

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ruby Rohrlich, ed. *Resisting the Holocaust*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1998. 264 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85973-216-8.

Reviewed by Stan Nadel (Department of Social Sciences, Southwestern Oklahoma State University)

Published on H-Holocaust (July, 1999)



Resisting the Holocaust

It is the contention of the editor and some of the contributors to this fine collection that “resistance” to the Holocaust is a topic that has been severely neglected. This contention is hard to contradict at a time when it is reported that one of the few older works on the subject, Reuben Ainsztain’s *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Resistance*, has been deaccessioned by the Cleveland Public libraries. So, let it be said up front that this is an important work, one that will help considerably in countering that historical neglect—or will if it is added to library collections. Like any collection of works by a variety of authors and with a wide range of foci, the parts of this book vary significantly in both quality and interest. But, the quality is mostly high and the topics are generally of compelling interest.

Ruby Rohrlich introduces the book with a consideration of the concept of “resistance,” which she reports has been defined in various ways to cover everything from armed struggle against the Nazis to anything done by Jews to survive—and even to any humane actions by non-Jews towards Jews. While never explicitly resolving the definition to be used for this volume, her introductory remarks and the substance of the following essays clearly come down towards the active resistance end of the spectrum. Rohrlich is particularly concerned to counter the assumption that resistance to the Holocaust was a male activity, which she does effectively through brief descriptions of the heroic activities of “little Wanda” Teitelboim, Mala Zimetbaum, and Germaine Ribiere. She points out that resistance was often collective, and in the cases of

the Bulgarians, the Italians, and the Danes the collectivity apparently involved the majority of their populations. Having laid out the parameters of the problem, Rohrlich briefly summarizes each chapter and lets the reader get on with the essays.

In the first of these, Martin Cohen explores the issue of “Jewish Ambivalence and Antipathy to the History of Resistance.” Pointing out that well over one and a half million Jews carried arms against the Nazis, Cohen explores the reasons why the predominant image of the Holocaust is one of passive Jews being slaughtered by Nazis, with only the rare righteous gentile standing between helpless Jews and total extermination. Cohen attributes this first of all to the historical image of the Jew as victim. Members of a small minority widely dispersed among an often hostile Christian majority, without a state or military of their own and often prohibited from carrying arms, the Jews of Europe had frequently been victimized and their easily overwhelmed efforts at resistance had been forgotten. By the nineteenth century, even many Jews had come to see themselves as non-violent, an image which lives on in the Holocaust histories of scholars like Raul Hilberg. What was sometimes a necessary condition of survival was raised to the status of a virtue—a sign of superior Jewish morality rather than just weakness.

Cohen cites a former partisan who reported social pressure to silence his memories: “The world started looking at Jews as martyrs. And here comes a Jew who

says he fought. That's not good. No one wanted to talk to me at all. Because I killed." Then too, Cohen suggests that the definition of resistance has often been set higher for Jews than for others. When a tiny minority of the French organized a resistance which focused more on propaganda, raising morale and preparing an organization ready to rise at an opportune moment than on armed struggle, that resistance was raised to the level of a national myth. But, similar Jewish activities in the ghettos of Nazi Europe have been denied the status of resistance unless they actually engaged in relatively large-scale battles with their oppressors.

Nor did former partisans living in Cold War America feel safe in openly proclaiming their participation in the activities of the Red Army, contributing further to American ignorance of the Jewish partisans. It was a combination of these factors, Cohen argues, which led to the minimization and near forgetting of the Jewish resistance.

Eric Sterling explores a fascinating incident which took place in Vilna. An armed resistance organization had been formed there and was preparing for an uprising in 1943 when the Gestapo learned about their plans. Learning of their existence and seeking to head off a repetition of the recent Warsaw ghetto uprising, the Gestapo demanded that the Ghetto leaders turn over the commander of the partisans, Yitzhak Wittenberg. Cutting through the confusion piled around this incident by several different fictional and historical accounts, Sterling explores the moral and political dilemmas faced by the ghetto and resistance leaders. Jacob Gens, the *Judenrat* leader in Vilna, was no Rumkowski and may even have been sympathetic to the resistance. But, faced with a German threat to liquidate the ghetto immediately if Wittenberg wasn't produced, Gens helped the Gestapo arrest Wittenberg. Before the arrest was completed, Wittenberg was rescued by resistance fighters. But that just spread Gens' dilemma to others. Gens announced that the Germans were going to destroy the ghetto and kill everyone if Wittenberg wasn't turned over, and the panicked populace demanded that the resistance turn Wittenberg in. With recent reports indicating that Soviet forces were on the move west, the hope that non-resistance would keep the ghetto going till rescue arrived was widespread, and a popular fury was unleashed on the resistance for apparently endangering everyone's survival.

Faced with a choice between turning Wittenberg in and having to fight against their own people, the leaders of the resistance voted to turn Wittenberg in. Although

fiction has Wittenberg sacrificing himself for the cause, Wittenberg in fact went into hiding from his own organization as well as the authorities. Only when he was caught was he turned over to the Gestapo, predicting accurately that the resistance plans wouldn't survive his betrayal. Afterwards, the resistance fighters gave up the planned uprising and mass escape, fleeing to the forests and abandoning the people who had pressured them into turning their leader over to the Gestapo torturers. Gens and his associates were all killed when the ghetto was liquidated two months later.

While the story has been told before, it is Sterling's sensitive readings of the practical and moral dilemmas faced by Gens, Wittenberg, the resistance command, and others which makes this an outstanding account.

In her chapter, Nechama Tec briefly recapitulates the story and the analysis from her book on the Bielski partisans, "the largest armed rescue of Jews by Jews in Nazi occupied Europe" (p. 89).[1] While she adds little to what she has already published, the chapter is a well written and sharply argued introduction to her longer work and plays a strong role in strengthening the current volume. Tec provides a close analysis of the patterns of social differentiation, which developed in the partisan movement in general, Jewish partisan units, and the Bielski detachment in particular (and does so without any of the intrusive jargon which often detracts from sociological studies). Her analysis of the experience of women among Russian and Jewish partisan units provides a telling refutation of those who have accused those writing about women in the Holocaust of dragging trendy irrelevancies into Holocaust studies.

This theme is extended in the next chapter by Judith Tydor Baumel, "The 'Parachutist's Mission' from a Gender Perspective. Exploring on an Israeli national myth, the story of the nearly forty parachutists from Jewish Palestine dropped into Nazi occupied Europe, she focuses on the three women among them and on how both their experience and their story were shaped and distorted by political ideology and gender stereotypes. In the process, she transforms "the virgin warrior," "the universal mother," and "the fearful phobic" back into real human beings and transforms myth into history.

Murray Baumgarten takes the reader away from the study of myth, history, and heroism to the examination of individual resistance—the resistance of that most extraordinary individual, Primo Levi. Baumgarten explores the ways in which Levi's writings go beyond the presentation of resistance to actually enact it. As he does so, he

enhances the readers understanding of both Levi's writings and his experience of the Holocaust. And he does so in a way which is convincing even to this historian, who rarely finds literary analysis historically convincing.

In the next chapter, Ami Neiberger explores the formation of social groups in Auschwitz—the ways in which real and fictive family ties were the basis of groups that helped their members maintain their humanity and survive. Based on numerous interviews with survivors, the study shows convincingly that the formation and maintenance of these groups was an important form of resistance in the death camps. Not in the sense of overthrowing the camp regime or leading to inmate escapes, but because it frustrated the purpose of the camps simply by helping the inmates survive. Neiberger's data is drawn solely from interviews with women survivors and women's memoirs, so her analysis may well apply only to the women's camp. If so, we have another indication of the importance of gender in understanding the experience of the Holocaust. But, far from making a feminist issue out of this, Neiberger fails to explore the implications of her materials. In a way that's a shame, but the chapter remains valuable in its own terms.

In his chapter "Protest and Silence," Nathan Stoltzfus returns to ground he covered at greater length in his *Resistance of the Heart: The Rosenstrasse Protest and Inter-marriage in Nazi Germany*. While the ground is familiar, this essay is not simply a recapitulation of the well-known story. Stoltzfus concerns himself with the ways in which the story of the Rosenstrasse protest has been misused by some scholars like Daniel Goldhagen, and why it has been largely ignored in Germany—most conspicuously in the case of the German Resistance Memorial Center. As usual, Stoltzfus' analysis is well written and persuasive, is well worth reading even by those who know the story of the Rosenstrasse protest well, and contributes significantly to the success of the volume as a whole.

Margret Collins Weitz then takes the volume into Western Europe with her chapter on "French Women in the Resistance: Rescuing Jews." The author of *Sisters in the Resistance*, she also returns us to issues relating to gender. She first points out the general marginalization of women's resistance activities by writers who have tended to focus primarily on military activities—even though military activities were themselves marginal to the overall resistance movement until late in the occupation. The real focus of the resistance during most of the occupation was on propaganda and organization, arenas

where women played major roles. The propaganda of underground newspapers was based on women's clandestine clerical work, while women couriers made resistance organizations possible and women ran the safe houses that sustained movement activists hiding from the authorities. These were also the activities through which the Holocaust was resisted in France and women took the lead in this resistance. Weitz surveys the activities of Catholics who joined the resistance in reaction against the Antisemitism of Vichy (Violette Morin); of Protestants who organized "God's underground" to rescue Jews (Madeline Barot); and of Jewish "soldiers of the night" who participated in many aspects of the resistance (Yvette Bernard Farnoux). Nor does Weitz neglect the women of the Organisation Juive de Combat and the Eclaireurs Israelites Francais—some of whom like Marianne Cohen gave their lives escorting Jewish children to safety in Switzerland. Their stories are heroic and inspiring, leaving the reader anxious for more.

Wayne Bowen's contribution, "'A Great Moral Victory': Spanish Protection of Jews on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944," endeavors to provide just that inspiration. Focused on the Spanish Blue Division, over 40,000 Spanish volunteers who joined Nazi Germany's assault on the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1943, Bowen's essay presents them as protectors of Jews in their areas of operation. He does make a fairly good preliminary case for the proposition that the members of the Blue Division were not complicit in the extermination campaigns of their German allies, but he fails to make the harder case for resistance. Relying heavily on memoirs of Blue Division veterans, Bowen provides a number of anecdotes where the vets reported that they disapproved of German policies and even tried on occasion to subvert them. The problem is that similar claims have been made by many who were anxious to distance themselves from the crimes of Nazi Germany after its defeat—sometimes by men who had played a conspicuous role in those same crimes. Nor are most of these anecdotes particularly impressive as examples of resistance, even if true. When Meir Michaelis made similar claims for Italian troops on the Eastern Front, he not only cited more impressive instances of aid to Jews, he based his claims on reports by Jewish eyewitnesses.[2] The lack of such citations for these Spanish claims creates a broad opening for skepticism. Granting the possibility that Spanish soldiers were indeed not particularly complicit in the Holocaust and that a few may well have saved some Jewish lives, Bowen is still a long way from making good his claim that theirs was "a great moral victory."

Myrna Goodman's "Foundations of Resistance in German-Occupied Denmark" re-examines the much studied case of Danish resistance in a thorough and well-reasoned manner. Starting with a demonstration of the unique aspects of the Danish case, Goodman focuses on an analysis of the specific historical conditions that led to this unique mass rescue. Noting the lax nature of the Nazi occupation of Denmark as a necessary condition of the rescue, Goodman starts with the high degree of assimilation of Denmark's Jewish population. They were viewed by other Danes as Jewish Danes rather than as Danish Jews—and Denmark's dismal record regarding Jewish refugees before the war assured that there were few non-Danish Jews to complicate the wartime situation. Goodman locates one source of resistance in the liberal/individualistic ideals of Danish nationalism as promulgated through the pervasive Folk High School system.

Another source of resistance lay in the Danish Lutheran Church, which publicly denounced Nazi Antisemitism even before the war, and which conspicuously distinguished itself from its German counterpart in this regard. Finally, Goodman notes the strong Danish tradition of collective action and mutual trust that permeates Danish society through the extensive network of economic cooperatives. All in all, Goodman makes a strong and convincing case for rooting the Danish rescue in the specific traditions, institutions, and circumstances of occupation era Denmark.

Nothing would be less appropriate than ending a book on the Holocaust on an up-beat note. Rather than let the readers off the hook by sticking with the limited success of resistance, Rohrlach has wisely chosen to end this collection with James Glass' sobering "German Treatment of Jewish Children during the Holocaust:

A Case Study in the Barriers to Resistance." Glass examines the consequences of the Nazi extermination program's requirement that Jewish children be particularly targeted. He strongly rejects the optimistic view of George Eisen and others that the persistence of play by children in the ghettos and the camps somehow demonstrated a victory of the human spirit.[3]

Glass analyzes the games played in the ghettos and camps as testimonies to "the victory of oppression and the ease with which psychological resistance was swept away," as "last-ditch efforts to ward off psychological death" which finally failed.

For the children of the Holocaust there was no Hollywood ending—no redemption, no note of hope, and no resistance. There was just indescribable brutality, misery and death. The message is clear. While we must not forget the resisters and the resistance to the Holocaust, in the end we must always acknowledge the fundamental reality of horror that forever remains the core of the Holocaust experience.

Notes

[1]. Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[2]. Meir Michaelis, *Mussolini and the Jews: German-Italian Relations and the Jewish Question in Italy, 1922-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) p. 321.

[3]. George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games among the Shadows* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-holocaust>

Citation: Stan Nadel. Review of Rohrlach, Ruby, ed., *Resisting the Holocaust*. H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3235>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.