



Educator's Guide

Defiance in the Face of Death – An Uprising in Auschwitz

Auschwitz was built to extinguish resistance: barbed wire, armed guards, industrialized murder. No one was meant to fight back, let alone survive.

In 1944, Jewish prisoners defied that design. Gunpowder was smuggled in, piece by piece. Knives were forged from scraps. A crematorium burned, guards panicked, and order briefly collapsed. The revolt failed — but it stands as undeniable proof of Jewish resistance at Auschwitz.

Link to [video](#).

Essential Questions

1. How should history remember acts of resistance that did not change the larger system but asserted human dignity?
2. In what ways does studying the Sonderkommando uprising complicate common understandings of victimhood and resistance during the Holocaust?
3. In what ways can small, secret acts be considered forms of moral courage?

Big Ideas

1. Acts of defiance have meaning beyond their immediate success or failure, shaping memory and legacy.
2. Human dignity persists even under dehumanizing conditions.
3. Resistance can take many forms.



Review Questions

1. What was the primary role of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz?
 - a. They were Nazi officers enforcing camp rules.
 - b. They escorted prisoners to the gas chambers and disposed of bodies.**
 - c. They smuggled information out to the Allies.
 - d. They ran the munitions factories.

2. Who was Rosa Robota?
 - a. A Polish partisan leader outside the camp
 - b. A young Jewish woman who organized the smuggling of gunpowder to the Sonderkommando**
 - c. A Nazi officer who oversaw the crematoria
 - d. A survivor who documented the uprising after liberation

3. What was the immediate goal of the Sonderkommando uprising?
 - a. To destroy the crematoria and cut the fences, allowing prisoners to escape**
 - b. To liberate the entire Auschwitz camp
 - c. To assassinate the Nazi leaders in Berlin
 - d. To delay the arrival of new prisoners

4. How did the Sonderkommando obtain weapons for the uprising?
 - a. They stole them from the SS arsenal.
 - b. They bought them from other prisoners.
 - c. They forged knives and bayonets from confiscated items and used smuggled gunpowder.**
 - d. They received guns from the Red Army.

5. What role did the Polish Underground play in the uprising?
 - a. They led the revolt inside the camp.
 - b. They smuggled gunpowder and contraband into the camp and helped transmit evidence to the outside world.**
 - c. They trained the prisoners in combat.
 - d. They transported prisoners to the Soviet front.



6. Which crematorium was destroyed during the Sonderkommando uprising?
 - a. Crematorium I
 - b. Crematorium II
 - c. Crematorium III
 - d. Crematorium IV**

7. Why is the Sonderkommando uprising historically significant, even though most participants did not survive?
 - a. It halted the extermination process entirely.
 - b. It demonstrated courage, defiance, and the persistence of human dignity under unimaginable conditions.**
 - c. It led directly to the liberation of Auschwitz.
 - d. It was widely publicized by Nazi propaganda.

Discussion Questions

1. Defiance or futility?

The Sonderkommando knew they were outnumbered, outgunned, and at a severe disadvantage. Yet, they chose to take on the Nazis anyway, in the most infamous of death camps, Auschwitz.

- Was the Sonderkommando revolt a meaningful act of resistance, or did it risk lives with little chance of tangible impact?
- Can the moral victory of defiance justify the probable loss of life?

2. Survival or sacrifice?

The Sonderkommando knew the risks involved, mainly death.

- Given the near certainty of death, was the choice to revolt primarily about moral courage and agency rather than survival?
- What happens if the risks, including death, will impact others? Is there a moral difference?

**3. External advice or autonomy?**

The Polish Underground criticized the Sonderkommando for not waiting for the Red Army.

- Was it reasonable for outsiders to judge the prisoners' timing and decisions, or was the revolt justified because the prisoners could not rely on external rescue?

4. Secrecy or solidarity?

In order to pull off such a plan, the Sonderkommando only included those who needed to know about it – people who could help gather supplies and weaponry.

- Did the secrecy required to plan the uprising strengthen the prisoners' chances of success, or did it limit the ability to involve more people who might have produced a greater impact?

Learning Activities

1. [Lesson plan](#)**2. Ethical debate: Defiance vs. survival**

Students will debate whether the uprising was worth it, despite prior knowledge of the mostly inevitable outcome.

- Divide students into two groups. One argues that the revolt was a justified act of defiance, even with near-certain death. The other argues that the revolt was futile and put lives at risk unnecessarily.

3. Timeline construction: Planning the uprising

Students will re-create the series of events of the uprising from the initial planning to its tragic ending. This can be done in small groups or together as a class.

- Give students slips of paper with the different moments from the uprising [linked here](#).



- OR, to make this more challenging, students should not be given anything in advance and should create 5-10 moments on the timeline on their own.

Students can share why each moment was included.

4. Creative writing

Students will write a diary entry from the point of view of a Sonderkommando or Rosa Roboto. They should imagine the thoughts of the resistance members before the revolt, focusing on fear, hope, moral conflict, and defiance.

5. Compare & contrast

This hidden uprising is not the only form of resistance from Jews during the Holocaust. Using other sources, students can research and then compare and contrast other forms of uprisings and defiance. They can specifically focus on a comparison of goals, methods, risks, and outcomes using this link [here](#).

- [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#)
- [The Bielski Partisans](#)
- [Jewish Partisans](#)

6. Primary source study

In small groups, students will receive [excerpts](#) from Sonderkommando testimonies (e.g., buried writings, quotes from Eliezer Eisenschmidt).

- Guide students through a short model analysis: Who wrote the excerpt? Why? What emotions or intentions are evident?
- Students will analyze excerpts, noting themes of hope, defiance, fear, or moral conflict.
- For each, they will respond in writing:
 - What does this source reveal about daily life and choices at Auschwitz?
 - How do prisoners express agency even in extreme circumstances?



7. Give your students our [Kahoot!](#)

Reflection Questions

1. Meaning of resistance

Sometimes the value of resistance is not in the outcome, but in what it represents: courage, defiance, and a refusal to be dehumanized. Think about why symbolic actions matter in history.

- Have you ever been in a situation that seemed bleak, but you felt the desire to resist anyway?
- How does this type of resistance challenge our usual ideas of “success”?

2. First-hand accounts

After reading first-hand testimonies and accounts of Sonderkommando, linked [here](#), think about whether your understanding of what it means to resist under extreme conditions has changed. If it has, what further understanding do you now have?

Students should respond in writing (3-5 sentences) or in a shared discussion.

3. Human dignity under oppression

The prisoners faced impossible conditions. Consider how choosing to act, even at great personal risk, can affirm one’s humanity.

- What lesson can you learn from the value of fighting to maintain courage and dignity in a situation designed to strip people of both?
- Can you think of any recent examples in human history which demonstrate the value of human dignity in the face of great harm?

4. Individual vs. collective impact

Acts of resistance rarely affect only the person taking action; they can also place others in danger. When considering defiance, how should we weigh the potential benefits against the very real risks?

- Would you have been able to resist if doing so put both your life and the lives of others in mortal danger?



- And how should we judge those who chose to risk everything—even when others might suffer as a result—because their actions inspired hope and shaped historical memory?

5. Legacy and memory

Historical memory is shaped by more than victories. Consider how stories of courage and defiance can teach values like hope and moral strength.

- Why is it important to learn about and remember acts of resistance that did not succeed in stopping the Holocaust?
- What specific lessons do they offer to both current and future generations?

6. Expanding the idea of resistance

Resistance isn't only physical. Think about ways people fight oppression through survival, documentation, helping others, or preserving culture (or watch [this Unpacked video](#) on Resistance during the Holocaust).

- If you were placed in a situation where open rebellion was impossible, what small or quiet actions might you consider acts of resistance?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:

- [Remembering the Holocaust](#) (collection)
- [Faces of the Holocaust Collection](#) (collection)
- [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#) (video)
- [The Escape Artist of Auschwitz](#) (video)
- [Righteous Among the Nations Collection](#) (collection)
- [The Boxer who Fought for his Life at Auschwitz](#) (video)

2. The National World War II Museum, [The Sonderkommando Uprising](#)

This site offers a summary of the Sonderkommandos' job and moment of resistance.



- 3.** United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Prisoner Revolt at Auschwitz-Birkenau](#)
A brief summary of the revolt, highlighting the actions of women.
- 4.** United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#)
This site offers a summary of the uprising of Jews in the Warsaw ghetto.
- 5.** United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [The Bielski Partisans](#)
This site offers a summary of one of the most significant resistance groups, the Bielski Partisans.
- 6.** United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, [Jewish Partisans](#)
This site offers information about Jewish partisans who also resisted the Nazi regime.
- 7.** Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, [The Revolt of Sonderkommando Prisoners](#)
This site offers a transcript of a 48-minute podcast episode marking the uprising of the Sonderkommandos.