

PARTISANS

Partisans during World War II were armed units in areas dominated by Nazi Germany and her allies that fought against them behind the front lines. As the war progressed, many countries fell under Nazi domination, either as occupied territory or run by regimes that were allied to Nazi Germany. Frequently civilians and soldiers continued to oppose this situation, and decided to continue the armed struggle against the Nazis and their collaborators.

The partisans generally formed and fought in places that offered them some sort of cover, such as forests, swamps, or mountains. They engaged in a variety of activities, most commonly ambushes and sabotage. Often they sought to disrupt the transport of soldiers and war material, and this meant that frequent targets were rail lines, bridges, and vehicles. Especially in the occupied territory of the former Soviet Union, partisan activity grew, became organized, and took place in coordination with military and government authorities.

When the murder of the Jews struck, many Jews fled to the countryside. They literally fled for their lives. Before fleeing, however, they had to face dilemmas about leaving behind family members who were unable to join them, and the realization that their actions could lead to repercussions in the places from which they had escaped. It is only when Jews were able to obtain weapons that they could engage in partisan activities.

Jewish partisan activity began before other more organized partisan warfare emerged. As a result, already existing Jewish units sometimes were brought under the control of the other partisan units that had firmer military backing, and many Jews as individuals joined those units as well. Owing to anti-Jewish attitudes, in many instances Jews were not wanted in these units, and even when they were allowed to join them,

they often faced discrimination that could be very harsh.

A hallmark of the Jewish partisans was that unlike other partisans who focused strictly on fighting, Jewish partisans also sought to rescue Jews from certain death at the hands of the Nazi regime. The result was that so-called “family camps” came into being. The largest was under the Bielski brothers in Belarus with some 1,200



About Photos

Top: A group of partisans from the “family camp” of Tuvia Bielski in the Naliboki Forest, Poland, May 1944. Ghetto Fighters House Archives (32425)

Bottom: Partisans Kiril Tros (left) and Masha Bruskina (center, holding sign) marched through Minsk, Russia by German troops on October 26, 1941 prior to their public executions. The sign reads in German and Russian “We are partisans and have shot at German soldiers.” Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1972-026-43/CC-BY-SA

Jews, many of whom were non-fighters—older people and children. A similar family camp in the same area—the Zoran unit—had about 800 Jews in it. The non-fighters often performed services for other partisan units, such as sewing clothing, nursing, and repairing weapons. It can be said of the family camps that they fought just enough to justify their existence as partisans, but focused primarily on keeping alive as many Jews as possible. Nonetheless some Jewish units, such as the one in which Abba Kovner was a leader, focused on fighting.

Life in the forests, swamps, and mountains for the Jewish partisans was far from easy and posed many dilemmas. Many were not used to the rough living conditions and their shelter was usually far from adequate. The provision of food, which often was confiscated from local

peasants, created tension that endangered them and rarely provided sufficient sustenance. When partisans were wounded or contracted sickness they only had the most primitive medical care, since medical equipment and medicines were not available. Many Jewish partisans fell victim to the “Jew hunts” conducted by the Nazis, who sought to discover Jews in hiding, and to other partisans who fought the Nazis but hated Jews. Like all partisans, Jewish partisans units frequently had to move their base of operations, sometimes in great haste, primarily because the Nazis considered the partisans a very serious problem and invested great effort in discovering and destroying them. In light of all of these hardships, and despite the heroic acts of many of the fighters, relatively few Jews survived the ordeal.

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Abba Kovner (back row, center) with members of the United Partisan Organization, a Jewish resistance organization based in the Vilna ghetto that organized armed resistance against the Nazis.



A group of Jewish partisans from the Kovno ghetto in the Rudniki Forest. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (7003/168)



Jewish women and children partisans in the forest near Pinsk, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (1262/1)



Jewish partisans in forest, Vilna, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (8409/59)