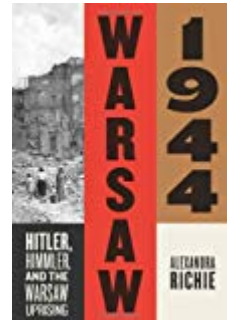


**Alexandra Richie.** *Warsaw 1944: Hitler, Himmler, and the Warsaw Uprising.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013. Illustrations. 738 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-28655-2.



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Alexandra Richie's sweeping study, *Warsaw 1944: Hitler, Himmler, and the Warsaw Uprising*, provides a new perspective on the bitter end of the Second World War from the Polish capital. The uprising, launched on August 1, 1944, was an attempt by the Polish Armia Krajowa (AK), or "Home Army," to retake the city in the narrow window between German military withdrawal and Soviet Red Army advance at the end of the war. The AK, commanded by generals Tadeusz Bór-Komorowski and Antoni Chruściel ("Monter"), seized a number of points in the capital city, but were surrounded by German forces and forced to surrender after two months of brutal fighting in which civilian casualties topped 150,000. Though Richie weighs in on a number of topics in modern Polish history and the history of Nazi-occupied Europe, her main insight is in her focus on German agency during the uprising, rather than Polish or wider Allied behaviors. Her telling of the story of the uprising is as a series of escalating German responses to Polish behavior,

and of the inconsistencies in German decision making at the last stage of the war.

A number of introductory discussions sets out the multiple contexts in which the Polish uprising needs to be understood, including a brief history of Poland under Nazi occupation, other Nazi anti-Slavic killing operations across the eastern front, and the trifold situation of summer 1944: the advance of the Soviet Bagration offensive, Walter Model's late July counterattack, and the fallout of the unsuccessful "July plot" to kill Hitler. These discussions lengthen the work but also establish the vulnerability of Polish resistance in the fluctuating diplomatic and military situation of 1944. In her view, the particular combination of military-political events that summer gave Heinrich Himmler enormous influence with Hitler and leverage over the Wehrmacht in determining policy, and predetermined that the German reaction to Polish resistance would be met with SS-directed violence. After setting this scene, Richie details the neighborhood-by-neighborhood devastation of Warsaw by German police, following the SS

through Wola, Ochota, the Old Town, Czerniaków, and Żoliborz. Each was systematically destroyed, looted, and emptied during August and September 1944. The culprits here are Oskar Dirlewanger and Bronisław Kaminski, who had led units primed in Belorussia for partisan “warfare” against Slavic civilians. Far from regular troops, Himmler knew they would be “too busy looting and raping to move the front line forward” (p. 323). Their behavior was so bloodthirsty—and here Richie’s extensive use of Polish victims’ voices describing the mass rape of women and girls and the murder of hospital patients underscores the point—that it upset the Wehrmacht.

It is this primacy of Himmler’s rampaging police that produces the grotesque body counts in Wola, Ochota, and the Old Town. Dirlewanger’s attack on Wola, she points out, should be counted as the “largest single battlefield massacre of the Second World War” (p. 255). His unit alone killed 30,000-40,000 civilians, a fair portion of the 150,000 total civilians killed and the 520,000 deported and displaced during the uprising (pp. 306, 648). Richie outlines how policies fluctuated and how the Poles were caught between Nazi institutions battling for primacy in the last days of the Third Reich. The struggle between Himmler, Hitler’s generals, and the various SS deputies on the ground led to a head-spinning oscillation in the treatment of the Poles, but did not save the city from final destruction, on which Hitler insisted. Richie reasons that the ripples of the Polish uprising caused changes far beyond Warsaw. The events were “a turning point in Himmler’s life,” after which he began to consider ways to prepare for the postwar future by betraying Hitler (p. 345). The Volkssturm, the Nazis’ last-ditch militia, was perhaps even “inspired in part by the Polish resistance” (p. 93), and the final recognition of the AK soldiers as combatants came from a Nazi hope for such recognition of their own militia by the Allies. The evolving Hitler-Himmler relationship is the backdrop of the Warsaw massacres, which Richies illustrates with a vivid portrait of Hitler as moti-

vated by a deep animosity for the Poles, and which were worsened by his spiraling decline, drug addiction, and “derangement” (p. 239).

Paralleling the deepening rifts within German institutions, the Grand Alliance’s fractures were made clear in the decision making—or lack thereof—over Warsaw. The British, Americans, and Soviets revealed themselves in their squabble about how or whether to aid the resisters to have fundamentally different visions of the postwar order. The general western Allied sympathy for the Polish cause resulted in a handful of paltry air drops and the sending of a few thousand of General Zygmunt Berling’s infantrymen from the Soviet lines across the river Vistula, a gesture that led to their massacre and failed to aid the trapped resisters. Richie draws a portrait of a pro-Polish but nervous Churchill, a vacillating and unreliable Roosevelt, and a Stalin delighted to take advantage of the collapsing Poles for his own gain. Echoing one of Model’s staff officers, she sees the fight over Warsaw as the “beginning of the Cold War” (p. 475). The result was that Poland’s military allies did nothing of substance to aid the AK, which was not equipped to hold what it had taken in the first days of August, and that hundreds of thousands of Polish civilians were left to the tender mercy of the SS.

Of note here is that unlike other studies, including Norman Davies’s *Rising ’44* of a decade prior, Richie’s focus is not on the AK and its struggle.[1] These young men and women, numbering about 40,000 “but only a few thousand [of whom] were properly armed and trained” (p. 161), fought bravely but were unsuccessful. The resisters functioned as a barometer of Warsaw civilians’ hope and despair. Though they “could do no wrong in those first days” (p. 218), civilians “began to turn against the AK, and to blame them for having started the uprising” as German brutality against the panicking population increased (p. 338). Indeed, Richie blames AK leaders Bór and Monter for their misunderstanding of the development of

the eastern front, which caused them to launch the uprising “at the worst possible moment” (p. 140). Rather than a detailing of the exploits of the AK, addressed elsewhere in memoir literature and in Davies’s earlier work, her attention is on what the uprising provokes: weeks of German police violence against unarmed Polish civilians.

Richie’s *Warsaw 1944* provides a vivid new narrative that should be of interest not merely to Polish historians, but also to scholars of the eastern front and Nazi atrocity. The scholarship on the final chapter of the war has misunderstood both the importance of the Polish uprising and of the halt of the Soviet advance.[2] Still not well known outside of Poland, she demonstrates that the uprising was a crucible of Nazi political wrangling, and revelatory both of the tensions within that hierarchy and those in the Grand Alliance that defeated it. The work profits from a rich source base and access to Władysław Bartoszewski’s extensive personal archives. It also manages to weigh in on a number of questions along the way, including the place of the Holocaust in Polish history, the comparison between the Warsaw Ghetto Rising of 1943 and the citywide uprising of the next year, the significance of Polish collaboration with Nazism, and the success of Bagration. Despite a colorful cast of characters who animate the whole of the narrative, and a nuanced description of the multifaceted political and military situation, Richie’s conclusion is straightforward: to understand the bloodletting and destruction of Warsaw in 1944, one must look not to Polish aspirations or to wartime diplomacy, but to the Nazi desire for vengeance.

#### Notes

[1]. Norman Davies, *Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw* (New York: Penguin, 2005).

[2]. She takes a different position than Richard J. Evans in *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin, 2009), who states that Stalin called for the launch of the uprising, or David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House in *When Titans Clashed*:

*How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), who focus on the strategic importance of the bridges over the Vistula, which she dismisses.

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