
Warsaw Uprising Commemoration

Germany, Poland Seek Reconciliation

by Elizabeth Hellenbroich

Ceremonies commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw uprising were held in Warsaw, Aug. 1, with the participation of thousands of veterans from the Polish Homeland Army (which had tried unsuccessfully to break the Nazi occupation of the city in 1944), in addition to representatives of the Polish government and foreign dignitaries. U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, and, most significantly, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, were among the foreign guests speaking at the ceremony. (It is noteworthy that no high-level French or Russian government representative spoke there.)

This was the first time a German Chancellor had been invited to participate officially in the ceremony, and Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski called Schröder's visit historic: "We were divided by an abyss filled with pain and blood," he said. "Today we welcome the Chancellor as a representative of a friendly and close nation."

Pope John Paul II sent an open letter to the survivors of the uprising, emphasizing that their actions will forever be an event of highest patriotism in the national memory. "As a son of this people, I want to give honor to the deceased and the living heroes of the August uprising," the Pope said.

Secretary of State Powell paid tribute to the heroic struggle: "Here, in this place, in the grim face of death, defeat, and destruction, there triumphed the God-given glory of the human spirit that no tyranny can ever extinguish. . . . I say to you tonight that everyone who fought during those dark 63 days was a hero; a hero for Poland, a hero for freedom."

In Russian President Putin's message, he stressed that the "uprising and the heroic struggle of the Polish patriots in the years of World War II made a vital contribution to our Common Victory."

The Warsaw uprising is one of the most traumatic events of the Polish resistance. Although it has been painfully remembered by the Polish people, for decades the event was not prominently commemorated in the East or the West. The uprising began on Aug. 1, 1944, in Warsaw. Approximately 20,000 soldiers of the Polish Homeland Army, following an order code-named "Burza," had planned to capture the central places of the Nazi-occupied capital within 48 hours. The fighters were ill equipped. They had no heavy weapons, just enough to hold through four days of offensive fight-

ing. By then, it was hoped, they could take over the enemy depots.

The Homeland Army had counted on substantial support from both the Western Allies, and the Soviet Red Army troops, which had been heading toward Warsaw. The Red Army had launched a major offensive June 22, 1944, against the Germans, and within weeks, 25 of 40 German divisions were destroyed, and the Red Army was rapidly advancing, reaching the Vistula River by the end of July.

Yet, neither the Western allies nor the Red Army, sitting nearby on the other side of the Vistula River, were willing to give substantial support to the fighters. After 63 days of bloody fighting, the uprising was smashed. There were 200,000 civilians killed, in atrocious massacres by Heinrich Himmler's SS troops. Most of the remaining Warsaw inhabitants, 350,000 citizens, were deported to concentration camps or to forced labor camps. The surviving 18,000 Homeland Army fighters were deported to concentration camps. Then, the almost empty city was reduced to ruins and ashes, on the orders of Himmler. The important cultural and historical buildings—including libraries and archives—were burned down.

Schröder: A Tribute and Reconciliation

Chancellor Schröder placed a wreath at the memorial for the victims. In his speech, which Polish observers considered an important step in furthering German-Polish reconciliation, Schröder paid tribute to the extraordinary "heroic and courageous resistance" in its 63 days of struggle against the German Occupation.

Schröder also spoke of the "shame" with which Germans today look back at the crimes of the Nazi troops that invaded Poland in 1939, and razed Warsaw to the ground. "Innumerable Polish women, men, and their children were murdered or abducted into camps and forced labor. At this site of Polish pride and German shame, we hope for reconciliation and peace." Nobody wants to bury history, Schröder said, "but today Germans and Poles are equal partners in Europe, and everything that could divide the two, must be categorically resisted."

Schröder dealt sharply with an issue that has strained German-Polish relations in the past months: the claims on Poland for restitution by Germans who lost their homes and property as result of the war. The juridical and practical possibilities for realizing such claims are nonexistent, according to international law experts, and the claims would open a Pandora's Box.

"We know who started the war and who its first victims were," the Chancellor said. "Therefore, there cannot be any room for restitution claims from Germany, which turns history upside down. . . . Neither the government nor any serious political force defends such claims, and the government will argue its position respectively in international courts."