (Hereinafter cited as Androfski).

⁴ Mordecai Anielwicz, *The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. London: MacMillan, 1981, p. 150; "Warsaw Ghetto," <http://www.warsawghetto.org>.

⁵Saul Baughmann, *The Warsaw Ghetto* (Los Angeles: The Holocaust Museum, 2002), p. 414.

⁶ "Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," <http://www.jewishdefenseleague.org>

⁷ Anthony Edwards, *WWII: The Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 340-45 (Hereinafter cited as Edwards).

⁸ Ibid., pp. 352-60.

⁹ Androfski, p. 410.

¹⁰ Edwards, pp. 550-52.

Bibliography

Androfski, Andrei. *My Years Against the Nazis*. Warsaw: Saul Lebowitz Press, 1948.

Anielwicz, Mordecai. *The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. London: MacMillan, 1981.

Baughmann, Saul. *The Warsaw Ghetto*. Los Angeles: The Holocaust

Museum, 2002.

Edwards, Anthony. *WWII: The Eastern Front*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Kelly, Ambrose. *World War II*. Richmond: Time-Life, 2002.

Pierce, Stephen. *The Camps: Nazi Policy and the Holocaust*. Princeton: Prentice-Hall, 1999.

"Warsaw Ghetto Uprising." <http://www.jewishdefenseleague.org>

"Warsaw Ghetto." <http://www.warsawghetto.org>