



ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
& EDUCATION CENTER

Introduction to Resistance during the Holocaust

Jews, and all groups of people oppressed by the Nazis, resisted in many ways, both armed and unarmed. Many brave acts of resistance were carried out in ghettos and camps by individuals and groups of people in national and political movements.

Have students read about courageous acts of resistance below, from excerpts of our Karkomi Holocaust Exhibition and explore the linked videos. This information will introduce students to the myriad of ways that the Jewish people resisted and fought back during the Holocaust. After reading this information, use the questions below to guide discussion, have students write a short response or create a video response.

Defiance: Cultural and Spiritual Resistance

Confronted with horrific conditions, Jews struggled to create as normal a life as possible.

When schools were closed, clandestine classes were started. When religious services were prohibited, makeshift synagogues were formed. Zionist youth groups and political parties met and sponsored social and cultural activities. Soup kitchens became late-night meeting centers. Gardens were planted. Theater, music, poetry, and art raised spirits and gave structure to people's lives.

In the early days of the deportations in 1942, most ghetto residents believed the time was not right for revolt—the fate of those deported was uncertain, and taking up arms would be suicidal. Jewish history taught that even the worst persecutions ended. But as deportations continued, despair gave way to a determination to resist.

Watch this video: [Charlene Schiff Describes a Clandestine School for Children in the Horochow Ghetto.](#) - USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia

Smuggling and Survival in the Ghettos:

For the Jews, protecting the most vulnerable was essential. Orphanages were relocated into the ghettos, and schools, health clinics, and soup kitchens demonstrated the Jewish community's commitment to ensuring its future.

Daily life in the ghetto was an unending struggle for survival. Work was scarce but essential. Traditional family structures were upended, as fathers lost their role as providers, mothers had little to offer their children, and children smuggled food for their parents.

Food was smuggled past inattentive guards, through breaches in walls, and within sewers and underground tunnels. Goods were then traded on the black market. As conditions worsened year by year, people ran out of possessions to sell or barter, making families' situations even more dire.

Escaping the Ghetto

Escape from the ghetto was possible only for a few. Some escaped through gaps in the wall, through sewers, or by tunneling underneath the wall. Others slipped away from work brigades outside the ghetto. Once outside, some Jews were able to pass as Christians by using false identity papers. Others found non-Jews willing to hide them as a gesture of solidarity or because it benefitted them financially. Jews also survived in forests bordering Vilna, Minsk, Kovno, and other cities.

Those who hid lived in constant fear of betrayal and discovery. Jews who were discovered in hiding were shot or sent directly to the camps. Rescuers who hid Jews were subject to death if they were discovered, while informers who turned in Jews and their rescuers received rewards.

The Couriers: Bringing News and Hope

From the beginning of the war, Zionist youth organizations sent out couriers—mostly young women, some as young as fifteen—to serve as a lifeline to Jewish communities throughout Europe. Passing as non-Jews, they transported information, mail, documents, forged identity papers, underground newspapers, money, and eventually ammunition and weapons into the ghettos.

Couriers maintained contact between ghettos and forest resistance groups, preparing the way for resistance fighters and other ghetto inhabitants to escape.

The mass murder of European Jewry ultimately became known within the ghettos through information gained by the couriers. Couriers also warned communities

where slaughter had not yet occurred, so they could possibly mount armed resistance.

Documentation in the Ghettos

Jews responded to ghettoization by establishing clandestine communications to inform one another about the progress of the war, counter false information about deportations, and eventually encourage Jewish resistance. Jews wrote eyewitness accounts in diaries and published underground newspapers--fifty such newspapers in the Warsaw ghetto alone.

Emanuel Ringelblum, founder of the Oyneg Shabbes underground archive in the Warsaw ghetto, assembled a group of historians and writers to clandestinely record what Jews were experiencing and collect the documents of daily life. Similar efforts were made in other ghettos.

Artists and photographers chronicled Jewish life—the work of social welfare agencies, Zionist youth movements, and cultural activities. They also recorded the unending misery in the ghettos. Archives, personal documentation, and photographic collections were buried or smuggled out for safekeeping to ensure that this documentation would survive.

Watch this video: [Emanuel Ringelblum: The Oyneg Shabbes Underground Archive in the Warsaw Ghetto](#) - Yad Vashem

Armed Resistance in the Ghettos

Most Jewish leaders and ghetto residents considered armed rebellion suicide. But as deportations and rumors of death camps increased, some realized their choice was not whether to die, but how to die. Resistance was its own reward.

Young Zionists and Jewish Socialists in Warsaw, angered by their own inaction when 265,000 Jews were deported to Treblinka in summer 1942, urged armed resistance. They formed the Jewish Fighting Organization and, with smuggled weaponry and handmade arms, prepared for an uprising should the Germans attempt to deport the 55,000 remaining Jews in the ghetto. When German troops entered the ghetto in January 1943, Jewish fighters attacked. German forces withdrew, halting deportations for a time. This resistance culminated in a month-long revolt in April and May 1943.

The Warsaw ghetto uprising was the largest Jewish revolt in German-occupied Europe.

It inspired underground groups in more than 90 ghettos in German-occupied Poland and Lithuania. The courage of the Jewish fighters also inspired uprisings in other ghettos including Bedzin, Bialystok, Czestochowa, Lachwa, and Tyczyn, and the citywide Warsaw uprising in August 1944.

Outside the Ghettos: Jewish Partisans

Jewish partisans fought in almost every country in Europe. Both male and female, many of them teenagers. The majority escaped ghettos and labor camps and joined resistance groups in the forests. 20,000-30,000 Jews joined organized resistance groups in eastern Europe. Jews were not always welcome in partisan groups because of antisemitism, so Jewish fighters concealed their identity or formed separate units. Jews joined hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish partisans fighting the Germans.

Partisans blew up thousands of Nazi supply trains and destroyed numerous power plants and factories, focusing their attention on military and strategic targets. The partisans had few arms and little ammunition but were successful because they knew how to use the terrain to their advantage. Most successful missions took place at night.

Living conditions were harsh, without real shelter from the elements. Partisans died from infection and disease; bandages were washed and reused. They begged, borrowed, bribed, and stole whatever they needed in order to survive and continue the fight.

Watch this Video: [Introduction to the Jewish Partisans](#) - Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation

Discussion Questions:

1. What types of resistance were discussed?
2. How were the types of resistance different? Similar?
3. What does the term "resistance" mean to you? Did your understanding of that term differ after reading through the information above?
4. What challenges did Jewish people face when trying to organize armed resistance?
5. What were some of the hardships that the Partisans faced?
6. What is the importance of spiritual resistance?

