

MAY UPRISING OF THE CZECH PEOPLE 1945

Culmination of the anti-Nazi resistance

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Prague Uprising - May 1945. Makeshift memorial - a cross erected from the beams of the burnt wing of the Old Town Hall with the names of the fallen defenders of the town hall buildings and municipal radio. Taken by Josef Foustecký.



Defence of one of the barricades. Author unknown.

In May 1945, anti-Nazi resistance in occupied Czechoslovakia culminated with an armed insurrection against the German occupiers. The final preparations for the uprising had been taking place since the start of the year. The objective was to create the conditions for the rapid liberation of Bohemia and Moravia from the German occupation and to minimise damages caused by the advancing German army. The domestic resistance, which from the start of World War II had been conducted by several subsequent resistance groups, organised and carried out various forms of resistance against the German occupying power, from demonstrative marches to helping the persecuted, spreading illegal intelligence, stockpiling and distributing weapons, and even sabotage and assassinations. For years the resistance had been harshly suppressed by the Nazis, with persecution of the civilian population and public executions of those suspected of helping the resistance no exception. The greatest threat for the resistance was infiltration by Czech Gestapo informants and subsequent arrests, terror and executions. Although the four days of fighting were very bloody, the uprisings in Prague and other Czech cities were not in vain, nor were the lives sacrificed for nothing. The show of arms by thousands of people against the Nazis hastened the end of the war in Europe by at least days or weeks. It also had an enormous psychological significance: it restored a human dignity to a nation that had been living for six long years in abject helplessness, systematic persecution, terror and fear for their very lives. During the Prague uprising, nearly three thousand people fell on the Czech side. Aside from Czech men and women who fell in battle, these also included foreigners hiding from the Gestapo and fighting on the Czech side, and also small children and defenceless people who became victims of German retaliation. Because the Nazi troops deployed heavy artillery and the bodies of the victims were torn to pieces by exploding shrapnel and armoured vehicle fire, there were dozens among the fallen who could not even be identified after the fighting.



8 May 1945 - murdered insurgents at Masarykovo nádraží. Author unknown.



5 May 1945 - armed insurgents on Balbínova street in Vinohrady during an exchange of fire. Author unknown.

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(with use of historical texts, academic literature and text from the Prague City Archives)



Memorial plaque located on the east side of the Old Town Hall.
Photo: © mARTin Frouz

THE PRAGUE UPRISING 5–9 MAY 1945

The fight for Old Town Square and the town hall buildings

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Prague Uprising – May 1945. The east wing of the Old Town Hall after the fire 8 May. Author unknown.

4 May 1945

The breakout of the uprising was preceded on Friday, 4 May by spreading reports that the Protectorate government had issued an order to do away with the regulation on official bilingualism, i.e. that the sole official language was now Czech. People who had been fearing for their lives up until that point took courage, and in many places German signs were enthusiastically torn down and Czechoslovak flags hung.

5 May 1945

The complex of three town hall buildings (Old Town Hall, New Town Hall and the New Office Building), with a radio transmitter for the municipal radio system, underground passages, shelters and a telephone switchboard, was gradually occupied over the course of Saturday morning by brigades made up of police officers and armed civilians who arrested German soldiers as well as civilians.

When the mayor was solemnly relinquishing control of city hall to representatives of the National Committee, the buildings around the town hall were already adorned with Czechoslovak and Ally flags, the bust of Hitler in the conference room had been removed and jubilant Czechs were gathering on Old Town Square. At 11:49 the city's loudspeakers sounded out:

Czechoslovak citizens: Hitler's Germany has been crushed. The Third Reich has ceased to exist! Down with war! Everyone stop work immediately! Do not judge anyone. You must not punish anyone, be they Czech or German...

After that the representatives of the National Committee wanted to greet the people from the town hall balcony, but the fire of German machine guns drove them back inside. The first casualties lay on the pavement. At 11:55 the well-known distress



8 May 1945 – putting out the fire in the east wing of the town hall. Taken by Josef Stehno.

call to help Czechoslovak Radio took the air: *Calling Czech police, gendarmerie and armed forces! Come to the assistance of Czechoslovak Radio...*

Massive attacks on the town hall buildings took place with several breaks for the next 90 hours.

6 May 1945

Starting Sunday morning, barricades sprung up on all strategically important streets and public spaces. At the town hall buildings the Germans deployed various types of heavy weaponry during the uprising, including armoured vehicles carrying tank cannons and machine guns.

Under the bleak situation in which the surviving defenders of the town hall were under unimaginable duress, receiving reports of possible mass slaughter of Czech civilians, a convoy of thirty tanks by the nearby Law Faculty building and the approach of armoured vehicles to the surrounding streets, under the explo-

sion of bombs and shelling, in the fire and smoke of the burning buildings, even under such conditions they continued to send out a continuous call for help, appealing particularly for men armed with anti-tank Panzerfaust weapons.

7 May 1945

On Monday at five in the morning, the Germans fired incendiary munitions and the first fire broke out at the Old Town Hall. Although the defenders tried to save the historical documents and relics by moving them in a human chain, much of the archival materials were irreversibly lost to the flames.

In the underground corridors and shelters of the town hall buildings, a large number of wounded were hiding from the Germans, as were Czech civilians and children that had fled from the surrounding buildings. Captured Czechs were being driven before the German armoured vehicles to serve as human shields and to clear away the barricades.

8 May 1945

Although the state radio announced the capitulation of the Germans in Prague on Tuesday at 17:15 and by the Jan Hus monument the German officers negotiated an end to fighting with the commander of the Richter gendarmerie company, shooting around the New Town Hall and New Office Building did not quiet until around 18:00.

The Old Town Hall was gradually succumbing to the devastating fire – the tower roof collapsed, the astronomical clock was burning, and so was the arcade and whole north-east wing.

An improvised memorial to the fallen was built from the charred beams of the Old Town Hall in front of the clock ruins immediately following liberation.



5 May 1945 – broadcast room for the public broadcast system – Lieutenant Antonín Kozel (standing) and announcers the Kučera brothers. Author unknown.



10 May 1945 – artillery prepared for the destruction of Prague at the barracks at Pohřebelec. Taken by Václav Dub.

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Old Town Hall after the fire – the glass negatives have melted. Taken by Antonín Alexandr.