

Praga '44 exhibition – an unknown history of the Warsaw Uprising on the right bank of the Vistula River

Praga Museum of Warsaw, 18 September 2024 – 23 February 2025



Graphic design: Anna Światłowska, based on the photo by Zofia Chomętowska titled *Floating Bridge, a Makeshift Vistula Crossing* 1945, Museum of Warsaw

The outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising divided Warsaw in two along the Vistula River. The city history from August 1944 till January 1945 can be narrated in two separate, albeit inter-connected threads. On the right bank, armed combat lasted mere few days. When, in September, the Uprising was being suppressed on the left bank of Warsaw, the Russians entered Praga. A new life was beginning to emerge in the shadow of threats and repressions on the part of the security service. *Praga '44* exhibition tells the lesser-known history of the four-day armed combat and shows how, with the backdrop of ongoing battles, daily life continued in the city right next to the front line. The exhibition opens on 18 September at the Praga Museum of Warsaw.

The information about the Uprising in Praga is so scarce that one might even get the impression that there was no armed combat on the right bank at all. Nothing further from the truth—the insurgents in Praga fought as fiercely as their brothers-in-arms on the left bank of Vistula. Without the account of their heroic battle, the history of August 1944 in Warsaw remains incomplete. “The history of the Warsaw Uprising is complex, and not all its aspects are widely known. Focused on what the Uprising was like on the left bank of the river, we usually don’t ask ourselves what was happening with the other side, where the Germans assembled their forces and where the Red Army entered and then stationed. *Praga '44* exhibition brings this lesser-known history to the viewers’ attention. It offers a different perspective on the Uprising and

reminds us of the life that began to re-emerge in the right-bank part of the city already in the autumn of 1944,” says Karolina Ziębińska, Museum of Warsaw director.

A city torn apart

Fighting in Praga lasted only four days. The poorly armed insurgents had to face well-trained, more numerous, and fully armed German units that assembled on the right bank in anticipation of a Red Army attack. The capture of designated targets was an impossible task, hence the decision to disengage from combat on 4 August. This saved Praga from sharing the fate of the left bank. The losses in population and buildings on this side of the river were incomparably smaller. Until the arrival of the Russians, Praga was seized by German terror: curfews, executions, roundups which resulted in 10,000 men sent to forced labour in the Third Reich. The residents endured extremely difficult conditions, suffering from hunger, deprived of medical care and medicines. As left-bank Warsaw fought on, all aflame, the residents of Praga, watching the destruction across the river and filled with fear about the fate of their loved ones who had stayed there, struggled to survive in inhuman conditions under German occupation. On 13 September, the retreating Germans blew up all the bridges. The Praga district was now cut off from the rest of Warsaw.

Praga—a district apart. Everyday life in a city next to the war front

After being captured by the Red Army and the Polish Army in mid-September, Praga became a frontline city. In the shadow of threats and repressions by the security service, postwar political, social, and cultural life was slowly being revived here. From the left bank, the fire continued, reaching as far as Targowa Street, which was dubbed the ‘death zone.’ The residents did not evacuate, so Praga became the only Polish city where 100,000 people deprived of fuel, water, food, and under constant threat, struggled to organize their daily lives.

Starting from 19 September, right-bank Warsaw had a mayor. With the support of the City Council, Mayor Marian Spychalski attempted to address the immediate issues: how to reopen bakeries, reclaim coal from burning waste heaps, distribute Soviet flour, bury the dead, and ration food. While the Nazis were razing the left-bank Warsaw to the ground, on the right bank, *Życie Warszawy* daily was being published, choir rehearsals were organized, and a chamber ensemble and orchestra were founded. In November 1944, the first premiere took place in a right-bank theatre. The actors performed from memory, in their own attire. The audience brought their own chairs. Workers tried to salvage whatever remained of the factories and to restart production. Merchants contributed to the rebuilding of the Różycki Bazaar. Medical doctors from the Praski Hospital reactivated the Faculty of Medicine. Praga was struggling to live its postwar life.

A city reconnected. Return to the rubble and the reconstruction

In January 1945, the Red Army and the Polish Army entered left-bank Warsaw. A deserted city in ruins stretched across the frozen Vistula River. As soon as the first floating bridges were in operation, people rushed over to search for their loved ones, recover family mementos hidden beneath the rubble, collect fuel and items for their new homes, and find goods for trade. Returning Varsovians began to arrive in

Praga, seeking shelter. By the end of the month, the population of this part of Warsaw increased by 12,000. People awaited the capital's reconstruction, and families and the city reunited and reconnected in a new postwar reality.

The right-bank's 'Map of the Dead', showing locations of mass graves and execution sites

Praga '44 exhibition will open with a map of execution sites and makeshift graves of civilians and insurgents in the right-bank district of the city, created as part of a social campaign initiated by the Praga Museum of Warsaw. Thanks to the joint efforts of residents and volunteers, each documented civilian victim and each fallen insurgent have been marked with a pin. The locations of executions and burials were determined based on historical sources, and the pins were placed on a map composed of aerial photographs taken during and after the Uprising, set on a pre-war map of Warsaw. The photographs come from The National Archives in College Park near Washington, D.C., and were analyzed by Zygmunt Walkowski, an expert in interpreting images of Warsaw from the period of the Second World War. The exhibition will also feature archival photos, preserved wartime mementos, documents, and a fragment of the testimony of Antoni Żurowski, the Uprising commander for the Praga district.

The exhibition is part of the program of the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising commemoration at the Museum of Warsaw. The full program is available on the Museum's website: <https://muzeumwarszawy.pl/obchody-80-rocznicy-powstania-warszawskiego/>.

***Praga '44* exhibition at the Praga Museum of Warsaw will be open for viewing from 18 September 2024 until 23 February 2025. The exhibition opening will take place on 18 September at 6PM; the admission to the event is free. The Museum is open on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 9AM till 5PM, on Thursdays from 11AM till 8PM and on Saturdays and Sundays from 11AM till 6PM. Ticket prices: 10PLN / 8PLN (reduced); on Thursdays admission is free.**

Read more about the exhibition:

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Materials for the media: <https://muzeumwarszawy.pl/dla-mediow/>

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