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Special report
The second world war

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'My duty was to take pictures'

On August 1 1944, Polish resistance fighters launched the biggest insurrection the Nazis ever faced - the Warsaw uprising. Two months later, a quarter of a million Poles were dead, the city in ruins. Until he was injured in the fighting, photographer Jerzy Tomaszewski recorded the uneven battle. He tells Janina Struk how he went to war with a camera

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Jerzy Tomaszewski's photo of fighters in Warsaw preparing for action on August 1 1944

Jerzy Tomaszewski was lying badly wounded in the rubble of the devastated city of Warsaw. He managed to raise himself on one arm and press the shutter to capture the catastrophic scene around him. It was the last war image he would take. It was September 6 1944, the 37th day of the Warsaw uprising. The city had endured continual bombardment from German forces and there was more to come: in the 63 days of that desperate struggle, more than 250,000 people lost their lives in the biggest, most heroic insurrection the Nazis ever faced.

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Tomaszewski had used photography to defy the Germans all through the war. In 1940, the eldest of his five brothers - all of whom were members of the Home Army (the Polish underground resistance) - recruited the 16-year-old Jerzy onto a secret training course in photography. He then went to work in Foto-Rys, a photographic shop in central Warsaw that served the German occupying forces.

By 1940 Poles were no longer allowed to own cameras or take photographs, but there was no lack of custom at Foto-Rys. "The Germans loved photography," says Tomaszewski, now 81 and still living in Warsaw's rebuilt Old Town, site of some of the fiercest fighting. The 20 or so Polish workers were kept busy processing and printing Nazi propaganda photographs and snapshots taken by ordinary German soldiers. They often showed atrocities - round-ups, Jewish ghettos, public hangings and executions. "When we first saw these pictures it was a shock for everyone," says Tomaszewski.

The underground established a secret cell in Foto-Rys. It was run by a chemical engineer called Andrzej Honowski who instructed Tomaszewski and fellow conspirator Mieczyslaw Kucharski in making illicit copies of the incriminating material. The copies were smuggled to the Polish government in exile, based in London. "It was highly dangerous work," Tomaszewski says, "but we were young and we didn't always understand the danger, or the importance of the work we were doing."

In fact it proved too dangerous - in 1943 the Nazis got wind of the Foto-Rys operation and raided the shop. Tomaszewski and Kucharski were tipped off and got away, but Honowski wasn't so lucky - he was arrested and executed. Undeterred, Tomaszewski and Kucharski continued their activities, organising a secret laboratory where documents and photographs were copied on to tiny strips of microfilm so that they could be smuggled in pens, razor handles and shoes.

In January 1944, the nature of the war was changing. The Red Army was on the march, its relentless drive west carrying it across the prewar Polish-Soviet border. By the end of July the Soviets were only 12 kilometres from the centre of Warsaw - close enough to hear the

gunfire. By that time the Soviets had set up the pro-communist "Lublin committee" and had declared that the Home Army were no better than fascists. Thousands had been interned.

In Warsaw, the Home Army realised it had little choice but to go on the attack. If they did not, they would be accused by the Soviets of collaboration, and if they waited for the Red Army to march in, the Lublin committee would be established in the capital. The decision to begin the battle was based on the assumption that the allies would airlift vital supplies and the Red Army would support them. The assumption was misguided on both counts.

When the uprising began, on August 1 1944, Tomaszewski was one of some two dozen photographers assigned by the Bureau of Information and Propaganda (BIP) to document the battle. Tomaszewski remembers the main principles of his job: always be on the frontline; process the film as soon as possible; and protect the negatives at all costs. The underground commandeered a number of photo labs, including one called Foto-Greger where a photographer named Waclawa printed Tomaszewski's photographs. Each print, captioned and dated, was dispatched to the daily newspapers and bulletins.

After five years of brutal occupation, there was jubilation that the fight had begun. "For the first three days," says Tomaszewski, "it was a wonderful atmosphere." The cultural life of this "secret underground state" as it was known, flourished. Newspapers and cinema newsreels reported on the uprising; there were concerts, and Polish radio returned to the airwaves. But by August 7, the Germans had begun to mobilise special forces, and a terrifying array of military might. There were round-ups, deportations to concentration camps, and executions: in the space of a week, an estimated 35,000 civilians - men, women and children - were massacred. The insurgents could not compete militarily, but their ingenuity and the support of the civilians helped them to maintain the uprising.

The human cost was enormous. "As the daily bombardments increased, the death toll rose, and as food and water supplies ran low the population became ever more desperate," says Tomaszewski. "My duty was to photograph not only the fighting but also the civilians, to find out how they were coping as they were confined to cellars without food or medicine, weapons or ammunition.

"It was difficult, they were suffering and I was taking photographs and writing about it." But he never doubted the importance of his photographic evidence. "Whenever I was in trouble or covered in rubble, I worried only about the camera and film."

He worked wherever possible, often with his Dolina 35mm camera hidden beneath his coat. "We had no military training and the work was increasingly dangerous. On one occasion I was told to photograph a German unit that was bombarding the city from the top of a building. I managed to get on top of the building opposite. To test the situation I put my hat on a stick. It was immediately blown to pieces."

By the end of August the Germans had tightened their grip on the central Old Town area. The air raids and artillery attacks increased. Armed mainly with Molotov cocktails, the Home Army fought on, but faced an impossible task. By early September thousands of fighters and civilians began to evacuate through the city's sewers.

When Tomaszewski heard that the central power station was under attack, he went to take photographs. "By then the Germans were in the centre of town with tanks," he says. "They were burning and destroying everything all around me. I was very frightened. There was tragedy everywhere: people carrying injured children, people being buried alive in the cellars. I was scared all the time. Comrades were shouting at me not to risk my life taking photographs."

With the Old Town collapsing around him, Tomaszewski was running across a main street between tanks shelling the buildings when he was caught in a blast of shrapnel and falling rubble. With his legs covered in blood, his comrades dragged him to the ruins of his nearby family home where he collapsed. "I was desperate to take more photographs," he says. There he took that last frame, showing several bodies lying in the street and a woman checking them for signs of life.

Tomaszewski's comrades took away his camera and underground ID in case of capture - effectively saving his life - and dragged him to the hospital. "There were so many other injured people worse than me - many without arms or legs - that I asked to be left outside so that I could be treated later," he says. "This was the worst moment of the uprising for me. As I lay on the ground the hospital was shelled. Everything was in flames and people were jumping from the windows. I was crawling towards them, but I couldn't help. They were burning alive and I couldn't do anything to help them."

The fact was, no one was helping the Poles. Despite endless pleas for assistance, the they were caught between the conflicting interests of the western allies and the Soviet Union and neither considered it in their interest to help. While the Red Army sat silently on the eastern bank of the Vistula, Winston Churchill pledged support, but besides a few air drops, the support was pitiful. When Stalin refused allied planes permission to land on Soviet controlled airbases, making further air drops impossible, neither Churchill nor Roosevelt exerted pressure. In mid-September, when a German victory was imminent, the Russians airlifted a few supplies, but it was too late. By allowing the Home Army to be annihilated, Stalin in effect had the Nazis do his dirty work for him.

On October 2, the Home Army capitulated. The Germans expelled the surviving population and razed the city. It was another three months before the Soviets rolled into the eerie landscape of deserted ruins.

Tomaszewski had been rounded up at the hospital with 20 other people and sent to the Pruszkow detention camp, about 20km outside Warsaw. But he managed to escape and went into hiding in the mountains in the south. In February 1945, he returned to Warsaw to bury his mother and one of his brothers - their bodies had been found beneath the rubble of their home. He took a few photographs among the ruins, balancing on his crutches. After that he took no more

photographs. "The trauma of the uprising left a permanent scar," he says.

After the war, the insurgents who had survived were effectively silenced. Under the communist regime any mention of the Warsaw uprising was dangerous. Over the next few years an estimated 50,000 members of the Home Army were killed, interned or deported to the Gulag. For almost 10 years the photographic evidence of the uprising was hidden away, along with the memories, but after Stalin's death in 1953 the "thaw" began and four years later the first collection of uprising photographs was published

None of Tomaszewski's photographs featured in the book - as far as he knew, they had all been buried beneath the rubble. But in June 1975 he saw an advertisement in a Warsaw newspaper from someone who was looking for him. He did not know the surname, but it was Waclawa Zacharska, who had printed his photographs during the war. He had not seen or heard from her since 1944, but she had taken all his negatives from the laboratory and hidden them in metal cans. The building had been destroyed, but the cans remained: although some were badly damaged, more than 600 photographs survived. Two years later, in May 1977, they were displayed in the first exhibition of images from the uprising, in Warsaw. In 1979 his book, Episodes in the Warsaw Uprising, was published.

Tomaszewski's home in the Old Town now doubles as his archive, and includes the artwork of his eldest brother Stanislaw, the Home Army's chief artist, and hundreds of images from Foto-Rys which had been hidden by his mother. He calls the collection his "family archive".

His apartment is within walking distance of the family home in whose ruins he lay to take his last photograph. He shows me the picture and falls silent. "Was it all worth it?" I ask him. "Perhaps it wasn't," he says. "So many lives were lost. It seems countries where people collaborated had it better than us.

"But later I heard that the Nazis already had a plan to destroy Warsaw and its population. Either way, the people of Warsaw couldn't have won."

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· Janina Struk is author of Photographing the Holocaust: Interpretations of the Evidence (IB Tauris)