



LESSON PLAN: What Is Resistance?

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students define resistance and investigate wide-ranging examples of resistance by some Jews during the Holocaust. As they view visual history testimony and analyze primary source documents, students expand their understanding of resistance and consider the power of spiritual, cultural, and moral resistance in addition to physical and armed revolt.

PART 1: WHAT IS RESISTANCE?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

- 1** In pairs or small groups, students discuss the meaning of *resistance* and situations in which resistance is necessary. Based on their discussions, students record their definition of this term.
- 2** Students watch the Video Toolbox from 0:49-1:43 and then view the testimonies of Jewish survivors who participated in resistance activities during the Holocaust: **Helen Fagin (bio)**, **Ruth Brand (bio)**, and **Itka Zygmuntowicz (bio)**. As they watch the clips, students consider how each survivor resisted and take notes on the Testimony Reflections handout.¹
- 3** After viewing the testimony clips, students journal and/or participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions:
 - What purpose did the *Gone with the Wind* story serve for the students in Helen Fagin's clandestine school?
 - What reason does Ruth Brand give for fasting on Yom Kippur, despite the danger of doing so?
 - Why did Itka Zygmuntowicz and her mother refuse to betray their neighbor, despite torture and possible death? What did Itka learn from this experience?
 - The video noted that many people ask why Jews didn't resist during the Holocaust. How would you respond to this question?
 - What different types of resistance were reflected in the stories of these women? Did their testimonies change your understanding of what resistance is? If so, how?
- 4** In their pairs or small groups (formed in step 1), students consider which of the testimonies fit within their original definition of resistance. They revise their definitions to reflect new understandings. The class discusses their insights, including the limitations of thinking of resistance in purely physical terms. The following definitions from the Echoes & Reflections **Audio Glossary** are introduced as needed: resistance, armed resistance, spiritual resistance, cultural resistance.²

¹ *It is often beneficial for students to watch each clip twice, completing the Testimony Reflections handout during the second viewing.*

² *Itka Zygmuntowicz uses the Yiddish terms 'mensch' and 'menschlichkeit' in her testimony. The literal translation of these terms is 'person' and 'humanness,' but they are used to describe the decency and good character with which a moral and honorable person behaves.*

PART 2: WHAT FORMS DID RESISTANCE TAKE DURING THE HOLOCAUST?

Post the supporting question above for students as you begin this part of the lesson.

5 The handout **Jewish Resistance** is distributed. In their small groups, students fill in their definition of resistance at the top. They begin to take notes in response to the other questions based on the testimonies they viewed and their prior knowledge.³

6 In their groups, students read and analyze the documents below, representing different forms of resistance. They continue to add information and ideas to the *Jewish Resistance* handout and to refine their definitions of resistance.

- **Pronouncement by Abba Kovner:** This call to armed resistance is among the first to recognize that Hitler was planning to kill all European Jews. Students should think about who Kovner was speaking to and the central rationale of his message – that it is better to die fighting than to live at the mercy of Nazi oppressors.
- **Cultural and Spiritual Resistance:** These excerpts demonstrate the spiritual, cultural, and moral ways in which Jews resisted. Students should reflect on the sense of agency demonstrated by Jewish people, even in the face of unimaginable cruelty and repression.

7 The class gathers to view the testimony of Jewish survivor **Roman Kent (bio)**. Students add information and ideas to their **Jewish Resistance** handout one last time. They then journal and/or participate in a whole group discussion in response to some of the following questions⁴:

- Do you agree with Abba Kovner’s assertion that “It is better to die as free fighters than to live at the mercy of murderers”? What were Kovner’s arguments in favor of armed resistance?
- Why were most Jews who participated in armed revolts youth? Why were others less able to resist physically?
- What are examples of other forms of resistance, as highlighted by Roman Kent and in the written excerpts?
- What does Roman Kent mean by, “Sometimes the easiest resistance is with a gun and a bullet”? Do you agree with him? Explain.
- How do you interpret Chaim Kaplan’s statement, “Everything is forbidden to us, and yet we do everything”?
- Why did Jewish people risk their lives to sustain customs and traditions, such as religious practice?
- How is cultural expression – such as music and writing – a form of resistance?

³ As students work through the questions on the graphic organizer during this lesson, they should be encouraged to move beyond what is immediately evident. For example, a first response to “What were Jews resisting?” might be “the Nazis,” but upon deeper reflection, students will discover they were also resisting things like isolation and dehumanization. Likewise, an answer to “How did Jews resist?” might be “They fought back,” but upon further investigation students will understand that forming schools, creating art, and maintaining religious rituals were also forms of resistance.

⁴ If students read the excerpt of Wiesel’s *Night* in *The Final Solution* unit, they may consider the act of resistance the young people wanted to commit, but were talked out of by the elders.



As a summative task, students write reflectively in response to the following prompt: “How, if at all, has your understanding of resistance, especially as it pertains to the Holocaust, changed over the course of this lesson?” Students draw upon their Jewish Resistance handout and evidence from lesson sources to support their ideas.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 90 - 120 MINUTES