

ARMED RESISTANCE IN THE GHETTOS AND CAMPS

RESISTANCE IN THE GHETTOS

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

During four days in January, the Germans sought to round up Jews and the armed resistance continued. The ghetto inhabitants went through a swift change, no longer believing that their value as labor would safeguard them. With the news of the first incident of fighting they stopped responding to the Germans' calls that they come to the gathering point, known as the *Umschlagplatz*. They began devising hiding places, and the Germans had to enter many buildings and ruthlessly pull out Jews. Many were killed in their homes when they refused to be taken. On the fourth day, having only managed to seize between five and six thousand Jews,



A Jew inside a bunker used for hiding. National Archives and Records Administration

the Germans withdrew from the ghetto. The remaining inhabitants believed that the armed resistance combined with the difficulties in finding Jews in hiding, had led to the end of the *Aktion*. As a result, over the next months the armed undergrounds sought to strengthen themselves and the vast majority of ghetto residents and zealously built more and better bunkers in which to hide.



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

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

On the eve of Passover, April 19, 1943, German forces again entered the ghetto aiming to liquidate it. This time they were more prepared for resistance, but so were the two Jewish undergrounds and the ghetto population. Mostly with handguns, but also with a few rifles and many homemade Molotov Cocktails, several hundred young Jewish fighters who had no military training or battle experience confronted the German military force in pitched battles. In the hand-to-hand combat the Germans were not able to put down the rebellion, since many fighters managed to get away and retreat over the rooftops; nor could the Germans find the non-combatant Jews hiding in the bunkers.

Both sides sustained losses, but the ghetto fighters knew even before they had begun that they could not really defeat the powerful German forces. They

fought primarily for the sake of offering resistance, for vengeance, and with the idea that the Germans should pay a heavy price for their lives. They did not believe the fighting could lead to mass rescue, but they did hope that some fighters and ghetto inhabitants might be able to escape from the convulsing ghetto and continue offering resistance as underground members and partisans.

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

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

the entire street shook, the flags ceased to wave, having been shot to pieces.

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

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

In addition to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in approximately one hundred other ghettos in Eastern Europe underground fighting organizations were formed. They came into being with goals similar to those of the Warsaw ghetto fighters, understanding they could not defeat the Nazis and to a large extent fighting



ABOUT PHOTOS

During the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, April–May, 1943, from left to right: Burning of blocks of dwellings during the suppression of the uprising, National Archives and Records Administration; Waffen SS soldier next to destroyed dwellings, National Archives and Records Administration; the ruins of the Great Synagogue on Tłomackie Street destroyed as a sign of the final suppression of the uprising.



Waffen SS soldiers leading Jews captured during the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park 6003996

for its own sake. Nevertheless, some undergrounds put more emphasis on various escape plans that would be implemented in the wake of the fighting. There were cases in which the fighting was spontaneous and others where it was more organized. In most cases, Jewish youth movements were deeply involved. In some places the planned armed resistance was never realized, owing to local conditions. Ultimately each ghetto has its own story. Among all of the ghetto uprisings, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the largest, the longest, and the most influential.

RESISTANCE IN THE EXTERMINATION CAMPS

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

The first of these uprisings was in Treblinka on August 2, 1943. Six hundred prisoners using mostly knives, clubs, and other “cold” weapons (weapons that do not



German storm troopers force Jews of all ages in the Warsaw ghetto out of the bunkers during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April-May, 1943.

involve fire or explosions) fell upon their guards and then broke out of the camp. Most of the rebels were killed immediately or very soon after they left the camp. Several dozen managed to escape. In Sobibor, on October 14, 1943, the fate of the fighters was very similar, although somewhat more managed to flee and hide or join the partisans nearby. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, on October 6 and 7, 1944, prisoners who were forced to work in the special unit in the gas chamber complex, the Sonderkommando, managed to blow up one of gas chambers, but they all fell in the ensuing battle. All of these uprisings were born of desperate situations, but nevertheless say much about the spark of humanity and dignity that remained alive among many prisoners even in the unyielding cruelty of the Nazi camps.