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## **THE SOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE 1944 WARSAW UPRISING<sup>1</sup>**

A victorious insurrection does not require justification. An insurrection that has failed always becomes the subject of passionate discussion immediately afterwards and of historical evaluation, in the future. One of the usual arguments raised by critics is that the Warsaw insurrection was premature. With equal regularity, the advocates of the insurrection assert that its outbreak was inevitable. Both may at the same time be right and wrong. Our method of investigation and evaluation of social phenomena is still considerably lacking in precision. It is difficult for us to go beyond the mere analysis of facts. Our judgments are still to a great extent irrational and depend on our ideological approach and our political program, which – despite illusions to the contrary – shape themselves in the sphere of the emotions rather than that of the mind.

There is a tendency to look for the sources of social phenomena in current events. This is only partially correct, since at the origin of nearly every social phenomenon lie many elements of the past, including the very important one of historical traditions, which by their very nature, constitute – as one of the elements of human behavior – an irrational factor.

This factor operates in nearly every geographical latitude; it is far from being limited to „romantic” Poles. Under certain circumstances, even the wise British are subject to its influence, the British who can be no less romantic against the background of Kiplingesque reality than the Poles are against the background of their century and a half struggle for their very existence.

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<sup>1</sup> The article was published for the first time in „Journal of Central European Affairs” Vol. 5, No 1, Boulder, Colo., April 1945, pp. 36–44.

That is why, in analyzing the social aspects of the Warsaw uprising of 1944, we shall, to begin with, turn our attention not to current events only but to two important traditions.

The first is the traditional role of Warsaw in the struggle for national independence. Although the Warsaw insurrection of 1794 was not the opening act in the Kościuszko Insurrection, and although at first it broke out independently of the national uprising, it was nevertheless of vital and decisive significance. This significance lay in the fact that it was essentially the expression of the revolutionary aspirations of the alliance between the lower strata of the Warsaw craftsmen and the Jacobin military intelligentsia.

The Warsaw insurrection of 1830 was the outgrowth of a similar alliance, with the difference that the somewhat anachronistic Jacobinism of the military intelligentsia gave place to other interests and aims. Later, under the conditions of emerging capitalism, social relations began to change. Led by the Polish Socialist Party, the Warsaw proletariat, in alliance with an important part of the intelligentsia (some of which later „got off at the Independence Station”<sup>2</sup> to become the contemporary equivalent of the old military intelligentsia), played a decisive role in the revolutionary struggle of 1904–1907. The role of the workers in the defense of Warsaw in September, 1939, the role of the Socialist Labor Movement in the defense of the Warsaw ghetto in 1943, the role of the Polish Socialist Party in the Warsaw uprising of 1944 – all these directly follow the same line of historical tradition.

Indissolubly linked with this is the other major tradition in Poland’s struggle for freedom – the close connection between the fight for national independence and the spirit of social revolution, a connection developed and maintained throughout the last 150 years of Polish history.

This connection is neither an accident nor the product of deliberate policy, but has deep roots in the specific conditions of Poland’s social development. At the end of the eighteenth century, the nascent patriotism of the Polish „Third Estate”<sup>3</sup> was directed against three reactionary powers, Russia, Prussia and Austria. The Polish aristocracy, together with a part of the Polish gentry motivated by their class interests, supported the dominant regimes; on the other side of the barricade were the middle class, the crafts-

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<sup>2</sup> Famous words of Piłsudski, who, after leaving the Polish Socialist Party, said that he had been traveling in a „Socialist street-car”, but got off at the „Independence Station”, while the others are continuing their journey.

<sup>3</sup> To be understood as the French „Tiers Etat.”

men, the military intelligentsia descended from the gentry, and certain patriotic elements of the ruling classes.

Capitalism was unable to develop normally in dismembered Poland, especially because the continuous wars that swept over Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries delayed and hampered her economic development. The „Third Estate” never achieved its proper role in partitioned Poland, and where it succeeded in developing, it adopted the defensive policy of compromising with the invaders. Therefore, by 1905, Polish Nationalism, which in 1794 had been revolutionary and Jacobin, already bore the stigma of collaboration with the reactionary invading powers. It thus became not only anti-revolutionary, but also essentially anti-patriotic.

The traditions of Jacobin patriotism were taken over by the movement for democratic revolution, and later by the Socialist revolutionary forces. Poles fought on all the barricades of Europe. The Polish proletariat undertook the mission that the Polish bourgeoisie could not or did not want to fulfill. As a result of this development, the cause of Poland's national independence became indissolubly bound up with the cause of progress and democracy throughout the world. The situation in which Poland found herself after 1918 as a relatively small country squeezed between two expansionist powers evolving in an anti-democratic direction, made her entirely dependent upon the victory of democratic forces which were free from the spirit of conquest and imperialist aspirations.

The Polish revolutionary struggles thus wove themselves quite naturally into the chain whose other links were the barricades of the „Spring of the Peoples” of 1848, the social upheavals of the post-war years, the Vienna insurrection of 1934 and the heroic defense of Madrid of 1937.

The consciousness of the people of Warsaw is deeply steeped in these two traditions, which, without any doubt, are the basis of their uncompromising attitude and “irrational” heroism. To illustrate this it is necessary to cite some further facts.

The Socialist proletariat of Warsaw assumed the initiative in the defense of Warsaw in September 1939. The military intelligentsia was at that time far from its early Jacobinism. But changed conditions again gave rise to an alliance between the two groups, for it immediately became clear that only the Socialist Labor Movement and its forces could save Poland. On September 14, the military officer in charge of the Warsaw radio declared in a conversation:

„I have the feeling that the workers' action in the defense of Warsaw smacks of a socialist revolution. So be it, then, so long as we save Poland.”

What a far cry this is from Weygand's decision in 1940 in response to the problem of whether to arm the people and entrust them with the defense of Paris or to let the Germans in. General Weygand answered, in effect:

„Arm the workers? Never! Better deliver Paris to the Germans!”

In its issue of September 9, 1943, the „Information Bulletin”, underground organ of the Polish Home Army, carried an article entitled: „What Kind of Poland Are We Fighting For?” This article clearly stated that a future Poland must have „freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, freedom of association; it will be a Poland of social justice and welfare for the wide masses, liberated from capitalistic chaos; a Poland which will nationalize its great factories and plants; a Poland which will fundamentally transform its agrarian regime, modernize its system of distributing goods, expand its network of cooperatives and industrialize the country.” These goals are vital because the nation is fighting for a „Poland of political democracy and for democratization of both economic life and culture.”

The decrees of August 18, 1944, establishing employee participation in the management of factories and introducing agrarian reform, were broadcast over the waves of the free radio-station of Fighting Warsaw. These decrees were the beginning of the practical realization of the above principles, a beginning that did not even wait for the end of the struggle in the capital.

Finally, no one can overlook the significance of the fact that the Warsaw section of the Home Army, which provided the very basis for the Warsaw uprising, was composed of the following three infantry divisions: the 8th, bearing the name of Romuald Traugutt<sup>4</sup>, the 10th, named for Maciej Rataj<sup>5</sup>, and the 28th, bearing the name of Stefan Okrzeja<sup>6</sup>. The Okrzeja Division – or rather what remained of it – was the last to lay down its arms.

The social goals and traditions of this truly people's army explain why its commander, General Bor, insistently urged the Government in London to hasten and complete the decrees regarding agrarian reform and the socialization of the key branches of production.

Such is the path followed by red Warsaw, and that is why the hearts of the fighters on the Warsaw barricades „beat in unison”.

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<sup>4</sup> Leader of the Polish insurrection in 1863 against Czarist Russia.

<sup>5</sup> Prominent Polish Peasant leader, former speaker of the Polish Diet (1922–1928) member of the Warsaw Defense Committee in 1939, subsequently executed by the Nazis in 1939 [in the Spring of 1940 – editorial note].

<sup>6</sup> Labor hero in the revolutionary year 1905, he was hanged in Warsaw by the Czarist Russian authorities.

## ■ The People Who Fought

Against the background of these traditions, the alliance of the army and the people – the alliance between the Home Army and the working masses active in the underground movement; of resistance and in the Warsaw uprising – takes on its proper significance.

What is the Home Army? We are not, for the present, interested in its technical organization, its equipment and training, its methods of fighting. We are interested in its social character, its weight as an independent and, undoubtedly, definite factor in the social strength of the underground movement.

The nucleus of the underground army began to form immediately after the September campaign of 1939. At the same time, however, the various political parties formed their own fighting or military detachments, which attracted young elements inspired by the highest ideological aims. In 1942 closer collaboration was established at home between the parties represented in the Polish Government. Simultaneously, the military effort was unified and the several military organizations were placed under unified leadership, under the control of the central political factor – the underground state.

Three factors have contributed to the character of the Home Army. Of first importance is the fact that the Home Army is composed of active and reserve forces developed under the control of political organizations, and educated by these organizations. They are thus connected directly with the people and are free from the cult of external military accessories and the military caste ideology. The training of officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers took place in quite another mental atmosphere: „group privileges,” drill, marches, stars, number of stripes, the manner of wearing the military uniforms, etc., were of no interest to anyone involved. Entirely different criteria decided the selection of officers and non-commissioned officers, who came from the same ideological and social environment as those whom they were to lead. And though an important proportion of the soldiers of the Home Army came from the younger intelligentsia, these young men had all the necessary qualities and prerequisites for becoming patriotic in the Jacobin tradition.

Second, the Polish Socialist Party which had behind it the tradition and the experience of many years of fighting and activity, showed from the very first a deep understanding of the meaning and importance of continuing these activities under the new conditions.

The military formations of the Polish Socialist Party entered the Home Army in compact ranks as active units and as units of reserve forces and militia, and in a number of industrial centers, particularly in Warsaw, they gave the Home Army its specific character. At the same time, the control over all the military activities, carefully and wisely exercised by the Polish Socialist Party as one of the parties of the National Coalition had positive results. The role which the P.P.S (Polish Socialist Party) played in relation to the Home Army can only be compared with the role and activities of the Spanish Left in relation to the Spanish Republican Army.

Thirdly, it was fortunate that the extremely nationalistic elements did not enter the Home Army (Armia Krajowa), but organized the so-called Nationalist Armed Forces (Narodowe Siły Zbrojne). This undoubtedly contributed to clarify the atmosphere and made the Home Army truly the military arm of the nation fighting for democracy in alliance with the other democratic countries.

Under these circumstances, the officers of the Home Army had very little resemblance to the old Polish officers, whose attitude was strongly objected to by Western public opinion. The new officers were mostly new men, with very few professional officers among them. As many interesting underground publications testify, these officers sought to develop a new attitude towards their subordinates, towards the people and towards duty, and evolved unequivocally in the direction of Jacobin patriotism.

These leading elements of the Home Army, the elements which we call the new military intelligentsia, have again played the role of their predecessors in the Kościuszko Insurrection, in Dombrowski's Legions, in the 1830 Insurrection, the 1863 Insurrection, the European revolutions of the nineteenth century, and the Legions of 1914 during World War I. This role has traditionally been played by the military intelligentsia in the history of Poland in association with the working people of the cities.

It would be an unpardonable error to overlook the role of the so-called Peasants' Battalions, the underground military formations of the Polish Peasant Party, which also entered the Home Army in compact ranks. In the discussion of the Warsaw uprising, however, we are concerned primarily with the armed units which emerged from urban communities and whose activities were carried on in the city proper.

In the Warsaw uprising of 1944 the hearts of the fighters beat in unison; as they fought on the barricades, there was not a single crack in the solid ranks of the National Coalition. This Coalition was led by the working people. Without a single dissenting note, the fighters sang the Marseillaise

and the *Warszawianka*<sup>7</sup>, and the words of Dombrowski's *Mazurek*<sup>8</sup> sounded forth not as a nationalistic demonstration, but as the expression of „citizens fighting for the freedom of all peoples.”

Such is the logic of events, such is the line of their development, and such is the social alignment in the current history of Poland.

## ■ Strategy and Politics

Was the Warsaw uprising premature?

There were many attempts, and there will be many others, to answer this question. Both those who uphold and those who reject the view that the uprising was premature, try and will continue to try to use all available documents, in order to judge the problem from the point of view of the standard criteria of military science, with sober efforts to evaluate strategy, while overlooking the political factors which played such an important part in the entire situation.

These efforts, although invaluable as factual and historical material, reflect in only a limited degree the deciding factors involved in the problem.

The logic of social events has nothing in common with the classical categories of an individual's logical thinking. Social and group action is largely influenced by tradition, material and moral interests, ideology, the interweaving of current events, etc.

Purely in the light of strategy, the question of the Warsaw uprising might be viewed as follows:

On the Eastern front, the progress of the Red Army must, it should be assumed, be constantly coordinated with the organized activities of the partisans in the rear of the German troops. This requires constant and systematic coordination, and not merely occasional accord effective only in cases of emergency. The leadership of the partisan army (in this case – the Polish Home Army) should be informed about all the projected methods of forcing a crossing of the Vistula river, as well as the plans for conquering Warsaw. The leadership would then attempt to canalize the natural flow of the uprising and curb moves which were not directly planned to contribute to the effectiveness of the activities of the Red Army in a given sector, activities

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<sup>7</sup> Old Polish revolutionary song of Warsaw revolutionaries.

<sup>8</sup> Polish National Anthem; at first a song of the Polish Legions of Gen. Dombrowski (Dąbrowski), who fought in Italy in 1796–1799.

of whose objectives, range and possibilities the partisan leadership would be closely informed.

Moreover, the partisans would know that they would not be arrested or suppressed after the liberators entered the land; that both their strategic and political objectives fully coincided with those of the liberating armies.

To close our eyes to the fact that none of the above conditions was fully in force in the case of Warsaw is, of course, an insuperable obstacle to the understanding of the strategy and policy of the Warsaw uprising.

Some elements of the Polish Home Army collaborated with the Red Army despite all difficulties and obstacles, setting up emergency liaison, and in many cases deciding to fight on given sectors of the front. Wilno, Lwów, Pińsk, Kowel, Lublin and many other cities were in fact liberated by the Polish Home Army, leading the uprising of the local populations. But there are also other facts that must be remembered: first, that the contacts between some of the Poles and the Red Army were established in a case of emergency; second, that the participation of the Poles was never officially acknowledged by the Soviet authorities; third, that the political objectives of the military action conducted jointly by the Poles and Russians were not the same; fourth, that the reward for participation in military activities was often arrest or deportation.

Facts and documents testify to the maximum efforts made by the Poles since the outbreak of the uprising to establish and maintain contact with the Russian command and political leadership<sup>9</sup>. But it also remains true that at the moment when the uprising broke out coordination between the Polish and Russian policies had not yet been achieved. Speculations as to whose fault it was are vain and sterile. The problem itself, however, is clear enough.

On the other hand, it is of the utmost importance to know that under the given historical and political conditions and at the moment when the Russians were approaching the capital of Poland, a spontaneous revolutionary movement of the working masses of Warsaw arose, striving to achieve liberation with its own hands and to show that it was the master in its own land. It is important to understand that this effort directly followed the ideological line of the traditional alliance between the proletariat and the intelligentsia, whose children now became the Warsaw fighters of the Home Army; last, but not least, it is essential that we realize that this move was also justified militarily, since the establishment of a bridgehead on the left bank

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<sup>9</sup> Capt. Kalugin, a Red Army Liaison officer, dropped by parachute into Warsaw, tried vainly to communicate with Moscow and finally, on August 5, 1944, sent a message to Marshal Stalin via London, but received no answer.

of the Vistula river, where Warsaw lies, could have decided the destiny of this sector of the Eastern front in a manner catastrophic to the Germans.

The attitude of the Russians towards the Warsaw uprising only served to confirm the moral right of the Poles to have taken such a decision. Against this background, the German attitude towards the Warsaw uprising, their all-out effort to prevent the Poles from holding Warsaw at any cost, amply proved that when the Soviet leadership faces a conflict between strategic and political factors, Soviet strategy is shaped primarily by political factors.

And that is to be regretted. Because, had the Soviets in this case given precedence to strategical factors, the political consequences would have changed as well in the most favorable direction. In view of both historical traditions and current social reality, the emotional attitude of the leading elements in the uprising (which were also the leaders of the entire country in its underground fight) was such, that whole-hearted assistance, and its political consequences, could have guaranteed to Russia on the part of Poland something that no puppet committee can ever guarantee: collaboration based on honest confidence, on good experience, and on faith in friendly intentions.

In conclusion, it must be emphasized that in the question of the relation between strategy and politics in Polish life, tradition and current reality always have and always will determine the social aspect of the nation's struggles for freedom and independence. This is fittingly expressed in the words spoken by the prominent Polish Labor leader; Mieczysław Niedziałkowski, in September, 1939: „THE WORKERS DO NOT SURRENDER, THE WORKERS CONTINUE TO FIGHT.”