

**Resistance During the Holocaust****Essential Questions:**

- How did people resist the Nazis, and what do these actions show about their beliefs and identities?
- What is the relationship between resistance and human dignity?
- What factors influence decision-making in the face of injustice?
- Why did many choose to resist even when defeat or death was certain?
- What does the Sobibór uprising reveal about the human capacity for defiance and resilience in the face of genocide?

**Subjects**

Multidisciplinary

**Grades**

9-12

**Lesson Objectives:**

- Identify and explain different forms of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.
- Evaluate the significance and legacy of resistance in Holocaust history.
- Examine the different forms of resistance during the Holocaust.
- Examine the obstacles to resistance during the Holocaust.
- Analyze the Sobibór uprising as a case study of organized resistance, exploring its motivations, execution, and impact.
- Reflect on the story of Esther Raab to understand personal acts of defiance and the preservation of dignity through resistance.

**EDUCATOR BACKGROUND FOR THIS LESSON**

It is important to address the myth of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust. Too often, students are left with the impression that Jews were simply helpless victims, lacking the courage or means to fight back. It is common to hear people ask, “Why didn’t the Jews resist?” In reality, resistance required great courage. Those who chose to resist had to grapple with many dilemmas, including the possible price of disobeying Nazi orders, the

## Resistance During the Holocaust

---

effect of their resistance on their families and communities, and the punishment they might have to endure for resisting. While the Holocaust is often remembered for the unimaginable suffering and loss inflicted on millions of people, it is also a story of remarkable resilience and resistance.

In the fall of 1941, Nazi Germany implemented a plan to systematically murder Jews in the General Government. This plan was codenamed “Operation Reinhard.” Three killing centers were established as part of this action: Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka. Operation Reinhard marked the deadliest phase of Nazi Germany’s intention to commit genocide against the Jewish people. Victims were transported by train to Sobibór, located in Nazi-occupied Poland, and almost immediately sent to the gas chambers. Only a small group of prisoners were spared temporarily to perform forced labor, sorting victims’ belongings or maintaining the camp. Operating from May 1942 to October 1943, an estimated 250,000 Jews were murdered at Sobibór.

On October 14, 1943, Sobibór became the site of one of the most significant uprisings in a Nazi death camp. The revolt was meticulously planned by a small group of prisoners. On the day of the revolt, prisoners lured Nazi officers into workshops and killed them with makeshift weapons. Amidst the chaos, approximately 300 prisoners escaped. Though many escapees were later captured or killed, around 50 Sobibór escapees survived until the end of the war. The Sobibór uprising demonstrated that even in death camps, where survival was nearly impossible, Jews organized, resisted, and reclaimed their agency.

### EXTERNAL LINKS

- [Frequently Asked Questions about the Holocaust for Educators](#)
  - [Students’ Toughest Questions](#)
  - [Resource Evaluation Rubric](#)
  - [Echoes and Reflections: Timeline of the Holocaust](#)
  - [Holocaust Survivors Project of South Jersey](#)
  - [Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation](#)
  - [USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)
    - [“Jewish Resistance”](#)
    - [“Killing Centers: In Depth”](#)
    - [“Lublin/Majdanek Concentration Camp”](#)
    - [“Sobibor”](#)
-

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- [Esther and Irving Raab Biographical Text](#)
- Testimony Clips: [Planning for the uprising in Sobibór](#) and [Describing the uprising in Sobibór](#)
- Clip from [Escape from Sobibór](#) (1987)
- Virtual tour of Sobibór

### LESSON SEQUENCE

#### WARM-UP & DISCUSSION

Write the following questions on the board: “*What does resistance mean to you? Can resistance be physical, emotional, or symbolic? Why might people choose to resist in the face of certain death?*” Ask students to reflect in writing and discuss with a partner.

#### MINI LESSON

Jewish resistance during the Holocaust was a powerful expression of courage and defiance. Even in the most brutal conditions, individuals and groups found ways to assert their dignity, fight back, and preserve their humanity. Resistance was not limited to armed rebellion—it included acts of spiritual and cultural defiance, maintaining human dignity, and preserving Jewish culture. Resistance took many forms, including:

- **Armed Resistance:** Organized uprisings in ghettos and Nazi camps, and partisan groups
- **Spiritual Resistance:** Maintaining religious rituals, preserving culture, and recording history.
- **Cultural Resistance:** Writing, art, and music as acts of defiance and hope.
- **Individual Defiance:** Small-scale acts of sabotage or courage

#### ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT - SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

Esther Raab, a Sobibór uprising survivor who settled in New Jersey after the war, dedicated her life to sharing her story and giving testimony about her experiences. When asked why, she explained, “I do it for several reasons: When we were about to escape from Sobibór, Leon [Feldhendler] made us pledge to speak out and let the world know what happened at Sobibór.

I'm sure he is listening now. I do it for those who were martyred, who can't speak for themselves. But most importantly, I speak out to inform students about the awful consequences of hate."

Have students watch both testimony clips.

- [Planning for the uprising in Sobibor](#)
- [Describing the uprising in Sobibor](#)

After watching both testimonies, have students respond to the reflection prompts independently or with a partner. Use these responses to guide a whole-class discussion.

- In her testimony, Esther describes the motivations behind the uprising. What emotions or factors do you think drove the prisoners to risk everything by planning a revolt? How does her account challenge or expand your understanding of resistance during the Holocaust?
- Esther recalls the careful planning and secrecy required for the uprising. What challenges did the prisoners face in organizing a coordinated rebellion? How did they overcome seemingly impossible obstacles?
- Esther mentions key individuals involved in the planning. What leadership qualities or strategies do you notice? How did collaboration and unity among the prisoners contribute to the success of the uprising?
- Esther describes both the triumph and the tragedy of the Sobibór uprising. How does she convey the emotional weight of the event? Do you think the act of resisting, even with tragic losses, gave the prisoners a sense of restored dignity or agency? Why or why not?
- Why is it important for students today to hear the voices of survivors like Esther when studying Holocaust resistance?

### **WHOLE CLASS DISCUSSION - SOBIBÓR UPRISING**

Show students a clip from the film [Escape from Sobibór](#) (2:06:42 – 2:19:36) depicting the uprising. After viewing the clip use the prompts below to guide students in a whole class discussion.

- During the escape, the prisoners face difficult choices, including whether to fight, flee, or help others. How do
-

these split-second decisions reflect both the human instinct for survival and the complexity of resistance?

- What does the scene reveal about the moral dilemmas the prisoners faced?
- The final scene shows both moments of triumph and tragedy as some prisoners escape while others are killed. Do you think it accurately conveys the bittersweet reality of the uprising's outcome?
- How does the film's depiction of the uprising compare to Esther's real-life account? What are the benefits and limitations of learning about history through dramatized films versus survivor testimony?
- How does this scene change or deepen your understanding of resistance during the Holocaust?

### **VIRTUAL TOUR PRE AND POST-REFLECTION**

The virtual tour of Sobibór is designed to help students better understand the breadth of the Nazi camp system. Before beginning the virtual tour, make sure students have a background understanding of the camp and know key terms and concepts related to the camp.

- How do you think physically seeing these sites—rather than just reading about them—might deepen your understanding of the Holocaust?
- What do you think are some challenges historians face when preserving and presenting these Holocaust memorial sites to visitors?
- What questions can you ask about the daily experiences of prisoners?
- What questions can you ask the guide about how resistance was organized and the risks prisoners took to fight back?
- What questions can you ask the tour guide about how surviving artifacts help us understand the individual lives of the victims or the operations of the camps?

After the virtual tour, have students respond to the following reflection prompts. These can be used to facilitate a whole-class discussion.

---

## Resistance During the Holocaust

---

- What is one specific story, image, or moment from the tour that will stay with you? How has this experience influenced your perspective on the importance of studying the Holocaust?
- How did hearing or seeing details about individual lives (e.g., personal belongings, names, or testimonies) influence your understanding of the Holocaust compared to studying general facts or statistics?
- Did the tour challenge or change any of your previous assumptions or understandings about the Holocaust? If so, how? If not, what parts of the tour reinforced what you already knew?
- How did virtually visiting the actual sites affect your connection to history? Did it make the events feel more real or immediate?
- How do you think sites of Holocaust memory and education contribute to fighting antisemitism, prejudice, or hatred today? What responsibilities do you think people have to preserve and share this history?

## STANDARDS

- **6.2.12.HistoryUP.4.b:** Report on the influence of war, economic depression, and genocide on the arts, cultural values, and social ideas.
-