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**by Steve Hochstadt**

# THE DESTRUCTION AND REBUILDING OF WARSAW



Warsaw destroyed, World War II

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I have spent the past three weeks in three cities which were destroyed during World War II and then rebuilt: Warsaw, St. Petersburg, and Berlin. Warsaw's experiences tell us much about what cities and history mean to people. Warsaw, the capital of Poland since 1596, was completely leveled by the German Army. It is hard to picture what those words mean.

Even before the Germans attacked Poland, architects developed a plan to obliterate the city and its 1.3 million people, and then rebuild a model provincial German city one-tenth that size. During the invasion of Poland in September 1939, the Luftwaffe made the largest air raid in history up to that time on Warsaw, a terror attack with incendiary bombs meant to demoralize the Polish people. Thousands of civilians were killed and buildings ruined.

A few years later, after the uprising of the last few thousand Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto in April 1943, that portion of the central city was entirely razed to the ground by the Wehrmacht, by bombing and bulldozers, following an order from Heinrich Himmler.

In August 1944, a second uprising in Warsaw began. As the Soviet Army approached from the east, Polish underground forces attacked the German occupiers, hoping to liberate the city themselves. The Soviets halted their advance, allowing the German Army to overwhelm the rebels and then use a special Annihilation and Incineration Detachment to methodically destroy the whole city, burning libraries and blowing up churches. Hitler's order was clear: "Warsaw has to be pacified, that is, razed to the ground."

By the end of the war, about 90% of Warsaw's buildings had been demolished and most of its population murdered, significantly greater destruction than was caused by the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Already during the German occupation, Polish architects and city planners risked their lives to document existing historic structures and to plan for rebuilding. After the war's end, the new Communist leaders of Poland considered moving the capital to another city. No modern city had ever been rebuilt after such complete demolition. Polish patriots who had fought in the resistance argued that the historical architectural substance of Warsaw represented the Polish nation and should be rebuilt.

Over the next 7 years, a replica of old Warsaw was constructed. The destruction of the city center was so complete that 22 paintings of city streets done in the 1770s by the Venetian painter Bernardo Bellotto were used to recreate historic buildings. Bricks from the rubble and fragments of architectural details were reused. Warsaw's

citizens returned by the thousands to help in the reconstruction, following the motto, "The entire nation builds its capital." Unlike the rebuilding of German cities, no foreign funds were available for Warsaw. The entire reconstruction was paid for by popular donations to the Social Fund for the Rebuilding of the Capital.

Is Warsaw now an architectural Disneyland of fake "old" buildings? No, it is a reborn place of remembrance, a monument to the importance of the past for the present. Warsaw's tragic history is displayed everywhere in monuments, plaques, sculptures and signs that remind residents and visitors of the two uprisings in 1943 and 1944, of the responsibility of Germans and Russians for the city's historical agonies, and of the pride of the Polish people in their resurrected capital.

Public historical reminders, as in every country, tell only a partial story. As national politics shift, so does the narrative told by a community's memorials, usually with a long delay. In June 2016, the Polish government decided to remove 229 monuments across the country to the Soviet "liberation" of Poland. The demoted memorials will be gathered in an open air museum at a former Soviet army base outside of Warsaw. The education director of the Institute of National Remembrance explained that these monuments propagate "what we consider as untruth: gratitude for having given Poland independence."

The conflicted national Polish reaction to their Jewish fellow citizens, which occasionally included massacres of Jews during and after the German occupation, is not addressed in public monuments. That difficult story is still politically controversial and may require more time to become part of accepted Polish history.

The fateful decision to recover a nation's history by rebuilding Warsaw, to undo the destruction of war and racism, has implications beyond Poland. The destruction of cities in the Middle East in the Syrian civil war or by the terrorists of ISIS raises similar questions about what will happen in the future – rebuilding the old or constructing the new. On a smaller scale, American towns like Jacksonville have faced similar decisions. The urban renewal craze of the 1960s and 1970s often led to the replacement of historic buildings by ugly new construction, as in Jacksonville's central square. More recently, considerable funds have been used to remove those architectural mistakes and to invest in the recovery of unique local architectural history. As in Poland and elsewhere, reconstruction of local history means the

recovery of local pride. The past lives on in old buildings, physical reminders of the accomplishments of our predecessors.

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