

How did Jewish people resist during the Holocaust?

History

Lesson 3 of 4 lessons

Lesson 3: Violent Jewish resistance

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The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Part 1)

When the ghetto was created in the Polish city of Warsaw in 1940, more than 400,000 people were imprisoned inside its walls. Tens of thousands of Jews died of disease and starvation. In 1942, between July and September, 235,000 people – almost all children and old people – were **deported** from the ghetto to be murdered in the Treblinka death camp. By 1943 only 60,000 people remained in the ghetto. When the final deportations began on 19th April 1943, Jewish resistance groups launched the uprising.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was the first major **civilian** uprising anywhere in Nazi-occupied Europe, one reason why it is the best known of the many ghetto risings of 1943. The Jewish resistance fighters faced many obstacles, the main one being how to find weapons. The fighters also faced the danger of being discovered and little support from the non-Jewish Polish resistance outside the ghetto walls.



The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Part 2)

Despite this, the desire to resist grew after the mass **deportations** of 1942. This is because the deportations made it clearer what the Nazis were intending to do with the Jews. Those who survived the deportations tended to be younger people who were physically and psychologically more likely to resist. Most of the Jewish resistance fighters did not have family ties, which helped them to fight all the harder.

Few resistance fighters expected to survive, but, feeling they had nothing left to lose, they hoped to make a statement of Jewish pride. The Jewish commander of the resistance was called Mordechai Anielewicz. His last letter read, “the dream of my life has come true. I’ve lived to see Jewish defence in the ghetto in all its greatness and glory.”

The Jewish resistance fighters fought German forces for four weeks.



The Sobibór Uprising (Part 1)

The Sobibór Uprising of October 1943, was perhaps the most spectacular act of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. The inmates of the camp faced difficulties similar to those of the Jewish resistance fighters in Warsaw. Their greatest difficulties were a lack of weapons and the risk of being discovered.

Naturally, the situation was even more dangerous because they were inside a tightly guarded death camp. Communication between prisoners was very difficult due to the physical separation of those who worked in the **extermination** area and those in the Nazi guard warehouses. Even if prisoners managed to get out of the camp, they faced huge obstacles: the exploding landmines around the camp fence; the swamps and thick forests; German search groups; limited opportunities for shelter in a sparsely-populated region; the possibility of being reported by the local population.



The Sobibór Uprising (Part 2)

In this context, the fact that so many Jewish people escaped may be seen as a success. There was a similar uprising at the Treblinka death camp. If put together, the Sobibór and Treblinka uprisings saw around 400 out of the 1,500 prisoners of the two camps escape and manage to stay safe and not be caught. Around 100 survived to 1945. The scale of this achievement can be measured by comparison with another camp, the Bełżec death camp, where there was no revolt and only two of the prisoners in Bełżec survived the war.



Glossary

Civilian: People in a war who are not in the armed forces. Ordinary men, women and children who are not fighting in an army but who are affected by the war.

Deported/Deportations: The organised rounding up of Jewish men, women and children in one place and transporting them to the ghettos or death camps.

Extermination: Another word for murder but more widely to mean to try to get rid of people completely, in this case, every Jewish human being living in Europe.

