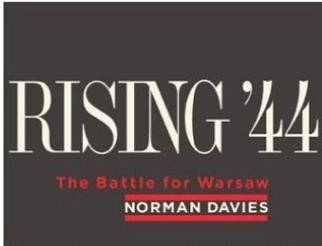

Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw by Norman Davies, 2004, Viking Press, 784 pages.



The latest book from Norman Davies is **Rising '44: The Battle for Warsaw**. The title *Rising '44* is somewhat misleading. Only about 200 pages in the middle of the book are devoted to the Warsaw Uprising itself. The rest of the book provides a general overview of the two centuries of Polish history prior to WWII and afterwards. The narrative devoted to the Uprising is supplemented by personal statements and recollections of those who witnessed or participated in the described events. The book is engaging and should be a rewarding read especially for a foreign student of modern Polish affairs. It provides a wealth of information, and clarifies some misconceptions (as on pages 287-288 when it explains who fought and who did not on the German side during the Warsaw Uprising) and misunderstandings about recent Polish history.

The 1944 Warsaw Uprising was a heartbreaking event. Warsaw and its population paid a terrible price for it – 200,000 dead and complete destruction of the city. Moreover the Rising failed to achieve its objective of liberating Warsaw and driving Germans out of the capital. No book about the Uprising would be complete if the author did not try to explain why Poles were left alone by their allies in the hour of need. Davies discusses this in a chapter titled “Interim Report” at the end of the book. There the author concludes that the “tragedy of the Warsaw Rising resulted from a systemic breakdown of the Grand Alliance.” After reading the book this conclusion seems too exculpatory of the members of the Grand Alliance. It seems more likely that the Poles and the Uprising were left to wither as it was not in the interest of any of the Grand Alliance members (Russians, British and Americans) to get actively involved on our side.

The book is a thick, 784 pages long, *opus*. It is not surprising then that some misstatements slipped past the editor as when we are told that Stalin and the Polish prime minister both agreed that Communism fits Germany as a saddle on a cow (p. 316). Germany? The book also includes a number of songs and poems written during the war by Polish authors, in their Polish originals and in English translation. Davies translates many of them into English. While one appreciates the effort devoted to the translations, in the opinion of this reviewer some translations do not do justice to the original poems. For an example of a less than satisfactory rendition see the translation of a poem by Ziutek (p. 686). The book includes an index but lacks a bibliography—that’s a serious omission for this type of work.

With all the above in mind it is utterly surprising that the author engaged in an unfortunate Polish name rewriting endeavor. This is done in an alleged effort to make Polish history more soothing to the English psyche (p. xi). It is all the more unexpected given the “Polish friendly” credentials of the author. Norman Davies is an eminent historian, an author of “the definitive history of Poland” **God’s Playground**, an honorary citizen of a few Polish cities, and a holder of a few honorary degrees from Polish universities. One is stunned then to read in the opening pages of **Rising '44**, a declaration that “...Polish [language] constitute[s] a near insurmountable barrier to a full understanding of the country’s affairs.” (p. xi) This is followed up by a Polish joke “that God created Polish by dropping his Scrabble box.” (p. xii), and by Davies resolving to correct this problem by making Polish names more palatable to the readers of his book. He does that through ad hoc changes of the last names of Poles and Polish geographical names appearing in the book. Thus Mikołajczyk becomes Mick, Andrzej Pomian – Andre P., Kazimierz Moczarski – Herr Mocharski, Warszawa Gdanska (a railway station in Warsaw) – Danzig Station, etc., etc. This experiment makes the book infuriatingly confusing to read. The transformations of Polish names are dutifully compiled in Appendix 35 for ease of use. The Appendix is of little help. Unless you agree with the author that the Polish language is a problem, and memorize Appendix 35 prior to reading the book, you have to deal on the fly with oddities like the one on page 51—“...the most active members of the exiled Government were the Premier, Mick; the Commander-in-Chief, Gen. S.; the Foreign Minister, Thaddeus R.; and the Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Ko.” This sounds like a press rendition of a police report and detracts considerably from the book.

Overall the book leaves a mixed impression. If you can, however, get past an unfortunate name rewriting experiment described above it is an engaging read. It covers a vast territory of Polish history and it is bound to enlighten many about the events that formed us as a nation during the last century. One has to appreciate the first rate scholarship that was employed in the writing of **Rising '44**.

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