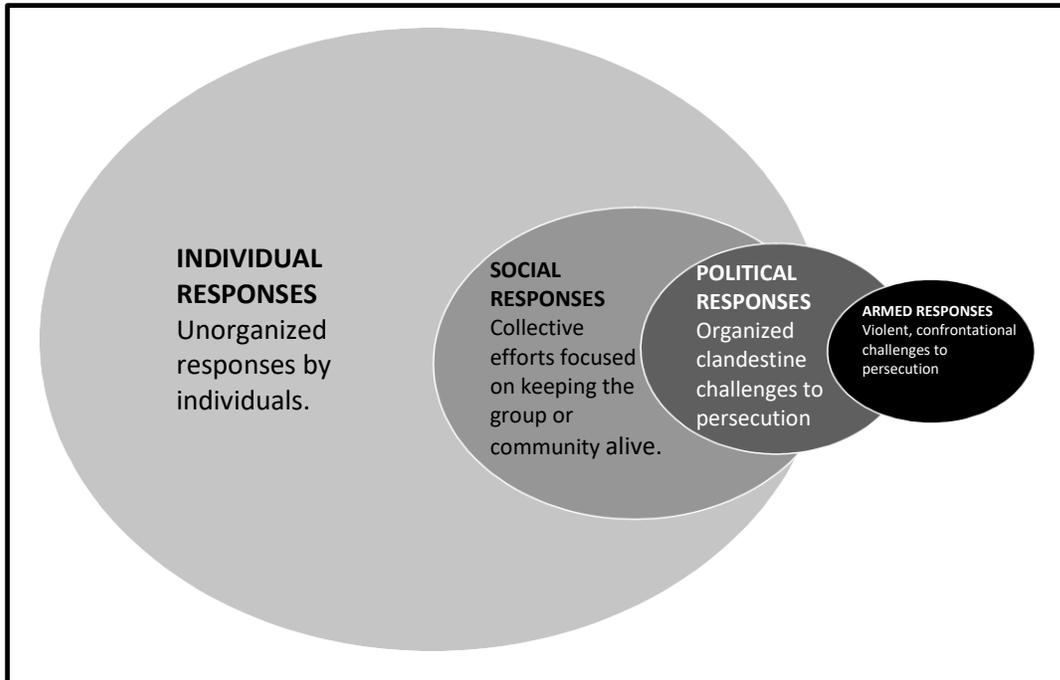


Teaching Jewish Responses to the Holocaust with Primary Sources

Jewish responses to the Holocaust are best described as “choiceless choices.” Jews were put in positions to make judgements and decisions without having real, viable alternatives to their situation. Despite this, many decisions were made and responses generally fell into the categories below.



This graphic suggests the proportional use of various types of Jewish responses to Nazi persecution.

A Note to Teachers:

The ability of Jews to effectively resist Nazi persecution and murder was impinged by strategies the Nazis used to prevent Jewish resistance and deter the assistance of non-Jewish neighbors. Despite many obstacles, Jews found creative ways to preserve individual lives, human dignity, and Jewish culture. Educators who want more information on this topic before teaching this lesson might find the following resources helpful:

- Yad Vashem video aligned with Echoes & Reflections: “Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust.” (15:29 minutes.) https://youtu.be/8GzV4Tbfhuo?si=C_XYcrEOQvblAyjN
- ADL. “Resistance During the Holocaust.” (This article includes info on the efforts of non-Jews.) <https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/assets/pdf/education-outreach/Resistance-During-the-Holocaust-NYLM-Guide.pdf>
- USHMM. Holocaust Encyclopedia. “Jewish Resistance.” <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-resistance>
- USHMM. Holocaust Encyclopedia. “Resistance in the Smaller Ghettos of Eastern Europe.” <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/resistance-in-the-smaller-ghettos-of-eastern-europe>

Please contact MCHE if you would like additional information or assistance.

Preparation:

Divide your students as evenly as possible into four groups. Assign each group one of the following readings, taking the reading skills of the students into consideration. Provide each student a copy of the **Jewish Responses Worksheet**. This worksheet has been designed for digital use; it will expand as students add their responses. If you prefer that students handwrite their notes, please add space for answers before making print copies.

- *Scroll of Agony* by Chaim Kaplan. Diary. Pages 242-245.
- *Smoke Over Birkenau* by Liana Millu. Personal narrative. Pages 13-19.
- “Bialystock Resistance Debate” in *Documents on the Holocaust* edited by Yitzhak Arad and others. Anthology of primary sources. Pages 296-301.
- *Five Chimneys* by Olga Lengyl. Personal narrative. Pages 11-15.

The texts listed above are available in the MCHE Library. Contact us if you need help obtaining these excerpts.

Process—Step One:

Briefly provide students with descriptions of the categories of Jewish responses to Nazi persecution and murder shown on the graphic above and listed in order from most common to least common below:

- Individual – Unorganized responses by individuals.
- Social – Collective efforts focused on keeping the community or group alive.
- Political – Organized clandestine challenges to persecution.
- Armed – Violent, confrontational challenges to persecution.

It is not necessary to give many examples for each category of Jewish response during this brief content lesson. Students will have opportunities to discuss Jewish responses described in the texts, how they ought to be classified, and why.

Process—Step Two:

Ask students to read their assigned excerpts and answer the corresponding questions on the student worksheet. (This portion of the work may be assigned as homework.)

Process—Step Three:

Allow students to meet in homogenous groups to discuss the excerpts they read and the notes they made on the Student Worksheet.

Process—Step Four:

Convene the whole class. Ask each group to share details and important observations about their assigned excerpt. Students should complete notes for the excerpts they were not originally assigned.

The teacher might lead the class in an over-arching discussion of these or similar ideas:

- What actions did Jews take when confronted with persecution and murder?
- Who was affected by these actions? How? Who was helped? Was anyone harmed?
- How should these actions be classified? Why do you think so?
- Were these responses effective in saving Jewish lives and Jewish culture?
- How are you affected today, reading about these actions by Jews who lived many years ago?