

Culture as Resistance: A Study of the Warsaw and Łódź Ghettos

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Goal of Research: Prompt a reconceptualization of resistance in the ghettos by identifying culture as a medium of challenging the perpetrators. Consequentially, this will challenge the simplistic approach to studying resistance in the ghettos wherein armed revolt is the only relevant method.

Theories of Resistance:

- Raul Hilberg: defines resistance loosely as “opposition to the perpetrators” yet does not include smuggling or any other attempt at survival as resistance, since they did not necessarily thwart the perpetrators.
- Michael Marrus: the definition in the context of the Holocaust must be broad due to the “diversity of circumstance.”

Using these scholars as a basis, a set of boundaries was formulated that includes acts of ‘passive’ resisting by taking into account Nazi policy both before and after a ‘Final Solution’ was established.

- Nature of ghettoization: a policy imposed by the perpetrators, wherein they challenged the physical and psychological well-being of the Jews by providing inadequate rations, in certain cases restricted communication with the outside world, forbid the practise of their traditions, and more.
- Thus, undertaking efforts to survive and remain well, with the use of the tools available, was in itself resistance to the perpetrators

Methodology

- Historiography of Culture in the Ghettos
 - often take a micro approach, addressing a single aspect of culture and analyzing its place within the ghetto world
 - a tendency to romanticize culture in the ghettos
 - lack of scholarship that tackles culture as a method of resisting physical oppression
- Primary Sources
 - a range of diaries from Warsaw and Łódź
 - these sources were essential in order to identify why culture was practiced in the ghettos, and how it fits under the umbrella of resistance

Culture in the Ghettos: 3 Trends

- 1) The production of culture as a method of physical survival, for example playing music on the street to get money or food.
- 2) Culture as a vehicle of expression, whether that being despise of the occupying forces and Jewish Police, daily struggles within the ghetto, or positively expressing connections to Jewish tradition and hope.
- 3) The role of culture as psychological relief, a metaphysical escape from the depressive atmosphere and a return to normalcy.

Key Individuals



Dawid Sierakowiak: A teenager in the Łódź ghetto who kept a detailed diary that centred mainly around his education and teaching in the ghetto. He died in the ghetto on August 8th 1943 most likely in result of disease.



Sara Zyskind: Sara was born in Łódź in 1927, and was one of the members of the ghetto school system established by Rumkowski. She was transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and later the Mittelstein labour camp. She survived the war and immigrated to Israel.



Wladislaw Szpilman: He was a classical trained pianist who managed to survive after the ghetto liquidation by hiding on the aryan side. After the war he continued to work as a composer and musician and published his memoirs.



Mary Berg: Born in Łódź, her family fled to Warsaw after the outbreak of war and were placed in the ghetto. Due to her mother's American citizenship, they were able to leave the ghetto and managed to immigrate to the United States in 1944.

Oskar Rosenfeld: A Jewish-Austrian intellectual who was transported to Łódź via Prague in 1942. Sometime in the summer of 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz and killed, leaving behind twenty-one notebooks chronicling the ghetto.



Yankele Hershkowitz: A singer in Łódź who made a living off street performance up until the deportations in 1942, when he was forced to find other employment. He was sent to Auschwitz, liberated, and lived in Łódź until his death.

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