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Response to the Polemic Regarding the Review of Research on Population Losses in the Wola District During the Warsaw Uprising of 1944

Summary: This response draws attention to the purpose of the original 2024 article, presents general remarks on the polemic text, and discusses the allegations concerning the review of research and the comparative study regarding: The number of victims of mass executions, the size of the German pacification forces, and the area and population of the Wola district. Finally, it addresses the relevance of the findings of the original article in light of the criticisms raised in the polemic.

Keywords: Warsaw, Wola district, civilian population, World War II, Warsaw Uprising 1944, mass executions, polemic

This text is a response to Hubert Kuberski's polemic¹ directed at my previously published article in this journal.² My article was a review of research relating to the extent of population losses in the Wola district during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. A polemic should contain constructive comments and substantive arguments supporting a different position in the debate. Unfortunately, reading its content evokes a deep sense of disappointment. I present the justification for my perspective in the following points of this response.

¹ Kuberski H. 2025, 129–141.

² Przeszowski K. 2024b, 109–128.



First, the polemic text is not organised according to a logical structure of the issues discussed. It does not contain a main thesis or its development, nor does it refer to the sequence of content in the original article.

Second, Kuberski, already in the very title of his polemic, formulates three extremely strong accusations: erroneous research, overestimation of numerical estimates, and lack of basis in archival sources. Given the nature of my publication — a review of research — the accusation of erroneous research is, in itself, absurd. It seems obvious that when compiling research conducted by other scholars, the author of such a review can at worst make errors in reporting them. The fact that this did not occur is even acknowledged by the author of the polemic, who states that the review was conducted correctly.

The accusation of allegedly overestimating the balance of numerical estimates must be considered absurd, since the balance I presented was based on a comparative analysis with the results of research conducted by other scholars. Thus, any potential error in this regard could only concern an unjustified comparison or incorrect reporting of research, not the overestimation of numerical data itself. However, there is no evidence of such errors in the content of the polemic.

The accusation of lacking a basis in archival sources is as strong as it is obviously unfounded. First and foremost, it is necessary to point out the aforementioned issues regarding the nature of a research review and comparative analysis, which do not require conducting one's own archival research for their validity. Therefore, this accusation must be considered unjustified. In the summary, the author of the polemic further alleges that the comparative part of the research review was based on statistical data derived from post-war historians' studies, claiming that statistical data on the population of the Wola district for the period 1938–1944 supposedly does not exist. However, for the period in question, information on the population of Warsaw has been preserved, for example from 1 September 1939 and 1 May 1940. I used this data in preparing my article.³

Third, in many paragraphs of the polemic, instead of addressing the position presented in the original article and possibly discussing it, we find the polemicist's own thoughts on topics not directly related to the subject under discussion.

Regarding the review of research, it should be emphasised that the author of the polemic confirms that it was conducted correctly. Nevertheless, Kuberski once again summarises the findings of publications that I had already presented in my review

3 See. Przeszowski K. 2024b, 124–125; Chart 3, Chart 4, footnotes 55–58; 127. Statistical data from the Population Registration Department of the Municipal Board of the City of Warsaw from the pre-war period and the occupation period were included in the clandestine study by Witold Kula from July 1940. See: AAN, ref. no. 76/III-61; Kula W. 1984, 216–217 and others; *Warszawa w liczbach*, 16, table: 'Population by districts.'

of the state of research. This repeated review covers seven publications,⁴ while omitting four items from the original literature review.⁵

A prominent place in Kuberski's remarks on the state of research is given to the book by Hanns von Krannhals, published in 1962. The author of the polemic is particularly disturbed by the fact that I did not accept its findings — published, incidentally, 63 years ago — as the only authoritative ones. He accuses me of not having sufficiently familiarised myself with the content of Krannhals's book and of failing to analyse the arguments contained therein. The supposed evidence of this alleged neglect on my part is that I do not uncritically accept the position expressed by the German historian.

In discussing the book by Norbert Bączyk and Grzegorz Jasiński, the author of the polemic devotes a separate paragraph to repeating information I had already indicated in my original review of research. In paraphrasing my text, Kuberski makes a small but significant change: In my original article, I stated that Bączyk and Jasiński did not indicate the source on which they based their data regarding the population of the Wola district at the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, nor the proportion of the population that managed to escape the district. Kuberski removes the word 'not' from this sentence and then claims that the source was the reporting of Einsatzkommando Alfred Spilker, which was in fact cited by the authors of the 2020 publication. However, in none of the 94 pages of these reports, held in the Central Military Archive in Warsaw, is there a scrap of information on this subject.⁶

The author of the polemic devoted the most space to discussing his own work, which addresses the issue of population losses in the Wola district in 1944.⁷ A prominent place in my opponent's arguments about the scale of losses in Wola in 1944 is given to research conducted by Marek Strok. A kind of research report was supposed to be an article by Strok, which was submitted but not accepted for a scientific conference on the Wola Massacre in 2019. As far as could be verified in publicly available sources, this article has not been published in any other form to date, and the author of the polemic became acquainted with its content through direct contact with the author.

The intended outcome of the research project was to develop an extensive database of residents and properties in the Wola district. However, we do not learn how many records about Wola residents murdered in August 1944 were collected by the creators

4 Hubert Kuberski once again discusses the content of publications by the following authors: Stanisław Płoski and Ewa Śliwińska, Hanns von Krannhals, Antoni Przygoński, Maja Motyl and Stanisław Rutkowski, Piotr Gursztyn, Norbert Bączyk and Grzegorz Jasiński, as well as his own work.

5 In his review of the state of research, Hubert Kuberski omits the publications of Adam Borkiewicz, Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski, Maria Turlejska, and Joanna K.M. Hanson.

6 CAW IX.3.40.60. The aforementioned reports from the period 12 August – 6 October 1944 for the entire area of operations of the Reinefarth combat group record a total of 2,873 people shot and over 11,000 burned individual bodies, as well as an unspecified number of burned piles of bodies, as I wrote in another article of mine from 2024. See: Przeszowski K. 2024a, 46–50.

7 Kuberski H. 2021.

of the database. As a result, there is doubt as to whether the cited figure of 15,000 represents the total number of fatalities or only the number of victims whose identities could be established. The latter would be analogous to the database of civilian victims of the Warsaw Uprising, published by the Warsaw Uprising Museum, which contains the names of nearly 50,000 people.⁸

Kuberski claims that the author of the numerical estimates for the victims of the Wola Massacre in 1944 is Strok, while he himself “introduced them into academic discourse.” The author of the polemic refers to the postulate of registering Wola residents and creating a database of victims, formulated by Edward Serwański and Irena Trawińska in 1946. Kuberski assures that it is precisely Marek Strok’s research that fulfils this postulate. However, this does not seem possible for several reasons. First, a complete registration of Wola residents who survived World War II would have required a mandatory census, including the Recovered Territories, and reaching all former residents who remained abroad after the war. Second, creating a complete list of victims by name would have required collecting testimonies from tens of thousands of people, which would have meant enormous expenditure of effort and resources. Thus, research conducted 50 years after the war and on a limited scale⁹ does not meet these conditions and therefore cannot be considered a final resolution of the discussion on the number of victims.

The author of the polemic did not provide any additional information about the research methodology on which his numerical estimates are based, compared to his original article. In addition to the obvious impoverishment of the scientific debate conducted in this journal, this also constitutes a fundamental obstacle to their current use in academic discourse.¹⁰

In my comparative review of research on mass executions of civilians during World War II in Central and Eastern Europe, the author of the polemic did not point out any substantive errors. Nevertheless, he described it as ‘even more problematic.’ The main — and only — argument supporting this opinion is the fact that my analysis led to conclusions different from those of the author of the polemic.

An important, though essentially overlooked, element of the polemicist’s position seems to be the issue of the duration of the mass executions in the Wola district in August 1944. Kuberski asserts with complete certainty that already on the first day (5 August) the executions took on a truly mass character, and that all the tragic events ended on the second day (6 August). Following the polemicist’s line of reasoning,

⁸ Civilian Victims [database].

⁹ The author of the polemic presented a description of the queries conducted, which is a literal repetition of content from his own article from 2021. See: Kuberski H. 2021, 174, footnote 76.

¹⁰ A necessary condition for including Marek Strok’s research in further debate is its scientific, peer-reviewed publication, which would provide other researchers with access not only to the final results, but also present the methodology of the research conducted.

one must conclude that if the mass executions lasted essentially only one day, and the total number of victims was 15,000, then the German pacification forces in Wola were sufficient to carry out mass executions of 15,000 people in a single day.¹¹ In light of this conclusion, Kuberski's determination to maintain that the mass executions in Wola could not have lasted longer than just one day becomes understandable.¹²

Regarding the issue of the area and population of Wola, it should be noted at the outset that Kuberski essentially does not clarify his own position on the territorial scope of the Wola district and its population, which is one of the key points of my review and analysis of previous research.

However, the polemicist even questions the very term "Wola district," pointing out that, from a formal perspective, this area was part of one of the four urban counties into which Warsaw was divided since 1931. Apart from this formal consideration, the author of the polemic does not present any other argument against my use of the term "Wola district" in its historical sense for the pre-war and occupation periods. Instead of the disputed term, Kuberski proposes the designation "the western part of the former Warsaw-North County, i.e., today's Wola district,"¹³ or alternatively "Northern County, commonly known as the Wola district."¹⁴ However, the polemic does not explain what research benefits would result from using these terms.

It should be noted that the urban county (*starostwo powiatowe*) Warsaw-North did not coincide with the historical area of the Wola district.¹⁵ The southeastern boundary ran along the streets Grzybowska, Karolkowa, Dworska, Bryłowska, Prądzyńskiego, and Kolejowa. Outside the area of the Warsaw-North urban county were, among others, the tram power station on Przyokopowa Street and the former Jewish hospital in Czyste (now Wolski Hospital), as well as a significant part of the Wola parish of St. Stanislaus. This area included two statistical districts: 24 and 24a — Przyokopowa Street, inhabited in 1938 by about 9,000 residents. The absurdity of such a situation leads to the rejection of the terminological proposal presented by the author of the polemic.

In summary, it should be stated that, despite making extremely strong claims in the title of his polemic, the author has not demonstrated any substantive errors

11 The figure of 15,000 victims in a single day, as suggested by Hubert Kuberski's position, is essentially consistent with the numerical data for mass executions in Babi Yar, Rumbula, and the vicinity of Lublin, which claimed between 25,000 and 42,000 victims over the course of two days.

12 However, the author of the polemic does not indicate what sources or literature his position is based on. Meanwhile, there is a consensus in the scholarly literature that the mass executions in Wola in August 1944 lasted several days. For example, Piotr Gursztyn states that they continued on August 5, 6, 7, and the following days of August 1944. See: Gursztyn P. 2015, 81–250.

13 The polemicist uses the term "the western part of the Warsaw-North County, i.e., today's Wola district" three times, on pages 7, 8 and 9.

14 The author of the polemic uses the term 'Warsaw-North County' two times, on pages 1 and 2.

15 The boundaries of the urban counties are shown on the map attached to the publication: *Warszawa w liczbach*, VII.

in my review and comparative analysis of the research. I regard the polemic against my article as an expression of the author's determination to present his own position. However, in my opinion, this position contains several significant shortcomings. First, the author of the polemic relies on the results of Strok's research, which remain unpublished and thus inaccessible to the wider academic community. Second, Kuberski attempts to draw conclusions about the total number of victims in Wola based on uncertain and substantially incomplete estimates of the weight of human ashes collected in the mass grave at the Wola Cemetery of the Warsaw Uprising. Third, the author of the polemic makes categorical judgments on issues in which he clearly lacks knowledge of the basic literature and sources, including archival sources. In light of these observations, I fully maintain the position presented in my original article published in this journal: The scholarly discussion regarding the scale of population losses in the Wola district during the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 is not concluded, and this requires further research.

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