

Black and red Company in the Warsaw Uprising (1944) against Nazi occupation

Participating in the Warsaw Uprising, the 'Union of Polish Syndicalists' (ZSP – 'Związek Syndykalistów Polskich') was a continuation of the pre-war 'Union of Trade Unions' (ZZZ). It became a member of the international association of anarcho-syndicalist unions, the 'International Workers' Association' (IWA). According to the 1943 ZSP program, the future political system of a popular Poland would be based on an association of autonomous and free parishes, the state bureaucracy will be replaced by delegates elected directly by workers' assemblies of self-governing workplaces and the defeat of capitalism would lead to the rising of libertarian socialism, thus ensuring the welfare of the whole society. However, the ZSP postulated the maintenance of the pre-war borders to the east and creation of new ones to the west based on the Odra river and the Baltic sea.

The editor of the newspaper 'The Syndicalist' ('Syndykalista') was an Anarchist Federation activist by the name of Pawel Lew Marek, a longer biography of whom can be found in ABB #29. The ZSP, as well as publishing various newspapers and conducting militant actions, was busy founding factory committees which were makeshift trade unions. It is thanks to these committees that workers were able to take many factories directly after WW2 – until the communist bureaucracy of the 'Polish Workers Party' (PPR – 'Polska Partia Robotnicza') seized back control despite promising the syndicalists that they could run the economy in September 1944.

The ZSP disbanded in 1945. Below is a chronological outline of the syndicalists' participation in the Warsaw Uprising.

104. Company of Syndicalists

On the first night of the uprising, lieutenant 'Wronski', commandant of the 104. Company of Syndicalists, tried to establish communication with officers of the 'Home Army' (AK – 'Armia Krajowa') (*1). He collected weapons (which were hidden in a decentralised manner during the whole period of occupation) and sent out patrols to different regions of the capital in order to assess the situation. The first patrol reported hearing groans of injured people coming out from the school on Barokowa Street. In the morning, one of the neighbouring uprising squads left the Old Town (a district of Warsaw) without informing anybody (*2) which led the company's side potentially vulnerable to Nazi advancement. At the same time, many groups of insurgents who were blindly moving through the Old Town in search of their squads decided to join the 104. Company of Syndicalists. Its numbers grew to fifty people and its weaponry consisted of two heavy machine guns, fifteen pistols and about twenty hand grenades (*3). With such miserable armament, the Company under the command of Lieutenant 'Koperski' (Witold Potz) (*4), started their assault on the school on Barokowa Street. The building was a designated Nazi field hospital and shortly before the uprising, the Nazis had managed to evacuate their injured servicemen and now guarded it with fifty soldiers.

Struggle in the Old Town district, Warsaw

This area of the Old Town was the only strong military point for the occupiers; it was protected with barbed wire and a complex of bunkers. However, the occupiers, in fear of further attacks from insurgents, decided to move to the building next door, leaving the injured soldiers in the school. Most probably they had been counting on the help of the Luftwaffe who was not forthcoming. At that moment, the syndicalist insurgents conducted their first big battle, during which they broke their enemy's resistance. The occupiers were overwhelmed by the numerical advantage of the insurgents and surrendered with some officers committing suicide. With the huge enthusiasm of the Old Town district inhabitants, the insurgents transported about fifty captives to their base which was the Szlankier curtain factory off Swietojska Street. The most impressive treasures of the battle were three heavy machine guns, five regular machine guns, some pistols, hand grenades and ammunition. Meanwhile, 'Ryszarda' (Maria Onaker), commandant of the 104. Company's women's squad organised another heavy machine gun together with some other machine guns and pistols. From here, the 104. Company of Syndicalists was the best armed insurgent unit in the Old Town area. New people were joining their lines everyday. The Company structure consisted originally of four sections, then six sections, then altogether about 360 insurgents. Immediately after the formation, the first section stormed Blank's palace and the prison on Banilowicza Street. Another section headed towards another strategically important point – the buildings of the Court in the Leszno neighbourhood. The rest of the Company, along with other insurgent units, attacked the National Currency Factory.

Organising logistics in the line of fire

Realising that the uprising would take much longer than anticipated, the syndicalists led by 'Dr. Adam' (Adam Krakowski) organised a base and system of supplying materials. From no. 10, Swietojska Street,

sergeant 'Winiak' (Hipolit Iwanik) organised the production of hand grenades and Molotov cocktails. Meanwhile, the German captives were organised into the transportation column and under the escort of insurgents they transported food from various ex-occupier magazines to the syndicalist supply base. One has to admit that in spite of being one of the smallest factions of the insurgent forces (*5), syndicalists managed to be the best supplied unit in the Old Town area.

Black and red units attract positive interest from civilians and negative reactions from the AK

By setting up a special committee composed of civilians and insurgents, the 104. Company also organised food and medicine for the civilians of the Old Town (*6) with children, the elderly and the sick given priority. These effective activities carried out in the black and red colours of the syndicalists (*7) gained interest from the inhabitants. One day during the uprising, a delegate of the main uprising forces – AK, captain 'Barry' (Włodzimierz Kozakiewicz), visited the syndicalist headquarters with the demand of changing their name to '104. Company of AK' and their colours to Polish ones. His hosts told him what they understood by the term democracy, at the end of which he was informed that his demands were unacceptable and sent back to the AK.

Beginnings of ZSP and its activities before the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising

The 104. Company of Syndicalists had its roots in the 'Union of Polish Syndicalists' (ZSP). This conspiracy organisation was founded in the Old Town area of Warsaw; specifically no.12 Brzozowa Street, in the flat belonging to the historian Prof. Kazimierz Zakrzewski who would later be killed in Palmiry (*8). The organisation started its activities according to the principles published in a declaration call 'Lets chase the weapons'. They spread their ideas through numerous publications such as 'Akacja' ('The Action'), 'Sprawa' ('An Issue'), 'Czyn' ('The Act'), 'Sprawa Chlopska' ('Peasant's Issue'), 'Myslimlodych' ('Idea of Youth'), Dekada ('The Decade') and the daily information bulletin 'Iskra' ('The Spark'). The organisation had a civilian and military wing with the latter established in April 1940.

Relations between the syndicalists and the AK

The ZSP militant groups were neither part of ZWZ (*9) nor the AK; there existed only some agreements in terms of cooperation in resistance against the occupiers. In such talks, participating on the AK side was general 'Grot' (Stefan Rowecki), later general 'Grzegorz' (Tadeusz Pelczynski) and Kortum (Antoni Sanojca), while on the ZSP side - 'Gornicki' (Stefan Kapuscinski). After his execution in May 1943, talks were resumed by Roman Galicz who would be arrested by Gestapo and executed among the ruins of Warsaw's Ghetto. Galicz's successor was 'Poreba' (Jerzy Zlotowski) who would be killed during the Warsaw Uprising as a member of the Syndicalists Brigade in the city's central district. In spring 1944, there was clear distrust on both sides during a regional inspection of syndicalist units by AK officers. This strain increased when the ZSP refused to join the 'Front of National Unity' ('Front Jednosci Narodowej') – the right-wing arm of the anti-German resistance, and instead joined the 'Front of the Patriotic Left' ('Front Lewicy Patriotycznej'). The last contact the syndicalists had with the AK leadership was July 31, hence they were not informed about the moment the uprising would break out.

Isolated struggles of various syndicalist units

Due to breakdown in communication, the syndicalists could not mobilise in time and were left disjointed with their forces fighting in different areas. Next to the 104. Company who were fighting in the Old Town district was the Syndicalist Brigade who under the leadership of Edward Wolonciej-Czemier were struggling in the central district, with another section in Powisle. On the second day of the uprising, there was another group of syndicalists lead by 'Ostrze' (Franciszek Lotocki). Within its ranks were telecommunication experts who took the telephone operator PAST. German residents in the centre subsequently ran into the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto while insurgents set up the telephone system and another in the Zoliborz district.

In the second half of August, the 104. Company was still fighting against significant occupied posts in the Old Town as well as defending its own position in the streets Brzozwa, Swietojanska and Swietojerska. Before the Old Town's evacuation (*10), the Company lost its military leadership; 'Wronski' and 'Koperski' both got trapped inside the ruins of a house on Długa Street with Nazi forces surrounding them. However, the two managed to find some food and stay hidden in the ruins until late autumn when the occupiers finally left Warsaw.

Meanwhile, there was confrontation between syndicalists and the AK. When the latter began coordinating and organising the evacuation of the Old Town to other districts, it emerged that they were not allowing injured syndicalists out and that the leadership decided that the syndicalists should be the last units to leave.

In response, from the night of August 31 to September 1, a section of syndicalists under 'Maly' appeared on Krasinski Square (the entrance to the evacuation channels) with the intention of attacking the AK forces. After long negotiation they decided to renege on their position. Later, the section was arrested, but managed to disarm the AK soldiers and escape.

The 104. Company of Syndicalists was at this time being evacuated from the Old Town to Powisle (September 1-2) and fighting there with 110 individuals to its name. They were losing heavily and were finally defeated by the Nazis on September 6. Some of the survivors evacuated to the city centre, some joined up with the famous insurgent battalion 'Parasol', while a second section composed of 26 people under the commands of 'Nalecz' (Stanislaw Komornicki) moved towards Czerniakow and participated in defensive struggle there until the moment of its complete re-occupation by the Nazis. On September 15, three members of this section managed to cross the river reaching the east side of the city (*11). They came back on the west side one day later as guides for the First Polish Army forces. Most of the defenders of the Czerniakow area, among them many syndicalists, were killed. On September 22, 1944, the last ten members of the second section of the 104. Company of Syndicalists managed to cross the river where they were conscripted into the Polish army forces which was part of the Red Army offensive.

Michal Przyborowski
Abolishing Borders from Below #31

Footnotes

(*1) AK – 'Armia Krajowa' (Home Army) – The Home Army with 380,00 soldiers at its peak was the military wing of the Underground State. It consolidated a number of military groups spontaneously formed after the Polish campaign of September-October 1939. There were AK groups which started the uprising.

(*2) The uprising started when more or less a hundred groups of insurrectionists went on the streets and attacked the Nazi forces wherever they met them. It was a large but also quite chaotic front during the first few days as many groups and squads were trying to find their respective squads and companies by moving sometimes blindly through the city. Some companies were formed successfully, some rather randomly and many groups and squads never managed to find their companies. As a result, the uprising was carried by a mix of strategic coordination and by autonomously acting squads.

(*3) Many squads undertook the struggle without any weapons in their hands or with just one pistol for the whole group since during the occupation possession of firearms was a crime. Thus, in the first phase of the uprising the main goal was to gain weaponry from the Nazis.

(*4) All members of the underground resistance used nicknames, their real names are in brackets.

(*5) The AK (Polish nationalists) and Polish communists were much bigger forces. Most of them had been supported by Polish or international state structures from abroad while anarchist and syndicalist insurgents had been mostly dependent on their own capacities.

(*6) Food was a big problem during the six year period of the occupation and reached its height during the uprising.

(*7) The vast majority of units participating in the uprising wore Polish national red and white coloured bands on their arms.

(*8) Palmiry is a place not far from Warsaw where thousands of resistance members and civilians had been executed during the Nazi occupation.

(*9) ZWZ – 'Zwiazek Walki Zbrojnej' ('Association of Armed Struggle') – was a cryptonym of the Polish Army formed in Poland after it was occupied by Germany and the Soviet Union. In 1942, the ZWZ was reformed into the AK.

(*10) The longer the uprising went on the stronger the occupiers became. The insurgents simply ran out of everything; food, ammunition, medicine, people, energy and hope.

(*11) Warsaw is divided by the river Wisla in two parts. The uprising took place only on the west side of the river while the east side was under control of the Red Army. Passing the river in any direction would have meant almost certain death since the river is quite wide and under the full range of Nazi fire. The massive defeat of the uprising in such close presence of the Red Army has been one of the most complex and

emotional debates in Polish history, one which is not the topic here.