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# Primary and Secondary Sources Activity

## World War II and the Holocaust

### Jewish Resistance to Nazi Germany

#### Background

As part of the Nazi New Order, Hitler implemented his racial agenda, which eventually took form as his Final Solution. Although the full extent of Hitler’s plans was unknown to many throughout Europe, native anti-Semitic populations often complied with Nazi policies toward the Jewish people. For this reason, the Jewish population often stood alone in their resistance to the Nazi’s Final Solution. Despite having little access to weapons, resistance fighters continued to struggle against Nazi forces.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is one example of Jewish resistance. In late 1940, German authorities isolated the Jewish population of Warsaw within the walled Jewish quarter of the city. By late 1942, close to 100,000 Jews in the ghetto had died, either from malnutrition, disease, or execution. An additional 300,000 had been deported, most of them to death camps. Eventually, leaders of the Jewish underground decided to fight back. Two separate resistance organizations were created: the Jewish Fighting Organization (ZOB) and the Jewish Fighting Union (ZZW). In January of 1943, the Germans attempted another round of deportations. A small group of resistance fighters hurried to block the Germans’ efforts. Over a four-day period, most of the resistance fighters were killed, but their courage energized the ghetto. The ZOB and ZZW regrouped and ghetto residents built a massive network of underground hiding places (bunkers) beneath buildings. When the next round of deportations came in April, the battle that ensued lasted for about a month. The Germans attacked with tanks, artillery, and air support, burning down buildings and demolishing the ghetto. Resistance fighters responded with sporadic surprise attacks, using guns, grenades, and Molotov cocktails. In the end, almost all the Jews died, but their determined effort to defy the Germans inspired other uprisings throughout Poland.

**Directions:** The selections below are from accounts during the Warsaw

Ghetto Uprising. Read the selections. Then answer the questions.

One of our battle groups, still unarmed, was caught by the Germans and was taken to the “Umschlag” [deportation facility]. Shortly before they were to enter the railroad cars, B. Pelc addressed the group with a few words. It was only a short address, but it was so effective, that not a single one of the sixty people moved to enter the car. Van Oeppen (the chief of Treblinka) shot all sixty himself on the spot. . . .

Of all the prepared battle groups only five took part in the January activities [resistance efforts that took place over four days]. . . .

Once again, as was the case in the first stage of the Z.O.B.’s activities,  
four-fifths of the Battle Organization’s members perished. . . . Public opinion, Jewish as well as Polish, reacted immediately to the Ghetto battles. For now, for the first time, German plans were frustrated. . . . For the first time the Jew in the street realized that it was possible to do something against the

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Germans’ will and power. . . . The mere fact that because of the unexpected resistance, weak as it was, the Germans were forced to interrupt their “deportation” schedule was of great value.

—Marek Edelman, a leader in the Jewish Fighting Organization, 1945

What we have experienced cannot be described in words. We are aware of one thing only: what has happened has exceeded our dreams. The Germans ran twice from the ghetto . . . I have the feeling that great things are happening, that we have dared is of great importance . . .

Keep well, my dear. Perhaps we shall meet again. But what really matters is that the dream of my life has become true. Jewish self-defense in the Warsaw ghetto has become a fact. Jewish armed resistance and the retaliation have become a reality. I have been witness to the magnificent heroic struggle of the Jewish fighters.

—Mordacai Anielewicz, a leader in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,  
in a letter, 1943

1. **Analyzing Information** What shared motivation did Jews in the Warsaw ghetto have for defending themselves against the Germans?
2. **Comparing and Contrasting** How do the two passages describe the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising? How are their descriptions similar? How are they different?

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1. **Drawing Conclusions** Why do you think the Warsaw Uprising was inspirational for other fighters in the Jewish resistance? Use examples from the passages to support your answer.
2. **Making Connections** What other examples of organized opposition or resistance to political or social violations of human rights can you identify throughout history?