

Southern New Hampshire University

Belorussian Forest Camps  
Jewish Resistance during World War II

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

By  
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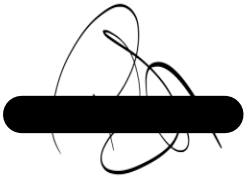
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## Abstract

During World War II the Nazi Party attempted to ethnically cleanse Europe of its population of Jewish people as well as starve and resettle the non-Jewish people of Eastern Europe. To achieve the annihilation of the Jews Nazis first forced whole communities into ghettos and from there into concentration camps, both death camps and work camps, with the intention of everyone eventually dying. Although this assault was brutal on both Jewish and non-Jewish populations it was not met without resistance in many places. In the eastern lands that bordered the Soviet Union Jews and non-Jews formed forest partisan groups and family camps formed along the edges of society. The forests were able to sustain life due to a variety of factors. These factors included topography, organization and resources found in the surrounding communities, backlash against the brutality of the Germans and in places lower levels of antisemitism in the local non-Jewish population. The forest partisan and family camps were strongest and most numerous in the Belorussian forests because of a special combination of these factors. The true story of the forests tells of two kinds of resistance; the active fighting of the partisans, many of whom were Jewish, and the almost unachievable act of surviving. This thesis relies on both secondary sources produced by historians through the years and memories of forest survivors in order to examine the value of each factor and its place in the story of Jewish resistance and survival in Belorussian forests during World War II.

## Dedication

To my parents, Susan and Jerry Wolfson; my partner, Jonathan Kotchian; and my daughters Gwynnevere and Alyda-Lilyth Wolfson and Aryana Youngquist, who not only have accepted my fascination with the Holocaust but who have also supported me wholeheartedly on this journey.

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## Introduction

World War II was an interesting time. In it we saw parts of humanity which had previously been unfathomable to us, or, barring that, had been left in the dust of our earlier barbaric history. Total warfare, mechanized weapons and ethnic cleansing all claimed their space in this war, clamoring to be recognized by history. World War II strained civilization and broke it apart in many places. One of the most broken places was the plight of the Jews in Eastern Europe. Thousands of years of culture and community was obliterated in a few short years, with families torn apart and the majority of the Jews killed. Death came through camps, like Auschwitz, which killed approximately one million Jews, as the Nazis gassed people in huge numbers and then burned them.<sup>1</sup> Death also came through mass killings like Babi Yar in Ukraine where the Nazis killed 33,771 Jews in a two-day period.<sup>2</sup> Most of the death, however, came through continual murder of Jews in occupied countries. Untold millions died this way, by the hand of another person, killed out of fear, hatred, blood lust or greed.

Within this plight of eastern European Jews, where there was so much death and destruction, we also see the largest resistance movements. Jews and others waged a guerilla war

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<sup>1</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, "Auschwitz.org," Auschwitz.org, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.auschwitz.org>.

<sup>2</sup> United States Holocaust Museum, "Mass Shootings at Babyn Yar (Babi Yar)," in *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (United States Holocaust Museum), [Page #], accessed October 19, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kiev-and-babi-yar>.

against the Germans and their collaborators in the forests of eastern Europe, and in turn they were supported by the unique features of this landscape in terms of physical and social elements which helped the Jews to not only survive, but also to resist.

During World War II, when the Nazi government had switched its policy from encouraging emigration of the Jews to total annihilation of the Jewish people, and the death camps were becoming known to those outside of the occupied areas, many hunted people in occupied European countries fled to nearby forests looking to escape widespread and all-consuming Nazi terror and destruction. Historian Suzanne Winer Webber calls these fleeing people “forest fugitives” and this is how the non-combatants among them will be referred to throughout the present text.<sup>3</sup>

Escaping to the woods happened all throughout Europe; however, this thesis will focus on Eastern Europe, in particular the Belorussian forests where there was the most significant partisan activity in Eastern Europe. Some other areas will be mentioned throughout to give a clearer picture of the lives of the partisans in Eastern Europe. The Eastern European countries treated in this thesis are Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belorussia, but also including an area called Polesia, situated between Ukraine and Belorussia. The number of Jewish and Soviet partisans and the level of partisan activity and existence in this area was higher than in other

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<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Weiner Webber, "Shedding City Life: Survival Mechanisms of Forest Fugitives during the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 18, no. 1 (2012): 2, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2012.11087299>.

areas of Europe. The climate was better, and Belorussia was a prime field of operation.<sup>4</sup> The Belorussian forests were thick, with very small populations, and vast expanses of uncharted territory. They were full of material for building, animals for hunting, and had just enough civilization on their edges to sustain an inner forest fugitive population. Also, the German supply lines for the eastern front crisscrossed Belorussia, giving partisans ample targets for guerilla warfare. The Belorussian forests contributed to heavy forest fugitive activity because they had an array of assets. These forests were dense and vast enough to support survivors, and near enough to vital enemy lines to allow for the infliction of maximum damage and for opposition groups to form.

The flight into the forest, even by people who had lived on its outskirts and therefore had some knowledge and skills at the outset of their lives as forest fugitives, was one that challenged and changed them. They had to “shed” the life they had outside and learn how to blend in.<sup>5</sup> They learned to hide and forage and kill. Safety was never assured, and Jews faced particular difficulties in the forests. Antisemitism was a powerful force which had stalked Jewish existence in European countries for centuries, and Jews were as likely to be killed when found in a forest as to be let go unmolested.<sup>6</sup> The Germans also wanted to corral Jews toward the deaths which were planned for them in ghettos and camps. Raul Hilberg wrote that the Jews in the forests had

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Michel, *The Shadow War: European Resistance, 1939-1945* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 278.

<sup>5</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 2.

<sup>6</sup> Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, 1994 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 66.

escaped German control, and this made them a different kind of problem for the Nazis.<sup>7</sup> Their numbers were not so great that they would seem statistically important, but their existence meant the failure of the German aim to exterminate them. The Jews in the forests were resisting Nazi Germany by surviving.

The forest fugitives who survived their flight into the forest, and then found a footing within it, organized into two main categories: fighting groups and non-combatant groups. Both main categories engaged in resistance work against their oppressors, albeit in different ways. The idea of Jewish resistance is one that has been debated since the end of the war. Some prominent historians believed that the only type of resistance that was valid involved a gun, while others looked deeper into what surviving meant to the people who had survived.<sup>8</sup> In the years after the war the idea of survival being a form of resistance has grown.<sup>9</sup> This paper examines how both fighters and non-combatants who lived in the forest relied on the unique combination of factors surrounding forest life to survive and therefore to resist. This thesis is about survival, but survival is about resistance.

Survival and resistance take on an additional meaning in the modern world and add to the importance of the study of eastern European partisans. As we have moved away from a concept of war in which one king's army meets another king's army on a battlefield and into a world where war is mechanized, killing many at once, and played out in cities, town and villages, partisans, fighters from the local population, who fight against a superior occupying force, have

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<sup>7</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 395.

<sup>8</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 1104.

<sup>9</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell, 1996), 27.

been created. Smaller groups in previous wars turned into massive partisan organizations throughout occupied Europe during World War II. Partisans were a new type of soldier created by modern warfare. The partisan story is found in the story of the oppressed, who so often throughout European history have been Jewish. Partisans still take up arms today to protect their homes and their lives against ethnic oppression.

One group in the forests during World War II was partisan units, who fought the occupation troops and collaborators. Depending on which country they were in, the makeup of these groups was different. Belorussia had a significant Soviet partisan group and a Soviet policy of admitting Jews. Partisan units were called *otryads*. *Otryads* in Belorussia came under official Soviet control in 1942, and Soviet policy discouraged strict ethnically segregated units, preferring instead for the organizational units to be clustered regionally.<sup>10</sup> This led to an intermingling of Jewish and non-Jewish soldiers in many Soviet *otryads*. Before this change in policy there were at least twenty-eight all-Jewish partisan groups active in Eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> These partisan groups did double duty in fighting Nazis and attempting ghetto rescues.

The other group was family camps of varying sizes, sometimes as small as two people but sometimes as many as a thousand. People in this group were often related to one another, but people who fled from the same place also banded together. They fled, often without much preparation, and into an unknown fate. They came from local towns and from nearby cities with ghettos. Some were escapees from Nazi camps. People with useful skills, or possessing weapons or training, were absorbed into larger groups while people without these assets were most often left to fend for themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> Yehuda Bauer and Nili Keren, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York, N.Y.: Franklin Watts, 2002), 293.

<sup>11</sup> Bauer and Keren, *A History*, 293.

Some groups were both partisan unit and family camp. These groups were comprised of Jewish fighters and Jewish escapees. The aim of these camps was to appease the Soviets and get revenge on the Germans by both fighting them and allowing the Jewish race to evade extermination. The most famous of these groups was the Bielski unit, but there were others, some of whom have been lost to time or have been under-researched, like the Zorin Family Camp.<sup>12</sup> These and other family camps will be discussed more fully in the topography chapter.

Within the formal units and larger family groups there were status distinctions between people, as discussed in both chapter one and four. Fighters and leaders, along with their families, were the most important and it went down from there in order of usefulness to the group's survival. Children, the elderly and the otherwise infirm were at the bottom. A person could move up in status by becoming a fighter or providing another valuable resource to the group. To build a society from scratch in the forests required the skills found in a city or town and so knowledge of medicine, food preparation, teaching, tailoring, and cobbling, blacksmiths and tanners were all necessary.

Although fleeing to the forest was common, not every forest in Europe could meet the needs of the fugitives, leaving many of them to die due to capture or exposure. In Eastern Europe, specifically the areas that bordered the Soviet Union such as Poland, Lithuania and Belarus, the forests were able to sustain many more fugitives due to several different factors. These factors included topography, organization and wealth of the surrounding communities, the brutality of the Germans and the lower level of antisemitism in the local non-Jewish population, all of which figured into the survival of the Jewish fugitives.

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<sup>12</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl*, paperback ed. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2011), 133.

This thesis will draw on the work of historians through the years examining how people lived in the forests and what they did there. Also included are the memories of people who lived through the war in these forests which supplies a closer look at how they coexisted with nature. That the Belorussian forests supported a larger number of fugitives is known.<sup>13</sup> This project will examine the unique elements in these forests that lead to people surviving in the Belorussian forests at a higher rate than they did elsewhere.

Chapter one will focus on the organizations supporting the fugitives, both before and during the war. The partisan organization itself was the most important aspect of forest survival. Taking form between 1941 and 1942, Soviet partisan units provided an important base for fleeing Jews.<sup>14</sup> Without the presence of partisans in the forests, escaping Jews were entirely at the mercy of local people and were an easy target for the Germans. Likewise, involvement with some sort of prior organization was often useful for survival as well. There were Zionist groups active before the war which sought to train young people for a move to Palestine, but this training helped forest fugitives to survive difficulties and death in a war much closer to home. These organizations also gave them established networks for communication and action.

Chapter two will cover antisemitism. Antisemitism was widespread and deeply entrenched in European culture. Within and without the forest it had an equally large part to play, both by driving people into the forests, but also in the relations fugitives had with each other and the local populations. Soviet antisemitism was also a large factor in fugitives' survival. By the time of World War II, the Soviets had been producing instructional propaganda aimed at decreasing antisemitism for years. The governmental framework which created the propaganda

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<sup>13</sup> Bauer, *The Death*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Reuben Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi Occupied Eastern Europe: With a Historical Survey of the Jew as Fighter and Soldier in the Diaspora* (London: Elek, 1974), 280.

buoyed the chances of survival for Jews by making the official aims of the partisan organization sympathetic to their plight, and more inclusive of them as soldiers and workers. In the units with less antisemitism there was a higher rate of Jewish survival.

Chapter three will treat brutality and its effects. The Germans stationed in the east during World War I had an intense experience there, and even occupied those lands. The German military created a slave labor state during World War I which reaped the bounty of the natural resources of Eastern Europe. German soldiers' thoughts and feelings, which were often negatively skewed, grew in reaction to what they perceived as a slovenly culture, unused land and non-productive lives of the Slavic people. This greatly influenced how Germans thought about eastern European people and how the Slavs were treated in the Second World War.

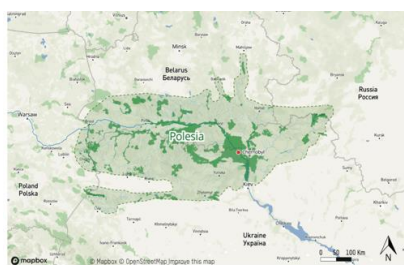
Brutality was not only a German phenomenon. The partisans themselves were often brutal to the local population, taking from them a variety of goods. German brutality led people to aid the partisans, while the partisan brutality lead people to sell them out to the Germans. Sometimes, as we will see, brutality was a necessary part of forest life. The choices made in the forests have a larger impact on everyone in a group than would normally be found in civilized society.

Chapter four considers the topography of the forest and its effects on fugitive survival. Family camps are mentioned in topography as they were truly the forest fugitives, as non-combatants trying to melt into the backdrop of the forest. These forests were vast, covering a huge expanse of uncharted territory. Food could be found in both the bounty of the forests themselves and the villages which bordered them. Materials for creating makeshift houses was readily available, and people lived in all manner of shelters.

The forests are a unique story of survival and resistance. Persecuted people ran to them in need and the forests gave to them a new existence, and a chance for life. Within the woody



confines people learned to exist as survivors and rebels, rebelling always against the force of Nazi oppression. They learned to take back some of what was stolen from them in the outside world and gained both the strength and courage to rebuild their shattered lives in the years after the war. In conclusion we will see how each of the elements above contributed to making the Belorussian forests so hospitable to this resistance and survival. Without each one of these elements in place in these forests there would not have been as many Jews, and other fugitives, walking out of the forests at the end of the war.



**Figure 1: Map of Polesia**

[Savepolesia.org](http://Savepolesia.org)

## Chapter 1: Organizations

From 1941 through the end of the war, Nazi domination came down hard on European people. Nazi oppression was the worst for Jews, and others considered undesirable like the Roma population, homosexuals and Jehovah's witnesses, but ultimately it impacted everyone. In heavily forested parts of eastern Europe people fled to the woods. Many went just to survive, but others went with a desire to fight back. Some came from the towns, villages and ghettos nearby, and others by longer and less straightforward routes. These forest fugitives came from all walks of life and types of people. One thing most fugitives had in common was that they were people of civilized world and were largely unaccustomed to life in the wilderness. In varying degrees, they each had to struggle to find their way and to survive in the forest. A farmer might have an easier time adjusting than a city person, but each would struggle to live almost wholly outside of civilization.

This flight from death was often a spontaneous choice made in a moment of fear and reckoning. Escaping death as it came close to them, forest fugitives were not able to plan for their journey into the forest, or their life within the forest. A moment of opportunity, like Brenda Sender had when she slipped through a fence when a guard wasn't looking, was often all they had.<sup>1</sup> The tiniest crevice appearing in front of them which allowed them to escape into the unknown was the largest opportunity they would have to defy death. These tiny moments

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Sender, "RG Number: RG-50.984.0004 Panel Discussion Regarding Partisans of Vilna," interview, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified December 20, 1987, accessed October 14, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn562680>.

allowed thousands of people to slip away from the darkness about to swallow them and live another day in the forests. Like Sender, they usually ran to the forest holding nothing but hope and tried to continue to live.

In the forests forest fugitives struggled against nature, and they struggled to form a new society. Keeping themselves alive was their first priority. The German occupation had flushed them out of the towns and villages, and the Germans did not give up the hunt for them. The Germans remained aware of the people slipping through their fingers into the forests. In order to remain alive, fugitives had to rebuild pieces of the society they had left behind when they fled. Organizations helped them to accomplish this.

Organizations, both formal and informal, dating from before and during the war aided forest fugitives in their survival. An organization provided a ready-made group in which to put oneself which allowed the focus to immediately turn to survival and resistance. A lone person could not stand up to the huge darkness the Nazis had covered the world in at this time, but a group stood a chance of fighting back.

Soviet partisan and Zionist youth organizations, which within them hold multitudes of smaller groups, are the main focus of this chapter. These two groups helped to stabilize the forest fugitives. Each in their own way contributed to the survival of the Jews who fled into the forest. At points they intermingled, as many Zionist groups were at least partly paramilitary groups.<sup>2</sup>

There were smaller organizations and other partisans around. Polish and Ukrainian partisans were active in the region, although on a smaller scale than the Soviets. Communists and other political organizations had underground networks and systems for sheltering people,

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<sup>2</sup> Litman Litow, "Oral History Interview with Litman Litow," *RG Number: RG-50.984.0003 Oral History Interview with Litman Litow*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1994, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn562678>.

fighting back and creating documents. In the ghettos there were resistance movements formed, with the most famous having been in the Warsaw ghetto. Although at times all groups functioned in isolated silos out of necessity, there was often movement and some form of collaboration between them. Eastern Europe was a large swath of territory. Often groups considered subversive were uncovered and the people killed, so these groups sustained heavy losses. These smaller groups, although existing concurrently with Soviet partisans and youth organizations, are not the focus of this thesis.

Within the Belorussian forest, partisan units and Zionist youth organizations were the backbone of existence. People running towards the wilderness needed structure to cling to. Survival with no tools and no structure was almost impossible. Small groups of people without tools or structure banded together to sell their lives at as high a price as they could. They fought back in unwinnable situations and met their death taking as many of the enemy as they could with them.<sup>3</sup> Brenda Senders, who became a partisan after escaping the ghetto her family had been forced into, mentions this idea when talking about her first flight into the unknown: “I will die. I must carry a gun and I will take as many as I can with me.”<sup>4</sup> That Sender did not have to die taking as many Germans with her as she could was because she quickly found a group of partisans when she made it to the forest. Senders survived the war because she had this partisan organization to join.

Organizations supplied knowledge, built underground networks which became so vital and allowed people to trust one another more readily. They gave people a sense of belonging and of pushing back against an enemy who often felt larger than the sky and who was consuming

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<sup>3</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl*, paperback ed. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2011), 122.

<sup>4</sup> Sender, "RG Number," interview, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

their entire world. Organizations allowed people to exact revenge for the murder of their loved ones. Esia Shor, a Bielski partisan, said that “revenge was engraved” on her mind.<sup>5</sup> Revenge was engraved on Esia’s mind because of the total devastation of her loss. Her family, save her father, was dead, and her hometown community no longer existed. The partisan poet Abraham Sutzkever, whose newborn baby was murdered by Nazis, wrote this about his wife in the Narocz Forest in September of 1943 and sums up why and how the partisans kept going in their quest for revenge:

“-And breathlessly we rush,  
Through swamp and growth so wild,  
You hold in hand a rifle-  
A shadow of your child.  
And every time the rifle  
Spits out its chunk of lead,  
In its dull glow we see  
The child we have bred.”<sup>6</sup>

The most important organization was the partisan movement itself: a group of fugitives and soldiers who banded together in order to fight the Germans. Lacking the existence of a partisan backbone forest fugitives often died.<sup>7</sup> Those forest fugitives without partisan infrastructure ran to empty forests and struggled against the elements, hostile locals, and the raids of the occupying troops. Wet, hungry, and despairing, many went back to the ghettos and camps they were previously living in. When there was partisan activity in a forest, however, it became a safer place. Sender said of the partisan presence in the forest that “the Germans were afraid to piss in the forest.”<sup>8</sup> This type of fear gave the forest fugitives an advantage. Germans knew that

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<sup>5</sup> Esia Shor, "Oral History with Esia Shor," interview, *RG-50.030.0565 Oral History with Esia Shor*, United States Holocaust Museum, 2010, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn41515>.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham Sutzkever, Barbara Harshav, and Benjamin Harshav, *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 175-76.

<sup>7</sup> Yehuda Bauer and Nili Keren, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York, N.Y.: Franklin Watts, 2002), 292.

<sup>8</sup> Sender, "RG Number," interview, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

partisans could be anywhere, and they would always strike given the opportunity. This level of safety was vital to the fleeing fugitives. It gave them time to get away and create a shelter. The Germans needed to be on the defensive when within the tree line and this allowed the escape of many people.

Even without being admitted to a formal partisan group, forest fugitives had the opportunity for trade and barter, and any hostile locals were less likely to kill without fear of reprisal. It was hard to know who was attached to which group, as allegiances shifted often. Partisans were violent when crossed. The locals did not want to get on the wrong side of the partisans and therefore face reprisals. Faygeh Marin Puchtik (Faye Porter), a Jewish female partisan, when asked by her son, the Holocaust scholar Jack Nusan Porter, if there was a lesson in partisan survival said, “yes, if more would have tried to escape, they’d be alive today. You had a much better chance to survive fighting with the partisans.”<sup>9</sup> Patrolling the forests, reprisals against hostile locals, and organizations in the woods such as hospitals all gave forest fugitives a sense of safety which in turn led to survival. Partisans were the one form of protection a people newly without a nation had in the woods.

Partisans, properly speaking, have not existed for very long in history. Nor have they always been the same type or person or had the same aim. Partisan history does not extend very far into the past beyond World War II. In the eighteenth century partisan units were mercenary, fighting for the highest bidder.<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon was in opposition to the growing recognition of a standing national army which was loyal to a king or emperor and largely paid in

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<sup>9</sup> Jack Nusan Porter and Yehuda Merin, *Jewish Partisans of the Soviet Union during World War II* (Brighton: Cherry Orchard Books, 2021), 479.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Rink, "The Partisan's Metamorphosis: From Freelance Military Entrepreneur to German Freedom Fighter, 1740 to 1815," *War in History* 17, no. 1 (January 1, 2010): 10, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.26069842&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

maintenance like food and clothing. Partisans were roving bands who would fight for a price and not out of nationalism or loyalty but instead for their commander, with whom they traveled. This commander negotiated hiring prices and wage distribution. Partisans and others like them waged “little wars” which were different from what a regular army would do.<sup>11</sup> They did not meet on a battlefield. Partisans accomplished raids and plundered the people they were hired to fight. It was a little bit like piracy. Interestingly, early partisans also did guard duty and “other security duties that the latter (regular troops) were not fit to accomplish.”<sup>12</sup> Later partisans, now small groups largely functioning far away from central command, would put a high price on their security duties. Sentries would be carefully tested, and the punishment for failing at the task was often death, either by the enemy or by the hand of the commander.

After the Seven Years’ War in 1763, the partisans underwent a change from mercenary bands to small independent national units.<sup>13</sup> These groups were often situated at borders, or other places where a small, lightweight military unit was useful. These units were conducting the same type of “little war” warfare, raids and skirmishes, but as national groupings they were now attached to countries and regions instead of individual commanders. Partisans had undergone their first major change, but it would not be their last change before becoming what we think of as partisans today.

Their second major change was during the “*Dos de Mayo*” uprising against Napoleon in Madrid, Spain.<sup>14</sup> At this time partisans become local people, under pressure, forming groups to battle an enemy. Partisans differed from local militias in that they were not called up by a

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<sup>11</sup> Rink, "The Partisan's," 11.

<sup>12</sup> Rink, "The Partisan's," 11.

<sup>13</sup> Rink, "The Partisan's," 14.

<sup>14</sup> Rink, "The Partisan's," 20.

regional or national force, and often not trained for the military. We see this phenomenon in eastern Europe during World War II, where the Soviet soldiers were joined by people fleeing death. Like the Spanish people rising against Napoleon, the later partisans were driven from their homes by war and necessity.

These reasons, war and necessity, make the modern partisan. In all of the later places we see them, they have been driven to this type of small, or guerrilla, warfare by circumstances foisted upon their country. The Cambridge English Dictionary states that partisan, as a noun, means: “(in a country that has been defeated) a member of a secret armed force whose aim is to fight against an enemy that is controlling the country.”<sup>15</sup> Partisans, being a secret force, used guerilla tactics, which are sudden and unexpected attacks.

Guerilla warfare is not conducted by large numbers of troops but instead in secret by small units who causes as much destruction and chaos as they can. Partisans’ aims are missions such as blowing up train tracks and stealing enemy munitions and supplies. Asher Mirochnik recounts his first mission to blow up a train, under the direction of a more experienced partisan: “I pulled the cord when the locomotive was on the mine. A loud explosion was heard, and the locomotive and eight cars filled with soldiers were hurled into the air. I wanted to run and grab a gun, but the partisan reprimanded me and ordered me to run quickly after him into the woods.”<sup>16</sup> This tactic of surprise attack followed by melting back into the woods allowed the partisans to both stay alive and continue to have the element of surprise. If they were caught, they would be tortured and killed, giving out any information they had during the torture. Information obtained by torture was thought valuable because occupying troops and local collaborators were at a loss

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<sup>15</sup> Cambridge English Dictionary, "Partisan," in *Cambridge English Dictionary*, accessed October 6, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/partisan>.

<sup>16</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 367.



to discern the next plan when the perpetrators of the explosion or raid disappeared back into the unknown after an event.

After a certain point partisans became more closely allied with regular Red Army operations. After 1942 they were always officially under the control of the Red Army but were largely left to local command in their endeavors. The Germans, trying to forestall the blowing up of their trains and becoming used to the manner in which partisans did this, put two or three carloads of sand at the front of their trains, so that when they were blown up there would be little damage to their cargo, just a lot of sand everywhere.<sup>17</sup> When it became apparent their tactics were no longer inflicting the needed damage on the German military, the Soviet army changed the direction of the partisan aim. The established way partisans got the explosives to bomb trains was that Soviet planes would fly into the area, bomb nearby cities, and then drop packages of TNT for partisans to use.<sup>18</sup> The Soviet Union originally dropped larger units of TNT, but after the sand became common started to drop only small packages of TNT. The new directive that came from Soviet headquarters was for the partisan groups to use these smaller amounts to blow up the entire railroad instead of just a train here and there.<sup>19</sup> To do this partisan groups had to work in tandem not only with one another, which was rare, but with the Soviet Army as well. Makower said several otryads died in this endeavor, but it allowed the Red Army to start their offensive in June of 1941<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel Makower, "Oral History Interview with Samuel Makower," *RG Number: RG-50.030.0388 Oral History Interview with Same Makower*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1998, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506410>.

<sup>18</sup> Makower, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>19</sup> Makower, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>20</sup> Makower, "Oral History," interview.

Partisans did not only kill people. On his way to a mission, David Blanstein and his unit found a group of Jews hiding in a house.<sup>21</sup> They were freezing and starving to death. David and those on the mission with him removed some of their clothing to give the people, and also left them food in the hope that these people too might survive.<sup>22</sup> Often Jewish partisans would help other Jews they stumbled across in the forests. Partisans supplied food and clothing, like Blanstein did, and when able to they would bring stragglers back to their family camps, or family camps they knew about. Blanstein claims his family camp had about a hundred people collected over the duration of the war.<sup>23</sup> Some family camps, like the Bielski family camp, helped Jews to escape from the ghetto. Tuvia Bielski managed to get 80 people out of a nearby ghetto via a tunnel at one point.<sup>24</sup> Other ghettos had secret tunnels for escape as well.<sup>25</sup> Many Jewish partisans actively strove to rescue as many other Jews as possible while still extracting their revenge from the Nazis.

Although partisans melted back into the forests after a raid, their survival was not guaranteed. Giving testimony in February of 1959 Dov Lorber tells of a train mission which went wrong.<sup>26</sup> Due to snow the partisans had to place mines on the tracks just before the train came as opposed to the usual set up beforehand. In his fear that the train would soon be upon them, and that they would miss the opportunity the man in charge of hooking up the wires was careless. The mine exploded on him, and he died.<sup>27</sup> The train remained standing unharmed, and

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<sup>21</sup>Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 317.

<sup>22</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 317.

<sup>23</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 317.

<sup>24</sup> Shor, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Elman, "Oral History Interview with Joseph Elman," *RG Number: RG-50.030.0390 Oral History Interview with Joseph Elman*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1998, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506424>.

<sup>26</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 439.

<sup>27</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 439.

the mission had failed. The living partisans had to retreat quickly. Raids and missions were also times when Jewish men specifically would be killed by their own unit. In an interview partisan Sonia Shainwald Orbuch said “ by some coincidence every time we had a fight, some Jewish men did not come back.”<sup>28</sup>

Often the goal of a partisan mission was more opportunistic than planned. The flow of people and missions through the forest brought new information and opportunity and partisans seized on this valuable resource, information. Dov Bronstein writes that after a successful mission blowing up a train full of salt, a precious commodity which was shared between his partisan unit and the local people, his unit learned that a local Ukrainian policeman, who was a German collaborator, was planning to attend a wedding in a nearby village.<sup>29</sup> Bronstein was charged with killing the policeman since they now had the opportunity to do so. Bronstein and a companion extracted him from the wedding with a show of force, took him into the woods and shot him.<sup>30</sup> Opportunity is important for an army which cannot confront the enemy head on. In order to wage war, the partisans needed to be able to adapt to shifting plans and unpredictable changes to both their plans and German plans.

The partisans in eastern Europe developed slowly. When Hitler attacked the Soviet Union in June of 1941 in Operation Barbarossa, he did so by surprise, and the Soviets were unprepared.<sup>31</sup> Abba Klurman, a Jewish Soviet partisan, recounts how German soldiers by the trainload crossed the Bug River in Ukraine disguised as merchandise. When the attack came, these soldiers jumped from the cars as fresh units with full military gear.<sup>32</sup> Klurman believes that

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<sup>28</sup> *Fighting on Three Fronts: Antisemitism and the Jewish Partisans*, produced by Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation.

<sup>29</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 383.

<sup>30</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 383.

<sup>31</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-45: Nemesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 393.

<sup>32</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 318.

the “rapid disintegration” of the Red Army at the onset of the attack is why so many soldiers were caught within the occupied territory.<sup>33</sup> Stalin had thought that Hitler would not attack the Soviets until he had finished with Britain.<sup>34</sup> The German army advanced quickly and ruthlessly, conquering a large territory (see figure 1). Hitler, at the culmination of Operation Barbarossa, was in control of more territory than any European ruler since Napoleon.<sup>35</sup>

Having no advance notice or formal preparation Jews, Soviet soldiers (and Jewish soldiers. They existed, but often hid their Jewish identities) and regular citizens were caught behind the rapidly formed and now advancing enemy lines. Official governmental policy of Soviet Russia saw no difference between its Jewish citizens and other Russians, and so even though they knew about the mass murder the Germans were perpetrating on the Jews in Germany they did not direct them to evacuate ahead of other citizens. Most of the Jews were still living in towns and cities at the start of the attack and that was by and large where the Germans found them. Soldiers took to the forests. Nazis did not start out killing Jews in their newly occupied territories, but soldiers would have been considered legitimate targets at this early point. The unabashed murder of Jews in this territory came on the heels of the military advance.

Soldiers who got caught behind the German line in Operation Barbarossa began to engage in small-scale guerilla warfare, taking shots at the enemy where and when they could. Their primary object was to stay alive, and if possible, to make it back into Soviet territory. The Soviet government could not offer much support in the way of directions, medical help, or arms at the start.<sup>36</sup> Soldiers were on their own, trying to stay alive and at this point were often more

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<sup>33</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 318.

<sup>34</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-45*, 394.

<sup>35</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-45*, 400.

<sup>36</sup> Reuben Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi Occupied Eastern Europe: With a Historical Survey of the Jew as Fighter and Soldier in the Diaspora* (London: Elek, 1974), 279.

dangerous than useful to Jews they encountered in the forest. With no organization set up they were robbing and murdering more people than they were saving.

In July of 1941 the Soviets officially called for partisan organization in the occupied regions. Early on the partisans had difficulty forming themselves into useful associations. They attempted, in their scattered state, to form regular army units. Scattered across a few different countries, their large numbers made them hard to supply and hide. Meanwhile their lack of integration with the local populations of western and eastern Slavs isolated them from the help they could have received. Instead, they requisitioned goods from the local people who were already stretched thin and became hostile. Local people would often report partisans and other potential fugitives to the authorities.<sup>37</sup> Partisans in 1941, then, were centrally disorganized, unsustainable, and ineffective. They also made a great target for the Germans.<sup>38</sup>

By 1942 the Soviets had established a formal organization in charge of the partisans, called the Central Partisan Staff, who were themselves part of the Supreme Headquarters in Moscow. This in turn constructed the organization under which the forest fugitives worked. In the forests *otryads* were the smallest units, comprised of a varying number of fighters. The range in the number of fighters was quite large. Some had only twenty people while others had as many as a hundred. A group of *otryads* was under the command of a larger detachment called a brigade, or *brigada*. A group of brigades was under the control of larger groups called *soyedineniye*. The largest group on the ground was a partisan division, and some brigades were considered divisions, but not many. Over the divisions were the Central Partisan Staff in

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<sup>37</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *The Partisan: From the Valley of Death to Mount Zion* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 97.

<sup>38</sup> Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance*, 280.

Moscow.<sup>39</sup> By 1943, Moscow would send commanders into forests to organize partisan units where there was low or no activity.<sup>40</sup>

Jewish partisans who did not hide their Jewish identity often had harder time joining a unit. There were restrictions on them in regard to weapons; they had to supply their own, and without weapons they often had to have some sort of useful role in a unit. Joe Kubryk, in an interview for Jewishpartisans.org said that “if Jews wanted to join the partisans, they gave them conditions. The conditions were that you had to bring your own ammunition, your own equipment, a rifle, a gun, a grenade, whatever you can get...”<sup>41</sup> Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb, herself a Jewish partisan, speaks about the difficulty for a person with no useful skills or supplies in joining the partisans: “Well, it was also a matter of being accepted. You know, you've got to...you've got to have value again. You've got to be able to do something to have somebody keep you.”<sup>42</sup> Elman echoes this, quoting Russian partisans: “Well, if you're going to get some arms, we'll take you in.”<sup>43</sup> Without being armed, a Jew who wished to fight had a hard time being able to fight. There was generally not a surplus of weapons in the forests, only what could be stolen from villagers or Germans, and so this resource was incredibly precious to the partisans. Esthy Adler, who was only a young child when her stepmother fled with her to the forest, recalls having to hide from her step-uncle, who was angry that his sister brought a child into the forests. Adler said “Oh, yes, oh he would have definitely disposed of me. I knew it. I knew it, so I tried never to be left alone with him anywhere and with a group I knew I was a little

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<sup>39</sup> Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance*, 280.

<sup>40</sup> Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance*, 287.

<sup>41</sup> *Fighting on Three*.

<sup>42</sup> Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb, "Oral History with Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb," interview, *RG-50.030.0082 Oral History with Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1991, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504577>.

<sup>43</sup> Elman, "Oral History," interview.

safer because he couldn't very well start shooting into the group. That became my life for a while living in the forest it was full of escaped Jews from various camps.”<sup>44</sup> A child was considered a burden in a partisan camp, although within a family camp they were treasured.

A partisan's daily life was difficult. Raids and missions were their focus, and the camp was only where you ate and slept. Sleep was rough, even in a shelter. Heating was rudimentary, and mattresses, if available, were made of straw. Fighters performed guard duty as well, so their sleep was broken by shifts. Most of their time was spent outside the camp, traveling to where they needed to go. Groups of partisans could be sent many miles in order to achieve a mission, or to raid somewhere for food or other goods. During such missions a partisan slept outside.

Abraham Puchtik tells about living in “trenches” and walking all night through snow and mud.<sup>45</sup> Litman Litow tells of wearing several layers of clothing, in order to be able to trade them for weapons when the chance arose.<sup>46</sup>

In his oral testimony Litow also tells of how partisans sometimes managed to get food. Litow says they would take some potatoes from a field, only a few from each plant so that the farmer would not notice, and after they would hang wooden buckets on a pole over a fire to cook their food, which was often potatoes mixed with rye flour.<sup>47</sup> This sort of meal kept alive many of the smaller partisan bands.

Family camps were more settled, resembling in some cases a town. A regular partisan unit, however, lived differently. Larger units had permanent or semi-permanent housing and a doctor was often attached to them. Each unit had shelter, and a place to cook. Women lived in

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<sup>44</sup> Esthy Adler, "Oral History Interview with Esthy Adler," *RG-50.030.0004 Oral History Interview with Esthy Adler*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1994, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504522>.

<sup>45</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 329-30.

<sup>46</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>47</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

these units as well, but not very many. Some were lovers of partisans, or cooks. Sometimes women doctors or fighters were attached to regular partisan units, but again, this was uncommon. Partisan units were male dominated and focused on warfare.

By 1942 when the Soviets managed to organize an official partisan detachment in the newly occupied territories, the Germans had killed off most of the Eastern European Jews.<sup>48</sup> Therefore Jewish numbers were statistically low, although their participation in the partisan organization was important to the partisans, just as partisans were important to Jewish survival.

Partisan organizations were not formed only by soldiers, nor were Jews and soldiers the only groups under Nazi threat who fled to the forests. Notably, many non-soldier communists took to the woods and formed their own detachments.<sup>49</sup> Communism had adherents in many of the European countries and were a persecuted group under the Nazi regime. Many people and organizations in Belorussia realized that forming a partisan *otryad* or *brigada* was the only way to fight back from where they stood.

The organization of the partisans gave life to the forest fugitives where before they might have had death. That is not to say that the partisan units were always safe for Jews. Official policy and personal feeling when alone in the woods, so far from the governmental center, could be at odds, and they often were. A Jew was as likely to be robbed or murdered by a partisan as to be helped. The punishment of these murderous partisans was non-existent. Many people who fled to the forests met death there at the hands of those they thought might save them.<sup>50</sup>

Zionist youth movements were an important organizational part of prewar life, and this continued into the war. At one time there were one hundred thousand young people affiliated

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<sup>48</sup> Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance*, 280.

<sup>49</sup> Ainsztein, *Jewish Resistance*, 283.

<sup>50</sup> Bauer and Keren, *A History*, 292.



with these groups in Eastern Europe.<sup>51</sup> Taking hold in the interwar years, and based on the German youth movement *Wandervogel*, Zionist youth movements were about reclaiming political power for the Jews.<sup>52</sup> Jewish people had very little political power of their own in European societies, while American and Russian Jewish political sway was seen as growing.<sup>53</sup> The growth of political power in Russia and America inspired hope that it could also grow in the eastern European countries, and also hope that a Jewish homeland was possible in Palestine. Zionism had two fundamental ideas which it operated under. One was that all Jews across the globe comprised one nationality; the other was that Jews would naturally want to congregate within their own homeland.<sup>54</sup> With a Jewish homeland in Palestine as their target these groups focused on agriculture and organized communal life.

Due to the war, the door to Palestine closed to these young Jews but the skills they had learned about surviving hardship and creating a homeland from nothing through the youth movements helped them in what was to come. People who had joined a youth movement took leading roles in the resistance which sprung up in the face of growing Nazi darkness.<sup>55</sup> These leadership roles were vital to the survival of the Jewish people. Youth movement members became underground couriers, resistance leaders, and partisans.

The interconnectedness of the different Zionist group branches before the war helped underground networks to form. Relationships between Zionist youth groups and non-Jewish youth organizations helped in creating these networks. Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair and its counterpart, the Polish Boy Scouts, worked together to smuggle the first account

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<sup>51</sup> Bauer, *The Death*, 27.

<sup>52</sup> Bauer, *The Death*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Bell & Howell, 1996), 54.

<sup>54</sup> Bauer, *The Jewish*, 52.

<sup>55</sup> Yad Vashem, "Youth Movements," Yad Vashem, accessed October 6, 2022, [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206378.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206378.pdf).

of mass gassing at Chelmno out to the West.<sup>56</sup> Zionist youth groups made attempts, sometimes successful, to break people out of ghettos and camps. They were trained to think of the whole instead of themselves and given an ideology-- the dream of settling in Palestine-- that proved to be hard to quench.<sup>57</sup> Youth movement members had been taught to endure hardship in defense of their dream and turned this skill on the Nazis.

Joseph Elman recalls that his Zionist youth group leader was quick to adapt as the situation in Poland became worse for the Jews. Elman says:

“because first of all my leader -- the leader of my group from Betar, was the first one -- organized the a -- the resistance in the ghetto. And he was the first one who left the ghetto, which -- you know, very -- the ghetto was still existing when we were trying, you know, to arm ourselves. And he was the first for the 10 people who left the forest when the ghetto was still established, four months before the liquidation. So -- y-you know, when you belong to this group, you got -- you got somehow indoctrinated. I would say -- I know indoctrinated.”<sup>58</sup>

In Elman’s testimony we see the route youth groups often took as they stayed ahead of the Nazi regime.: organizing and arming in the ghetto, followed by a flight elsewhere, often, like this particular leader, to the forest. This youth group leader who fled to the forest was their connection later to escape the ghetto and join the partisans.<sup>59</sup>

The Ukrainian city of Buczacz hosted three underground units created by youth movement members.<sup>60</sup> They attempted to foment uprisings in the nearby ghettos. When this did not work, a group of them fled to the forest where they were active until the end of the war. They were not alone; all through eastern Europe young people active in these Zionist organizations

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<sup>56</sup> Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler's Final Solution* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 108.

<sup>57</sup> Yad Vashem, "Youth Movements," Yad Vashem

<sup>58</sup> Elman, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>59</sup> Elman, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>60</sup> Bauer, *The Death*, 122.

fought back by attempting uprisings and to lead people out of ghettos into the woods. There were at least thirty-five groups formed by Zionist youth active in the forests at that time, some of which were absorbed by larger groups and others which functioned outside the main organization.<sup>61</sup> These organizations were powerful motivators for European Jewish youth.

Litman Litow, another partisan, was active in the Zionist youth groups in his Polish town. This Zionist group aided him through the war and was active even after the war attempting to rebuild Jewish culture from the ashes of attempted annihilation. Groups like Litow's were engaged in smuggling young people over the borders, originally with the aim of getting them to Israel, but after the war began in earnest the goal changed to getting them safely out of dangerous areas. The local group joined forces with the Jewish Brigade Group, who provided fake Greek papers for Litow.<sup>62</sup> With these papers he was able to pretend to be a Greek laborer and to slip between occupied countries. Different Jewish groups aided him as he moved from country to country, at one point having to buy border guards off with his wristwatch.<sup>63</sup> Litow made it to the Austrian Alps, to a camp for partisans. Here a pit of decaying bodies left by the Germans opened up due to the gasses erupting from the bodies.<sup>64</sup> He later represented his Zionist Youth Group in conferences and committees throughout eastern Europe. Recalling one such conference Litow said "here I was condemned by Hitler to be annihilated, to die. He vowed there would be only Jews left in a museum. He was shot like a dog and burned like a piece of trash, and I am here."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Bauer, *The Death*, 123-24.

<sup>62</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>63</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>64</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

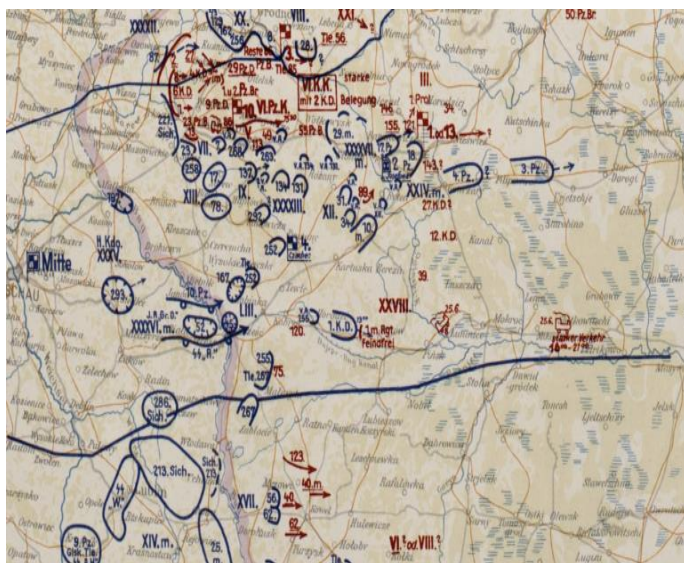
<sup>65</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

Yitzhak Arad, a partisan, was part of a Zionist youth movement before the war. He and his sister, Rachel, were sent outside of Warsaw to extended family as the Nazi noose tightened in Poland. Arad, a young teen at the time, found himself forced into a ghetto with his remaining family. There he managed to find weapons while assigned to a work detail outside of the ghetto, form a fighting group, and escape to the forests to join the partisans. The partisans wanted young men like Arad because they were armed and determined. He fought in many skirmishes attached to different regional units, and eventually found his way into the Naroch forest in Belorussia.<sup>66</sup> Arad moved between the different organizations in his wartime journey. First Arad was a Zionist youth group member, and later he had the skills to become a partisan.

Organizations aided people immensely. The partisans were more active in Belorussia due to the topographical makeup of the forest and their proximity to the German supply chains. Zionist youth organizations were active in the cities of this region. Together these organizations gave Jews a fighting chance at survival. Young people who refused to accept death, and were wise enough to see it coming, fell back on their training and organized. They joined the partisan movements and fought back against the oppression and death being meted out all around them. People who could not fight ran to the forest in the hopes of surviving in its protective embrace. Both were helped by organizations.

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<sup>66</sup> Arad, *The Partisan*, 145.



**Figure 2: Operation Barbarossa**

“The atlas of June 26, 1941, shows the German troops (blue) overtaking Russian troops (red). Note the progress of the Third Panzer Division (3.Pz) as it drives east. Warsaw, the occupied Polish capital, is at the middle left edge of the frame.” <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2019/12/the-nazi-war-atlas-of-operation-barbarossa/>



**Figure 3: Group Portrait of Jewish Partisans in the Forest**

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 99978

## Chapter 2: Antisemitism

The driving force behind people needing to flee and become fugitives was an ancient one, seen again and again in societies around the world. The idea of the “other,” an entity who lives among you and yours, but is wholly different, perhaps wrong or scary, is an old one. This idea of otherness can turn to hatred, as we saw in Europe before and during World War II. This racial hatred, called antisemitism, drove the slaughter of European Jews during World War II.

Antisemitism did not originate in the 1920's and 30's with the rise of Nazis and turn into the evil, hungry monster it became. Nazis borrowed heavily from an ancient cultural stream of antisemitism which came before them, stretching back into the early roots of Christianity. For Nazi laws they often borrowed from medieval church laws, which in turn were based on even more ancient ideas. The early church viewed the lack of conversion to the Christian faith on the part of the Jews poorly, as the church championed conversion or expulsion for non-believers. As will be examined soon, this in turn caused the population to believe Jews drank the blood of Christians or used Christian children's blood in their bread, also believing sometimes that Jews had horns and cloven feet. These ideas engendered fear in both Jewish and non-Jewish populations in Europe. The Christians were afraid of the scary things they heard and believed that Jews might do, and Jews were, predictably, afraid of a population who believes these things. A population which believes you might be using their blood is a population which quickly will become violent.

Antisemitism was a long burning fire in European culture that rose to a roar heard around the world during the Nazi era. Antisemitism was so deeply ingrained in the culture and mindset of the people of the European continent that even the deaths of whole communities were not always enough to make people stand in the way of it. Shmaryahu Zafran, a Jewish partisan, tells

of a woman he met near a site of mass killing called “Horses’ Graves.”<sup>67</sup> At this place Jews would dig pits, and then be shot into them, which was a common practice. The woman, Linda, burst into tears over this and said, “even though I don’t see Jews as people, this is too much already.”<sup>68</sup> She did nothing to stop the mass murder, not even keep Shmaryahu safe.<sup>69</sup>

As far back as the fourth century C.E. there were examples of antisemitism in Europe. In the fourth century, under the direction of Emperor Constantine, the church began to demand the acceptance of the Christian faith by everyone.<sup>70</sup> Prior to this the Romans wanted taxes and nationalistic idolatry but were content to allow their subjects to worship whatever gods they wanted. This change in official religion with a few centuries would lead to a twofold plan for dealing with the Jews in the countries on the European continent. The first step was conversion, the second expulsion.

Wanting to unify all of mankind under the banner of what they considered to be the true faith, and not having yet reached the stage of expulsion, by the medieval period the Church began to use force to separate Jews who would not convert from the surrounding society. The Middle Ages was a time of movement forward in antisemitism. Religious and racial hatred was directed specifically towards Jews from various fronts. In his work St. Thomas Aquinas wrote “the leaders of the Jews knew Jesus *to be the messiah promised in the law but did not know him to be God*. Still, it was a wished-for ignorance that doesn’t excuse them: they saw the evidence

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<sup>67</sup> Jack Nusan Porter and Yehuda Merin, *Jewish Partisans of the Soviet Union during World War II* (Brighton: Cherry Orchard Books, 2021), 335.

<sup>68</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 335.

<sup>69</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 335.

<sup>70</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 2.

and perverted it out of hatred and envy of Christ.”<sup>71</sup> The idea that Jews hated and envied Christ and Christians remained popular in Europe.

During the medieval period laws were enacted barring intermarriage between Jews and Christians and discussions of faith between them as well.<sup>72</sup> This separating of the two societies helped to isolate the Jewish populations in Europe. Furthering this isolation were laws prohibiting Jews from living in certain areas, and from holding public office.<sup>73</sup> This isolation would continue through the centuries, and by World War II was an accepted fact in many of the countries, especially in Eastern Europe, where Jewish communities thrived in very confined and sheltered enclaves.

The isolation of the Jewish community from the wider community around it had far reaching consequences. There was little integration except in metropolitan cities by World War II. Raul Hilberg writes “the old legal barriers had almost disappeared, but a complex pattern of mutual isolation remained in place.”<sup>74</sup> Largely confined to ghettos and shtetls some Jewish communities flourished but could not rely on their outer neighbors. This made them vulnerable when pogroms, which were sporadic killing sprees, happened throughout the centuries, and again later when the threat of total ethnic annihilation came in the form of Nazism.

When early conversion did not work on a mass scale, the church turned to expulsion. Rome forbade forceful conversions and theological arguments were not working on the Jewish population. Jews held fast to their faith. Between the thirteen and the sixteenth centuries the major European powers expelled their Jewish populations.<sup>75</sup> Although time softened these

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<sup>71</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, new ed., trans. Timothy S. McDermott (Allen, Tex.: Christian Classics, 1995), 527.

<sup>72</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 2-4.

<sup>74</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 1119.

<sup>75</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 4.



polices, and Jews moved back into the European countries from which they had been expelled, this legacy of ostracism would continue into the twentieth century.

Although religious sentiment decreased in modern culture, Jews were considered an outside presence in a society and this otherness created a wall at which people could throw any antisemitic idea at. Popularized by the printing of a book called the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in 1903 the idea of an international plan for global domination became deeply seated in the antisemitic mind. Although the book was a forgery, and no such plot or indeed authentic text exists, the idea combined easily with the antisemitism already in society. We can see echoes of this theory still very much alive in media and thought today.<sup>76</sup> This theory of Jewish economic and media control was large and enduring, but it was not the only idea which furthered the antisemitism of European peoples.

Related ideas within European culture before World War II have Jews depicted as “blood sucking parasites” bent on attaining wealth at the cost of less wealthy Christians.<sup>77</sup> Jews were also called criminals and cheats.<sup>78</sup> Jews were thought of as so dissimilar from Christians that they would be instantly noticeable. Harry Burger said that people thought Jews were “red with big horns. They didn’t know that we could be normal.”<sup>79</sup> Antisemitism was everywhere, even when a person didn’t feel the tension constantly. A young Greek man named Shlomo Venezia, interviewed in April and May of 2009 by Béatrice Prasquier, remembers antisemitism in Greece in the 1930’s like this: “the only time you felt an unpleasant tension was the Orthodox Easter. In the cinemas you could see short films that fueled antisemitism, saying that the Jews killed

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<sup>76</sup> Ron Dicker, "Kanye West Revs Up Antisemitism and Chris Cuomo Hits Him With Hard Fact Check," *Huffington Post* (New York City, NY), October 18, 2022, Entertainment, accessed October 19, 2022, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kanye-west-jewish-media-mafia-chris-cuomo\\_n\\_634e6fd8e4b0b7f89f5a4455](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kanye-west-jewish-media-mafia-chris-cuomo_n_634e6fd8e4b0b7f89f5a4455).

<sup>77</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 18.

<sup>78</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 18.

<sup>79</sup> *Fighting on Three Fronts: Antisemitism and the Jewish Partisans*, produced by Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation.

Christian children and used their blood to make unleavened bread.”<sup>80</sup> Venezia would go on to be a Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, working in the gas chambers. Even if he didn’t feel European antisemitism growing up, he became intimately connected with the worst of it as an adult.

Samuel Makower, a Polish partisan, put it more bluntly in his oral testimony: “we were the killers of God.”<sup>81</sup> This idea was one that excited people deeply. For this reason, Makower sometimes had to reroute on his way home when there was a procession of Christians: “I had to go the long way home because there was a procession, and I would be beaten up if I go there.”<sup>82</sup>

Adolf Hitler himself was turned by popular opinion and media into the raging antisemite the world now knows him as.<sup>83</sup> After poring over this popular antisemitic material, Hitler recounts encountering a Jewish man in Vienna, with black hair locks and dressed in a black caftan. Hitler ponders how foreign he thinks this man is, and recounts looking at him cautiously, and then asking of himself, “is this a German?”<sup>84</sup> From thence Hitler claims to begin to see Jews as different, even claiming that “districts north of the Danube Canal swarmed with a people which even outwardly had lost all resemblance to Germans.”<sup>85</sup> This lens which Hitler applied to view Jews was one that was all too common in Europe at that time and it continued to be so.

Starting in 1934 the Nazi regime lifted the ban on anti-Jewish propaganda and the newspaper *Der Stürmer* began to publish stories about racial “defilement.”<sup>86</sup> This salacious idea was picked up by other rags and fomented in popular opinion. It furthered hate in the community

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<sup>80</sup> Shlomo Venezia, *Inside the Gas Chambers Eight Months in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz*, trans. Béatrice Prasquier (Washington, DC: Polity Books/ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2009), 6.

<sup>81</sup> Samuel Makower, "Oral History Interview with Samuel Makower," *RG Number: RG-50.030.0388 Oral History Interview with Samuel Makower*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1998, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506410>.

<sup>82</sup> Makower, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>83</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936 : Hubris* (New York: Norton, 2000), 63-65.

<sup>84</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim and Abraham H. Foxman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 56, digital file.

<sup>85</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 56.

<sup>86</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936*, 560.

and opened the floodgates which allowed later manifestations of this anger and hatred, like the Holocaust, to happen.

When Hitler came to power in 1933 German hatred of the Jews was a fire ready to be stoked. Nazis would first try expulsion, and when not feasible due to the huge number of Jews it would be followed by annihilation. Mirroring the earlier European religious practices in their non-religious administration, Nazis first tried to expel via forced emigration the Jews within Germany, and later within all of their occupied territories. To make life unbearable and to hopefully force out the undesired population, the in 1935 Nazi regime enacted racial laws called the Nuremberg Laws which were based on the earlier church laws forbidding Jewish participation in daily life.<sup>87</sup> Intermarriage was banned, as was eating in dining cars on trains by Jewish people, which mirrored the segregated eating put forth by the Synod of Elvira in 306.<sup>88</sup> The ban on Jews holding public office, going out in the streets at certain times, the wearing of a yellow star, being moved into ghettos, not employing Christians, and paying taxes in support of Christian churches were all Nazi laws which directly followed canonical law.<sup>89</sup>

Another model Nazi Germany pulled ideas from was laws of the United States. Nazis borrowed American race laws, recognizing that America had many laws in place which diminished citizenship.<sup>90</sup> Between Jim Crow and miscegenation laws, American people of color lived within a society that claimed equality but treated people unequally. There was little pushback against this in 1930's America.

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<sup>87</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 6-12.

<sup>88</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Hilberg, *The Destruction*, 7-9.

<sup>90</sup> James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 42, digital file.

The Nazi government looked for increasing ways to diminish the citizenship of its Jewish population until it pushed them out of society altogether. This pushing out of daily life of the Jewish population was a slow process. Franja Hidvegi spoke of wanting to work in telephone services, but he could not because Jews were not accepted in government service jobs.<sup>91</sup> There was not much pushback in either Germany or the occupied territories. Antisemitism made looking the other way easy for people.

As Nazis had confined millions of Jews into camps and ghettos across occupied Europe, expulsion was recognized as an impossible feat. After 1942, and the planning of the Final Solution, the main aim of the Nazi administration in regard to the Jews changed from expulsion to annihilation.<sup>92</sup> These policies propelled the Nazi administration forward in their destruction of Jews, but it was the older church-led antisemitism which drove the people of other European countries.

Eastern Europe was a vast and unique place. Dotted with cities, the bulk of the area throughout these countries was rural, with many of its inhabitants being peasants.<sup>93</sup> Huge expanses of land and an absence of people led to societies which were highly stratified and often almost medieval in their daily lives.

Longtime tension in eastern Europe between peasants and landowners left Jews, generally stuck in the middle as belonging to neither class, in an unenviable position.<sup>94</sup> *Shtetls*, or Jewish centered communities, sprang up, and in these tight knit communities' people lived out

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<sup>91</sup> Franja Hidvegi, "Oral Testimony of Franja Hidvegi," interview, *RG-50.462.0308 Oral Testimony of Franja Hidvegi*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1985, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn565932>.

<sup>92</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-45*, 481.

<sup>93</sup> Alfred A. Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet Antisemitism," *The Antioch Review* 12, no. 3 (October 1, 1952): 289, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.4609576&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>94</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl*, paperback ed. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2011), 152.

their whole lives with gentiles kept to the outside. In cities the separation was not as pronounced, with much integration between Jews and Gentiles happening in the more modern ones. Likewise in smaller communities where there were not as many Jews more integration between the two took place due to the tiny number of people. Still, these pockets were small, and sixty percent of the pre-World War II Jews lived within the social and physical confines of a *shtetl*.<sup>95</sup>

Polish antisemitism played a part in the lives of partisans, even though there was less Jewish partisan activity in Poland than in Belorussia. Poland had a significant number of partisans and very many Jews. Poland was a hostile place for these Jews. The Polish Home Army adopted this type of partisan guerilla tactics later than the surrounding countries, but the Polish partisans were active throughout the forests of Polesia. What made Poland special for the partisans was that this antisemitism led to their Home Army troops killing more Jews than accepting them.<sup>96</sup> The Soviets accepted far more Jews than the Poles did.

Prior to the war Poland was one of the most antisemitic countries in Europe.<sup>97</sup> The government right before the start of the war, headed by Marshal Josef Pilsudski, came into power by campaigning on the idea of a sanitation of public life.<sup>98</sup> Between economic crashes and high unemployment the Jews were an easy minority to blame, although Pilsudski himself was not an antisemite. Jews were accused of being outsiders who were in control of the economy, and in addition to inflaming the non-Jewish population the government sought to drive the Jews from their livelihoods and then fully from civic life. Many Jews were craftsmen and in trade, so the market days were changed, often to Jewish holy days. Their locations were also moved to places

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<sup>95</sup> Bauer, *The Death*, 1.

<sup>96</sup> YadVashem.org, "Partisans," Yad Vashem, accessed October 5, 2022, [https://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205704.pdf](https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205704.pdf).

<sup>97</sup> Emanuel Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations during the Second World War*, repr. ed. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>98</sup> Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations*, 10.

outside of towns, at the same time as the bus routes stopped going through the Jewish quarters. In professional and academic life examinations were made harder for Jews to take, and people who were lucky enough to have studied outside of Poland had their credentials invalidated. These actions created an additional drain on Jewish finances at a time when the overall Polish economy was floundering. After Pilsudski's death in 1935 his party fractured and the popular offshoot was even more antisemitic, now calling for the "Aryanization" of Poland.<sup>99</sup>

During the war Poland had the largest extermination camps. Auschwitz, Chelmno, Sobibór, Majdanek, Belzec and Treblinka were all found in occupied Poland. The native population of Jews in Poland was large, but during the war millions more of them were being brought in from all over occupied Europe. The antisemitism rife in Poland already made survival for the few Jews trying to slip through the fingers of the murderous regime even less likely.

Soviets controlled Belorussia, and in turn its partisan units. The Belorussian Headquarters of the Partisan Movement was part of the Soviet Central Headquarters of the Partisan Movement and were under control of the Supreme High Command. Soviet policy was often out of line with the feelings of the people in these organizations. Soviets did not consider Jews a special category within society and so did not evacuate them from areas which were soon to be overrun by Germans ahead of the non-Jewish populations.<sup>100</sup> In Soviet determination to officially have a classless society they left many Jews to die at the hands of the Germans.

In Belorussia, the murder of the Jews was kept very quiet. In fact, in the Belorussian partisan directives there is no mention of the Nazi annihilation of the Jews.<sup>101</sup> This was in part

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<sup>99</sup> Ringelblum, *Polish-Jewish Relations*, 17-18.

<sup>100</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941-1944: The Case of Belorussia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 208, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edshol&AN=edshol.he.in.journals.hologen20.15&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>101</sup> Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet," 211.

due to the Soviet idea that Jews were not a special class and so whatever was happening was happening to everyone, and also from a sense of guilt over the actions within the local population. Jewish belongings such as weapons, clothing, and land were often stolen. Jews were often murdered. Trusting the Jews who did make it into the forests and attempted to join partisan units was also a not a given. Many generations of antisemitism had led to the overall Slavic population's belief that the Jews could not be trusted and were likely to be infiltrators sent by Germany to break down the partisan movement from within.<sup>102</sup>

A conspiracy theory arose via Jews under torture that the Germans had a spy training program going on which sent trained murderers into the forests.<sup>103</sup> Even though this rumor had no basis in reality the underlying antisemitism enabled non-Jews to believe it more readily. It persisted in the forest, and it is likely that many Jews were killed because of it.

Often, escaping Jews were met with derision, if not outright death either through murder or abandonment. Abandonment was the case for Itzhak and Reuven Yuzhuk. After spending several days with a partisan group Reuven and his friends were abandoned and left to survive on their own.<sup>104</sup> Taking Jews in and suddenly abandoning them after a few days was not unusual for partisan groups and the motives are hard to fathom. Partisan units were fluid, and the natural ebb and flow of their nature may have played a part. Antisemitism was a likely factor, although then why take them in at all? The scarcity of resources is likely to have played a part as well. Whatever the reasons were, they are lost to time, or behind a wall of Russian access. The Soviet accounts featured in the first section of Jack Nusan Porter's book all have a nationalist bias and do not recount anything negative in the attitude of Soviets to Jews. It was written in Soviet

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<sup>102</sup> Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet," 217.

<sup>103</sup> Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet," 218.

<sup>104</sup> Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet," 215.

Russia to extoll the amazing virtues of the partisans. The later sections, reports collected by Porter himself, are all memories of Jewish partisans and therefore do not account for the Soviet side.

Soviet antisemitism itself must be examined closely because it resulted in both life and death for Jewish partisans. Russia had not escaped the antisemitism that was so widespread on the rest of the continent. During Tsarist rule Jews lived in a territory of their own, referred to as the Pale. The Tsars limited the freedom of movement and education of Russia's Jews, and these policies led to poverty and competition over resources.<sup>105</sup> Pogroms, a word taken from the Russian language which means mob attack, killed many Jews between 1881 and 1917.<sup>106</sup> These killings also forced a mass emigration, similar in some ways to the old idea of expulsion, albeit accomplished without an edict.

The Soviet revolution heralded a new era for the Russians. The Civil War which followed the Revolutions, and the peace, which was created after, reorganized social orders throughout the nation. The 1917 Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia made equality and self-determination the national ideal.<sup>107</sup> For Jews this meant possibilities which had previously been denied them. Jews became prominent in the Bolshevik government, even earning the support of its leader Vladimir Lenin and Maxim Gorky.<sup>108</sup> This led to an increased number of Jews in more professional jobs, and these jobs fueled the unfounded theory of Jewish economic domination both in Russia and in its republics Belorussia and Ukraine.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 289.

<sup>106</sup> "Pogroms," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, ed. The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified December 13, 2018, accessed October 5, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pogrom>.

<sup>107</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 301.

<sup>108</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 291.

<sup>109</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 293.



The Soviet government tried to eradicate antisemitism by outlawing pogroms and declaring punishments for people who committed antisemitic attacks. Even with this push, the anti- antisemitic education which the Soviet government attempted was met with ingrained antisemitism.<sup>110</sup> Although this was official policy it was rarely enforced, and this divide continued into the partisan forests.

The Soviet push to create a classless workers' society failed to fully consider the existing structure of antisemitism.<sup>111</sup> When Jews began to move out of the Pale and into wider civic life waves of antisemitic attacks washed over the republics spreading antisemitism into areas which previously had not experienced as much of it.<sup>112</sup> The violence, in the form of pogroms, murdered Jews throughout the Soviet territories. The Soviet Five-Year economic plan, created to transform an agrarian society into a industrialized one, created insecurity and panic, and this, as well as everything else, was laid at the feet of the Jews.<sup>113</sup>

In 1926 antisemitism was outlawed in Soviet territories.<sup>114</sup> Non-Soviet organizations were also outlawed at this time, and so Zionist groups became illegal. Included in this organizational ban were Jewish schools and synagogues. This created an environment for mass arrests and imprisonment of Jewish people, not on a racial basis, (they were not arrested nominally for being Jews) but instead for belonging to a nationalist organization which was not in support of the Soviet Union. This was a creative way to express the antisemitism of the past with new words. Hatred had a new jacket but still walked among the people.

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<sup>110</sup> William Korey, "The Origins and Development of Soviet Anti-Semitism: An Analysis," *Slavic Review* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 1972): 113, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2494148>.

<sup>111</sup> Bauer, *The Death*, 129.

<sup>112</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 295.

<sup>113</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 296.

<sup>114</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 301.

The 1930's brought with rising Nazism a decline in Soviet antisemitism visible within the government.<sup>115</sup> This invisibility was not absence. Antisemitism was still widespread, and with it oppression of Jews. Soviet news did not report fully on the atrocities of Nazi behavior towards the Jews for fear the population would react with excitement as opposed to horror.<sup>116</sup> This deep-seated antisemitism shifted governmental policy, and slowly unspoken antisemitism became Soviet governmental policy.<sup>117</sup>

The changing governmental trends on antisemitic policies had a huge impact on the forest fugitives, as the single largest reason any fugitive survived in the forest was the presence of partisan groups.<sup>118</sup> Even with a huge antisemitic population the fact that there had been twenty years of propaganda and instruction against antisemitism meant that not every Soviet partisan automatically killed the Jews they came across. Some partisan commanders tried to help Jews in the forest. Also, directives from the Soviet Army allowing Jews to serve alongside non-Jews in partisan *otryads* were not always met with resistance and were sometimes even enforced, created whole units of Jews and non-jews fighting Nazi oppression alongside one another. Samuel Makower summed this up well when he said, "more Polish Jews survived in Russia than in Poland."<sup>119</sup>

The number of people this governmental policy and partisan rule saved cannot be measured against the number it did not. There is no accurate account of how many people went into the forests to die. Like so much of the Holocaust, there was so much death in so many isolated places that accounting for it all is impossible. It is likely that thousands of people who

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<sup>115</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 305.

<sup>116</sup> Skerpan, "Aspects of Soviet," 311.

<sup>117</sup> Korey, "The Origins," 117.

<sup>118</sup> Bauer, *The Death*, 131.

<sup>119</sup> Makower, "Oral History," interview.

cannot now be named met their fate in the woods. Murder, exposure and starvation, wild animal attack, and drowning are all possibilities. Partisans coming out of the forests could be loosely counted, but those who did not come out again can never be properly accounted for. As life giving as the forests were, they were also death traps.



**Figure 4: Members of the SA drive through the streets of Recklinghausen, Germany on propaganda trucks bedecked with anti-Jewish banners.**

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 80821  
Courtesy of Warren A. Gorrell

### Chapter 3: Brutality

It is estimated that forty or fifty million people around the world lost their lives during World War II.<sup>120</sup> In this tide of death, brutality shaped events and people. Brutality came from all sides. People were brutal to one another, and events were brutal to people. People who had been brutalized often brutalized others. The Holocaust, the dark heart of World War II, was layer upon layer of death trapped in the skin of the European continent. The outer brutality of the war applied pressure on the inner brutality until everywhere one looked brutality was there.

Brutality in Eastern Europe was a complex mixture of national identities, fear, and hatred. This brutality played a part in both life and death in the forests. German brutality against eastern European races made the local people more likely to aid the partisans who were resisting Germans. Longstanding and widespread hatred of Jews made both partisans and local people more likely to kill Jews wherever they found them. Brutality is a force applied across all ethnic and class barriers, whereas antisemitism is directed solely at Jewish people. Therefore, we need to closely examine both antisemitism, which can be brutal, but is specifically directed towards Jews, and brutality, which was prevalent in all societies, anywhere inequality gave it a chance.

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<sup>120</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "How many people died during World War II?," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, by Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified May 15, 2021, accessed October 7, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/question/How-many-people-died-during-World-War-II>.

The seeds of some of the brutality date back to World War I. Belligerent forces were sent around the world, and the people within these forces had varying experiences. One thing every fighter from every country shared was an intimate introduction to new industrialized weaponry and tactics. Modern machines and gasses killed hundreds in a short span of time. Ian Kershaw writes that “more than any previous war, this was a war of industrialized mass slaughter. Human flesh stood against killing machines.”<sup>121</sup> Soldiers dug trenches and lived in them for months in a haze of dirt, war, and sudden death. The power of the brutality on the human mind cannot be overstated. Ernst Jünger describes a fellow soldier’s death thus: “a larger splinter from a shell that struck the wall of the trench just opposite flew into the dugout entrance and hit him in the back of the head when he thought himself in safety. He died an instant, unlooked for death.”<sup>122</sup> A deep, controlling fear was born in these men resulting in nervous collapse. Many soldiers refused to participate in combat, and they were shot for cowardice or desertion.<sup>123</sup> We know the nervous collapse today as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. There was no name for it then, other than cowardice, which was its own burden to bear if they survived the war. The shells of men shocked by industrial warfare returned to their countries and attempted to make lives for themselves.

German soldiers on the eastern front had something else to contend with as well. The landscape was alien to them, huge and frightening.<sup>124</sup> The land was “undrained” and given over to “rank growth.”<sup>125</sup> Destroyed by the wreckage of war the villages were dirty and run down.

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<sup>121</sup> Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 45.

<sup>122</sup> Ernst Junger and Basil Creighton, *The Storm of Steel* (Place of publication not identified: publisher not identified, 2021), 32.

<sup>123</sup> Kershaw, *To Hell*, 67.

<sup>124</sup> Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 153.

<sup>125</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 155.

Lice and disease were prolific.<sup>126</sup> Even languages and ethnicities were disturbing, flowing together in a what German soldiers perceived as a messy jumble.<sup>127</sup> Some Germans reacted to this perceived mess with disdain.

The Weimar German idea of “*lebensraum*” or living space for Germans in the eastern European lands was within their grasp.<sup>128</sup> Dreams of colonization blossomed during the occupation of eastern lands.<sup>129</sup> The idea that the Germans stood for order and administration led them to believe that they should be administering this “uncannily empty” land.<sup>130</sup> By fall of 1917 there were plans afoot for this “*Neuland*” which would produce grain, cattle, wood and wool for the Germans.<sup>131</sup> German military control over the land and people would harvest all of this wealth for the German nation.

To further these perceived utopian colonies in the east, Germany built up the industry of its occupied eastern countries.<sup>132</sup> During the British naval blockade of the 1916-1917 winter these industries were able to supply one third of the meat eaten by the eastern armies.<sup>133</sup> The natural resources in these less industrialized eastern countries were vast and Germans quickly utilized them. Industries for processing food, both plant and animal, sprung up. Vast forests yielded much timber, the byproducts of which were used in weapons making.<sup>134</sup> Germany was making these lands, which seemed so alien and under-used to them, into places of highly

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<sup>126</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 42

<sup>127</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 42.

<sup>128</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936 : Hubris* (New York: Norton, 2000), 248-49.

<sup>129</sup> Joanna Gierowska-Kałuża, "Death-Agony and Birth Pangs: Inheritors of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania under German Occupation 1915–1918.," *Central Europe* 17, no. 2 (November 2019): 118, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790963.2019.1718452>.

<sup>130</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 42.

<sup>131</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 70.

<sup>132</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 72.

<sup>133</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 72.

<sup>134</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 72.

organized productivity, with themselves at the helm. They were not building this industry for the good of the Slavic peoples, whom they did not think very highly of, but for their own nation.<sup>135</sup>

They viewed the land as able to be productive, and the people suitable for labor. Military administration was brutally forced on the unwilling native population. The 1916 Order of Rule forced all adults in the territories into a form of enslavement, although there was, sometimes, paltry pay.<sup>136</sup> The pay was not enough to sustain them, and the coerced workforce could no longer apply themselves to their previous livelihood. Natives did not have the right to refuse work orders, lest they incur up to five years of prison.<sup>137</sup> In Lithuania 60,000 work gangs were moved from project to project.<sup>138</sup> They were fed bread and soup and housed in unheated barracks, reminiscent of the camps Germany would create a few years later throughout the same region.<sup>139</sup> There were no provisions for the elderly or infirm to be exempted, and with the deplorable conditions workers lived under there were many deaths.

These brutal deaths spread out past the involuntary workers in waves of involuntary brutality. Famine spread through the east, and the economic and social options of earlier times were not available. The very poor could not find work and food in hard times from local farmers, as the German army's requisitions had impoverished them as well.<sup>140</sup> The number of poor was ever increasing. Breadwinners were often pulled into forced labor for little to no pay, leaving behind a family to starve.<sup>141</sup> People who were at first hoping for things to settle down became hostile to German rule and brutality. Men fled to the woods to avoid work details, and gangs of

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<sup>135</sup> Gierowska-kałaur, "Death-Agony and Birth," 120.

<sup>136</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 73.

<sup>137</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 73.

<sup>138</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 73.

<sup>139</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 73.

<sup>140</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 75.

<sup>141</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 74.

bandits sprung up.<sup>142</sup> German soldiers took delight in having complete control over the native female population after the men had fled, with women often turning to prostitution for survival.<sup>143</sup>

The German army decided it was best to completely divide up the eastern territories for easier governance. There was trouble with the natives rebelling and so making it into tiny unconnected regions was the solution. These sections created an internal chaos. Families were separated. People could no longer go to their community church, and established trade routes were broken up and people trying to cross the new borders to see family, or attend to business were subjected to fines, penalties and confiscation of goods.<sup>144</sup>

The imperialist land grabbing ideas had their home in the 1890's, but now they were coming true.<sup>145</sup> This strange land containing rich resources, including a labor force, caught the attention of the German public at home.<sup>146</sup> Schools, teaching in a military style, churned out starry eyed youth raised on the idea of German expansion into these lands.<sup>147</sup> The idea that the native population was fit only for work, and that the Germans should be brutal masters of the vast rich lands would not be entirely quenched by the economic impacts of losing World War I, and would seek fulfillment during World War II.

When the German army again pushed into the eastern European lands it was with the memory of this brutality on the minds of conqueror and conquered. Again, the Slavic races were supposedly meant to be exploited and brutalized for the benefit of the Germans. This seemed to provoke two different reactions in the native populations. Some people in turn foisted the

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<sup>142</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 74.

<sup>143</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 159.

<sup>144</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 93.

<sup>145</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler: 1889-1936*, 248.

<sup>146</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 169.

<sup>147</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 171



brutality onto the Jews but others chose to not continue the wave of brutality. Some helped the forest fugitives, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Nazi brutality drove settled people to the forests and the partisan bands. The scope of their disregard for human life was horrifying. Skirka Gaman recounts a story of the village tinsmith Zemach.<sup>148</sup> Zemach and his wife Rachel lived in a town where most of the Jews, except a few craftsman, had been recently killed. Zemach's wife was bedridden. While Zemach was in his shop the Nazis set fire to what remained of the town, burning his wife to death in her bed. By the time Zemach got to his house she was nothing but a cinder.<sup>149</sup> Zemach then states that with nothing left for him in his previous life he would go into the woods with his "sons" the partisans.<sup>150</sup>

During World War II Nazi brutality was not confined to Jews alone. Whole villages were torched, and the people killed.<sup>151</sup> Starvation, robbery, beatings and murder often followed German occupation for the members of the community who did not align with their goals. V.A. Andreyev, a partisan commander, tells of many villagers coming into the forest and to the camps for the treatment by partisan doctors of bullet wounds inflicted on them by the Nazis.<sup>152</sup>

This violence had two different major impacts on society. One segment of people was brutalized and became collaborators, aiding the Nazis in their goals. Often these people were hoping for some personal safety or gain through their actions. Collaborators were killed by partisans as often as they could be found. Other villagers went in the opposite direction and aided partisans and forest fugitives. The end of this chapter will discuss them further.

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<sup>148</sup> Jack Nusan Porter and Yehuda Merin, *Jewish Partisans of the Soviet Union during World War II* (Brighton: Cherry Orchard Books, 2021), 78-80.

<sup>149</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 80.

<sup>150</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 80.

<sup>151</sup> Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, 1994 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 122.

<sup>152</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 110.

Antisemitism shaped the brutality of the native populations towards the Jews, and the war created an environment in which this brutality could flourish. Pogroms had created frenzied killing sprees that were still outside of normal behavior. Once some people had been killed order would be restored to society and life would go on as it had been for those left alive, and constant murder was not part of the normal eastern European village life. Nazi-implemented wholesale slaughter changed the norms for this in society. Norman Salsitz, a Jewish partisan in Poland said about his non-Jewish neighbors, “ before the war they couldn’t go out and kill. It was a normal country. They were antisemitic but they didn’t kill. During the war when they saw the Germans killing, they killed too.”<sup>153</sup>

Nazis had normalized brutal death and this normalization spilled over into the partisan movements as well as the general population. Jews were often not accepted into units, and if they were it was hard for them to stay alive. Dov Lorber, in his interviews with Jack Porter, speaks about being under the command of a man named Kruk. Kruk was nice to the Jews until more non-Jews joined. He changed towards the Jews in his unit gradually.<sup>154</sup> Lorber recounts: “one day his true face was revealed. With his own hands he shot in the woods a twelve-year-old Jewish boy, whose only sin was that he requested to go with his relatives, the Wolper family, when they have to leave the base, because the German and Ukrainians surrounded our woods.... His only explanation was that he was obligated to act as he did for the sake of discipline.”<sup>155</sup> As with most acts of violence against Jews in partisan units, there was no repercussions to Kruk’s action. He did have to report to his commander but was only reprimanded and sent back.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> *Fighting on Three Fronts: Antisemitism and the Jewish Partisans*, produced by Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation.

<sup>154</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 452.

<sup>155</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 453.

<sup>156</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 453.

Speaking later about being in the forests, partisan and survivor Eta Wrobel said of non-Jewish partisans, “ We avoided them. Stayed out of their way. It was more than antisemitism, it was murder.”<sup>157</sup>

Women faced special types of brutality in the forests. Rape was also a common element in the forests.<sup>158</sup> Women tended to have been more sheltered in their prewar life. Therefore, in the new alien environment of the forests they required greater protection, which was not always forthcoming.<sup>159</sup> Women were a particular target for Soviet partisans, who tended to kill them, sometimes citing “reliable sources” claiming the women’s duplicity.<sup>160</sup> Soviet command suspected the Germans were sending Jewish women to poison their food.<sup>161</sup> In Soviet units women were allowed mainly for sex.<sup>162</sup> Women traded safety for sex, attaching themselves to a male fighter.<sup>163</sup> This attachment would protect her from murder, but also rape and sexual harassment. Unfortunately, it also led to unwanted pregnancies, which was another common brutality in the forest borne by women alone. Forest abortion was a difficult surgery, and many women died as a result of it.<sup>164</sup> Among those who lived, some had difficulty conceiving after the war, and the majority of them found the subject to be bitter and painful.<sup>165</sup> Abortion was also expensive, costing a woman precious foodstuffs, or if she had it, money.<sup>166</sup>

Some brutality was necessary. Living in the forests was very different than living in civilization. In the orderly prewar towns death was not around every corner. Yisroel Puchtik

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<sup>157</sup> *Fighting on Three*.

<sup>158</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 150.

<sup>159</sup> Tamara Vershitskaya, "Jewish Women Partisans in Belarus," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 568, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=70640534&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>160</sup> Vershitskaya, "Jewish Women," 568.

<sup>161</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 151.

<sup>162</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 156.

<sup>163</sup> Vershitskaya, "Jewish Women," 571.

<sup>164</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 167.

<sup>165</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 167.

<sup>166</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 167.

talks of an incident where necessary brutality haunted him.<sup>167</sup> A friend of his was setting up a mine when it exploded. Puchtik's friend cried out for help, but a Soviet partisan would not let him go to his friend.<sup>168</sup> Their safety had been compromised by the noise of the explosion and the cry. They had to retreat into the forest in order to stay alive themselves. Puchtik later found out that his friend lost his leg and was tortured by Germans but did not reveal any information.<sup>169</sup> The brutality of their retreat into the woods saved their lives and the later brutality the friend endured stoically again saved them.

Other brutal methods of saving people happened in the forest as well. Very young people especially had trouble understanding and honoring the rules of forest life. Sometimes scaring them was the best method for quick and total compliance. Asher Flash had to deal with a young boy who continued to slip back into town for extra food, which was a danger to the partisan unit he was attached to. Asher had the boy dig a pit in the forest with him, and then made the boy lie down in the pit in the same way the Germans made their victims dig and lay in their own graves.<sup>170</sup> The boy was cold and upset, and Asher bade him come out, warning him that the next time he went into the town for food he would be killed and buried in the pit.<sup>171</sup>

The brutality of everyday life in the forest changed the perceptions of some forms of brutality. Things which would not have been within the realm of possibility, or even of kindness, became both in the forest. Mira Eisenstadt told the story of a young partisan named Misha who was badly wounded by a shell while fleeing a battle.<sup>172</sup> Misha begged for death to relieve him of

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<sup>167</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 456.

<sup>168</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 456.

<sup>169</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 456.

<sup>170</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 370-71

<sup>171</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 371

<sup>172</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 209.

his pain but out of devotion to him no one could bring themselves to do it. Finally, someone laid a gun next to him, and Misha took his own life.<sup>173</sup>

The perception of what brutality was changed in other ways as well. A partisan named O. Cherny speaks of a woman named Leah. Leah was tortured by the Germans. Cherny says “with unspeakable cruelty they stabbed her in the eyes and then hanged her in the town square.”<sup>174</sup> Cherny marks this act of violence as a beyond words. Cherny and Leah lived among death; they were fighters who took lives. They lived among people who would kill for their weapons or boots as easily as for their freedom in a world which was killing millions in pits and gas chambers. Still, stabbing Leah in the eyes before hanging her stood out to Cherny as something spiteful and beyond the scope of the normal brutality around them.

Brutality did not always lead to more brutality. Although some people reacted with anger and furthered the cycle, it brought others together over the lines which previously divided them. The non-Jewish population stepped forward and hid their neighbors.<sup>175</sup> In the forests Jews and non-Jews fought together in units. Some locals gave willingly to both the fugitive Jews and to the fighting partisans. These “Righteous Among the Nations” as they are known were rare in the overall population but existed nonetheless.<sup>176</sup> Dov Bronstein talks of a Ukrainian policeman in a village he knew who helped whatever Jews came through; “when Jews walked about the woods and villages, knocking on the doors of villagers for a piece of bread, a potato, or any kind of food to satisfy their hunger, he would give them something and even ordered his younger brother to

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<sup>173</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 209.

<sup>174</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 92.

<sup>175</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 520.

<sup>176</sup> United State Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Righteous Among the Nations,” in *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (United State Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed October 13, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/righteous-among-the-nations>.

transport Jews behind the village and send them to the woods.”<sup>177</sup> These people, fed and sent to the woods, had a chance at life because of the kindness of this Ukrainian policeman. Through those forest fugitives who lived, many generations into the future now had a chance of being born, all because a man chose kindness over brutality at a time when brutality was condoned and expected.

Some villagers aided partisans but were still antisemitic enough to not help Jews. Yitzhak Arad speculated that a sense of national loyalty as well as response to German terror made some regions very much disposed to helping non-Jewish partisans.<sup>178</sup> In these regions Jewish survival would have been impossible unless the partisan groups offered them some protection.<sup>179</sup>

World War II and the Holocaust were both brutal human experiences. The forests were a brutal human experience. Starvation, the ice of winter, and the sun of summer mixed with the elements of death, murder and destruction tested people’s limits and they had to find new ways to survive, or they would perish. The different shades of brutality directly colored the partisan experience in the forests. Where partisans and forest fugitives met life, food and comfort it was in defiance of brutality. When they met robbery, torture and death it was an expression of that brutality.

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<sup>177</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 383.

<sup>178</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 506-07, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=264653&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>179</sup> Arad, *The Holocaust*, 507.



**Figure 5: A partisan is hanged somewhere in the Soviet Union**

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 99247

Courtesy of Maria Seidenber

## Chapter 4: Topography

The fugitives who fled to the Belorussian forests were a cross section of the population. They were comprised of Soviet soldiers caught behind the German advance, but also of ethnic natives from the interconnected regions which had mixed and un-mixed for centuries as the names of countries and their allegiances changed back and forth, and all of whom had now run afoul of the occupying Germans. In 1942 the mass annihilation of Jews in Belorussia commenced.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds, if not thousands, of Jews fled from towns and cities into the forest. Some even had longer routes to the forests. Litman Litow was shuffled over borders and through various camps before making it to the forest.<sup>2</sup> Franja Hidvegi fled his hometown in Yugoslavia and went to the Soviets, where he was sent to an “anti-fascist reeducation camp” in Moscow before being sent to a partisan unit in the forests.<sup>3</sup> There were many paths into the forests, but once there, forest fugitives had to acclimate to a new life outside the bounds of what they had known of civilization. In this “topsy-turvy” environment where civilization meant death and the wilds meant life many people underwent a readjustment period as they learned how to survive in the forests.<sup>4</sup> The ancient sanctuary of the forest called to all the different types of fugitives, and

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<sup>1</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *The Partisan: From the Valley of Death to Mount Zion* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 116.

<sup>2</sup> Litman Litow, "Oral History Interview with Litman Litow," *RG Number: RG-50.984.0003 Oral History Interview with Litman Litow*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1994, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn562678>.

<sup>3</sup> Franja Hidvegi, "Oral Testimony of Franja Hidvegi," interview, *RG-50.462.0308 Oral Testimony of Franja Hidvegi*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1985, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn565932>.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Cole, "'Nature Was Helping Us': Forests, Trees, and Environmental Histories of the Holocaust," *Environmental History* 19, no. 4 (October 1, 2014): 679,



within it they shed their former selves and created new selves out of the materials offered by the forest.<sup>5</sup> The topography of the forests of Belorussia was paramount to the survival of forest fugitives.

The main groups in the forests were partisans and family camps. These two categories of groups largely stayed separate. Partisans were small bands of fighters who had left their families behind somewhere in civilization. Family camps were groups of non-combatants banded together for survival. Some family camps had fighters who went on partisan raids, and some did not.

These two camps lived very differently. Partisans were in control of the forest. They had weapons and status. Family camps were trying to stay out of the way of both the partisans and the Germans. Movement was important for both camps, although later larger family camps, like the Bielski *otryad*, and partisan brigades, became quite a bit larger and permanent.

Small camps had shelters and not much else. Their inhabitants usually died off or were absorbed into larger groups as the war went on, like Sonia Shainwald Orbuch's family was absorbed.<sup>6</sup> Without human protection even the forests with their multitude of resources could not entirely protect people.

Larger camps had many buildings. There were schools on some of these bases, as well as facilities for processing food and making supplies.<sup>7</sup> In addition family camps created a sense of normalcy. The Bielski camp created enough useful items that other groups came to them to trade,

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<https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.24690636&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Weiner Webber, "Shedding City Life: Survival Mechanisms of Forest Fugitives during the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 18, no. 1 (2012): 5, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2012.11087299>.

<sup>6</sup> Sonia Shainwald Orbuch and Fred Rosenbaum, *Here, There Are No Sarahs: A Woman's Courageous Fight against the Nazis and Her Bittersweet Fulfillment of the American Dream* (Muskegon, MI: RDR Books, 2009), 81.

<sup>7</sup> Sonia Bielski, "Oral History with Sonia Bielski," interview, *RG-50.030.0025 Oral History with Sonia Bielski*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1994, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504532>.

and thereby made themselves indispensable. Their camp was called “shtetl of bells.”<sup>8</sup> People lived fairly normal lives, if you can discount the death, lice and fleas. Although most of the forest couples were not officially married, there were weddings performed in the forest.<sup>9</sup>

Living situations changed over the course of the war, as the partisans became more confident. Samuel Makower said that by the end of the war his partisan unit “did not live anymore in the forest, but in the village. Each village had a partisan commander. We had the hospital in the forest and people to guard the hospital.”<sup>10</sup>

The safety provided by the impenetrable forest was the first and most important aspect of the topography. Many of the European forests were penetrable with roads going through them and no dense growth to cover people, or swamps to protect them from incursions.<sup>11</sup> Unlike these forests, the Belorussian forests were thick enough that people did not build roads through them, preferring to go around them during peacetime. There was no road network of any kind going through them.<sup>12</sup> They were also dotted with farms and villages near their edges. The Belorussian forests provided concealment, allowing forest fugitives settlements to grow up in them during the war.

Historian Tim Cole writes that “forests have long been sites of both real and mythical evasion.”<sup>13</sup> The forests of Eastern Europe fulfilled reality in regard to evasion during the Second World War due to special features which allowed partisans not only to survive but also to thrive.

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<sup>8</sup> Bielski, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>9</sup> Esia Shor, "Oral History with Esia Shor," interview, *RG-50.030.0565 Oral History with Esia Shor*, United States Holocaust Museum, 2010, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn41515>.

<sup>10</sup> Samuel Makower, "Oral History Interview with Samuel Makower," *RG Number: RG-50.030.0388 Oral History Interview with Same Makower*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1998, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506410>.

<sup>11</sup> Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl*, paperback ed. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2011), 121.

<sup>12</sup> Leonid Smilovitsky, "Antisemitism in the Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941-1944: The Case of Belorussia," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 210, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edshol&AN=edshol.he.in.journals.hologen20.15&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>13</sup> Cole, "Nature Was Helping," 666.

The massive old growth, which was impassible by local traffic, and the deep swamps which offered shelter and protection to those fleeing the outer civilization enfolded the forest fugitives. At times disorienting and harsh, the forest provided a place of safety and refuge from the world outside, which had become dangerous and unrecognizable to them.<sup>14</sup> In recollections of his boyhood gathered by historian Jack Nusan Porter, Micha Gazit recalls going into the forest thus; “in front of us there were the great Polesia forests, the marsh land, and the rivers streaming through enormous areas.”<sup>15</sup> The forests of Belorussia had thick woods and marshes providing shelter, food and material, as well as rivers for water, safety, and fast transportation. Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb recounts the forests as safe places due to their physical makeup:

“They were afraid of those deep forests. The forests were so thick and not only thick. Uh that area is known as the Polotski Bloty. Uh the marshes. You could sink into those marshes and never come out. They could not go in with a vehicle. You must realize that the Germans prided themselves on their cleanliness. If they got dirt on their boots, they didn't like it. They were not very apt to uh to venture in. They would venture in every so often just to hit sort of an area and get out to discourage the partisans to coming to close to the railroad stations, to the to the railroad tracks and when they hit, we would run into the forests.”<sup>16</sup>

During a large raid in the Nalibocka forest in August of 1943 most of the surrounding forest camps had to quickly move further in towards the center of the forest.<sup>17</sup> The Germans had surrounded the forest and were killing any and all fugitives they found. Many people died. Within many of the forests there were large swamps, and some of the larger settlements were constructed in these after the raid. Getting to them was treacherous (a wrong move and you could easily drown) and this afforded protection.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cole, "Nature Was Helping," 679.

<sup>15</sup> Jack Nusan Porter and Yehuda Merin, *Jewish Partisans of the Soviet Union during World War II* (Brighton: Cherry Orchard Books, 2021), 322.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb, "Oral History with Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb," interview, *RG-50.030.0082 Oral History with Rachel Mutterperl Goldfarb*, United Stats Holocaust Museum, 1991, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504577>.

<sup>17</sup> Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, 1994 ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 115.

<sup>18</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 15.

Esia Shor speaks of the marshes in her oral testimony. She recounts being in the water for two days during this raid.<sup>19</sup> Shor's account is different from that of Lilian Bielsky-Bell. Bielsky-Bell recalls it as ten days, in water up to your throat.<sup>20</sup> The presence of swamps gave them protection from the surrounding Germans, but not without hardship. Sonia Boldo Bielski speaks about sleeping in the mud during the Big Hunt, and about the all-pervasive hunger: "and it was hunger. We were sitting there 10 days, and we heard the Germans talking to each other. We heard the dogs barking. And they were shooting over our head, and nobody opened their mouth."<sup>21</sup> The Bielskis lost five or six people to drowning during this time.<sup>22</sup> Other groups were wiped out entirely by the Germans.

Some of the larger Soviet *otryads* built their settlements near forest airfields, to be close to the hearts of the Soviet partisan movement. These Soviet airfields were buried deep in the heart of the forests. Orders for the *otryads*, aid such as food, medical supplies, and weapons, and even people like commanders or fighters were often flown into the forests through these airfields.<sup>23</sup>

The need for shelter was the first requirement after sanctuary. The forest provided a multitude of housing options, yet housing remained hierarchical, as much of forest life was. People had to become creative in their quest for lodging, and many people who came to the forest at first did not possess the knowledge to adequately survive there.<sup>24</sup> Knowledge became a

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<sup>19</sup> Shor, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>20</sup> Lilian Bielsky-Bell, "Oral History Interview with Lilian Bielsky-Bell," *RG-50.030.0026 Oral History Interview with Lilian Bielsky-Bell*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1992, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504533>.

<sup>21</sup> Bielski, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>22</sup> Bielski, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Makower, "Oral History Interview with Samuel Makower," *RG Number: RG-50.030.0388 Oral History Interview with Same Makower*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1998, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506410>.

<sup>24</sup> Cole, "Nature Was Helping," 671.

type of power as they learned to build shelters which evaded the enemy's eye above, on, and under the ground, and forage in the woods for food and materials to make clothing and shelter. Simple dwellings grew into more complex ones as forest fugitives learned things like that using dry wood and aspen trees would minimize the danger of detection that smoke from stoves could cause them.<sup>25</sup> Knowledge increased both their comfort and their safety.

The most rudimentary family groups and tiny bands of people unaffiliated with formal partisan units often lived in small lean-tos. These groups had to move more often to remain hidden. Not only were they hiding from Nazis, but also from hostile locals and partisans. Some dwellings were made of branches leaned against a tree, rock, or steep hill or against the overturned base of a tree.<sup>26</sup> To the uninformed eye they would appear to be nothing but undergrowth or fallen trees. Another type of shelter consisted of holes dug into the earth, often on the side of a hill. The position of these shelters needed to allow for a good lookout, while being underground afforded one a place to hide which was not easily found. The earthen shelters also tended to be warmer, although both types had a stove if being used for more than a night or two.<sup>27</sup> There was a drawback to the dugout earthen shelters, however. Snow in these forests was thick and heavy and could hinder the quick escape of people, if not preclude it entirely.<sup>28</sup> A shelter that you could not escape from became a death trap one way or another. Rain was another challenge for these types of shelters. In writing her memoirs Sonia Orbuch recalls moving every fortnight into a newly created shelter and her uncle creating a pitched roof to keep rain off of them, so they could be dry; the shelter was so tiny that their party of four could not move when

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<sup>25</sup> Cole, "Nature Was Helping," 672.

<sup>26</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 15.

<sup>27</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 377.

inside.<sup>29</sup> Joseph Elman describes what he calls a bunker in English in which his group of 21 fugitives took refuge early on in their time in the forest: “ about three, four feet in the ground, yeah. With plenty -- you know, in the woods, you have plenty of trees and logs and all that. So, you try to -- you brace and then you’re -- we knew -- we have an idea how the bunker -- you know, how to build the bunker so you can s-sleep about 10 on each side. So -- and just high enough, six feet, so you can -- you know, you can go in. And then you had the -- on both sides you had the -- what you call it? Bunk -- the -- the bunks where you can just lay around and -- you know, just lay around and sleep. And in -- in middle, eventually, in the middle of the -- middle of the bunker was a stove, made a stove.”<sup>30</sup>

How close local villages were was essential to survival. Not only were goods available, but also shelter. Some people survived going between shelters such as these in the warmer months and the cellars or barns of nearby farmhouses during the colder months.<sup>31</sup> Not everyone could survive the elements year-round. Boldo Bielski’s mother was one of these. Boldo Bielski says “My mother was very fragile, but in the wintertime, she wouldn't stay in the forest. So, he (Zus Bielski, her husband) took all these men, and they were putting her every day in another house by the, by the villages. And she survived the winter. In the summertime she went to the forest.”<sup>32</sup> Without the flexibility to go between civilization and the wild less people would have survived the war.

For larger groups and units with better organization and protection housing became permanent and a lot sturdier. Still, these groups often moved around from permanent camp to

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<sup>29</sup> Orbuch and Rosenbaum, *Here, There*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Elman, "Oral History Interview with Joseph Elman," *RG Number: RG-50.030.0390 Oral History Interview with Joseph Elman*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1998, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506424>.

<sup>31</sup> Cole, "Nature Was Helping," 677.

<sup>32</sup> Bielski, "Oral History," interview.

permanent camp for safety reasons. Partisan groups had *ziemlankas*, which were sturdy fortresses built underground or into the side of a hill.<sup>33</sup> These were larger structures than the dugouts made by smaller groups, with wooden beams holding them up and a wooden floor covered in straw mattresses called *pulankas*. *Ziemlankas* had a small fireplace and a hole in the roof so smoke could escape.<sup>34</sup> Some groups only had a few *ziemlankas* while others had many of them. In these *ziemlankas* many people could sleep or hide in relative safety. Similar to the dugouts, having an underground place was safer than living above ground all of the time. Underground shelters were harder to find by ground troops than lean-tos and were less visible from the air. Boldo Bielski testifies that after the war many of the *ziemlankas* were still standing.<sup>35</sup>

At times partisan groups made living quarters in villages. Litman Litow, in his oral testimony retells the story of creating one such living space in a storeroom. Litman says they created a two-level space under the floor by digging and spreading the dirt out.<sup>36</sup> They used a curtain to separate their living space from their storage space, and a further dug out space with a bucket for their sanitary needs.<sup>37</sup> The door to their living space was constructed to look like a box filled with dirt so that it would not be recognized as an entrance.<sup>38</sup> Their living space was so clever that the Germans and the local polish police could not find them, and even spread rumors that the partisans had tunnels under the roads which enabled them to get around the villages without detection.<sup>39</sup> Litow also speaks of the problems with lice and fleas. He told of dipping

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<sup>33</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 17.

<sup>34</sup> Bielski, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>35</sup> Bielski, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>36</sup> Litman Litow, "Oral History Interview with Litman Litow," *RG Number: RG-50.984.0003 Oral History Interview with Litman Litow*, United States Holocaust Museum, 1994, accessed October 18, 2022, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn562678>.

<sup>37</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>38</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>39</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

clothing in hot ash and water and then baking it in a hot oven for a few minutes to kill the vermin.<sup>40</sup>

Some larger partisan units were even able to move whole houses from nearby non-forest villages if needed. One group did so when their existing encampment was overrun with typhus and new housing was deemed necessary to eliminate the threat.<sup>41</sup> This feat, like the growth of a real village within the forest, took a lot of confidence. Larger, better protected units could tackle projects such as moving whole existing houses. This was not something most groups could do, lacking in both safety and manpower.

A village was not as portable as a smaller settlement and therefore was more likely to suffer attack and devastation. Nonetheless, whole villages complete with schools, hospitals, blacksmiths, butchers, bakers, and many conveniences were constructed in the depths of these forests. People needed a sense of community and of safety and therefore recreated it in the forests of eastern Belorussia.

Even the greatest of the quickly and secretly constructed villages was only as good as its ability to feed itself. Even the most hidden people could easily starve to death when separated from a food source. Food was hard to find, even with the natural abundance of animals, berries, grains, eggs, and mushrooms available in the forests. Getting enough food via scavenging was a difficult way to sustain oneself.

Larger units raided the nearby farms and villages.<sup>42</sup> Raids like this supplied, willingly and unwillingly, cows, chickens, grain, and dairy to the forest dwellers.<sup>43</sup> Stealing, or “requisitioning” from farmers was a common occurrence, but as the Belorussia partisans formed

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<sup>40</sup> Litow, "Oral History," interview.

<sup>41</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 109.

<sup>42</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 140.

<sup>43</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 4.



into formal Soviet run *otryads* trade and barter between the two became more commonplace. Trade and purchase did not entirely eliminate requisitioning, however, and they certainly did not stop stealing. Troops felt entitled to requisition goods and starving people felt no compunction about stealing. David Blanstein talks about supervising such a requisition of bread from local shepherds supervising flocks in the forest where he was living.<sup>44</sup> This requisitioning, and later trade, helped the larger units to sustain themselves and even grow their communities. Livestock, large, organized kitchens and even bakeries became commonplace within these larger settled communities.<sup>45</sup>

There were peasants who lived in and around the woods who were neither robbed nor sold food to the forest fugitives but shared what they had with them out a sense of decency and perhaps camaraderie.<sup>46</sup> They weave in and out of the memories of those who survived the forest. Many people were rescued again and again simply by human kindness. The hierarchy within the fugitive groups remained firmly in place, however, and people with less usefulness to the group ate differently from the leaders and fighters.

Smaller groups and individuals who were lower in the social order did not have the same access to trade, although they did steal from farms and villages when they could not purchase or trade. Not only were grain, potatoes, sugar, dairy, and livestock meat stolen, but some forest fugitives also stole the feed given to livestock, so great was their hunger.<sup>47</sup> Most of the smaller family groups and individuals supplemented these stolen foodstuffs with the berries, mushrooms, bird eggs, wild grains, honey, and animals hunted within the forest. Charlene Schiff, who survived between the forest and surrounding villages, hiding in cellar and the woods of a Polish

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<sup>44</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 314.

<sup>45</sup> Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski*, 140.

<sup>46</sup> Orbuch and Rosenbaum, *Here, There*, 70.

<sup>47</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 8.

forest, recalls eating even rats and human waste.<sup>48</sup> The struggle to get enough calories to remain alive was a constant one for many of the forest fugitives. This struggle and the war they waged to remain nourished was a form of resistance.

Another bounty of these forests was in the materials available for constructing clothing. Even the clothing of well-prepared forest fugitives eventually would become unusable. People in the forests lived a rough life. The settlements did not become as urban as towns or cities, and fugitives spent a good deal of time outside in the elements, which were often cold, harsh and dirty. Complicating this matter was that coming into the forest was a gamble and whether people planned ahead or simply managed to escape opportunistically they were unprepared for the environment.<sup>49</sup> A young Polish woman named Chanakeh Goldberg was allowed to flee into the forest naked from a killing pit when a soldier took pity on her at the last minute.<sup>50</sup> The dress she was able to grab from beside the pit as she fled was her only source of clothing, indeed her only possession, upon entering the forest.

Within the larger units clothing was more easily bartered among units and with the nearby villages. It was not unusual for a high-ranking member of these groups to have fur coats and good boots in the winter.<sup>51</sup> In these settlements as well, there were craftspeople who could make significantly better clothing from appropriate materials looted on raids, bought or traded for, and so a larger group had the possibility of being better clothed. The hierarchy within the larger groups bled into every facet of life, and so a commander would have a warm coat and boots, but the cobbler repairing those boots might not have similar gear.

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<sup>48</sup> Cole, "Nature Was Helping," 676-77.

<sup>49</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 18.

<sup>50</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 376.

<sup>51</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 17.

For those less fortunate, in large or small groups, clothing had to be made from readily available resources. Rags donated by peasants could be repurposed into clothing. These could either create new garments or be used to repair existing ones. Materials such as tree bark was used to fashion shoes, giving a small but important barrier between a person's soft skin and the forest floor and offering some protection from cold and injury. Cheesecloth traded, given or stolen from nearby settlements, and even gentile burial shrouds made from linen and stolen from cemeteries found within the forest, provided a lining for the bark shoes making them slightly less uncomfortable and a little warmer.<sup>52</sup> The bark and cloth lined shoes were "like walking barefoot," while the rags did little to keep people warm.<sup>53</sup> Without them the exposure from a lack of proper clothing would have meant death to the forest fugitives. This rough clothing had another value as well. Wearing it disguised people living outside the local society by making them look like locals. Soviet partisan Asher Mirochnik recounted using this disguise on a reconnaissance mission into a town; "I dressed as a villager in a coarse woolen jacket and shoes made out of tree bark."<sup>54</sup> This anonymity allowed forest fugitives some measure of safety in going about their business on the edges and outside the forest.

Topography in these forests was vital to survival. Life sustaining food could be found. A person could build themselves a shelter. How dense and vast the forests were allowed people security and the ability to move quickly and safely. Water was available to drink and travel on. To support the large amount of activity these forest saw each of these points needed to be in existence together. Each of these points could be found in other forests throughout Europe, but not all together. This region of Belorussia was particularly vast and untouched. Other European

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<sup>52</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 19.

<sup>53</sup> Weiner Webber, "Shedding City," 19.

<sup>54</sup> Porter and Merin, *Jewish Partisans*, 365.

countries had forests that were smaller and had more of a population living within them.

Fugitives hid in those forests, as every country had partisan activity, but their numbers were smaller.



**Figure 6: Former Zhetel partisans go on a picnic shortly after liberation.**

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 51776

Courtesy of Harold Min

## **Conclusion**

The Belorussian forests were uniquely able to support life and resistance against the backdrop of World War II. As antisemitism came down on the Jewish people in the form of mass death, on the edges of eastern Europe it was met with a myriad of forces ready to combat it. These forces aided survival and therefore resistance in the Jewish population. Organizations repurposed their aims, regrouped their people, and struck back against the Nazi forces. Thus, organizations became vital to survival for the forest fugitives. Lost bands of people grouped together under the heading of the Soviet army became partisans and fought back against the Nazis. With the support and direction that the Soviets were able to offer these units damaged vital infrastructure and caused the chaos that is the hallmark of partisan groups, thereby weakening the German army. Family camps sprung up in the forest with the hope of surviving outside of the grasp of the German army. These small bands of people, pushed together by circumstance and fate, resisted the ethnic cleansing that was happening all around them by surviving in the forests, and by coming out of the forests at the end of the war. Local people who had also experienced brutality chose to honor life and aid partisans and forest fugitives, or, conversely, to take the side of the German army and kill resisters when possible. These local people were a factor which was unpredictable but important in the story of the forest. All of this bravery and cowardice played out against a topography which was uniquely suited for life. The density of the forest made hiding easy for partisans and fugitives and finding them much harder

for the Nazi forces. The size of the forests allowed many groups to flourish but was not so large that they had to survive in total isolation, which would have been detrimental. There were just enough farms on the edges to supply food, shelter, and common checkpoints. When the Germans amassed their forces and tried to drive the groups from their hiding spots and into the German grasp, there were swamps in which the forest fugitives hid, and in their hiding resisted Nazi oppression and violence. All of these factors bore on the outcome for the partisans and forest fugitives who survived in these forests and allowed so many people to walk out of them at the end of the war. A different combination of factors would have impacted the survival rates of the forest fugitives and the partisans.

Jewish resistance against Nazi Germany is still an incomplete story. There are many pockets where further research is needed. Even within the older, more heavily researched fields new lenses should be applied. The idea, which has come to the forefront in recent years, and was discussed in the introduction, of what Jewish resistance means and looks like is a new lens. We can apply this lens all throughout World War II history. There were Jewish people in almost every country at war, and they fought in different ways. Many were Allied soldiers, fighting the Germans on traditional battlefields and later liberating camps. Looking at the people in the forest is also important. When considered through the view of what an ethnic cleansing is, and what it is meant to do, then people without weapons who make it through the ethnic cleansing are resisting. People survived this ethnic cleansing in the forests and the camps. People survived this ethnic cleansing hiding under buildings and in walls or living a fake life in cities with false papers. Examining these acts as acts of resistance gives them new light.

The partisans of eastern Europe themselves are understudied. Access to Soviet materials is hard to come by for western scholars. Jack Nusan Porter, the son of Jewish Soviet partisans, wrote a book that is an interesting mix of material. The first part is an old Soviet book on the

partisans. It is nationalistic and you can see the bias in the stories. Everything is told in such a way as you feel lifted by it, impressed by how benevolent and amazing the partisans were, and how little antisemitism there was. It is also vague. It does not deal with the complexities of either forest life, or Jewish forest life. The second half is Porter's own interviews with his parents' comrades, and it is more in-depth and honest. The passage of time combined with being out of the Soviet Union allowed them to speak of their life in full, the joys and the hardships. In the space Porter provided they recount not only their escapades, but also how they saw what was happening around them. There was antisemitism, and they learned to live with it. There was a fear running through their stories; the idea of a sudden death is never far away. There is also a freedom in them, borne of their escape out of the Nazi grip and into the woods. In the past few decades more study has been applied to partisans, and so different narratives have sprung up, most notably in a book called *Defiance* by Nechama Tec. Tec's book is the definitive work on the Bielski *otryad*. The Bielskis were the largest group of Jews to survive in the forests and Tec carefully explains how they managed to walk that tightrope between Jewish survival/resistance and the Soviet partisans, as these two factors were not often in alignment.

These are vitally important studies. Partisans are a newer phenomenon in Western history, only going back a few hundred years. They were born of a different type of warfare, a modern warfare where the battle was brought to the civilian population. Partisans started out as mercenaries, but now they are the people caught in a ground war who fight back against the occupier. The destruction of human life during World War I was unprecedented. Machine guns and gas ate bodies unlike the world had ever seen. Trenches scarred the landscape to such an extent that they are still visible today in aerial photographs. World War II destroyed both human life and civilization. Even without counting the millions of dead in the Holocaust, which is its



own special section of World War II, both sides relentlessly bombed one another's cities. War was brought to the native populations on a daily basis.

As we push into the future we are seeing more and more of this type of war. Armies rarely meet on battlefields now as they did the past; they have missions and raids and hope to get out quickly with little engagement. While armies face little engagement, civilians' whole lives are swept up in these engagements. The wars in the 1990's and 2000's in Afghanistan and Iraq were fought in cities with civilians, many of whom were children in the first one and fighters in the second. Modern battles are fought guerilla style in city streets, and groups retreat and advance at advantageous moments and in this world of blood and destruction partisans are born.

The study of partisans is the study of a modern phenomenon and deserves its place next to the tank, machine gun and atomic bomb. Each of these new inventions was a reaction to old warfare mixed with new innovation and they changed the world. Partisans sprang just as much from external forces as these other modern tools of war. They have no control over the war strategy as a whole, only their small piece of it. As we see with the Soviet plan to utilize the partisans to disrupt the entire railroad these forces can be put together as needed, if there is a central head giving support and direction, then fall apart again, melting into the woods. Modern warfare has changed how humans conduct war, and how they respond to it. The forest fugitives and the partisans are both parts to this larger story of the evolution of warfare. They may flee out of harm's way, but these fugitives do not really leave; they wait. As the partisans did, modern humans attack where they can, and as the forest fugitives did, they survive where they can.

Most currently we see this in the Russian-Ukrainian war which started in February of 2022 with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. The new rules of engagement are present; these are people forced from their homes. New weapons, given from countries around the world, are being used, and partisans are once again active. Advancing day by day the Russian army has blown up,

taken over, destroyed or killed as much as they can. While the Ukrainian army attempts to push them back with a centrally located head and a strategic battle plan, Ukrainian partisans are slipping between the two countries under cover and striking Russian ammunition and air bases.<sup>1</sup> They are waging a “little war” on a virtually invisible front. They appeared, like the ghosts of their forefathers, to cause chaos in secret and in the tradition of their World War II forebears these partisans cannot take on the frontal assault of the Russian army, but they can strike in smaller places to weaken both might and morale.

If this war continues, we may see people fleeing into the forests and another round of survival there, under another occupation. If this feels very far away to most of the world, we have to remember that nowhere is untouchable by war and occupation. Thinking that something so life changing can’t happen to you was responsible for many deaths during World War II. The voices of those who gave testimony after World War II all start at the same place—a warm stable home surrounded by loved ones. These voices then speak of flight, death and exacting revenge on the enemy, as well as building sustainable lives in the forests. Voices like these will be repeated again and again, from all reaches of the globe, as long as humans make war on one another’s homes and cities. These partisan voices are the natural reaction to modern warfare, and we will hear them until we end the wars that create them.

Not only are these voices important to understanding the future, but they are pertinent to the past as well. The past is never very far from us in the present. World War II history exists in no place without an immense struggle against the Axis powers. It was not an easily won war; it was a constant enduring battle for most of the world. We see large shows of force against the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Behind Enemy Lines, Ukrainians Tell Russians 'You Are Never Safe,'" *New York Times* (New York City, Ny), August 17, 2022, Russia-Ukraine War Briefing, accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/world/europe/ukraine-partisans-insurgency-russia.html>.

Axis powers, like storming the Normandy beaches, or dropping the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and with these large shows it is easy to forget that the small ones are just as important to the defeat of the enemy. Partisans may have been more of a rock in the shoe of the German war effort, but their contribution, both military and personal, cannot be overlooked. Together partisan and forest fugitives waged a battle for their lives, their families and their homes which was constant, enduring, brutal and very much real. Their resistance needs to be examined, to be acknowledged. The dirt, mud and heroism of foraging for food, of surviving in the rain and snow, of managing to escape, again and again, the German grasp, of blowing up enemy transport and communication, of taking revenge for the senseless murder around them, needs its place in history. These were people who were being shut out of history, but they persevered, and their voices can still be heard.

To quote former partisan Yitzhak Arad, “nowhere else in occupied Europe was there a similar situation in which thousands of Jews fought the Germans in forests in the German rear areas. The Jewish partisans, with their non-Jewish comrades, contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany.”<sup>2</sup> In the 77 years since World War II ended the forests have been empty of partisans, but the echo of them is still present. They are waiting in the shadows as we continue to wage war in city blocks. Partisans are still forming from the civilian population in reaction to new methods of warfare throughout the world. Nowhere else in Europe did this particular form of forest resistance happen on this scale, but it very well may again.

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<sup>2</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 516, <https://ezproxy.snhu.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=264653&site=eds-live&scope=site>.



**Figure 1: Drawing by Alexander Bogen of Partisan Standing With a Rifle.**

Naroch Forest 1943.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum # 2005.181.112

Courtesy of The Abraham and Ruth Goldfarb Family Acquisition Fund

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