

## Intelligence in Public Media

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### ***The Light of Days. The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos***

Judy Batalion (William Morrow, 2020), 558 pages, 1 map, 16 pages of photographs.

#### **Reviewed by J. R. Seeger**

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*Resistance to tyranny does not always involve violence or revolt. In such a brutal and pitiless environment, even the collection and distribution of extra food and essential supplies was an act of defiance. Small acts of kindness such as the sharing of their meagre rations took on great significance and strengthened the determination of the persecuted to endure their suffering and survive.<sup>a</sup>*

Historians live for a moment of discovery. It might be the discovery in a national archive, long buried in time. It might be a diary or a set of photographs in an attic. No matter the circumstance, the hope is that the moment will lead down a trail that takes them and, eventually, their readers to a long-forgotten time or place. Judy Batalion's book, *The Light of Days*, begins with just such a discovery in the British Library. It was a simple enough quest, at first. She opens the book with a single sentence of her original plan. "I had been searching for strong Jewish women."

Instead, what she found was a book written in Yiddish titled *Freuen in di Ghettos (Women in the Ghettos)* edited by Leib Spizman and published in New York City in 1946 by a small publishing house called Pioneer Women's Organization. It recorded a series of memories of women who were members of the Jewish resistance in the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Poland. These women served in every possible job in the resistance from fighter to courier to propagandist to supporter (what unconventional-warfare experts would call "the auxiliary" providing supplies, support, and safe locations for the resistance). *Women in the Ghettos* described the lives and, often, the deaths of 175 different Polish women who fought the Nazis.

After that moment in the British Library, it took Batalion a dozen years and travels across the globe to turn her discovery into a book. Batalion selected a more manageable number of women in the list, including women who survived, or whose families survived, the Holocaust. In her book, she describes in detail the horrors

these women faced and their intrepidity as they fought back against impossible odds as the Nazis put into effect their genocidal plans. These women were convinced they were facing certain death. In response to that belief, they chose resistance.

From the very start of World War II, Poland was caught in a vice with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union carving up parts of the country. When the Nazis invaded in 1939, the Polish Army fought using World War I technology against a modern German war machine. The German blending of armor, airpower and psychological operations resulted in the collapse of the Polish military and government and the wholesale displacement of the Polish population.

A small portion of the Polish Army and Air Force escaped to either the USSR or Great Britain. The rest of the population was left to their German occupiers. A nascent Polish resistance retreated into the forests and survived a hand-to-mouth existence until the end of the war. Moreover, those resistance groups were caught between two hostile forces: the Nazi occupation force and a Soviet Red Army that was nominally allied to the Germans until Operation Barbarossa in June 1941. Even after the Soviets entered the war, the Soviets were unwilling to support a Polish resistance that was not communist.

Before the war, Jewish communities faced prejudice from their Polish Catholic neighbors, but they were integrated into the economy and their children attended Polish schools and universities. Suddenly, that came to an end when the Germans isolated the Jews into ghettos in the major cities guarded by collaborating Polish police and, ironically, by collaborators within the Jewish community itself. Batalion's book takes the reader through the horrific transition from initial isolation of the Jewish communities into ghettos through the starvation program during 1940–41 and then deportation of Jews to the extermination camps. The story of the Holocaust has been told many times, but when it is told through the eyes of the

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a. Paul Roland, *The Jewish Resistance: Uprisings against the Nazis in World War II* (Sirius Publishing, 2018), 8.

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people who lived through it, it is not hard to understand at first why the Jewish community decided to cooperate. The evil of the Nazi plan for the extermination of the entire population of the Jews was simply impossible to imagine. That said, there were some in the Jewish community who knew from the beginning that resistance was the only path to survival.

Operational security is one of the keys to any clandestine organization but most especially a clandestine resistance organization living under occupation. The early Jewish resistance movement in the ghettos had an advantage because the groups described in Batalion's book began as clandestine socialist and communist movements hiding from the Polish government long before 1939. Once the first of the Nazi pogroms began in the Warsaw Ghetto in the spring and summer of 1942, these same movements went further underground and became the Jewish Fighting Organization, known by the acronym ZOB for the Polish *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa*. From a small group in the Warsaw Ghetto, the ZOB expanded to the other major cities that held Jewish ghettos. The ZOB maintained a degree of connectivity among the various ghetto resistance groups using female couriers who could travel under false Polish documents that identified them as Polish Catholics. Most of the resources they used in their efforts were obtained through guile and direct attacks on Nazis and their Polish collaborators.

From the beginning the ZOB had few allies. Batalion describes the other resistance organizations as follows:

*The Home Army (known in Poland as the Armia Krajowa or AK) was affiliated with the predominantly right-wing government in exile in London. The Home Army had an antisemitic leadership, even though many individual members were liberals who helped the Jews.... The People's Army, on the other hand, was affiliated with the Communist Group (PPR), and, at the time, was the weaker of the two factions. The leadership of the People's Army (Armia Ludowa, or AL) cooperated with the Soviets, and was more willing to collaborate with Jewish ghetto and forest*

*fighters—frankly, with anyone who want to topple the Nazis. But they lacked resources.*

The US and UK efforts to support resistance organizations in occupied Western Europe could not reach the Poles because of the long distance from Allied airfields.<sup>a</sup> Small groups of Jews escaped the ghettos and moved into the forest. They became the focal point of Jewish armed resistance conducting small raids, sabotage, and even attacking some of the concentration camps. While the story of the armed Jewish resistance in the forests in Eastern Europe is better known through books and film,<sup>b</sup> throughout more than five years of German occupation, pockets of the Polish Jewish community inside the cities conducted resistance operations and those pockets of resistance included nearly 200 women.

Initially these small attacks took place in the forests and in the cities on the Nazi occupation. That changed completely during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising from January to May 1943, when Jewish resistance forces attacked their Nazi occupiers in the city using small arms, Molotov cocktails, and homemade bombs. The uprising ended when the Nazis destroyed the entire Warsaw Ghetto. Batalion focuses considerable attention to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising as seen through the eyes of her women characters. In a few dozen pages, she describes military resistance in a city in ways that most historians either can't or won't describe. It is a brutal war of attrition, killings at close range, escapes through sewers, and gatherings in basements and in gutted buildings to fight another day. As with most of the vignettes in this book, it is not for anyone unprepared for detailed descriptions of the extreme violence.

This book is by no means the only one that describes the Jewish resistance to the Holocaust. And it is not the only book that focuses on women in the resistance forces in Europe.<sup>c</sup> What makes the book important is Batalion's in-depth research into the tactics, techniques, and procedures used by the women members of the ZOB. Batalion used dozens of diaries and previously published research into Jewish resistance in Poland as well as interviews with

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a. For additional information on the Polish resistance and the obstacles—geographic and political—to Western Allied support to the resistance, see Jonathan Walker, *Poland Alone: Britain, SOE, and the Collapse of the Polish Resistance, 1944* (The History Press, 2011).

b. See Roland, *The Jewish Resistance*; Patrick Henry, ed., (Catholic University Press, 2014); and Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans* (Oxford University Press, 1993); Tec's book was made into a film in 2008 starring Daniel Craig and Liv Schreiber.

c. See Sarah Helm, *A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII* (Anchor Books, 2007) and Gordon Thomas, *Shadow Warriors of World War II: The Daring Women of the OSS and SOE* (Chicago Review Press, 2017), and the podcast *Invisible Women* written by Diane Greig.

Holocaust survivors and their relatives to create a series of tales of incredible bravery in the face of near certain death. Readers familiar with the efforts of the Special Operations Executive and the Office of Strategic Services already know that any operator, man, or woman, caught by the Nazis faced death. The difference in this case is that the men and women of the OSS and SOE were taught to disappear into the population of normal citizenry. In the case of these Jewish women, “disappearing” into the crowd first meant escaping the ghetto guards and then assuming an entirely different culture and language and sometimes engaging in anti-Semitic discussions on the streets and trains of Poland to accomplish their mission. One mistake meant immediate denunciation and certain death by torture or in the gas chambers of the camps in Poland.

This book is a series of stories offered in chronological order and describing in detail the courageous efforts of Jewish women in the ghettos of Poland. It is not about grand strategy, and Batalion makes no effort to explain the larger context of Poland, the resistance or even the larger organizational structure of the ZOB or other Jewish Resistance organizations. Instead, it is a heartfelt effort to ensure the names of these women are not lost in archives in Israel, the United States, or the United Kingdom. Few survived the war. Fewer still survived the arrival of the Red Army “liberators.” And even those who made it to Israel after the war were rarely acknowledged except, perhaps, by their family or their kibbutz. Batalion makes sure that their sacrifices are not forgotten.



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