

## Reading 15A

### JEWISH ARMED RESISTANCE

#### PART I: THE QUESTION OF ARMED RESISTANCE

1. For Poland, the war is over. Germany has won. Polish cities are occupied. The Jewish and non-Jewish populations are subjected to laws imposed by the conquering Germans. People are still with their families—parents, grandparents, sisters and brothers. It is against the law to own any weapons, and guns are scarce. Recognizing all of these factors, consider carefully the following question.

Should the Jews have retaliated with violence at this point?

2. A Jewish ghetto is ordered to be formed. Jewish families are moved into apartments with other families. The average apartment now has 7.5 people per room.

Should the Jews have retaliated with violence at this point?

3. Food is rationed and forced labor begins. Anyone refusing work will be imprisoned along with his family in a concentration camp.

Should the Jews have retaliated with violence at this point?

4. Within two weeks, starvation reduces the ranks of the Jewish population. Typhus is rampant along with dysentery. Sanitation facilities and running water are minimal. Lice, disease, hunger all produce hysterical, weakened and sick people. Within one month, most people have lost 30 to 40 pounds.

Should the Jews have retaliated with violence at this point?

5. Deportations begin and contrast is everywhere: dying, starving and sick victims contrast with healthy, strong, heavily armed SS men.

Should the Jews have retaliated with violence at this point?

6. Rumors continue to be heard that those who are deported have been resettled and are working. Post cards and letters have come back saying that life is hard but tolerable (no one in the ghetto knew that their relatives had been forced to write these postcards.) On the one hand, there is fear for one's family members; on the other hand, there is hope for survival. No one expects a policy of annihilation.

Should the Jews have retaliated with violence at this point?

7. A train transport. Eighty people are jammed in a boxcar for three days without food or water. There are no sanitary facilities and barely enough air to breathe. This happens after prolonged starvation, slave labor, sickness, beatings, fear. People are totally demoralized.

The doors open—Auschwitz. Dogs, guns, yelling, crying, screams, smoke, the stench of burning flesh, family members slip away—a nightmare.

Should the Jews have retaliated with violence at this point?

8. Do you think asking: “Why didn’t the Jews resist?” is an appropriate question in light of what you now know of the conditions during the Holocaust?

Also, family bonding worked against Jewish resistance. The *Gestapo* technique of holding the group responsible for individual actions stopped armed resistance. Whole communities were destroyed because of acts of armed resistance. One example is the Czech town of Lidice {*lid-i-say*}. After the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in 1942, the Germans randomly chose the town of Lidice to be punished for this act. The men of Lidice were killed along with the children. The women were sent to concentration and labor camps. Such acts of brutality effectively stopped most armed resistance.

## **PART II: THE REALITY OF ARMED RESISTANCE**

Given the conditions described in this lesson, the following examples seem nothing less than miraculous. ([See map](#) for each example.) Keep in mind the conditions that prisoners endured in the death camps, the near-total dehumanization and starvation described by survivors in the videotape and presented in other parts of this curriculum.

### **Ghettos:**

- Tulin {*too-chin*} ghetto: On September 3, 1942, the Jewish community burned its homes and fled to the woods. Local Ukrainian populations hunted down all but 15 survivors of the 700 Jewish families and delivered them to the Germans.
- Warsaw ghetto: On April 19, 1943, German troops surrounded the ghetto in order to begin the final deportations. Over 310,000 Jews had already been deported since June 1942. Almost all had been sent directly to the gas chambers at Treblinka. The Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB), led by 23-year-old Mordechai Anielewicz {*ann-nee-lev-ich*}, consisted of about 1,500 young men and women. These young resistance fighters had lived in the ghetto for over two years and were nearly starved, suffering from disease and the sadness of having lost families and friends. In addition to these terrible conditions, they had managed to get only three light machine guns, about 100 rifles, a few dozen pistols, some hand grenades and explosives. When the resistors opened fire, the surprised German troops fled from the ghetto. The Warsaw Ghetto Rebellion had begun. It would last about one month, although the last documented skirmish in the Warsaw ghetto occurred in October, 1943, six months after the start of the rebellion.

The ZOB faced 3,000 German troops who were equipped with armored trucks, artillery, flame throwers, heavy machine guns and heavy explosives. The ZOB resisted until May 16, when the Great Synagogue was blown up and the ghetto, already in flames, was burned to the ground. Along with a few Polish non-Jews who had helped in the battle, 56,065 Jews surrendered. The prisoners were either shot, sent to Treblinka or Maidanek death camps or to labor camps where almost all died. Sixteen Germans had been killed. The Warsaw Ghetto Rebellion against the Germans was an utter failure from a military point of view. But word of it spread across Europe as a symbolic sign of hope for all those resisting the Nazis.

- Bialystok {bee-al-eh-shtok} ghetto: On August 16, 1943, realizing the Nazis were going to destroy Bialystok, the ZOB attacked the Nazi forces. The battle lasted one day on the outskirts of the city. The resistors ran out of ammunition and were captured or killed. One group of young women carried on the struggle from within the ghetto and were eventually killed. Several other people escaped and joined partisans in the nearby forests.
- Vilna ghetto: On September 1, 1943, largely because of increasing activity around the city, the Nazis moved to liquidate, that is, destroy, the ghetto. The United Partisan Organization (FPO), active for months, attempted an uprising within the ghetto. Poorly armed, they were hunted down and killed. Some escaped to the forests where they joined partisans until the liberation of Lithuania in July 1944.

### **Death Camps:**

- Treblinka: On August 2, 1943, after the camp had existed for one year, the 600 remaining Jews (800,000 had died there) blew it up and escaped to the nearby woods. Forty survived.
- Sobibor: On October 14, 1943, armed with hatchets, Jewish prisoners and some Russian prisoners of war killed about a dozen Nazi officers. Four hundred prisoners, almost all who remained in the camp, rushed to the woods. Half died in a minefield surrounding the camp, and more were killed by Nazi and Polish Nazi groups. About sixty survived and joined Soviet partisans. Two days later, Himmler ordered Sobibor dismantled. The camp had been the site of the murder of over 250,000 Jews.
- Auschwitz: On October 7, 1944, one of the *Sonderkommando* units, the special group of prisoners used to clear the gas chambers of bodies, blew up one of the crematoria and attempted an armed escape. The members of this *Sonderkommando* were all killed.