

**Judy Batalion.** *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos.* New York: William Morrow, 2021. 576 pp. \$28.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-06-287421-4.

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**Published on** H-Poland (November, 2021)

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*The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos*, by historian Judy Batalion, brings to light the names, histories, and legacies of young Jewish women resisters in Poland during the Holocaust. Intended for a broad readership, the book—which consists of four parts comprising thirty-one chapters, plus an introduction, a prologue, and an epilogue—tells a captivating story that will be of interest to scholars of Polish Jewish history, the Holocaust in Poland, and women's studies.

The book explores resistance primarily through the lens of gender. Women's efforts to plan, smuggle, negotiate, masquerade, lie, hide, protect, maintain contacts, and fight were key for Jews trying to survive in or escape from ghettos and camps, and for those who lived in forests and on the "Aryan" side. Age was a factor that facilitated the women's involvement in the Jewish underground. All were young, many were teenagers. They came from various backgrounds, and Batalion explains how their families' religious denomination, social status, and place of residence influenced the women to assume new roles during World War II. The elements that comprised the psychological profile of the female resister are weaved throughout the book. But the most important factor that shaped the women was their membership in Jewish youth groups, which they had

joined and thrived in already in interwar Poland. This stands among the most important interventions of this study. Through individual histories, Batalion illustrates how loyalty and connections established in the ideologically diverse networks trumped most, if not all, other considerations during the Holocaust.

To tell the history, Batalion brings together multilingual accounts of and about the Jewish women whose clandestine activities spanned the area of prewar Poland. This is a major contribution of this book, as it gives English speakers access to sources in Hebrew and Yiddish, including some of the earliest efforts to document this history. Batalion discusses the reasons why women's histories became less discoverable and outweighed by the male perspective. One of the most illuminating aspects relates to how the former female resisters and their recollections were received after the war, mainly in Israel, and how these women continued to struggle with the memories and effects of their wartime activities.

Just as Batalion moves from the prewar to the wartime and the postwar periods, she also guides the reader across geographic regions. The women whose lives Batalion documents were constantly "on the move," thus the notion of mobility is intertwined with individual stories and the larger narrative of the book. Batalion turns the attention to

areas of Poland that have been rather sidelined in Holocaust scholarship: the western territories annexed by the Reich, such as Będzin and Katowice. Batalion highlights these locations, in addition to discussing the illicit activities of Jewish women in Warsaw, Kraków, Vilna (Vilnius, Wilno), Grodno, and elsewhere. By widening the geographic lens, Batalion traces the various connections that Jews forged. This, in turn, accentuates the existence of a well-organized network facilitated by Jewish women couriers (*kashariyot*). However, Batalion's depiction of Jewish women fighters and their activities reaches beyond the areas of interwar Poland. This is a transnational history. Among the most revealing parts in this trans-border narrative is the discussion of rescue as resistance, in particular of smuggling Jews from German-occupied Poland to Slovakia.

A geographic arc creates opportunities to spotlight Jewish women's ordeals and resistance activities in various sites of persecution. The most harrowing and detailed account tells about the experiences of incarceration and brutal interrogations in German prisons in western Poland. These tend not to be automatically associated with places of persecution of Jews. Therefore, a focus on prisons delineates how Jewish women reached those places, what they endured there, how they lived their daily lives, and how some managed to escape. Then too, by zooming in on penitentiary sites, Batalion elucidates two major points: that Jews hid on the "Aryan" side well after the liquidation of ghettos in western Poland and that they faced the most danger from their Polish neighbors.

In fact, relations between Poles and Jews come into view in the book. These are stories of fear, blackmail, betrayal, denunciation, and death. The women whose stories Batalion relays, as well as their comrades in the resistance, faced threats from their non-Jewish acquaintances, neighbors, and strangers, both adults and young people. What is striking in this history is how lonely these

women were as they struggled to save Jewish lives. To survive under a false identity, the Jewish women had to blend into the Polish society. In doing so, they encountered everyday displays of anti-semitism. These situations affirm that rescue and cooperation were not the dominant behaviors of the Polish population. Therefore, this book challenges the common, politicized, narrative about the Polish people's choices and actions during the Holocaust. Some individual Poles exhibited empathy, stretched their own resources, and endangered their and their family members' lives to help Jews. These instances are also noted in the book.

A sweeping study, this book tackles a range of themes, among them sexual violence against women. This topic is difficult to research, challenging to analyze, and onerous to read about. But it is essential for understanding the Holocaust. Batalion weaves in a commentary to show the settings and ways Jewish women were violated. However, graphic examples of brutal physical abuse left without context that follow later in the book may raise questions about the purpose of highlighting them.

Entwined in the narrative of the book is Batalion's own journey of discovering material that inspired her to write *The Light of Days*, of her research process, and of ways she connects history with memory and contemporary phenomena. In the epilogue, Batalion reflects on her experiences in Poland in 2018. This could have been an opportunity to discuss if and to what extent the histories of women during World War II in Poland, and of Jewish women resistance fighters, are curated, displayed, promoted, and known in the country of origin of the Jewish women whose stories are chronicled in the book. Efforts to address the lacuna made in the past several years illustrate greater awareness about gendered experiences of the Holocaust and an interest in exploring marginalized histories.

*The Light of Days* illuminates the choices, actions, risks, achievements, and losses of the Jewish women as they pursued resistance activities. The comprehensive approach of the book posits this study as a seminal reading about Jewish women and Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. This riveting book has the power to ignite, or rekindle, interest in individual women mentioned in the book and inspire to search for others whose stories await to be told.

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**Citation:** Joanna Sliwa. Review of Batalion, Judy. *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos*. H-Poland, H-Net Reviews. November, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57110>



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