

Like Sheep to the Slaughter? Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust

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Why did European Jewry not stand up to their Nazi persecutors? Why did they not resist, even with their bare hands? Why did they march to their deaths like sheep to their slaughter?

Nearly seven decades after the end of the Holocaust, the image of helpless Jews passively going to their gruesome ends remains a fixed imprint in the minds of many. It is an impression that, when examined closely, tells quite another story—one of heroism, defiance and forms of resistance that did not always depend on the weapons of war.

Here is how the great Polish Jewish historian Lucjan Dobroszycki described the “army” of potential Jewish resistance: “Has anyone seen an army without arms, an army scattered over 200 isolated ghettos, an army of infants, old people, the sick, an army whose soldiers are denied the right even to surrender?”

Even if Jewish inhabitants of ghettos and concentration camps were able to create a form of armed, partisan resistance, the barriers that awaited them were nearly overwhelming: limited, at best, access to weapons and explosives, a non-Jewish, anti-Semitic partisan movement that was as ready to murder Jewish fighters as it was to join forces with them; a conservative, myopic group of ghetto council leaders who feared that the “young Turks” who called for resistance would upset the status quo—a misguided belief that if the Jewish ghetto worked for its German masters it would be allowed to live.

But, despite such obstacles and the impossible odds that any form of resistance could end the Nazi effort to destroy European life, significant Jewish armed resistance did take place, especially in Poland and other areas in Eastern Europe: Jewish underground organizations were set up in seven of the largest ghettos (Bialystock, Cracow, Czestochowa, Kovno, Minsk, Vilna and Warsaw), in forty-five minor Jewish ghettos, and armed uprisings took place in five concentration camps including four death camps (Treblinka, Sobibor, Auschwitz, Janowska, Chelmno) and in eighteen labor camps.

The most famous of the uprisings took place on April 19, 1943 in the Warsaw Ghetto when a small group of fighters from different Zionist and non-Zionist organizations held off an overwhelming force of German soldiers and heavy artillery shelling for nearly a month before the German commander declared that “the Jewish quarter of Warsaw no longer exists.”

Perhaps the best known of the Jewish partisan units was the so-called Bielski Brigade, a group of Belorussian fighters led by three Bielski brothers, Asael, Zus and Tuvia. By 1942,

Tuvia had assumed the leadership of the partisan unit, a group that accepted any and all Jews willing to resist regardless of gender, age, or health.

And it was with the Bielski Brigades activities that we can begin to understand the parameters of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. Tuvia Bielski told his partisan fighters that they were not to be so eager to engage the German enemy in armed combat. “Don’t rush to fight and die. So few of us are left, we have to save lives. To save a Jew is much more important than to kill Germans.”

To fight the German enemy, to resist its death thrust against the Jewish people was seen as an effort without any hope of victory and carried out with the most minimum of resources. Yes, that was the ordinary understanding of resistance—to inflict physical harm upon the enemy, to kill as many of them as possible to slow the inevitable march toward a “final solution of the Jewish problem.”

But Jews believed in other forms of resistance, based upon their understanding of the need to uphold the lives of the Jewish people. To life, L’chaim, was as important in times of Jewish suffering and threat of total annihilation as the notion of God as the Master of the Universe, of God as One.

Can we understand the small, humanitarian actions of Jews in extremis as a form of moral resistance, as a way of resisting death by seeking to extend life? Can we understand that to save one Jewish life, as it is written, is as if we saved the entire Jewish people?

And even when death did occur, in the futile armed uprisings in ghettos, death and labor camps, the fact that Jews chose to die rather than having annihilation imposed upon them through starvation, shootings, gassings and crematoria was an extraordinary form of resistance.

Yitzhak (Antek) Zuckerman, second in command of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and one of the few Jewish fighters to survive, wrote of the reasons for the struggle against the overwhelming German forces and a certain death:

I don’t think there is any need to analyze the uprising in military terms. This was a war of less than a thousand people against a might army and no one doubted how it was likely to turn out... If there is a school to study the human spirit, it should be a major subject. The really important things were inherent in the force shown by Jewish youths, after years of degradation, to rise up against their destroyers and determine what death they would choose: Treblinka or Uprising. I don’t know if there is a standard to measure that.

Understanding this, can we ever again speak with such certainty about Jewish passivity? The “sheep” who marched to the slaughter did so with a human spirit, a devotion to saving lives, and a resistance that deserves a special place in the history of the Holocaust.