



## Jewish Resistance Against Nazism

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In March 1937 two young Berlin Jews, Kurt Berkheim and Ernst Prager, were arrested for possessing illegal material. Unlike many others arrested on such charges by the Gestapo, they were carrying not a Communist newspaper, but rather a satirical poem lampooning Robert Ley, the head of the German Labor Front. Ley was a notorious alcoholic; even his Nazi colleagues dubbed him *Reichstrunkenbold*, the “drunkard of the Reich.” The incriminating poem referred to Ley as a lecher and morphine addict as well as a drunk (*Sauf sack*), concluding that it was “high time” for the “working class to be rid of these riff-raff (*Gesindel*).”<sup>1</sup> Berkheim, who had never been a member of any political organization, copied the poem out of a Communist periodical given to him by someone he knew via a Jewish youth organization. Berkheim was sentenced to one year’s imprisonment and Prager received 18 months; their culpability for possessing the scandalous material was compounded by their “declaring themselves ready to continue” engaging in such “high-treasonous” activity, according to the judgment rendered against them.

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<sup>1</sup> Bundesarchiv Zwischenarchiv Dahlwitz-Hoppegarten (BA Zw), Z-C 4862, March 23, 1937 Indictment of Berkheim and Prager.

Three and a half years later, approximately 50 people—most of them Jewish—met in northern Berlin at the large Jewish cemetery, the *Weissensee*. This risky gathering was organized by a left-wing, predominantly Jewish resistance group led by Herbert Baum to protest the murder of a Jewish Communist, Rudi Arndt, who had led the underground resistance at Buchenwald. Arndt “encouraged his fellow prisoners to write poems and songs,” according to one source, “and made the greatest efforts to combat the degradation of humanity” that characterized camp existence. He was permitted to assemble a string quartet that performed works by Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven. Arndt was also acknowledged by the Buchenwald authorities as a spokesperson for the prisoners, and derisively termed the “king of the Jews.”<sup>2</sup>

One year later, in August 1942, German troops murdered 1,800 Jews outside the Byelorussian town of Lenin. Among the two dozen survivors was the 22-year-old Faye Schulman, who later fled to the woods outside the town and joined a Soviet partisan band. Initially confined to “women’s work,” as well as photography—she had trained to be a photographer, and kept her equipment when she fled—she was eventually allowed to use a rifle, which became “a friend. It meant survival, vengeance and self defence.”<sup>3</sup>

While Schulman was making contact with the partisans, another Jewish woman of the same age helped sabotage some important rail lines in Warsaw. Yuri Suhl told the story of “Wanda,” the nom de guerre of a slender young woman from Warsaw’s leftist student movement. She reportedly shot and killed several German officers, sometimes in scenarios that would make for memorable cinema. She and her People’s Guard (Communist) comrades also bombed the offices of a collaborationist newspaper, as well as a club frequented by Gestapo and Wehrmacht officers.<sup>4</sup> Although the details of “Wanda’s” exploits are fragmentary and difficult to prove, there is a natural tendency for later generations of scholars and others with an interest in the Holocaust to *want* them to be true. But it would be misguided to look for “uplifting” tales within the history of the Holocaust. On the whole, Jewish people responded as any other people would, through a wide range of behaviors and survival mechanisms. It is best to approach this topic without any inclination toward hagiography or in a search for redemptive or uplifting tales, but rather with humility, based on the knowledge that we cannot predict how we would ourselves act under such extreme circumstances and pressures.

None of the anecdotes that opened this chapter convey typical Jewish responses. While Berkheim and Prager possessed anti-government propaganda, their parents almost certainly knew nothing of their “subversive” activities and would not have approved, and most of the members of their own generation engaged in less dramatic strategies to persevere and attempt to “wait out” their oppressors. And, like many of the Nazis’ victims, Schulman’s parents and siblings had no time to weigh their options: They were captured with little warning and marched to their deaths.

### ***Defining “resistance”***

For many years after World War II, public and scholarly understanding of the anti-Nazi resistance—Jewish as well as non-Jewish—was distorted by Cold War-inspired political considerations. Many of the early studies of German opposition to Nazism advanced a very narrow definition of “resistance”: Only a force that could have

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<sup>2</sup> Stephan Hermlin, *Die erste Reihe* (Dortmund: Weltkreis-Verlag, 1975), 37-43.

<sup>3</sup> Faye Schulman, *A Partisan’s Memoir: A Woman of the Holocaust* (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995), 100.

<sup>4</sup> Yuri Suhl, “Little Wanda With the Braids,” in *They Fought Back: The Story of the Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe*, ed. Yuri Suhl (New York: Crown Publishers, 1967), 51-54.

potentially overthrown Hitler was worthy of the term “resistance” and merited serious study. Accordingly, most West German and U.S. studies of resistance focused nearly exclusively upon Claus von Stauffenberg and his fellow conspirators, who attempted to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944. “A rehabilitated and democratized [West] Germany needed heroes,” pointed out historian Theodore Hamerow—preferably conservative ones.<sup>5</sup> Numerous books were published that examined only von Stauffenberg and his allies, but that were adorned with titles or subtitles referring to “*the Resistance*,” suggesting (not so subtly) that this was the extent of conscious or organized opposition to Nazism.

By limiting the “resistance” in this manner, Western politicians and academics could also ignore or denigrate all opposition that originated in Germany’s leftist parties—further reinforcing Cold War prejudices. Meanwhile, many East German historians reversed this approach, countering that the only true “*Widerstand*” (resistance) consciously struggled against the system responsible for fascism—that is, capitalism. Such tendentious definitions turned “resistance” into a posthumous honorific to be bestowed by historians on both sides of the Berlin Wall.

Eventually, an evolution in research—as well as in the social and political climate—engendered subtler understandings of resistance, particularly in the West. In 1979, Konrad Kwiet asserted that “any action aimed at countering the ideology and policies of National Socialism” should be deemed resistance, including those that, “even without the intention, were nonetheless directed against” Nazism.<sup>6</sup> Other historians have supplemented Kwiet’s argument, if not establishing quite as broad a definition. In an essay published in 1991, Detlev Peukert outlined a continuum of more tangible and conscious oppositional behavior, from “occasional, private nonconformity, proceeding to wider acts of refusal, and then to outright protest, in which some intentional effect on public opinion is involved.”<sup>7</sup> The Nazi state’s totalitarian ambitions and its fear of any sort of independent thinking converted relatively innocuous acts into “resistance.” Therefore, the distinction between *conscious* and *unconscious* resistance should further discourage us from establishing rigid, static definitions.

Meanwhile, historical research into specifically Jewish resistance had first to confront Raul Hilberg’s controversial assessment—in his pioneering 1961 *The Destruction of European Jewry*—that the Jewish victims had in fact exhibited little, if any, outward defiance. “The reaction pattern of the Jews” was characterized “by almost complete lack of resistance,” Hilberg asserted, consistent with a “2,000-year old experience” of “placating and appeasing” rather than resisting their enemies.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the 1960s, though, several scholars were chipping away at this assertion of Jewish submission and exposing the thinness of Hilberg’s argument, which rested on a very narrow definition of “resistance.” In a perceptive historiographical essay published in 2004, Robert Rozett noted that by the 1970s “consensus was forming” for an “inclusive definition,” and that by the end of the 1990s “researchers began considering Jewish resistance less and less as a special category of behavior, and started to discuss it in the context of a broader exploration of the life of Jews” under Nazism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Theodore Hamerow, *On the Road to the Wolf’s Lair: German Resistance to Hitler* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Konrad Kwiet, “Problems of Jewish Resistance Historiography,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 24 (1979), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Detlev Peukert, “Working-Class Resistance: Problems and Options,” in *Contending With Hitler: Varieties of German Resistance in the Third Reich*, ed. David Clay Large (Washington, DC: German Historical Institute, 1991), 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York: Penguin, 1987), 109.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Rozett, “Jewish Resistance,” in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 341.

Key to the reframing of the topic was the concept of *amidah*, a Hebrew term that translates directly as “stand” but that has a deeper meaning in this context. At an important conference on resistance held at Yad Vashem in 1968, Mark Dworzecki described *amidah* as “all expressions of Jewish ‘non-conformism’ and for all the forms of resistance and all acts by Jews aimed at thwarting the evil design of the Nazis,” a design that included not only physical destruction but also to “deprive them of their humanity, and to reduce them to dregs before snuffing out their lives.”<sup>10</sup> For Yehuda Bauer, a pioneering historian of the Holocaust and of resistance, *amidah* includes “smuggling food into ghettos; mutual self-sacrifice within the family to avoid starvation or worse; cultural, educational, religious, and political activities taken to strengthen morale; the work of doctors, nurses, and educators to consciously maintain health and moral fiber to enable individual and group survival; and, of course, armed rebellion or the use of force” against the “Germans and their collaborators”—in short, “refus[ing] to budge in the face of brutal force.”<sup>11</sup> These discussions of *amidah* are part of the larger process of redefining “resistance” and recognizing that most individual and group responses cannot be easily categorized; that is, the lines separating “resistance” from defiance or nonconformity—or even “compliance”—were often very thin, and that one could shade into the other almost imperceptibly.

Like many historical issues and controversies left over from the war, Jewish resistance was also exploited for political purposes. This exploitation derived not only (or primarily) from the exigencies of the Cold War, but also from the slow, uneven progress toward an engagement with the Holocaust through the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s in Europe, Israel, and the United States. Israeli debates over national identity and Jewish history have also shaped—and occasionally distorted—the historiography of Jewish resistance. In particular, Israeli ideologies often advanced the myth of the “weak” Diaspora Jew versus the strong, new Israeli Jew; as Raul Hilberg phrased it in his memoir, resistance was sometimes intertwined with a mythology that “depicted the Exile as weak, feminine, and passive, and the Yishuv as strong, masculine, and active.”<sup>12</sup> The task for historians and others is to sift through these competing agendas to gain as accurate as possible an understanding. “We historians are in the truth business,” as Raul Hilberg once reminded us.<sup>13</sup> We do not honor Nazism’s victims by exaggerating resistance, which can imply a condemnation of those who did *not* resist. Nonetheless, the notion that the Jews “went like sheep to the slaughter” has been convincingly disproved.

### ***Obstacles to resistance***

All opponents of the Nazis faced a multitude of obstacles, but for Jews who wished to fight back the impediments were even greater. These included the lack of support from surrounding populations, a prerequisite for successful partisan warfare. Centuries of anti-Jewish prejudice had conditioned the populace of German-occupied eastern Europe to be indifferent, if not hostile, to Jewish refugees and partisans. A justified fear of the Nazi occupiers further discouraged local citizens from helping the Jews. And it was not only the local populace that Jewish partisans in the East had to fear: even the Russian-led partisan units would sometimes kill their own Jewish members.<sup>14</sup>

A lack of armaments and military training also impeded armed resistance by Jews. For example, the Warsaw

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<sup>10</sup> Rozett, 346.

<sup>11</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 120.

<sup>12</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002), 134-35.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 166.

<sup>14</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 293.

Ghetto fighters received few arms, but plenty of high-minded plaudits from the Polish nationalists and the Allies, who refused to believe that Jewish resisters could constitute an effective fighting force. The German policy of harsh reprisals provided another powerful deterrent. In March 1942, 1,540 inhabitants—half the Jewish population—of the town of Dolhynov in Belarus were murdered as punishment for the escape of two resistance fighters who were hiding in the town's ghetto.<sup>15</sup> Six months later, a prisoner at Treblinka killed an SS officer; 160 inmates were killed in retribution.<sup>16</sup> Similar examples abound, from the ghettos to the camps to the countryside. The effectiveness of reprisals was enhanced by a sense of Jewish responsibility for the welfare of the community and the traditional cohesion of the Jewish family.

Another psychological obstacle to resistance was the absence of any hope of military victory. Fighters in Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, France, and elsewhere could realistically believe that, with the eventual help of the Allies, their efforts could eventually succeed in liberation, or at least dealing a severe blow to the enemy. Jewish fighters, on the other hand, could not recruit to their cause through false promises of eventual victory. Mordechai Anielewicz bluntly informed a friend that his planned uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto would lead to the ghetto's destruction. "He was sure that they would die like stray dogs and no one would even know their final resting place," recorded Immanuel Ringelblum.<sup>17</sup>

An additional psychological factor was the lack of comprehension of the totality of Nazi plans. As we now know, the Nazi leadership itself did not decide until the middle of 1941 that its mission was to physically annihilate all Jews; for the future victims, "the ultimate horrors were inconceivable," as a surviving German Jew later said.<sup>18</sup> In December 1941 Abba Kovner told a Hashomer Hatzair gathering in Vilna that the Jews faced a systematic effort at annihilation, from which there was no escape. His comrades were not yet prepared to accept this.<sup>19</sup> Related to this incomprehension, the hope for survival—by making oneself useful as a laborer in the ghetto, for example—mitigated against actions that would presumably invite destruction. Most people believed in the *Judenrat* policy of survival through compliance. Ironically and sometimes tragically, the Jews of a ghetto such as Vilna's would sometimes adopt a hostile attitude toward the resistance, which they saw as a threat to the survival of the community, "not as a source of protection or hope."<sup>20</sup>

But it was the debilitating conditions within the ghettos and camps that presented the greatest obstacle. The daily struggle to keep body and soul together usually precluded individual or collective action against the oppressors. In his 2004 meditation upon the moral complexities of Jewish resistance, James M. Glass painted a vivid picture of the horrors of daily life: "Individuals and families disintegrating emotionally; catatonic children wasting away, fouling themselves against ghetto walls; shrieking women roaming the streets; suicides increasing daily."<sup>21</sup> And Glass was describing a typical scene in a ghetto, not the death camps.

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<sup>15</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1982), 248.

<sup>16</sup> Yitzhak Arad, "Jewish Prisoner Uprisings in the Treblinka and Sobibor Extermination Camps," *The Nazi Holocaust*, Vol. 7, *Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust*, ed. Michael Marrus (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1989), 247-48.

<sup>17</sup> Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 524.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold Paucker, Lecture at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, October 11, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Bauer, *History*, 250-51.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Sterling, "The Ultimate Sacrifice: The Death of Resistance Hero Yitzhak Wittenberg and the Decline of the United Partisan Organization," in *Resisting the Holocaust*, ed. Ruby Rohrlich (New York: Berg, 1998), 64.

<sup>21</sup> James M. Glass, *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Moral Uses of Violence and Will* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 73.

### *Resistance inside Nazi Germany*

To the degree that German Jews organized to combat the Nazi state, they did so primarily by joining groups that originated in the pre-1933 working-class, leftist, and Zionist movements. Even for conservative Jews who sought allies, there was very little room within the bourgeois resistance, whose leaders had no intention of restoring the civil rights denied Jews.<sup>22</sup> The Herbert Baum Groups offer a striking example of German-Jewish resistance. Herbert Baum had begun building his network of dissident groups and circles in the last years of the Weimar Republic, and during the Third Reich the groups loosely under his command encompassed more than 100 members. The Baum groups engaged in covert forms of resistance, surreptitiously dropping leaflets around Berlin, scrawling anti-Hitler graffiti on walls, and seeking allies among the forced laborers in the factories where they worked. But the main activities of the Baum groups were semi-informal evenings—usually called by the members *Heimabende*, literally “home evenings” or study groups—that revolved around discussions of novels, political texts, and music. These evening meetings imparted cohesiveness, helped the participants maintain morale, and attracted new members to Baum’s resistance network.

On May 8, 1942, the “Soviet Paradise,” an exhibition staged by Goebbels depicting the degradation of Russia under its supposed “Jewish-Bolshevik” regime, opened with great fanfare in Berlin. Baum and several comrades resolved to sabotage the exhibit, and one close colleague, Werner Steinbrinck, was able to steal a kilogram of explosive black powder, as well as a flammable solution, from his workplace.<sup>23</sup> On the evening of May 18, despite some logistical difficulties, Baum and several associates, including his wife, Marianne, managed to place one firebomb that burned a small part of the “Soviet Paradise.” This rare act of direct, public resistance, however, led quickly to the demise of the Baum Groups. Over the next two months, the police arrested four dozen people, some of whom were only tangentially linked to the Baum groups. All told, 32 members and supporters of Baum’s groups were executed or otherwise murdered by the German authorities over the next year and a half. Sixteen of those executed were no more than 23 years old.

The Baum Groups, most of whose members were non-doctrinaire leftists, do not fit easily into such categories as “Jewish resistance”—where their Marxist loyalties are difficult to reconcile—or, for that matter, “Communist” or socialist resistance, although post-war East Germany exploited their memory in a dishonest, self-serving fashion, burying their Jewish identity. Baum’s groups demonstrate the difficulty in acknowledging the intersections of Jewish and leftist resistance, as evidenced by the missing “First they came for the Communists” in the truncated version of Martin Niemöller’s famous poem that adorns a wall of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The Baum Groups were not the only formations of young German Jews who engaged in varied, often creative forms of dissidence and resistance. In 1971, a survivor of a small “Berlin anti-fascist Jewish girls’ group” wrote a letter to Arnold Paucker; if not for this letter, we would know nothing of the existence of this extraordinary group. The young women knew each other from their time in the *Bund Deutsch-Jüdischer Jugend*, a non-Zionist Jewish youth group with a large membership in Berlin. “Already before the war, the group’s leader, Eva Mamlok, had been caught distributing anti-fascist propaganda,” wrote Paucker. During the first two years of the war, “the group’s members, working as forced labour in Berlin, concentrated their efforts

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<sup>22</sup> See Theodore Hamerow, *On the Road to the Wolf’s Lair*, especially 126-30, 157-62, 294-311, and 381-85.

<sup>23</sup> BA Zw, Z-C 12460. May 22, 1942 Werner Steinbrinck interrogation record.

on anti-war propaganda. In September 1941, the girls were denounced, accused of subverting the defensive will of the German people,” and eventually all but one of them perished in the camps.<sup>24</sup>

### *Resistance in the ghettos*

The evolving emphasis over the last 30 years on the multiple forms of anti-Nazi action should not detract attention from the fact that Jews *were* involved in substantial—in fact, disproportionately large—numbers in armed resistance. Jewish prisoners staged armed revolts in five concentration camps and 18 forced-labor camps, according to Nechama Tec.<sup>25</sup> And the inhabitants of the ghettos of at least seven “major” and 45 “minor” ghettos formed underground organizations that conducted myriad acts of defiance.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is understandably the most well-known case of Jewish armed revolt. The Jewish Combat Organization (ZOB), composed of members of Zionist and non-Zionist groups as well as Bundists and Communists, emerged in the middle of 1942 during the massive deportations that reduced the ghetto population from about 350,000 to roughly 65,000. Revisionist (right-wing) Zionists and their youth movement, Betar, established the Jewish Military Union (ZZW) in the fall of 1942.

The ZOB ambushed the German forces during the January 18, 1943 deportation *Aktion*, firing on the Germans and claiming a few casualties. This bold act greatly enhanced the prestige within the ghetto of the underground, which became more assertive, executing a handful of “traitors,” including the second-in-command of the Jewish police, over the next three months.<sup>26</sup> By the inception of the final *Aktion*—April 19, 1943, the eve of Passover and the day before Hitler’s birthday—the two forces had about 750 fighters, two-thirds of them under the command of the ZOB, and had acquired revolvers and a few rounds of ammunition for each fighter, as well as about 10 rifles and two machine guns. “Only God knows how they obtained them,” wrote Goebbels in his diary. We know how they did *not* obtain them: from the Allies, who provided little assistance and rebuffed emissaries from the ghetto resistance even after the uprising had begun.<sup>27</sup> To arm themselves, the ghetto fighters resorted to such inventive tactics as smuggling arms in carts transporting corpses to the cemeteries.<sup>28</sup> They also produced 2,000 of the inexpensive, easily assembled device favored by urban guerrillas since the Spanish Civil War a few years earlier: the Molotov cocktail.<sup>29</sup>

The Germans’ April 19 *Aktion* was met with a stronger, more well-prepared military response by both the ZOB and the ZZW, which had made some progress toward coordinating their forces. The Jewish combatants fought with great courage and creativity. Tovia Bozhikowski, a young fighter who survived the war, later recounted the first hours of the uprising:

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

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<sup>24</sup> Arnold Paucker, *German Jews in the Resistance 1933 – 1945: The Facts and the Problems* (Berlin: Gedenkstätte deutscher Widerstand, 2005), 37.

<sup>25</sup> Nechama Tec, *Jewish Resistance: Facts, Omissions, and Distortions* (Washington, D.C.: Miles Lerman Center for the Study of Jewish Resistance of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Friedländer, 522-23.

<sup>27</sup> Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 241-42.

<sup>28</sup> Bauer, *History*, 254.

<sup>29</sup> Gutman, 204.

attitude of our men was impressive.... Liaison officers scurried between positions with messages. The battle went on for two hours. Rivka, an observer, watched the enemy retreat.... 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.<sup>30</sup>

Open warfare persisted until April 28, and only on May 16 could the German commanding general proclaim success. It is not possible to gain an accurate estimate of German casualties; probably two or three dozen, at a minimum, were killed. Most ZOB and ZZW fighters died, and the overwhelming majority of the ghetto's remaining population was either killed or deported to Treblinka or other camps. ZOB leader Yitzhak Zuckerman remained in Warsaw, hiding in the "Aryan" section, and helped mobilize several hundred Jews to join fight with the Communist partisans (the *Armia Ludowa*) in the ill-fated nationalist uprising of August-October 1944.

In the ghetto of Vilna, Lithuania, the Jewish Fighting Organization (JFO; sometimes called the United Partisan Organization, or FPO) formed in early 1942. The JFO succeeded in some acts of sabotage, for example destroying a German military train carrying armaments to the front.<sup>31</sup> Vilna's *Judenrat* and the JFO were blackmailed into surrendering Yitzhak Wittenberg, the group's founding commander, in a heart-rending drama in July 1943: The Nazis threatened to rain bombs upon the entire ghetto if Wittenberg, who had escaped a German trap and was hiding in the ghetto, was not turned over. Ghetto residents frantically searched for him while the underground and Council leaders agonized over a decision. In the end, the resistance reluctantly voted to hand their leader over.<sup>32</sup>

Largely because of this fateful decision, the JFO was prevented from launching the rebellion they had hoped would at least impede the destruction of the ghetto and its 20,000 inhabitants. Instead, in carefully coordinated actions during September 1943, Abba Kovner, who now commanded the FPO, and most of the fighters slipped out of the ghetto to fight in the forests, where they fought until Lithuania's liberation in July 1944. According to some reports, Kovner led his group—now dubbed "the Avengers"—back into the city on the heels of the Red Army to "engage the Germans in battle and exterminate them by the score."<sup>33</sup> Kovner's group lived up to their name in the early postwar months, hunting down Nazi criminals and, in at least one case, killing SS prisoners being held by the Allies.<sup>34</sup>

The Warsaw and Vilna underground movements give insight into the motivations of Jewish resisters, especially in the later stages of the Holocaust. Jewish resisters were driven by a thirst for revenge; the prospect of striking back at their tormentors; the possibility of escape; and, in many places by 1942, a desperation borne of a growing awareness that other options would not spare them. Some Jewish fighters were consciously motivated by the desire to make a statement for posterity, to show the world that the Nazis had to pay a price. For Mordechai Aneliewicz, the fight was an end unto itself: "Jewish self-defense in the Warsaw ghetto has

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<sup>30</sup> Jacob Glatstein, Israel Knox, and Samuel Margoshes, eds., *Anthology of Holocaust Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 309-10.

<sup>31</sup> Sterling, 73.

<sup>32</sup> Sterling, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Isaac Kowalski, ed., *Anthology of Armed Jewish Resistance*, Vol. 2, 1939-1945 (Brooklyn: Jewish Commemorative Publishers House, 1985), 62, quoted in Sterling, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Rich Cohen, *The Avengers* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

become a fact. Jewish armed resistance and retaliation have become a reality,” he wrote from his bunker shortly before his death. “I have witnessed the magnificent heroic struggle of Jewish fighters.”<sup>35</sup>

Jewish Councils often conducted activities that fit clearly into *amidah*, such as organizing lectures, theatrical productions, and other cultural events, and establishing soup kitchens.<sup>36</sup> It is also in the ghettos’ underground groups that we have more sources to investigate gender dynamics in relation to resistance, a topic that has yet to be fully explored. Women “made up the bulk of couriers in clandestine operations in general and in Jewish resistance groups in particular,” observed Nechama Tec.<sup>37</sup> Women could take advantage of Nazi ideology, which held women incapable of aggressive or military action. One courier said, “the Germans had a tendency to pass a smiling young girl.... It was simply difficult [for them] to imagine that I was doing what I was doing with the way I looked.”<sup>38</sup>

### ***Against all hope: Defiance and resistance in the concentration and death camps***

In the concentration and death camps, “the Jews were enervated by exhaustion, starvation, and disease and crushed by the most complete totalitarian structure to have been devised by man.”<sup>39</sup> Under these extreme circumstances, many Jews and other prisoners lost the physical and psychic ability to persevere, sinking to the level of the so-called *Musselmänner*, the most downtrodden and hopeless prisoners, who were only one “selection” away from death. Others succumbed to the Nazis’ divide-and-rule tactics, and rose a few steps above the mass; others survived through luck, organizational skill, connections, solidarity, or other means. “The paths to salvation are many, difficult and improbable,” concluded Primo Levi.<sup>40</sup>

Despite these conditions, there were several notable examples of organized resistance. In Sobibor and Treblinka, Jewish prisoners staged armed rebellions in 1943; the following year, the underground organization in Auschwitz blew up a crematorium. Smaller-scale Jewish-led armed revolts in erupted in 18 labor camps.<sup>41</sup> In most camps, prisoners undertook other, less visible forms of resistance, holding secret political or religious meetings, swapping information, assisting one another (in defiance of the Nazi goal of fomenting a pitiless struggle of “all against all,” as Levi termed it), and organizing escapes.

The Treblinka and Sobibor camps had similarly small numbers of prisoners as well as guards by 1943. Treblinka held only about 850 prisoners at the time of the revolt, while Sobibor housed roughly 500; both camps were policed by about 20-30 SS guards, supported by 80-120 Ukrainians.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, as well as the nearly identical camp layouts, the uprisings in Sobibor and Treblinka followed a similar pattern: Resisters would lure SS officers to locations where they could be quickly and quietly killed; the prisoners would then procure weapons and initiate a mass break-out. The Treblinka uprising occurred on August 2, 1943; after the resistance had killed a few guards and set several buildings ablaze, several hundred prisoners escaped. Perhaps 30 or 40 survived, while the large majority were hunted down and executed.

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<sup>35</sup> Gutman, xx.

<sup>36</sup> Tec, *Jewish Resistance*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Tec, *Resilience*, 264-65.

<sup>38</sup> Tec, *Resilience*, 265.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 147.

<sup>40</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Collier, 1993), 90.

<sup>41</sup> Tec, *Jewish Resistance*, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Arad, “Jewish Prisoner Uprisings in the Treblinka and Sobibor Extermination Camps,” 241-42.

In Sobibor, Leon Feldhendler, the son of a rabbi in a nearby town, helped start a resistance group in July 1943. Two months later, the Germans made the mistake of shipping several Red Army officers, among other Soviet Jews, to the camp. Among the officers was Alexander Pechersky, who quickly made contact with the underground and lent his military expertise to its planning. On October 14, 1943, they staged the revolt, killing 11 Nazi guards, including the commandant; 200 to 300 prisoners escaped, and while most of them were killed within a few hours or days, several dozen survived the war.<sup>43</sup> Some of them, like Pechersky, joined partisan groups after fleeing the camp. For his troubles, Lt. Pechersky was imprisoned for five years by his own government after the war, a victim of the paranoid and antisemitic atmosphere of Stalin's final years.<sup>44</sup>

In Auschwitz-Birkenau, a resistance group composed of Jews and non-Jews planned an uprising that never took place, but it was the *Sonderkommando* that organized a desperate, ill-fated revolt in October 1944. They succeeded in blowing up a crematorium, and instigated a break-out of several hundred prisoners, but virtually everyone was captured or killed while fleeing.

### *Jews in the partisan war*

Jews served in disproportionately high numbers in the partisan armies that hounded German forces in all corners of the Nazi empire. An estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Jews fought in Soviet partisan groups, and four-fifths of them perished.<sup>45</sup> Many thousands of other Jews served in armed groups based elsewhere in the forests of eastern Europe; roughly 1,600 members of the Slovakian partisans were Jewish, for example, and Tito's Yugoslav army included about 7,000 Jews.<sup>46</sup> There were about 30 Jewish partisan detachments and some 21 additional non-Jewish partisan groups in which Jews fought.<sup>47</sup> And to the West, perhaps one-sixth of the fighters of the French Maquis were Jewish, although Jews constituted less than 1 percent of the country's population.<sup>48</sup>

The Bielski Brothers partisan army, led by Asael, Tuvia, and Zus Bielski, "harried Nazis and saved Jews," as the headline for Zus's 1995 obituary in *The New York Times* stated.<sup>49</sup> Led principally by the charismatic Tuvia, these Belorussian Jewish peasants organized a partisan army that was integrated into a large compound resembling a shtetl in the Naliboki Forest. The Bielskis sent emissaries and scouts to find Jews and bring them to their compound, and they ultimately saved more than 1,000 people, while conducting such effective actions against the occupying forces—killing several hundred Germans troops and sabotaging transports—that the Nazis placed a bounty of 100,000 Reichmarks on Tuvia's head.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Miles Lerman Center for the Study of Jewish Resistance, *Resistance During the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.), 27.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Blatt, "Excerpts from an interview with Alexander Aronowicz Pechersky" <<http://www.sobibor.info/hero.html>> (accessed January 1, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Rueben Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1974), 394-95.

<sup>46</sup> Amos Goldberg and Yehuda Bauer, "Pattern of Jewish Response and Resistance: Excerpts from Interview with Yehuda Bauer," <[http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203881.pdf](http://www1.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203881.pdf)> (accessed December 15, 2009), 5.

<sup>47</sup> Miles Lerman Center, *Resistance*, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Tec, *Jewish Resistance*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Thomas, "Alexander Z. Bielski, a Guerrilla Fighter Who Harried Nazis and Saved Jews, Is Dead," *The New York Times*, August 23, 1995.

<sup>50</sup> Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

A survey of Jewish anti-Nazi resistance would be incomplete without mention of the 6,000 Jews who fought in the Spanish Civil War, many of them German Jews looking for a new front, after the defeat of the German workers' movement in 1933, on which to fight Nazism and fascism.<sup>51</sup> The “outbreak of the Spanish civil war “acted as the clarion call” for many Jews, recalled Arnold Paucker many years later. “This was the beginning of the military response by Jews.”<sup>52</sup>

### *Conclusions*

It is only possible here to provide a brief overview of anti-Nazi activities in the ghettos, camps, and forests of German-occupied Europe; a fuller overview would also chronicle resistance in Belgium, France, and elsewhere in Western Europe. But this summary should make clear that whether by organizing hundreds of clandestine religious schools (*yeshivot*) in Poland; arranging secret libraries and archives throughout the ghetto system; raising money to support prisoners' families; producing and distributing prohibited literature; or fighting with guns in hand, European Jewry defied and resisted the Nazis in numerous ways.

And ultimately, history is best served by avoiding a simplistic dichotomy between resistance and submission. It is better, and more accurate, to think in terms of a spectrum of responses and survival strategies, not always distinct from one another: nonconformity, defiance, self-assertion, and *amidah*, as well as resilience and the refusal to submit—that is, simply attempting to continue civilized life under uncivilized conditions.

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<sup>51</sup> See Arno Lustiger, *Shalom Libertad!: Juden im spanischen Bürgerkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1989).

<sup>52</sup> Paucker, October 2005 Lecture.