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Jewish Resistance in World War II & Zionism: Making Aliyah in the Death Camps

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in

History.

By

Cierra Tomaso

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Brian K. Feltman*

ABSTRACT

My thesis examines the contributions of Jewish resistance fighters in Europe during World War II. The sources used are primarily memoirs of resistance fighters, primary documents from resistance groups, and secondary articles related to Zionism during that time period. The resistance movement began because there was a need for dismantling the Third Reich from within the bounds of the ghettos, the death camps, and the killing fields. This thesis will show that Zionism played a key role in the motivations of the Jewish resistance fighters in World War II. Additionally, it will examine how as Jews found that their home countries sought to cut ties with them, they found refuge in their new identity as Zionists.

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Introduction

The cultural marginalization of German Jews began years prior to the Holocaust, when Germany first unified. In 1879, Wilhelm Marr wrote about a war on Germany perpetrated by Jews.¹ Adolf Hitler and the Nazis traced their “image of the Jew to Christian antisemitism.”² This notion of biblical righteousness paired well with the fight to preserve what he referred to as the “Aryan race.” Following Hitler’s seizure of power, antisemitism became legalized persecution in 1935 with the implementation of the infamous Nuremberg laws. There was resistance from a small portion of the German population, but due in large part to the dehumanization propaganda Nazis had utilized, many “Aryans” had viewed Jews as inferior for years. As Marian Kaplan argued, the “social death”³ of the Jews had occurred.

By 1939, the T-4 Euthanasia Program, devised to get rid of people viewed as a drain on German society, was well underway, and this would become the training ground for future camp guards. By 1939, Poland was boxed in by Germany and the Soviet Union. For Polish Jews, it was too late to seek safe haven elsewhere. But in the years leading up to the war, Jews who could potentially flee found it difficult to leave their entire lives behind. Jewish men in particular were often pillars of their community--they had “a great deal more to lose [than women].”⁴ If Jews wanted to leave, most countries

¹ Wilhelm Marr, *Der Sieg Judenthums ueber das Germanethum vom nicht confessionellen Standpunkt aus betrachtet*, Trans. by P. Mendes-Flohr and J. Reinharz, (Bern: Rudolph Costenoble, 1879), 30-35.

² Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2001), 42.

³ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.

⁴ Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, 64.

had quotas, including the United States, and the German government was intent on making sure Jews left with no money, making it incredibly difficult to start a new life.

The question “why did Jews allow the Holocaust to occur?” is often posed by people unfamiliar with the historical significance of Jewish resistance. A more fitting question would be “why did the world allow the Holocaust to occur?”--since Jews did resist. They resisted in relatively small numbers due to a lack of weapons and resources. When Jewish resistance fighters coordinated with outsiders, it was typically the Red Army. The other Allied governments prioritized winning the war over saving individual Jews, though they knew about the mass killings from November 24, 1942 onward.⁵ December 17, 1942, the Allies, “issued a declaration denouncing Hitler's intention to murder the Jews of Europe and warning that any perpetrators would be held responsible for their crimes,”⁶ but made no further attempts to directly stop the mass killings.

Some estimates of Jewish partisan forces placed their numbers at upwards of 30,000.⁷ This includes groups in, “Poland, Belarus, the Ukraine, and the Baltic States.”⁸ Conditions were extremely difficult, regardless of whether the groups were operating in ghettos, camps, or fighting in the forests. This could account for the relatively low numbers of resistance. The Nazis would usually shoot members of Jewish Councils who aided in resistance efforts, which was an additional deterrent. Jews knew they were left to

⁵ “United States Policy and its Impact on European Jews,” United States Memorial Museum (hereafter USHMM), Last Accessed 30 March 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007652>.

⁶ USHMM, “United States Policy and its Impact on European Jews.”

⁷ Donald L. Niewyk and Francis R. Nicosia, *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 100.

⁸ Niewyk and Nicosia, *The Columbia Guide to the Holocaust*, 100.

fight for themselves, but they did not accept defeat. This thesis argues that Jewish resistance fighters, often motivated by Zionism, had a major impact during World War II. It focuses on Jewish armed resistance with ties to Zionism who fought against the Nazis. The motivations of the Jews who joined these resistance groups will be examined primarily through primary documents such as memoirs, pamphlets, and interviews by these resistance fighters.

Part I: Zionist Activities

The concept of Zionism existed in Germany and around the world before Theodor Herzl, the movement's founder, ever came up with "the grand gesture of creating a deliberative body to act as the representative of the Jewish people in its striving for national restoration."⁹ The first Zionist Congress met in Basel, Switzerland, in August 1897, but Zionist sentiment already had a foothold in Germany in the creation of the *National-jüdische Vereinigung*, or the National-Jewish Association, which met the month prior.¹⁰ Zionism was a reaction to both antisemitism and forced and/or voluntary assimilation Jews had been undergoing for centuries in all areas of Europe, but particularly Germany. Herzl allegedly witnessed "the collapse of the assimilationist dream"¹¹ which inspired his Zionist work. As some Jews were forging a new identity with another nation, gentiles in Germany were making key decisions about who was and was not a German. The NSDAP stated that Jews were not citizens in the 25 Points, which echoed what early Zionists had been fearful of in the 1890s.¹²

The Basel Program of 1897 stated, "Zionism endeavors to create for the Jewish people a homeland in Palestine secured by public law."¹³ In 1934, 8,497 Jews immigrated from Germany to Palestine to fulfill just that goal.¹⁴ There were numerous groups committed to Zionism in Europe and across the world. When World War II occurred,

⁹ Stephen M. Poppel, *Zionism in Germany 1897-1933; The Shaping of a Jewish Identity* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977), 21.

¹⁰ Poppel, *Zionism in Germany 1897-1933*, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² "Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression Volume IV, Document No. 1708-PS," The Avalon Project, last accessed 5 April 2017, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/1708-ps.asp>.

¹³ Poppel, *Zionism in Germany 1897-1933*, 173.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Table 7.

these groups did not simply disappear, rather, many shifted goals and became armed resistance to the Nazis.

Initially, Zionist Jews represented a small portion of German Jews. Prior to World War I, of about 500,000 Jews, 9,000 were Zionists.¹⁵ That number rose sharply to more than 33,000 by 1933.¹⁶ But by and large, German Jews followed the assimilationist *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* ideology--which placed precedence on one's German identity before one's Jewish identity.¹⁷ As World War II drew closer, 57,202 German Jews joined Zionist organizations between 1934 and 1935, constituting 5.8% of the total Zionist population around the world.¹⁸ Zionism remained prominent enough but clearly had "at best a secondary status behind other Jewish political organizations with different orientations and aims, such as the socialist Bundist party or the traditionalist Agudath Israel party, which represented Poland's sizable Orthodox Jewish population."¹⁹ Zionist youth, however, often either partnered with existing partisan groups or created their own groups during the war to take up armed resistance. Their ideology was that Jews would need to place themselves in Israel and not wait for G-d to do it for them. Zionist youth groups often wore uniforms and worked to differentiate themselves from their often more religious parents in other ways as well, including in ideology and work.

¹⁵ Poppel, *Zionism in Germany 1897-1933*, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Table 3.

¹⁹"Jewish Youth Movements in Wartime Poland: From Minority to Leadership — Photograph," USHMM, accessed March 17, 2017, https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10007224.

Hehalutz, or, the pioneer²⁰ movement, was, “an association of Jewish youth whose aim was to train its members to settle on the Land of Israel; it became an umbrella organization of the pioneering Zionist youth groups.”²¹ “In 1939, Hechalutz numbered 100,000 members worldwide, with approximately 60,000 having already made aliyah,”²² a number that explained its prominence in the Zionist movement.

Hehalutz was the largest proponent of the kibbutz movement during the 1930s, and “together with smaller pioneer organizations affiliated with other political parties such as the religious Zionist Mizrahi and Revisionist Betar, there were an estimated 34,000 young women and men living in kibbutzim in the diaspora, preparing to go to Palestine.”²³ Hehalutz mainly housed Jews without significant economic means, as the government of Mandate Palestine wanted Jews of some means to fulfill their limited emigration quota. In fact, “Only Jews with sufficient capital could enter freely and special permits (called certificates) were required for people without capital who came as workers.”²⁴ There were a limited number of certificates available and without significant money, Jews who took this route had to be prepared to enter on their own merits and work on a kibbutz.

²⁰ Rona Yona, "A Kibbutz in the Diaspora: The Pioneer Movement in Poland and the Klosova Kibbutz," *Journal Of Israeli History* 31, no. 1: 9, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2017).

²¹ “Resistance in the Smaller Ghettos of Eastern Europe: Glossary,” USHMM, accessed March 15, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007240>.

²² “History of Hechalutz,” Hachalutz, accessed March 10, 2017, <http://hechalutz.org/3.3/index.php/about-us/history-of-hechalutz>.

²³ Rona Yona, "A Kibbutz in the Diaspora: The Pioneer Movement in Poland and the Klosova Kibbutz," *Journal Of Israeli History* 31, no. 1: 9, EBSCOhost (accessed March 19, 2017).

²⁴ Yona, “A Kibbutz in the Diaspora,” 11.

The type of person willing to join a kibbutz seemed to line up with the type of person who would engage in resistance: “Anyone who was single, fit, over 18 years old, and engaged in hakhsharah, could join Hehalutz.”²⁵ Hakhsharah meant hard physical labor and knowledge of Jewish history and cultures, specifically: “Hebrew, as well as Jewish history and the geography of Palestine.”²⁶ The hard, physical labor was not just agricultural in nature, in fact, in Sarny, Poland, Zionist youth named themselves the Stonecutter’s Kibbutz. Like the third Aliyah creating roads in Palestine, they were stonemasons. Zionists of this sort were more like communists (though not in ideology) in their desire to unite and work together to achieve practical and visceral goals like paving roads.

These Jews were not necessarily studying Torah after pulverizing stones into gravel, and this set them apart from more religiously observant Jews, particularly most members of the Orthodox sect. There was good reason for the members of the Stonecutter’s Kibbutz to not inform their parents of their plans before they set off to plan their kibbutz. Zionism had an uneasy relationship with mainstream Judaism, which, “depended on the popularity of Zionism.”²⁷ As the economy in Palestine took a nosedive in 1926, people began to leave the kibbutz and Zionism in general—but those who stayed were dedicated to the cause. While many Zionist organizations disbanded, membership in Hehalutz dwindled, but came back with a vengeance when a new leader took charge. Benny Marshak’s “main contribution was to transform hakhsharah into an extension of

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 14.

the kibbutz movements in Palestine,”²⁸ which drew the Jews in Mandate Palestine closer to the Jews still desperate to make aliyah. The dispensing of certificates to get to Mandate Palestine was temporarily on hold, but there was work to be done training new emigrants.

Eventually, the kibbutz became not a waystation on the way to Palestine, but a way of life that could be practiced in the Poland until the certificates came through. Members of the kibbutz celebrated holidays together and became more family unit than friends. This shift to a permanent kibbutz marked the move to a more radical movement, one that did not resemble the average European Jew’s life in the slightest. In a way, it was a rejection of the past and a move towards a very different future. Winter of 1927 saw further changes in the kibbutz. Now, those wishing to make aliyah had to wait longer than six months. Additionally, those who were sick were kept on the kibbutz rather than being sent off. These decisions served to strengthen the validity of the permanent kibbutz.

The kibbutz was not just successful in its own right—it was a symbol, a beacon of hope to young Jews with Zionist aspirations with no familial support for their goals. Education and job prospects for most Polish youth, particularly Jewish Polish youth, was on the decline, and “in Poland the overwhelming majority of pioneers had an elementary education (84 – 91%).”²⁹ These were Jews with a deep yearning to experience radical Zionism, but without the knowledge to imagine the reality of life on the kibbutz. Observant Jews were not particularly welcomed, most kibbutz members seemed more secular, a fact which likely served them well later when working with the often antisemitic non-Jewish partisans. However, these Jews, some who would later fight in

²⁸ Ibid., 15.

²⁹Yona, “A kibbutz in the diaspora,” 21.

various resistance groups, grew up hearing the stories of the Maccabees and the siege on Masada. They took their fighting spirit and melded it with their work ethic and created a fierce opposition for the Nazis. There was something about the kibbutz movement that changed Jews formerly much more moderate on Zionism.

As the intent for the war became more defined, the true goals of Nazi antisemitism became clearer. If a group of people had not been considered citizens since 1920, the next step was dehumanization, so that when horrible things happened to Jews Germans would think about it no more than they would think about a rat being crushed. A well-known propaganda movie from 1940, *The Eternal Jew*, juxtaposed pictures of Jews and rats to create a firm link in German's minds about the nature of Jews. As Germans had victories throughout Europe, they experienced a sense of euphoria. In addition to winning territory in the war, they also compiled evidence for themselves being the superior race. Nazis realized that it was possible to undertake the race cleansing of their beloved Germany (and the rest of Europe) with little more opposition than finger-wagging from the Allies.

For Jews, the war caused not only a social death, but a literal death in numbers--the Jewish population has only just begun to return to its original size prior to the Holocaust, despite the advent of the state of Israel.³⁰ Many Jews who might have been considered "assimilated" in the 1920s would go on to fight against the Germans. They

³⁰ Alexandra Sifferlin, "Global Jewish Population Approaches Pre-Holocaust Levels," *Time*, June 29, 2015, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://time.com/3939972/global-jewish-population>.

“appear to have been motivated to a large extent and consciously by their Jewishness.”³¹

In Bauer’s *Rethinking the Holocaust*, he states, “Jewish armed resistance all over Europe should never have occurred,”³² especially not in the relatively large numbers it did. Bauer questions where this tradition of fighting could have come from.

While Bauer may have questioned the origins of “Jewish armed action”³³ he did not question its importance. Wherever this “communal self-defense”³⁴ came from, it became a way for the Jews of Europe to fight for their lives during World War II. It cannot be proven that armed resistance in and of itself swayed the war, thus, “the measuring rod has to be the effect this type of resistance had on those who engaged in it and on postwar Jewish consciousness.”³⁵ The impact of Zionist organizations like the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) and the Jewish Military Union (ZZW) cannot be underestimated. Some groups, like ZZW, “had ties to the Polish Home Army and received arms from some Polish officers.”³⁶ For the most part, though, the groups fought alone, and did not coordinate well even with one another. However, during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, ZOB and ZZW did coordinate, and together had approximately 750 members to ignite the uprising.³⁷ Throughout the course of the war, Jews masterminded many uprisings and sabotages. These occurred at some of the deadliest

³¹ Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 139.

³² *Ibid.*, 142.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

³⁶ “Jewish Military Union, Warsaw,” Yad Vashem, accessed March 17, 2017, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206384.pdf.

³⁷ “Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,” USHMM, accessed January 3, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005188>.

extermination camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau.³⁸

³⁸ Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 139-140.

Part II: Armed Resistance in the Holocaust

Popular accounts of the Holocaust often featured a recurring image. Time and again, the phrase, “as sheep led to slaughter,” made an appearance--ironically, a phrase that may have originated with Zionist resistance fighter Dolek Liebeskind. The image held by the Allies about Holocaust survivors was that of victims. The American soldiers and Soviets who liberated the camps often took pictures. The expression, aside from having a dehumanizing connotation, implies the Jewish people are to blame. The term martyr, or fighter, would lead some to the conclusion that the Allies could have--and did not--collaborate with the resistance movement. Instead of the story being the tragedy of mass genocide, it appeared the Allies simply refused to help the resistance fighters.³⁹

In Europe, there were two main kinds of camps: extermination and concentration. This thesis focuses on uprisings in extermination camps, which were the camps focused on killing prisoners. Concentration camps still tried to cultivate the appearance of the “Arbeit macht frei” motto-- “work will set you free.” This was the motto of the infamous extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the parts of Europe occupied by the Nazis, the Germans eventually sought a convenient, quick way to get rid of their “Jewish problem” and the extermination camp was the solution.

The average American, when faced with the question, “what did armed Jewish resistance look like,” probably pictured Jews fighting in the woods, as depicted in the popular movie *Defiance*. While the Bielskis and partisan groups like them provide a piece

³⁹ Richard Breitman has show that decoded messages from Nazis demonstrated that the British and Americans knew about resistance and the camps. See Richard Brietman, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans Knew* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).

of the puzzle behind the mentality of resistance, their path was different than the Zionist youth groups. While many of the Zionist youth group members wanted to escape, they also wanted to cause destruction and take as many Nazis down before they went. Many of the Zionist members were in places where it was not possible to hide older people and children from Nazis—places like Treblinka and Sobibor. The goal of the Bielski group was to save Jewish lives, but most Zionists just wanted to go out with a fight. Perhaps some of the Zionist youth's tendency towards violent uprisings could be attributed to youth, but it could also be attributed to their desire to preserve their reputation and dignity rather than hide in the woods and avoid confrontation.

Despite the prevalent myth that Jewish armed resistance was practically nonexistent, “Jewish armed uprisings took place in five concentration camps and in eighteen forced-labor camps.”⁴⁰ Unfortunately, by all accounts, Jewish partisans were always short on guns and ammunition.⁴¹ Additionally, Jewish resistance took place in forests and from within non-Jewish partisan groups. Those that disappeared in the non-Jewish partisan groups often did not disclose their identity, due to rampant antisemitism among the ranks. “Regardless of how Jews had joined a non-Jewish underground group and no matter how they felt about their Jewishness, being Jewish inevitably affected them,”⁴² sometimes through negativity from their comrades. Groups who hated the Soviets were often suspicious of any Jews, because they felt they were Soviet sympathizers. Roughly 20,000 to 30,000 Jews did participate in Soviet partisan

⁴⁰ Nechama Tec, *Jewish Resistance Facts, Omissions, and Distortions*, Miles Lerman Center For The Study of Jewish Resistance, 2001, 1.

⁴¹ Nechama Tec, *Jewish Resistance Facts, Omissions, and Distortions*, 17.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 40.

groups, but the suspicions of other partisans were built on antisemitism rather than cold facts.

Resistance in the Holocaust took many forms, and although this thesis focuses on armed revolts, it is important to note it was not the only type of resistance. In Hebrew *amidah* “means literally ‘standing up against’.”⁴³ This term encompasses all forms of resistance except passive resistance. In the ghettos and death camps a concept Bauer addresses in *Rethinking the Holocaust* is the “sanctification of life”⁴⁴ which “was taken to denote *meaningful* Jewish survival.”⁴⁵ The sanctification of life excluded armed resistance, which could and did often result in the death of Nazis and their collaborators and could additionally put other Jews at the risk of being killed for disobedience. Cultural resistance sometimes encompassed putting on plays in ghettos, though this brought up certain issues. In the Vilna ghetto’s theater, the Judenrat head Yakov Gens wholeheartedly endorsed the theater.⁴⁶ The inherent issue with the kind of comfort theater and activities could provide was it could “lull people into illusions of permanency and normalcy”⁴⁷ that were ultimately not in their best interests. Some Jews, like Herman Kruk, member of the Warsaw Bund, saw the theater as abhorrent, because “one does not stage performances on graves.”⁴⁸ Kruk, however, also did not endorse the upstart underground youth resistance movements if they promoted violence. Kruk spent his time involved in a pet project of the Germans, the Yiddish Scientific Institute, collecting data

⁴³Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 120.

⁴⁴ Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 120.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

“Germans wanted to use to document Jewish culture after the destruction of the Jews themselves.”⁴⁹ Abba Kovner, of the Farainikte Partisaner Organizacie (FPO) partisan group, firmly believed in armed resistance but also found no inherent issue in the theater and organizations like it.

“Contrary to a widely held belief in the immediate postwar period and the 1950s, there was a great deal of armed Jewish resistance throughout Europe”⁵⁰ which complicates the picture of the war many people hold in the twenty-first century. “In the primeval forests of eastern Poland, Belarus, and the northern Ukraine, probably some 30,000 Jews fought against the Germans, with inadequate weapons,”⁵¹ but most were murdered before war’s end. But the underground was fighting against an enemy that even most of its members did not expect to defeat: “In Poland and Lithuania working with the underground could not offer a real chance of survival, just a different type of death.”⁵² Resistance fighters were quite aware of this fact, and even of the fact that history would largely forget them. Zionist resistance fighter Dolek Liebeskind said, “For three lines in history that will be written about the youth who fought and did not go like sheep to slaughter it is even worth dying.”⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

⁵¹ Ibid., 136.

⁵² Ibid., 136.

⁵³ Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 140.

*III: Resistance in the Ghettos***Poland**

Within the ghettos, there were *Judenrat*, or Jewish Councils, which carried out the orders of the SS. These positions were a double-edged sword. As the middleman between the Jews and the Nazis, the chairmen of these positions often learned important information long before their fellow Jews. However, while this gave the illusion of power, these chairmen were largely powerless to stop the Final Solution, even in their own ghettos. Resistance was sometimes symbolic and spiritual, rather than armed, when it came from these chairmen. A perhaps infamous example was Adam Czerniakow. Czerniakow lived the realities of the Warsaw Ghetto until 1942 as the chairman of the Warsaw Judenrat. He committed suicide almost a year prior to the Warsaw Uprising. But although he did not survive long into the war, Czerniakow played a key role in the memory of Warsaw during the months prior to the uprising.



“Fascism must be smashed,” Warsaw Ghetto, 1941, from the underground newspaper *Jugend Shtimme*⁵⁴

Armed resistance against the Germans, who had an entire army and SS at their disposal, seemed futile in a ghetto where people had been starving for years. The first resistance was repressed within a few days, but resistance fighters continued to hide in the ghetto for months after the formal fighting ended. Czerniakow mentioned the resistance movement just twice in his diary. He does so through the eyes of the Gestapo, and carefully leaves any personal feelings or knowledge out of his diary. K. G. Brandt

⁵⁴“Jewish Youth Movements in Wartime Poland: From Minority to Leadership — Photograph,” USHMM, accessed March 17, 2017, https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10007224&MediaId=6071.

was “the Gestapo expert on Jewish affairs”⁵⁵ and he was particularly unhappy with the underground. Czerniakow held contempt for “Jews who served the Germans, the informers, extortionists, and underworld figures who degraded and corrupted the ghetto”⁵⁶ and thus probably sympathized more with the underground and their efforts to rebel.

The resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto had an effect not only on Jewish resistance fighters, but also on people in countries like the United States. The *Southern Israelite*, a newspaper from Atlanta, Georgia, covered the story on May 21, 1943, in an article entitled, “Heroic Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto.” The writer of the article was aware of the Warsaw Uprising and a similar uprising in Bialystok. There were many details in the article that pointed to why the Germans had such a hard time suppressing the revolt, but perhaps the best was this: “The revolt which broke out in the ghetto on April 18 was the culmination of similar uprisings which have raged sporadically in Warsaw since last December, when Jews who were being rounded up for deportation attacked the Nazi guards with axes and spades.”⁵⁷ The revolt was extremely violent, calculated, and had more weapons due to the Polish underground army supplying fighters with hand grenades and machine guns. The resistance made its way far beyond the Warsaw Ghetto and inspired many other uprisings, such as the one in Treblinka.

One of ZOB’s founders was Yitzhak Zuckerman, who was active as a youth in Vilna’s chapter of Hehalutz. He was active in Zionist activities throughout his entire life,

⁵⁵ Raul Hilberg et al., ed., *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, Publisher, 1979), 14.

⁵⁶ Hilberg et al., *Warsaw*, 19.

⁵⁷“Heroic Resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Southern Israelite*, May 21, 1943, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://newspapers.ushmm.org/article/7443>.

and helped found the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz in Palestine when the war ended. "In many cases, the youth movements were often the first to assess the early Jewish massacres as part of a comprehensive program, and were thus instrumental in the early organization of resistance."⁵⁸ Some of these leaders were trained in military tactics, many had worked on a kibbutz, and all knew how to organize youth and disperse information. The leaders had more autonomy than ever before—most groups answered to a larger umbrella organization prior to the war, but during the war they functioned as self-contained entities. These youth leaders were too young to serve on Jewish councils within ghettos, giving them more freedom to organize resistance.

ZOB formed on July 28, 1942 to circumvent Jewish deportations to extermination camps.⁵⁹ However, at that time, they could not mobilize other Jews to resist. Even if they had managed to convince them to resist, ZOB was divided, "made up of different political factions who had trouble cooperating, and the group did not have enough weapons."⁶⁰ This severely hindered them. But although deportations left "only 55,000--60,000 Jews in the Ghetto,"⁶¹ those young Jews left were now motivated by revenge and guilt at being unable to stop the deportations.

ZOB did not carry out any military attacks until November 1942, when they underwent a change in leadership with Mordecai Anielewicz taking over. They killed

⁵⁸USHMM, "Jewish Youth Movements in Wartime Poland: From Minority to Leadership — Photograph."

⁵⁹"Jewish Fighting Organization, Warsaw," Yad Vashem, accessed March 17, 2017, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206370.pdf.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹"Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," Yad Vashem, accessed March 17, 2017, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206509.pdf.

Jews who aided the Nazis with deportations, and in January of 1943 resisted the next round of deportations. They worked in coordination with Hashomer Hatzair, a Zionist-socialist group, and the Jewish Military Union. Deportations were temporarily halted, but the resistance continued to prepare for the next attempt at deportation. It was during April of 1943, when the deportation was again attempted, that they revolted and attacked the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto. They managed to keep fighting for almost a month, frustrating Germans who should have had a tactical advantage. The Germans tried to literally smoke the fighters out by lighting the bunkers they hid in on fire, but just when they thought the threat had been eliminated, the fighting would resume. Most ZOB fighters were eventually killed, but “several dozen fighters managed to escape with the help of ZOB members on the Polish side of the Ghetto who led them through the city's sewer system.”⁶² But like the fighters on Masada so many centuries ago, it was never about victory against almost unwinnable odds. It was about killing as many Germans as possible and fighting to the end. Mordechai Anielewicz wrote, “I have seen the Jewish defense of the ghetto in all its strength and glory.”⁶³ The fight was not, “to save themselves, but rather as a battle for the honor of the Jewish people, and a protest against the world's silence.”⁶⁴

⁶² Yad Vashem, “Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.”

⁶³ “Holocaust Survivors Describe the Last Months in the Warsaw Ghetto: Fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto.” Yad Vashem: Voices from the Inferno. Accessed April 1, 2017. http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto_testimonies/fighters.asp.

⁶⁴ Yad Vashem, “Fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto.”



Hehalutz fighters captured at Warsaw⁶⁵

While some Jewish partisans joined Soviets in the Red Army to fulfill their goals, one group fell more to the political far right. The organization Brit Yosef Trumpeldor, or Betar, came from Riga, Latvia, in 1923, but had a large presence in Poland—nearly 60% of Betar members lived in Poland in the early 1930s.⁶⁶ Their approach closely aligned with authoritarian leader Jozef Piłsudski's plan for Poland in 1931. One of Betar's core principles was its paramilitary component, and Betar members played this up for

⁶⁵“Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: Hehalutz Fighters,” Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, accessed April 1, 2017,

<http://www.lamoth.info/index.php?p=digitallibrary/digitalcontent&id=4308&q=hehalutz>.

⁶⁶ Heller, Daniel Kupfert. "Obedient children and reckless rebels: Jabotinsky's youth politics and the case for authoritarian leadership, 1931–1933." *Journal Of Israeli History* 34, no. 1 (March 2015): 47. *Historical Abstracts with Full Text*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 18, 2017).

Pilsudski, as they “pledged their obedience to him as faithful soldiers in the quest to build the future Jewish state.”⁶⁷ Revisionist Zionism promoted “the establishment of a Jewish majority in a Jewish state in Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Heller, “Obedient children and reckless rebels,” 48.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

IV: Belorussia

One of the most successful movements towards resistance was the partisans who hid in the Belarussian forests. Jewish partisans like the Bielskis hid in the forest and rescued other Jews. In fact, “the Bielski otriad eventually grew to over 1200 individuals, distinguishing itself as the largest armed rescue of Jews by Jews.”⁶⁹

However, while it was safer to live in the forest than it was to stay in a ghetto or camp, there were dangers from other partisan groups, not just from the Nazis. “An extreme danger for Jews seeking refuge was the Polish partisans of the Armia Krajowa (AK, Polish Home Army), and especially the Narodowe Sily Zbrojne (NSZ, National Armed Forces), known for their militant nationalism”⁷⁰ who were eager to purge Jews from the country. Jews, in their minds, were pro-Soviet, and thus posed a threat to their interests. While Jewish and non-Jewish Poles both wanted to take back their country, they had wildly different ideas of what rebuilding that country might look like. Jewish partisans had to avoid the “Guerrillas of the AK, NSZ, and other Polish underground organizations (nine out of thirteen) [that] looked upon the Jews as a pro-Soviet element, antisemitism playing its notorious role.”⁷¹ This is not to say that there was no cooperation between the Jews and non-Jews in resistance movements. In many cases, they traded intel

⁶⁹ Nechama Tec, "Women in the Forest," *Contemporary Jewry* 17, no. 1 (1996): 36, accessed Dec 1, 2016, EBSCOhost.

⁷⁰ Leonid Smilovitsky and Michael Gelb, "Righteous Gentiles, the Partisans, and Jewish Survival in Belorussia, 1941-1944," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 1997): 312, accessed November 29, 2016, EBSCOhost.

⁷¹ Leonid Smilovitsky and Michael Gelb, "Righteous Gentiles, the Partisans, and Jewish Survival in Belorussia, 1941-1944," *Holocaust & Genocide Studies* 11, no. 3 (December 1997): 312, accessed November 29, 2016, EBSCOhost.

and weapons, and there were known to be at least “nine detachments and one battalion”⁷² in non-Jewish partisan groups in Belorussia. Many Jews were saved from ghettos by partisans and brought across the Soviet lines.⁷³ In the summer of 1944, the Bielski’s particular group had 1,230 people.⁷⁴ From the Bielski camp, the Kalinin and Ordzhonikidze Detachments of the Kirov Brigade were created, proving the mettle and valor of Jewish partisans to many of their fellow partisans in Belorussia. In just two short years, “Between 1942 and 1944 they saved from martyrdom or deportation to forced labor in Germany more than one thousand civilians; derailed six enemy trains; destroyed nineteen bridges; burned one lumber factory and eight other German government properties; blew up eight hundred meters of railbed; and killed 261 politzai, Vlasovites (Russian soldiers who entered German service), and Germans.”⁷⁵ They were certainly not content with sneaking Jews out of camps, instead they also wanted to damage their enemy. The partisans evaded the Germans and took huge swathes of territory in Belorussia: “By the end of 1943 the partisans controlled 108,000 square kilometers in the rural districts, sixty percent of the republic.”⁷⁶

The Bielskis formed their partisan group in 1942, once “they became convinced that the Germans were determined to murder all the Jews.”⁷⁷ Tuvia Bielski had a strong commitment to his policy to accept all Jews, regardless of any potential adverse effects to the strength of the group. He believed in safety in numbers. The Bielskis reached out to

⁷²Smilovitsky et al., "Righteous," 313.

⁷³Ibid, 314.

⁷⁴Ibid., 315.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid., 318.

⁷⁷Nechama Tec. *Jewish Resistance Facts, Omissions, and Distortions*, 12.

Soviet partisans and formed a kind of partnership, which, “extended to food collection and to joint anti-German military ventures, and later included economic cooperation.”⁷⁸

The main goals of the group was survival and rescuing Jews.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

V: Poland

Resistance groups like the AK had no vested interest in rescuing Jews, even Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau, because their “non-Jewish prisoners were not confronted with total destruction.”⁷⁹ When the revolt in Birkenau finally came, Jews were aided by Soviet prisoners, not the Polish resistance. Late in 1944, “The rising began with the dynamiting of Crematoria IV, and continued with a fight in the nearby grove,”⁸⁰ and retaliation was swift. A handful of Germans died, but the losses were catastrophic for those who had risen up--roughly 450 people died either immediately or later as punishment for the uprising. The failure of the Polish underground and the Allies to assist the Jews in Birkenau may have contributed to its failure. Those who were part of the uprising were weak due to starvation and hard labor, and perhaps with more people and more arms could have staved off the guards long enough to at least allow a few prisoners to escape. As it was, no one escaped Birkenau that day. The Polish government had a base in England, with space and the relative freedom to develop strategies. They could assist the resistance fighters within the camp, but they delayed until it was too late.

Sobibor

Sobibor was built as a cog in *Operation Reinhard* and was the second killing center. This was not a concentration camp and kept only a limited amount of laborers to dispose of the corpses. 170,000 or more people were killed at Sobibor.⁸¹ Once there were

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ "Sobibor," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005192>.

no more bodies to bury, the camp would be shut down and all those who had been working murdered. When October 14, 1943 dawned, there were about 600⁸² prisoners still in Sobibor, and many were involved in a planned revolt. The camp was isolated, according to resistance fighter Esther Raab, it was, “so deep in the woods that nobody could even know that something goes on there.”⁸³ The mentality of the resistance fighters within Sobibor was desperate, because there was no real skill required in sorting clothes or burning corpses, so the workers were easily replaceable. The uprising was their only chance to survive.

Raab recounted, “I promised myself I'll never go to the gas chambers, I'll start running, I'll start do--they have to waste a bullet on me.”⁸⁴ Chaim Engel described the plans for the uprising, which essentially involved killing the guards quietly without drawing attention to themselves. Knives or axes were used, and, “they overwhelmed them and they killed them, and shoved them in under the, under somewhere that nobody sees, and, and the work went through like nothing happened.”⁸⁵ Approximately 300 prisoners successfully broke out, 200 of which escaped capture.⁸⁶

Treblinka

Treblinka II was like Sobibor in construction. It was also a part of *Operation*

⁸² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Sobibor.”

⁸³ “Jewish Resistance – Oral History: Esther Raab,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 16, 2017, https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_oi.php?ModuleId=10005213&MediaId=1126.

⁸⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Esther Raab.”

⁸⁵ “Sobibor – Oral History: Chaim Engel,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005192>.

⁸⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Chaim Engel.”

Reinhard. The Warsaw Ghetto transport in May 1943 had survivors of the uprising, which fueled existing sentiment to organize and revolt. Extermination camps were being cleaned up at the time—Germans did not want evidence of these camps left behind. Like in Sobibor, prisoners revolted in 1943 as the killing center seemed to be closing shop. During its tenure, “Treblinka was the most lethal extermination camp of Operation Reinhard, where approximately 870,000 Jews were murdered during the thirteen months that the camp was in operation.”⁸⁷

The resistance fighters had a distinct advantage, or so they thought—“They obtained access to the armory thanks to a broken lock.”⁸⁸ However, their revolt involved taking weapons from the camp armory, a risky endeavor that quickly got them discovered. They engaged in a shoot-out with the guards. While 350-400 Jews escaped, just 100 survived being hunted down by guards and locals alike.⁸⁹

⁸⁷Sheryl Ochayon, “An Interview with Samuel and Ada Willenberg.” Yad Vashem, accessed March 18, 2017,

<http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/interviews/willenberg.asp>.

⁸⁸ Thomas V. Maher, “Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action: The Cases of Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz,” *American Sociological Review* (2010): 260, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 19, 2017).

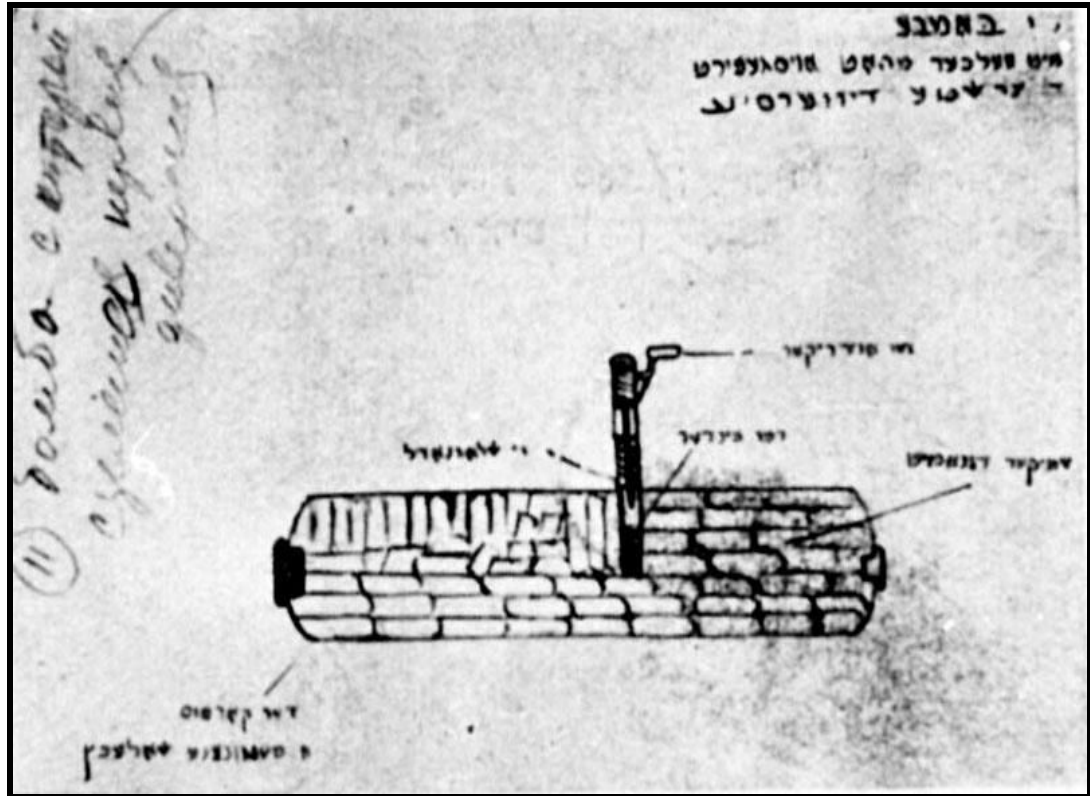
⁸⁹ Thomas V. Maher, “Threat, Resistance, and Collective Action: The Cases of Sobibór, Treblinka, and Auschwitz,” *American Sociological Review* (2010): 260, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 19, 2017).

VI: Lithuania

The Zionist group Betar was popular in Lithuania. Josef Glazman headed Betar in 1937 for just three years before members had to move underground when the Soviet Union banned all Jewish political movements. “Glazman helped found an underground militia called the United Partisan Organization (Fareynegte Partizaner Organizatsye, FPO)”⁹⁰ in 1942. Glazman and Abba Kovner organized, between them, 300 members into two separate units. The FPO used propaganda against the Germans when they created “an underground printing press in Vilna and later in the ghetto which served to print posters calling for resistance to the Germans.”⁹¹ They engaged in many forms of sabotage as well, putting mines on tracks in July 1942 to delay German trains. Weapons were brought into the ghetto by resistance fighters, and weapons manufactured for Germans were sabotaged in the factories.

⁹⁰ “Josef Glazman,” Yad Vashem, accessed March 16, 2017, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206295.pdf.

⁹¹ “Final Days of the Ghetto: The Underground Movements in Vilna,” Yad Vashem, accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/ghetto_underground_movements.asp.



Bomb diagram for railroad track sabotage⁹²

The support for the creation of the FPO began “At a meeting of Zionist youth groups on January 1, 1942,”⁹³ where Abba Kovner introduced his manifesto, which encouraged these young Zionist Jews to rail against the Nazi rule. Lithuanian Jews were what Kovner referred to as being “chosen as the first in line”⁹⁴ to be murdered by Hitler. Lithuanian Jewish youth had little to lose by this point, because as Kovner pointed out in

⁹²Yad Vashem, “Final Days of the Ghetto.”

⁹³“Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto,” USHMM, accessed March 17, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/research/the-center-for-advanced-holocaust-studies/miles-lerman-center-for-the-study-of-jewish-resistance/medals-of-resistance-award/resistance-in-the-vilna-ghetto>.

⁹⁴USHMM, “Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto.”

his speech, 60,000 of the 80,000 Jews in Lithuania's "Jerusalem" were already dead.⁹⁵ The speech was notably read in Hebrew and Yiddish, not Lithuanian or a secular language. The FPO followed similar patterns as the ZZW in the Warsaw Ghetto, but never enacted a formal uprising due to miscommunication between others in the Vilna Ghetto when it was liquidated in September of 1943.⁹⁶ This group, and one of its leaders, Kovner, are thought to be responsible for the popularization of the phrase regarding sheep led to slaughter, although his exact quote has a different tone: "Let us not go as sheep to slaughter."⁹⁷ His quote had ramifications, as many felt it assigned undue blame to Holocaust victims, but at the time he must have felt it had merit as a battle cry, what he hoped would spur the Vilna ghetto into an uprising.

The manifesto spread, and "was disseminated from Vilna by youth movement couriers, mainly women, to the ghettos of Poland, Lithuania and Belorussia."⁹⁸ Kovner closed his speech with the words, "Resist! To the last breath."⁹⁹ The fighting in the Vilna Ghetto was ultimately aborted and the FPO went to join partisans in the forest, but the seeds of rebellion had been planted in other places.

⁹⁵ "Response of the Youth Movements in Vilna and Rescue Efforts," Yad Vashem, accessed March 17, 2017, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/vilna/during/responses_to_the_murder.asp.

⁹⁶ "United Partisan Organization, Vilna," Yad Vashem, accessed March 16, 2017, http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205902.pdf.

⁹⁷ Ginor Ben-Yoseph Zvia, "'Meteor-Yid': Abba Kovner's Poetic Confrontation with Jewish History," *Judaism* 48, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 35, EBSCOhost (accessed March 16, 2017).

⁹⁸ Yad Vashem, "Response of the Youth Movements in Vilna and Rescue Efforts."

⁹⁹ Ibid.



Boris Yochai placing dynamite near Vilna¹⁰⁰

Kovner held a firm belief in Zionism, and as the war came to an end, he “helped to lay the foundations for the organized mass exodus of surviving Jews from Eastern Europe through the closed gates of British-controlled Palestine.”¹⁰¹ Like Zuckerman, he wanted to take the Zionist mission beyond what was accomplishable prior to World War II. The resistance, for Kovner, did not end in 1945. The group Nokmim, or the “avengers,” was dedicated to finding war criminals that had not been prosecuted, and killing them. There

¹⁰⁰ “Armed Jewish Resistance - Photographs,” USHMM, accessed March 18, 2017, https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10005441&MediaId=1957.

¹⁰¹ “Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto,” USHMM, accessed March 19, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/research/the-center-for-advanced-holocaust-studies/miles-lerman-center-for-the-study-of-jewish-resistance/medals-of-resistance-award/resistance-in-the-vilna-ghetto>.

was a plan for “the poisoning of the water supply of five German cities,”¹⁰² but it was never enacted. “The world wanted to move on; the Americans, especially, were anxious to absorb western Germany into a new alliance against the Soviet bloc,”¹⁰³ but men and women like Kovner could see no justice in allowing war criminals to walk free. Even after the war, Zionist resistance fighters continued to see themselves as the protectors of Jewish honor.

¹⁰² Jonathan Freedland, "Revenge," *The Guardian*, July 25, 2008, accessed April 1, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jul/26/second.world.war>.

¹⁰³ Jonathan Freedland, "Revenge."

VII: Conclusion

Jewish resistance fighters played an important role in World War II, despite their relatively low numbers. Zionism was instrumental in the motivations of many resistance fighters. Many saw resistance as a way to save the dignity of the Jewish people, despite the odds that they would die fighting. Zionist Jewish resistance fighters motivated revolts in places like Treblinka and Sobibor where no other groups could or would reach. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in particular was known outside the bounds of the Ghetto. When survivors brought news of the difficulty Germans experienced in putting down the rebellion, death camp prisoners in Treblinka were motivated to overthrow their camp. Zionist Jewish resistance fighters found comfort in fighting side-by-side with people who were often times fellow members of the Zionist groups of their youth. While Zionists alone could not curb the death and destruction of the Jewish people, their actions of defiance showed the world Jews were not about to be led like sheep to slaughter.

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