

Women in War - 2017 Special Issue

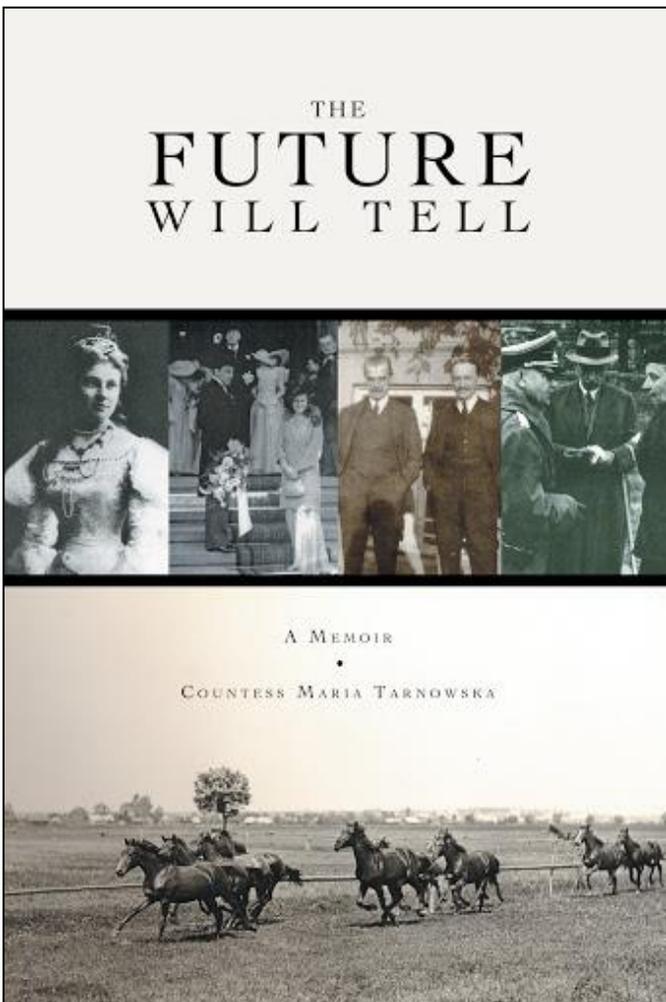
Countess Maria Tarnowska

A Life of Contrasts

A talk by Gabriella Bullock with readings by Rula Leńska

You could have heard a pin drop in the packed events room at the Polish Hearth Club, as Gabriella Bullock gave her stunning presentation of the Countess Maria Tarnowska's book: *THE FUTURE WILL TELL - A Memoir by Countess Maria Tarnowska*, with readings by Rula Lenska, was introduced by Clare Mulley, on 23rd February.

This important contribution to Polish history is only available during 2017, so it is best to order soon. It is available on Amazon in paperback, hardback and Kindle.



Maria in Red Cross uniform during the First World War

(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Countess Maria Tarnowska was larger than life and unafraid to speak her mind. In spite of her many personal losses, she gave unstintingly of herself to her beloved Poland, becoming a symbol of strength for others. The author belonged to the Polish aristocracy and was the wife of a diplomat, a role that opened her world to rulers and prominent politicians. As she recounts poignant episodes in her life, the personal and the historic become intertwined.

In her role as second-in-command of the Polish Red Cross, and as a member of the Resistance during WWII, the reader immediately understands that hers was not a life of idleness but one of extraordinary courage and sublime sacrifice. Maria harshly condemns the Russian treachery in restricting the promised assistance of the Red Army during the Warsaw Uprising. Life, as hellish as it was during Nazism, becomes ludicrously unbearable under the crude Communist regime. Coming from one who was twice imprisoned, and who was reduced from a comfortable life, to risking her life, even walking through fetid sewers, in an endeavour to free her beloved Poland, Maria Tarnowska's memoir is a resounding tribute to the concept of freedom and democracy. A must-read! (Celia Lee)



Gabriella Bullock giving her talk at the Polish Hearth Club with Rula Leńska reading passages from the book (Photo: Clare Mulley)



A charming childhood portrait of Maria Tarnowska and a picture taken at the ball at which she met her future husband, Adam Tarnowski, in 1900

(Photos: Family Collection)

Maria Tarnowska grew up on a large estate in the part of Poland under Russian dominion, and she was raised on proud tales of the Uprisings against tsarist Russia. Both in her family and later, in her husband's family, young men (her own father included, and his father before him) had taken part in these rebellions, been sent to Siberia, or spent years in prisons, or been killed. Her father's prisoner's chains with their heavy ankle ring hung on a wall in his room, and she saw them every day. No matter that she was a girl: for somebody like her – and this was by no means only true of the privileged class to which she belonged – heroic resistance was quite simply part of her psyche.

Maria carried this particular brand of Polishness – so different from the English psyche – throughout her life : as the bride of a diplomat; through the years of the First World War when her long involvement with the Red Cross began; through the following twenty years when Poland - a war-torn but free and independent country at last - needed people to build it; then through the invasion of Hitler's army and the years under the Nazi boot; through the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, to the end of the War; and through the advent of Communist domination, so hateful to her; till the end of her life. She stood an extreme test and she seldom flinched –NEVER gave way. She was not a complicated person: patriotic and with a strong sense of honour, and a tendency to idealise her country and her countrymen. She herself played the straightest of bats, and was deliciously naïve – completely ignorant of the underbelly of life. So much so that, during the Second World War, the existence of the Polish Underground came as a big surprise. She joined it, of course.

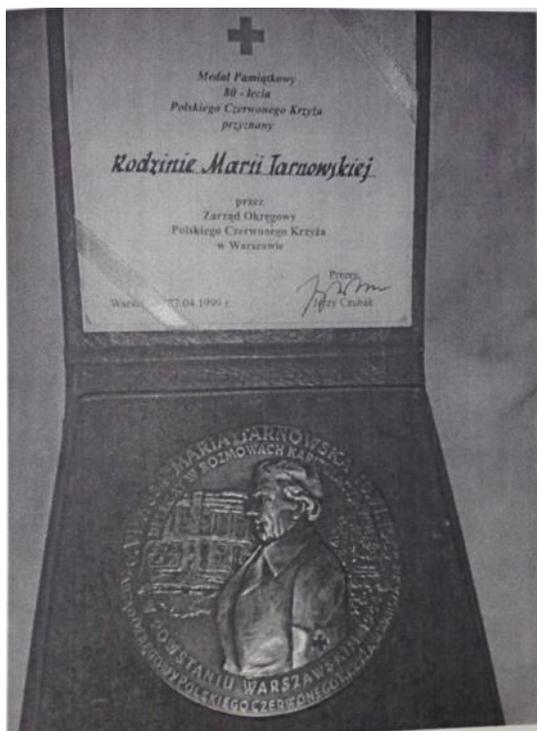
It was not until the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 that the Polish Home Army openly confronted the enemy occupier of its country. Maria Tarnowska explains that, just as the French Resistance movement rose up to synchronise with and to support the Allied advance on Paris, so the Polish Home Army prepared their Uprising to synchronise with and to support the Russian advance on Warsaw, which was planned for 6th August.

The Uprising was launched on the 1st. Carefully planned, it was never conceived as a unilateral action; it was never possible for it to succeed on its own – so disaster was inevitable when the Russians halted their advance on the far side of the Vistula, Warsaw's river, where they stationed themselves throughout the following weeks, leaving unanswered all communications from the Poles, and largely ignoring pressure from the Western Allies. Meanwhile the Germans, too, were expecting a Russian offensive, and lost no time in bringing in massive reinforcements. Over the 2 months that followed Warsaw took the full force of the ensuing bombardment. Thousands were killed and wounded. Maria Tarnowska, Second in Command of the Polish Red Cross, was now aged 64. She carried on her work throughout, in makeshift hospitals forced to operate underground by torchlight, with the wounded being brought through sewers and burning hot tunnels. I will only say that what she describes, the way they lived, is comparable only to the horrors of Aleppo, which have, in our time, so affected us all.

What hurt her most, I think, was that this was the first generation to be born in a free Poland, and they were simply being mown down.

She is fulsome in her praise of the women of Warsaw: during the Uprising, it was the men who fought, but women performed all supportive tasks, however dangerous or however menial.

But the situation was intolerable and many ordinary people, trapped in the city, were panicking; Maria realised that something had to be done: so on a day in September, with the Army's agreement, the barricade was swiftly opened, and – unannounced – she and a male colleague entered No Man's Land. Instantly a volley of bullets sputtered all around them. They threw themselves flat on their faces, and waved their Red Cross flag. After some minutes, a German white flag appeared, and the shooting stopped. Maria and her colleague succeeded in gaining an interview with the German general, and succeeded in negotiating a ceasefire, under which Warsaw's citizens could be evacuated. The German general tried in vain to press for a full military surrender... Negotiations were long and difficult, and one of the German officers noted “we were left with the sense that it was not the Poles who were surrendering, but we ourselves who were surrendering to the old countess”.



Medals awarded posthumously to Maria Tarnowska—the Red Cross medal (left) was awarded in 1999 and the Polish medal awarded in August 2016.

(Family collection)



Countess Maria Tarnowska and Dr Hieronim Bartoszewski, Delegates of the Polish Red Cross, being blindfolded by German soldiers before passing through German lines to negotiate terms of surrender for the exhausted Poles. (Not included in the book - photo source IWM - HU 105688)

Also Clare Mulley's latest book *THE WOMEN WHO FLEW FOR HITLER* will be published on 29th June 2017. Available as hardback or e-book.



Clare with the cover of her new book, *The Women Who Flew for Hitler*, at the London Book Fair (Photo: Clare Mulley).