

# H-Net Reviews

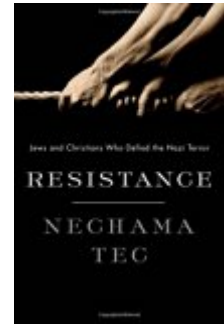
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nechama Tec. *Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defied the Nazi Terror*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 256 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-973541-9.

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## Survival in Poland

Nechama Tec's husband, to whom she dedicates *Resistance*, encouraged her "to write and never stop" (as noted on the book's dedication page). Tec, a Holocaust scholar and retired professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut, Stamford, is indeed a prolific writer. Born in Lublin in Poland as the daughter of a chemical-factory owner, eight years old when Adolf Hitler invaded Poland, she survived the Holocaust because Polish Catholics took her and her family in and helped her pass as a non-Jew during the years of Nazi occupation and genocide. Her writing is rooted in her life experience and she has made it the basis of her research into the lives of Jewish and non-Jewish Poles as the hunted and hunters, as victims and fighters. In 1982 she offered her own life story (*Dry Tears: The Story of a Lost Childhood*), and in a further book in 1986 she explicitly singled out Christians who saved Jews in Poland (*When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland*). She presented the story of the Polish Jew Oswald Rufeisen who saved many Jews and Soviet prisoners of war in 1990 (*In the Lion's Den: The Life of Oswald Rufeisen*), followed in 1993 by *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, an account of a Jewish partisan group that saved over 1,200 Jews. Ten years later came *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust* (2003), and now the volume here under review. One common theme in Tec's books is the determination and efforts of Jews to survive, to defy the Nazi murderers, and to combat them; another points to the connections between non-Jewish Poles—in Poland this meant mostly Catholic Christians—and Jewish resisters and leaders in rescue and guerilla

operations. Tec is one voice in a vast chorus of Holocaust writers and scholars, a number of whom appear in her bibliography. Still she succeeds, particularly through interviews with other survivors, to add original sources to the extensive literature on survival in occupied Poland during the Second World War.

The book under review is far from trying to provide a comprehensively researched history of these themes—survival, resistance, cooperation, and hostility, between non-Jewish and Jewish Poles, occasionally also Russians. It is systematic in the sequence of chapters on categories of Jewish existence in occupied Poland, describing aspects within these categories, often merely anecdotal, of Jewish life in the ghettos, the forests, and the concentration camps. The story of Jan Karski is retold at the end in order to emphasize that many "Christians", i.e., non-Jews, helped Jews. The book includes many moving episodes and numerous insights into the circumstances and psychologic realities of Jewish existence in occupied Poland during the Second World War. The book does not cover or even refer to resistance and aid to Jews by Christians in other countries—e.g., Denmark, The Netherlands, France, and Italy—much less to the resistance in Germany which was radically different than that in German-occupied lands. Moreover, "Christians" in the title is misleading in regard to most of the stories the author does tell. While a number of Poles and Russians are recorded here as having helped Jews, these helpers and rescuers acted from compassion, or righteous anger, not as or because they were Christians. Christians, rather than

just “Poles,” make their appearance in the book as converted Jews and violent anti-Semites collaborating with the SS in the Warsaw Ghetto. Christian Poles who helped Jews are mentioned in passing, apart from a reference in the introduction and some paragraphs at the end of the book. Through more than half the book the author distinguishes “Jews” and “Poles,” not “Jewish Poles” and “non-Jewish Poles” or “Christian Poles,” and she commonly refers to “Jewish-Polish” cooperation. The index does not include such terms as Christian, church, Catholic, convert, conversion, Lutheran, Protestant, and religion.

Tec employs an eclectic choice of episodes and anecdotal evidence, is often vague on chronology and spotty in identifying the places under discussion, and records events as parts of Jewish history and children as the Jewish future. Tec highlights Jewish-underground archivists as “racing against time” “unable to protect the Jewish people, they concentrated on saving Jewish history” (p. 70). Their collected notes, sealed and buried in metal boxes and milk bottles, were partially retrieved in 1946 and 1950. Ghetto fighters looked for arms and other support from the Polish underground, mostly in vain, largely owing to Polish anti-Semitism and only in part because the Poles did not wish to risk their lives before the Germans had become too weak to annihilate them. The Jews, of course, could not wait. They would be exterminated before the Poles were ready to fight the Germans. Some in the ghettos managed to flee to the forests where the Soviet and Polish partisans were, but acceptance into existing non-Jewish groups was always difficult or entirely frustrated. Tec notes that there were instances of Soviet partisan leaders seeking to have Jewish partisan leaders assassinated; and Polish partisans killed Jewish partisan leaders under orders of the Polish Home Army.

*Resistance* gives accounts of survival schemes and techniques, horrors, dangers, adventures, raids, and tragedies and deaths of Jews and non-Jews, in the general area of occupied Poland and Belorussia during the war years. Tec’s emphasis lies on all forms of counteraction to Nazi atrocities, torture, and murder. She rejects the accusation, initiated by Bruno Bettelheim in a 1943 article, “Individual and Mass Behaviors in Extreme Situations” and continued in 1960 in his book *The Informed Heart*, that Jews by their own passivity, as paraphrased by Tec, “had become collaborators in their own destruction” and that “the Jews had contributed significantly to their doom” (pp. 2, 7).[1] Tec writes that Hannah Arendt accused the Jewish councils of complicity with the murderers, and that Raoul Hilberg assumed a general absence of Jewish resistance. But Hilberg, of course, respecting

the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the rebellions in Sobibór and Treblinka, repeatedly referred to the “Jewish resistance movement”; although it is true that his hard realistic assessment is “almost a complete lack of resistance,” and that, “measured in German casualties, Jewish armed opposition shrinks into insignificance.”[2] Tec then cites Philip Friedman, Isaiah Trunk, Ruben Ainsztein, and Israel Gutman who deprecate assertions of Jewish passivity and complicity. Those maintaining the two extreme positions consider “resistance” more or less synonymous with “armed struggle.” Some scholars seek to reconcile these views. Tec vigorously asserts, expanding the concept of resistance, that there was an army without arms, scattered over two hundred ghettos, “an army of infants, old people, the sick,” an army “whose soldiers are denied even the right to surrender” (p. 15); and that unprecedented forms of resistance emerged under unprecedented oppression. She demonstrates that there was also a considerable amount of armed resistance, as anyone thinking of the Treblinka and Warsaw Ghetto uprisings could hardly fail to acknowledge. Tec also draws attention mainly to the abortive revolt in the Auschwitz crematoria.

The resistance of Jews that Tec describes differs profoundly from the national resistance in other occupied countries, all of which were distinct from each other, as in Czechoslovakia, Norway, Denmark, Belgium, The Netherlands, France, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and later in the war in Italy. In Norway and Denmark, for example, resistance was patriotic and nationalist; in France, it was essentially initiated by Communists upon Moscow’s instruction after Germany had invaded Russia, and taken up by non-Communists and others aided, supplied, and guided by the British Special Operations Executive; in Yugoslavia and Italy, it could be described as mixed Communist-nationalist, and in the case of Yugoslavia again it was semi-independent of Moscow’s direction. The German resistance was unlike all of these. In all the occupied countries, resistance was part of the national struggle for liberation and the resisters were celebrated as national heroes. In Germany, although the resisters invoked patriotism as well as fundamental human ethics, they confronted their own national government in time of war, not a foreign occupier, inevitably incurring the disgrace of being seen as traitors to their own nation. Some who, risking their own lives, did all they could to protect the Jews against persecution and murder, as did Carl Goerdeler,[3] are maligned and slandered as anti-Semites and traitors, while some resisters, such as Hans von Dohnanyi, were honored by Yad Vashem as Righteous

teous Gentiles.

At the very end of her book, Tec appends touching incidents of compassion from Germans for Jews and eloquently reiterates her finding that companionship and friendship were exceedingly important factors for survival. Survival itself was a fundamental form of resistance against the Nazi attempt to murder all Jews.

Notes

[1]. Bruno Bettelheim, "Individual and Mass Behav-

iors in Extreme Situations," *Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38 (1943): 417-452.

[2]. Raoul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, rev. ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier), 499-513, 915-916, 973, 981-982, 1030-1031.

[3]. Peter Hoffmann, *Carl Goerdeler gegen die Verfolgung der Juden* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2013); and Peter Hoffmann, *Carl Goerdeler and the Jewish Question, 1933-1942* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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