

Jewish resistance to nazi occupation



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Jewish Resistance From early 1930s to middle 1940s, Jews in Germany, Poland, and other parts of Europe faced discrimination from Hitler and the Nazis. They were sent to ghettos and later concentration camps and extermination camps. In the ghettos, Jews had to live in small homes and consumed small amounts of food. In addition, disease and death were rampant. Living conditions were worse in the concentration camps. In contrast to common belief, not all Jews accepted such unreasonable and unequal treatments of the Nazis.

Consequently, Jews resisted in various forms. Resistance by the Jews could be as simple as planning uprisings and escapes. They disguised themselves as Aryans (non-Jewish people). They organized secret schools and religious services, hid Jewish books, and wrote diaries about life and death. The effort to preserve their traditions was a kind of spiritual resistance. (Fidhkin 8) Resistance took forms without weapons. For many, attempting to carry on a semblance of "normal" life in the face of wretched conditions was resistance.

David Altshuler writes in Hitler's War against the Jews about life in the ghettos, which sustained Jewish culture in the midst of hopelessness and despair. (Grobman) Underground newspapers were printed and distributed at great risk to those who participated. Praying was against the rules, but synagogue services occurred with regularity. The education of Jewish children was forbidden, but the ghetto communities set up schools. The observance of many Jewish rituals, including dietary laws, was severely punished by the

Nazis, and many Jews took great risks to resist the Nazi edicts against these activities.

Committees were organized to meet the philanthropic, religious, educational, and cultural community needs. Many of these committees defied Nazi authority. (Grobman) The Jews did not care that these actions were against the rules. They felt they needed to keep their race and religion alive and they did whatever they needed to do peacefully. Some Jews thought differently though. Many Jews thought they needed to use violence to beat the Nazis. Nazi-sponsored persecution and mass murder fueled resistance to the Germans in the Third Reich itself and throughout occupied Europe.

Although Jews were the Nazis' primary victims, they too resisted Nazi oppression in a variety of ways, both collectively and as individuals. Organized armed resistance was the most forceful form of Jewish opposition to Nazi policies in German-occupied Europe. Jewish civilians offered armed resistance in over 100 ghettos in occupied Poland and the Soviet Union. Also in Eastern Europe, Jewish units fought the Germans despite minimal support and even anti-Semitic hostility from the surrounding population, thousands of Jews battled the Germans in Eastern Europe.

Jews resisted when the Germans attempted to establish ghettos in a number of small towns in eastern Poland in 1942. As the Germans liquidated the major ghettos in 1943, they met with armed Jewish resistance in Krakow (Cracow), Bialystok, Czestochowa, Bedzin, Sosnowiec, and Tarnow, as well as a major uprising in Warsaw. Between July 22 and September 12, 1942, the German authorities deported or murdered around 300, 000 Jews in the

Warsaw ghetto. SS and police units deported 265, 000 Jews to the Treblinka killing center and 11, 580 to forced-labor camps.

The Germans and their auxiliaries murdered more than 10, 000 Jews in the Warsaw ghetto during the deportation operations. The German authorities granted only 35, 000 Jews permission to remain in the ghetto, while more than 20, 000 Jews remained in the ghetto in hiding. For the at least 55, 000-60, 000 Jews remaining in the Warsaw ghetto, deportation seemed inevitable. In response to the deportations, on July 28, 1942, several Jewish underground organizations created an armed self-defense unit known as the Jewish Combat Organization (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa; ZOB).

Rough estimates put the size of the ZOB at its formation at around 200 members. The Revisionist Party (right-wing Zionists known as the Betar) formed another resistance organization, the Jewish Military Union (Zydowski Zwiazek Wojskowy; ZZW). Although initially there was tension between the ZOB and the ZZW, both groups decided to work together to oppose German attempts to destroy the ghetto. At the time of the uprising, the ZOB had about 500 fighters in its ranks and the ZZW had about 250.

While efforts to establish contact with the Polish military underground movement (Armia Krajowa, or Home Army) did not succeed during the summer of 1942, the ZOB established contact with the Home Army in October, and obtained a small number of weapons, mostly pistols and explosives, from Home Army contacts. In accordance with Reichsfuhrer-SS (SS chief) Heinrich Himmler's October 1942 order to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto and deport its able-bodied residents to forced labor camps in Lublin

District of the Generalgouvernement, German SS and police units tried to resume mass deportations of Jews from Warsaw on January 18, 1943.

A group of Jewish fighters, armed with pistols, infiltrated a column of Jews being forced to the Umschlagplatz (transfer point) and, at a prearranged signal, broke ranks and fought their German escorts. Most of these Jewish fighters died in the battle, but the attack sufficiently disoriented the Germans to allow the Jews arranged in columns at the Umschlagplatz a chance to disperse. After seizing 5, 000-6, 500 ghetto residents to be deported, the Germans suspended further deportations on January 21.

Encouraged by the apparent success of the resistance, which they believed may have halted deportations, members of the ghetto population began to construct subterranean bunkers and shelters in preparation for an uprising should the Germans attempt a final deportation of all remaining Jews in the reduced ghetto. The German forces intended to begin the operation to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto on April 19, 1943, the eve of Passover. When SS and police units entered the ghetto that morning, the streets were deserted. Nearly all of the residents of the ghetto had gone into hiding places or bunkers.

The renewal of deportations was the signal for an armed uprising within the ghetto. ZOB commander Mordecai Anielewicz commanded the Jewish fighters in the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Armed with pistols, grenades (many of them homemade), and a few automatic weapons and rifles, the ZOB fighters stunned the Germans and their auxiliaries on the first day of fighting, forcing the German forces to retreat outside the ghetto wall.

German commander SS General Jurgen Stroop reported losing 12 men, killed and wounded, during the first assault on the ghetto.

On the third day of the uprising, Stroop's SS and police forces began razing the ghetto to the ground, building by building, to force the remaining Jews out of hiding. Jewish resistance fighters made sporadic raids from their bunkers, but the Germans systematically reduced the ghetto to rubble. The German forces killed Anielewicz and those with him in an attack on the ZOB command bunker on 18 Mila Street, which they captured on May 8. Though German forces broke the organized military resistance within days of the beginning of the uprising, individuals and small groups hid or fought the Germans for almost a month.

The Germans had planned to liquidate the Warsaw ghetto in three days, but the ghetto fighters held out for more than a month. Even after the end of the uprising on May 16, 1943, individual Jews hiding out in the ruins of the ghetto continued to attack the patrols of the Germans and their auxiliaries. The Warsaw ghetto uprising was the largest, symbolically most important Jewish uprising, and the first urban uprising, in German-occupied Europe. The resistance in Warsaw inspired other uprisings in ghettos (e. g. , Bialystok and Minsk) and killing centers (Treblinka and Sobibor).

The Jews didn't break even after being tortured and killed by the Germans. The Jews fought the Nazis until their death. In every ghetto, in every deportation train, in every labor camp, even in the death camps, the will to resist was strong, and took many forms. The Jews were fighting with the few weapons that would be found, individual acts of defiance and protest, the courage of obtaining food and water under the threat of death, the

superiority of refusing to allow the Germans their final wish to gloat over panic and despair.

To die with dignity was a form of resistance. To resist the demoralizing, brutalizing force of evil, to refuse to be reduced to the level of animals, to live through the torment, to outlive the tormentors, these too were acts of resistance. Merely to give a witness of these events in testimony was, in the end, a contribution to victory. Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit.