

The Purpose of Armed Jewish Resistance During World War II

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In his personal narrative of his experiences during the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel described his feelings as he arrived at the extermination camp, Birkenau. First, the Jews were lined up and sorted. He wrote of the simple, yet profound act of his father's resistance in deceiving the SS guards so that they would be able to remain together and spend their last few moments of life together. Then Wiesel described the attitude among the Jewish prisoners as they began to realize that they were not being taken to another ghetto or even to a concentration camp, but directly to the crematoria:

I heard whispers around me: "We must do something. We can't let them kill us like that, like cattle in the slaughterhouse. We must revolt." There were, among us, a few tough young men. They actually had knives and were urging us to attack the armed guards. One of them was muttering: "Let the world learn about the existence of Auschwitz. Let everybody find out about it while they still have a chance to escape " But the older men begged their sons not to be foolish: "We mustn't give up hope, even now as the sword hangs over our heads. So taught our sages... " The wind of revolt died down.¹

The whispers that Wiesel remembered hearing echo throughout the decades since the most infamous genocide in the world's history. Why did millions of Jews let the Nazis kill them "like cattle in the slaughterhouse?" However, upon closer investigation of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust, it becomes immediately clear that the Jews were indeed going to their deaths, but in a manner much more dignified than a slaughterhouse. What is even more clear is that many chose that fate as an alternative to violence resistance, not for a lack of the option to revolt. Within Jewish communities generally, there were only two reasons to use violent resistance: as a means to preserve independence and freedom, or as a last-resort act of resistance.

The means of resistance was a complicated and very personal choice among the European Jews. A full discussion of the various means of resistance could not be addressed in a research project of this scope, but it is worth briefly noting that even most of those who did not choose armed resistance did not choose to passively allow themselves to be slaughtered like animals. Dozens of Jewish historians, writers, and teachers created a secret archive called the *Oneg Shabbat*, containing over 1,500 different documents which chronicled Nazi actions against the Jews, including stolen German documents, and hid

¹ Elie Wiesel and Marion Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 2017), 31

them in the ghetto.² Some of those documents were smuggled out of the ghetto and delivered to the exiled Polish government in London. The Jews in the Warsaw ghetto created an underground library and a symphony orchestra in defiance of German orders.³ They smuggled food, documents, weapons, and people into and out of the ghetto.⁴ Jewish leaders, like Adam Czerniakow, who were required by the Nazi officials to prepare lists of people who were to be deported to the extermination camp, refused to cooperate. In Czerniakow's case, suicide was his final act of resistance, rather than to be complicit in even a small way in the extermination of his fellow Jewish prisoners.⁵ Dr. Israel Milejowski and other doctors and researchers published one of the most comprehensive studies ever done on starvation's impact on the human body in the Warsaw ghetto.⁶ All of these, and many more types of resistance were employed by Jewish men, women, and children in the ghettos and camps of Nazi Europe.

It is in this context that it should be understood that millions of Jews chose to resist the Nazis. Most were not "cattle going to slaughter" but rather, dignified people who made active choices in what type of resistance to engage in. In many cases, it was only when those other forms of resistance were taken away as viable options that Jewish leaders then turned to violence. Those that did choose armed resistance typically choose to do so in two distinct ways. The first method of armed resistance was to participate in a prisoner uprising or riot such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising or the revolts at the Treblinka and Sobibor camps. The second way that Jews participated in armed resistance was to join various partisan or military actions throughout Europe. Both sorts of uprisings were not as infrequent as one might be led to believe by the typical historiographical treatment of the Holocaust. According to Lichten, uprisings occurred at "Bialystok, Wilno, Czestochowa, Tarnow, Minsk Mazowiecki, Slonim,

² Yad Vashem, "Oneg Shabbat," Yad Vashem, accessed May 29, 2018, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205802.pdf.

³ Yad Vashem, "Warsaw Ghetto," Yad Vashem, accessed May 29, 2018, <http://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Derrick B. Jelliffe, "Hunger Disease: Studies by the Jewish Physicians in the Warsaw Ghetto," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 242, no. 8 (1979)

Nieswiez, and many other cities and towns in Galicia and Silesia, and in the camps of Treblinka, Soliborz, Auschwitz and Lwow.”⁷

Uprisings in the camps and ghettos were perilous endeavors that cost most of the Jewish fighters their lives. In the case of the Sobibor revolt, the Jews were able to procure a small number of axes which they used to kill guards in close combat.⁸ As the revolt continued, they were able to gather several weapons from the guards they had killed, but most fought back against German machine gun fire by throwing “rocks and sand.”⁹ These camp uprisings were complicated by the fact that Jews from all over Europe had been concentrated at Sobibor, and therefore had great difficulty communicating with one another. Even the direction of escape was different for each group. Soviet and Polish Jews typically had an easier time in their escape since their destinations were more local, but in the words of Alexander Peczorski, one of the organizers of the escape, “The Jews who had come from Holland, France, and Germany were particularly helpless.”¹⁰ However, Peczorski’s account of the escape is clear, the violence was an act of desperation to escape, not as an act of anger directed at the Nazi guards.

This theme is repeated in many other Jewish stories of armed resistance, the priority of living took precedence over a desire for revenge. To escape and survive was seen as preferable to dying with honor. The debate between the fatalistic view which often led Jews to choose armed resistance and the desire to survive as an act of resistance can be clearly seen in the transcript of a conversation of the Bialystok Members of the Dror Movement. Mordecai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff believed that some sort of action was necessary because there was no option to “wait together, collectively, for death.”¹¹ Yitzhak Engelman saw the essential decision as whether to fight directly and die immediately, or to attempt to

⁷ Joseph L. Lichten and Harold B. Segel. "The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: Legend and Reality." *The Polish Review* 8, no. 3 (1963), 64

⁸ Alexander Peczorski, "Ha-Mered be-Sobibor" ("The Revolt in Sobibor"), *Yalkut Moreshet*, No. 10 (1969), 30-31

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Bialystok Members of the Dror Movement, "The Discussion on Fighting Aims," (1943), <https://www.yadvashem.org/docs/bialystok-dror-movement-fighting.html>.

hide in the woods for a time, and to die fighting in two or three days.¹² The counter-argument to these viewpoints was expressed by Sarah Kopinski who responded to the remarks of these two men by saying:

It is more important to stay alive than to kill five Germans. In a counter-*Aktion* we will without doubt all be killed. In the forest, on the other hand, perhaps 40 or 50% of our people may be saved. That will be our honor and that will be our history. We are still needed, we will yet be of use. As we no longer have honor in any case, let it be our task to remain alive.¹³

Ultimately, Kopinski's idea prevailed, and it was decided to join up with partisan groups that were fighting from the woods due to a lack of the tools necessary to effectively prosecute an effective resistance.¹⁴ The lack of arms with which to resist effectively was also a key factor in this case and the Sobibor revolt. This does not mean that violence as a form of resistance was abhorrent to the Jewish community, just that it did not take precedence over the opportunity to live. In fact, the Dror Movement leaders decided to join with the partisans,¹⁵ who they hoped would have what they lacked in weaponry. Therefore, it can be concluded that from a historiographical perspective that the perceived lack of armed resistance is mostly due to a pragmatic assessment of reality on the part of the Jewish people, rather than a lack of will. Axes, rocks, and sand were a poor match for German machine guns. Additionally, violence was more acceptable as a means to secure or preserve freedom than as an act of vengeance or justice.

When the option to survive was no longer possible and all other forms of resistance were taken away from a Jewish community, dying with honor was seen by many as a good alternative to meekly allowing themselves to be taken to the slaughter. This mindset can be illustrated in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, specifically with the ideas of the Jewish Fighting Organization expressed in a 1943 call to Resistance.¹⁶ The release makes a very logical argument that they have been slaves to the Nazis, and that the only logical treatment of a slave that has ceased to be useful is to eliminate them.¹⁷ It goes on to explain that any rumor that extermination is not the next step is a lie propagated by the Gestapo

¹² Bialystok Members, "The Discussion on Fighting Aims,".

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jewish Fighting Organization, *Call to Resistance by the Jewish Fighting Organization in the Warsaw Ghetto*, (Warsaw, 1943), <https://www.yadvashem.org/docs/jewish-fighting-organization-in-warsaw-ghetto-call-to-resistance.html>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

specifically for the purposes of pacifying the Jews.¹⁸ The overall tone of the release does not carry with it the belief that resistance could actually be effective in the sense of deterring or countering German action. Rather, to the Jewish Fighting Organization and the armed resisters of Warsaw, victory was in taking as many Germans with them as possible, and in dying as free men rather than slaves. Given their knowledge of what had occurred to the thousands of Jews that had already been taken to the death camps, the Warsaw fighters also understood that survival was not an option. They would die in Warsaw resisting, or they would die as slaves who had ceased to be useful, so in this context, armed resistance was the only form of resistance left.

It is also possible that the discrepancy of the tones of the Jewish resistance in Warsaw and the Dror Movement was clearly defined by their assessments of the ability to mount an “effective” resistance. Kopinski’s conclusion that flight was a better approach for the Dror Movement is clearly expressed in her belief that even if a resistance were mounted, it would only result in the deaths of “five Germans.”¹⁹ According to Bergen, the Jews in Warsaw had prepared an “elaborate system of bunkers and underground passages,” and were equipped with “gasoline bombs, hand grenades, pistols, a very few submachine guns, and some rifles.”²⁰ The Germans were forced for several days to escalate their tactics far beyond the scope they had believed would be necessary at the outset as the Jews put up a much stiffer defense than they had anticipated. They were eventually forced to lay siege to the ghetto, after tanks, flamethrowers, and a large troop assault failed to produce more results than large numbers of casualties on both sides.²¹ In the conclusion of sociologist Rachel Einwohner, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was a result of a lack of alternative opportunities.²² An important caveat to this assessment is that the Warsaw Resistance also had significantly more assets available to them. Had they been limited to rocks and hand-held weapons, other alternatives like escape may have been considered or attempted.

¹⁸ Jewish Fighting Organization, *Call to Resistance*.

¹⁹ Bialystok Members, "The Discussion on Fighting Aims,"

²⁰ Doris L Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham [etc.]: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 269

²¹ Delegatura, *Extract From a Report by the "Delegatura" to London on the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt*, (1943),

<https://www.yadvashem.org/docs/delegatura-report-to-london-on-warsaw-ghetto-revolt.html>.

²² Einwohner, Rachel L. "Opportunity, Honor, and Action in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943." *American Journal of Sociology* 109, no. 3 (2003), 652

Some Jews chose to be a part of overtly militaristic resistance movements from the very beginning by joining with various partisan groups who were opposing Nazi control. Some partisan efforts were undertaken almost exclusively by Jewish people, such as the famous Bielski Otriad, while other Jews joined movements like the French Resistance Movement which had no specific Jewish aspect to it. The circumstances of the partisan movements allowed for a much more complicated dynamic than in the ghettos and camps. The partisans were technically free, and therefore had a choice of whether to fight for revenge, or to fight as a means of self-preservation. Even within various groups, both motivations could be found among their ranks, but at least in one of the most famous and studied cases, the stated mission of the partisan group was self-preservation.

Tuvia Bielski, the leader of a Jewish partisan group that eventually saved 1,200 Jewish people from the Nazis, summarized the purpose of his partisan group by saying “Don’t rush to fight and die. So few of us are left, we need to save lives. It is more important to save Jews than to kill Germans.”²³ Another partisan in Bielski’s group, Zorach Arluk expressed a similar belief that living free was more important to the Jews in Bielski’s partisan group than revenge or killing Germans.²⁴ In this respect, their words echo the sentiment expressed by Kopinski, who also saw staying alive as the greatest act of resistance. However, for Bielski and the other members of his partisan group, fighting was a reality of their situation; the means by which they preserved their end of remaining alive.

For the duration of its existence, the Bielski partisan group fought to preserve the integrity of its own reason for existence and to balance that mission with its practical realities. At least limited cooperation with the Russian partisan groups was essential for the Bielski Otriad, because that was their main source of weapons, and therefore self-defense.²⁵ To that end, the Bielski partisans became an official part of the Soviet Resistance Movement because the weapons they received from the Russian partisans were contingent upon their participation in the partisan efforts. Since the weapons were

²³ Franziska Reiniger, "Solidarity in the Forest – The Bielski Brothers," Yad Vashem, accessed May 26, 2018, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/28/bielski_brothers.asp.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

essential for self-defense, participation in armed resistance became the means through which they obtained these weapons, rather than the purpose of the partisan group.²⁶

The most notable exception to the generalization that Jews fought mainly as a means of self-preservation was in contexts where the existence of their freedom was not as much in doubt. Jews served in most of the Armed Forces of the Allied Powers fighting against the German Army. Approximately 1.5 million Jewish people served in various armies of the Allied forces including the armies of the United States, Great Britain, Poland, and Soviet Union.²⁷ In many cases, Jews served in these units at levels which were proportionate to their representation in the population, which would seem to emphasize their participation as citizens of their respective countries, and not as an act of Jewish resistance per se. For example, about 100,000 Jews fought with the Polish army during the Nazi invasion of 1939.²⁸ This represented about 10% of the total Polish army enlistment, and Jews also represented roughly 10% of the total population of Poland.²⁹ This seems to be a clear example of Jews acting as Polish citizens, and not as members of the Jewish community.

There is a notable exception in the formation of the Jewish Brigade, a special unit created for Jewish people within the British Army. In a telegram sent to Roosevelt, Winston Churchill expressed his intention to create a Jewish Brigade within the British Army.³⁰ His rationale was clearly and deliberately focused on the creation of such a unit in order to give the Jewish people a sanctioned vehicle for armed action against Nazi Germany.³¹ The unit was also clearly intended to give the Jewish people in Europe a military group with which they could identify. However, it was not just Churchill who desired that this brigade be distinctly Jewish; the members of the proposed brigade itself saw themselves as being Jewish fighters, rather than British fighters.

²⁶ Reiniger, *Solidarity in the Forest*.

²⁷ Yad Vashem, "Jewish Soldiers in the Allied Armies www.yadvashem.org," accessed May 29, 2018, <http://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/combat-resistance/jewish-soldiers.html>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Winston Churchill, *Prime Minister to President Roosevelt No. 765*, (1944), <https://www.yadvashem.org/docs/churchill-and-roosevelt-on-establishment-of-jewish-brigade.html>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

The first evidence of such an identity was the request that Churchill references that the Jewish Brigade be allowed to use a flag with Jewish symbols, most notably a blue Star of David symbol on a white background.³² However, this is not the only piece of evidence that the members of this unit in particular saw themselves as a part of Jewish resistance to the Nazis, rather than British or even Allied resistance. A close examination of Shmuel Gafni's artifacts which were a part of his Jewish Brigade uniform and personal effects clearly demonstrate an emphasis on his Jewish heritage and identity. One can clearly see the use of Yiddish symbols on the patch of his British Uniform, representing a clear connection between his decision to fight and his Jewish heritage.³³ The Star of David armband³⁴ would have had a similar effect. However, the most telling artifact into the mindset and identify of this soldier is the embroidered handkerchief that Gafni carried. On it, one observes a Jewish flag clearly shown in a dominant position crossed over a flag with German colors.³⁵ The handkerchief, patch, and armband reveal that Gafni clearly viewed his enlistment in the Jewish Brigade as an act of Jewish resistance. He was a Jewish soldier, not a British soldier.

Jewish resistance took many forms throughout the Holocaust, but, from a historiographical perspective, there are two generalizations which can be made about all armed resistance by Jewish groups. First, the primary motivation of these Jews, even those who considered and chose not to employ armed resistance in favor of alternative methods, was a desire to avoid going like sheep to a slaughter. Jews were not passive and docile recipients of the genocide committed against them. Additionally, the extent of armed resistance often depended upon the resources and options immediately available. The answer then to the question "Why didn't more Jews fight back against the Nazis?" may ultimately be that after a pragmatic and realistic assessment of the available resources in most cases, armed resistance was not the best option for resistance in the minds of those who considered its use.

³² Churchill, *Prime Minister to President Roosevelt*.

³³ See Figure 1, Page 10

³⁴ See Figure 2, Page 10

³⁵ See Figure 3, Page 10



Figure 1—Shmuel Gafni's identifying tag and pin



Figure 2—Shmuel Gafni's armband



Figure 3—A handkerchief belonging to Shmuel Gafni

All images are a part of the Yad Vashem Artifacts archive.

Yad Vashem, "Jewish Soldiers in the Allied Armies Wwww.yadvashem.org," accessed May 29, 2018, <http://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/combat-resistance/jewish-soldiers.html>.

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