

Unit Title: **Jewish Resistance****Holocaust Education - Historical Notes and Teaching Suggestions for Educators:**

Students frequently ask, “Why didn’t the Jews fight back?” It may appear at first glance that Jews didn’t resist, but this is not true. They resisted as much as any other group under Nazi occupation. Most often, they had to act under circumstances that could hardly have been less suited for such activities. They used the methods available to them according to local situations and individual circumstances. Resistance was usually carried out against great odds and with incomplete information about the overall situation. They had little or no outside help and often had to contend with the antisemitism of others who were also under occupation.

There are several problems with the question, “Why didn’t the Jews fight back?” Key lessons about the Holocaust emerge from legitimate responses to this question.

1. Which Jews? (Part One) The Holocaust did not descend upon all Jews in the same way. The situation facing German Jews developed slowly over the course of a decade. They loved their country and many couldn’t give it up easily, in spite of Nazi rule. The situation facing Eastern European Jews was very different. They faced invaders and occupiers. Even so, they couldn’t necessarily rely on non-Jews for assistance. Some helped, but traditional anti-Judaism poisoned the attitudes of many others who should have been natural allies against a common enemy. In some areas, Jews had only days or weeks to understand the nature of events, since the Nazis imposed their destructive program much more quickly under occupation than they did in Germany. In Western Europe, Jews were accepted in national resistance groups, but distinctions were often made between “native” and “foreign” Jews.
2. Which Jews? (Part 2) Jews across Europe were not a homogeneous group. There were various political, social, economic, and religious philosophies among Jews. Many of these overlapped with non-Jewish groups as well. The way that a person or group chose to respond to the Nazis naturally arose out of their overall worldview, not just their religious identity.
3. Which Jews? (Part Three) Jews are also individuals. Each person had to respond according to his/her own abilities and circumstances. Age, gender, family status, occupation, and specific personality traits all played a part in helping a person decide what to do. Obviously, it is ridiculous to oversimplify the topic of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust by framing it as a single question, such as “Why didn’t the Jews fight back?”
4. What was the goal of resistance? Some people think of resistance only in terms of military fighting. For most Jews, the goal was individual and collective survival, not killing the enemy. They had no army. They were greatly outnumbered and out-gunned. Military resistance, except in places where guerrilla activity was possible, was suicidal. Consequently, fighting resistance usually occurred only after the Nazi mass murder program became known. With survival eliminated as unlikely, resistance often became a choice of the manner of death.
5. The question, “Why didn’t the Jews fight back?” is somewhat disrespectful. It implies that Jews didn’t respond as they should have or as we would have. The question hints at the idea that there is something wrong with them - that they are *fundamentally* different from the rest of us. This brings us perilously close to the Nazi lies and stereotypes that disparaged Jews. As teachers, we must help students see through such distortions. It would be tragic if Holocaust education perpetuated the very ideas that made the Holocaust possible in the first place.

It may be easier to think about Jewish resistance during the Holocaust if we look at the various types of resistance. There were basically two types of resistance and two modes of application.

- Active resistance describes **doing something** to thwart the enemy’s goals.
- Passive resistance describes a refusal to act - **not doing** what the enemy wants.
- Both types of resistance can be carried out in direct or indirect modes. Direct resistance targets the enemy. Indirect resistance is carried out in support of the oppressed individual or community.

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These categories represent a paradigm of resistance. They are not mutually exclusive. There are many acts of resistance that would fit into more than one category. The main goal of this model is to broaden our thinking to recognize the validity of the various resistance strategies. The following chart illustrates some resistance possibilities.

	Active	Passive
Direct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising · Death Camp revolts at Treblinka, Sobibor, and Auschwitz · Fighting as Jewish partisans and as members of national resistance groups · Sabotage during labor projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Refusing to report for deportation · Hiding · Refusing to wear the Jewish star or concealing Jewish identity
Indirect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Smuggling supplies or information into the ghetto or camp · Producing or obtaining false identification papers · Engaging in clandestine religious, educational, or cultural activities in spite of prohibitions · Escaping from camps, ghettos, or Nazi-occupied areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Survival – Refusal to give up in spite of conditions designed to lead to death · Death with dignity – refusing to increase one’s own chance of survival at the expense of others, such as refusing to abandon the sick, weak, very young, or very old.