

Frequently Asked Questions on the

Holocaust

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<http://www.adl.org/uprising/faq.asp>



What were the obstacles that made Jews hesitant to resist?

Jewish resistance fighters had the odds against them. Unlike classical guerrillas, who lose themselves by blending in with the local population, Jews were not mobile or unrecognizable. Confined to ghettos, they were captives who were vulnerable to retaliation. Because of widespread antisemitism in Eastern Europe, the Jewish resistance could not rely on popular support. Jews did not easily blend in with the local population. Finally, it was difficult and dangerous to obtain arms. They had to be purchased and then smuggled into the ghetto pistol by pistol, rifle by rifle. Material assistance was not available either from the Allies or the underground armies in Poland. Most importantly, the Nazi doctrine of collective responsibility where hundreds or even entire communities could be killed in retaliation for an act of resistance restrained ghetto residence [sic] from actively resisting until they clearly understood that *all* were going to die because they feared that their actions would put their family and friends, or even the entire ghetto at risk.

Were there other instances of resistance in the Holocaust?

Jews fought the Nazis in the forest of Eastern Europe and the ghettos of Poland. They fought in resistance movements in the West, with Tito in Yugoslavia, and side by side with Soviet partisans. Even in the death camps of Birkenau, Treblinka and Sobibor, Jews resisted with force. Crematoria were blown up and escapes were organized.

Is armed resistance the only form of resistance?

At first, armed resistance was not how Jews responded to Nazi oppression. They were more practiced in the art of spiritual resistance. Jews initially attempted to thwart Nazi intentions by non-violent means, stopping short of direct confrontation in which Jews would inevitably be overpowered. Later it became clear that death could not be evaded by cooperation, negotiation or forbearance.

Courage and valor in the face of death took many forms in the ghettos of Europe. Janusz Korczak went to the death camp of Treblinka with his orphaned children. He knew he was facing certain death. Still, he stayed with the orphans to the end. Mothers and fathers stayed with their children. Resistance fighters tended to be young and single. They did not have to care for their parents or provide for their children.

When did armed resistance break out?

Armed resistance was almost always an act of desperation that burst forth when all hope was lost. When Jews fully understood what the Nazis intended, any hope of survival was abandoned. At that point, the fighters were impelled by the desire to uphold Jewish honor and to avenge Jewish death.

Jews in the ghettos took up arms in 1942 and 1943 when liquidation was imminent. In many ghettos in Poland, Lithuania, Byelorussia and the Ukraine organizations were formed for the purpose of waging armed struggle. There was little hope of survival, even less of victory. Resistance was its own reward.

There were various patterns of ghetto revolts. In most ghettos, the underground was led by young people who had been trained in Zionist or Communist youth movements. The leaders and fighters were most often young because they were not bound by responsibilities for older parents or young children. They could think primarily about themselves and history.

Why did some Jewish leaders such as Adam Czerniakow oppose resistance?

The underground was at odds with those *Judenrat* leaders who believed that the ghetto would survive because of its economic utility. They did not accept the doctrine, practiced by Mordecai Rumkowski in Lodz and by many other *Judenrat* [Jewish Council] leaders, of salvation through work. Many Jewish leaders felt that acquiescence to German orders, even at the cost of the lives of a minority of residence would be sufficient to keep the larger ghetto population alive –at least for a time. But not all Jewish leaders opposed resistance. The young leaders of underground movements worked in tandem with those *Judenrat* leaders who fully understood the implication of Nazi policy. In most ghettos the choice was stark: deportation or armed revolt. Either one led inevitably to death. In many small ghettos where armed revolt erupted, among them Starodubsk, Tatarsk, Kletsk, Mir, Lachava, Kremenets and Lutsk, few survived. In Czestochowa, Bedzin, Sosnowiec and Tarnow, Jews rebelled only on the eve of the final deportations. In some areas geography provided a third option. Surrounded by dense forests of thousands of square miles, some ghetto residents in the German-occupied Soviet Union could escape to the forests and hide there for the duration of the war. One notable case – the Bielski brothers – formed a family camp composed not only of fighting forces but of

young children and older people who survived the war in hiding and by resisting.

Is there any truth to the accusation that Jews went like sheep to the slaughter?

In the fall and winter of 1941-42 the Germans killed millions of Soviet Prisoners of War, military men who offered no resistance. Jews were no less prone than other segments of the population that Germany controlled to offer resistance and indeed the forces in Warsaw put up a fierce struggle and held out for weeks against overwhelming odds. The Germans decided to set fire to the ghetto building by building rather than risking door-to-door combat. The phrase "do not go like sheep to the slaughter" was first years by resistance leader Abba Kovner who sought to shake the Jews out of their complacency in Vilna (contemporary Vilnius, Lithuania) in 1942. It was a poetic, polemical call to arms, not an actual description of Jewish behavior.

Some groups say the Holocaust never happened. How do we know it happened?

The Holocaust is one of the most documented moments in human history. The Germans left massive documentation, which has been supplemented by films and photographs, even aerial surveillance of the death camps. Survivors have written memoirs and documented their experience. One project, the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation established by Director Steven Spielberg has taken more than 50,000 interviews in 32 languages in 57 countries of the survivors. The Germans never denied their crime and court cases on five continents – beginning with the Nuremberg Trials convened by the Allies shortly after the end of World War II have established a judicial record of the crime. A recent court case in England established that it was accurate to call one of the leading Holocaust deniers "a racist and antisemite who deliberately falsified the historical record." In short, the evidence of what happened is massive and compelling.

Can you give me a basic timetable of the Holocaust?

Adolf Hitler came to power in January of 1933. From 1933-38 Germans laws were changed to systematically persecute and segregate the Jews. Jews in Germany were defined on the basis of the religion of their grandparents not on the identity they affirmed or the religion they practiced. Their property was confiscated, they were subject to apartheid-like regulations and encouraged if not forced to leave the country. In November 1938 their synagogues were set on fire, and 7,000 Jewish stores were looted in Germany, 30,000 men were arrested. As the Third Reich expanded in 1938 into Austria and Czechoslovakia and in 1939 into Poland and in 1940-41 throughout most of Europe, the persecution of Jews immediately followed. But actual killing of Jews did not begin until 1941.

In 1940 Jews in Poland were confined to ghettos. In 1941 Mobile Killing Units started to murder the Jews of the occupied Soviet-Union one by one, community after community. Mobile killers were sent to stationary victims.

And in 1942 six killing centers in German-occupied Poland were opened – Treblinka, Belzec and Sobibor, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Chelmno – and gassing replaced shooting as the preferred means of killed when trains transported the ghetto inhabitants to stationary killing centers. By mid 1943 almost all the ghettos of Poland were emptied of their Jews by then had been murdered. Some killing centers were then closed as their task was complete.

What did we know in the U.S. about the Holocaust? What did we do about it?

In retrospect it seems that the United States had early and accurate information regarding the murder of the Jews but such information was often dismissed as propaganda and full attention was given to the war effort. Until 1944, there was no American commitment to rescue Jews and the general policy was that we would win the war and then worry about the refugees after the war, never quite understanding that by then it would be too late. American policy was described by a Treasury Department memo as Acquiescence to the murder of the Jews and the State Department was accused of "preventing rescue," "surreptitiously attempt[ing] to stop obtaining of information concerning the murder of the Jewish population of Europe and trying "to cover up they guilt by concealment and misrepresentation and the giving of false and misleading explanations for their failures to act and their attempts to prevent action. In short, the verdict of history is harsh. As one high ranking American official of the time said: "We did too little, too late."