



JEWISH RESISTANCE

“Resistance does not have to be with a gun and a bullet...”

– ROMAN KENT, JEWISH SURVIVOR

PREPARING TO TEACH THIS UNIT

Below is information to keep in mind when teaching the content in this unit. This material is intended to help teachers consider the complexities of teaching about Jewish resistance during the Holocaust and to deliver accurate and sensitive instruction.

- 1** It is best that this unit be taught in sequence, after students have learned about life in the ghettos (Unit 4) and the “Final Solution” (Unit 5) and have an understanding of the brutal repression under which European Jews existed during the Holocaust. Without this critical context, students may not appreciate the perilous risk involved in even the smallest acts of defiance, the daring and resourcefulness it took to plan armed revolts, and the significance of spiritual and cultural acts of resistance, such as holding a concert in the ghetto or fasting on a high holiday in a concentration camp. It is only once students understand the circumstances surrounding these acts of resistance that they can truly understand how incredible they were.
- 2** Rather than describing resistance in binary terms – armed or spiritual – encourage students to see resistance as a nonhierarchical spectrum or range of behaviors. While examples of armed revolt are dramatic and inspiring, most Jews – children, the aged, the sick, the injured, and caretakers of all of the foregoing – could not take part in this type of uprising. Nor could most inhabitants of the ghettos who were suffering from starvation and overcrowding, or those who had been subjected to oppression and dehumanization over the course of months and years. During the Holocaust, spiritual resistance was often the only possible way to oppose Nazi tyranny. Such resistance should be considered “active,” as even choosing to keep a diary or ignore a command constituted conscious action.
- 3** It is important to address the myth of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust. In his manifesto distributed to residents of the Vilna ghetto, Abba Kovner urged his fellow Jews to “not go like sheep to the slaughter.” Over time, this entreaty has been misrepresented to claim that “Jews went like sheep to the slaughter.” In fact, Jews resisted in myriad and untold ways, from sabotage and armed revolt to spiritual forms of resistance that allowed them to preserve their humanity in the face of unimaginable degradation.
- 4** Throughout this unit, help students understand that resistance required great courage and at times physical strength. Those who chose to resist had to grapple with many dilemmas including the possible price of disobeying Nazi orders, the possible effect of their resistance on their families and communities, and the punishment they might have to endure for resisting. Those who were immobilized by fear, hunger, disease, or other hardships and did not participate in direct forms of resistance should be viewed with compassion as students attempt to imagine the impact of extreme terror and violence on any human being.

5 Active or armed resistance refers to acts of opposition, defiance, or sabotage, often using weapons and various forms of attack. Examples include uprisings, bombings of Nazi facilities, destruction of train tracks, forging false papers, and smuggling supplies. Spiritual resistance refers to acts of opposition rooted in culture, traditions, and moral behavior to undermine Nazi power, preserve human dignity, and inspire hope. Examples include clandestine schools, concerts, underground newspapers, documenting ghetto and camp history, sharing food rations, and maintaining religious customs.

6 Emphasize that the fighters of the Warsaw ghetto were Jews who were imprisoned in the ghetto and suffered from the same misfortune as other Jews there. Because their actions were so remarkable, it may seem that they were “different” from other Jews in the ghetto. Realizing that what they did was done from within the misery of the ghetto, their deeds seem even more remarkable.

ABOUT THIS UNIT

INTRODUCTION

This unit provides an opportunity for students to explore resistance efforts made by some Jews during the Holocaust, from the establishment of the ghettos through the implementation of the “Final Solution.” Students define resistance and investigate a wide range of examples, from cultural and spiritual resistance in the ghettos to armed revolt by partisans and concentration camp prisoners. Through analysis of visual history testimony, examination of primary source documents, and independent research, students consider how these forms of resistance demonstrate the capacity of Jews during the Holocaust to preserve their humanity in the face of extreme violence and inhumanity.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How did some Jewish people resist Nazi oppression?
- What forms did resistance take during the Holocaust?
- What is the relationship between resistance and human dignity?
- Why did many choose to resist even when defeat or death was certain?

OBJECTIVES

Students will

- Define resistance within the context of the Holocaust.
- Describe the various forms of resistance that some Jewish people engaged in during the Holocaust, including spiritual, cultural, and armed resistance.
- Investigate the range of resistance efforts that took place in the Warsaw ghetto.
- Interpret primary source materials—including clips of visual history testimony—that represent a range of resistance efforts against the Nazi regime in Europe.
- Conduct independent research on an example of resistance during the Holocaust.