

Partisans

Groups of organized guerilla fighters operating in enemy-occupied territory. During World War II, partisans in Nazi-occupied Europe were mainly active in Eastern Europe, but there was also partisan activity in Yugoslavia, Greece, Slovakia, and Western European countries such as France and Italy.

The rise of the partisan movement in Eastern Europe was gradual. On July 3, 1941, just days after Germany invaded the Soviet Union and Soviet-held territories, Joseph Stalin called for the establishment of an underground that would help the Soviet army fight the enemy. However, early efforts to set up partisan units were not particularly successful. About a year after Stalin's original order, centralized headquarters were established for the whole partisan movement, and the number of Soviet partisans grew exponentially. By the last year and a half of the war, the partisans were integrated into military operations on the warfront, and took part in the effort to liberate regions before the Soviet army arrived.

Despite the fact that there was no independent Jewish partisan movement in Europe during the Nazi reign of terror, many Jews did operate as partisans, whether as part of individual Jewish units or as members of non-Jewish units. Jewish and non-Jewish partisans were different in several ways. Non-Jewish partisans joined the fight either as ultra-nationalists, who wanted to rid their countries of all foreigners (Nazis and Jews), or as socialist-leftists, who wanted to combat Fascism. They had left their families at home in a relatively safe environment, generally expecting to return to them after the war. The Jewish partisans were not fighting for an ideal, such as nationalism or anti-fascism- the Jewish partisans were fighting for their lives. Jewish partisans believed that they would never see home or family again, especially since most of their families had already been slaughtered by the Nazis. Furthermore, non-Jewish partisans had support, and believed that as patriotic citizens doing their duty for their country, they could rely on local farmers to provide them with food and supplies. Not so the Jews. Jewish partisans could not rely on the locals, who often hated the Jews as much as the Nazis did.

The Jewish partisan was a stranger, and had a very slight chance of actually surviving in the forest.

Just to become a partisan, a Jew had to overcome all sorts of hurdles. First, he had to escape from a Ghetto. After a successful getaway, he had to enter the forest, and locate a partisan base whose members may or may not have been willing to accept him. Even if the partisan group did agree to accept him into its ranks, the Jew, being a Jew, was not always treated as an equal (outside of Eastern Europe, Jews were generally accepted into partisan units as equals). Despite all these obstacles, Jewish partisan activity in Eastern Europe swelled to considerable proportions. Scholars believe that some 20,000-30,000 Jews participated in the partisan units in the forests, where they carried out daring raids and rescue operations.

The Eastern European forest was a natural place for Jews running from the Nazis to hide and regroup for partisan activity. First, the territory was full of thick woodlands and many swamps, which provided ample cover. Second, many of the Jews had lived in nearby areas before the war and were familiar with the terrain, and thus were able to adapt to life in the forests. After the Germans launched mass murder campaigns in Belorussia and the Ukraine during the second half of 1941, many Jews felt that their only choice was to flee to the forests. From that time on, Belorussia had the largest concentration of partisans in Eastern Europe. By late August 1941 there were some 230 partisan units in the region, with about 5,000 fighters (Jewish and non-Jewish). Just two years later the numbers had multiplied greatly, with 243,000 partisans in 1943 and 374,000 in 1944.

Many Jewish partisans in Belorussia had their own units that operated as part of the general Belorussian partisan movement, although some of these Jewish units lost their Jewish character over time. The largest Jewish unit in Belorussia was led by the Bielski brothers; operating in the Naliboki Forest, it consisted of 1,200 people, including partisans and a family camp (see also Bielski, Tuvia). The Zorin unit, led by Shalom Zurin, included 800 Jews. Many other Jewish partisan units were active in the Lipiczany Forest.

The partisan movement in Lithuania developed much later than the one in Belorussia. It was in Vilna, Lithuania that Jewish Youth Movement leader

Abba Kovner called for his fellow Jews to resist the Germans in the ghettos and escape to the forests to form a Jewish partisan movement. Ultimately, there were about 850 Jewish partisans active in the forests of Lithuania (mainly the Rudninkai Forest), making up one-tenth of the entire Lithuanian partisan movement.

A large Soviet partisan movement was also active in the Ukraine where, from the earliest days of the German occupation, Jews fled to the forests and swamps in search of refuge. In the summer of 1941 they began to form partisan units. Some groups like that of Moshe Gildenman or Sofievka-Kolki later joined Soviet units. A Jewish partisan company of 120 under D. Mudrik operated in the Vinnitsa district.

Jewish partisan activity in Poland was much smaller in scale, as the Polish underground Home Army did not use guerilla tactics for most of the war; Poland is not highly forested; Jews who did manage to escape to the forests were often murdered by the fascist, antisemitic National Armed Forces underground militia (see also National Armed Forces, Poland); and by the time the partisan movement in the Generalgouvernement region was strong enough to fight, most Jews in the area had already been wiped out.

Jews also became partisans in Slovakia, where more than 1,500 participated in the Slovak National Uprising. In Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Greece, Jews were accepted into partisan units as equals; however, and perhaps because of that acceptance, there were no separate Jewish partisan units in those countries. (see also Family Camps In The Forests.)