

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 392

“Warsaw and Katyn”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Societies can break, democracies can fall, ethics can collapse, and ordinary men can find themselves standing over death pits.”

Timothy Snyder. *On Tyranny*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 392. Warsaw and Katyn.

On September 17, 1939, the Soviet Union invaded Poland, two and a half weeks after Germany had, and pursuant to the secret protocol between the two countries, divided Poland between them. See episode 314 for more about that.

Following the invasion, the President of Poland, Ignacy Mościcki, like most of the Polish government, fled across the Romanian border. There were some complications I won't trouble you with, but by the end of September, Mościcki had resigned his office in favor of his appointed successor, Władysław Raczkiewicz, pursuant to the Polish constitution. Raczkiewicz would hold the office of President of the Polish government in exile for the rest of the war. Mościcki, with the help of US diplomatic intervention, was permitted to retire to Switzerland, where he lived until his death in 1946.

Raczkiewicz appointed as his prime minister General Władysław Sikorski, a distinguished military leader who had previously held the post of prime minister in 1922 and 1923. Together they established the Polish government in exile, first in France, then in London. The Polish government in exile was the first of a gaggle of governments in exile, most of them based in London, representing the various European countries under German occupation.

Most of the Polish Navy and most of the pilots of the Polish Air Force also escaped Poland and made their way to Britain, as did tens of thousands of Polish soldiers. The Polish government in

exile represented the civilian leadership of what remained of the Polish armed forces, which fought under the operational command of the British. Polish ground forces in Britain were organized as the Polish I Corps. In previous episodes of the podcast, we've seen Polish forces involved in Allied operations in Norway, in the Battle of Britain, and in North Africa.

Following the occupation of Poland, both Germany and the Soviet Union declared the end of the Polish state, which also meant they did not recognize this or any government to be the government of Poland. The Polish government in exile was recognized by Western Allied governments and was included as a signatory to the Atlantic Charter in September 1941 and the Declaration by United Nations in January 1942.

On June 28, 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Scarcely two weeks later, the USSR and the UK signed the Anglo-Soviet Agreement, which committed both nations to cooperate in the war against Germany. This left the Polish government in exile in the awkward position of being notionally an ally of a country that had made war on Poland and was occupying Polish territory...or had been occupying Polish territory until the Germans drove them out of it.

After some cajoling from the British Foreign Office and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden, Prime Minister Sikorski began negotiations with the Soviet ambassador in London aimed at resolving the outstanding issues between the two governments. The Polish government and the Soviet government signed two agreements, on July 30 and August 12, 1941. In December, Sikorski traveled to Moscow to meet with Joseph Stalin.

The two governments agreed to recognize each other, and the USSR agreed to abrogate the 1939 treaty with Germany and renounce the partition of Poland. That was all well and good, but an unresolved question of great concern to the Polish government was the whereabouts of the tens of thousands of Polish prisoners of war still being held in the USSR, not to mention the Polish civilians who had been forcibly relocated to Siberia. There were hundreds of thousands of people in those two categories at the least, perhaps more than a million.

The Soviets agreed to relent on their demand that Polish citizens of eastern Poland accept Soviet citizenship. About 30,000 Polish civilians were permitted to leave the USSR before the agreement broke down. More about that in a moment. These Poles were resettled, most of them in various places within the British Empire, but they represented only a small fraction of the total number of Polish civilians who had been forcibly relocated in 1939 and 1940.

As for the Polish prisoners of war still held in the Soviet Union, the Polish government in exile proposed that they be released and organized into new Polish military formations, which would fight the Germans alongside Soviet forces on the Eastern Front. In a manner similar to the Polish I Corps, this force would also be under the civilian leadership of the Polish government in exile, but under the operational command of the Red Army.

The Soviet government agreed to this, and ultimately assembled more than 70,000 Polish soldiers, both POWs from 1939 and new volunteers from among the civilian Poles living in the USSR. This force was placed under the command of Władysław Anders, a Polish Army general who had himself been taken prisoner by the Soviets in 1939 and was interrogated, tortured, and held prisoner ever since. This new force would become the Polish II Corps, though it was informally referred to as “Anders’ Army.”

One stumbling block in the effort to get these two nominal allies working together was the Polish government’s list of more than twenty thousand Polish Army soldiers, mostly officers, plus police, border guards, and a number of prominent civilians, known to have been taken into custody by the Red Army in 1939 and still unaccounted for.

Now you know and I know and Josef Stalin knows that most of these Poles were murdered by the NKVD in 1939 and 1940. I described these killings to you in episode 314. The Polish government did not know this and Stalin was not about to admit to it. The response of the Soviet government to these Polish inquiries amounted to a shrug. Missing officers, you say? No idea. Never heard of them.

Tensions between the Polish government and Moscow over this question, and a few others, sank the idea of the Polish II Corps fighting alongside the Red Army on the Eastern front. Anders’ Army was instead shipped to Iran and on to the Middle East, where they would fight with the British Army in the Mediterranean.

As for the murdered Polish officers, they’d been buried in mass graves in forests, most notably the Katyn Forest, outside Smolensk.

The site of this mass grave came under Wehrmacht control in 1941, during the advance on Moscow. The German Army had no idea what was there; then in 1942, Polish slave laborers working on the railroad line near Smolensk were told by local people that a large number of Polish soldiers had been buried nearby. They dug, found a few bodies in Polish Army uniforms, and passed information about their discovery to the Polish underground, who forwarded it to the government in exile, but at this point, only a few bodies had been found. The full significance of the site had yet to be revealed.

Within Poland, Poles had begun to come together and organize resistance to the German occupation within weeks after it began. By 1942, various groups of underground fighters had been consolidated into the Polish Home Army, which was operating throughout the territory of pre-war Poland. A few fighters remained aloof from the Home Army; these fighters were either Communists loyal to the USSR or right-wing Polish nationalists.

The Polish Home Army answered to the Polish government in London, and it had two goals: end the German occupation and afterward bring back the Polish Republic within its borders as they existed before the Germans invaded.

The Home Army had some success as a partisan force in rural Poland. Its favorite tactic was to ambush German shipments of supplies and equipment on their way to the Eastern Front, which helped to hinder the German war effort as well as offering the opportunity to seize arms and ammunition for use by the Home Army.

Apart from thefts of German weapons, or purchases of German weapons on the black market, the Home Army also relied on weapons cached by the Polish Army in 1939, weapons airdropped to them by the British, and occasionally their own handmade weapons.

When the Germans forced Jewish people in Poland into the ghettos in 1940, it had the effect of separating Jews from the Polish resistance. It was not obvious at first to the people living in the ghettos that organizing armed resistance to the Germans was necessary or desirable. In 1940, it was ethnic Poles, not Jews, who were being sent to labor camps or killed by the German occupation forces.

Things began to change after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Life in the ghettos became increasingly harsh, and word began to trickle in of mass shootings of Jewish people in the USSR by German soldiers. In spring of 1942, new rumors began to circulate about mass deportations of Jews from the ghettos.

By the time the Germans began rounding up Jews in the Warsaw ghetto for shipment to Treblinka, people there had a pretty good idea of what was in store for them.

The hungry and the sick were the first to go, along with children, the elderly, the homeless, and the poor. If someone was too old, too young, too sick, or too disabled to be transported conveniently, the Germans simply shot them dead right there in the ghetto. Anyone who worked as a laborer was spared. This category consisted almost exclusively of young men, which had the perverse effect of giving those in the ghetto who would have made the best fighters into those who had the least incentive to resist.

This calculus of interests had shifted by the end of 1942, when the population of the ghetto was down to 60,000, just 15% of its peak population. Those who remained were now largely those young men whom the Germans had spared for the sake of their labor. They had felt safer than the rest of the ghetto population, and in many cases were also deterred from resisting the Germans out of fear for the safety of their parents, girlfriends, wives, or children.

By the end of 1942, they no longer had any parents, girlfriends, wives, or children. They had been taken away by the Germans. Those left behind were under no illusions about what had happened to them.

Resistance in the Warsaw ghetto began in late 1942, by which time weapons had been smuggled in. Some of these were in exchange for money and valuables surrendered by the ghetto's wealthier residents. Some were donations from the Home Army.

The Polish resistance and the Jewish resistance were two different movements with two different agendas, whose relationship was often fraught. The Polish resistance was more interested in hampering German military operations; the Jewish resistance was more interested in Jewish survival. The Jewish resistance was leery of the Polish resistance, with good reason, considering the rampant anti-Semitism in Poland. Remember that before the war, the Polish government had been pursuing a kinder, gentler version of the Nazi plan to force their Jewish citizens to emigrate.

Commanders in the Home Army varied in their treatment of Jews from kindness and compassion to indifference, even hostility. Some Polish resistance units took in Jewish fighters as members; others refused to.

In spite of the prejudice, there were a substantial number of Jewish fighters in the Home Army. Some of them thought of themselves primarily as Poles rather than as Jews. Others carefully kept their heritage a secret, because let's face it, being known to be Jewish in German-occupied Poland would likely prove fatal.

Still, at least the Home Army sent weapons into the Warsaw ghetto. They also helped get the word out to the Western Allies about the ongoing mass murders in Poland. In December 1942, the Polish government in exile in London released a report, detailing information gathered by the Home Army concerning the Holocaust and identifying some of the murder camps. At this stage, the Polish government was the only Allied government speaking out against the murders of Jews. The Poles believed, or hoped, that publicizing the killings would shame the Nazis into suspending them. The other Allied governments eventually issued a joint declaration as the United Nations condemning the Nazi murder campaign. Attempts by the Polish government to get the Vatican to condemn the killings were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, inside the Warsaw ghetto, armed resistance was beginning to appear. As the United Nations were making their declaration, resistance fighters in the ghetto were banding together as the Jewish Combat Organization. Jewish police armed with clubs were no match for angry young men with firearms. Attacks on police and informants became routine. Soon the Jewish Combat Organization had replaced the *Judenrat* as the real administrative authority in the Ghetto.

On January 9, 1943, Heinrich Himmler visited Warsaw to order that the city's ghetto be entirely shut down. About 8,000 of its remaining inhabitants were there illegally—meaning they were in hiding. Those 8,000 were to be rounded up and sent to Treblinka to be murdered. The rest of the ghetto population would be distributed through the network of German labor camps.

The Germans could no longer depend on the *Judenrat's* assistance, so on January 18, German SS troops entered the ghetto for the purpose of rounding up those 8,000 people Himmler wanted sent to Treblinka. To their surprise, they were fired on. The Jews in the ghetto resisted, or hid. In four days of fighting, the Germans managed to seize about 5,000 of the 8,000 people they were looking for, while killing more than a thousand resistance fighters. But the SS took some casualties too, forcing them to suspend the effort to close down the ghetto.

For three months, the ghetto defied German orders. The Jewish Combat Organization well understood that it would be no more than a matter of time before the Germans returned, probably better armed and in greater numbers, so they spent the time acquiring new weapons, training fighters, and creating a network of bunkers in the ghetto. They drew encouragement from their earlier success in driving away the SS and from the German surrender at Stalingrad. It seemed Germans could be defeated after all.

The Polish Home Army was impressed and sent more weapons into the ghetto. Jewish resistance did wonders in terms of rebutting anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Meanwhile, eight hundred kilometers to the east, a German intelligence officer first heard of the discovery of bodies buried in Katyn Forest sometime in early 1943. He reported the news to his superiors in Berlin, and it worked its way up the chain of command. Sometime in March, Joseph Goebbels heard about it and recognized the potential propaganda value. Were the Allies accusing Germany of mass murder? Well, Germany would show that the Allies had blood on their hands, too.

On April 13, German radio announced to the world that the Army had uncovered a mass grave containing the bodies of more than 3,000 Polish Army officers murdered by the Jewish Bolsheviks in 1940. In the days that followed, it was a top news story everywhere.

Goebbels's purpose was twofold. One was to counter Allied propaganda accusing Germany of mass murder, throw it back at them, and hope it would breed dissent among the Allies. This discovery underscored the German position that it was the Bolsheviks, not the Nazis, who were the dangerous, uncivilized murderers. We've been trying to tell you that, world. And since Nazis framed Bolshevism as a Jewish plot, Goebbels also hoped the revelation would drive a wedge between the Polish resistance and the Jewish resistance.

On the domestic front, it was supposed to stiffen the resolve of the German people. The bodies in Katyn Forest were a cautionary tale. They foretold of what Germans could expect would be done to them, if the Jews and the Bolsheviks won the war.

The Soviet government flatly denied the German accusations. They claimed the victims had been Polish POWs doing construction work for the Soviet Union when they were taken and executed by the Germans after they occupied the region in the summer of 1941. The Germans gleefully invited representatives of the International Red Cross from neutral Switzerland and Axis allies such as Italy and Bulgaria, and even Polish and other Allied POWs to come to Katyn Forest and examine the evidence for themselves.

As Goebbels hoped, the revelation ruptured the already uneasy relationship between the USSR and the Polish government in exile, which broke diplomatic relations with Moscow over this revelation, but it did no greater harm to the alliance than that. The governments of the United Kingdom and the United States pretended to accept the Soviet explanation. As Winston

Churchill privately told the Soviet ambassador in London, even if the accusation was true, it would not change his policy, which was to work in cooperation with the USSR to defeat Germany as quickly as possible.

[music: Giazotto, *Adagio in G minor*.]

Recently I spent two episodes talking to you about Hollywood motion pictures. I talked some about German film back in episodes 241 and 293. Germany had had a vibrant and creative motion picture industry in the Weimar era. Much of this new art was dismissed by the Nazis as “degenerate” art. After Hitler became chancellor, Nazi disapproval quickly quenched the creativity in German cinema.

Artsy was out. Most commercial films produced in Germany in the Thirties were light entertainments told in conventional ways, along with the occasional propaganda film. The year 1940 saw the release in Germany of three films meant to promote and encourage anti-Semitism. Two of them were fictional depictions of real-life Jewish figures in European history, titled *The Rothschilds* and *Jud Süß*, emphasis on the fictional. These films purported to be dramatizations of history, but the stories were altered to ensure the title characters were depicted repeatedly doing all the terrible things Nazi propaganda attributed to Jewish people: lying, thieving, conniving, oppressing, having designs on our women, etc., etc., while the anti-Semitic hostility they endured was presented as the justified retribution of their aggrieved victims.

The third one was something different. It was a documentary titled *The Eternal Jew*. The “Eternal Jew” is the German name for the character known in English as the Wandering Jew, a figure of legend said to have been cursed to walk the Earth until the Second Coming.

And let’s face it, that’s pretty anti-Semitic right there. But Joseph Goebbels and his propaganda ministry used this legend as the theme of a viciously anti-Semitic documentary which depicted Jewish people as degenerate, parasitical, and dangerous. The most outrageous aspect of the film is that it used real documentary footage of poor, sick and starving people in the Polish ghettos and presented these images as representative of a typical Jewish community. These images were juxtaposed with images of rats, as a voice-over narrator emphasized the similarities and applied the word *vermin* to both.

Ugly stuff. You won’t be surprised that a documentary, or alleged documentary, like *The Eternal Jew* wasn’t as popular with the film-going public as the historical dramas *The Rothschilds* and *Jud Süß* and sold only a fraction as many tickets.

But a film doesn’t have to sell a lot of tickets to be influential. There always was a certain amount of anti-Semitism in Germany, and from that base the Nazis had layered on a decade’s worth of propaganda. Too many Germans accepted Nazi anti-Semitic claims as fact, especially younger people who had little or no memory of life before Hitler. *The Eternal Jew* helped

prepare some Germans for work in the murder camps by offering a justification for the killings and helped others to be able to look the other way and ignore what they had seen or heard.

How many Germans were looking the other way as the Holocaust progressed? How many knew what was going on? This historical question is a bit contentious, but at minimum hundreds of thousands of workers in government and in the German railroad must have known. In the eastern parts of Germany, many had seen killings of Soviet POWs with their own eyes. The soldiers engaged in shooting Jewish people during Operation Barbarossa in 1941 surely told something of their experiences to their families and friends.

It was public knowledge that Jews from across Europe were being relocated to the East. The government promised they would have better lives there, but when you combine the news that Jewish people are being shipped east with the news that they're shooting Jews in the East, anyone should be able to put two and two together. It might not yet have been clear how swift and ruthless the murder machine was, but it was easy to guess that at least some of these people were being "relocated" to their deaths.

It came as an uncomfortable surprise to the Nazis when they broadcast the news of the bodies discovered in the Katyn Forest that the public reaction wasn't quite what they'd hoped for. Instead of expressing fear, horror or disgust upon learning of Bolshevik crimes, there were many who asked questions like, "Who are we Germans to criticize, when we do worse things?"

Even as some members of the German public were asking this question, the SS was preparing to demonstrate its underlying truth.

The SS had ceded control over the Warsaw ghetto to Jewish fighters in January, but Heinrich Himmler was furious over the uprising and determined to put it down. In February, he decreed the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto. The remaining residents would be split up among the many labor camps administered by the SS.

But that wasn't enough to slake Himmler's thirst for revenge. He wanted the ghetto itself destroyed. The buildings in the ghetto had been used by "subhumans," as he put it, making them inappropriate to house Germans, so they had to be pulled down. Afterward, Himmler wanted the ghetto grounds to be converted into a labor camp. After the war it could be made into a park, he suggested.

Inside the ghetto, the fact that Jewish fighters had actually killed some members of the SS and driven away the rest was a huge morale booster, as was the faith expressed in them by the Home Army when it sent them more weapons. Since no one in the ghetto had any illusions that submitting to the Germans meant anything other than a death sentence, there was no reason not to go down fighting. The Jewish Combat Organization built their bunkers and prepared for the day everyone knew would come.

The SS chose Monday evening, April 19, 1943, to begin their assault. The date was selected because it was the first night of Passover. But the ghetto had advance warning on the 18th, when they received word of SS units, including auxiliary forces of Soviet POWs, taking up positions all around them.

When the attack began on Monday night, the defenders were ready. In bunkers and basements around the ghetto, families sat down and conducted Seders, their recitations from the Haggadah occasionally interrupted by the sounds of machine guns.

The initial assault did not go well for the Germans. Twelve soldiers were killed and the rest forced to withdraw. The gleeful defenders raised the Polish flag and the Zionist flag on the tallest building.

The next day, April 20, Adolf Hitler's 54th birthday, Heinrich Himmler relieved the SS commander in Warsaw and instructed his replacement, "You must take down those flags at any cost!"

They tried again. This time, the Germans entered the ghetto to stay. They took down the flags as Himmler ordered, while resistance fighters sniped at them. Those who could not resist, such as patients at the ghetto's one operating hospital, were simply shot dead, since they wouldn't have been suitable for a labor camp anyway. In the hospital's obstetrics ward, SS soldiers murdered pregnant women, women who had just given birth, and their babies.

Days of fighting followed. The SS commander on the scene recommended setting fire to the ghetto as the only way to force the Jewish fighters out of their bunkers. Himmler gave his permission and beginning on April 23, the SS, using flamethrowers borrowed from the German Army, began torching buildings; burning up whole blocks and creating huge firestorms that forced fighters to flee their bunkers or jump off rooftops.

On the other side of the ghetto wall, in Catholic Poland, this was Holy Week. Not far away in Krasiński Square, children rode the merry-go-round. Polish families celebrated Easter as usual on Sunday April 25.

By the end of April, resistance in the ghetto had virtually ceased. The SS continued to destroy buildings until May 16. That day, the Germans celebrated their victory by blowing up the Great Synagogue in Warsaw. Built in 1878, it had once been the largest synagogue in the world. Now it was rubble.

SS reports indicate that a total of 56,000 people were taken prisoner. Of these, about 7,000 were shot on the spot, another 7,000 sent to Treblinka to be murdered, while the rest were sent to labor camps. No one knows how many people died in the battle to subdue the ghetto.

Per Himmler's instructions, the site was made into a labor camp that housed some 8,000 prisoners. One of the first tasks assigned to the slave laborers in the new Warsaw concentration

camp was to demolish what ruins still stood. They were also told to search for and collect any items of value the ghetto residents might have left behind.

Outside Warsaw, Polish resistance attacks on the German military continued. When the Germans captured Polish prisoners, they were brought to the Warsaw camp to be executed. Jewish laborers were then made to stack the bodies along with wood and set them alight. Once the cremation pyres were burning, SS soldiers would shoot the workers who had built them and toss their bodies onto the piles too.

The point here, besides mass murder, was to eliminate any evidence that mass murder had occurred. You see, though the Nazis trumpeted the killings at Katyn Forest before the world, privately, the discovery had them worried. It was the condition of the bodies. Although they'd been interred for more than three years, when they were unearthed, they and their clothes were surprisingly well preserved and the evidence of what had happened unmistakable.

This was good news for the propaganda ministry, because it was easy for investigators to prove their accusations. On the other hand, it was bad news for the SS and their Nazi leaders. They had buried the corpses of the millions of people they'd murdered in similar mass graves, right there at the sites where they were killed. Katyn Forest showed that it would be a simple matter for some future investigator to open those graves, work out what had happened, and display the evidence before the entire world.

Fear of future discovery was not the only reason the SS was worried. Not to put too fine a point on it, these huge graves stank. You didn't have to be there to know; the stench of death was plain from kilometers away. Pathogens from the corpses were contaminating the local groundwater.

Here is when the murder machine shifted gears. In place of mass graves, crematoria were installed at the camps, where bodies could be disposed of more neatly. As for the old mass graves, slave laborers were forced to dig them up and cremate the bodies in huge pyres.

The horrors of the Holocaust continue, but we'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening. This is difficult material to think about or talk about, but this is history that must never be forgotten. I'd like to thank John-Paul and Robert for their kind donations, and thank you to Amie for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like John-Paul and Robert and Amie help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on the *History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn back to the Pacific Theater to discuss the Japanese occupations, a topic just as disturbing as what we talked about today, I'm afraid. Everything Is Going to Be Fine, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In July 1943, Polish prime minister Władysław Sikorski was returning to Britain following an inspection tour of Polish forces in the Middle East. In Gibraltar, he boarded a B-24 Liberator bound for England, but the plane crashed into the sea just seconds after taking off from Gibraltar Airport. The pilot of the plane was the only survivor.

A Polish Army officer at the airport who witnessed the crash reportedly exclaimed, "Now Poland is lost!" Not exactly, but the death of Sikorski, along with the rupture with the Soviet government meant the Polish government in exile would no longer be treated as a peer by Allied governments and its influence would dwindle to nothing.

[music: Closing War Theme]