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Jewish Resistance in the Holocaust

As the principal sufferers of Nazi Germany, the Jewish people resisted oppression both physically and spiritually during the Holocaust, keeping Judaism alive. The resistance of Holocaust era Jews had two purposes: to gain freedom and maintain dignity as Jewish people. When studying the Holocaust, people usually learn about the humiliation and suffering millions of Jews (and non- Jews) endured. While that history is important, it is also imperative to reflect on the many people who fought oppression in order to preserve both their personal dignity and religious roots. These active and passive forms of aggression were heroic, no matter how small the action seems nowadays.

The Jews' physical resistance to Nazi oppression took place within the Jewish ghettos and death camps. Underground organizations had to be formed in order to smuggle weapons and form a formal uprising (*Resistance during the Holocaust*). Armed resistance fueled by Jewish citizens took place in more than one hundred ghettos in occupied Europe. In approximately one hundred ghettos, in Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia, and Ukraine, underground organizations were formed. The purpose of such organizations was to wage armed struggle, that is, to stage an uprising in the ghetto or to break out of the closed ghetto by the use of force in order to engage in partisan operations on the outside (*Resistance during the Holocaust*).

Weapons were obviously extremely hard to smuggle into the ghettos. The Nazis punished anyone found participating in such activities very harshly.

The most well-known ghetto uprising took place in the Warsaw ghetto. The Warsaw uprisings lasted a month. The long length of the war is considered a victory in itself. This hard fought fight proved as an example that rebelling was possible within the ghettos.

“In April-May 1943, Jews in the Warsaw ghetto rose in armed revolt after rumors that the Germans would deport the remaining ghetto inhabitants to the Treblinka killing center. As German SS and police units entered the ghetto, members of the Jewish Fighting Organization and other Jewish groups attacked German tanks with Molotov cocktails, hand grenades, and a handful of small arms. Although the Germans, shocked by the ferocity of resistance, were able to end the major fighting within a few days, it took the vastly superior German forces nearly a month before they were able to completely pacify the ghetto and deport virtually all of the remaining inhabitants. For months after the end of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, individual Jewish resisters continued to hide in the ruins of the ghetto, which SS and police units patrolled to prevent attacks on German personnel.” -*(Jewish Resistance)*

Around the same time as the Warsaw ghetto uprisings, Jewish inhabitants of other ghettos were rebelling as well. Although the rebels knew their battles were

mostly too late, they continued to fight in order to preserve Jewish honor and avenge the genocide of millions

Physical resistance, both in the Jewish ghettos and Nazi death camps, took place in the form of escape. Large numbers of ghetto residents fled once they realized they were being deported to death camps. On the night of August 10 1942, around two hundred residents of the Mir Ghetto fled into a nearby forest (Mir During the Holocaust). Some of these refugees joined forces with Soviet forces to fight against the Nazi regime, while others just tried to stay alive and hide from search parties looking for them.

Active resistance within extermination camps only took place very few times. The revolt that took place in Auschwitz-Birkenau attempted to put an end to the murder by disrupting the operation of the crematoria, and also to create a memory and a testimony to the tragedy of the lives and deaths of the hundreds of thousands of people who were killed there (*Resistance during the Holocaust*). Jewish prisoners whose assignments were to dispose of bodies from the gas chambers initiated the rebellion within the camps. In Auschwitz, women smuggled in explosives from a weapon factory in order to blow up a crematoria. At the same time, prisoners from Birkenau attempted a mass escape. The prisoners managed to kill a few SS Guards who got in their way. Although most of the rebels died in the fight, some prisoners were able to escape. Within concentration camps, prisoners that were captured after attempted escape were executed as a warning to other prisoners. In Treblinka, SS guards killed around 750 prisoners that were attempting escape (Camp Rebellion).

Within the all women's concentration camp of Ravensbrück, the political prisoners helped organize some active resistance. The women smuggled out illegal correspondences such as lists of arriving prisoners, the names of Nazi guards, and lists of executions.

Along with the many cases of Jews' physical resistance to the Nazi regime, a large amount of spiritual resistance took place throughout the Holocaust. In order to preserve their identity as human beings, they attempted to maintain their family life and cultural traditions. This was an attempt to not only resist losing their individuality but also a strong desire to retain family life, professions, dignity, and their very existence (The International School for Holocaust Studies). The smuggling of food into the ghettos can also be viewed as a form of resistance against the Nazis.

In Martin Gilbert's book, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy*, he states:

“Even passivity was a form of resistance. To die with dignity was a form of resistance. To resist the demoralizing, brutalizing force of evil, to refuse to be reduced to the level of animals, to live through the torment, to outlive the tormentors, these too were acts of resistance. Merely to give a witness of these events in testimony was, in the end, a contribution to victory. Simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit” (Gilbert).

This passage makes the important point that the Jews did not go to their deaths passively and without a fight. Both of their forms of opposition gave them dignity and pride, even though the Nazis were actively working to take it away. The

quality of life was so poor in occupied Europe, it is truly incredible how much resistance took place.

Throughout Nazi occupied ghettos, education went on in secret. Students would hide books under their clothing, while books and manuscripts were smuggled through underground channels into the ghettos. Cultural events such as concerts, lectures, and theater productions were also held, unbeknownst to Nazi authorities.

Religious traditions and practices were the major sufferers of persecution. Once the Nazis banned any sort of practice of Judaism, religious traditions and ceremonies had to take place in secret. Empty attics, garages, cellars, and storage spaces were transformed into small synagogues and prayer rooms (Terezin: The Prayer Room in the Former Jewish Ghetto). Religious observance became increasingly important as the Holocaust waged on. Although acts of spiritual resistance seem much smaller and inconsequential compared to physical resistance, both types of opposition took incredible amounts of courage; this defiant religious observance was necessary to keep Judaism alive.

Many prisoners, ghetto inhabitants, and victims of the Holocaust, kept diaries in order to document the atrocities of the Holocaust. The most well known diary is The Diary of Anne Frank. Millions of readers around the world have been touched by Anne Frank's first person account of World War II.

At the concentration camps, prisoners would keep secret records of details such as lists of the murdered and executed. People buried these documents in the hopes of them one day being found.

Ravensbrück was a concentration camp built specifically for women. This specific camp nurtured spiritual resistance in the form of small gifts, secret drawings, and the writing of poetry and recipe books. The women prisoners helped each other survive the grim conditions of the camp by lifting each other's spirits. Holidays and birthdays were celebrated with small gifts and tokens of affection (University of Minnesota). These attempts to keep morale high definitely made it harder for the Nazis to completely diminish the women. When spirits are higher, it is harder to psychologically break a person and exterminate a class of people. Women prisoners sharing recipes and participating in homemaking activities could allow them to temporarily and mentally escape from the camps. Jewish political prisoners Olga Benário Prestes and Dr. Käthe Pick Leichter collaborated on a newsletter, wrote poetry, and created an atlas to go along with secret geography lessons (Ravensbruck Women's Concentration Camp).

Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau would silently say their prayers as they worked and would hollow out potatoes to use them as menorahs for Chanukah; wicks were simply thread from clothing, and oil was stolen from within the camp (Resistance within Auschwitz-Birkenau).

The direct and indirect acts of resistance against the Nazi regime helped conserve an entire religion, culture of people, and the dignity of many. The opposition of Hitler and his forces took many forms. Underground movements of weapons and intellectual materials were the source of combat against SS forces. Passive resistance such as creating synagogues out of garages and maintaining religious traditions preserved an entire religion that was on the verge of extinction.

Other forms of passive resistance such as secret documentation is part of the reason why people around the globe know so much about the Holocaust and the atrocities of World War II.

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