THE HOLOCAUST AND HISTORY The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined

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The Armed Jewish Resistance in Eastern Europe

ITS UNIQUE CONDITIONS AND ITS RELATIONS WITH THE JEWISH COUNCILS (JUDENRÄTE) IN THE GHETTOS

The response of the Jews in the ghettos of Nazi-occupied Poland and the Soviet Union has yet to be fully explored. With few exceptions, it was mainly in these areas that ghettos were established and mainly there that Jewish armed underground organizations arose.

In order to understand the uniqueness of the Jewish armed resistance, it is necessary to compare its problems of organization and action with those facing the non-Jewish underground and to examine the aims of each.

The main aim of the latter movement was to prepare an underground force that would in due time stage an uprising against Germany and, with Allied help, liberate or participate in the liberation of their countries. All their other activities (sabotage, intelligence, partisan warfare, retaliatory acts) were of secondary consequence. They maintained clandestine contacts and received support, including arms, from their governments-in-exile. Their decisions about when and where to conduct operations of any sort, and especially when and where to start the uprisings, took into account the conditions prevailing under occupation. Among these were the price the local population would pay as a consequence of armed activities, as well as the overall strategic situation in the war. Their aims and activities were supported by large segments of the local populations.

This notion of an armed underground does not apply to the Soviet partisan movement. It did not evolve from the population under German occupation, but was, rather, a part of the Soviet army. Its initiators were individual soldiers or small units that, during the retreat of the Red Army in the first months of the war, had remained in occupied territories, or those who had escaped from prisoner-of-war camps. They later were joined by local people and by regular Soviet military units, NKVD units, or special groups organized by the Communist Party inside the Soviet Union, that parachuted in or otherwise crossed the front line in order to operate in the German rear. The higher staff and the command of this partisan movement remained behind Soviet lines. The partisans' activities were dictated by the Soviet army and its strategic needs without consideration for possible German retaliation against the local populations. The communist resistance movement in occupied Soviet cities does largely

correspond to the status of an armed underground. It is appropriate to examine when and under what conditions planned uprisings were to be carried out.

The largest and best organized underground in occupied Europe was the Polish "Armia Krajowa," which numbered approximately 300,000 members. A March 8, 1942, directive from Gen. Wladyslaw Sikorski, the prime minister of the Polish government-in-exile in London, to Gen. Stefan Rowecki, the commander of the Armia Krajowa inside occupied Poland, offers an overview:

The uprising in our country, in the rear of the German army, can be carried out only in case of full collapse and dispersal of the German forces. If sizeable German forces conduct an organized retreat through the country, an uprising will be impossible because it will have no chance of success.²

Rowecki's March 23, 1943, uprising plan, sent to Sikorski on March 22, 1943, confirmed that the "uprising will start when Germany's defeat, either by collapse on the front line, or from inside [Germany], is without doubt. [This] means when there appear clear and increasing signs of Germany's catastrophe." The underground knew that any attempt to stage an uprising against the German army at full strength would be drowned in a sea of Polish blood. Policy notwithstanding, substantial Polish partisan activity—so-called Operation Burza (tempest)—started in the spring of 1944, when the Soviet army reached the pre-September 1939 borders of Poland.

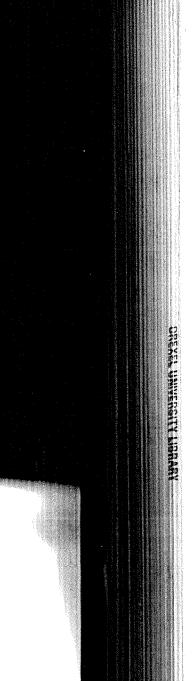
The Polish uprising in Warsaw broke out on August 1, 1944, when Soviet forces were one kilometer from the city, on the opposite bank of the Vistula River. Although both of these Polish military operations were conducted against Germany, their political thrust was against the Soviet Union. The government-in-exile in London and the Armia Krajowa, which was subordinate to the government in London, claimed that the eastern borders of Poland should be as they were before September 1, 1939, that is, western Byelorussia and western Ukraine were to remain part of Poland. However, Moscow regarded these areas as part of the Soviet Union. The aim of Operation Burza was to bring Armia Krajowa units to western Byelorussia and western Ukraine and then meet the Soviet army as established and operating units controlling the area and representing the exiled Polish government. On November 20, 1943, Bor-Komorowski, commander of the Armia Krajowa, ordered that the "Polish commander, meeting the regular Soviet army that enters our lands, . . . should come and present himself as the landlord of this area." 4

Similarly, the intention of the uprising in Warsaw on August 1, 1944, was that the capital of Poland would be liberated by the Polish people and not the Soviet army. Bor-Komorowski wrote:

The liberation of Warsaw from German rule by the Red Army without Polish participation would be stressed by Russia as proof that the Polish people are awaiting liberation only by Russia and want to build their future with Russian support, relinquishing their right to a free national existence.⁵

The policy of waiting until the Germans were on the verge of defeat before starting an uprising was adopted by all other underground organizations in Europe.

The uprising in Slovakia began in August 1944 when the Soviet army entered East Slovakia; the uprising in Prague began in May 1945, as Soviet and American



The situation of the Jewish armed underground was entirely different from that of its non-Jewish equivalents. The Jewish armed underground, in most of the ghettos, was the continuation of the political underground, which developed from the prewar Jewish political parties. Jews were a minority among the local population and received support neither from them nor the outside world.

In many places, part if not most of the local population collaborated with the Germans against the Jewish population or at least approved of German efforts. Jews were isolated in ghettos and camps, surrounded by walls, barbed wire, and armed guards. Therefore, from the very beginning the conditions for armed resistance were extremely adverse. Moreover, fear of German strength and of retaliation against the civilian population, which prevented the active and continuous struggle of the non-Jewish undergrounds until the moment of Germany's collapse, had still more terrible consequences for the Jews. The Jewish underground knew that even the smallest actions, or German discovery of arms-smuggling into the ghetto, could lead to the immediate execution of thousands of Jews and perhaps even to the liquidation of the ghetto. On the other hand, the Jewish armed underground could not afford to wait for ideal conditions to begin the active struggle against the Nazis. They could not wait for the German collapse and retreat, because the Jews were being systematically murdered while the Nazis were still at the peak of their power. To await German retreat and collapse would be to abandon the idea of armed resistance, because by the time of the collapse, there would be no more ghettos and no more Jews to stage the uprisings. Therefore, the timing of armed resistance and uprisings in the ghettos was not the result of a military evaluation of the situation, which the non-Jewish undergrounds could afford, but was dictated by the very fact that the Jews had nothing to lose.

The question remains, when did the Jews grasp that they were doomed to total destruction and that they had nothing to lose? The realization came only after the majority of the Jews had already been murdered—when in Warsaw, for example, there remained only fifty to sixty thousand Jews out of an earlier population of 450,000. This happened in Vilna (Vilnius) when only one-third of the sixty thousand Jews there remained alive. It happened in the ghettos of Kovno and Białystok after there were virtually no Jews left in the surrounding countryside and part of the ghetto population had been annihilated. Through ruse and secrecy the Germans succeeded in hiding from the Jews the real purpose of the deportations. As a consequence, the Jewish armed underground emerged when the majority of the Jews had already been murdered and only a portion remained in the ghettos. The Jewish masses, from whom the resistance organizations might have derived real strength, no longer existed. This also distinguishes the situation from that of the non-Jewish armed underground, which drew its strength from an essentially intact population and social infrastructure.

In the adverse conditions under which the Jewish underground had to act while the Germans were strong and the Allies far away, the uprisings had a priori, no chance of even partial success. The organizers had no means for rescuing the Jews in the ghetto or even to save themselves.

Specifically, the uprisings in the ghettos of Warsaw, Białystok, and Vilna, and acts of resistance in the ghettos of other cities, took place on the eve of their liquidation, when the Soviet army was hundreds of kilometers to the east. In that situation, the Jewish fighters and their leaders knew that most of them would fall.

This begs the question of the aim of the uprisings. One of the answers reflected in the surviving underground documents is revenge. As the January 21, 1942, agreement of the underground groups to establish the United Partisan Organization (F.P.O.) in the Vilna Ghetto stated, "Resistance is a national act, the struggle of the people for their honor."6 Another such document from the same city declares, "Better to fall with honor in the ghetto than to be led like sheep to Ponary." A February 1943 meeting of members of the Zionist "Chalutz" movement in Białystok recorded this sentiment: "Only one thing remains for us, . . . to consider the ghetto our Musa Dagh, to write in history a proud chapter of Jewish Bialystok and of our movement."8 A leader of the Jewish armed underground in Kraków proclaimed, "The Jewish fighters are fighting for three lines in history."9 Mordechai Anielewicz, Warsaw Ghetto revolt commander, wrote in a letter during the fighting, "The dream of my life has risen to become fact. Self-defense in the ghetto will have been a reality, Jewish armed resistance and revenge are facts. I have been a witness to the magnificent, heroic fighting of Jewish men in battle."10 The desire to fall fighting and not in the gas chambers was a defining characteristic of the Jewish armed underground. Without hope of liberation or even the option of continued slavery, the Jews fought to choose the way they would die; the non-Jews fought for a way to live.

Partisan warfare is not within the scope of this examination but, given the situation described above, it is necessary to ask why the Jews stayed in ghettos, why they did not leave for the forests. There are a number of answers, some based on ideological factors and some on practicalities. Most of the armed underground organizations in the ghettos were dominated by Zionist youth movements. From their ideological point of view, their place was with their fellow Jews, was to share their fate until the last moment and to rise up and fight for the honor of the Jewish people if and when the conditions were ripe for it. A departure to the forest was to come only after an uprising in the ghetto. A second reason was the lack, in some places, of sizeable forests into which they could escape and take up partisan warfare.

In the vicinity of Warsaw, Kraków, and other areas there were no such forests. But even in places where there were, the partisans could operate and survive only when they had support from the local population. Rarely did Jews find such support. On the contrary, in many places the local population acted against the Jews, for antisemitic reasons or out of fear of German reprisals. The Jews could operate in the forest only if there was a non-Jewish partisan movement that was ready to accept Jews into its ranks. This was the case only in the areas where Soviet partisans were active, and only at a later stage, not earlier than the second half of 1942, by which time most of the ghettos and their inhabitants had been destroyed. In the areas where Polish partisans dominated the forests, the Jews, with few exceptions, could not survive. Nevertheless, for ideological reasons in the Mińsk Ghetto, where the underground was dominated by communists, and for practical reasons in the Kovno Ghetto, the aim

of the Jewish undergrounds from the very beginning was to escape to the forests and participate in partisan warfare and not to stage uprisings inside the ghetto.

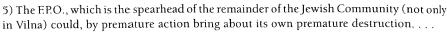
The armed underground came into being in Kovno at a late stage. There were already Soviet partisans in the forests as well as contact between the underground and the partisans. The chances of continued fighting and survival were better in the forests. New documents recently received from former Soviet archives confirm that Jewish armed resistance took place on a much larger scale than is represented in previously published historical works. There were many Jews among the partisans in the more eastern districts of the German occupied territories. Among lists of partisans found in the Archives of the Central Staff of the Soviet Partisans in Moscow and in the Republican Archives of Ukraine and Byelorussia, there are names of several thousand Jewish fighters. Some of them were commanders of partisan brigades and smaller units, among them officers of the Soviet army who remained in the German rear. Jews, most of whom perished, were also among the leaders and members of the undergrounds of Odessa, Kiev, Minsk, and other cities.

Let us turn now to the relations between the Jewish armed underground and Judenräte. The question is whether the idea of armed resistance and uprisings in the ghetto was the antithesis of or an alternative to the Judenräte's "work for survival" policy, or whether the leaders of the undergrounds may be perceived as an alternative to the official Jewish Councils. Typical Judenräte policy in the ghettos was based on an assumption that the German war economy and the local German authorities needed the remaining Jews as a work force, especially when, at the end of 1941, it became clear that Germany faced a prolonged war. Therefore, if ghetto inhabitants could prove that they were productive, they would prolong their existence, increase their chances of survival, and maybe even live to see the day of liberation.

The hope to keep the inhabitants of the ghetto alive was not opposed by the Jewish underground. On the contrary, the existence of the ghetto enabled the resisters to organize themselves: the longer the ghetto was maintained, the more time they had to plan, to acquire arms, and the like. There were no Jewish underground organizations in places where the Jews were murdered before the establishment of the ghettos, nor where the ghettos were liquidated and their inhabitants murdered a short time after their establishment. It was only in ghettos the Germans left standing because of the need for Jewish labor that underground organizations came into being. The fact that the underground organizations timed the uprisings to coincide with the final liquidation of the ghettos, when the Judenräte's policy of prolonging the existence of the ghettos had ended, proves that the Jewish armed underground tacitly approved of the Judenräte's policy of survival through work. This is what happened in Warsaw, Białystok, Vilna, and other ghettos. For example, in the April 4, 1943, "Comments of the Program" of the Vilna underground, we find the following articles:

¹⁾ The EP.O. will move out into battle when the existence of the ghetto as a whole is threatened. . . .

⁴⁾ The EPO., however, is not a large military force that can enter into a battle of equals with the enemy. It cannot and will not come out in defense of each individual Jewish life.



6) This kind of action would be quixotic, a suicidal tactic. Furthermore, Jews might condemn us as provocateurs, and this might cause us to fight against our own brethren.

8) The EP.O. will move out in such an action when it is estimated that the beginning of the end has come. 11

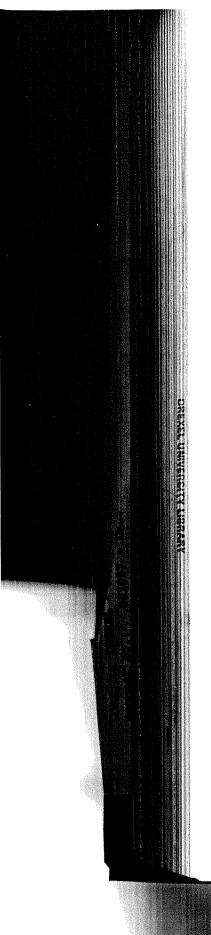
On the other hand, most of the Judenräte did not in principle oppose the existence of an armed underground inside the ghetto. Nor were they against staging an uprising at the time of the final liquidation of the ghettos, when it would be clear that the Jews were being taken to their deaths. In many ghettos there were some contacts and an exchange of ideas between the underground leadership and that of the Judenräte.

Specifically, in the Kovno, Białystok, and Mińsk Ghettos which, with the exception of Warsaw and Vilna, had the strongest Jewish undergrounds, the resistance organizations even enjoyed support from the Judenräte. The heads of these councils, Elhanan Elkes in Kovno and Ephraim Barasz in Białystok, were in close contact with the leaders of the underground and had good relations with them until the final liquidation of the ghettos.

In March 1942, the Germans discovered that there was a Jewish underground organization in the Mińsk Ghetto and a communist underground outside the ghetto, and that the Judenrat, headed by Ilia Mushkin, was supporting the two organizations with medicine, clothes, and the despatch of people into the forests to conduct partisan warfare. Consequently, the Germans arrested and executed Mushkin along with the commander of the ghetto police, Ziama Serebrianski. The second chairman of the Judenrat, Moshe Joffe, and the second commander of the ghetto police, Blumenshtok, suffered similar fates. They were executed during the big "Aktion" of July 1942 and accused of inciting the Jews to oppose German orders during that action.¹²

Relations between the underground and the Judenräte were not always ideal. There were contradictions and conflicts, some acute. These occurred when and where the activity of a particular underground was perceived as jeopardizing the existence of a ghetto. The perception of a threat might arise solely within the Judenräte, or it might be the result of a formal warning by the German authorities when the latter discovered that Jews were purchasing and smuggling arms into the ghetto, or when they learned that Jews from the ghetto were escaping to the partisans. As long as the acquisition of arms remained undiscovered by the Germans, the Judenräte did not interfere.

The most conspicuous example of this relationship is that between Jacob Gens's Vilna Judenrat and the underground there. In the spring of 1943 the Germans liquidated some small ghettos that still survived in the eastern part of the General Commissariat Lithuania; several thousand inhabitants were murdered. At that time the partisans became more active in the areas of west Byelorussia, close to Vilna. These two developments caused an increase of underground activity in the Vilna Ghetto, which included arms smuggling and the escape of young people to the forests to join the partisans. The Gestapo discovered these activities and warned Gens of



terrible consequences for the ghetto inhabitants should this continue. Gens convened a meeting of leaders of the labor brigades and members of the police and told them:

A few days ago I was called to the Gestapo and the talk with the commander of the SD ["Sicherheitsdienst," or Security Service] there was about the revolvers. I may tell you that he is not at all stupid. He said to me: "From an economic point of view the ghetto is very valuable, but if you are going to take foolish risks and if there is any question of security, I will wipe you out. And even if you get 30, 40, or 50 guns, you will not be able to save yourselves and will only bring on your disaster faster." 13

At the end of June 1943, when a group of people, including some police patrolmen and even some of officer rank left the ghetto for the forests, Gens told the leaders of the working groups:

We are faced with the question of leaving for the forest.... Why should I not go? Because the question now arises 1 or 20,000! The ghetto exists by virtue of 2,500 strong young men. The rest dance around them.... Just imagine if 500 men went out, what would happen then?... I put myself in Neugebauer's [commander of the SD] place.... I would wipe out the entire ghetto, because a man must be an idiot to allow a nest of partisans to develop under his nose.... My interest is to preserve a loyal ghetto so long as it can exist. 14

Gens was convinced, and to a large extent it was true, that the ghetto (including its women, children, and elderly) existed because it served the Germans as a source of labor. Therefore, if the younger men, who were the main source of that labor, were to leave the ghetto, it would be liquidated. Against this background there were some confrontations between ghetto police and the underground fighters within the ghetto.

A unique event that sheds light on the intricate and crucial relations between the Judenräte and the underground was the Yitzhak Vitenberg affair in the Vilna Ghetto in mid July 1943. Vitenberg was the commander of the F.P.O. and simultaneously a member of the underground committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party outside the ghetto. The German Security Police uncovered this committee and arrested its members. Their investigation revealed that Vitenberg was a member of the committee. The Germans demanded from Gens that Vitenberg be surrendered as a member of the non-Jewish communist underground. The Germans did not know about the F.P.O. and Vitenberg's role as its commander. Vitenberg was arrested by the Jewish police in the ghetto, but he escaped and went into hiding. The F.P.O. refused to hand over Vitenberg. The Germans insisted—either Vitenberg or liquidation of the ghetto. The people of the ghetto supported Gens's demand to surrender Vitenberg. The F.P.O. faced a situation in which they would have to fight the Jews of the ghetto if they wanted to defend Vitenberg. The result was that the F.P.O. and Vitenberg decided that he would be surrendered in order not to endanger the entire ghetto. Vitenberg later committed suicide in a German prison. 15

In some of the ghettos where small numbers of Jews vital for the war economy still remained after the big extermination action with its transfers to labor or concentration camps, the Germans liquidated the Judenräte. The Germans did not need councils that were composed of Jews who, with few exceptions, both collectively and individually did their best to help the ghetto population in their struggle for survival. In place of the Judenräte the Germans appointed leadership bodies, called by a variety of names, composed mainly of people ready to carry out any German order. These groups were ready to combat the Jewish underground, and even turn over some of its members. In many cases they were not local Jews but refugees, strangers who had recently arrived in the ghetto.

In the ghetto of Mińsk, where the extermination action at the end of July 1942 left only approximately nine thousand Jews out of the nearly 100,000 who had been living there the previous year, the Germans abolished the Judenräte and appointed a "ghetto directorate" with a police department. The groups were called "Operativniki" (Operation Groups) by the ghetto Jews. After the successive execution of the two Judenrat chairmen who had cooperated with the underground, the Germans finally found a group of collaborators, headed by Epshtein, a refugee from Poland. This group of Jews handed over underground members who planned to escape into the forests. In reprisal for their collaboration, some of the Operativniki were caught and executed by the partisans. ¹⁶

Similarly, in Kraków during the action of June 1942, when six thousand Jews were sent to the Belzec death camp, the twenty-four-member Judenrat was liquidated and its leaders sent with the same transports. On June 3 the Germans appointed a new seven-man leadership body called the Commissariat. It was headed by David Gutter, who was not from Kraków and who was ready to do everything the Germans demanded. The Jewish police in the ghetto tracked down underground members and arrested some of them. The hostile attitude this action exemplified was one of the main reasons why the two underground groups there, Hechalutz Halochem and Iskra, decided to transfer their base to the city outside the ghetto. From there they carried out their fighting activities, including the famous attack on the Ziganeria, the German officers' coffeehouse, on December 22, 1942.¹⁷

But the Operativniki in Mińsk and the Commissariat in Kraców were not and should not be considered Judenräte. They were not the Jewish leadership that enjoyed authority and respect among the ghetto inhabitants. They were criminals ready to do anything in order to save their own lives.

The situation in the Warsaw Ghetto differed from that in other places. There the Judenrat, exercising authority as a Jewish leadership institution, existed from the beginning of October 1939 and ceased to exist with Adam Czerniakow's suicide and the big Aktion of July–September 1942, when about 300,000 Jews were deported, most to the Treblinka death camp, leaving around fifty-five thousand people in the ghetto. During Czerniakow's chairmanship of the Judenrat there was no armed underground in the ghetto, and therefore one cannot examine relations between the two. The formal leadership institution that came into being after Czerniakow's suicide was headed by Mark Lichtenbaum, who had virtually no influence in the ghetto and does not even deserve to be considered a Judenrat representative. The Jewish police and the Jewish managers of the workshops wielded some authority, under strict supervision of the SS, but were not a formal Judenrat.

As time passed, the armed underground, which came into being as a force after

When, on April 19, 1943, the Germans ordered the inhabitants of the ghetto to appear for deportation, the Jews responded instead to the call of the underground to disobey. Some went into hiding and some joined the uprising. They were convinced that the real purpose of the deportation was to send Jews to the gas chambers of Treblinka, as had happened from July to September 1942. They also believed that the strength of the underground was greater than it in fact was, and they hoped that resistance would force the Germans to stop the planned deportation and liquidation of the ghetto, as in January. This earlier experience was the main reason why the Warsaw uprising received widespread popular support, in contrast to the lack of response to calls for uprisings in the ghettos of Białystok in August 1943 and Vilna in September 1943. In those two cities authoritative Judenräte still functioned, which convinced many of the Jews, and it was partly true, that the deportations at that time were to labor camps and not to a certain death.

In summary then, as a rule the Judenräte were neither collaborators nor blind tools in the hands of the German authorities. Neither did the councils assist the Nazis in combating the underground movements. The trend in historiography that identifies the Judenräte as collaborationist institutions is mistaken. First, on two major issues there were no differences of opinion between the Judenräte and the Jewish armed underground in the ghettos: the latter did not oppose the main policy of the Judenräte in prolonging the existence of the ghettos for as long as possible by making the ghetto economically useful to the Germans. Therefore, the time of the uprisings was fixed (and they actually took place in Warsaw, Vilna, and Białystok) when the Germans began the final liquidation of the ghettos. The councils, for their part, did not object to the idea that the underground would rise up and fight when the ghettos were about to be liquidated. When the inhabitants were to be sent to the death camps, it was understood there would be nothing more to lose.

Second, for ideological and practical reasons the Judenräte did not have, did not build, and did not intend to build the tools of force to struggle against the armed Jewish underground.

Third, the clashes between the Judenräte and the underground occurred only in cases in which underground activities, such as smuggling arms into the ghetto or escape to the partisans, endangered the Judenräte's policy of maintaining the existence of the ghettos.

Fourth, the tragedy of this period was that neither the policy of the Judenräte nor that of the underground organizations could affect the ultimate survival of the Jewish masses in the ghettos. Germany's strength and policy were the dominant factors. The result was that some 6,000,000 Jewish people were murdered by Nazi Germany and its collaborators.

NOTES

1. Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, Armja Podziemna (London, 1989), p. 176, and Shmuel Krakowski, Lechima Yehudit B'Polin neged Hanatzim (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 21.

2. Armja Krajowa Dokumentach, vol. 2 (London, 1973), p. 203; Bor-Komorowski, Armja Podziemna, pp. 170–71.

3. Armja Krajowa, p. 329.

4. Bor-Komorowski, Armja Podziemna, p. 174.

5. Ibid., p. 203.

6. Yitzhak Arad, Ghetto in Flames (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 236.

7. Lucy S. Dawidowicz, A Holocaust Reader (New York, 1976), p. 335.

- 8. Ibid., p. 349. Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. The author, an Austrian Jew, wrote in this historical novel, published in 1933, about the heroic resistance of the Armenians during the massacres carried out by Turkey in 1915. Musa Dagh is a mountain in eastern Turkey.
 - 9. Israel Gutman, ed., Encyclopedia of the Holocaust, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1990), p. 873.
- 10. Y. Arad, Y. Gutman, and A. Margaliot, eds., Documents on the Holocaust (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 315-16.

11. Ibid., pp. 435–36.

12. Shalom Cholawski, Besufat Hakilayon (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 116–19, 132, 152, 173.

13. Arad et al., eds., Documents, p. 453.

14. Arad, Ghetto in Flames, p. 384. SS-Obersturmführer Neugebauer commanded the security police and SD in Vilna.

15. Îbid., pp. 387-95.

16. Cholawski, Besufat Hakilayon, pp. 133-34.

- 17. Yael Peled, Krakov Hayehudit: 1939–1943 (Ghetto Fighters' House, 1993), pp. 187–88, 197.
- 18. Yisrael Gutman, Yehudey Varsha: 1939–1943 (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 230–31, 319–23, 335–37.