



Study Guide: Antisemitism in the Partisans

RECOMMENDED FOR
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS



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Throughout German-occupied Europe during World War II, some 20–30,000 Jewish men and women fought as partisans. While some fought as part of non-Jewish groups, others formed their own Jewish partisan units. But no matter where or within which organizations, all Jewish partisans shared a common vision—to fight the Nazis and their collaborators and to forestall what they feared would be the obliteration of all European Jewry.



The strong antisemitic propaganda the Nazis used, as shown here in a rally in Berlin, played upon years of antisemitic feelings many people had. The Nazi anti-Jewish rhetoric spread beyond Germany and affected populations, especially in eastern Europe, where Jewish partisans had tremendous difficulty with both locals and fellow partisans. Source: USHMM Archive.

Like all guerrilla fighters, the Jewish partisans faced the difficult challenges of securing food, weapons and shelter, while surviving German attacks. Unlike non-Jewish combatants, though, the Jewish partisans also had to contend with pervasive antisemitism, hatred of them because they were Jews. Unlike classical guerrilla fighters, they could

not find safety within the local population, even under occupation.

Antisemitism had a long-standing presence in Europe. During the Middle Ages, for example, Jews were accused of being Christ-killers, child murderers, well-poisoners, the devil's helpers or devils themselves. Reviled and disdained, Jews were confined to ghettos and forced to wear specially marked clothes long before the Nazis came to power in Germany. Jews had even been excluded from certain professions and expelled from the countries they lived in simply for being Jewish.

While Jews had experienced antisemitism on and off for centuries, the kind of antisemitism introduced by the Nazis was radically different than its previous forms. In Christian Europe, for the most part, Jews were allowed to convert to Christianity; that is, while Judaism was despised and Jews were mistreated, if and when they converted, they could be accepted as Christians. By contrast, Nazi antisemitism, allowed no possible escape for Jews. Being Jewish was a

matter of blood, genetics, not religious identity. Being Jewish was considered a genetic defect, a taint of the blood, not something learned or professed but biological reality. And the Jews were considered a cancer among German society. For Hitler and many, many of his followers, Jews were considered subhuman, and their destruction was not only deemed desirable, but necessary for the health of the German nation. Under Hitler, in short, Christian religious antisemitism and secular political antisemitism was transformed into racial antisemitism.

To better understand the antisemitism Jewish partisans faced, it's important to understand the different forms antisemitism took in different parts of Europe. It's also important to consider the obstacles Jewish partisans faced just because they were Jews as well as the triumphs they achieved despite tremendous odds against them.

IN THE WEST

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Jews of Western Europe, including Germany, had been granted civil and political rights equal to their Christian neighbors. Metaphorically and actually, the walls of the ghetto had come down. This emancipation paved the road for assimilation, allowing many Jews to succeed in numerous professions. Such Jews had solid grounds for believing that in their regions of Europe, at least, antisemitism was a thing of the past.

In part, this assimilation explains how the Jews of Western Europe were able to blend fairly easily into resistance networks: the Maquis (underground) in France, Liberty and Justice in Italy, and the Fighting Squads in Holland. But while Jews fought alongside non-Jews in each of these partisan groups, the painful history of antisemitism had taught them to be careful in their dealings with non-Jews both within and outside the organization. As a Greek Jewish partisan recalled, it was best "not to tell we were Jewish." It was

helpful, too, "to appear Christian" by attending church, as he explained, "If we didn't do that (the villagers) would not give us any food or the information we needed."

According to Bernard Musmund, the same caution applied to French Jewish partisans. Before joining the Maquis, Musmund created fake identification and ration cards; after joining, he was armed. As he describes it, though, he "never met any antisemitism in the underground." That said, secrecy was of utmost importance to the partisans,



A Jew being threatened by a Polish partisan. Source: Ghetto Fighters House Archive.

and "nobody discussed personal business." As Musmund explained, "The less you knew about somebody and the less they knew about you, the better." In other words, while antisemitic attitudes may have been common among non-Jewish French partisans, there was little opportunity for the French Jewish partisans to find out.

As a member of the Italian partisans, Harry Burger explained that hiding his Jewish identity was aided by the fact that mountain villagers had little interaction with Jews. "They didn't know about Jews," Burger said, explaining, "In their eyes we wore red horns and a big tail. They didn't know that we're normal." Their antisemitic attitudes, in other words, blinded them to Burger's Jewishness. Burger's commander, by contrast, did know that Burger was Jewish, but didn't care. As the Viennese-born Burger explained, "My boss always said: 'He's Jewish, but that's okay because he shoots.'" The partisan commander may well have preferred not to have Jews in his outfit, but the need for fighters outstripped any antisemitic leanings.

In sum, in Western Europe, Jewish partisans faced antisemitic attitudes, but those attitudes tended to be held in check by a variety of forces: by the need for secrecy, by organizational demands, and ironically, by the antisemitic beliefs themselves. In a sense, the emancipation of Jews in Western Europe translated into their being somewhat more accepted within non-Jewish partisan units. Jewish fighters within the partisan units, even as they fought on behalf of Jewish survival, were often required to hide their Jewishness or it was 'kindly' overlooked.

IN EASTERN EUROPE

Under ordinary circumstances in the world of partisans, the enemy of your enemy is an ally. Thus, one would have imagined that all partisan groups would have cooperated and that partisans would have worked with each other. They would have been drawn together and cooperated with one another because of their common bond—the hatred of German-occupation. But in Eastern Europe, the condition of Jews was far from ordinary.

In Eastern Europe, Jews had been a historically hated minority, and religious antisemitism was common. "It was taken for granted," explained Simon Trakinski, a Jewish partisan from the city of Vilna. "The Catholic Church where I grew up used to remind their parishioners that the Jews killed Jesus. It was a way of life." Ben Kamm added, "I went to school with 98% Polish kids and two Jews. We were abused every single day. 'Dirty Jew, lousy Jew,' every single day we had to fight." Having never experienced emancipation, the Jewish populations of Eastern Europe were far less assimilated than their counterparts in Western Europe. The average Jew differed from his or her non-Jewish neighbors in religion, dress, looks, occupation, language and accent. Many Jewish men were orthodox, sporting beards and sidelocks, black caftans and hats. And most Jews spoke Yiddish, a language rooted in old German. Moreover, the Jews of Eastern Europe were far more populous than were the Jews of Western Europe. Eight million of the roughly 11 million Jews of Europe lived in Poland and Russia alone. With one of ten citizens having Jewish ancestry, Poland had the highest concentration of Jews in all of Europe.

While violence against Jews in Eastern Europe was not uncommon, before the onset of WWII, antisemitism was most often expressed systemically.

In Poland, for example, Jews were not allowed to hold government jobs after 1919 when these positions were nationalized. In the same year, all 6000 Jews who worked in the lumber industry were expelled from these positions. Quotas limited Jewish enrollment at universities, where those Jews who were admitted had to occupy the back benches of the classrooms. And while making up only 10% of the population, Polish Jews were made to pay 30% of the country's taxes. While these policies oppressed Jews, Polish non-Jews didn't typically murder Jews outright.



Norman Salsitz changed his identity seven times to blend into non-Jewish partisan groups, ultimately saving hundreds of Jewish lives. Source: Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation Archives.

The German occupation, however, loosened the restraints on violent impulses. Non-Jews were encouraged to attack Jews with impunity, sometimes perpetrating violence with greater force than the Germans requested." It was not uncommon, for example, for non-Jews, with the encouragement of the Germans, to go on 'Jew hunts,' seeking out Jews who had escaped from the ghettos or were 'passing' as Aryans. A report to the Polish government in exile explained that "A Pole who turns up with a captured Jew is first ordered to dig a grave for him. Immediately after his luckless victim is executed, he receives an award of 200 zlotys and the clothes and shoes of the deceased." As the war progressed,

such incentives grew more and more attractive. According to Simon Trakinski, "If a non-Jew would turn a Jew over to the Nazis, they would give them 50 pounds of salt or 10 liters of kerosene," both much-needed and hard-to-come-by supplies.

There are, of course, numerous examples of non-Jews who not only helped Jews, but saved Jewish lives despite the threat to their own. Polish partisan Sonia Orbuch credits her and her family's survival in the forest to a peasant who provided them with food during the brutal winter of 1942. When Ukrainian nationalists discovered the family's hiding place and prepared to attack, the peasant warned them to run. "Even though the world is cruel," says Sonia, "there are some good people and they should not be forgotten."

Within the partisan units of Eastern Europe, antisemitism thrived. Jewish partisans' accounts bristle with stories of betrayal, violence and murder. Gertrude Boyarski was nineteen when

the Germans destroyed the ghetto in her hometown of Derechin in eastern Poland. Together with her family she managed to escape to the forest, where they joined a partisan group led by a Russian commander. Her mother and the younger children stayed in a so-called family camp attached to the unit. The inadequately defended camp, a sanctuary for Jews attempting to escape slaughter in the ghettos, soon became a target for local collaborators. In one attack, her mother was murdered. In a second, two siblings and her father were also killed. Among the murderers Boyarski recognized a former classmate, a young man who only a few years earlier had been her partner in a dancing class. She pleaded with him to spare her life. "You are a Jew. You must die," she recalls him saying. He fired his machine gun at her and left her for dead. Luckily, none of the bullets actually hit her, and she made her way back to the family camp.

OBSTACLES JEWISH PARTISANS FACED

Whether in Western or Eastern Europe, and whether antisemitic violence was obvious, veiled or held in check, Jewish partisans faced tremendous obstacles, many of which had antisemitic histories as well. The Boyarski family's helplessness points to one of these: a lack of military training, which was especially pronounced in Eastern Europe. In Poland, for example, Jews had not been allowed to serve in the Navy and Air Force, and the Army had done its best to keep them from advancing beyond the rank of private. In Russia, it was not uncommon for Jews to end up serving 20-year tours of duty. "So what they did, they did tricks" to avoid army service, Ben Kamm explained. "Cut off a half a finger, ...because they wouldn't be able to shoot. Make a hole in their eardrum.... And this is what the Jews got that name as not a fighter. ...they did with reason. They didn't like the country to fight for. They didn't want to defend the country they lived in because it was so bad to them, to the Jews." A common Polish joke asserted that "a Jew can only shoot with a broom."

Another major problem which Jewish partisans had to face was their typical lack of presence in the countryside. The overwhelming majority of Eastern European Jewry lived in cities and towns—a habit descending from antisemitic laws against Jews' owning land. Accustomed to living in cities, many Jews were initially ill-equipped to carry on a life-and-death struggle in a rural setting.

The work of the partisans took place mostly in forests and depended on the collaboration and goodwill of farmers and foresters. The Jews' lack of strong links to the countryside therefore posed a serious challenge. Moreover, rural populations tended to be even more antisemitic than urban ones...Abe Asner's group in Poland tried to buy weapons from a local man in a small Polish village so they could defend themselves and fight the Nazis. The man kept promising to sell to them, but whenever it came time to meet, the man was never there, or made excuses why he could not sell it to them. Once, Frank Blaichman's group tried to buy food from a town's general store and the town's population chased them out of the village with pitchforks.

Finally, the deep antisemitism of many of the partisan unit members meant that Jewish partisans faced terrible dilemmas while serving in them. When Norman Salsitz was shot in the hand, requiring medical attention for the wound, he was taken to a doctor known to hate Jews. The doctor asked Salsitz to lower his pants for an injection, presumably so that he could find out if Salsitz was circumcised. The Jewish partisan coolly pulled out a hand grenade, informing the doctor, "If you do something funny I'll pull out the pin and we'll all be killed." The doctor complied.

The Home Army (Armia Krajowa, or AK) was the largest underground partisan movement in Poland, and took its orders from the Polish Government-in-exile in London. In the AK, antisemitism was not merely the belief system of certain members, it was official policy. The AK did not accept Jews. Norman Salsitz had tried to enter the AK, but was turned away. "I wanted to join the AK to be equal with all the other Polish fighters and not to be afraid for the AK members who fought on the same side." An AK document penned in 1943 stated that Jews were an "alien minority" that would have no place in post-war Poland and had to be gotten rid of "without exception." Thus, not only did the AK not accept Jews in its ranks, often, its members went out of their way to kill Jews. Unlike the Germans who were on unfamiliar territory, the AK was composed of local people who knew the area well. This made them extremely dangerous as Jews had nowhere to hide. "They looked for us in haystacks and sheds," declared Simon Trakinski, "They killed us even though we fought for the same side." As a result of this policy, few Jews survived in areas dominated by the AK.

Sometimes, Jewish partisans were singled out for the most dangerous or difficult assignments in their units. In Martin Petarsek's unit in Slovakia, a Jewish man named Schwartz was assigned the task of carrying a machine gun for many miles after a mission. This was the kind of job that would normally be shared between several partisans and was impossible for only one man to accomplish. Yet the commander ordered Schwartz to carry the heavy weapon himself. After two hours Schwartz requested a break so he could rest. The commander grabbed the machine gun and said, "That's exactly what I can expect from a Jew. Nothing else." Schwartz was later executed for "disobeying" orders.

Despite the Soviet history of problematic attitudes and policies towards the Jews, the Jews fared better in the partisans under communism. Unlike Nazism, communism preached racial and ethnic equality, at least in theory. Jews fought alongside non-Jews in the Red Army and as compatriots with Soviet partisans. Still, antisemitism in the forests ran deep. Many Jewish partisans were murdered by communist comrades. Even so, with communism and Nazism as the most bitter of enemies, it is not surprising that there were Jews who saw the former as the answer to antisemitism. Martin Petrasek, was convinced of it and "felt pretty comfortable" fighting alongside communists. Nonetheless, "for some reason," he still thought "it better that I don't say that I'm Jewish. Even if I saw a Jewish family...I tried to help them as a non-Jew."

JEWIS HELPING JEWS

Despite these considerable obstacles, Jewish partisans found clever avenues to overcome the disadvantages facing them. Jewish partisans in non-Jewish groups sometimes were able to help other Jews surreptitiously, whether those Jews were other partisans or desperate civilians. When the AK was organizing a mission to murder Jews known to be hiding on a farm, Norman Salsitz 'volunteered' to be one of the two men to carry out the job. Salsitz had earlier found a way into the AK—by changing his name and passing himself off as a Catholic. "As a Jew I couldn't even fight for my country. As a Jew I couldn't give my life for my country," he sadly acknowledged. But as a member of the AK, he saved Jewish lives. While en route to the farmhouse, Salsitz first shot his partner, then

More Information on the Jewish partisans

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation recommends these resources for further information.

Books

Jewish Resistance in Occupied Eastern Europe
by Reuben Ainsztein

The Jewish Resistance
by Lester and Lazar Eckman

Films

The Partisans of Vilna, a film by Aviva Kempner. Available for rental in VHS in some independent video stores.

The following short films are available online at: www.jewishpartisans.org/students/films

Introduction to the Jewish Partisans

Partisans Through the Eyes of the Soviet Newsreel

Living and Surviving in the Partisans: Food, Winter, Medicine and Shelter

Web Sites

Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation:
www.jewishpartisans.org

Simon Wiesenthal Center:
<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com>

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:
<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/jpart.htm>

coaxed the Jews from their hiding place by addressing them in Yiddish, eventually leading them to a Jewish partisan group in the forest.

Joe Kubryk did something similar. Kubryk had left home at age fourteen, joining a group of partisans a year later. The partisan unit included Ukrainians, Poles and Russians, and "none of them really liked the Jews," he explained. When Kubryk discovered that Jewish partisans were getting killed in far greater numbers than non-Jews in his unit, he investigated, learning that non-Jewish partisans often simply shot their Jewish partners, reporting them as having been killed in action. Kubryk informed a Jewish commander, who in turn informed his superior, a non-Jew. When nothing happened, the Jewish commander threatened to inform up the chain of command to Moscow itself, which finally triggered a response. Eighteen non-Jewish partisans were court-martialed and hung "from eighteen different trees with a sign explaining why." Kubryk was careful to emphasize that "They didn't hang them because they were antisemitic.... They were hung because they killed partisans."

The Jews in Kubryk's unit also gave assistance to escapees from the ghettos. These fugitives, Kubryk recalled, invariably showed up at their base without rifles, guns, or grenades, ruining their chances for admission to the partisan ranks. By burying some of the weapons captured during missions, Kubryk and his Jewish companions aided these new arrivals. Kubryk explained, "If a Jewish guy comes in and he's been told that he's got to go get himself a rifle we...gave it to him and he comes back with a rifle, or with a gun, or with a grenade, or whatever it was available at the time."

ALL-JEWISH PARTISAN GROUPS

As Kubryk's case makes clear, not all partisan groups in Eastern Europe excluded Jews. In Poland, Jews fought in the Peasant Battalions (Bataliony Chlopskie) as well as the communist-led People's Army (Armia Ludowa). Yet the pervasive climate of Jew hatred was oppressive. As Ben Kamm explained, "We didn't have one enemy; we had three enemies. We had the Ukrainian Nationalists, Polish Nationalists and the Germans. We had to fight three Wars."

Similar feelings prompted many Jews to form truly revolutionary armies, their own fighting units: all-Jewish partisan groups. These groups faced enormous challenges procuring weapons, food, clothes and other supplies. And yet, they occasionally succeeded beyond their wildest hopes.

Frank Blaichman was a 21-year-old fighter from the small Polish town of Kamionka. Blaichman's approach was simple: "If someone did something to a Jew.... We try to punish those people." The unit's first mission targeted two collaborators. Their execution marked a "turning point in our struggle." "People started talking," asserted Blaichman. People began recognizing that "there's some Jews who were defending Jewish life.... We became notorious overnight.... The general population knew that the Jews had the guts, the courage to go after those bandits who were working for the Germans." Subsequent acts of resistance—mining the railroad and sabotaging a dairy factory—solidified their reputation, earning "the respect from everyone that we knew how to fight."

Blaichman's group was so well organized that not even the AK was able to destroy it. "They make an ambush," he explained, "kill one or two, but we would kill some of them too. They saw that it didn't pay for them to liquidate us. They stopped it."



Tuvia Bielski's all-Jewish partisan group grew to 1200 people by allowing any Jew to join, with or without a weapon.

area. More than merely respect, his bold initiatives earned them acts of cooperation and collaboration from which both sides benefited. The People's Army, for example supplied his group with arms and ammunition.

Like most of the all-Jewish partisan groups, Blaichman's activities included protecting family camps of approximately 200 Jews. "All the bandits know if they gonna touch them, they gonna be punished for that," Blaichman made clear.

Questions

1. Explore the differences between the experiences of partisans in Eastern and Western Europe. What are some of the factors that could account for these differences?
2. What is the difference between prejudice and discrimination? Apply these concepts to the history of Jews in Eastern and Western Europe. Under what conditions can prejudice and/or discrimination turn to murder? Find examples from the text that support your statements. How does prejudice and discrimination work in our world today? In our lives? Under what conditions could racism turn to murder in our own times?
3. Italian partisan Harry Burger explains that the villagers' antisemitic beliefs "blinded" them to his identity. Can you think of ways in which you have experienced this phenomenon? Ways in which you have been "blind" to the identity of others?
4. On one side of a sheet of paper, list the obstacles Jewish partisans faced in their struggle to fight and survive. On the other side, describe the strategies they employed in order to overcome these obstacles. Rank obstacles in order of most challenging to least challenging and explain your choices.
5. What do you think are some of the special challenges that the all Jewish partisan units faced? What tactics did these units employ in order to survive? Do you think these tactics were justified? Why or why not?
6. "To save a Jew is much more important than to kill Germans," stated partisan leader Tuvia Bielski. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Even so, the protection of “civilians”—a category that included women, children and the aged—added yet another layer of complexity to the already difficult task of fighting the Germans. Faced with the choice of rescuing Jews or fighting Germans, though, Jewish partisan commanders usually opted for the former. “To save a Jew is much more important than to kill Germans,” decreed Tuvia Bielski, a legendary Jewish partisan operating in Belorussia. Like Blaichman, Tuvia made himself feared by avenging the actions of the local population and responding in kind. He would leave notes: “This family was wiped out for collaboration with the Germans and for turning Jews over to them. Signed, The Bielski Company.” In order to remain an all-Jewish unit, Bielski’s partisans and family camp members made themselves indispensable to the Russian units by supplying them with tailors, locksmiths, bakers, shoemakers and other much needed artisans. Thanks to Bielski’s outstanding leadership, approximately 1,200 Jewish men, women and children—only 30% of them armed—saw the end of the war.

Blaichman and Bielski were exceptions, however. Most units did not fare nearly as well. Norman Salsitz’s all-Jewish partisan group, which he joined after rescuing the Jews in hiding and eventually led, was more typical. At its height, his group included 125 members. Only six survived.

CONCLUSION

Hitler believed that he could not win the war without murdering every single Jewish man, woman, and child. This was the threat—unprecedented in the 3,500-year history of the Jews—that gave birth to the Jewish partisan. Given this frightful scenario, resistance was more than a matter of honor and dignity; it was matter of life and death. From the beginning, however, the cloud of antisemitism hung heavy over Jewish partisan efforts. This invisible German ally could be found in every European country, but more so in Eastern Europe, where its impact was devastating.

Yet no matter where they fought Jewish partisans proved remarkably resilient, adapting and adopting coping strategies and tactics as they went along. The all-Jewish partisan units and associated family camps—uniquely Jewish creations—are but one example among many. Jewish courage and determination won respect even from hardened antisemites. Whenever possible, Jews fighting in non-Jewish groups used their positions to rescue fellow Jews. Blaichman and Bielski proved that Jews could conduct successful partisan struggles even as they protected Jewish lives. In a word, Jewish partisans had to be bolder, more inventive and show greater resolve than ordinary partisans, not only because they had to combat an enemy fixated on killing every last Jew, but also because they had to overcome what was perhaps the most ruthless enemy of all: antisemitism.

Ask A Partisan

Ask a panel of partisans any question of you like, and get a personalized answer on-line. Or, read questions and answers from others. Go to: www.jewishpartisans.org/students/activities/aap/ and look for the 'Ask A Partisan' section.

Sources

For a complete list of sources for all the material found in this study guide, please consult our website: www.jewishpartisans.org/sources

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