

September 23, 1944

The Battle for Warsaw

Citation:

"The Battle for Warsaw", September 23, 1944, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Container 174, W. Averell Harriman Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. <https://wilson-center.drivingcreative.com/document/220030>

Summary:

Stalin updates Harriman and Kerr on the Battle for Warsaw and what the Red Army has encountered as it advances toward Warsaw.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan
Transcript - English

Container 174, W.A. Harriman papers LCC
 TOP SECRET

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

☐ Retain class'n ☐ Change/classify to _____
☐ With concurrence of _____

Conversation. ☒ Declassify ☐ in part and excise as September 23, 1944.

EO 12356, Sec. 1.3(a) (_____) 313086
 AICDC/SR by QAS

Present: The American Ambassador, Mr. Harriman
 Mr. Edward Page, Second Secretary of
 Embassy

The British Ambassador, Sir Archibald
 Clark Kerr
 Major A. H. Birse, Second Secretary of
 Embassy

Marshal I. V. Stalin
 Mr. V. M. Molotov, People's Commissar for
 Foreign Affairs
 Mr. Pavlov, Soviet interpreter

Subject: The Battle for Warsaw.

I inquired whether the battle for Warsaw was proceeding to Marshal Stalin's satisfaction. He replied in the negative, stating that the Vistula had proved to be a tremendous obstacle. It was impossible to get tanks across the river because of continual heavy German shelling and it was difficult to carry on operations without tanks. Even medium tanks could not be ferried across the river because of German vigilance. The Russian plan was to encircle the city and to cut the German communications so that the Nazis would find themselves in a "mousetrap". They could not take Warsaw by a frontal attack because of the advantageous position of the Germans.

I inquired whether contact had been made with the resistance groups in Warsaw. Marshal Stalin replied that some infantry battalions had been ferried across the Vistula to support the resistance groups. These were Polish troops -- four infantry battalions -- and they had been transferred on General Berling's insistence against the better judgment of the Red Army. They had suffered great losses and they would have to be withdrawn.

I inquired whether fighting was still going on in Warsaw. Marshal Stalin replied that after Praga had been taken the Russians got a clearer picture of the Warsaw situation. The insurgents were still fighting in four different isolated parts of the city. They were attempting to defend themselves but they had no offensive ability.

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They had beaten off some German attacks but could not emerge from their positions of hiding. They had no artillery and were equipped only with rifles and pistols. The Russians had dropped mortars, tommy guns, food and medicinal supplies and the Red Army was in contact with the groups both by radio and by men who got back and forth by swimming the river. It was now clear, he continued, that little of the supplies dropped by the American and British planes from high altitudes had actually gotten to the Poles. Most of these supplies had been scattered by the wind in some cases up to 30 kilometers away. He explained that the Russians had used, in the dropping of supplies, single-motor night training planes at an altitude of 300 to 400 meters. Receipt of the supplies had been acknowledged. I remarked that it was the American planes that had attempted to drop supplies by day from a high altitude. The British came through at night at 200 to 400 feet and it was thought that they had been successful.

Marshal Stalin continued that according to Soviet estimates there were about 2500 to 3000 armed insurgents in the above-mentioned four areas. In addition there were many sympathizers who were giving assistance wherever they could but from lack of arms they were unable to fight. The insurgents intermingled with the Germans and it was therefore difficult to bomb or shell the German positions.

He stated that it was now understood why the insurrection had started prematurely. The Germans had threatened to deport all the male population from Warsaw upon the approach of the Red Army. It thus became necessary for the men to rise up and fight -- they had no other choice as they were faced with death either way. As a result most of the population of Warsaw went underground and started resistance. The British Ambassador inquired whether Berling's four battalions would be of assistance to the insurgent groups. Marshal Stalin replied that this was unlikely since they had suffered too great losses. They were in uniform and consequently could not go underground. The mutineers had hidden themselves in drain pipes and sewers and this was difficult for soldiers in uniform.

Marshal Stalin said that General Bor had never been found. He had obviously left the city and was "commanding a radio station in some unknown place". He had no contact with the insurgent groups which operated independently; in all probability he was afraid to establish such contact. On the other hand, the Soviets had direct contact with the insurgents.

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In conclusion the Marshal stated that when Praga had been liberated it was found that the entire population was starving. The Germans had given the people no food whatsoever. In addition they had endeavored to hunt out the male population with police dogs in order to deport them for slave labor.

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Copy to General Deane.

THE AMBASSADOR
TOP SECRET

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