



Resistance, Jewish

Planned or spontaneous opposition to the Nazis and their collaborators by Jews. During the Holocaust, Jewish resistance came in many forms. In some cases, the resistance was organized and obvious, such as the armed struggles carried out in ghettos, camps, and by Partisan units. In other cases, individuals resisted the Nazis' plan to dehumanize the Jews in a multiplicity of minor acts, such as keeping themselves clean in the unsanitary conditions in the concentration camps, or by making sure to pray despite the threat of being shot if discovered. In all cases of resistance, the Jews were fighting against almost impossible odds and the fact that resistance took place at all is one of heroic proportions. After the Holocaust, many asked how the Jews could have let themselves be destroyed, and why there was so little resistance. However, many instances of armed and other resistance did take place.

Within the ghettos and camps, non-armed resistance against the Nazis was widespread and part of everyday life. Jews resisted the Nazis' unbearable economic and social restrictions in order to survive through smuggling food, clothing and medicine into the ghettos and camps to preserve their physical strength. They founded Jewish newspapers, schools, theaters, and orchestras to sustain their spiritual and mental strength. The cultural and communal aspects of the ghettos and camps helped the Jews maintain their dignity despite the Nazis' systematic efforts to dehumanize them. These aspects also helped boost their morale in the face of uncertainty and death. The Jews called this attempt to maintain their humanity "*Kiddush ha-Hayyim*," meaning "Sanctification of Life."

Rescue and partisan activities also come under the heading of Jewish resistance. Sometimes these were organized and carried out by Jews in conjunction with non-Jews. In France and Belgium, children were a special focus of rescue actions, and heroes such as Yvonne Nevejean saved many children by placing them with foster families or institutions. In Poland, the Council for Aid to Jews (*Zegota*) hid thousands of Jewish children in foster homes, public orphanages, and convents. In Eastern Europe, many Jews



resisted by joining partisan units, while in Western Europe, many participated in the French and Belgian undergrounds.

Individuals and groups physically resisted the Nazis by escaping to safer regions. Over 300,000 Polish Jews fled to the Soviet Union as the Nazis advanced towards their homes, while tens of thousands from the western Soviet Union fled eastward. Thousands of Jews managed to escape from the Warsaw Ghetto to the Polish side of the city. Thousands escaped Slovakia and fled to Hungary when deportations commenced in Slovakia, and thousands more escaped Hungary for Romania following the German occupation of Hungary. Jewish youth movements helped plan the escape of Jews in France and Italy to Spain, and Switzerland.

Despite the almost impossible conditions, there were many cases of Jewish armed struggle during the Holocaust. The Jews of the different ghettos and camps had little or no contact with each other, no outside support, were physically debilitated, had few weapons and little training at armed warfare, and were up against the might and wrath of the German war machine. In some cases, they were even resisting the policies of the *Judenraete*, which were sometimes accused of collaborating with the Nazis. Most of the fighters also knew that they had no real chance of beating their oppressors, and maintained the resistance. Many wanted to show the world that they did not sit back and wait for the end, but instead took a stand at defending Jewish honor. These Jews resisted for resistance's sake.

Underground organizations were formed in about 100 ghettos throughout Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia, and the Ukraine, whose purpose was to stage armed uprisings or break out of the ghetto by force in order to join the partisans on the outside. Resistance actions were usually timed to coincide with the dates chosen by the Nazis for deportations to extermination camps. In some cases, the uprisings were spontaneous. The most famous ghetto revolt was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The Nazis entered the ghetto on April 19, 1943 in order to resume deportations to extermination camps. The Jews, led by the Jewish Fighting Organization, then began their revolt, bravely holding off the Germans for three weeks. Dozens of survivors managed to escape to the partisans.



Armed revolts took place in many other ghettos, as well. In Cracow, the Jewish resistance felt that they had no chance fighting inside the ghetto so they moved the fight to the "Aryan" side of the city staging attacks against the Germans. In Vilna, the Jews were not content to resist locally. They vainly attempted to enlist the involvement of Jews all over Eastern Europe. In Kovno the underground members tried to reach the partisans. In Bialystok, as the uprising faltered, a planned escape to the partisans was foiled and the fighters were killed.

All reason opposed physical resistance within the camps. The Jews there had no weapons, they were at the mercy of their guards, were starving, exhausted, and sick, and they knew that if one person resisted, many others would be punished. And yet, revolts took place in a number of camps, including Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz-Birkenau. (see also Jewish Military Union, Warsaw, and United Partisan Organization, Vilna.)