Nechama Tec (2013)

Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defied the Nazi Terror

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Nechama Tec's Defiance, an account of a Jewish partisan unit that fought the Nazis in the Polish forests during World War II, was turned into a major feature film. Yet despite the attention this film brought to the topic of Jewish resistance, Tec, who speaks widely about the Holocaust and the experience of Jews in wartime Poland, still ran into the same question again and again: Why didn't Jews fight back? To Tec, this question suggested that Jews were somehow complicit in their own extermination. Despite works by Tec and others, the stereotype of Jewish passivity in the Holocaust persists.

In Resistance, Tec draws on first-hand accounts, interviews, and other sources to reveal the full range of tactics employed to resist the Nazi regime in Poland. She compares Jewish and non-Jewish groups, showing that they faced vastly different conditions. The Jewish resistance had its own particular aims, especially the recovery of dignity and the salvation of lives. Tec explores the conditions necessary for resistance, including favorable topography, a supply of arms, and effective leadership, and dedicates the majority of the book to the stories of those who stood up and fought back in any way that they could. Emphasizing the centrality of cooperation to the Jewish and Polish resistance movements of World War II, Tec argues that resistance is more than not submitting--that it requires taking action, and demands cooperation with others. Whereas resilience is individual in orientation, Tec writes, resistance assumes others. Within this context, Tec explores life in the ghettos, the organizations that arose within them, and the famous uprising in Warsaw that began on January 18, 1943. She tells of those who escaped to hide and fight as partisans in the forests, and considers the crucial role played by women who acted as couriers, carrying messages and supplies between the ghetto and the outside world. Tec also discusses resistance in concentration camps, vividly recounting the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp uprising on October 7, 1944. The refusal of the rebel leaders to give information under unspeakable torture, Tec displays, was just one more of the many forms resistance took.

Resistance is a rich book that forever shatters the myth of Jewish passivity in the face of annihilation.
Nehama Tec’s latest book, *Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defied the Nazi Terror*, is born from an eagerness to facilitate discussion. Tec responds to a clear and constant demand by her public audiences to answer the question: why didn’t the Jews fight back during World War II? Tec admits that the question cannot be answered forthright but rather it demands “systematic, comparative examinations of historical facts” (p.2). She presents a large count of testimonies that demonstrate various forms of resistance in a general overview that “attempts to clarify and instruct” (p.15). While admittedly not intended for scholars already familiar with the subject, Tec’s work does successfully inform a larger, public audience of the various forms of resistance by both Jews and gentiles that were committed to helping protect and save Jews during the Holocaust.

### Defining resistance

In the book’s introduction, Tec carefully defines resistance as: “a set of activities motivated by the desire to thwart, limit, undermine, or end the exercise of oppression over the oppressed” (p.4). The presence of resistance, however, is contingent upon several conditions, which she outlines succinctly as oppression, cooperation, topography, and a steady supply of arms (p.4-5). Tec also lays out her methodology, and acknowledges the faults and merits of the limited previous scholarship on the topic of Jewish resistance.

### Forms of resistance against the German occupation of Poland

Tec’s Chapter 1, “Learning How to Oppose,” profiles three separate teens, Zygmunt Rytel, Antoni Zieleniewski, and Ephraim Bleichman, each with distinct experiences but common goals. In 1940, Rytel initially concentrated his efforts on Polish elites, and then expanded his blanket of protection to Jews. Rytel’s efforts were fueled by the memory of his experience in Auschwitz and his brother’s murder at the camp. Zieleniewski was a member of the Polish underground committed to saving Jews. His deepest motivations came from witnessing the anti-Semitic demoralization of a close Jewish friend at university. Bleichman, Tec’s final example in the triad, resisted the Nazis with what Tec demonstrates as a proactive attitude seen in younger Jews that greatly contrasted the passivity of their elders. Bleidman led a group of Jews into the forest as a Jewish partisan, demonstrating a great degree of resilience and self-reliance (46).

Chapter 2, “Ghettos,” explores stories of resistance within the walls of numerous ghettos. Tec briefly explains the establishment of the Judenrat Jewish councils formed as transmitters of German orders. Tec shines light on
the social disintegration within the ghetto, contrasting the breakdown with examples of young Jewish ghetto resisters emphasizing the notable strength of women. She quotes Warsaw ghetto inhabitant Vladka Meed, who suggests that "...the devotion, the ability to sacrifice for others, were more strongly developed in the ghetto in women than in the men..." (p.56). Women's sensitivity was often strongly directed toward the protection of children, a quality that Tec supports with several emotional accounts of acts of strength and humanity toward these young ghetto residents. Tec also examines the formation and efforts of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) and its youthful members who pushed for active resistance over passive, balancing the deeply emotional recollections with historical information. Passages like these are what make Tec's book more than just a retelling of others' stories.

Tec progresses toward the topic of forests and partisan activity of military and civilian fugitives in the Belarussian woods in Chapter 3, accordingly titled "The Forests." She includes the harrowing tales of Zvi Shefet, Mina Vokowisky, Dr. Julian Alexandrowicz, Hersh Smolar, and the Bielski brothers (the same Belorussian partisans on whom her earlier book, Defiance, focuses.) Among her examples, Tec highlights a contrast between two motivations of resistance: revenge and preservation of life. She demonstrates through contrasting narratives the deep complexities of resistance, underscoring the choices made that involve physical fighting, feelings of vengeance, and bearing witness. In all moral quandaries, these choices become symbols of opposition, which Tec recounts in brilliant detail.

The Chapter 4, "The Concentration Camps," revolves around attempts of revolt and escape from Auschwitz-Birkenau. Tec details the planning, successes, and failures to the minutest of points, with details so vivid that the reader cannot help but become emotionally invested in the outcome of these attempts. She recounts personal anecdotes of men and women who used wit and guile in small acts of resistance, while also familiarizing readers with the strength and heart of these personalities.

Chapter 5, "The Couriers," is devoted to the stories of female couriers that risked their own lives in supporting resistance, thereby resisting in their own way, assisting in the carrying out of larger movements and thereby making effective action possible. Tec poignantly states, "Jewish female couriers functioned as the glue that held an underground together" (p.159). She highlights the stories of Leah Silverstein and Hela Schupper, showing the commitment and loyalty they gave to the cause, and the enormous difference their efforts made in the successes of resistance and survival of others.

Gentiles and the Jewish resistance

Tec's final case study fills Chapter 6, "The Special Case of Jan Karski." Karski was a celebrated courier for the Polish underground who precariously travelled between Poland and allied states to deliver messages and reports to allied governments abroad about "the plight of the Jewish people" (p.186). Karski's devotion to assisting and resisting is a perfect summation of and conclusion to Tec's attempt to demonstrate acts of resistance in the Holocaust.

In the book's conclusion, Tec retells a few heartfelt acts of kindness that are, as she says, "acts of resistance in [their] own way," (p.196) proving that defining resistance is indeed complicated, and is, again, best understood
through examination of many individual cases. She has taken stories from the archives and made them accessible to her general audience. Her book is heartfelt, well researched, and informative to those unfamiliar with the subject. The writing reads almost like fiction, both for Tec’s beautiful way with words, and for the true, astonishing acts of resistance that, at times, seem too incredible to be real.

Zitierweise: