

# RESISTANCE

during the Holocaust



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This pamphlet explores examples of armed and unarmed resistance by Jews and other Holocaust victims. Many courageous acts of resistance were carried out in Nazi ghettos and camps and by partisan members of national and political resistance movements across German-occupied Europe. Many individuals and groups in ghettos and camps also engaged in acts of spiritual resistance such as the continuance of religious traditions and the preservation of cultural institutions. Although resistance activities in Nazi Germany were largely ineffective and lacked broad support, some political and religious opposition did emerge.

Front cover: Partisans from the Kovno ghetto in the Rudniki forest of Lithuania. 1943–44. *Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel*

Back cover: Jewish partisan musical troupe in the Naroch forest in Belorussia. 1943. *Organisation des partisans combattants de la résistance et des insurgés des ghettos en Israel*

Inside front cover: Three Jewish partisans in the Parczew forest near Lublin. 1943–44. *Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel*

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

**D**uring World War II an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Jews fought bravely as partisans in resistance groups that operated under cover of the dense forests of eastern Europe. Among them was a Polish Jew named Izik Sutin. In summer 1942, before he had joined up with partisans, Sutin was one of 800 Jews crammed into the Mirski Castle — in Polish, the *mir zamek* — on the outskirts of Mir, a small Polish town near the Russian border. The Germans had moved him and their other prisoners, mostly skilled laborers, to the castle after liquidating the Mir ghetto in town. Over the course of two days, Germans had marched most of the Jewish men, women, and children from the ghetto to the outskirts of town and forced them at gunpoint to dig their own mass grave. The mass killings went on for two days. Recalling what happened after he survived the massacre in which his mother, Sarah, was murdered, Sutin said:

*It was during that summer in the zamek that roughly forty of us younger persons — many of whom had gotten to know one another in the Hashomer Hatzair [the labor-oriented Zionist youth organization] — began to attempt to organize some sort of resistance. We ranged in age from roughly sixteen to thirty. The majority were men, but there were some women as well. In any ordinary sense, our situation was completely hopeless. We had no weapons except for rocks, bottles, and a few knives. We were completely outnumbered and surrounded by a trained German military force supported loyally by the local population. But then again, we had no expectation that we would live beyond the next few weeks or months. Why not resist when the alternative was death at a time and place chosen by the Nazis? Desperation was what drove us, along with the desire for revenge. Our families had been butchered and piled into nameless graves. The thought of taking at least a few German lives in return was a powerful incentive.*

From the Nazis' rise to power in 1933 in Germany to the end of the Third Reich in 1945, Jews like Izik Sutin, as well as other victims of Nazism, participated in many acts of resistance. Organized armed resistance was the most direct form of opposition to the Nazis. In many areas of German-occupied Europe, resistance took other forms such as aid, rescue, and spiritual resistance.

Resistance by partisan fighters using “hit-and-run” guerilla tactics during the war provides an important and necessary context for understanding the limits and

possibilities of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. But one should not confuse partisan resistance to the German military effort and the German occupation of Europe, on the one hand, with Jewish resistance, on the other, even though the two sometimes overlapped, as in the case of Sutin, who fled from certain death as a Jew and ended up fighting as a partisan.

As the victims of Nazi genocide and an isolated, often scorned, minority among occupied populations, Jews were in a distinctively weak situation. Because they were doomed to destruction, they could not wait for the beginning of the German collapse in 1943 to act, as the nationalist and patriotic anti-Nazi resistance movements generally did. By the end of 1942, more than four million Jews had already been killed by mass shootings and gassings, or had died from starvation, exhaustion, and disease during their internment in Nazi ghettos and concentration and forced labor camps.

Nazi methods of deception and terror and the superior power of the German police state and military severely inhibited the abilities of civilians in all occupied countries to resist. But the situation of Jews was particularly hopeless, and it is remarkable that individuals and groups resisted to the extent they did.

In addition to many acts of unarmed resistance in the ghettos and camps and the armed and unarmed resistance of Jewish partisans operating underground in both eastern and western Europe, armed Jewish resistance took place in 5 major ghettos, 45 small ghettos, 5 major concentration and extermination camps, and 18 forced labor camps. With few exceptions (notably three major uprisings by partisans in late summer 1944 in Warsaw, Paris, and Slovakia as Allied liberators approached), Jews alone engaged in open, armed resistance against the Germans. They received little help from anyone on the outside. As Izik Sutin from Mir stated, desperation and the desire for revenge drove Jewish resistance, as courageous young men and women facing certain death had little to lose.

## O B S T A C L E S   T O   R E S I S T A N C E

**M**any factors made resistance to the Nazis both difficult and dangerous. The form and timing of resistance were generally shaped by various and often formidable obstacles. Obstacles to resistance included:

**Superior, armed power of the Germans.** The superior, armed power of the Nazi regime posed a major obstacle to the resistance of mostly unarmed civilians from the very beginning of the Nazi takeover of Germany. This was particularly true of the German army during World War II. It is important to remember that at the outbreak of war in September 1939, Poland was overrun in a few weeks. France, attacked on May 10, 1940, fell only six weeks later. Clearly, if two powerful nations with standing armies could not resist the onslaught of the Germans, the possibilities of success were narrow for mostly unarmed civilians who had limited access to weapons.

**German tactic of “collective responsibility.”** This retaliation tactic held entire families and communities responsible for individual acts of armed and unarmed resistance. In Dolhyhnov, near the old Lithuanian capital of Vilna, the entire ghetto population was killed after two young boys escaped and refused to return. In the ghetto of Bialystok, Poland, the Germans shot 120 Jews on the street after Abraham Melamed shot a German policeman. The Germans then threatened to destroy the whole ghetto if Melamed did not surrender. Three days later, he turned himself in to avoid retaliation in the ghetto. At the Treblinka killing center in occupied Poland, camp guards shot 26 Jews after four prisoners slipped through the barbed wire in winter 1942. After Meir Berliner, a Jewish prisoner at Treblinka, killed Max Bialas, a high ranking Nazi officer, guards executed more than 160 Jews in retaliation.

In Yugoslavia, the German army routinely executed 50 to 100 people for every German soldier killed by partisans. In Serbia, Jews and Gypsies (Roma) filled the retaliation quota, and by November 1941, German firing squads had murdered almost the entire adult male Jewish and Roma population of Serbia. One of the most notorious single examples of German retaliation as punishment for resistance involved the Bohemian mining village of Lidice and its 700 residents. After Czech resistance fighters assassinated Nazi leader Reinhard Heydrich in 1942, the Nazis retaliated by “liquidating” nearby Lidice, whose citizens were not involved in the assassination. The Germans shot all men and older boys, deported women and children to concentration camps, razed the village to the ground, and struck its name from the map.

OBSTACLES TO RESISTANCE

*The Germans executed 51 residents of Bochnia, Poland, in retaliation for an assault on a German police station by members of the underground organization Orzel Biały (White Eagle). December 16, 1939.*

*Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, Warsaw*





**Isolation of Jews and lack of weapons.** Jewish victims of Nazism faced an additional, specific obstacle to resistance. Jews were isolated and unarmed. Even if individuals had the physical strength, the will, and the opportunity to escape from imprisonment in a Nazi ghetto or camp, they faced great difficulties in finding hiding places on the outside, food, and a sympathetic local population willing to risk safety in favor of assistance. Most Jews could not blend easily into non-Jewish communities because of various differences of accent or language, religious customs, and physical appearance, including the circumcision of male Jews.

In many occupied regions of eastern Europe, local populations, including many peasants in forest areas where Jews often had the best chances of hiding, were either hostile to Jews or indifferent to their fate. Local populations themselves were living under harsh conditions of occupation, subject to food rationing and many forms of German terror including murder, roundups for forced labor, and deportation to concentration camps. Civilians who did help Jewish escapees did so under penalty of death.

**Secrecy and deception of deportations.** The speed, secrecy, and deception that the Germans and their collaborators used to carry out deportations and killings were intended to impede resistance. Millions of victims, rounded up either prior to mass shootings in occupied Soviet territory or for deportation to Nazi killing centers where they were gassed, often did not know where they were being sent.

Rumors of death camps were widespread, but Nazi deception and the human tendency to deny bad news in the face of possible harm or death took over as most Jews could not believe the stories. There was no precedence for such a monstrous action as the planned annihilation of a whole people as official government policy. The German or collaborating police forces generally ordered their victims to pack some of their belongings, thus reinforcing the belief among victims that they were being “resettled” in labor camps.

When, as late as summer 1944, almost one-half million Jews were deported to Auschwitz from German-occupied Hungary, many had not even heard of the camp. To further the deception for those Jews left behind after the first wave of deportations, many deportees at Auschwitz were forced to write postcards to friends and relatives just before they were gassed: “Arrived safely. I am well.”



## RESISTANCE IN THE GHETTOS

Between 1939 and 1943 the Germans forcibly concentrated hundreds of thousands of Jews into more than 400 ghettos established in occupied eastern territories.\* The ghettos varied greatly in size, from those confining several hundred Jews to the largest ghetto in Warsaw, where almost one-half million Jews lived at the peak of the ghetto's population in late 1940. Death through starvation and disease, Nazi deportations to extermination and labor camps, and executions by shooting decimated the ghettos. By summer 1944, the Nazis had emptied all ghettos in eastern Europe and killed most of their former inhabitants.

In the ghettos, Jews were isolated from the outside and separated from Jews in other ghettos. Most ghettos were surrounded by barbed-wire fences or brick walls with entrances guarded by local and German police. Some ghettos, such as the major ghetto at Lodz, were tightly sealed with no one allowed to enter or leave. (Lodz was in the "Warthegau," the western Polish region incorporated into the Reich soon after German occupation.) In other places, such as Warsaw, the ghettos were also isolated and walled in but permitted greater opportunities for movement in and out through underground sewers and breaks in the walls. (Warsaw was in the German-occupied but unannexed central Polish territories called the "Generalgouvernement.") In Warsaw and other ghettos not tightly sealed, a brisk trade developed in smuggled goods, including arms.

Starvation, exposure, and disease killed tens of thousands of people in the ghettos and sapped the strength and will to resist of those who survived. The Germans conscripted many Jews into forced labor gangs, in construction, or other hard labor related to the German war effort, where they were weakened or killed by exhaustion and maltreatment. One in ten of Warsaw's 400,000 Jews died in 1941 alone.

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\*After Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, two million Jews in western and central Poland came under German control. In 1939 and 1940, the Soviet Union annexed eastern Poland, the Baltic states, and Bessarabia and Bukovina as allowed by Germany in the German-Soviet pact of 1939. More than two million Jews lived in these territories. After the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, those Jews as well as the hundreds of thousands living in western, German-occupied regions of the Soviet Union (Belorussia, Ukraine) also fell under German rule. Between summer 1941 and summer 1943, more than one million Jews in the Baltics and Ukraine, Belorussia, and other occupied regions of the Soviet Union were killed in mass shootings carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen*, special mobile squads made up of paramilitary units of the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, German for "Protection Squad") and police who followed in the wake of the advancing German army. They were assisted by local police and collaborators. Many Baltic and Soviet Jews who survived the first round of *Einsatzgruppen* killings were forced into ghettos.

The diverse population in many ghettos worked against unified resistance. Jews from the surrounding countryside and from other countries and, in some places, Gypsies were forcibly moved into ghettos alongside local Jews, many of them evicted from their dwellings in other neighborhoods. The Germans usually set up ghettos in a town's most run-down section. Living space was cramped, as several families had to share a small apartment. Living on starvation rations and deprived of their previous employment, ghetto residents were forced to compete for a small number of forced labor jobs in manufacturing workshops or factories, which offered a temporary reprieve from deportation.

### UNARMED RESISTANCE IN GHETTOS

The deprivations of living in the ghettos and under the constant fear of Nazi terror made resistance difficult and dangerous but not impossible. Acts of unarmed resistance predominated, as Jewish ghetto activists did not usually take the risk of armed resistance against overpowering military force until the last days and weeks before the destruction of the ghetto. Ghetto underground groups also needed time to organize and plan acts of armed resistance and to smuggle weapons into the ghetto.

It is important to remember that from the beginning of their confinement in the ghettos — when they could not begin even to imagine the idea of gas chambers and crematoria — underground activists were focused on survival, not only physical survival, but on standing up in defiance against their enemies' goals of persecution, degradation, and dehumanization (see p. 37 on spiritual resistance). What Vladka Meed, a Holocaust survivor, has written based on her experience in the Warsaw ghetto could apply to many other ghettos as well:

*Jewish armed resistance . . . , when it came, did not spring from a sudden impulse; it was not an act of personal courage on the part of a few individuals or organized groups: it was the culmination of Jewish defiance, defiance that had existed from the advent of the ghetto.*

Members of prewar political parties and youth movements who formed underground organizations in the early days of the larger ghettos thus were attempting, initially, to provide mutual support and to recreate a semblance of their communities before they were thrown into disarray by German occupation and terror. Soup kitchens that activists set up to ameliorate the suffering of ghetto residents often served as fronts for underground meetings.

Ghetto activists included the Labor Zionists and associated socialist Zionist youth movements, including *Dror*, *Hashomer Hatzair*, and *Hehalutz*. These groups supported the creation of a Jewish state in the British mandate of Palestine. The rightist Betar party (Jewish Revisionists), which included former Polish army officers, also participated in ghetto resistance.

The Jewish section of the Communist party and the Bund, a Jewish socialist organization that had controlled most of the Jewish trade unions before the war, also were active. Both groups had fought in the 1930s for the equal rights of Jews as part of a larger political struggle for social reform or revolution to improve the lives of all workers. The ideals of brotherhood and hopes for a better future that characterized those groups survived even in the ghettos.

Young men and women in their late teens and early twenties became the mainstay of the underground movements, in part because many of the older prewar political leaders had fled or had been killed or imprisoned after the outbreak of war. Also, youthful leaders were less cautious and had fewer responsibilities than their 40- or 50-year-old parents who had to care for younger children and aged parents.

**Underground newspapers and radios.** Most underground political groups in the larger ghettos published illegal newspapers and bulletins to inform people of events and keep up morale. In the Warsaw ghetto, groups of all political persuasions issued papers typed and reproduced on mimeograph machines. Those printed materials provided news about the war and other information outside the ghettos. Activists gathered the news from BBC or Soviet broadcasts on hidden radios, as possession of receivers was illegal.

In the Lodz ghetto, an underground group composed of a dozen people from several different political parties maintained a radio listening post for five years. When German authorities discovered the radio, they executed those involved in the illegal activity. The team leader, Zionist activist Chaim Nathan Widawski, committed suicide to avoid arrest and torture.

**Acts of sabotage.** Despite the enormous risks, underground political groups and their press organized many acts of sabotage. Many Jews working as forced laborers in or near ghettos (as well as Jews and other prisoners in forced labor camps) made a conscious effort to damage or undermine the German war effort. Saboteurs stole documents, tampered with vital machinery, produced faulty munitions, slowed production on assembly lines, stole parts for the black market, and set fires in factories.

**Underground couriers.** In occupied Poland and the Soviet Union, young couriers, who were usually members of underground political organizations, created an extensive communication network that helped connect the isolated ghettos. Traveling under false names and false papers, couriers carried illegal documents, underground newspapers, and money. Couriers also bought and smuggled arms into ghettos, ran illegal presses, and arranged escapes.

Women were active in the underground political organizations and played a particularly important role as couriers. They could move around more freely without arousing the suspicions that men of combat age would. Moreover, police could more readily establish the identity of Jewish men because most were circumcised.

The couriers undertook enormous risks to bring news and information into and out of the various ghettos to their underground groups. Everywhere outside the ghettos, police, blackmailers, collaborators, informers, and spies were looking for victims and prize rewards. Many couriers were caught. The sisters Sarah and Rozhca Silva and Shlomo Antin were arrested and killed on a mission from Vilna to Warsaw. The messenger Lonka Kozhivrozha was captured and sent to her death in Auschwitz.

Irena Adamowicz, a Polish Catholic, also courageously served as a courier for the Jewish underground in Warsaw. Irena, one of many Polish scouts who had developed close ties to members of Jewish youth movements with a tradition of scouting before the war, stands out as a moral example in her steadfast loyalty to her Jewish friends after the German invasion. Poles, like most other non-Jewish populations across Europe, generally remained indifferent to the plight of Jews or were too frightened to help.

In 1941, as mass shootings by German units commenced in occupied Soviet territories, and in 1942, as deportations and mass murders in Chelmno, Treblinka, and other extermination camps began, the couriers spread the incredible news of disaster, in the beginning to mostly unbelieving listeners.

**ARMED RESISTANCE: GHETTO REBELLIONS**

Armed resistance in the ghettos was an act of desperation that arose from the realization that all Jews were to be killed. The first wave of mass deportations of Jews to the killing centers began in summer 1942. Initially, underground members greeted with skepticism the first reports of mass killings at Treblinka and other Nazi extermination camps, just as months earlier they had doubted or not known how to interpret the significance of reports of mass shootings in areas of the German-occupied Soviet Union.

After couriers verified the reports, the genocidal intent of the Nazi regime became undeniable to resistance leaders, and it fell to them to convince others. Defiant young activists from the political underground already in place in many ghettos began to organize armed resistance to their own deportation. Most were realistic about the dire chances of success but vowed to die fighting in the ghetto rather than in mass executions by gassing or shooting. In choosing this course, many also aimed to uphold Jewish honor and avenge the murders of their parents and loved ones.

In eastern Poland, the Baltics, Belorussia, and Ukraine — areas that were part of Soviet territory between 1939 and 1941 and then were occupied by German forces in 1941 — the mass murder of Jews by shootings began immediately after occupation, before the Germans established ghettos. There too, however, underground resistance organizations generally did not launch revolts or attempts at mass escapes until the approach of the ghetto's final days and until they were convinced that all Jews were to be killed. Occasionally, in ghettos surrounded by forests, such as Minsk in western Belorussia and Vilna in Lithuania, movement of individuals and small groups out of the ghetto and into partisan groups in the forests occurred over a longer period of time.

**Vilna ghetto fighters, 1942–43.** The first Jewish fighting organization was formed in Vilna. It was called the United Partisan Organization (FPO was the acronym for the name in Yiddish). Mass killings, including mass shootings in Ponar, a wooded area six miles away, had decimated the Vilna ghetto population, which had fallen from 60,000 to 20,000 by the end of 1941.

On January 1, 1942, 23-year-old Abba Kovner, a Zionist youth activist, spoke at a clandestine meeting held in a public kitchen in the ghetto. About 150 young people heard Kovner's fiery speech summoning them to resistance. Recognizing the human tendency to deny the worst, Kovner tried to dispel the glimmer of hope that remaining ghetto residents clung to, that somehow they would survive.

*Abba Kovner (standing center) and other Vilna ghetto fighters pose for a photograph shortly after the Soviet army liberated the city. July–August 1944. Wiener Library, London, United Kingdom*



Earlier than most, he grasped that the Nazi plan was to destroy all Jews in Europe, including the Jews remaining in Vilna. Defenseless against superior German force, they could not expect to triumph in battle, but they could choose to die honorably, as “free” fighters. Three weeks later, on January 21, 1942, the FPO was formed by youth activists, including Kovner, and members of political parties ranging from the Communists on the left to Betar on the right.

On July 5, 1943, Itzak Witenberg, the Communist commander of the FPO, was arrested. In a daring rescue, his comrades freed him as he was being led away. But Witenberg gave himself up to the Germans the following day after a German ultimatum threatened the destruction of the ghetto if he did not surrender. Realizing that he would not survive German torture and that under duress he would risk identifying fellow underground members, Witenberg committed suicide in his prison cell by taking a cyanide capsule. Before his death, he named Kovner the FPO commander in his place.

Two months later, in late August and early September 1943, the Germans began liquidating Vilna. The Vilna FPO issued a manifesto to the ghetto imploring the remaining 14,000 Jews to resist deportation to their deaths. In doing so, the Vilna FPO took encouragement from the Warsaw ghetto uprising three months earlier (see p. 18).



## THE VILNA PARTISAN MANIFESTO

*Offer armed resistance! Jews, defend yourselves with arms!*

*The German and Lithuanian executioners are at the gates of the ghetto. They have come to murder us! Soon they will lead you forth in groups through the ghetto door.*

*In the same way they carried away hundreds of us on the day of Yom Kippur [the holiest day in the Jewish calendar]. In the same way those with white, yellow and pink Schein [safe-conduct passes] were deported during the night. In this way our brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers and sons were taken away.*

*Tens of thousands of us were dispatched. But we shall not go! We will not offer our heads to the butcher like sheep.*

*Jews defend yourselves with arms!*

*Do not believe the false promises of the assassins or believe the words of the traitors.*

*Anyone who passes through the ghetto gate will go to Ponar!*

*And Ponar means death!*

*Jews, we have nothing to lose. Death will overtake us in any event. And who can still believe in survival when the murderer exterminates us with so much determination? The hand of the executioner will reach each man and woman. Flight and acts of cowardice will not save our lives.*

*Active resistance alone can save our lives and our honor.*

*Brothers! It is better to die in battle in the ghetto than to be carried away to Ponar like sheep. And know this: Within the walls of the ghetto there are organized Jewish forces who will resist with weapons.*

*Support the revolt!*

*Do not take refuge or hide in the bunkers, for then you will fall into the hands of the murderers like rats.*

*Jewish people, go out into the squares. Anyone who has no weapons should take an ax, and he who has no ax should take a crowbar or a bludgeon!*

*For our ancestors!*

*For our murdered children!*

*Avenge Ponar!*

*Attack the murderers!*

*In every street, in every courtyard, in every house within and without this ghetto, attack these dogs!*

*Jews, we have nothing to lose! We shall save our lives only if we exterminate our assassins.*

*Long live liberty! Long live armed resistance! Death to the assassins!*

In Vilna, the majority of people remaining in the ghetto did not heed the ghetto fighters' summons. Most believed the Germans would send them to work camps and not to Ponar. In each ghetto German authorities had created a Jewish council (*Judenrat*), which they forced to carry out their orders and administer ghetto affairs. The leader of the Jewish council in Vilna, Jacob Gens, opposed storing smuggled arms in the ghetto because he believed there was still hope for saving part of the ghetto through work. In his view, armed resistance could only lead to the destruction of the entire ghetto due to the German tactic of collective responsibility. Many in the general ghetto population followed Gens's lead.

On September 23–24, 1943, the Germans liquidated the Vilna ghetto. Nearly 4,000 residents were in fact deported to work camps in Estonia, where the Nazis would eventually kill them. Nazis and their collaborators deported more than 4,000 children, women, and old men to their deaths at the Sobibor extermination camp, and took several hundred other children and old people to Ponar and slaughtered them. A few hundred members of the FPO, including Kovner, escaped to join partisan groups in the Rudniki and Naroč forests (see p. 31).

**Fighting organizations in other ghettos, 1942–43.** As in Vilna, Jewish youth in the remnants of many other ghettos also formed fighting organizations in 1942. To do so, they had to overcome several major hurdles. These included political divisions and disagreements about tactics. In places where forests provided hiding places for partisan fighters, ghetto activists debated whether they should flee into the forests or make a final stand with the people remaining in the ghetto.

In the larger ghettos with underground organizations, fighters usually could not count on the support of the Jewish councils or the general ghetto population, which either tended to follow the councils' lead or suffered from inertia in the absence of aggressive leadership. As in Vilna, the Jewish council leader of the ghetto in Białystok, Poland, Efraim Barash, was ambivalent about helping the resistance because he hoped part of the ghetto could be saved through work and regarded an armed rebellion as suicidal. In Warsaw, the Jewish council leader Adam Czerniakow did not assist the resistance, and was much criticized by the Jewish underground. (In late July 1942, Czerniakow committed suicide to avoid bearing the responsibility for handing Jews over to the Germans for deportation.)

In Kovno and Minsk, council leaders cooperated with the underground — perhaps because their proximity to mass shooting sites had convinced them of Nazi intentions to kill all Jews. In many smaller ghettos in German-occupied Soviet territories, Jewish council members were active in the underground or cooperated with the resistance — again, for reasons that are not completely understood. Two likely

reasons are the greater possibility of flight to the forests in areas further east and support of Soviet partisans. The choices council leaders made reflected both individual resolve and the possibility of success.

Further handicapping resistance groups planning armed rebellions or mass escapes was the difficulty and danger of obtaining weapons. Jews received no arms from Allied governments or forces. Couriers had to steal or purchase arms and then smuggle them into the ghetto in pieces and in small quantities incapable of detection. Fighters from the Vilna ghetto stole weapons from German arsenals or purchased arms from sympathetic farmers who had hidden arms from the war. In Warsaw, most weapons were bought from members of the Polish underground, but the prices were high, the quantities limited, and the quality poor.

**Location of revolts.** Jewish resistance was most widespread in German-occupied territories of eastern Poland, Lithuania, and Belorussia. The largest organizations were based in Kovno, Vilna, Minsk, and Bialystok. Altogether, at least 60 ghettos had attempted revolts, mass escapes, or the formation of armed underground movements. Although no rebellion took place in Kovno, the ghetto had a large resistance organization composed of Zionist youth groups and Communists. Some 350 Jews from Kovno were able to join up with the Lithuanian Communist resistance in the forests. The most successful organized resistance was the underground in Minsk, which helped an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 persons flee to the dense forests. Several thousand survived until the end of the war.

In many smaller ghettos in German-occupied eastern Poland and the Soviet Union, spontaneous uprisings broke out during the final liquidations of those ghettos. At Lachva in southwestern Belorussia, for example, ghetto Jews heard that Jews in a nearby town had been murdered. On August 3, 1942, the day after the Germans ordered peasants to dig pits outside Lachva, Jews set fire to the ghetto and, lacking guns and ammunition, attacked the Germans with axes, knives, iron bars, pitchforks, and clubs. In the ensuing chaos, 2,000 Jews fled, but only 120 survived to join with Soviet partisans in the Chobot forest about 12 miles away.

In her memoir *On Both Sides of the Wall*, Vladka Meed, who was a courier for the Warsaw ghetto underground, describes the dangers associated with obtaining weapons:

*The main objective of our mission on the "Aryan side" — the goal for which we endured constant danger, hid like frightened animals, assumed false identities, moved from dwelling to dwelling to escape detection as Jews — was to obtain arms for the resistance in the ghetto. . . .*

*Yurek (Aryeh Wilner) had succeeded in buying a considerable quantity of revolvers and hand grenades from a Gentile woman. But as soon as he had brought the valise with the "merchandise" to his apartment, the Gestapo swooped down on him, found the weapons, and arrested Yurek. . . .*

*Several months later I learned that Yurek had been tortured by the Gestapo. His hands and toes had been beaten to a pulp, yet he had not betrayed his co-workers. . . .*



In German-occupied central Poland, the open terrain generally did not lend itself to resistance, and the Polish partisans were generally less receptive to Jews than Soviet partisans (see p. 31), but armed rebellions occurred in Warsaw, Czestochowa, and Tarnow. Four attempted rebellions took place at Kielce, Opatow, Pilica, and Tomaszow Lubelski. Armed combatants escaped from 15 other ghettos into the surrounding forests.

**The Warsaw ghetto uprising, April 19, 1943–May 16, 1943.** The most famous and dramatic example of armed resistance during the Holocaust was the Warsaw ghetto uprising by Jewish fighting forces in April and May 1943. As was true in most other locations, the uprising occurred after most of the ghetto population had already been deported and killed. In summer and fall 1942, about 300,000 Jews from Warsaw were deported to Treblinka. When reports of mass murder by gassing filtered back to the ghetto, surviving members of separate underground groups, which for months had been engaged in smuggling arms and other acts of unarmed resistance, joined together in armed resistance. Many members of the newly formed unified Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) were angry that no one had resisted the mass deportations in 1942.

On January 18, 1943, the ZOB, led by 23-year-old Mordechai Anielewicz, leader of a Zionist youth group, fired on German troops during an attempted deportation of 8,000 Jews. After a few days, the troops retreated. The small victory inspired



*During the Warsaw ghetto uprising, German soldiers round up Jewish underground members for deportation. April–May 1943. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD*

the ghetto fighters to prepare for future resistance. When the final liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto began on April 19, 1943, the ZOB resisted the German roundups. One of the ghetto fighters, Tovia Bozhikowski, later recalled that momentous day:

*Monday, April 19, was the day before Passover, the first day of spring. Sunshine penetrated even to the cheerless corners of the ghetto, but with the last trace of winter the last hope of the Jews had also disappeared. Those who had remained at their battle stations all night were annoyed by the beauty of the day, for it is hard to accept death in the sunshine of spring.*

*As members of Dror, we were stationed at Nalevskes 33. I stood on the balcony of a building on Nalevskes-Genshe with several friends, where we could watch the German troops who stole into the ghetto. Since early dawn long lines of Germans had been marching — infantry, cavalry, motorized units, regular soldiers, S.S. troops and Ukrainians.*

*I wondered what we could do against such might, with only pistols and rifles. But we refused to admit the approaching defeat.*

*By 6:00 A.M. the ghetto was surrounded. The first German detachment advanced toward Nalevskes. As it neared the crossroads of Nalevskes-Genshe-Franciskaner we opened fire with guns, grenades and small homemade bombs.*

The Warsaw ghetto uprising assumed a significance beyond the revolt itself. As news of the heroic Warsaw ghetto fighters spread through the underground network, Jews in other ghettos were inspired to resist deportation to their deaths. The Warsaw ghetto uprising would become a defining moment in Jewish history, as ZOB leader Mordechai Anielewicz seemed to recognize when he wrote his last letter two weeks before his death on May 8, 1945:

*It is now clear to me that what took place exceeded all expectations. In our opposition to the Germans we did more than our strength allowed — but now our forces are waning. We are on the brink of extinction. We forced the Germans to retreat twice — but they returned stronger than before.*

*One of our groups held out for forty minutes; and another fought for about six hours. The mine which was laid in the area of the brush factory exploded as planned. Then we attacked the Germans and they suffered heavy casualties. Our losses were generally low. That is an accomplishment too. Z. fell, next to his machine-gun.*

*I feel that great things are happening and that this action which we have dared to take is of enormous value.*

*We have no choice but to go over to partisan methods of fighting as of today. Today, six fighting-groups are going out. They have two tasks — to reconnoiter the area and to capture weapons. Remember, 'short-range weapons' are of no use to us. We employ them very rarely. We need many rifles, hand-grenades, machine-guns and explosives.*

*I cannot describe the conditions in which the Jews of the ghetto are now 'living.' Only a few exceptional individuals will be able to survive such suffering. The others will sooner or later die. Their fate is certain, even though thousands are trying to hide in cracks and rat holes. It is impossible to light a candle, for lack of air. Greetings to you who are outside. Perhaps a miracle will occur and we shall see each other again one of these days. It is extremely doubtful.*

*The last wish of my life has been fulfilled. Jewish self-defense has become a fact. Jewish resistance and revenge have become actualities. I am happy to have been one of the first Jewish fighters in the ghetto.*

*Where will rescue come from?*

*Our bombs and grenades exploded over their heads as they returned our fire. They were excellent targets in the open square, while we were concealed in the buildings. They left many dead and wounded. The alert, confident attitude of our men was impressive. The youthful Jacob shot his pistol continuously, while Abraham Dreyer and Moshe Rubin commanded from windows. Zachariash, Dror commander, moved among the men, building their courage. Liaison officers scurried between positions with messages. The battle went on for two hours.*

*Rivka, an observer, watched the enemy retreat. There were no more Germans on the front street. Zachariash returned beaming from his survey of the battlefield; 40 dead and wounded Germans were left behind, but we suffered no losses.*

*But even in our satisfaction we realized we would eventually be crushed. It was, though, a triumph to gladden the hearts of men who were about to die.*

Armed with a few submachine guns, a small number of rifles and pistols, and some handmade Molotov cocktails and hand grenades, the 750 Jewish fighters were no match for more than 2,000 German troops and their Ukrainian auxiliaries armed with heavy machine guns, hand-held machine and submachine guns, several howitzers, and hundreds of rifles.

Still, using a network of cellars, bunkers, and rooftops, ghetto fighters fought the battle-hardened German troops for 28 days. The commander of the operation, General Juergen Stroop, reported to his superiors a week after his troops first entered the ghetto: "The resistance put up by the Jews and bandits could be broken only by relentlessly using all our force and energy by day and night."

By May 16, 1943, after fierce house-to-house fighting, the Germans recaptured and destroyed the ghetto. Of the more than 56,000 Jews captured, about 7,000 were shot; the rest were deported to killing centers or concentration camps. Others, including Anielewicz, committed suicide rather than be captured. Stroop then ordered the ghetto set on fire, block by block, to force out anyone left hiding in the ruins.

Some fighters managed to escape from the ghetto after wading for hours amid the dead and dying through the filthy, putrid water of the sewers. Many of them continued their resistance work on the "Aryan" side, helping Jews who were in hiding by distributing money to them, finding them apartments, and moving them from place to place. They also joined the Polish resistance in fighting the Germans during the Warsaw uprising in August 1944 (see p. 30).

*Inmates at forced labor  
in the Mauthausen con-  
centration camp.  
Mauthausen, Austria,  
1942.*

*National Archives and  
Records Administration,  
College Park, MD*





## RESISTANCE IN NAZI CAMPS

During the war, 1939–1945, millions of people, victimized and captured by the Germans, passed through an extensive network of thousands of camps established in greater Germany and the German-occupied countries of Europe. In addition to concentration camps (today often mistakenly used as a generic term for all types of camps), there were extermination camps, work camps, forced labor camps, transit camps, prisoner-of-war camps, and internment camps.

At least three million Jewish men, women, and children perished in the camps, most of them gassed soon after their arrival at one of six Nazi extermination camps, all located in German-occupied Poland or Polish territories incorporated into the Reich — at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno, and Majdanek-Lublin. Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek-Lublin also served as concentration camps, and there, as in other camps, a minority of Jews — physically fit teenagers, men, and women without children — were given a temporary reprieve from death as forced laborers.

Forced labor included performing totally meaningless tasks such as hauling heavy rocks from one place to another and back again. But increasingly, in 1942, after it became clear that the Germans were not going to win the war quickly, hundreds of satellite camps began to spring up in factories outside concentration camps where Jews chosen for labor and other camp inmates produced war materials. Many of these prisoners died from exhaustion, exposure to the elements, starvation, and disease spread through overcrowding and unhygienic conditions.

Gypsies (Sinti and Roma) were also deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in family groups, and 23,000 are known to have been murdered in that camp by gassing. Many others, including Soviet prisoners of war, Poles, political and religious dissidents, homosexuals, forced laborers, and resistance fighters from across Europe, were also imprisoned in concentration camps and their satellites, and many, exploited as forced laborers, died from maltreatment. Unlike Jews and Gypsies, they were not systematically gassed.

The atmosphere of total terror and isolation in the camps as well as the chronic starvation of most prisoners severely inhibited the will of the prisoners and the possibilities of resistance. Barbed and high voltage electrical wires and guard towers left little hope of escape. The daily routine in the larger camps was brutally regimented. It included an elaborate system of harsh punishments for the slightest infractions, close surveillance, and endless roll calls for counting prisoners. Those who attempted to resist or escape were killed when caught.

*In retaliation for the escape of a prisoner, the SS at Buchenwald concentration camp hanged 20 prisoners, most of whom were Jews. 1942–43.*

*YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, NY*



Still, despite these enormous obstacles, there were acts of resistance by members of the diverse camp populations. In many camps, underground groups formed, sometimes across the divergent political, ethnic, and language barriers; members exchanged information and coordinated efforts to alleviate suffering of the inmates. While the conditions of imprisonment made armed resistance extremely difficult, it was not impossible.

The most dramatic examples of armed resistance were revolts planned and carried out by organized underground groups of Jewish inmates at Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. As was the case with the ghetto revolts, the uprisings in these killing centers occurred with little hope of success against the superior German force. But, like the ghetto revolts, the Jewish prisoners realized their days were numbered anyway.

#### UNARMED RESISTANCE IN THE CAMPS

**Clandestine political organizations and meetings.** Clandestine resistance groups formed in many concentration camps with political prisoners and captured members of national resistance groups often providing the leadership. For example, in 1940 many Communists and captured French resistance fighters united to form a resistance organization at Ravensbrueck, a camp for women prisoners situated

north of Berlin. Three women of different nationalities and political affiliations led the group. To raise the spirits of prisoners and give hope for eventual escape or liberation, the resisters traded newspapers, battle maps, and war information. They also held secret political meetings to share news and information about the camp. All these activities were extremely dangerous.

**Attempts to alleviate suffering of camp inmates.** Many resistance activities in concentration camps centered on attempts organized by the underground to alleviate the day-to-day suffering of the camp inmates. These included gathering food, money, and medical supplies for those in need.

Before Auschwitz was fitted with gas chambers for the systematic murder of Jews in late 1941, it served as a concentration camp primarily for Polish prisoners, including army officers who served as leaders of the first resistance groups. Poles who had gained positions in the infirmary and administrative offices were well placed for resistance activities. They were also in the best position to make contact with free Poles who lived nearby and worked in the camp, as well as with Polish resistance groups.

In November 1942, members of the Polish resistance movement in Auschwitz secretly contacted the Polish underground in nearby Cracow about the lack of medical supplies in the camp. The amount of medicine dispensed in the camp infirmary only covered the needs of a small fraction of the prisoners. The Auschwitz underground sought to steal medical supplies from warehouses that also held victims' belongings. A group of Poles who worked for the underground in the Rajska clinic, near the main camp at Auschwitz, organized an operation to smuggle medicine into the concentration camp. Despite their help, however, medical supplies remained woefully inadequate in the camp.

**Attempts to inform the outside world about the camps.** Other forms of resistance in concentration camps consisted of efforts organized by the underground to inform the world about Nazi brutality, the cruel physical conditions, and the Nazis' systematic annihilation of Jews in the extermination camps.

On April 7, 1944, two Slovakian Jews, Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg (who later took the name Rudolf Vrba), escaped from Birkenau. The motive for their escape was to warn the Hungarian Jews of the Germans' plans for their destruction. They hid in bunkers outside the camp fence near places where prisoners worked for three days, the length of the state of alert the SS imposed after any escape. After a journey of several days on foot, Wetzler and Vrba reached Slovakia, where they presented to Jewish leaders a long report illustrated with

sketches describing installations at Auschwitz-Birkenau, including details about the gas chambers.

These reports and news of the first gassings of Hungarians at Auschwitz were confirmed in late May by two Polish Jewish escapees, Arnost Rosin and Czelaw Mordowicz. That summer, the reports reached the Allies, who had earlier (in late 1942) confirmed the news of mass murder of Jews. The Allies, however, rejected the request by certain Jewish activists in Europe that Auschwitz or the railway lines leading to the camp be bombed. The Allies continued to make winning the war their highest priority. Some 437,000 Jewish men, women, and children were deported from Hungary on 148 trains between May 15 and July 8, 1944. Most — as many as 10,000 each day — were gassed soon after their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

#### ARMED RESISTANCE: KILLING CENTER REVOLTS

Even in the death camps, in the shadow of the gas chambers and crematoria, Jews resisted against their oppressors. Three bold and daring uprisings occurred in the killing centers at Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. As was the case with ghetto rebellions, those organized killing center revolts arose out of a sense of desperation and hopelessness when it became clear that all Jews in these extermination camps were to be killed.

Almost all Jews — children, the elderly, and physically fit teenagers and adults — deported to the Treblinka and Sobibor extermination camps were gassed upon arrival. Few barracks existed for resident inmates. Camp guards temporarily spared small numbers of prisoners for use in special units called the *Sonderkommando*, which operated the crematoria and other camp facilities. But those *Sonderkommando* members realized that it was only a matter of time before they, too, would be gassed.

**Treblinka.** At Treblinka, an underground organization plotted an armed rebellion and mass escape. Learning about the Warsaw ghetto revolt from the last transports of Jews brought to Treblinka from Warsaw, the organizers decided the moment for revolt had arrived. On August 2, 1943, the underground fighters put their plan into action: to steal arms from the warehouse, eliminate the German and Ukrainian guards on duty, set the camp on fire, destroy the extermination area, then help the remaining prisoners escape to the forest. Many were killed during the rebellion, including all the resistance leaders, as the flames and reports of the revolt brought German reinforcements from all directions. But as many as 200 prisoners escaped to the neighboring forest, and perhaps 20 of those men survived German efforts to recapture them.

A few months after the revolt, Germans closed the camp, leveled it, and planted pine trees to hide all traces of the mass murders. At least 750,000 Jews perished at the camp between July 1942 and November 1943.

**Sobibor.** At Sobibor, Leon Feldhendler, the son of a rabbi from the nearby town of Zolkiewka, formed an underground organization in July 1943. By then transports to the death camp were slowing down and veteran Jewish prisoners sensed the end was quickly approaching. In September 1943, a new deportation of Soviet Jewish prisoners from Minsk brought a trained Soviet army officer, Lieutenant Alexandr “Sasha” Aronovich Pechersky to Sobibor. The Jewish underground recruited Pechersky and placed him in command.

Pechersky and his deputy Feldhendler devised a daring plan. Resisters would lure SS officers into storehouses on the pretext that they were to receive new coats and boots. Once inside, prisoners would attack them with axes and knives. The prisoners would then seize Nazi weapons and ammunition and set the camp ablaze during roll call. The insurgents would then break open the gate, and all prisoners would have a chance to run across the German mine fields toward the forest.

The revolt occurred in the late afternoon of October 14, 1943. Insurgents killed 11 of the Nazis in the camp, including the camp commander, and several Ukrainian guards. By dusk, about 300 prisoners had escaped. Nearly 200 of them managed to avoid recapture. Only a small number, however, survived to the war’s end. Rumors that the escapees carried gold and silver made them easy prey for the local population, and few hiding in the forest survived the harsh Polish winter. Pechersky joined a partisan unit in the forest and survived the war; he later wrote a memoir about the revolt.

After the uprising, the Germans destroyed all traces of Sobibor. By the end of 1943, workers had plowed the death camp under and planted crops to cover the place where, between March 1942 and October 1943, the Nazis had murdered more than 250,000 Jews.

**Auschwitz-Birkenau.** At Auschwitz-Birkenau, an elaborate underground network of Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners planned a revolt. By summer 1944, Soviet forces were advancing swiftly from the east, and the Allies from the west. Transports had slowed to Auschwitz-Birkenau where the Nazis had murdered more than one million Jews and tens of thousands of others.

Most of the non-Jewish underground backed out of the planned revolt after the failure of the Warsaw uprising by the Polish resistance in August 1944 (see p. 30)

and after the Polish underground outside of Auschwitz became aware that the Germans had learned about the plan. Underground leaders issued orders to give up the revolt.

But members of the Jewish *Sonderkommando*, sensing that the end was near and their usefulness to the Germans over, went ahead with the plan with help from some Soviet prisoners of war. On October 7, 1944, in a daring act of desperation, a group of prisoners blew up one of Birkenau's four crematoria using dynamite the underground had smuggled from a nearby munitions factory to the *Sonderkommando*. Six hundred prisoners escaped after the explosion, but all were either captured or killed as they fled.

On January 6, 1945, less than three weeks before the Soviet liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, four young women accused of supplying the dynamite — Roza Robota, Ella Gaertner, Esther Wajcblum, and Regina Safirsztain — were hanged in the presence of the remaining inmates. As the trap door opened, Robota shouted defiantly, "Be strong, have courage!" Before her execution, guards had tortured her brutally, but she had refused to divulge the names of any members of the resistance.

**Spontaneous resistance by Gypsies at Auschwitz-Birkenau.** In Auschwitz-Birkenau, camp officials set aside specific barracks in early 1943 to house Sinti and Roma family groups deported from Germany and other countries occupied by Germany. By the end of 1943, the Nazis had interned 18,736 Sinti and Roma in the Gypsy camp, and thousands of those men, women, and children died in the gas chambers. Others, more fit adult men and women chosen for forced labor, were deported from Auschwitz to other camps.

On May 15, 1944, prisoners in the Birkenau Gypsy family camp learned that the camp administration intended to gas the 6,000 remaining Gypsy prisoners the next day. When SS guards armed with machine guns surrounded the camp and attempted to begin the transport to the gas chambers, they met armed resistance. After stealing scraps of sheet metal, the prisoners had sharpened the metal into crudely fashioned knives. With those improvised weapons, and with iron pipes, clubs, and stones, the Gypsies defended themselves. Guards shot some resisters. The final liquidation of the camp occurred in early August when guards moved 2,897 men, women, and children to the gas chambers in the dead of night.

## **S E L E C T E D   P A R T I S A N   A C T I V I T I E S I N   E U R O P E**

**I**n many countries across German-occupied Europe, underground partisan units formed to help regular Allied forces defeat the Germans. Men and women joined partisan groups as citizens fulfilling their patriotic duty to their country or as members of left-wing (socialist or Communist) political groups fighting Nazism.

Initially unprepared and disorganized, activities of resistance groups in the early stages of the war were usually limited to printing and distributing clandestine literature, forging passports and other personal documents, and secretly monitoring foreign radio broadcasts. By 1943, when the war had turned against Germany, the resistance grew bolder. Partisans smuggled arms and ammunition and used hit-and-run tactics to disrupt enemy communications, kill off isolated groups of German soldiers, and punish collaborators. Partisans usually lived off the land but were sometimes supplied with arms and munitions by air drop. While many partisans operated illegally from hiding places in forests, many others worked in urban settings.

### **P O L I S H   P A R T I S A N S**

Soon after the German occupation of Poland began in fall 1939, the Germans began their campaign to destroy potential sources of Polish resistance, including many individuals in Polish intellectual, cultural, and religious life. They carried out massacres of university professors, artists, high school teachers, writers, politicians, and priests. In response, widespread resistance developed as the Poles organized into more than 300 underground political and military groups and subgroups with wide popular support. Some of these groups were only loosely connected, and sometimes they worked at odds with each other. (For example, the Falanga [NSZ] was a fascist group that was usually opposed to all other sections of the underground.)

Members of the Polish resistance ran an underground government with courts. Through the aid of secret couriers, the resistance maintained contact with the Polish government-in-exile in London. The resistance also set up a rudimentary educational system after the Germans closed many Polish schools with the intention of reducing the Poles, whom Nazi ideology viewed as “subhuman,” to minimally educated slave laborers for the Reich. (In his memo entitled “Some Thoughts on the Treatment of the Alien Population in the East,” SS Chief Heinrich Himmler wrote: “The objective of this elementary school [with only four grades] must simply be to teach: simple arithmetic up to 500 at the most, how to write

one's name, and to teach that it is God's commandment to be obedient to the Germans and to be honest, hard working, and well-behaved. I consider it unnecessary to teach reading.”)

In Warsaw, in December 1942, members of the Polish resistance formed an underground organization called *Zegota*, the Council for Aid to Jews. *Zegota* provided refuge, funds, forged papers, and other means of social welfare to Jews living in Poland. The group saved an estimated 3,000 Jews, many of them children.

As part of the Polish resistance movement, officers of the regular Polish army headed an underground Polish armed force, the “Home Army” (*Armia Krajowa*—AK). After several years of organizational activities, including the training of fighters and hoarding of weapons, the AK established fighting partisan units in many parts of Poland in 1943. The AK aimed to prepare for the moment, near the end of the war, when they could liberate their homeland from conquerors on both sides, Nazi Germany and the Communist Soviet Union. A Communist underground, the “People's Guard” (*Guardia Ludowa*), also formed in Poland in 1942, but its military strength and influence were weak.

On August 1, 1944, the AK launched an uprising in Warsaw against the German army. After bitter fighting that lasted 63 days, and while the Soviet army remained on the sidelines unwilling to assist, the Germans defeated the Poles. It was a staggering loss. Nearly 200,000 Poles, most of them civilians, lost their lives. The Germans deported thousands of men, women, and children to concentration camps. On October 11, 1944, Hitler ordered that German forces raze the city of Warsaw. They reduced to rubble the part of the city not previously destroyed during the German invasion in 1939 or the Jewish ghetto uprising in 1943.

### SOVIET PARTISANS

The Soviet partisan movement was the largest in Europe. In the first weeks and months after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, small partisan groups formed from Red army stragglers, from Soviet POWs who had escaped from their German captors, and from Communist party officials who managed to escape capture and death at the hands of the *Einsatzgruppen* mobile killing units. In the beginning, keeping alive was the main focus. The partisans' actions primarily consisted of raids on the local population to obtain food and clothing.

The number and size of partisan bands grew and, in 1943, were absorbed into a large resistance movement directed by a Soviet command headquartered within the Soviet Union. By summer 1943, more than 200,000 individuals, including several thousand women, fought in the Soviet partisan movement.



Partisan groups flourished in the dense forests and marshes of northwestern Ukraine, Belorussia, and portions of the occupied Russian Republic. In 1943, partisan attacks on railway lines and other targets in those areas became so effective that the Germans began to commit frontline troops to clearing partisan units from the forests. In July and August of that year, the Germans attacked the Naliboki forest in Belorussia and found approximately 20,000 partisans operating there, including about 3,000 Jews.

The Naliboki forest was immense, with hundreds of square miles of thick evergreen trees and swampland providing cover. Resistance was much more difficult because of the absence of hiding places in the open agricultural areas of central and southern Ukraine and the agrarian landscapes of the Baltics.

#### **JEWISH PARTISAN UNITS IN THE FORESTS OF EASTERN EUROPE**

An estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Jews fought in partisan groups based in the forests of eastern Europe. There were about 30 Jewish partisan detachments and some 21 additional non-Jewish partisan groups in which Jews fought.

Non-Jewish partisan groups did not always welcome Jews because of both anti-semitic and anti-Communist attitudes. In such countries as Poland and Lithuania, where anti-Soviet feelings often ran as strong as anti-Nazi ones, Jews were frequently identified in the popular imagination with Bolshevism. The Polish Home Army usually refused to accept any Jews. Sometimes right-wing AK detachments as well as Ukrainian nationalist partisans even hunted down and murdered Jewish partisans.

Soviet partisan units tended to be more receptive to Jewish fighters. This was true especially after the Red army and Communist party established control over Soviet partisans who previously, in their search for weapons, had sometimes engaged in violent raids on Jewish camps. However, the timing was not beneficial for Jews overall, as the Soviet partisan movement, like the Polish resistance, did not gain significant strength as fighting forces until 1943 — that is, until after the Nazis had already killed the majority of Jews in eastern Europe in mass shootings or gassings. Some Jews in Soviet partisan units concealed their Jewish identity because Jews were not always welcome.

In 1944 more than 150 Jewish partisans were fighting in the Parczew forest north of the Polish city of Lublin; of these only 40 survived until liberation. Notable partisan leaders included Ephraim (Frank) Bleichman and Shmuel (Mieczyslaw) Gruber. Gruber became second-in-command to Yechiel Greenshpan who led Jewish forces in the Parczew forest, and Bleichman was one of Greenshpan's two



platoon commanders. Protected by sympathetic People's Guard officers against antisemitic partisans and equipped with machine guns, explosives for mining railways, and food and other supplies dropped by the Soviets, the Jewish partisans fought with the People's Guard in a number of intense engagements against German forces. They participated in the takeover of the city of Parczew on April 16, 1944.

While most Soviet and Polish partisan groups consisted of single, able-bodied men armed for combat, some Jewish fighters established another kind of partisan unit: the family camp, where women, children, and elderly people lived with and were protected by the fighters. Most inhabitants of family camps had fled from the Germans during ghetto liquidations or had escaped with the help of the underground. An estimated 10,000 Jews survived the war in such family units by raiding local communities for food and by providing support for partisan brigades.

In western Belorussia, in summer 1942, a Jewish partisan group known as the Bielski *otriad* was officially established. (*Otriad* is the Russian word for an official



*Members of the Bielski otriad at the family camp in the Naliboki forest in Poland. 1943–44. Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, Israel*

partisan detachment.) The Bielski *otriad* took on the dual roles of rescuers and fighters. Headed by the charismatic leader Tuvia Bielski and aided by his two brothers, Asael and Zus, the group at first numbered fewer than 40.

A one-time Jewish peasant, Tuvia Bielski, a man with little formal education, initiated the group's open-door policy. According to the policy, the Bielski partisans accepted into their group all Jews regardless of sex, age, or any other characteristic. Not only did the Bielski partisans take in all Jews who reached them, they also sent special guides into the ghettos to rescue Jews who were then incorporated into their *otriad*. Special Bielski scouts also would collect Jews who roamed the forest and bring them to their unit. The Bielski partisans distinguished themselves as the largest armed rescuers of Jews by Jews. In summer 1944, when the Soviet army liberated western Belorussia, the Bielski *otriad* numbered more than 1,200 individuals, most of whom were older people, women, and children, precisely those whom most non-Jewish partisan units refused to take in.

Another family camp was formed under the leadership of Shalom Zorin, a Soviet Jewish prisoner of war who had escaped German captivity in Minsk. Zorin's so-called 106th Division fought and survived until liberation in 1944. Both the Zorin and Bielski camps were in the densest parts of the Naliboki forest.

**PARTISAN ACTIVITIES OF JEWS IN WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE**

Many individuals from the comparatively small, non-ghettoized Jewish population in western Europe joined national partisan groups rather than forming exclusively Jewish resistance organizations. Jews who escaped deportation were usually welcomed into and many became prominent in the partisan movements in Italy and France. In Italy the resistance was concentrated in the mountainous north and in the center, with its base in Rome.

Most members of the *Maquis*, as the French resistance movement was called, were concentrated in the mountainous areas of unoccupied Vichy France in the south, but the resistance also operated underground in cities, including occupied Paris. Although Jews made up less than one percent of the French population, an estimated 15 to 20 percent of the French underground were Jews.

In some cases, Jews also organized small Jewish underground organizations. In France, the Jewish resistance movement formed several organizations. The *Organisation Juive de Combat* (Jewish Fighting Organization) united nearly 2,000 members from several smaller groups in 1944 after a number of Jewish partisans had been deported. The group was responsible for hundreds of armed actions, including attacks on railway lines and the demolition of German factories.

The *Eclaireurs Israéliens*, a French Jewish scouting organization, was active in the French resistance. Members helped find non-Jewish homes for several thousand Jewish children, forged bogus identity papers, and smuggled children to safety across the borders of France. The *Eclaireurs* also participated in the liberation of southwestern France, fighting with General de Gaulle's underground units and the Jewish Fighting Organization.

In Belgium, Jewish resistance fighters operated as an independent underground organization that worked with and received support from the general Belgian resistance movement. In 1941, a Committee for the Defense of Jews was organized. On April 19, 1943, members of the Committee, in cooperation with Christian railroad workers and the general underground in Belgium, attacked a train leaving the transit camp of Malines (where Jews were temporarily held) for Auschwitz. This was the only known deportation train to Auschwitz to be stopped anywhere in Europe. Between 600 and 700 Jews jumped from the cars; approximately half of them escaped. The Committee also engaged in acts of sabotage and the rescue of some 3,000 Jewish children.

Members of Zionist youth movements joined Slovak partisan units in a national uprising against the German occupation that broke out in August 1944, when the



*Egon Novak (left) and Oskar Wertheimer (third from left) were among the 1,566 Jewish partisans who fought in the Slovak national uprising, 1944.*

*Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Tel Aviv, Israel*

Soviet army was approaching the Slovakian border. The Jewish fighters had been imprisoned in the Sereď and Novaky labor camps, where they planned the uprising with members of the Communist underground. The revolt was suppressed, and the rebel fort of Banská-Bystrica fell in October 1944. About 15,000 rebels, including 2,000 Jews, refused to surrender and retreated to the mountains to wage partisan warfare.

The Jewish community of Palestine contributed volunteers to the British army, and sent parachute teams and commandos behind German lines to organize resistance efforts. The death of one parachutist, the 23-year-old poet Hannah Senesh, has become an emblem of martyrdom. Senesh, a Hungarian Jew who emigrated to Palestine in 1939, aimed in late spring 1944 to warn Hungarian Jews about the extermination camps. She was captured on June 8, 1944, and executed as a traitor to Hungary. The day before she crossed into occupied Hungary, knowing of the risk she was taking, she had handed a poem to one of her companions. It ended with these lines:

*Blessed is the heart with the strength to stop  
its beating for honor's sake.*

*Blessed is the match consumed  
in kindling flame.*

In Yugoslavia, more than 4,000 Jews fought against German occupation with Communist partisans under the command of Josip Broz Tito, despite the obstacles Jews faced in reaching the remote areas where the fighting occurred. Among the Jewish partisans was Mocha Pijade, Tito's deputy in charge of political activities, who was later credited with helping Yugoslav patriots see the nationalist character of Tito's resistance movement. Dr. Roza Papo was the first woman given the rank of general, and General Voja Todorovic commanded Tito's land forces after the war.

Some Gypsies who eluded deportation also participated in partisan activities. The Flemish artist Jan Yoors, who lived in France during the war with a Roma family, recalled in his memoirs how his Roma friends used their wagons to transport refugees and smuggle small arms and explosives. The frequent movement of those Gypsies also allowed them to accrue ration cards under different names in a variety of places. Those ration cards were important in supplying food to resistance fighters. When German authorities began tighter scrutiny of rations, the Yoors group joined French partisans in raiding ration distribution posts. They also brought the partisans news heard on BBC radio broadcasts.

## SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE IN THE GHETTOS AND CAMPS

Spiritual resistance refers to attempts by individuals to maintain their humanity and personal integrity in the face of Nazi attempts to dehumanize and degrade them. Yiddish linguist and historian Zelig Kalmanovich (1885–1944) described as “the clear victory of spirit over matter” the many educational, religious, and cultural institutions that underground political groups had organized in the Vilna ghetto. These groups also consciously aimed to preserve Jewish culture against the Nazi genocidal assault. Most generally, spiritual resistance may refer to the refusal to have one’s spirit broken in the midst of the most horrible degradation. Rabbi Isaac Nissenbaum, one of the leaders of Warsaw Jews, referred to this spirit in the Warsaw ghetto as *Kiddush Hachaim*, Hebrew for “sanctification of life.”

**Underground schools and libraries.** Throughout occupied Poland, hundreds of secret *yeshivot* (Jewish religious schools) were organized inside the ghettos. Jewish children also attended informal, clandestine classes called *komplety*, where they studied religious and secular subjects. Going to and from class, students hid their books under their coats or in their trousers. The danger of being caught was always present, but the secret learning continued.

Jews smuggled books and manuscripts into many ghettos for safekeeping, and opened underground libraries in numerous ghettos, including the secret library at Czestochowa, Poland, which served more than 1,000 readers. Activists established a 60,000-volume library in the Theresienstadt ghetto, near Prague, where the Germans interned many artists, writers, and scholars.

**Documenting the Holocaust.** Gathering documentary evidence about what was happening to and around them reflected a conscious effort among victims to undermine German efforts to hide the truth about the Holocaust. Groups in many ghettos established secret archives and methodically wrote, collected, and stored reports, diaries, and documents about daily life in the ghetto.

The most well known of these archives was that of the Warsaw ghetto, code-named *Oneg Shabbat* (“Joy of the Sabbath”). Founded by historian Emmanuel Ringelblum (1900–1944), *Oneg Shabbat* included his own chronicle of events. Many of the containers holding the archives that the group hid were dug up from the rubble of the Warsaw ghetto after the war. The papers found inside have provided valuable documentation of life and death inside the ghetto. In the Bialystok

David Graber, a 19-year-old member of the Warsaw ghetto resistance, helped bury metal containers holding the *Oneg Shabbat* documents. Graber did not survive; his “last will” was found after the war in one of the containers. It read:

*I would love to see the moment in which the great treasure will be dug up and shriek to the world proclaiming the truth. So the world may know all. So the ones who did not live through it may be glad, and we may feel like veterans with medals on our chest. We would be the fathers, the teachers and educators of the future. We would be the grandfathers of the bards who tell to the grandsons, to the young the story of victories and defeats, of keeping alive and of perishing. How they would cock the ears! But no, we shall certainly never live to see it, and therefore do I write my last will. May the treasure fall in good hands, may it last into better times, may it alarm and alert the world to what happened and was played out in the twentieth century.*

...

*We may die now in peace. We fulfilled our mission. May history attest for us.*

ghetto, activist Mordechai Tenenbaum, who had come to Bialystok from Warsaw in November 1942 to organize the resistance movement, established ghetto archives modeled after *Oneg Shabbat*.

**Cultural activities.** Spiritual resistance also took the form of cultural activities, such as the creation of works of art, songs, theatrical productions, concerts, cabarets, dances, and lectures. Young children at Theresienstadt painted pictures and wrote poems in classes organized by adults to help the young deal psychologically with their trauma. Fewer than 100 of the 15,000 children under the age of 15 who passed through Theresienstadt survived.

One young poet at Theresienstadt wrote in a poem entitled “Homesick”:

*People walk along the street,  
You see at once on each you meet  
That there's ghetto here.  
A place of evil and of fear.  
There's little to eat and much to want,  
Where bit by bit, it's horror to live.  
But no one must give up!  
The world turns and times change.  
Yet we all hope the time will come  
When we'll go home again.  
Now I know how dear it is  
And often I remember it.*

**Clandestine prayer.** The Germans forbade religious services in most ghettos, so many Jews prayed in secret — in cellars, attics, and back rooms — as others stood guard. In Warsaw alone, in 1940, 600 Jewish prayer groups existed. Prayer helped build morale, reaffirmed a cultural and religious identity, and supplied spiritual comfort. Many Orthodox Jews who opposed the use of physical force viewed prayer and religious observances as the true and only weapons. (Other Jews, feeling abandoned, could no longer believe in God's justice or mercy.)



In Nazi camps, many Jewish women — at great risk — blessed electric light bulbs or made Sabbath candles out of hollowed potato peelings filled with margarine. Jewish inmates participated in clandestine prayer services inside barracks while other inmates stood guard. At Dachau, where the Germans had imprisoned more than 1,000 Polish priests, clergymen managed to celebrate Mass in secret.

Persecuted for their religious beliefs, which prohibited them from serving in the military or giving the Nazi salute, most Jehovah's Witnesses (see p. 42) continued to practice their religious beliefs inside the concentration camps. Witnesses regularly smuggled the official newspaper, *The Watchtower*, into the Neuengamme concentration camp in Germany to pass it among the prisoners. As part of their continuing proselytizing efforts, Neuengamme Witnesses also produced testimony cards in the various languages spoken by their fellow prisoners. They held Bible study groups and gave regular lectures to Russian and Polish prisoners. Camp guards publicly shot one Witness after they caught him reading *The Watchtower* and he refused to renounce his religion.

Some Jews in the Nazi camps even continued to observe Yom Kippur (the solemn day of atonement) with the traditional fast, though it meant further depriving already starved bodies of the meager daily rations. In his memoir, *Night*, survivor Elie Wiesel (who was in his teens at the time) recalls the issue of fasting:

*Should we fast? The question was hotly debated. To fast would mean a surer, swifter death. We fasted here the whole year round. The whole year was Yom Kippur. But others said that we should fast simply because it was dangerous to do so. We should show God that even here, in this enclosed hell, we were capable of singing His praises.*

*I did not fast, mainly to please my father, who had forbidden me to do so. But further, there was no longer any reason why I should fast. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my bowl of soup, I saw in the gesture an act of rebellion and protest against Him.*

*And I nibbled my crust of bread.*

*In the depths of my heart, I felt a great void.*

## RESISTANCE IN NAZI GERMANY

Compared with other countries, resistance activities in Nazi Germany were limited, lacking in broad support, and largely ineffective. A unified resistance movement never existed. Hitler's foreign policy successes in the mid-1930s and the drop in unemployment, trumpeted by an effective propaganda machine, helped forge widespread popular support for the regime. Feelings of patriotism and nationalism also made it difficult for the majority of Germans to oppose Nazi policies. The state and many German citizens equated even passive opposition to the regime with treason.

Equally important, the ruthless nature of surveillance by police, assisted everywhere by spies and informers, including Nazi youth, eliminated most possibilities for political opposition inside Germany between 1933 and 1945. Daily life under Hitler's police state required absolute conformity. The arbitrariness of Nazi repression is revealed by the story of one woman who grumbled to her grocer in the early months of the regime, "Hitler hasn't made anything better"; within 24 hours, German courts had sentenced her to ten months of hard labor.

In a society in which personal freedoms to say or do what one wished were extremely limited, acts of nonconformity and opposition that are permissible in a democracy frequently endangered the lives of those engaged in them as well as the safety of family members and friends.

### NAZI DESTRUCTION OF POLITICAL OPPOSITION AND RESISTANCE

The first targets of terror were Communists and Social Democrats who opposed Nazi beliefs. Immediately after Hitler became chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, the government took steps to eliminate political opposition. Police arrested thousands of left-wing party leaders, including many *Reichstag* (Parliament) deputies. Many were beaten, killed, or thrown into jails and concentration camps administered by Nazi paramilitary storm troopers (members of the SS and SA—*Sturmabteilung*). By mid-July 1933, by government decree, the Nazi party was the only legal party in Germany. Anti-Nazi democrats, socialists, Communists, and trade union leaders had either been arrested or driven underground or had fled the country.

Both socialists and Communists developed clandestine organizations. Members met secretly and distributed illegal newspapers and leaflets produced on secret

printing presses in Germany or neighboring countries. Innocent covers disguised the literature as harmless reading, such as cookbooks. In 1934, a group of German socialists who had fled to neighboring Czechoslovakia published *Concentration Camps, A Book of Horrors: The Victims Accuse*, which included secretly made photographs of the first concentration camps. Communist refugees in Prague and Paris published the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung* (Workers Illustrated Paper) with brilliant, satirical anti-Nazi photomontages by John Heartfield that reached more than one million readers in Europe and the United States.

But by 1935 and 1936, the Nazi regime's police forces infiltrated most of the larger underground organizations. Mass arrests and trials ensued. Thousands of political opponents continued to meet clandestinely, but in small groups isolated from each other and without effective leadership. Some groups tried to help Jews, such as a socialist group known as the "European Union," but they were arrested and tried in 1944 for feeding Jews in hiding and providing them with false papers.

Left-wing groups tried to spread their political ideals, often at great risk, but they were never able to generate widespread support among the German population or threaten the stability of the Nazi government. Nor were they able to mount any effective opposition to the mass deportations of Jews from Germany during the war.

#### ANTI-NAZI ACTIVITIES OF THE CHRISTIAN OPPOSITION

Many Christians welcomed the arrival of Hitler in 1933. The opposition of church leaders tended to be limited to the defense of their own interests against attempted control by the Nazi party and German state. The leadership of the Protestant churches, which represented about two-thirds of the German population, were generally politically conservative and did not oppose the regime or its persecution of political opponents, Jews, and Gypsies. The same was true for the Catholic church in Germany, which was accorded legal status and protection in an agreement (the concordat) between the Reich and the Vatican signed in July 1933.

However, some individual clergy and members of religious orders did speak out against Nazi German policies and assisted Jews in fleeing the country. A minority of dissident clergymen led by Karl Barth, Martin Niemoeller, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer opposed efforts to Nazify the Protestant churches. They formed an alliance known as the "Confessing Church" after they issued their May 1934 Theological Declaration — the "confession" — at Barmen, Germany, in which they stated their "commitment to a conscientious struggle against . . . every use of force and coercion of conscience in the church."

Members of the extended Bonhoeffer family actively opposed the Nazi regime. Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer courageously assisted a number of Jews in leaving Germany through Switzerland and tried to mobilize international pressure against the persecution of Jews, especially after the violent anti-Jewish riots across Germany and Austria of November 9–10, 1938 (*Kristallnacht*). Dietrich's father, Karl Bonhoeffer, a distinguished psychiatrist, fought the implementation of the so-called euthanasia program, the murder of psychiatric patients and physically handicapped persons that began in October 1939. He urged church groups to pressure church-run institutions not to release their patients to authorities.

In October 1940, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, along with his brother Klaus and his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi, became active in the German military resistance, which was plotting to assassinate Hitler and overthrow the regime. In the aftermath of the failed attempt to kill Hitler on June 20, 1944, the regime executed seven family members, including Dietrich, Klaus, and Hans von Dohnanyi.

#### DEFIANT ACTIVITIES OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

By the early 1930s, some 20,000 of a total German population of 65 million were Jehovah's Witnesses, then known as "International Bible Students." As citizens of Jehovah's kingdom and soldiers in Jehovah's army, the Witnesses refused to swear allegiance to or fight in the army of any secular government. In Nazi Germany, they defied laws and practices that conflicted with their religious beliefs. They refused to raise their arms in the "Heil, Hitler!" salute; they did not vote in elections; they would not join the army after the reintroduction of compulsory military service in 1935. They ignored the ban on their activities and continued to meet and distribute their literature, usually smuggled in from Switzerland.

Police arrested many Witnesses for their defiance. By 1939, an estimated 6,000 Witnesses were detained in prisons and camps. Because Witnesses refused to escape from camps or physically resist their guards, camp officers and guards often sought them as domestic servants. They were absolutely certain that Witnesses would never slash their throats as they shaved them.

Unlike other groups of Holocaust victims, Witnesses could escape persecution by simply signing a declaration renouncing their faith, but almost none did, even when tortured. An estimated 2,500 to 5,000 Witnesses died in the camps or prisons from hunger, disease, exhaustion, exposure, and brutal treatment. The regime executed more than 200 men for refusing military service.

### ACTIVITIES OF THE HERBERT BAUM GROUP

German Jews could not develop a large-scale resistance movement. Factors that inhibited the formation of any major resistance movement in Germany also worked against the organization of Jewish resistance. Impoverished by the loss of jobs and businesses and encouraged by the regime to emigrate, many German and Austrian Jews fled from the Reich. Between 1933 and 1939 more than one-half of Germany's 600,000 Jews — and after 1938, about two-thirds of Austria's 180,000 Jews — managed to leave. Thousands of others committed suicide in despair.

Nevertheless small pockets of Jewish resistance did develop. The Herbert Baum group is best known. Founded in 1937 by Herbert and Marianne Baum, this clandestine group was composed of young people, primarily Jewish Zionist members of the Communist party. Members distributed anti-Nazi leaflets, painted slogans on walls, and published a six-page newspaper. The Baum group also sabotaged armaments being produced at the Siemens electrical motor plant where most members worked as forced laborers.

On May 18, 1942, the group set fire to an anti-Soviet propaganda exhibition in Berlin. Most of the members were denounced, tried, and executed between July 1942 and June 1943 — the period when police were deporting tens of thousands of German Jews, mostly to Auschwitz. In reprisal, the police also seized 500 other Jews not engaged in political activity. Firing squads executed 250 of them on the Berlin SS airfield, and officials sent the rest to the nearby Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

### THE "WHITE ROSE"

In 1942 Hans Scholl, a medical student at the University of Munich, his sister Sophie, Christoph Probst, Willi Graf, and Alexander Schmorell founded the "White Rose" movement, the only German group that spoke out against Nazi genocidal policies. Nazi tyranny and the apathy of German citizens in the face of the regime's "abominable crimes" outraged idealistic "White Rose" members. Many of them had heard about the mass murder of Polish Jews; as a soldier on the eastern front, Hans Scholl had also seen firsthand the mistreatment of Jewish forced laborers and heard of the deportation of large numbers of Poles to concentration camps.

The group expanded into an organization of students in Hamburg, Freiburg, Berlin, and Vienna. At great risk, "White Rose" members transported and mailed mimeographed leaflets that denounced the regime. In their attempt to stop the

*Alexander Schmorell  
(left front) and Sophie  
Scholl at the Munich  
railroad station prior  
to the men's departure  
to the Eastern Front.  
1942.*

*George J. Wittenstein.  
George J. Wittenstein  
Collection, Photo Archives,  
USHMM*



war effort, they advocated the sabotage of the armaments industry. “We will not be silent,” they wrote to their fellow students. “We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!” Because the students were aware that only military force could end Nazi domination, they limited their aims to achieve “a renewal from within of the severely wounded German spirit.”

After the German army’s defeat at Stalingrad in late January 1943, the Scholls distributed pamphlets urging students in Munich to rebel. But in the next month, a university janitor who saw them with the pamphlets betrayed them to the Gestapo. The regime executed Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst on February 22, 1943. Officials also eventually arrested and executed philosophy professor Kurt Huber, who had guided the movement, and the rest of the “White Rose” members. At his trial Huber remained loyal to the great 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s ethical teaching, as he concluded his defense with the words of Kant’s disciple Johann Gottlieb Fichte:

*And thou shalt act as if  
On thee and on thy deed  
Depended the fate of all Germany,  
And thou alone must answer for it.*

## N O T E S

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- p. 10 ***Jewish armed resistance:*** Vladka Meed, “Jewish Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Dimensions* 7, no. 2 (1993): 11.
- p. 15 ***Offer armed resistance!:*** “A Manifesto of the Jewish Resistance in Vilna,” in *Anthology of Holocaust Literature*, ed. Jacob Glatstein, Israel Knox, and Samuel Margoshes (New York: Atheneum by arrangement with The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 332–33.
- p. 17 ***The main objective:*** Vladka Meed, *On Both Sides of the Wall: Memoirs from the Warsaw Ghetto*, trans. Dr. Steven Meed (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 94–95.
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- p. 20 ***It was now clear:*** “The Last Wish of My Life Has Been Fulfilled,” in *Massacre of European Jewry* (Kibbutz Merchavia, Israel: World Hashomer Hatzair, English-Speaking Department, 1963). Reprinted in *Anthology of Holocaust Literature*, ed. Glatstein, Knox, and Margoshes, 334–35.
- p. 36 ***Blessed is the heart:*** Linda Atkinson, *In Kindling Flame: The Story of Hannah Senesh 1921–1944* (New York: William Morrow, Beech Tree Books, 1992), 136.
- p. 38 ***I would love to see:*** Joseph Kermish, ed., *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor! Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives “O.S.” [“Oneg Shabbat”]* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986), 66.
- p. 38 ***People walk:*** Anonymous (9 March 1943), “Homesick,” in *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children’s Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp 1942–1944*, ed. Hana Volavkova (New York: Schocken, 1993), 36.
- p. 39 ***Should we fast?:*** Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 65–66.
- p. 44 ***And thou shalt act:*** Inge Scholl, *The White Rose: Munich 1942–1943*, trans. Arthur R. Schultz (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 65.
- Back cover ***Never say:*** Hersh Glick, “Jewish Partisan Song,” trans. Aaron Kramer in *Folks-Shtimme* (Poland). Reprinted in *Anthology of Holocaust Literature*, ed. Glatstein, Knox, and Margoshes, 349.

## C H R O N O L O G Y

### **1933**

#### **January 30**

Adolf Hitler is appointed chancellor of Germany.

#### **February 27**

*Reichstag* (German parliament) is burned.

#### **February 28**

Mass arrests of Communists. Decree "For the Protection of the People and the State"; suspension of constitutional rights, declaration of State of Emergency (in force until 1945).

#### **March 4**

Franklin D. Roosevelt is inaugurated as 32d president of the United States.

#### **March 23**

First concentration camp opens at Dachau.

#### **April 1**

Jehovah's Witnesses' pamphlets are banned from circulation.

Boycott against Jewish businesses.

#### **April 7**

Law for the "Reestablishment of the Civil Service" results in the firing of Jewish professors from universities by the summer.

#### **May**

A "Theological Declaration" against the use of force and coercion of conscience by Nazis vis-à-vis the Protestant churches is issued by an alliance of clergymen called the "Confessing Church."

#### **May 10**

Public burnings of the books written by Jews, political opponents, and the intellectual avant-garde.

#### **July 14**

Law to "Prevent Offspring with Hereditary Defects" provides the basis for involuntary sterilization of Gypsies, "social misfits," psychiatric patients and physically handicapped persons, and 500 teenagers, pejoratively called the "Rhineland bastards," who were the offspring of German mothers and colonial African soldiers stationed in the Rhineland.

Hitler issues a decree declaring the Nazi Party to be the only legal political party in Germany.

### **1934**

#### **January 8**

The German Social Democratic Party in exile issues their "Prague Manifesto" calling for a revolutionary struggle against the Nazi dictatorship.

#### **October**

First major wave of arrests of homosexuals occurs throughout Germany, continuing into November.

### **1935**

#### **April**

Jehovah's Witnesses are banned from all civil service jobs and are arrested throughout Germany.

#### **Summer**

"No Jews" signs and banners are placed with increasing frequency outside towns and cities and outside shops, restaurants, and public recreation facilities.

#### **September 15**

Nuremberg laws issued, stripping Jews of citizenship and prohibiting marriage and sexual relations between Jews and "Aryan" Germans.

### **1936**

#### **July 12**

The first German Gypsies are arrested and deported to Dachau.

#### **August 1**

The Olympic Games open in Berlin; the United States and 48 other nations participate in the two-week event.

#### **August 28**

Mass arrests of Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany. Most are sent to concentration camps.

### **1938**

#### **March 13**

The *Anschluss*: the incorporation of Austria into the Reich.

#### **September 29**

The Munich agreement is signed. On October 6, the Sudetenland is annexed by Germany and the Czechoslovak Republic is established, with autonomy for Slovakia.



**October 28**

Between 15,000 and 17,000 stateless Polish Jews are expelled from Germany into Poland.

**November 7**

Herschel Grynszpan, a Polish Jew living in France, assassinates Councillor von Rath, a German embassy official in Paris, France, to protest the deportation of his parents to Poland. This act was used as a pretext for “*Kristallnacht*,” the state-organized attacks against Jews and Jewish property carried out throughout the Reich on November 9–10.

**1939**

**March 15**

The German army enters Czechoslovakia; the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia” is created.

**September 1**

Germany invades Poland; World War II begins.

**September 17**

Parts of eastern Poland are annexed by the Soviet Union.

**September 28**

Poland is partitioned by Germany and the Soviet Union; the Germans occupy Warsaw.

**October 8**

The first ghetto established by the Nazis is set up in Piotrkow Trybunalski, Poland.

**November 8**

An attempt on Hitler’s life in Munich fails as a bomb explodes but leaves him uninjured.

**December**

The first “*euthanasia*” murders are carried out in the children’s unit at Brandenburg-Goerden, near Berlin.

**1940**

**April 27**

SS Chief Heinrich Himmler orders the establishment of a concentration camp at Auschwitz. Early in June the first prisoners, mostly Polish Christians, are brought there.

**April 30**

The Lodz ghetto in annexed Polish lands is sealed.

**May**

Dr. Emmanuel Ringelblum founds the *Oneg Shabbat* (“Joy of the Sabbath”) secret archives in the Warsaw ghetto to document the plight of Polish Jews.

**May 10**

The war in the west begins as the Germans invade the Netherlands, Belgium, and France. Germany completes its conquest of continental western Europe by the end of June.

**1941**

**February 25**

A strike protesting the deportation of Jews from the Netherlands begins in the Amsterdam shipyards and soon spreads throughout the city.

**June 22**

Germany attacks the Soviet Union.

**June 23**

*Einsatzgruppen* units begin massacres of Jews, Gypsies, and Communist party leaders in the Soviet Union.

**August 21**

The first German soldier is killed in Paris, France, by a member of the French resistance.

**December 7**

The Japanese attack Pearl Harbor.

**December 8**

Chelmno killing center begins operations.

**December 11**

Germany declares war on the United States.

**December 31**

Abba Kovner calls for armed resistance of Jewish youth groups in the Vilna ghetto.

**1942**

**January 20**

German government leaders meet in the Berlin district of Wannsee, where they draft detailed plans for the annihilation of European Jewry.

**March 1**

Sobibor killing center begins operations.

**March 17**

Belzec killing center begins operations.

**May 1**

A successful one-day general strike of ghetto workers in the Bialystok ghetto in eastern Poland is organized by the ghetto resistance.

**May 18**

Members of the Herbert Baum resistance group set fire to an anti-Soviet propaganda exhibition in Berlin.

**June 1**

Treblinka killing center begins operations.

## CHRONOLOGY

### **June 14**

Thirteen-year-old Anne Frank begins to write her diary several days before her family goes into hiding to avoid deportation from the Netherlands.

### **July**

Members of the “White Rose” movement begin to distribute anti-Nazi leaflets in Munich.

### **July 22**

Residents of the Nieswiec ghetto in eastern Poland resist a German deportation with knives, axes, clubs, and a handful of firearms. A few Jews manage to escape to join the partisans.

### **August 30**

Leaders of the *Rote Kapelle* (Red Orchestra), a German Communist resistance group working with Soviet intelligence from 1939, are arrested. They are executed in December.

### **September 2-3**

The residents of Lachva, Belorussia, stubbornly resist German attempts to massacre them. Up to 700 Jews are killed in the struggle, enabling some to flee into the forests to join partisan groups.

### **September 10-11**

Meir Berliner, a Jewish prisoner at Treblinka, kills SS officer Max Bialis. In retaliation, Ukrainian guards massacre many Jews awaiting death in the camp’s gas chambers.

### **September 23**

Following a German order to assemble for deportation, Jews in the Tuczyn ghetto in western Ukraine set fire to the ghetto’s houses, offering strong resistance. Up to 2,000 people escape into the forests.

## **1943**

### **January 18**

Several combat groups of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) fight German units attempting to deport Jews not working in armaments factories from the Warsaw ghetto.

### **February**

Some 200 to 300 Christian women in mixed marriages protest for nearly one week outside several Berlin assembly centers after their Jewish husbands are arrested.

### **February 2**

German forces at Stalingrad surrender to the Soviet army, a turning point in the war.

### **February 18**

Hans and Sophie Scholl and other leaders of the “White Rose” are arrested for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets in Munich. On February 22, they are executed.

### **April 19**

Members of the Committee for the Defense of Jews in Belgium cooperate with the Belgian resistance to attack a deportation train leaving the transit camp of Malines.

Warsaw ghetto revolt begins.

### **August 2**

Armed revolt begins in the Treblinka killing center.

### **August 16**

Fighting begins in the Bialystok ghetto as the Germans prepare to deport the residents to death camps. Resistance fighters hold out against German tanks and artillery until August 26. Several groups manage to escape into the surrounding forests. Some 40,000 Jews left in the ghetto are deported in the coming weeks.

### **September 1**

Armed resistance is ordered by Vilna ghetto resistance leaders as the liquidation of the ghetto begins. Lacking arms, only a few fighters manage to fight to the death over the next few days. Others escape to join partisan bands outside the city.

### **October 14**

Armed revolt begins at the Sobibor killing center.

### **December 22**

Cracow’s underground Jewish Fighting Organization carries out a daring attack on German officers sitting in the city’s Cyganeria cafe. Eleven Germans are killed and 13 wounded.

## **1944**

### **March 7**

Emmanuel Ringelblum and his family are executed by the Germans. After the war, his *Oneg Shabbat* histories are discovered and published.

### **May 16**

Gypsies at Auschwitz resist the destruction of the Gypsy family camp.

### **June 6**

D-Day: the Allies land on the coast of Normandy, France.

**July 20**

A group of dissident German officers and politicians attempt to assassinate Hitler. The attempt fails, and a number of those implicated are either summarily shot or executed after sentencing by a “People’s Court” within a few days.

**August 1**

The Warsaw uprising begins as Polish resistance forces occupy important parts of the city. The fighting continues until October 2, when remnants of the Polish forces surrender. Tens of thousands of Polish citizens and fighters are killed.

**August 19**

An insurrection begins in Paris, France, to liberate the city as the western allies approach. The city is liberated on August 25.

**September 1**

The Slovakian uprising begins. Partisan units battle the Germans until October 27, when surviving partisans flee into the mountains.

**September 8**

Italian partisans seize the Val d’Ossoloa near the Swiss border. They proclaim a republic, which lasts for five weeks, until the Germans recapture the area.

**October 6–7**

Prisoners blow up Crematorium IV at Auschwitz–Birkenau.

**October 20**

Belgrade is liberated by Yugoslav partisan units and Soviet troops.

**1945****January 6**

Four women prisoners — Roza Robota, Ella Gaertner, Esther Wajcblum, and Regina Safirsztain — are hanged in the women’s camp at Auschwitz. They had smuggled the explosives that were used during the *Sonderkommando* revolt of October 7, 1944.

**February 2**

During the night, more than 570 prisoners, many of them Soviet prisoners of war under death sentences, revolt and escape from a barrack in the Mauthausen concentration camp. All but 17 are later caught and killed.

**April 9**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is hanged at Flossenbuerg concentration camp.

**April 11**

Prisoners at Buchenwald revolt to forestall the planned evacuation of the camp as the Allies draw near. Some 150 Germans are taken prisoner a few hours before units of the American forces enter and liberate the camp.

**May 7**

Germany surrenders to the Allies.

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\*Yoors, Jan. *Crossing: A Journal of Survival and Resistance in World War II*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971. Yoors remembers his experience living with Roma (Gypsies) in France during the war.

## VIDEOS

*Flames in the Ashes*. A Ghetto Fighters' House Release produced by Monia Avrahami. 1986. Distributed by Ergo Medica, Inc. (800-695-3746). A 90-minute, black-and-white documentary on Jewish resistance, which uses survivor testimony. In Hebrew, Yiddish, French, Italian, and Polish, with English subtitles.

*Partisans of Vilna*. Produced by Aviva Kempner and directed by Josh Waletzky. Distributed by National Center for Jewish Films (617-899-7044). This two-hour documentary includes interviews with 40 survivors of the Vilna ghetto, including Abba Kovner. The film effectively raises questions about the types of circumstances that made Jewish resistance feasible, and what motivated people to resist.

*Purple Triangles*. Produced and directed by Martin Smith. 1991. Distributed by Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 25 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, NY 11201. In this effective 25-minute film, members of the Kusserow family recall their arrests and incarceration in concentration camps where they and other Jehovah's Witnesses were identified by their purple triangles.

*The Warsaw Ghetto*. A BBC Production. 1969. Distributed by Zenger Video (800-421-4246). Narrated by a ghetto survivor, this 51-minute documentary uses historic film footage made by the Nazis and shows the creation of the ghetto, early Nazi propaganda, scenes from everyday life, and the final weeks of resistance before the ghetto was liquidated.

## CD

"Rise Up and Fight! Songs of Jewish Partisans." Produced by the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. 1996. Distributed by USHMM Museum Shop (202-488-6144). Anthology of songs from the repertoire of eastern European Jewish resistance fighters of World War II. Recorded at the USHMM, the album features the voice of Theodore Bikel and includes an illustrated booklet with background information as well as song texts in the original and English language translation.



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“NEVER SAY” became the unofficial song of Jewish partisans across occupied Europe. Hersh Glik (1922–44), a poet in the ghetto of Vilna, Lithuania, wrote the song in Yiddish in 1943, after the Warsaw ghetto uprising. It was set to music by two Soviet-Jewish composers, the brothers Dimitri and Daniel Pokras. Glik was killed after he and other partisans tried to escape from a concentration camp in Estonia in summer 1944.

### **Never Say**

*Never say there is only death for you.  
Though leadened skies may be concealing days of blue—  
Because the hour we have hungered for is near;  
Beneath our tread the earth shall tremble: We are here!*

*From land of palm-tree to the far-off land of snow,  
We shall be coming with our torment and our woe.  
And everywhere our blood has sunk into the earth.  
Shall our bravery, our vigor blossom forth!*

*We'll have the morning sun to set our day aglow,  
And all our yesterdays shall vanish with the foe,  
And if the time is long before the sun appears,  
Then let this song go like a signal through the years.*

*This song was written with our blood and not with lead;  
It's not a song that birds sing overhead,  
It was a people, among toppling barricades,  
That sang this song of ours with pistols and grenades.*

*So never say that there is only death for you.  
Leaden skies may be concealing days of blue—  
Yet the hour we have hungered for is near;  
Beneath our tread the earth shall tremble: We are here!*