ARMED RESISTANCE IN THE GHETTOS AND CAMPS

Resistance in the Ghettos

On January 18, 1943, German forces entered the Warsaw ghetto in order to arrest Jews and deport them. To their astonishment, young Jews offered them armed resistance and actually drove the German forces out of the ghetto before they were able to finish their ruthless task. This armed resistance came on the heels of the great deportation that had occurred in the summer and early autumn of 1942, which had resulted in the dispatch of 300,000 Jews, the vast majority of the ghetto’s inhabitants to Nazi camps, almost all to the Treblinka extermination camp. About 60,000 Jews remained in the ghetto, traumatized by the deportations and believing that the Germans had not deported them and would not deport them since they wanted their labor. Two undergrounds led by youth activists, with several hundred members, coalesced between the end of the first wave of deportations and the events of January.

During four days in January, the Germans sought to round up Jews and the armed resistance continued. The ghetto inhabitants went through a swift change, no longer believing that their value as labor would safeguard them. With the news of the first incident of fighting they stopped responding to the Germans’ calls that they come to the gathering point, known as the Umschlagplatz. They began devising hiding places, and the Germans had to enter many buildings and ruthlessly pull out Jews. Many were killed in their homes when they refused to be taken. On the fourth day, having only managed to seize between five and six thousand Jews, the Germans withdrew from the ghetto. The remaining inhabitants believed that the armed resistance combined with the difficulties in finding Jews in hiding, had led to the end of the Aktion. As a result, over the next months the armed undergrounds sought to strengthen themselves and the vast majority of ghetto residents and zealously built more and better bunkers in which to hide.

On the eve of Passover, April 19, 1943, German forces again entered the ghetto aiming to liquidate it. This time they were more prepared for resistance, but so were the two Jewish undergrounds and the ghetto population. Mostly with handguns, but also with a few rifles and many homemade Molotov Cocktails, several hundred young Jewish fighters who had no military training or battle experience confronted

About Photos

Top Left: HeHalutz women captured with weapons during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. HeHalutz (The Pioneer) was an association of Jewish youth.

Top Right: Waffen SS soldiers locating Jews in dugouts. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, 6003996

Bottom: A Jew inside a bunker used for hiding. National Archives and Records Administration
the German military force in pitched battles. In
the hand-to-hand combat the Germans were
not able to put down the rebellion, since many
fighters managed to get away and retreat over
the rooftops; nor could the Germans find the
non-combatant Jews hiding in the bunkers.

Both sides sustained losses, but the ghetto
fighters knew even before they had begun that
they could not really defeat the powerful German
forces. They fought primarily for the sake of
offering resistance, for vengeance, and with the
idea that the Germans should pay a heavy price
for their lives. They did not believe the fighting
could lead to mass rescue, but they did hope
that some fighters and ghetto inhabitants might
be able to escape from the convulsing ghetto and
continue offering resistance as underground
members and partisans.

A significant episode in the uprising was the
so-called “battle for the flags” that took place
in the northern ghetto on Muranowska Street.
A group of fighters had managed to hoist two
flags at the top of a high building on that street:
the blue-and-white flag of the Zionists, and the
white-and-red flag of Poland, which had been
smuggled into the ghetto through the sewer
system. The flags could be seen from outside the
ghetto walls, and communiqués concerning them
were communicated to the Polish underground
and broadcast over Polish radio (certain
sections of these communiqués were even picked up by *The New York Times*). The flags
flying over the ghetto sparked the imagination
and the enthusiasm of the local population—a
grave affront to the Germans. The Germans
understood this and made Muranowska Street a
primary target, bringing in even heavier artillery
and increasing manpower in order to take the
flags down at any cost.

Yet the fighters were determined to do whatever
it took not to give up the flags, which they
continued to wave over the ghetto for almost
four days. Finally, by Friday, April 23, 1943,
after tanks and artillery had pounded the
buildings on Muranowska Street to such an
extent that the entire street shook, the flags
ceased to wave, having been shot to pieces.

When the Germans understood they would be
unable to make the Jews report for deportation
as planned, they began systematically setting
fire to the ghetto, turning it into a vast firetrap.
The flames and the heat turned life in the
bunkers into hell; the very air felt afire, the
goods that had been stored spoiled, and the
water was no longer fit to drink. Gradually,
the Jews’ ability to resist or hide declined. For
almost a month the Jews of the Warsaw ghetto
fought for their lives. Many of them perished in
the fire and smoke; others were murdered in the
ghetto streets; those who remained were sent to
Treblinka, Majdanek, and other camps.

On May 16, 1943, Jurgen Stroop, the German
commander of the forces ordered to put down
the uprising, had the Great Synagogue on
Thomackie Street destroyed. After the building
had been razed, he declared, “There is no
longer a Jewish quarter in Warsaw,” meaning
the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had been quashed. Even after Stroop's declaration, sporadic resistance continued for a while and a few of the fighters and others did manage to flee by way of the sewer system; some went on to join the Polish underground and continued to battle the Germans.

In addition to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in approximately one hundred other ghettos in Eastern Europe underground fighting organizations were formed. They came into being with goals similar to those of the Warsaw ghetto fighters, understanding they could not defeat the Nazis and to a large extent fighting for its own sake. Nevertheless, some undergrounds put more emphasis on various escape plans that would be implemented in the wake of the fighting. There were cases in which the fighting was spontaneous and others where it was more organized. In most cases, Jewish youth movements were deeply involved. In some places the planned armed resistance was never realized, owing to local conditions. Ultimately each ghetto has its own story. Among all of the ghetto uprisings, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest, the longest, and the most influential.

Resistance in the Extermination Camps

The extreme terror of the Nazi camp system made any kind of organized resistance tremendously difficult. Nonetheless prisoners in a number of camps carried out organized acts of resistance. Most notably Jewish prisoners in three extermination camps, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz-Birkenau rose up against their persecutors. This happened at a point when it was clear to them that they were destined to be murdered. In Treblinka and Sobibor, the goal was to facilitate escape; in Auschwitz-Birkenau the goal was to disrupt the process of murder.

The first of these uprisings was in Treblinka on August 2, 1943. Six hundred prisoners using mostly knives, clubs, and other "cold" weapons (weapons that do not involve fire or explosions) fell upon their guards and then broke out of the camp. Most of the rebels were killed immediately or very soon after they left the camp. Several dozen managed to escape. In Sobibor, on October 14, 1943, the fate of the fighters was very similar, although somewhat more managed to flee and hide or join the partisans nearby. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, on October 6 and 7, 1944, prisoners who were forced to work in the special unit in the gas chamber complex, the Sonderkommando, managed to blow up one of gas chambers, but they all fell in the ensuing battle. All of these uprisings were born of desperate situations, but nevertheless say much about the spark of humanity and dignity that remained alive among many prisoners even in the unyielding cruelty of the Nazi camps.