

Resistance in the Ghettos

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While some scholars like Raul Hilberg have argued that there was little resistance from Jews during the Holocaust, the large amount of evidence available has demonstrated that this is false, and that Jews resisted in many different ways. Specifically in the ghettos throughout Europe, resistance took many different forms which can be categorized as either active or passive resistance. The most well-known examples of resistance are the various uprisings, such as in the Warsaw ghetto, though it also includes other active forms such as raids to attack German supply lines or train stations. Active resistance was not common throughout the ghettos, however, as it created controversy because of the very real threat of reprisals from the Germans, who had no compunction about killing dozens of Jews in retaliation for one German death. This threat divided many ghettos about whether or not active resistance was the appropriate action to take. The concept of passive resistance was perhaps more important, as it was much more prevalent throughout the ghettos and affected the everyday lives of the majority of the inhabitants. It included life giving examples such as the smuggling of food, as well as more psychological examples such as religious education, or cultural activities like music and theatre. These types of examples are especially important because they specifically address the German strategy of demoralizing the inhabitants of the ghettos. Additionally, they serve to demonstrate that resistance was not only common throughout the ghettos, but was integral in maintaining the health and identity of the Jewish community in the face of the desperate circumstances.

When Germany took over Poland in 1939, decision makers were not sure what to do with the large population of Jews who came under their control. Ghettoization was to be a temporary measure until a more permanent solution could be found, and, in the meantime, it served the greater purpose of concentrating and isolating Jews. It also allowed the Germans to exploit Jews by confiscating their property, in addition to forcing them to work in factories producing war materiel. The policies of the Germans toward the ghettos, such as inadequate rations and crowded conditions, meant that even though they were not

actively killing Jews in large numbers, many died because of starvation, disease, disciplinary action, or simply for sport. Doris Bergen asserted that between 1939 and 1941, in Poland alone nearly half a million Jews died in ghettos and labour camps.¹ In addition to the weakening of the physical bodies, the appalling conditions in the ghettos also had a serious effect on the spirits and minds of the inhabitants.

In Hilberg's famous work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, he made the claim that the Jews were completely unprepared for any form of resistance. He stated specifically: "The Jews had no resistance organization, no blueprint for armed action, no plan even for psychological warfare."² However, it is now obvious that this was not the case. Throughout Europe, there were various Zionist organizations full of youth who were educated in the ideas of community discipline and self-sacrifice, and who provided the nucleus of membership and leadership of many of the underground movements. These movements were often a continuation of organizations that had developed during the interwar period, and provided a psychological readiness for revolt and fighting capacity.³

During the Holocaust, some underground movements formed into a loose confederation known as the Jewish Fighting Organisation, which had at its core members of the Zionist youth organisations who were known for their loyalty and devotion.⁴ This concept, that youth formed the core of the resistance, is reified by a report from an SS General following the Warsaw uprising. "Again and again, fighting units of 20 to 30 or more Jewish youths, 18 to 25 years old, accompanied by corresponding numbers of females, renewed the resistance."⁵ This quote also demonstrates another interesting aspect of the people who constituted the resistance, the role of women. Though they are seldom mentioned, evidence demonstrates that they played a pivotal role in the resistance, and were

¹ Doris L. Bergen, *The Holocaust: A Concise History*, (New York: Roman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 111-112.

² Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews Vol. III*, (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1985), 1030.

³ Joseph Kermish, "The Place of the Ghetto Revolts in the Struggle Against the Occupier," in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance*, (Jerusalem: Alpha Press, 1971), 306.

⁴ Ibid, 307.

⁵ "SS General Stroop on the Battles in the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt Final Report from the German Battle Diary, April-

May 1943," 2, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20579.pdf.

considered by some to be more motivated and dangerous than the men. For example, the diary of Emanuel Ringelblum mentioned the existence of a legend concerning the Jewish Maid of Orleans, based off of a female underground fighter. Furthermore, it discussed the multiple activities that women were involved in, such as smuggling and assassination, and asserted: "Altogether, they completely outdid the men in courage, alertness and daring."⁶

While the heart of the underground units revolved around the Zionist youth organizations, other groups were involved as well, often political or ideological movements. As the war progressed, these fractious organizations often coalesced as they saw themselves engaged in a common struggle. For example, James Glass noted that the diaries of many underground fighters were filled with idea that they were continuing a long tradition of biblical Jewish resistance.⁷ In the winter of 1941-1942, these fighting groups attempted to break out of the ghettos and establish contact with one another, and it was out of these contacts that the Jewish Fighters' Organisation was formed. The difficulty of communication, combined with the isolation of the ghettos, ensured that the organization never became a proper underground army; however, there was comfort for the groups in knowing that they were not alone.⁸

The nature of resistance varied throughout the different ghettos, in large part due to the attitude of the different *Judenrats*, or Jewish councils who administered the ghettos. Some actively participated against the underground, reporting their actions to the Gestapo and cooperating in the investigations. For example, in the ghetto of Kletsk, one survivor recounted how he and some friends were planning to escape and join the partisan units forming in the forests. When the *Judenrat* found out, they warned him that if he tried anything he would be handed over to the Germans, when he tried to convince them that escape was the only option, they locked him up for the night in the synagogue.⁹ At the same time, however, there were also councils which, either wholly or individually, supported the

⁶ "From the Diary of Emanuel Ringelblum on the women fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," 1-2, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206175.pdf.

⁷ James M. Glass, *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Moral Uses of Violence and Will*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 42-44.

⁸ Michael Elkins, *Forged in Fury*, (Loughten: Judy Piatkus Publishers Ltd., 1981), 57.

⁹ Isaiah Trunk, "The Attitude of the Judenrats to the Problems of Armed Resistance Against the Nazis," in *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance*, (Jerusalem: Alpha Press, 1971), 206-207.

actions of the underground, even actively participating in it. This was expressed in various ways such as by urging youth to organize into movements, advising individuals to escape and join the partisans, as well as helping with logistics and communication.¹⁰ One example from the Lachwa ghetto noted how Berl Lopatin, the Chairman of the *Judenrat*, realized that the end was close at hand. He arranged a signal for attack, and then went house to house to let everyone know. When the signal came, the Jews attempted to break out, and though many were killed, some succeeded and met later on in the forest. Lopatin was among them, and ended up fighting as a partisan in the Kirov Brigade.¹¹ The majority of the *Judenrats* took a central position however. While they might have agreed with the idea of resistance, there was one overwhelming factor which lay heavily on the minds of everybody in the ghetto and prevented many from action.

In Ringelblum's diary, he mentioned a discussion he had with the head of the social relief organisation in the ghetto, who angrily asked him how much longer they would go "as sheep to slaughter."¹² Ringelblum answered: "The question torments all of us, but there is no answer because everyone knows that resistance, and particularly if even one single German is killed, its outcome may lead to the slaughter of a whole community or even of many communities."¹³ Mass reprisals were used extensively and effectively; Glass claimed they were an integral part of the German's strategy, and sources like Ringelblum's diary demonstrate how successful they were at keeping Jews from rebelling. A reprisal would not only be the execution of just the underground fighter, but also their families, friends, or even random strangers, as the Germans would have no issue with killing large numbers of people to avenge one German death.¹⁴ In 1943, a group of partisans escaped the Vilna ghetto with fourteen Jews. During an encounter with a German patrol, a number of the Jews were shot and two taken prisoner. The Gestapo chief in the area ordered that all of the families of the Jews who had fled, along with their work supervisors and their families, to

¹⁰ Ibid, 212-213.

¹¹ Ibid, 220-221.

¹² "From Ringelblum's Diary: Thoughts About Resistance and its Consequences are Evoked When News About Massacre Reach the Ghetto," 1, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203728.pdf.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ James M. Glass, *Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust: Moral Uses of Violence and Will*, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 31.

be delivered to him. Additionally, he declared that if any Jew escaped, their family would be taken, if they could not find the family, those in their rooms would be taken, if the room could not be found, the entire courtyard would be shot.¹⁵ The reprisals were so vicious and heavy handed that the topic of resistance sparked huge debates among the *Judenrats*, however, most decided that they were responsible for the lives of the majority in the ghettos. The leader of the Vilna *Judenrat*, Jacob Gens, declared: "As long as the ghetto remains a ghetto those of us who have the responsibility will do everything we can so that nothing shall happen to the ghetto."¹⁶

This idea of responsibility to the majority broaches a complicated ethical question. At what point does one have the moral right to endanger the whole community, or more specifically for the underground, at what point does one realize that there is nothing to be lost since the whole community is going to be murdered anyway?¹⁷ In hindsight it is perhaps easy to say that Jews in the ghettos were blind to reality, however, at the time it was not so clear. The Germans were cunning, and carried out evacuations in such a way that it was not obvious they were preparing for a massacre.¹⁸ The residents of the ghettos were so spiritually and physically worn down that the fear of immediate death was all that mattered, a feeling exemplified by the story of Itzik Wittenberg. Wittenberg was the first commander of the Jewish Fighting Organisation in Vilna, and was betrayed by a Jew captured by the Gestapo. The Gestapo told Gens, the *Judenrat* chairman, that if he did not give up Wittenberg, the ghetto would be razed. After telling the other residents of the ghetto, the Jews turned on the resistance fighters and attacked them viciously. The resistance refused to fight back against their own people, and eventually Wittenberg gave himself up to the Germans.¹⁹ To the Jews of the ghettos at the time, it was not obvious that the Nazis wanted to destroy them, and they were angry that a few resistance fighters would endanger the whole ghetto. While they could live with the passive resistance of the

¹⁵ Trunk, "The Attitude of the Judenrats," 204.

¹⁶ "Address by Gens, Head of the Ghetto, at the Meeting of Brigadiers, Supervisors and Policemen, on the Danger of Bringing Arms into the Vilna Ghetto, May 15, 1943," 1, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, Accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%202002.pdf.

¹⁷ Kermish, "The Place of the Ghetto Revolts," 313-314.

¹⁸ "From Ringelblum's Diary: Thoughts about Resistance," 1.

¹⁹ Elkins, *Forged in Fury*, 68.

underground, in many instances they only lived because of it, the act of physically fighting back, especially when Germans were killed, only meant more death for the inhabitants.

From the very beginning of the ghettos, there were always reactive forms of passive resistance; survival in the ghettos necessitated it. For example, the nutritive value of the food that the Germans supplied to the ghettos was nowhere close to what was needed for a human being to survive. Therefore it became necessary to smuggle food into the ghetto on a regular basis, an act which carried the penalty of death. Though the amount was not nearly enough to stave off starvation and disease for all, Elkins asserted that enough Jews survived to ensure that if the Germans wanted them dead, they would have to do the deed themselves.²⁰ Another example was the creation of underground hospitals. Any babies that were reported were killed by the Germans, and if the Germans discovered an unreported baby, the Germans decreed death to the mother as well. Therefore the creation of these hospitals ensured the survival of both, though it was often a harrowing experience; a natural birth underground, where the slightest sound could mean death for all involved.²¹

While these actions were important to ensure the survival of the physical bodies of Jews in the ghettos, the spiritual resistance for their psychological health was, if anything, more important. Glass asserted: "Terror and fear, the drive for self-preservation, corrupted the ghetto's moral order. The disintegration of moral limits appeared almost daily in the life of the ghetto."²² This is reified by Ringelblum in his diary, when he stated the reason it was so easy to lead Jews to be killed was "partly due to the complete spiritual break-down and disintegration, cause by unheard of terror which has been inflicted on the Jews for 3 years."²³ Spiritual resistance, therefore, became fundamental in creating a "psychological refuge" in which an individual could protect their identity, as a person and as a Jew, from the barbarity of the Germans; it was a powerful political tool in that it specifically addressed the German strategy of demoralizing the Jewish population.²⁴ This spiritual resistance was very diverse, and included religious activities as well as cultural events. Though there was a noticeable decline in faith and religious practice in the ghettos,

²⁰ Ibid, 45.

²¹ Ibid, 46.

²² Glass, *Jewish Resistance*, 41.

²³ "From Ringelblum's Diary: Thoughts about Resistance," 1.

²⁴ Glass, *Jewish Resistance*, 104.

religious education and activities like studying the Torah were still important to the population, and were significant as a form of resistance since being caught meant death. Additionally, rabbis played critical roles in helping people deal with the despair and moral quandaries that were found in the ghettos on a daily basis.²⁵ Equally important as the religious activities were the cultural events, as many ghettos created their own organizations which coordinated entertainment such as musical and theatre performances.²⁶ In a speech about cultural activity in the Vilna ghetto, Gens stated: "We wanted to give man the opportunity to free himself for several hours, and this we achieved...Our bodies are in the ghetto but our spirit has not been enslaved."²⁷ It was these types of activities that allowed the Jews to escape life in the ghetto and the inhumanity of the conditions there, which was extremely important in maintaining the moral and psychological health of the inhabitants.

The existence of underground movements offered a similar type of resistance, not only did their presence have a moralizing effect on the communities for the most part, but it also offered those involved an alternate moral environment, separate from the one created by the Germans.²⁸ More importantly, acts of resistance had a psychological impact on isolated Jewish communities throughout Europe, proving that the Germans were not invincible, and that they were not alone.²⁹ The last letter from Mordecai Anielewicz, the commander of the Jewish forces during the revolt in the Warsaw ghetto, demonstrated the importance that the uprising had on its participants. Though the only outcome of the uprising would be death, a fact that he acknowledged in the letter, Anielewicz wrote: "One thing is clear, what happened exceeded our wildest dreams. The Germans ran twice from the ghetto...The dream of my life has risen to become fact...Jewish armed resistance and revenge are facts. I have been a witness to the magnificent, heroic fighting of Jewish men in battle."³⁰

²⁵ Ibid, 106-108.

²⁶ Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 7.

²⁷ "The Importance of Cultural Activity in the Vilna Ghetto," 1, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203109.pdf.

²⁸ Glass, *Jewish Resistance*, 44.

²⁹ Bergen, 209.

³⁰ "The Last Letter From Ghetto Revolt Commander Mordecai Anielewicz, Warsaw," 1, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206659.pdf.

Active resistance against the Germans was limited, mainly because of the fears of reprisals, and generally occurred in the latter years of the ghettos. The first instances were raids, such as one example by Vitka Kempner, who, in late 1942, left the Vilna ghetto through the sewers with three other girls all carrying dynamite. They traveled thirty kilometers to a railway line running east towards Moscow, under which they set their explosives. When a train carrying soldiers finally came and detonated the explosives, they ran up and threw grenades in the windows before running off and hiding in a swamp.³¹ Raids became more common and daring as time went on, and include stories such as dynamiting railway stations used for deportation at Riga, Lodz, and Sosnowicz.³²

Uprisings were the other major form of active resistance; however, they were always a last effort when the underground realized that the end was coming. The underground knew about the death camps from survivors who had escaped and spread the word amongst the ghettos, such as the example of Moshe Podhlebnik, who survived execution in Chelmno and was eventually brought to a rabbi who had connections to the underground.³³ They tried to warn the ghettos of what was happening and encourage them to resist, such as by distributing leaflets. One leaflet from the underground in the Warsaw ghetto declared: "He who fights for his life stands a chance of saving himself! He who in advance gives up – has lost straightaway! Only disgraceful death in the asphyxiating machine of Treblinka awaits him."³⁴ Those in the Warsaw ghetto knew the final liquidation was coming soon; Ringelblum noted in his diary all of the preparations that were being made, such as smuggling in weapons and explosives. "It was understood that it would be the struggle between the gnat and the elephant, but national pride commanded that Jews offer resistance and not let themselves be led helpless to the slaughter."³⁵ When it came in January of 1943, the uprising was temporarily successful – the Germans retreated for four

³¹ Elkins, *Forged in Fury*, 59-60.

³² *Ibid*, 72.

³³ *Ibid*, 50-51.

³⁴ "Calls For An Armed Struggle Made By the Jewish Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto," 1, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206167.pdf.

³⁵ "From the Diary of Emanuel Ringelblum on Preparations for Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto," 2, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206172.pdf.

months – however, they returned heavily armed and crushed the resistance, razing the ghetto to the ground.³⁶

The Warsaw ghetto uprising was the most famous, and had effects beyond simply being an act of resistance. For example, in the Vilna uprising later on, the underground were able to fight the Germans effectively enough that, fearing another Warsaw debacle, they offered the Jewish community ‘safety’ in a real labour camp. The twenty thousand Jews went to the labour camp where they survived another year until they were murdered just before the Soviets liberated the camp.³⁷ Additionally, the uprising in Warsaw had an important psychological effect on Poland as a whole. It awakened feelings of sympathy for Jews amongst the Gentiles in addition to demonstrating that the Germans, and especially the SS, were not all powerful.³⁸

Hilberg asserted in his text: “The reaction pattern of the Jews is characterized by almost complete lack of resistance...the documentary evidence of Jewish resistance, overt or submerged, is very slight.”³⁹ However, the large amount of evidence available today has demonstrated this statement to be false, and that Jews resisted in many ways. In the ghettos specifically, the less visible forms, such as the spiritual resistance of education and cultural events, may not seem to have made a large difference or be very heroic, however, they were integral in maintaining the moral and psychological health of the Jews in the ghettos. More importantly, they subverted the German strategy of demoralizing the Jewish population. The concept of active resistance was a controversial one for all, as reprisals from the Germans were swift and heavy-handed, and the moral question of whether a few had the right to endanger the many weighed heavily on many underground commanders. In the end, however, the underground knew about the death camps from survivors, and realized that there was a slim chance of survival regardless, therefore, many in the underground justified their preparations for uprisings. The uprisings themselves may not have had a large impact on the outcome of the war, but they were extremely important as

³⁶ Bergen, *The Holocaust*, 208-209.

³⁷ Elkins, *Forged in Fury*, 72-72.

³⁸ “Extract From a Report by the "Delegatura" To London on the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt,” 2, *The Holocaust Resource Center*, Yad Vashem, accessed April 2, 2016, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20583.pdf.

³⁹ Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 1030.

an assertion of life, and, more significantly, as an integral part in refuting the argument that there was no resistance on the part of the Jews.

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