

RESISTANCE

during the Holocaust



United States
Holocaust Memorial Museum



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*

PRODUCTION OF THIS PAMPHLET IS FUNDED IN PART BY THE
UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM'S MILES LERMAN CENTER
FOR THE STUDY OF JEWISH RESISTANCE.

RESISTANCE

during the Holocaust

Introduction	3
Obstacles to Resistance	5
Resistance in the Ghettos	9
Unarmed Resistance in Ghettos	
Armed Resistance: Ghetto Rebellions	
Resistance in Nazi Camps	23
Unarmed Resistance in the Camps	
Armed Resistance: Killing Center Revolts	
Selected Partisan Activities in Europe	29
Polish Partisans	
Soviet Partisans	
Jewish Partisan Units in the Forests of Eastern Europe	
Partisan Activities of Jews in Western and Central Europe	
Spiritual Resistance in the Ghettos and Camps	37
Resistance in Nazi Germany	40
Nazi Destruction of Political Opposition and Resistance	
Anti-Nazi Activities of the Christian Opposition	
Defiant Activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses	
Activities of the Herbert Baum Group	
The "White Rose"	
Notes	45
Chronology	46
Selected Annotated Bibliography	50

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

During 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

Many 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.

*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!

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

