

Jewish Resistance

For the Jews, overcoming the destructive goal of the National Socialists, or the Nazis, was impossible because of Adolph Hitler's popularity with the German people. Hitler fired-up crowds with his anti-Semitic and nationalist rhetoric that promised to create a greater Germany. With improved economic conditions, a string of foreign policy victories, and the terror of the SS and the Gestapo, the Nazis were able to gain the support, or at least the obedience, of every major group within Nazi Germany. Hitler further reinforced German pride by integrating all societal groups into a *Volksgemeinschaft*, or national community that promoted the ideals of National Socialism. Historian Jackson Spielvogel explains, "Not all Germans accepted the Nazi propaganda about their new community, but enough did to create a powerful German state" capable of squashing any resistance to it (Spielvogel, p. 308). Scholars disagree over how much more the Jews could have done to resist Nazi persecution. In part, these differences are based on whether an author accepts non-conformist behavior as resistance or whether he only accepts armed resistance as true resistance. Points of contention are also found over how much Jewish cooperation with the Nazis impacted their fate.

Concentrating on the plight of the Jews in Germany, historian Konrad Kwiet argues that the Jews did not sit idly-by while they were persecuted. Their use of non-violent protests, including their circulation of "anonymous pamphlets,

broadsheets, letters, and slogans” attests to this fact (Kwiet, cited in Large, p. 71). While conducting these protests, Jewish leaders urged their coreligionists not to break any laws because they hoped that the Nazis would eventually be overthrown. Consequently, they refused to take-up arms while they had the chance. After *Kristallnacht* in 1938, this optimism dissipated and many Jewish leaders realized that emigration was their only chance for survival. Kwiet explains that the “persecution and expulsion [of the Jews] took place in full view of the German public. With few exceptions, there were no objections among the population at large” (Kwiet, cited in Large, p. 67). Not even German resistance groups, which opposed the Nazis for their own reasons, would assist the Jews.

Jews who were unable to get out continued their non-conformist behavior despite the threat to their lives. Kwiet notes, for example, that some Jews “would not call themselves ‘Sara’ or ‘Israel,’ the identification code the Nazis insisted they employ starting in 1938” (Kwiet, cited in Large, p. 71). After the Jews started to be resettled, he explains that their only alternatives were to commit suicide or to hide in the underground (Kwiet, cited in Large, p. 71). Kwiet insists that thousands of Jews took one of these two options rather than blindly follow the Nazis. He makes it clear that after the deportations began to the extermination camps, physical resistance was impossible. Kwiet explains, “those survivors who climbed out of the railway boxcars were starved, exhausted, broken people who had passed through all the phases of moral defamation, social discrimination,

rigid ostracism – who had, in short, come to know all too well the full hopelessness of their situation” (Kwiet, cited in Large, p. 73).

In order to explain why Jews did not take-up arms against their oppressors when they had the chance, historian Raul Hilberg looks at the overwhelming hardships that the Jews had faced over the past two-thousand years. Jewish history, he explains, taught the Jews to appease their tormentors through hard work and through appeals for mercy since the passing of time usually made things better for them. Hilberg considers the protests that Kwiet discusses to be a continuation of the Jewish history of seeking mercy from their tormentors. Hilberg contends that over this time period, Jews never took-up arms against their persecutors because “armed resistance in the face of overwhelming force could end only in disaster” (Hilberg, cited in Niewyk, p. 147). For this reason, he explains, the Jews always acquiesced to their enemy’s demands. Despite Hilberg’s claim that the Jews did not stand a chance to successfully resist the Germans, he is highly critical of them for not offering much of a defense. He faults them for following their history of appeasement and for not anticipating what their ultimate fate would be (Hilberg, cited in Niewyk, p. 147).

Not only does Hilberg blame the Jews for not resisting the Nazis, but he blames the Jewish councils for helping to carry out the Final Solution. He explains, “During the concentration stage the councils conveyed German demands to the Jewish population and placed Jewish resources into German hands, thereby

increasing the leverage of the perpetrator in significant ways” (Hilberg, cited in Niewyk, p. 146). Without this assistance, Hilberg suggests that the mass murder of Jews would not have been possible because the Germans did not allocate adequate funds for their extermination. This argument fails to take into account whether the Germans would have increased their funding for the final solution if they did not receive cooperation from the Councils.

In a more sympathetic tone towards the Jewish Councils, historian Isiah Trunk argues that these councils felt that cooperation was the only way to survive (Trunk, cited in Niewyk, p. 167). Trunk absolves the Councils from blame for their role in Jewish resettlement, claiming “It simply was humanly impossible to perceive that ‘resettlement’ meant physical destruction of the entire Jewish population, particularly since the police and the officials of the civil administration used elaborate tricks before and during the course of the ‘actions’ to keep the Jews in the dark about their monstrous intentions” (Trunk, cited in Niewyk, p. 167).

Like Hilberg, Isiah Trunk also discusses the history of Jewish appeasement to explain why the Councils cooperated with the Nazis. Jewish leaders believed that through hard work and making themselves useful to the Nazis, their coreligionists could live to see another day. Using the Lodz Ghetto as an example, Trunk attests that the Jewish work ethic postponed the liquidation of that ghetto until August 1944 (Trunk, cited in Niewyk, p. 166). If the Jews in the

ghetto refused to work, they may have been killed much faster and the Jewish Councils dissolved, Trunk explains. He maintains that “the prospect of being killed sooner or later was a concrete eventuality, and that every step they took was liable to postpone or hasten it” (Trunk, cited in Niewyk, p. 175).

After the Final Solution began, the Jewish Councils were allowed to choose which Jews were sent to the gas chambers first. Had they not agreed to undertake this task, the Nazis would have rounded-up the first Jews they came across. The Jewish Councils chose the sick and the elderly to go to the gas chambers first, in order to keep the ghettos going so that the majority of their coreligionists could stay alive (Trunk, cited in Niewyk, p. 169). Trunk insists that “to a large degree the age-old Jewish optimism that a miracle might yet occur even at the very last moment itself contributed to the fatalistic attitudes of Council members and of the ghetto populations as well, particularly since no other solution to their tragic situation was in sight” (Trunk, cited in Niewyk, p. 168).

As opposed to Hilberg, Trunk attests that not all Jews stood paralyzed and unable to resist because of their history. While acknowledging that many Jewish Council members opposed resistance for fear of retribution by the Nazis, he explains that many Council members went to their deaths rather than participate in the murder of their coreligionists. He further adds that “one of the most prominent members of the Warsaw Jewish Council, Abraham Gepner, adopted a positive attitude toward the resistance movement and contributed money to buy

arms” (Trunk, cited in Niewyk, p. 174). This goes a step further than the non-conformist opposition that Kwiet discusses and it shows that not all Jews were complacent and waiting to be rescued; there were some who took action to save themselves.

Like Trunk, historian Yehuda Bauer also takes exception with Hilberg’s claim that the Jews were “paralyzed” in fear and thus did not resist. Bauer also rejects Hilberg’s claim that the Jews have a history of complete obedience to their tormentors. He insists that “Jews did defend themselves throughout the ages by forces of arms when this was feasible or when they had no other choice” (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 149). Like Kwiet, Bauer believes that the Jews needed help to establish a successful resistance to the Germans and that their inability to get help from any group or outside power sealed their fate (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 148). Regarding Jewish armed resistance in Poland, Bauer explains, “It is generally accepted that large-scale operations were mainly dependent on two ingredients: the availability of weapons, and the support of a civilian population capable of aiding underground fighters. Neither of these preconditions existed for the Jews” (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 150). Hilberg did not consider these factors in his criticism of the Jews for not resisting.

Bauer maintains that getting weapons into the ghettos was nearly impossible and that Jews preferred not to use them anyway because their use would result in retribution against their coreligionists. Despite this general feeling

by the Jewish Councils, there were six rebellions on record in concentration camps and death camps. Additionally, he notes there were over sixty ghettos that participated in armed rebellions in Lithuania, eastern Poland, and Byelorussia (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 154). Bauer maintains that “Jewish resistance was considerably more widespread than has been subsequently assumed” (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 156).

Bauer agrees with Kwiet that Jewish non-conformist behavior played a major role in showing that they were anything but passive. To make his point, he gives examples such as their continuance of education in the ghetto, despite its illegality, and also their smuggling or creation of food within the ghetto to supplement their measly rations. Bauer highlights one particular resistance movement in Kovno that makes the Jews seem heroic. In Kovno, he explains, “smuggling was organized by groups that were controlled by the Judenrat and the Jewish police – the police here were the very heart of the armed resistance organization” (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 157). While this was only one case, it illustrates that not all Jewish Councils cooperated with the Nazis. In an interesting comparison between the plight of the Germans under Nazi rule and that of the Jews, Bauer attests that “when Jews were unaware of any Nazi intentions to murder them, Jewish behaviour was at least in some measure comparable to the behaviour of non-Jewish populations under Nazi rule” (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 156). When it became clear to the Jews that the Nazis

intended to murder them, they hid from both the Nazi authorities and the Jewish Councils in the ghetto (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 161).

From the arguments made by Kwiet, Hilbert, Trunk, and Bauer, it is clear that Jewish resistance is a heated topic. The debate persists over how much more the Jews could have done to resist and whether non-conformist behavior should be considered as resistance. In any event, Jews could not have known before it was too late that the Nazis were serious about pursuing the complete destruction of the Jewish race. In contrast to Hilberg, Bauer notes that Jews have fought back against their oppressors during their history, when resistance “was feasible or when they had no other choice” (Bauer, cited in Niewyk, p. 149). While this statement reasons that Jews have been willing to fight back, it implies that armed resistance was never the Jews’ first choice. Taking this angle, Hilberg’s sentiment that the Jews have a history of appeasement makes more sense. For his part, though, Hilberg only defines resistance as armed resistance. He does not take into account the non-conformist behavior depicted by Kwiet and Bauer.

Hilberg also faults the Jewish Councils for cooperating with the Nazis, believing that the Final Solution would not have been possible without their assistance. Trunk, believes, however, that they could not and did not know that resettlement would lead to a certain death. He explains that the Jewish Councils were simply trying to make the Jews useful to the Nazis so that they would be kept alive. Bauer and Trunk have also noted that there were cases where Jewish

Council members did take-up arms against the Nazis, despite the hardships in getting weapons. While all of these authors make some valid points, Bauer's piece offers a more detail-oriented, all-encompassing discussion of Jewish resistance, including acts of Jewish armed resistance and their use of non-conformist behavior. Both Hilberg and Kwiet did not discuss the existence of Jewish armed resistance. Trunk notes that there were instances of Jewish armed resistance, but focuses his piece more on trying to explain why the Jewish Councils cooperated with the Nazis. For these reasons, Bauer's article provides the most comprehensive account of the Jewish resistance to the Final Solution.

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