

Resistance During the Holocaust - Majdanek**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?

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.
- Challenge misconceptions of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust.
- Reflect on the meaning of human dignity and courage under oppression.

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 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.

Resistance During the Holocaust

Majdanek, located on the outskirts of Lublin, Poland, was established by the SS in the fall of 1941. Originally intended as a prisoner-of-war camp for captured Soviet soldiers, it was quickly transformed into a concentration and extermination camp. Unlike the remote Operation Reinhard death camps such as Sobibór and Treblinka, Majdanek was built in plain view of a major city. Its proximity to Lublin meant that local residents could see transports arriving, smoke rising from the crematoria, and hear gunfire from mass executions, underscoring the openness of Nazi terror.

Conditions at Majdanek were brutal. Prisoners were subjected to forced labor, starvation, disease, and systematic murder. While Jews comprised the majority of victims, the camp also held Polish political prisoners, Soviet POWs, Roma, and others targeted by the Nazi regime. Historians estimate that at least 78,000 people were murdered at Majdanek, including around 60,000 Jews. Methods of killing included shootings, gassing in stationary chambers, and mass executions. On November 3, 1943, during Operation “Erntefest” (Harvest Festival), approximately 18,000 Jews were shot in a single day at Majdanek—the largest single-day, single-camp massacre of the Holocaust.

Majdanek holds a unique place in Holocaust history because it was the first major camp liberated by the Allies, when Soviet forces entered in July 1944. Unlike other death camps that were dismantled by the Nazis to hide evidence, Majdanek was left largely intact. Liberators found crematoria, gas chambers, piles of personal belongings, and thousands of shoes from murdered victims. This immediacy and visibility made Majdanek one of the earliest sites used to document Nazi crimes and to present undeniable evidence of mass murder to the world. Today, the State Museum at Majdanek preserves the site as both a memorial and an educational site.

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”](#)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- [Helen K. Edited Testimony](#)
- Virtual Tour of Majdanek

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

Explain to students that at Majdanek, large-scale rebellion was nearly impossible. Resistance often looked like small, quiet acts: helping a fellow prisoner, sharing food, preserving dignity, or documenting Nazi crimes.

Show students an excerpt from the survivor testimony of Helen K (14:21- 20:4). Ask students to take notes as they watch the testimony, focusing on:

- Examples of resistance she describes (big or small).
- Challenges or risks prisoners faced in resisting.
- Emotional impact—what feelings come through in her words and voice?

After watching the testimony, divide students into groups of 3 to 4.

4. Using their individual viewing notes, have the groups discuss:

- What specific forms of resistance does Helen K. describe? How do they compare to your expectations from the warm-up?
- What risks or dilemmas did prisoners face if they resisted? Why were these acts of resistance still meaningful?
- How does Helen's story expand our understanding of what it means to "resist"?
- How do personal accounts like Helen's challenge the myth of Jewish passivity during the Holocaust?
- How do tone, emotion, and personal detail make her testimony more powerful than reading a textbook account?

WHOLE CLASS DISCUSSION - RESISTANCE AT MAJDANEK

After allowing the small groups to discuss, bring the class back together for a full class discussion. You can focus on the prompts the small groups used or add in some of the prompts provided below:

- How do spiritual, cultural, or everyday acts of defiance—such as praying, teaching, or sharing food—represent forms of courage equal to armed resistance?
 - Majdanek was liberated with much of the camp intact, including evidence of Nazi crimes. How can we think of preserving testimony, artifacts, and memory as acts of resistance in their own right?
 - In what ways does studying Majdanek help us see resistance as not just about fighting back physically, but about preserving dignity and humanity?
-

VIRTUAL TOUR PRE AND POST-REFLECTION

The virtual tour of Majdanek 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.

- 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?
-

Resistance During the Holocaust

- 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.
-