The role of Jewish women as primary organizers of the Minsk Ghetto resistance during the World War II German occupation

Phillip Alloy

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A Thesis

Entitled

The Role of Jewish Women as Primary Organizers of the
Minsk Ghetto Resistance During the World War II German Occupation

by

Phillip Alloy

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree in History

Dr. Michael Jakobson, Committee Chair

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The University of Toledo
August 2013
An Abstract of

The Role of Jewish Women as Primary Organizers of the Minsk Ghetto Resistance During the World War II German Occupation

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It is a common belief the Jewish population of Europe did little to resist the genocide perpetrated by Nazi Germany. However, there were many instances of armed resistance in both city ghettos and concentration camps. The most well-known ghetto uprisings took place in Vilna, Lithuania, and Warsaw, Poland. In 1943 Jewish prisoners staged rebellions in Treblinka and Sobibor camps, destroying portions of the facilities and managing short-lived escapes. Due to lack of outside support, each of these actions—ghetto and concentration camp—was doomed from the initial stages, and none had any long term success.

Still, these were not the only examples of wartime Jewish resistance. Starting shortly after the city of Minsk, Byelorussia, was occupied by German forces, a resistance organization arose from within the Jewish ghetto in that city. Until the fall of the Soviet Union, and access to archival documents and individuals living in that area, this aspect of wartime Jewish resistance had evidenced little study. More recently, access to post-Soviet information sources has allowed for a better understanding of the depth of the Minsk
ghetto resistance. Of particular interest in the Minsk Jewish resistance is its apparent reliance upon women for major support within the organizational makeup and at the uppermost levels of the ghetto underground command structure. This paper will study the contribution of Jewish women to the Minsk ghetto resistance. Primary resource material has been obtained from first-person published accounts of the resistance, wartime archival material, and direct interviews with Jewish women and men active in the partisan and underground movement.
This paper is dedicated to my family: parents Irving and Camille Alloy, wife Valerie, and daughter Sara, whose love, support, and encouragement allowed for the most positive outcome of this research.

A very special dedication to my grandfather Samuel Lawrence Alloy, zikhrono livrakha, who, when he immigrated to America from Czarist Russia in 1910, carried with him a tiny photograph showing three generations of his family. From the time I first saw that image as a young boy, I dreamed of one day visiting that faraway land. That picture served as the original inspiration for what has become this research.
Acknowledgments

In Belarus: My grateful appreciation to Sergey Makarevich whose interest in my pursuit helped lay the foundation for this research. Sergey is the lynchpin upon which all subsequent work evolved and has my deepest gratitude. Thanks to Tamara Durbin for use of her flat as a base of operations during three trips to Minsk. To Tatiana Romanovich who acted as guide and interpreter a *spasibo bol’shoy*. Mikhail Treister granted my first interview and provided contacts to women and men, many of whom had never spoken to an outsider about their experiences. Felicks Lipskii, son of resistance leader Roza Lipskaia, took me to sites of the Minsk ghetto, made me aware of the depth of the Jewish resistance, and encouraged me to carry the story to new generations to discover.

In the U.S.: At the University of Toledo: Dr. Michael Jakobson and Dr. Karen Rhoda. Early in my time at UT, Dr. Rhoda recognized I had the ability to succeed at high levels of academia and encouraged my entry in the Honors College and beyond. Dr. Rhoda is one of those educators who change lives and life’s possibilities. Dr. Michael Jakobson mentored and advised me throughout graduate school and during the “sabbatical” between this paper’s start and finish; I owe him a great depth of gratitude.

My sister, Jan Alloy, for editing my writing and directing it into a cohesive paper.

Galina Dashevsky and Sonia Mittleman for translations, photographs, and key historical background information just when they were needed the most.

To my friend Jack Ceboka, who provided diversion at times of writer’s block.
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Preface

This paper is an outgrowth of a research paper originally presented at the Eleventh National Conference on Undergraduate Research. That paper, entitled “Jewish resistance in the Nazi occupation of Lithuania and Belarus during World War II,” focused on a wider view of Jewish citizenry as active participants in fighting and members of partisan units defending against the Nazi invasion.

Byelorussia (the present-day country of Belarus) was ravaged by fighting during the 1941-1944 World War II German occupation. Early on, the Nazis established a Jewish ghetto in the Byelorussian capital city of Minsk for subjugation and, ultimately, extermination of Jews. Within the ghetto, a small cadre organized an underground group to resist the Germans and save as many Jews as possible. While men were initiators of the underground organization, historical evidence appears to point to women as having played important positions in the leadership and support roles of the ghetto resistance. Women’s roles as part of the ghetto underground appear to have had little study, and only since the 1989 dissolution of the Soviet Union has access to archival information allowed for more direct research into their participation. The activity of the ghetto underground has not been broadly studied in the west and, in particular, in the English-language literature. Women’s role in the Minsk resistance, especially the role of Jewish women, appears to be understudied.
Men involved in the Minsk Jewish underground appear in a wide range of published historical documentation. Jewish women’s roles have not been so well documented. In previous work on the subject of Russia’s Jewish partisans and resistance, this researcher noted that first-person interviews and archival primary resource material show women in more important positions, in both leadership and support roles, than appears in currently available historical literature.

To better analyze the role of women in the Minsk Jewish ghetto resistance, this thesis draws upon three resource areas: archival resource documentation consisting primarily of written accounts of wartime activity, first-person videotape interviews with Jewish men and women participants in the ghetto underground and partisan resistance, and published secondary resource historical literature accounts.

Research conducted in Belarusian archives, combined with first-person statements from former members of the Jewish resistance, indicates that women played a crucial part in primary ghetto resistance during the German occupation. This paper looks to further a chapter in history that is only now getting the exposure on a nearly unknown movement in Russian, Jewish, World War II, and women’s history.
Chapter 1

Invasion, Occupation, and Atrocities Against Jews

*Citizens of the Soviet Union: The Soviet Government and its head, Comrade Stalin, have authorized me to make the following statement: Today at 4 o'clock a.m., without any claims having been presented to the Soviet Union, without a declaration of war, German troops attacked our country, attacked our borders at many points and bombed from their airplanes our cities: Zhitomir, Kiev, Sevastopol, Kaunas and some others, killing and wounding over two hundred persons* (Molotov 1941, Modern History Sourcebook).

With these words, broadcast by radio on June 22, 1941, Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union Vyacheslav Molotov announced to that country’s populace the invasion by the forces of Nazi Germany. This attack was in defiance to, and direct opposition of, the terms of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact; Molotov himself had been a principle negotiator and signatory on behalf of Russian leader Josef Stalin.

The idea for the Russian invasion came into being in midsummer 1940, when Adolf Hitler commissioned Army Chief of Staff General Franz Halder to devise a plan of attack. Halder, in turn, delegated the planning to Chief of Staff of the 18th Army General Erich Marcks, who presented the first planning outline in August 1940 (Fowler 2001, 16). Officially called Fuehrer Directive No. 21, the attack was code-named Operation Barbarossa (Stokesbury 1980, 152). As initially devised, Operation Barbarossa was to be a two-pronged attack thrusting deep into Russia. The southern force was to drive into the Ukraine toward Kiev. The northern invasion was to head east through Byelorussia,
following the same path as Napoleon’s 1812 Grand Army invasion, with the aim to capture Russia’s capital city, Moscow. Once their initial goals were completed, the two German armies were to turn toward each other in an attempt to encircle and destroy the remainder of the Red Army. The entire plan was expected to be accomplished within seventeen weeks of the start of the invasion (Keegan 1971, 32).

After a number of modifications to the original idea, the generals presented a three-pronged plan of invasion to Hitler on December 17, 1940 (Keegan 1971, 38). The idea encompassed three army groups of massive strength to cut into Russia. Army Group North, under the command of General Ritter von Leeb, was to move from its Polish staging area toward Leningrad. Army Group South, under Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt, would work toward Ukraine, Crimea, and the Caucasus regions, rich with raw materials of oil, grain, and coal (Calvocoressi and Wint 1972, 170). Army Group Center, commanded by Field Marshall Fedor von Bock, was to invade through Byelorussia, split the Soviet Union in half, capture Smolensk and then provide support to Army Groups North and South. Under von Bock were General Hermann Hoth, commanding the Third Panzergruppen tank group, and General Heinz Guderian, the leading proponent of blitzkrieg warfare, leading the Fourth Panzergruppen (Keegan 1971, 41).

The proportions of the German invasion force were immense by any measure. The attack was Germany’s largest military action of the war, consisting of over 3.5 million German and Allied soldiers, 3,350 tanks, 600,000 vehicles, 7,200 artillery weapons, 625,000 horses, and nearly 2,500 aircraft (Stokesbury 1980, 153). By comparison, Russia’s opposing military force totaled about 2.9 million soldiers in 170 divisions, 37,500 heavy guns and mortars, 1,800 tanks, and 1,540 combat aircraft
(Archives of Belarus 2006, The Great Patriotic War). As further contrast, on June 6, 1944, the opening day of Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion of Western Europe, 130,000 troops landed on the Normandy coast, using 5,000 ships and about 1,000 air transports (Neson 1993, D-Day Fact Sheet).

Unlike in the western European theater, where the war was very loosely conducted according to the Geneva Convention, the Russian invasion was to be fought without constraint. Hitler believed the German-Russian war would be a death struggle between the fascist and communist philosophies, that National Socialism must triumph. During a March 1941 meeting with heads of his military services, Hitler told his commanders how to conduct the war in the east. General Halder took down Hitler’s words, later to be known as the Commissar Order:

The war against Russia will be such that it cannot be conducted in a knightly fashion. This struggle is one of ideologies and racial differences and will have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful, and unrelenting harshness. All officers will have to rid themselves of obsolete ideologies. I know that the necessity for such means of waging war is beyond the comprehension of you generals but … I insist absolutely that my orders be executed without contradiction. The commissars are the bearers of ideologies directly opposed to National Socialism. Therefore the commissars will be liquidated (Shirer 1960, 830).

To further detail the pursuit of the Russian front warfare, General Wilhelm Keitel issued the following directive, on behalf of Hitler, absolving the German military of war-related offenses or the necessity of carrying out court martial proceedings against Russian civilians:

Punishable offenses committed by enemy civilians [Russians] do not, until further notice, come any longer under the jurisdiction of the court-martial… Persons suspected of criminal action will be brought at once before an officer. This officer will decide whether they are to be shot. With regard to offenses committed against the enemy civilians by members of the Wehrmacht, prosecution is not obligatory
even when the deed is at the same time a military crime or offense (Shirer 1960, 831).

The stage had been set for war conducted on a scale unprecedented in history. With the invasion under way, Army Group Center (AGC) began its assault into Russia. Despite having to cross the Bug and Niemen rivers to access Russian territory, AGC moved swiftly. Led by its twin Panzer groups, AGC made rapid headway into Russia, as Red Army defenders provided little resistance to the advancing columns of German MK III and MK IV tanks. The Panzer groups disrupted and shredded Russian front-line defenders while the Luftwaffe provided aerial support by destroying large numbers of Russian planes, both in the air and on the ground. Within a short time, German advance troops were moving up to 50 miles daily into Russia (Calvocoressi and Wint 1972, 71). The following German army infantry was then able to surround, isolate, and destroy or capture large numbers of Russian soldiers. On June 28, Minsk was invaded and occupied by German forces. As the capital of the Byelorussian Republic, and near the frontline of the invasion, Minsk was the first major Russian city captured. The next day, combined forces of Army Group North and Center Panzer Groups encircled a huge pocket of Russian army defenders between Bialystok and Minsk. The results yielded 323,000 Russian prisoners, and 3,000 tanks and 1,800 artillery weapons captured or destroyed (Howell 1956, 26). Pushing farther east toward Smolensk, AGC took another 310,000 Russian captives and secured 3,200 tanks and 3,100 heavy guns (Keegan 1971, 65).

Under Hitler’s direct order, German forces had been organized to carry out the Commissar Order to the fullest extent. The plans for Operation Barbarossa included a set of instructions entitled “OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht or High Command of the
Armed Forces) Directive for Special Areas”: “In the area of operations, the Reichsführer SS is, on behalf of the Fuhrer, entrusted with special tasks for the preparation of the political administration…. Within the realm of these tasks, the Reichsführer SS shall act independently and under his own responsibility” (Cooper 1979, 163). Those instructions allowed a group apart from the invading army, and under a separate command structure, to operate independently within the occupied areas of combat. Further, on March 28, Wehrmacht Chief of Staff General Walter von Brauchitsch issued an order to the military that, “In order to carry out certain special security-police duties [the mass murder of Jews] which are outside the army’s domain, it will be necessary to employ special security detachments in the zone of operations” (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, iii). These security detachments, named Einsatzgruppen, would be responsible for the in-field extermination of Russia’s Jewish citizens.

On June 28, when the German army entered Minsk, it was unclear how many Jews lived in the city. According to the survey Das Judentum im osteuropäischen Raum (“Judaism in Eastern Europe”), in 1926 Minsk had 53,700 Jews, representing 40.8 percent of the city’s population (Hilburg 1971, 100). Within days of the Operation Barbarossa invasion, thousands of rural Jews fled east to Minsk ahead of the advancing German army, increasing the Jewish total to as many as 75,000 people (Yahil 1987, 270). Even with this influx, the majority of Byelorussian Jews, many living directly in the German army’s path, did not recognize the threat and chose to stay in their towns and villages. Of approximately 2 million Jews living in the path of the invasion, only about 8 percent managed to flee ahead of the Germans (Dobroszycki and Gurock 1993, 97).
The German plans for the Jewish population were soon apparent. According to Minsk resident Bronya Gofman, who would later join the underground resistance, “The first German soldiers arrived on motorcycles and stopped just in front of my house. The Germans began gathering up all the Jewish people. When someone asked what you will do with the Jewish people they answered, ‘You will be kaput’” (B. Gofman, personal communication).

Once military control had been established, the Wehrmacht commander ordered all men between 15 and 45 to report to Drozny, a small village north of Minsk. At risk of execution for not reporting, 40,000 male civilians soon found themselves contained with another 100,000 Russian POWs in a small field. In a report dated July 10 to Reichminister for the Occupied Eastern Territories Alfred Rosenberg, German Ministerial Counselor Dorsch said the containment area was so small that the prisoners “can hardly move and are forced to satisfy their physiological needs where they stand” (Ainsztein 1974, 244). On the fifth day of detention, the Russian POWs were transferred to a camp at Masiukovshtshina and all non-Jewish civilians were released. From the remaining Jews, 3,000 intellectuals and professionals, anyone the Germans anticipated could instigate or lead a resistance, were separated from the larger group and shot (Smoliar 1966, 15). A report sent by Einsatzgruppe B to the Chief of the Security Police and the SD in Berlin confirms: “In Minsk the entire Jewish intelligentsia has been liquidated [teachers, professors, lawyers, etc.]” (Arad 2010, 46). Mass executions of Jews on Russian soil had begun.

Einsatzgruppe B’s July 13 Operational Situation Report USSR No. 21 discussed early anti-Jewish activity upon the Germans’ arrival in Minsk. The Einsatzgruppe and
Secret Field Police had been ordered to screen men for political and criminal activity. Only those persons “able to clear themselves beyond reproach” were set free. The remaining men were subjected to individual and careful investigation. Of this group, “1,050 Jews were subsequently liquidated. Others are executed daily.” Plans for development of a ghetto, use of clothing marks as identification of Jews, and formation of a Jewish committee also were discussed in the report (Arad 2010, 22).

On July 15, the Military Field Commandant issued an order requiring all Minsk Jews to wear a yellow patch to distinguish them from the city’s non-Jewish population. The patch was to be a minimum of 10 centimeters wide and to be worn on both the chest and back. Under the same order, Jews were forbidden to congregate or walk on the city’s main streets or to greet non-Jews (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 146).

On July 20, the German Wehrmacht commander posted an order establishing a “Jewish Quarter in the City of Minsk.” The order defined streets to border the area, where access to the quarter was to be maintained, and specifications for the wall separating the district from Minsk’s non-Jewish area, and mandated a three-day time limit for relocation. The order also established a Jewish police force within the quarter and demanded a fee of 30,000 chervontsi (about $30,000) to be paid to the Germans by the city’s Jews for purposes of relocation (Smolar 1989, 12). Further detailed was a living space allotment of 1.5 square meters per adult, with no allowance for children. A nightly curfew was put in force from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. Every person 14 and older was required to carry identification papers, and each residence within the Jewish quarter was ordered to post a list of people living within (Smilovitsky 1995, 161-182). The word *ghetto* appeared nowhere in the order, though it was apparent that the Germans intended to
establish the first and only such facility they would organize during the war in occupied Russia. As a means to define terminology, from this point forward, the so-called *Jewish Quarter* will be referenced as *ghetto*.

Although a maximum of three days was allowed Jews for relocation into the area set aside for the ghetto, it took until August 1 for the resettlement process to be completed. During this time, the Germans set up the Minsk Judenrat, a Jewish council to administer affairs within the ghetto. From a group of Jews assembled before the German military commandant, Russian Ilya Muskin was appointed head of the Judenrat simply, it seemed, due to his ability to speak German (Smoliar 1966, 20).

![Figure 1-1: Judenrat headquarters building in Minsk Ghetto. Photograph courtesy of Minsk Jewish Museum.](image-url)

The short time allowed for resettlement was not sufficient to erect a solid wall separating the ghetto from greater Minsk. Instead, the area was surrounded by a five-strand fence of barbed wire (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 147). The ghetto’s main gate was on Shorna Street, with a number of alternate exits added for use by Jewish labor.
groups (Smoliar 1966, 20). Although quick construction may have been a consideration in erecting the barbed wire fence rather than a solid wall, events would soon demonstrate that the Germans had little thought of establishing a permanent facility in Minsk. Ominously, the existing Jewish cemetery was within the set-aside area.

![Figure 1-2: Minsk ghetto fence. The sign says, in German and Russian, “Warning: We will shoot those who try to climb through the fence.” Photograph courtesy of Belarusian State Archives of Films, Photographs, and Sound Recordings.](image)

At the same time the Germans were restricting Jews’ living area, they were also organizing a forced labor camp on Shiroka Street, about a kilometer to the east of the ghetto (Halevy 1996, 57). There they maintained a permanent labor force of about 500 Jewish craftsmen, 100 Red Army prisoners of war, and 300 Russian laborers (Ainsztein 1974, 753). Camp workers were expected to perform such support tasks as shoe repair, clothes mending, construction, and menial labor tasks for the German army. For this they were fed a daily allotment of 300 grams of bread and potato-peeling soup (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 148).
In November German Jews from within the Reich began to arrive in Minsk, further confusing the situation in the ghetto. The German Jewish groups had vastly different clothing styles and culture from the Russian Jews. That they could only speak German prevented nearly any ongoing communication between the Reich and native groups. To further distinguish between these groups, the new arrivals were made to wear the yellow six-pointed Star of David symbol on their clothes rather than the rectangular patch mandated to the Russian Jews (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 154). A separate barbed wire surrounded encampment was erected for this group inside the borders of the Minsk ghetto, creating a ghetto within the ghetto.

So far removed socially and culturally were the Reich Jews from the Russian Jews, that the German military Generalkommissar of Byelorussia, Wilhelm Kube, sent a personal appeal to Hinrich Lohse, head of the civilian occupation regime. Kube’s letter, dated December 16, 1941, states that among the new arrivals are German World War I veterans, holders of the Iron Cross military award, and even partial Aryans. Kube, who believed the German Jews were cleaner and more skilled than the local population and were likely to die from the unfamiliar weather conditions, wrote:

I am certainly hard and I am ready to help solve the Jewish question, but people who come from our cultural milieu are certainly something else than the native animalized hordes…. I ask you, consider the honor or our Reich and our party, and give clear instructions to take care of what is necessary in a form which is humane (Hilberg 1961, 233).

The Generalkommissar’s attempted intervention did not, unfortunately, stave off the coming catastrophe.

By mid-August, Jewish killings were accelerating within the ghetto. On August 14, 25, and 31, German Einsatzkommandos, assisted by Lithuanian fascist sympathizers,
rounded up over 5,000 Jewish men from the ghetto. The group was forced to the city center’s Jubilee Square, where they were beaten by their captors. From Jubilee Square they were herded to the Tutshinka Street site of the former headquarters of Russia’s secret police, the NKVD, which the German army had converted to a prison. Here, the assembled Jews were ordered to empty their pockets and undress. They were then driven into a newly dug pit and machine-gunned to death (Smolar 1989, 27).
Chapter 2

Jewish and Non-Jewish Resistance in Minsk Area

The August mass killings, near daily German raids into the ghetto, beatings, robberies, rapes, and shootings convinced a small group of Minsk Jews that some manner of organized resistance or protection was necessary. The local Jews, together with a group of Polish Jewish Communists who had fled east ahead of the German advance, held their initial meeting in the ghetto home of Sonya Rivkin, with Rivkin serving as outside lookout (Smolar 1989, 29). Her flat, at 54 Ostrovsky Street near Jubilee Square, had been chosen for its strategic location (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 149). The immediate neighborhood was heavily trafficked, making people coming to the meeting less likely to be noticed by informers. And the house had three exits, one each on Ostrovsky, Republikaner, and Hlebna streets, allowing for quick escape if German authorities became suspicious of activity (Smolar 1989, 29).

The meeting was planned for a Sunday, when German aggression and aktions were less likely to occur. As further precaution, Rivkin had gathered a number of other young women to warn the group if German patrols came too close. Although this time they were relegated to lookouts, women would later play increasingly important and prominent roles in the organization of the Minsk ghetto resistance.
The meeting at Rivkin’s flat included Boris Haimovitsh, Isaiah Shnitman, Nahum Feldman, Hersh Smoliar, and Jacob Kirkaieshto. Haimovitsh and Shnitman, from Minsk, were labor organizers at the city textile factory and connected into the Communist Party (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 149).\(^1\) Feldman was from Bialystok and had worked with the Polish underground organizing resistance activities (Ainsztein 1974, 466). Smoliar had been convicted of underground activities with the Polish Communist Party and had spent four years in prison. In 1939 he managed to escape jail, fleeing east to Poland’s frontier with Russia before arriving in Minsk ahead of the German invasion (Tec 1993, 265). Kirkaieshto was Propaganda Minister of the Minsk Communist Party (Smoliar 1966, 29). Three others who were to attend, Notke Wainhoyz, Hersh Dobin, and Haim Aleksandrovitsh, had been pressed into service by a German labor detail (Smoliar 1966, 13). Wainhoyz, editor of a Minsk Yiddish newspaper and a radio station manager, was well networked into the Jewish community (Smoliar 1966, 24). Doblin and Aleksandrovitsh both had extensive organizational experience and could offer valuable logistical strength to the fledgling underground group.

The organizers prioritized five tasks as the initial steps in building a resistance organization:

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\(^1\) Primary resource material referenced for this paper all originated in Russian, Hebrew, or Yiddish languages. As such, when translated phonetically into English, a variety of spellings may exist for the same name or geographic location, for instance, Slutsk or Slutzk, Nadezhda or Nadezhda, Chaimovitch or Haimovich. As a means to maintain continuity, once a common identity was confirmed for a place or person the same spelling was utilized consistent throughout this paper. The sole exception is when referring to Hersh Smoliar/Smolar. As part of the narrative text, his name always appears as Smoliar, the spelling credited on his 1966 book *Resistance in Minsk*. When his name is used as a reference, it appears consistent with the book from which the credit is taken, either as “Smoliar” from the 1966 *Resistance in Minsk* or as “Smolar” from the 1989 *The Minsk Ghetto: Soviet-Jewish Partisans against the Nazis*. 

13
1. Put an end to the panic among the Jews in the ghetto
2. Publish and organize a systematic distribution of informational papers
3. Establish contact with Communists outside the ghetto
4. Establish contact with partisans in the forests surrounding Minsk
5. Set up a radio receiver (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 150)

Kirkaiestho, assigned to handle logistics for the group, was to locate safe houses, find trustworthy couriers, obtain typewriters, and acquire radios. The latter was a great risk, as possession of radios, absolutely forbidden by the Germans, carried the death penalty. Wainhozy was to continue his prewar communication expertise by writing and distributing propaganda, news, and other communiqués within the ghetto. Smoliar was to build an organization composed of 10-person cells. Each cell was to have at its head a leader able to plan and act independently from other groups as needed (Smoliar 1966, 31). Smoliar also was to establish contacts with Russian underground organizations outside the ghetto. As he was relatively new to Minsk and unknown to the Germans, Smoliar was nicknamed “Smoliarevich” to throw them off his trail (Ainsztein 1974, 466).

Smoliar was to make contact with other secret organizations opposed to the German occupation. Despite the city’s being overrun by German forces, the Jewish underground assumed counterpart groups organized by Communist Party or Soviet officials existed outside the ghetto and within Minsk. However, it soon became apparent that local officials who should have remained and organized resistance activities had been among the first to flee Minsk. Not until mid-September did events allow the Jewish underground to connect with Russian resistance outside the ghetto and partisan groups fighting in the forests surrounding Minsk.

Despite attempts to conceal the establishment of a ghetto resistance group and the identities of its organizers unforeseen circumstances arose that put their lives at risk. The
Germans organized frequent raids into the ghetto to secure new workers for the Shiroka Street labor camp or simply to kill Jews. On one of these raids, Jacob Kirkaieshto, who organized the Jewish underground’s logistical needs, was among a number of people summarily executed. Although the Germans had no knowledge of Kirkaieshto’s connection to the resistance, his death struck an early setback against the underground group.

A few days after Kirkaieshto’s execution, Smoliar was introduced to Mikhail “Misha” Gebelev, a Jewish Communist Party organizer from the Kaganovich Regional Committee (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 150). Through his prewar party affiliation, Gebelev had extensive contacts with many non-Jews who were living outside the ghetto. He had also located an area along the ghetto fence on Novo-Miasniyzka Street that was rarely patrolled by the Germans, allowing for a secret exit point (Smoliar 1966, 39). Gebelev took over logistics and became a connection to resistance groups outside the ghetto.

Figure 2-1: Mikhail Gebelev.  Figure 2-2: Hersh Smoliar.

Photographs courtesy of Belarusian State Archives of Films, Photographs, and Sound Recordings.
Two of the underground’s goals were attained when they obtained a printing press and a radio receiver. The German army frequently used skilled Jewish laborers as support in order to free soldiers for more direct war effort. This support extended beyond the Shiroka labor camp and into the army’s administrative offices and day-to-day routine. Jewish printers pressed into service by the Germans were able to steal enough parts of a printing press that Mikhail “Misha” Chipchin, who prior to the war directed a Minsk print plant, was able to assemble a working unit (Ainsztein 1974, 472). To make it less likely to be discovered by the Germans, the press was reassembled and located outside the ghetto. Much of the information used to produce leaflets came by means of a radio receiver that, like the printing press, had been stolen piece by piece from the Germans by Jewish technicians working in army offices. The receiver was hidden in the chimney of a house in the ghetto, its antenna made of twisted wire disguised as a clothesline (Kowalski 1986, 316).

On October 26, three partisans were hanged in the main square of Minsk. A 17-year-old woman, Mariia “Masha” Bruskina, and two men, Kirill Trus and Vladamir “Volodya” Sherbatseyvich, were the first partisans to be publically executed by the occupying German forces. Army photographers documented the proceedings with a series of pictures of the trio being marched to the gallows, prepared for execution, and dangling lifeless from the hangman’s noose. A sign suspended around Bruskina’s neck proclaimed in both German and Russian, “We are partisans and have shot at German soldiers” (Miller 1990, 174).
Two weeks later, on the November 7 anniversary of Russia’s October Revolution, German SS troops supported by a group of Lithuanian fascists entered the ghetto and herded nearly 12,000 men, women, and children to Novokrasnaya Street (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 152). The significance of the date was not lost on the Germans, who in a cruel twist distributed Soviet flags to the group and made those at the front of the procession carry a banner emblazoned with the words “Long live the 24th anniversary of the Great Socialist October Revolution!” (Smoliar 1966, 41). The procession was filmed by the Germans, presumably as propaganda concerning how well conditions were for Jews under the occupation. Herded through the streets of Minsk, the Jews were forced into a former NKVD building, where they were imprisoned for two days without food or water. Those who survived were forced to an area near Tutchinka Street, where most were machine-gunned over pits that had been dug during their imprisonment. Others were killed by carbon monoxide poisoning while being transported in German spezial-
wagens—gas vans—one of the earliest recorded uses of these vehicles for mass murder (Yahil 1987, 259).

On November 20, 1941, a group of seven thousand Jews was forced from the ghetto and machine-gunned at the Tutchinka Street location (Smoliar 1966, 27). Among those killed in this aktion was Notke Wainhoyz, one of the original organizers of the ghetto resistance. The group experienced another major loss with the discovery of its radio receiver, hidden in the Tatarskaya and Zamkova streets sector, when the Germans temporarily removed the inhabitants. The area was not vacant long, as a group of sixty-five hundred Jews newly arrived from Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna, and Prague were swiftly located there (Ainsztein 1974, 470).

In an attempt to sow discord among the inhabitants of the ghetto, the Nazis further divided the living area into sections for skilled workers and for those they perceived to have no function. The skilled were concentrated into the Obutkov Street zone already occupied by members of the Judenrat and security staff. The area across Jubilee Square from Obutkov Street was mandated as the area for “nonessential” persons (Smoliar 1966, 20). Clearly, people from this second group would be the first chosen for extermination. Knowing this, the underground coordinated efforts with ghetto printers and forgers to manufacturer false worker documents for many in the nonessential section of the ghetto. In this manner, large numbers of the unskilled, at-risk population were able to live in the Obutkov district and, at least for the short term, avoid Nazi death plans.

At the same time, word reached the ghetto underground that a Russian resistance organizer named Slavek had requested a meeting. Smoliar was chosen as representative and, on December 21, met Slavek just outside the ghetto. As it turned out, Slavek was a
pseudonym for a Russian engineer named Isai Pavlovich Kazinets (Ainsztein 1974, 469). Kazinets revealed that four resistance groups had emerged, independently of the others, in the Russian sector. Like the Jewish ghetto underground, each had spent weeks futilely searching for Communist Party organizers to lead the resistance against the occupation. Realizing there was no such group, the Russians combined forces and, learning of the Jewish group, wanted to extend their reach into the ghetto. Gebelev, with his familiarity of the neighborhoods of Minsk and his ability to slip out and return to the ghetto seemingly at will, became the contact between the two organizations.

Gebelev brought the group Roza Lipskaia, who was to play a crucial part in the resistance. Like many others in Minsk, Lipskaia had attempted to flee east as the German advance reached the city. Accompanied by her son, Felicks, and her sister and her three

Figure 2-4: Isai Kazinets. Photograph courtesy of Belarusian State Archives of Films, Photographs, and Sound Recordings.

Figure 2-5: Roza Lipskaia and son Felicks. Photograph courtesy of Minsk Jewish Museum.
children, Lipskaia’s group could not outpace the onrushing German army. Sixty miles east of Minsk, near the village of Beresin, the group ran into a German column and, fearing for their safety, were forced to return to Minsk. Lipskaia unsuccessfully attempted to locate members of the Communist Party, of which she had been a member since 1928. After a number of weeks spent searching, Lipskaia finally made contact with Gebelev and volunteered to work in the resistance. Gebelev assigned her to a Group of 10 in the ghetto and instructed her to spread information received from Moscow by Soviet Informbureau and heard on an illegal radio receiver hidden in the ghetto. From there, she began to organize the collection of clothing for partisan detachments in the forests. Many of her initial contacts were with people she knew prior to the invasion. During an August 1999 interview in Minsk, former resistance member Ekaterina Tsirilina recalled how Lipskaia involved her in the underground:

There was an acquaintance of mine named Roza Lipskaia. I worked with her before the war. Now we worked in the ghetto together. She was a participant in the underground organization but no one really knew about it. One day she wanted to talk to me. She said there was an underground group in Minsk. She said she was a member of this group. She wanted me to participate in the group if I was not afraid or frightened. So I did, because I was alone and there was nothing to lose for me. So I agreed to work (E. Tsirilina, personal communication).

New recruits such as Tsirilina were given small tasks to check their ability to carry out orders and see if they could be trusted. Tasks could be anything from serving as lookouts near buildings where resistance meetings were underway to posting newspapers the underground published to gathering clothing for the partisans. Tsirilina’s earliest task for the underground, assigned by Lipskaia, was to handwrite propaganda papers against the Germans and post them on walls in the ghetto.
Gebelev then assigned Lipskaia a more important task of obtaining medical supplies from German facilities. Using her prewar contacts, Lipskaia enlisted sympathetic physicians in the ghetto hospital to access medical supplies stored in a German facility in the Russian sector. To do so, they had to bribe storage facility guards to acquire supplies in excess of their allotment. Lipskaia organized a separate group of people she knew from Komsomol to secure funding. The group got the Judenrat to channel money destined for the Germans, to be used instead as bribes at the storage facility. The organization was successful since, as Lipskaia wrote after the occupation, “they bought medical supplies according to my instructions … obtained a lot of medical supplies, brought them to me, and I personally gave them to Gebelev” (Lipskaia 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus). In early 1942, the Jewish underground appointed Lipskaia leader of her own Group of 10.

As the Russian side and the Jewish underground continued to firm up their relations, they were contacted in the ghetto by Fedor “Fedya” Shedletskii, a representative from a partisan otriad (group) outside Minsk (Ainsztein 1974, 467). Shedletskii, who had grown up in Minsk before fleeing to the forests, was a member of Captain Bystrov’s partisan unit operating to the east of the city (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 150). Bystrov requested aid in the form of clothing, medicine, and forged documents. The resistance responded with a message pledging support as long as he accepted into his unit Jews fleeing the ghetto. The resistance understood the importance of a cooperative effort between the forest-based partisan otriads and the ghetto underground as a way to save at least some of the city’s Jewish residents from slaughter. The underground began to organize efforts in this direction and coined a slogan, “The
road out of the ghetto must lead to the partisan detachments,” as a way to make the wider populace more easily understand the thrust of their work (Smoliar 1966, 17).

Thus, within only a few weeks of its organizational meeting, the Jewish ghetto resistance had made contact with both the Russian underground in Minsk and partisans in the forests. These goals, accomplished at great risk, were successful in large part due to the social and cultural climate that existed between Jewish and non-Jewish Belorussians. Relations between Jews and non-Jews were better in Belorussia than in either Poland or Lithuania, where historical anti-Semitism worked strongly against the formation of Jewish/non-Jewish alliances during the war. In prewar Belorussia, many Jews were members of, and held prominent positions in, the Communist Party. While many high-level Party officials fled the German advance in the first days of the war, remaining Jewish and Russian Party members together formed the basis of the Minsk city resistance.

Once contact was established between the Minsk underground and Bystrov’s otriad, a group of six Jewish men was taken from the ghetto by Fedor Shedletskii. Boris Haimovitsh, one of the ghetto underground organizers, was chosen as leader due to his previous military experience. Using his Russian connections outside the ghetto, Haimovitsh obtained a horse-drawn wagon that had a hidden compartment constructed into the underside. The men removed their yellow Jewish patches, knowing that the consequence if they were discovered was death, and left the ghetto for a rendezvous in the Russian sector. There, a man named Kudriakov lead them to an arms cache containing 13 rifles and 4,000 rounds of ammunition (Smoliar 1966, 28). After secreting the arms in the wagon’s hidden compartment, the group successfully reached Bystrov’s
**otriad** in the Boborovich forest about 30 kilometers from Minsk (Ainsztein 1974, 471). Two more rescue attempts launched into the ghetto brought an additional thirty men and women to the partisans (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 150). Captain Bystrov ordered Haimovitsh to organize a machine gun unit among the Jewish arrivals from Minsk. This group ultimately grew into the Stalin Brigade, one of seven all-Jewish partisan detachments that would be organized to fight the Germans during the war (Ainsztein 1974, 317).

During a 1999 interview in Minsk, former Jewish partisan Mikhail Treister detailed some of the logistical issues and dangers involved with moving people from the ghetto to the forests. Treister was 15 years old at the time he conducted this rescue attempt.

Not all the Jewish people who escaped from the ghetto were successful in reaching the partisans. Of a group of thirty I led from the ghetto, only half were able to be successful. I was assigned to take out a smaller group but, as others found out about it, more joined. It was very difficult because of the size, and many died because of the hardships. It was very difficult to reach the partisans, and the partisans would not always take them in. Often they just took their weapons and made them leave. I went in less than one month before the ghetto was terminated. When I came back, I was not sure I would manage to get out alive again. From freedom to prison was the assignment. We gathered in the basement of the ghetto medical center. At 2 a.m. we were able to cut the barbed wire. I ordered them to wrap rags around their shoes so they wouldn’t make any noise. We all managed to get out of the ghetto. I was very surprised. We headed to an area that is now in Minsk but was then a small village. The Germans were on patrol when we got there. Before we were ambushed, I divided the big group into three smaller groups. The first got through the village okay, but the second group was discovered and most were killed. My group was the third and got through okay. We were going to where [the partisan] headquarters was. There were many people as I have said who joined us. They did not have weapons and were not ready. That is why they died. They were not ready for this operation” (M. Treister, personal communication).
As Treister said, moving these groups was extremely risky. If caught, ghetto escapees could expect a quick death at the hands of the Germans. And there was no guarantee they would be accepted by the partisans. The *otriads* were seeking those with skills and talents to benefit the partisans: doctors, metalworkers, tailors, leather smiths, military, and those who could help support the ongoing resistance effort. Captain Bystrov’s partisan *otriad* accepted the initial group of Minsk ghetto Jews, as they brought weapons and ammunition, and he made clear that he would accept only those coming to his encampment armed (Ainsztein 1974, 471). This requirement was quickly disseminated throughout the ghetto by members of the underground. “Provide yourself with the ‘new passport’ a pistol, grenade, a rifle-part, an automatic, any kind of weapon or part of a weapon. This will give you entry into the partisan forests” (Smoliar 1966, 65).
The danger was not all from discovery. Fedor Turovets was a courier from a partisan group based near Rudensk, about 50 kilometers south of Minsk. He was able to enter the ghetto and select people to lead back to his partisan otriad. Once outside Minsk, Turovets would rob the group of any valuable possessions and abandon them at gunpoint to their fate. Capture by the Germans or death from exposure was frequently the end of those left in the forests by Turovets (Smilovitsky 1995, 161-182).

Those who did arrive were always under suspicion of being secret German informers planted in the ghetto to help ferret out resistance members and partisan locations. Many times it was nearly as dangerous to join the partisans as remain in the ghetto. David Karpilov, a prewar editor at the Zviazda publishing house in Minsk, was shot by the partisan group he sought refuge with after being accused as a German spy.

Maria Zaiats was denied access to the Russian partisan otriad she fled to and was saved when discovered wandering in the forests by members of Shlomo Zorins’ all-Jewish 106 Family Detachment partisan group (Smilovitsky 1995, 161-182).

Gregorii “Batya” Linkov, a Russian partisan commander questioned the legitimacy of two women who arrived at his camp with his otriad’s patrol. The women had been found by the patrol wandering in the forests south of Minsk. Linkov knew the Germans frequently used women as spies and informers to locate partisan encampments, believing they might more easily be accepted into the forest groups. As Linkov would later state:

I could not sleep all night for fear that women spies had come into our partisan base. In the morning I made up my mind that I should not have any suspicions concerning the validity of my doubts. Accompanied by a few handpicked young men, I went toward … where the “newcomers” were. I had decided to talk with them, interrogate them thoroughly before issuing the order to have them executed (Porter 1982, 167)
Only after the women said they were Jewish was the execution temporarily halted. By that time, three men who had fled the Minsk ghetto were brought forward to confirm their identity and save their lives.

Bystrov’s mandate that all arriving at his encampment bring weapons added a new layer of complication to the underground’s planning. Early in 1942, the group began to focus on support to be provided to partisans in exchange for taking Jews fleeing Minsk. In addition to weapons, clothing, money, and medicine were to be collected for the partisans. In lieu of the weapons trade plan, an alternate idea was conceived by the underground to hide Jews from the ghetto in the Russian sector or countryside until other arrangements could be made. Many of the underground’s meetings took place at the ghetto hospital, by suggestion of its head, Dr. Kulik. Kulik knew the German command was wary of contagious diseases they feared could spread from the ghetto to the Germans troops. As a precaution, they tended to stay away from the hospital, making it one of the safer locations for resistance meetings to take place.

Despite the Germans’ fear of contagion, there was no guarantee the hospital remained a safe haven in the ghetto. Dora Alperovich, in a 1999 interview, revealed how tenuous the safety factor actually was at the ghetto hospital.

A hospital was organized in the ghetto. I worked in this hospital. The building still exists today. We were very afraid of German raids there. Any minute they could come and kill us. We saw that whenever someone would get well they would just kill them. (D. Alperovich, personal communication).

By the end of February, 12 10-person cells had been organized, including the one led by Roza Lipskaia. Nahum Feldman, one of the original ghetto underground organizers, also led a cell. In the short term, each cell was responsible for obtaining from the ghetto, the city environs, and the German forces, items needed to supply partisan
groups. The long-term goal was to provide safe haven for Jews and manpower to partisan groups as cell personnel fled the ghetto.

With 12 cells operating, the flow of weapons into the ghetto stolen from the Germans or obtained in the Russian sector increased. Noam Brustin’s cell obtained fifteen grenades, while another cell stole pistols from a German warehouse. The cell headed by Joel Rolbin located a buried cache of rifles and ammunition. Nahum Feldman diverted funds collected by the Judenrat and destined for the Germans, to instead purchase weapons from the Russian side (Smoliar 1966, 65). Members of the Mirkin cell working in a German munitions storehouse accumulated a supply of ammunition by carrying out bullets hidden in their pockets. The Mirkin cell passed their supplies on to the Kagan Group of 10, already well armed with pistols (Smoliar 1966, 31).

Stealing weapons took bravery, brazen audacity, and serious planning. Nahum Goldzak, a Jew working in a German labor camp, described how a weapons cache was stolen:

I had worked in carpentry. The Germans came and asked us to make a beautiful ark to store the weapons of the partisans. The ark and its contents were destined to be displayed in a museum in Berlin. The Germans gave us weapons in order for us to know the necessary measurements for the ark! Immediately, we made contact with the courier and a date for departure for the forests…. We set, with the courier, the date of November 1 for our departure…. In the meantime, we did not sit with idle hands. We hid weapons … armed ourselves and left the ghetto (Kowalski 1986, 322).

In addition to the organized cells, groups of young women and men added to the growing stocks of weapons flowing into the ghetto and on to the partisans. Sixteen-year-old Valik Zhitelseif found thirty rifles and ammunition buried near the ghetto walls. Sonya Kaplinski and Jaschke Lapidus found a hidden cache of bullets, grenades, and rifle parts along the highway to Mohilev. Tsypa Botvinik and Emma Rudova were able to
smuggle out, a piece at a time, entire machine guns from their work in a German weapons warehouse (Smoliar 1966, 66).

Botvinik, pregnant at the time of the German invasion, found herself trapped in Minsk during the initial stages of the occupation. Like many others who were unable to flee, she spent weeks searching for an organization that supported resistance against the Germans. In October 1941, she met Mikhail Gebelev, who put her in contact with Roza Lipskaia. Lipskaia assigned Botvinik the gateway task of collecting clothes for the partisans. Botvinik also spread news from Soviet Informbureau radio broadcasts heard on clandestine receivers. Established in June 1941 by order of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Soviet Informbureau disseminated news of the war and international events to the Russian populace.

Proving her mettle by successfully completing these assignments, Botvinik was then assigned by Lipskaia to work in the German warehouse that processed weapons damaged in or recovered from battle. Here, she organized other women into a smuggling ring to steal and transport weapons out of the warehouse. The women used ingenious methods to secrete various pieces of weapons past the Germans. They hid small parts in their boots and the false bottoms of specially constructed soup containers used to feed the workers. They bound complete rifles in the bundles of firewood the Germans allowed workers to take home to heat their houses. And, as Jewish underground member Ekaterina Tsirilina related in an interview in Minsk years after the war’s end, “women could hide gun parts on themselves in places no German soldier would dare search” (E. Tsirilina, personal communication). In a document submitted in August 1945 to the Minsk Bureau of the Communist Party to regain her party membership papers, destroyed
during the war, Botvinik said she “managed to bring out guns bolts, hammers, firing pins, magazines,… and reserve parts for different types of weapons. All of that were mainly headed through a liaison … to Minsk’s partisan brigades” (Botvinik 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus).

Medicine, clothing, and food also were in great demand, both in the ghetto and by the partisans. The German military served as unwitting source for many supplies. The Nazis established forced-labor factories in Minsk for food production, clothing repair, or equipment manufacture. While supplies continued to the German war effort, a sizable piece of this production was stolen by the resistance and diverted to the partisans. The resistance eventually became so emboldened, they disguised agents as German soldiers and stole an entire truckload of shoes, soap, and clothes that had been destined for the front line east of Minsk (Smoliar 1966, 32).

The German authorities were keenly aware of ongoing activities being conducted by the underground and on behalf of the partisans. Security Service Operational Situation Report USSR No. 165, from February 13, 1942, stated that 2,000 people connected with Minsk black market activity had been rounded up and quantities of German goods confiscated (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 294). The roundup appeared to have little impact, as less than a month later Operational Situation Report USSR No. 176 stated that extensive bribery within Minsk’s municipal administration-controlled communal kitchen allowed food to be diverted to the black market (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 303). In February 1942, an Einsatzgruppe A report stated that an encampment of 400 to 500 partisans had been raided and a quantity of machine guns, antitank rifles, automatic pistols and large stocks of food had been recovered. According to a partisan
captured during the raid, much of these stocks had been brought to the camp from Minsk the previous week (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 297).

As a means to stem the flow of ghetto escapees and materials to the partisans, the Germans took direct action against those whom they believed to be supporting the resistance. In February, the Gestapo arrested Ilya Mushkin, head of the Judenrat and so-called Elder of the Jews. Mushkin had been placed as the Nazi’s figurehead leader of the ghetto to enforce German orders. However, his sympathies were with the Jews, and he offered secret support to the underground as they arranged escapes from the ghetto. This required the most circumspect behavior on Mushkin’s part, as it was assumed the Germans had informers throughout the ghetto and perhaps even within the organizational structure of the Judenrat.

Mushkin was held for nearly a month, and beaten and tortured by the Germans. When it became apparent he would not reveal further connections into the ghetto resistance, he was executed. In his place, the Nazis installed Moshe Yoffee (Even-Shosan and Maccabee 1988, 54) and a German Jew named Blumenstock as co-heads of the Judenrat (Smoliar 1966, 41). Neither man was widely known by the ghetto population or the underground, and neither was trusted as Mushkin had been.

Shortly after Yoffee and Blumenstock had been installed as leaders of the Judenrat, the Gestapo issued an order through them demanding that 5,000 Jews be assembled on March 2 at 10 a.m. for transfer to labor camps (Ainsztein 1974, 473). The order excluded skilled workers from the group. When the Judenrat questioned why children and older people were to be included, they were told by the Germans that it was ganz legal (quite legal) to do so (Smoliar 1966, 72). Clearly the group was being
assembled for execution and not labor. The German command issued an additional order that a pit be dug in the ravine along Ratomskaya Street, which ran through the center of the ghetto.

In response to the Gestapo order, some Judenrat members proposed sending only elderly and infirm among the 5,000. However, the overwhelming response was that there would “be no trafficking in Jewish souls” (Smoliar 1966, 43). Instead, word of the Nazi plan was spread throughout the ghetto by the underground. People assigned to German work groups were told to be with those groups, outside of the ghetto. Others were told to locate hiding places in the ghetto or even in the Russian sector if they could find a way to flee the area.

At the appointed hour, a group of Einsatzkommandos, accompanied by Lithuanian fascists and Byelorussian Black Police, arrived at the ghetto labor exchange and fortified themselves with vodka that had been provided for their use. Proceeding to the site of a former factory on Shpalernaya Street, they rounded up a group of elderly, children, and women. At nearby Tekhnicheskaya Street, houses were set afire to force the residents into the streets. Finally they met a group of workers returning to the ghetto, many of whom, with the groups from Shpalernaya and Tekhnicheskaya streets, were loaded into railway cars and sent to the village of Dzerzhinsk, south of Minsk, and executed (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 158).

Elizaveta Zambovna Gutkovich, one of the survivors of the work group, described during a 1999 interview in Minsk the selection process used by the Germans to determine who would live and who would die.

On that day [March 2] we were coming from work like usual but the Germans did not open the [ghetto] gate. Everybody was crowded near the gate. We could not
go on, and we began to suspect something was going on. We only felt safe in the ghetto. People who wanted to go through the gate into the ghetto they shot them and there was much blood. Suddenly the cars arrived with the SS and they started shooting. The SS commander … announced a list of professions, electricians, tailors and jobs the Germans needed. We understood these people would get the documents and would not be shot. Many people received documents. I got them but it was not written that I was an electrical engineer. They were written that I was a sewing person. We knew that those people who were the intelligentsia would be shot. There was a German. He was checking the documents with a lamp because it was dark and freezing. My document said I was a tailor but I was working as an electrical engineer. He said you’re not working as a tailor. I started to say I was working as a tailor and had two jobs. An SS man was standing nearby. He was ready to take me from the crowd and shoot me but the head officer decided to take me as a tailor and saved me. Then they divided all the people into 2 groups. The workers in one crowd. The intelligentsia in another crowd. The people were crying when they took these people away. There were 5000. They were shot. (E. Gutkovich, personal communication).

The Einsatzkommandos then went to the Jewish Children Home orphanage and ordered the directors, Drs. Tshernin and Fleisher, to lead the youths to the freshly dug pit at the Ratomskaya Street ravine. There, children, doctors, and nurses were machine-gunned. Jacob Greenstein, a survivor of the Minsk ghetto and eyewitness to the events, described the ensuing scene:

Jews began to run and the murderers began to shoot the running crowd. On the Rotomska (sic) Street, the killers threw living children down and covered them with earth. The cries of the children reached heaven! Kube, the General Kommissar of White Russia, arrived and began to throw candies for the children being thrown into the grave (Kowalski 1986, 318).

Not all in attendance found Kube’s candy enticement amusing. In his official report of the day’s activities, SS-Obersturmbannführer Eduard Strauch, commander of Einsatzkommando 2, called Kube a “sentimentalist” for his actions (Smoliar 1966, 73).

Kube had been accompanied to the Ratomskaya Street pit by a number of SS men, including Adolf Eichmann, who was in Minsk on an official visit. Despite his position as one of the prime planners of Hitler’s Final Solution, Eichmann evidenced little stomach
for the horror he was complicit in creating. After an earlier visit to Minsk, Eichmann had reported to Gestapo head SS Gruppenführer Heinrich Müller that he saw “marksman who took aim at the skulls of dead people in a large ditch … and that was quite enough for me … my knees went weak” (Arendt 1963, 83). During the March 2 killings, Eichmann became very upset when blood and gore splattered on the long coat he was wearing (Smoliar 1966, 73).

Figure 2-7: Felicks Lipskii at the Ratomskaya Street ravine massacre site, July 1995. Monument to the event right background. Photograph by the author.

The day’s events were noted by the German Chief of the Security Police, who reported, “During an action against the Jews, carried out on March 2 & 3, 3,412 Jews were executed in Minsk” (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 307). Still, many imprisoned in the ghetto managed to escape the carnage. The Judenrat had prepared a malina (hiding place) for several hundred people within their workshops. Others, including Bronya Gofman, were able to dig escape routes under the ghetto fence. Gofman, who had been forced into the ghetto when the Germans occupied Minsk, had no work skills or proper identification papers. Knowing she was doomed if singled out by
the Germans, she found an opportunity to escape during the shootings and, as she would later say, “careful like a cat I slipped through the wire” and fled into the Russian sector (B. Gofman, personal communication).
Chapter 3

German Actions Against the Resistance

Near the end of March, the Gestapo made a key break against the Minsk resistance. The Germans had been aware of the groups’ activities in Minsk and had tried unsuccessfully to plant informers into the organization. Finally, they managed to penetrate a group in the Russian sector with two informers, named Belov and Rogov. The pair managed access into the inner circle of the group’s military committee and were able to learn the identities of top leaders in Minsk (Ainsztein 1974, 475). Using this information, the Gestapo swept the city’s Russian sector and captured many top resistance leaders, including Isai Kazinets, the contact known to the Jewish underground as “Slavek.” The Gestapo immediately knew they had captured a top operative in Kazinets and sent a report to Berlin entitled “Reports from the Occupied Eastern Territories, No.2—Enemies and Executions.” In it, Kazinets was described as a chief organizer for recruiting Russian soldiers living disguised as civilians within Minsk. In this capacity, Kazinets was to “recruit for the partisans and to collect clothing, as well as to see to it that the ranks of the partisans are kept full” (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 339). The report further detailed that Jews were being smuggled out of Minsk to
the partisans and the ghetto resistance as well organized and a major source of finances for the otriads

Also caught in the net during the German sweep for resistance operatives was Mikhail Tulski, head of the ghetto’s Second District Jewish police. Under questioning, and in an unsuccessful attempt to save his life, Tulski named Nahum Feldman, Hersh Smoliar—known to Tulski as Smoliarevich—Mikhail Gebelev, and Ziama Okun as primary organizers of the Jewish ghetto resistance.

Tulski also provided the Germans the location of Nina Liss’s flat at 18 Kollektornaya Street (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 159). Liss’s apartment was frequently utilized as a clandestine meeting place for ghetto underground leaders. It was to that location that Fedya Shedletskii had arrived carrying word from the partisans they were ready to link with the Jewish underground in Minsk. Blonde haired and blue eyed, Liss could pass for an ethnic Russian and was an important asset for the Jewish underground as she carried secret messages and instructions between the ghetto and city. With her ability to move past the Germans, Liss was chosen by the Jewish underground to seek out connections in the countryside beyond Minsk when initial arrangements were being planned to send people to safety beyond the city.

Using Tulski’s information, the Germans raided Liss’s apartment in hope of capturing the Jewish underground heads in one mission. Raids into the ghetto by the Germans were common, but the intent became clear when they called out for Smoliarevich before storming the flat. None of the four men named as conspirators by Tulski was present, but everyone found there, including Nina Liss and her 5-year old daughter, was shot.
Armed with names of the Jewish underground organizers, the Germans issued an ultimatum to Judenrat head Moshe Yoffee that he produce the four men by the next day. If they were not handed over to the Gestapo, the Judenrat and thousands of others in the ghetto would face execution. Rather than turning them in, Yoffee instead sent word to the men that the Gestapo was in pursuit and closing in. Despite the risk, Smoliar, Gebelev, and Okun met and agreed the best strategy was to temporarily limit resistance activities and go into hiding. Gebelev managed to get to a cave located near Zamkov Street used by the underground. Okun attempted to follow but was spotted en route by the Jewish informer Rozenblat, who turned him in to the Gestapo. Meanwhile, the head of the ghetto hospital, Dr. Kulik, knowing the German’s aversion to contagious diseases, arranged to have Smoliar smuggled on a stretcher into the contagion ward disguised at a typhus victim (Smoliar 1966, 50).

With the deadline approaching, Moshe Yoffee devised a scheme he hoped would satisfy the Germans. He filled in a blank ghetto pass with the name Efim Smoliarevich, then smeared it with blood. Taking the pass to the Gestapo, he explained it had been found in the clothing of a man killed during one of the previous night’s raids. The Gestapo accepted the explanation and left the ghetto before the deadline.
Kazinets’ arrest also drastically curtailed the ability of the resistance to spread news and propaganda within the ghetto and the Russian sector. He had served as the main conduit for information being passed on to a “secret printing shop [that] distributed by leaflet” (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 339). The print shop referred to in the report was run by Mikhail Chipchin, the man who had built a printing press for the underground using parts stolen from German army offices. By the time of its discovery by the Germans, the print shop had produced material for the Minsk resistance and three thousand leaflets for distribution by the partisans (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 339).

Despite the end of Chipchin’s operation, resistance print facilities in Minsk and with partisan groups served as the main means to produce and disseminate information
about the war and resistance activity. Printing equipment and supplies were in great
demand but were not items that could easily be constructed. Many of the supplies needed
for printing operations were stolen piece by piece and reassembled in Minsk safe houses
or taken to partisan camps. Women, both Jewish and Russian, were key to many of the
operations needed to obtain printing equipment or direct access to shops themselves.
Many, who served as domestics, cleaners, and chambermaids in civilian facilities run by
the Germans and in the military occupation and officers’ personal living quarters, had
access to areas typically off limits to men working for the occupiers.

As a top courier among the Russian sector, Jewish ghetto, and partisan *otriads*,
Emma Rodova carried important instructions outlining plans to be used by the
underground. Through Rodova, the Chkalov partisan brigade sent word to Roza Lipskaia
to initiate a plan to obtain printing supplies, paper, and fonts to send to the partisans. The
partisans sent two young girls, Rochele Priklad and Rosele Rubinshtik, with Rodova to
return with the printing supplies; they were to stay with Lipskaia until the equipment was
obtained (Smoliar 1966, 96). Basia Chernyak, a member of Lipskaia’s Group of 10,
worked in a printing plant and was tasked to steal the supplies. On a daily basis,
Chernyak managed to smuggle out fonts and paper, which she passed on to Lipskaia.
Lipskaia, already housing the two couriers, could not risk being discovered with the
stolen printing supplies and asked her acquaintance Nadezhda Shusser to hide the
contraband until it could be taken out of the ghetto to the partisans. When a full
accompaniment of fonts and a supply of paper had been assembled, they were
successfully sent with the young girls, Priklad and Rubinshtik, to the partisans.
While much printing was done using stolen equipment sent to the partisans or set up in clandestine Minsk locations, some was done on equipment still under German control. Bronya Gofman, after escaping the ghetto, made her way to the Russian sector, where she found an acquaintance who repaired clothes and officers’ uniforms for the Germans. The tailor introduced Gofman to a friend working in a Minsk printing house, who in turn convinced the printing house’s owner to take Gofman on as a cleaner. One day, she was approached by a Byelorussian man working in the print shop who asked, “Do you believe in the victory of our army?” “Of course, because there is no use to live without faith,” was her reply. “Then you must help us” (B. Gofman, personal communication). At first Gofman was asked to steal small items and supplies, blank paper, ink, and the like. Soon she was approached for a larger assignment. In her position as chambermaid, Gofman had access to all rooms and locked areas in the printing plant.

The underground knew I had all the keys…. One day we got an assignment to print a newspaper so people could know what was happening. It was a very difficult and dangerous task,…It was not possible to do this during the day…I could only do this during the night, but I was afraid they would notice what I was doing. I told the printing chief’s wife that I had no time to clean during the day so I must stay at night. She said it was okay. There were other Jews involved, and we did the printing in the basement…. We had a single lamp that we had to keep covered to keep other people from seeing the light. We could not stay there for long. We worked every night but only for a short time. It took us a month to make one paper (B. Gofman, personal communication).

For a time the Germans thought the papers were being airlifted by plane to Minsk from Moscow. But, as the underground prepared for a second edition, the Germans figured out the papers were being printed in Minsk. The Germans realized they could eventually locate their printing source by studying the lettering styles used in the newspapers. “The Germans were not idiots and decided to learn where the papers were
from…. [They] decided it was printed in this print house,” said Gofman during a 1999 interview.

Figure 3-2: Bronya Gofman with copy of Zvezda underground resistance newspaper, 1999. Photograph by the author.

It was not long before the Gestapo arrived to question the manager and print house personnel. Determined not to be caught, Gofman “had to pluck up all my courage” and walk out the door, through the yard and past German soldiers who had accompanied the Gestapo to the print house. She successfully made her way to a safe house used by the underground.

On May 7, 1942, the Nazis executed 28 leaders of the Minsk resistance (Smoliar 1966, 90). Among this group were a number of prominent leaders of the Jewish underground including Slavek, Ziama Okun, and Hersh Ruditser (Ainsztejn 1974, 477).
At the same time, the Germans continued their offensive against the ghetto resistance. During a search of the ghetto they discovered and destroyed the cave on Zamkov Street where Gebelev had fled, which by then was being used by groups fleeing the ghetto to store food and supplies. Among items destroyed by the Germans were two radio receivers, a quantity of grenades, four rifles, and boxes of ammunition (Smoliar 1966, 56). Another radio receiver, hidden in a bunker under a nearby house was also discovered. Grenades from the Germans destroyed the bunker and, for the time being, effectively ended the ghetto’s electronic communications with the outside (Kowalski 1986, 320).

Despite the ongoing pressure, the underground continued to carry out sabotage against war materiel being manufactured in Minsk. At the October Factory, electrical equipment and boilers were frequently disabled with aid from Stalin District underground members. Sand and dirt were put into machinery to disrupt production or delay use. At the Bolshevik Factory, workers sabotaged clothing being made for German frontline troops fighting in the area.

Much of the sabotage to troop clothing was orchestrated under the direction of Nadezhda Shusser. Shusser, like Roza Lipskaia, was a woman working at the highest levels of the Minsk underground. A worker in a Minsk clothing factory prior to the invasion, Shusser had attempted to flee the city on June 26 ahead of the onrushing German army. Accompanied by her 12-year-old daughter and a small group of people, she had followed the Moscow highway toward the city of Smolevich east of Minsk. Aerial bombardment from the Luftwaffe impeded their progress and they turned south trying to escape, but before they could cover much ground they had been cut off by a
German tank column. For the next ten days the group wandered in the forests, unsuccessfully trying to locate an eastern escape route. Forced back toward Minsk, Shusser returned to the city on July 7 and three days later was able to reach her old apartment.

When the Germans announced the organization of the Jewish ghetto, Shusser found her flat was within the boundaries. During the days when the ghetto was being formed, she tried without success to locate ranking members of the Communist Party. Working with a female acquaintance, Shusser organized a number of trusted people who would “not work for [the] Germans, sabotage their orders, [and] not turn in radios” (Shusser 1944, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus).

By early September, the group numbered 20 people. Shusser by then had established contact with both Gebelev and Smoliar. She was given command of her own Group of 10 and assigned responsibility for obtaining clothing for the partisans and stealing fonts from German printing plants. Shusser also arranged for Jewish children to be placed into orphanages in Minsk’s Russian sector. In doing so she saved many lives, as remaining in the ghetto was a certain death sentence for these parentless children.

In December Shusser was tasked to organize a group of fifteen people working in the Bolshevik plant to sabotage clothing produced for German soldiers. Boots were produced with nails protruding through the soles, making them unwearable. Jackets and much-needed cold weather gear was constructed with sleeves too small and thus useless. The saboteurs used a caustic liquid on clothing and leather goods that dissolved seam stitching and caused the goods to fall apart days or weeks after being shipped from the plant. The liquid, most likely battery acid, came from the German’s own troop vehicles.
While much of Shusser’s instruction came from leaders of the ghetto underground, she was also in contact with partisan *otriad* through courier Emma Rodova. Rodova continued to be an invaluable liaison to the partisans for Shusser, Lipskaia, and others working in the upper echelons of the underground resistance.

At the Minsk distillery, a large shipment of whiskey for German soldiers was poisoned by members of Lipskaia’s Group of 10. One of her group, who worked in the distillery, proposed poisoning an entire shipment of whiskey bound for German troops in the Eastern Front. He had two requirements in order to carry out the plan: He must have enough poison to effectively render the whiskey supply deadly. And he and his family must be guaranteed a safe exit from Minsk to the partisans, to avoid retribution from the Germans. With her connections to the ghetto physicians and the resistance printers, Lipskaia provided both the poison and the documents required to fulfill the distillery worker’s demands. The plot was carried out successfully when a large quantity of poison was added to the shipment. After the poisoning operation was completed, Lipskaia herself requested exit documents and guides to escape to the partisans, but Gebelev denied the request. As she later wrote: “I was needed very much here. So I continued to do [the] underground job” (Lipskaia 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus).

A major blow to the resistance came when Gebelev was arrested while leaving the ghetto through the Miasnitka Street fence. Gebelev had hidden his “Jewish jacket,” with the yellow patch and identification number, and was carrying a Russian-sector passport identifying him as a carpenter named Rusinoff. As he was carrying a box of tools, the Germans did not realize Gebelev’s true identity, thinking him instead a smuggler.
Gebelev was the primary contact between the Jewish and Russian underground operations within the city and both factions worked to free him from prison. A ransom was collected to bribe German guards and, if that failed, plans were made to free him by force. Unfortunately all was for naught, as Gebelev died in prison during one of the Germans’ periodic “cleansing” operations designed to reduce jail population and make room for more prisoners. With Gebelev’s death only Hersh Smoliar, from the original group of Jewish underground organizers, remained in the ghetto. All others had been killed by the Nazis or had fled to the forest partisan *otriads*.

In order to increase surveillance and pressure on those in the ghetto, the Gestapo set up an organization called the Operative Group. The Operative Group allegedly worked under the auspices of the Jewish police but in reality functioned as an arm of the Gestapo. The Germans placed a Jewish informer named Rozenblat as leader of the group. Rozenblat had a long criminal history in Warsaw. Fleeing ahead of the German invasion, he ended up in Minsk, where he established himself as a blackmailer, often turning Jews over to the Gestapo if they did not pay him. With Rozenblat as its head, and using the Gestapo as leverage, the Operative Group took control of the Judenrat, the Labor Exchange and most of the remaining ghetto service institutions. The Gestapo placed two other Polish Jews, Epstein and Weinstein, to run the Labor Exchange. Like Rozenblat, Epstein and Weinstein had come to Minsk from Poland, where both men had reputations as union breakers and thugs. In its Gestapo-controlled version, the Exchange was little more than a front for an in-ghetto spy agency.

The Operative Group learned that Smoliar had escaped the raid at Nina Liss’s Kollektornaya Street flat and that the bloodied ghetto passport shown the Gestapo was a
false document. In an attempt to locate Smoliar, the group began to watch locations he was known to frequent. The ghetto hospital, which was suspected as a meeting place for the underground resistance, drew increasing scrutiny. Workers at the hospital were questioned whether “Efim Smoliarevich” had been there recently. Searches of the facility’s basement and boiler room turned up nothing. Unknown to the Operative Group spies Smoliar, disguised as a patient, was hiding in the ghetto hospital.

With the increased surveillance, as the Gestapo attempted capture of the last leader of the Jewish underground, additional effort was made to keep Smoliar secure. In a single night, hospital personnel constructed a false brick wall around the attic chimney as a hiding place for him. The space was so small that Smoliar could do little more than stand upright or lie on one side. He was able to move aside a few loose roof shingles, for fresh air and a quick glance at the scene around the hospital. By removing some loose bricks, he was able to exit the space or receive food and communication from his hospital contact. With his ability to plan for and communicate with the resistance severely curtailed, Smoliar found his position in the ghetto becoming untenable. He sent word to the underground in the Russian sector to make plans for his escape to the partisans.

In late July, the Germans initiated a series of aktions against the remaining Jews in the ghetto. On the morning of July 28, SS and Security Police entered the ghetto, followed by a contingent of Lithuanian fascists and Byelorussian police. Each group was assigned an area within the ghetto to attack, and they divided their ranks accordingly. During the first wave of attacks, ghetto residents were forced from their houses to Jubilee Square. Loaded into gas vans, they were driven to the outskirts of Minsk, where burial ditches awaited. Jews trying to escape or found hiding in houses were shot on the spot. A
German patrol entered the hospital and executed patients as they lay in their beds. Forty-eight doctors and accompanying medical personnel were assembled, loaded into gas vans, and killed (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 164). Smoliar and a few others managed to escape the carnage, hiding under a pile of clothing behind a false wall in the attic (Smoliar 1966, 61). The group was armed and vowed a fight to the death, but the Germans left the hospital without discovering their hiding place. The violence continued for two more days when the Judenrat building was attacked. Inside were the organizations leaders and their families, members of the Jewish Police and Jews who had paid for the privilege of what they thought was “protection” within the building. All were driven into the street and executed, including Judenrat leaders Yoffee and Blumenstock. The killings effectively ended any form of Jewish organization within the ghetto.

An SS sergeant named Arlt, in an August report concerning activity in the previous month, detailed plans of the mass executions of Jews in Minsk. Arlt wrote of his company’s “digging of pits for the reception of the Jewish transport.” The preparation continued for a number of days, culminating in the July 28–29 aktion, when 9,000 Jews were “brought to the pits.” After these executions, the SS sergeant noted, “the following days were filled with cleaning weapons and repair” (Hilberg 1971, 58).

In an attempt to save Smoliar, the only remaining leader of the Jewish underground still alive in Minsk, the resistance sent word to Roza Lipskaia to locate safe houses and obtain false documents for him. Lipskaia arranged a series of apartment flats to be used as temporary hiding places for Smoliar. The underground was so bold as to place him in a safe house in the same office building used by members of Generalkommissar Kube’s staff. Armed with a false passport supplied through Lipskaia,
Smoliar was accompanied to the office building by Mariia Gorokhova, a woman from Minsk’s Russian underground. Gorokhova then convinced German guards that Smoliar was a mechanic brought to the location to repair a defective boiler unit and the pair walked right past the sentries. Lipskaia recounted this most dangerous time during the occupation when many from the Jewish underground were captured and killed, including Gebelev, Slavek, and Radova, by writing, “Regardless [of] all horror we lived through when we lost them I did not stop working and doing my best” (Lipskaia 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus).

The four-day German *aktion* drastically reduced the numbers of Jews living in the Minsk ghetto. Both Suhl and Kowalski, in their respective works on the Russian Holocaust, state that 25 thousand Jews perished during the July 1942 killings (Suhl 1987, 164; Kowalski 1986, 320). However, in a report to Reichskommissar Heinrich Luza, Generalkommissar of Byelorussia Wilhelm Kube claimed a lower number of deaths and details plans for the remaining Jewish population in Minsk:

In the city of Minsk during July 28 and 29, 1942, approximately ten thousand Jews were killed. Sixty-five hundred of these were Russian Jews, particularly elderly persons and children; the rest were Jews from Vilna, Brin, Bremen, and elsewhere who had been dispatched to us by order of the Fuhrer. In the city of Minsk twenty-six hundred Jews who came from Germany are still alive as are six thousand Russian Jewish workers, men and women, who kept at their work during the great slaughter.

In the future, keep Minsk for large concentration of Jews, for railroad work and to manufacture arms. The S.S. will also need about eight hundred Jews for work. If possible, we will try to cut this number to five hundred. After we finish our prepared acts of slaughter against the Jews, eighty-six hundred Jews should be left in Minsk (Kowalski 1986, 323).

Based on Kube’s report, of the 75,000 Jews in Minsk at the beginning of the German occupation in June, 1941 only 8,600 remained 13 months later; a reduction of
nearly 90 percent from the pre-invasion population. In *The Minsk Ghetto*, Hersh Smoliar takes exception to the numbers of survivors stated in Kube’s report. Smoliar claims after the four days of killings there were still around 12,000 people alive in the ghetto, 3,400 more than detailed by Kube. Smoliar stated the Germans, despite their efforts to flush out Jews, were unaware of thousands of mostly women and children who survived the killings by hiding in secret places, “malinas” as he refers to them, throughout the ghetto (Smoliar 1966, 108).

After the mass executions of July 1942 it became clear to the surviving members of the Jewish underground the ghetto’s end was near, the only means of survival for the remaining population being escape to the forests. The underground learned through word brought by Emma Radova that Nikolai Geraimenko, head of the city’s Stalin District resistance brigade, had organized a plan of assistance for the ghetto. With the ongoing turmoil and increase in executions the underground sent word back with Radova that a mass evacuation of all Jews from the ghetto would be more sensible. During the Germans’ July offensive in the ghetto, the underground had lost communication with Jewish partisan bases in the surrounding forests. The two primary Jewish partisan groups the ghetto underground had been instrumental in establishing had moved from the Minsk area due to ongoing pressure from the German army. As such, without Jewish partisan camps to depend upon for guides and as destinations any potential escape from the ghetto would be heavily reliant upon support from the Russian sector.

To further complicate the situation, Radova was arrested by members of the Operative Group while trying to enter the ghetto, and handed over to the Gestapo. At the time of her detainment she was carrying letters from the Russian sector resistance. As the
top courier between Minsk’s Russian sector, the Jewish ghetto and partisan *otriads* in the forests surrounding the city. Radova’s arrest cut deeply into the ability of the underground to communicate with the outside. Moreover, the seizure by the Gestapo of secret written communication intended for ghetto leaders put them all in serious jeopardy.

As the violence receded the Russian underground sent Mariia Gorokhova into the ghetto under the guise as a member of a returning labor column. Her mission was to locate any remaining Jewish leaders, get accounts of the situation and report back to the Russian sector. Gorokhova accomplished her assignment, and the day after she carried word from the Jewish underground to the Russian sector, she returned again to the ghetto. This time she carried orders from the Russian resistance telling Hersh Smoliar to leave Minsk and assume a command position with the partisans. Gorokhova was to take Smoliar to the Russian sector flat at 25 Niemega Street occupied by Nikolai Geraimenko and his family (Smoliar 1966, 110). Geraimenko had recently returned from an inspection of partisan bases deemed suitable for accepting mass escapees from the city (Smoliar 1966, 64). Geraimenko revealed to Smoliar his plan in which 5,000 men, including a large number of Jews, were to escape the city and join 20 partisan groups aligned with the Minsk underground (Smolar 1989, 110). The two worked out gathering points for assembly, passwords to be used, and weapons to be carried. After discussing the plan, the men retired for the evening. About midnight a loud pounding on the door announced the arrival of the Gestapo. Smoliar, wearing only underwear, fled through an open window on an upper floor as the flat’s entrance door was broken in. He hid on a narrow tin roof between two windows while the Gestapo carried out a search, one agent even coming to the window Smoliar had just exited. While the Gestapo had raided the flat to arrest
Geraimenko, they had no knowledge Smoliar was there at the time. Geraimenko, his wife, Tatiana, and their 11-year-old daughter, Liudmila, were arrested by the Gestapo, taken to the Maly Trostinetz camp outside Minsk, and executed (Smoliar 1966, 112).

The deaths of Gebelev and Geraimenko affected not only those operating at the upper levels of the underground but had ramifications throughout the ghetto resistance. Mariia Karantaer was a member of one of the Groups of 10 operating in the ghetto. In 1945, during testimony before a Minsk Communist Party tribunal as she sought to regain her membership, she described issues maintaining contact with underground leaders as the Germans increased pressure on the resistance.

I was a member of the Group of 10. After [its leader] escaped the city for the partisan’s forces I made contact with the secretary of the underground committee Gebelev to carry out his orders. I obtained false documents using the names of imaginary dead people as well as those who went to the partisans, agitated people to join the partisans, brought newspapers and fliers. In 1942 I asked Gebelev to let me go to partisans but he said I had to stay in Minsk for the underground job. When Gebelev was arrested I made contact with the member of the underground committee of Russia’s district Nikolai Geraimenko and obtained clothes and shoes for those who had to go to the partisans. Geraimenko gave me newspapers and fliers for the ghetto. In September or August 1942 Geraimenko prepared documents for me to go to partisans but he was arrested and the documents were not delivered. (Karantaer 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus).

After he felt it safe Smoliar slipped out of the flat and hid in the rubble of a nearby building. On the third day he recognized one of the workers in a labor column returning to the ghetto and slipped into the group. Smoliar learned Niemiga Street had been blockaded by the Gestapo and flyers posted around the city offered a reward to “anyone who brings in Efim Smoliarevich dead or alive” (Smoliar 1966, 111). With the detainment of Emma Radova and seizure of the secret documents she carried, the arrest and execution of Nikolai Geraimenko, the breakdown in communication between the
ghetto and Jewish partisan units, and the capture of many of the heads of the underground, there was no longer enough structure within the city to maintain an ongoing opposition to the German occupation of Minsk or to organize a mass escape to the forests.

Inside the ghetto, Smoliar took refuge in a flat on Tankova Street. There he met with a few trusted people and made plans to send groups from Minsk in an attempt to locate and reestablish contact with the partisans. Three search groups were organized, with two assigned to women. The first, headed by Dora Berson, went south toward the Rudensk Forest. Berson had recruited and led groups against the Germans since early in the occupation. She also had served the underground as a courier between the ghetto and the Russian sector and had previously guided escapees to the partisans. Sonia Levin, originally from the Staroselsk district south-west of Minsk, led the second group in that direction. Smoliar and four others in the third group went northwest, toward the Nalibocki Forest. Among Smoliar’s group was Nahum Goldzak, builder of the display on which the German army intended to show captured partisan weapons in Berlin.

Smoliar’s group searched the forests for 17 days before making contact with the Frunze Detachment partisan group near the village of Koidanov (Kowalski 1986, 322). The detachment commander, Mikhail Kashinski, introduced Smoliar to a “blond, typically Byelorussian women” named Bronya Kreynovich (Smoliar 1966, 114). Due to her local ethnic, non-Jewish appearance, she was able to move past the Germans without raising great suspicion and volunteered to serve as a courier and guide. During late 1942 and into early 1943 Kreynovich was dispatched to the Minsk ghetto to guide Jews to the partisans. During her many forays into Minsk, she rescued enough Jews to form two
additional partisan detachments and also brought out a radio and a printing press (Ainsztein 1974, 481).

Starting in February 1943, the Germans intensified their campaign against Minsk’s Jewish ghetto. On February 1, 1,500 Jews were taken to the pits near the village of Maly Trostinetz and shot (Ainsztein 1974, 481). On the same day, a Gestapo detachment led by Obersturmführer Miller executed 401 Jews in mobile gas vans (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 171). A few days after that, the Germans erected gallows in the public squares and markets of Minsk and hanged 250 people, including a number of Jewish underground members (Smoliar 1966, 67). On February 19, a Gestapo group commanded by Hauptscharführer Ribbe surrounded a building in the ghetto at 48 Obuvnaia Street. All 140 residents were ordered into the street and shot for allegedly having stored weapons in the building (Smolar 1989, 119). It appeared plans for the liquidation of the Minsk ghetto were reaching the final stage.

Ribbe quickly gained a reputation for his cruelty and perversion and his summary execution of anyone suspected of even the smallest transgression. Possession of German items ranging from food to clothing to books would result in a quick death. Jewish children found in the Russian sector were taken to the ghetto cemetery and shot. Ribbe established a policy of searching all workers in the labor columns returning to the ghetto. If an individual was found with a scrap of food, the person was immediately executed. If a returning labor column was missing a worker, a person who might have escaped to join the partisans or into the Russian sector, the entire group was shot.

In short order, Ribbe ordered the executions of the elderly and any person suspected of being unemployed; 150 people were shot on the first day of this order. He
ordered the warden to execute all Jewish workers in the prison. In April, Ribbe ordered the remaining doctors in the ghetto, and their families, to the ghetto labor exchange building. Once assembled, the group of nearly 100 people was taken to the ghetto prison and executed. Later that month, Ribbe ordered the murder of all children in the Zaslavsky Street orphanage.

In early May, he turned his attention to the ghetto hospitals. Ribbe and six men dressed as civilians entered the hospital area and commenced firing with submachine guns they had hidden under their clothes. Many were killed at point-blank range or in beds where they lay. Witnesses reported seeing people jumping from second floor windows attempting to escape the carnage. After the killing stopped, Ribbe ordered surviving hospital staff to remove the dead and clean the facility in order to receive new patients later that afternoon. “The German authorities do not carry out pogroms, but we do need healthy people—not sick ones,” Ribbe reportedly explained to the staff (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 177).

Despite the continuing elimination of the ghetto’s Jewish population remnants of the underground continued their activity. Sonya Kuriandski, from her position as secretary for the Shiroka camp commandant, conspired with resistance operative Zyamke Gurvich to rescue two wagonloads of Jewish workers, including a number of condemned men. They were able to escape with 60 rifles. Dora Berson, who fled the ghetto at the same time as Smoliar, made contact with the 11th Minsk partisan brigade in the Rudensk Forest (Smoliar 1966, 67). Using the brigade as a base of operations, she returned to Minsk and smuggled out a group of Jews from the ghetto in a car stolen from the Shiroka labor camp.
Lieutenant Semyon Ganzenko, who escaped from the Shiroka labor camp aided by Jews and joined with Nahum Feldman’s brigade, had by now established his own partisan otriad called the Budyonny Detachment (Ainsztein 1974, 482). He dispatched numerous missions into Minsk, many headed by young people, to rescue Jews from the ghetto. Bunya Hammer, a 12-year-old, led over 100 people from the ghetto before being apprehended and killed. In a dozen successful rescue attempts, teenager David Klenskii saved three hundred people. A 12-year-old girl named Antonina Zomer led 100 people from Minsk to the forest camps. Discovered by a German army patrol, she shot a number of soldiers before being killed (Ainsztein 1974, 482).
Chapter 4

Destruction of the Minsk Ghetto

With the defeat of Army Group B at Stalingrad in early 1943, Germany’s advance into Russia was halted. As the Red Army began its offensive to push the invaders toward the west, new strategy emerged from Russia’s occupiers regarding Jews held on Soviet soil. On June 21, 1943, Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler issued an order that “all Jews still remaining in the ghettos in the Ostland are to be closed in concentration camps…. Inmates of the Jewish ghettos who are not required are to be evacuated to the east” (Arad, Krakowski, and Spector 1989, 205). From this point on, the Germans continued to reduce the number of Jews still alive in the Minsk ghetto. The policy of eliminating the last of the Jewish workers met with objection from Generalkommissar Wilhelm Kube. At a July 1943 conference of regional ministers, organized by head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories Alfred Rosenberg, Kube requested replacements for the Jewish workers being deported from Minsk (Smoliar 1966, 141). Kube’s request was ignored, and the killings in Minsk continued.

As Generalkommissar for Byelorussia, Kube was the highest ranking civilian administrator of the Reichskommissariat Ostland, one of two territories the Germans organized in occupied Russia. His responsibilities were to carry out directives toward
treatment of Jews established by the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories. Kube had oversight for Jews used as laborers in support of the German war effort and the eventual liquidation of all Jews in the Ostland as part of the Nazis’ Final Solution.

Although he carried out his orders with the ruthless effectiveness expected at his level, his reputation with Germany’s high command was as being soft on Jews. He frequently complained to his superiors for what he perceived as excess cruelty toward Jews. A report to Kube from a regional commander in charge of liquidating Jews in the town of Slutsk, south of Minsk, detailed “indescribable brutality on the part of … German police officers … that persons shot have worked themselves out of their graves after they have been covered” (Levin 1968, 253).

More than the brutality was what the commander believed to be indiscriminate killings of all Jews, including those with specific skills that could be utilized as laborers, specialists, and mechanics to support the German war industry in that occupied area. Kube was so incensed by the report, he forwarded copies to his superiors Reichskommissar Hinrich Lohse and Alfred Rosenberg with a note that Hitler himself should be made aware of the situation. Instead, his superiors ordered SS Lieutenant Colonel Eduard Strauch to Minsk to monitor Kube’s behavior. Strauch, in a report highly critical of Kube, reported the Generalkommissar was seen to have congratulated and shaken hands with a Jewish worker who saved his car from a burning building. Further, Kube admitted his enjoyment of the music of Jewish composers Felix Mendelssohn and Jacques Offenbach.

Regardless of how Kube’s superiors viewed his treatment of Jews, he was the top Nazi official governing the Minsk region and, as such, a mortal enemy to the resistance.
If that were not enough he had earned the hatred of the city’s Jews by his callous
treatment of the orphan children murdered at the Ratomskaya Street ravine. Like many
other Nazi officials working, governing, and living in the Ostland Kube became a target
for partisan assassination attempts.

Kube was not the first high Nazi official the partisans attempted to kill. The July 1,
1943, edition of the German occupation newspaper *Minsker Zeitung* reported that a high-
ranking political kommissar named Heinrich Kluze was killed “by the hands of the
partisans.” In the same month, six German officials on an inspection trip to the Slutsk
area were ambushed by partisans and killed. By 1943, the German army cemetery in
Minsk contained over 1,600 Nazi officials who had been killed by partisans (Kowalski
1986, 324). The danger to Nazi officials in Byelorussia became so great many put in for
transfers out of the area. Josef Goebbels wrote of the situation “This shows what dangers
leading National Socialists must face, especially in the occupied territories of the East. To
remain alive in the present crisis one cannot be too careful” (Cooper 1979, 92).

A number of attempts to assassinate Kube had been organized by the partisan
*otriad* commanded by Gregorii Linkov. Most were attempts to ambush Kube along
roadways or during inspection stops where he would be in the open and most vulnerable.
The closest Linkov’s detachment had come was in the village of Smolovichi where
informants passed word Kube was to speak to German troops. The partisans managed to
infiltrate into the local populace, but Kube cancelled at the last moment and the attempt
was called off. Linkov then assigned David Keymakh, a Jew and his top commander, to
work on an alternate plan to kill Kube (Ainsztein 1974, 482). The assassination plot,
perhaps the most audacious act by women working with the partisans, was carried out
during the final days of the ghetto.

After studying Kube’s movements, Keymakh determined that the best way to
access the Generalkommissar was in his own house in Minsk. Many high-ranking Nazi
officials living in the city, including Kube, used local women in their households as
cooks, cleaners, and domestics. For proper security, all workers with access to the Kube
household were required to undergo investigation by the Gestapo. As effective as the
checks were, a few women with partisan affiliation still managed to gain employment in
Kube’s house.

Using this knowledge, a female member of Keymakh’s squad approached Elena
Maznik, who worked as a housemaid for Kube’s wife. Maznik, a Jew, agreed to become
a key conspirator in the assassination plot. A plan was formulated in which a bomb would
be used to kill Kube. Since Maznik was familiar to the Kube family, household staff, and
security, she was able to move throughout the residence and was chosen to place the
device under Kube’s bed. On September 20, 1943, Maznik was provided with a bomb
hidden in the bottom of a small basket and covered with a scarf and gifts she was to say
were for Kube’s wife. As expected, Maznik was stopped at the gate by German sentries
searching all incoming people and items. Using the ruse about the basket’s contents, she
was able to pass the security screen by showing only the scarf and a bottle of perfume.
Once past the guards and in the house, she successfully placed the device under the bed.
At midnight, as planned, the bomb detonated, killing Kube. His body was taken to Berlin,
where Kube was given a military funeral with full honors attended by many high-ranking
Nazi officials including Adolf Hitler. Other Nazis, who felt Kube was too soft to the
plight of the Jews, were less kind regarding his assassination. Heinrich Himmler called
Kube’s death a “blessing” since the SS head considered that his Jewish policy “bordered
on treason” (Hilberg 1961, 254).

By autumn 1943, the ghetto’s demise was near complete. On September 12, an
announcement was made that the German Jews should prepare to return to Germany.
Rather than their homeland as destination they were loaded into mobile gas vans and
executed (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 181). The following week, 2,000 Jews were
packed into 25 railway cars (Ainztein 1974, 482). Told by Kommandant Waks they
were headed to Germany, since “Hitler has found it possible to spare the lives of those
Jews who want to work honestly,” they were instead taken to the Sobibor extermination
camp (Smoliar 1966, 142). Among those sent to Sobibor were 80 Jewish Red Army
soldiers, including Lieutenant Aleksandr Pecherskiy. Less than a month later, Pecherskiy

Figure 4-1: Funeral of Generalkommissar Wilhelm Kube, Berlin.
Photograph courtesy of Belarusian State Archives of Films,
Photographs, and Sound Recordings.

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soldiers, including Lieutenant Aleksandr Pecherskiy. Less than a month later, Pecherskiy
lead a revolt and escape from Sobibor, one of only two successful uprisings by Jewish prisoners from a Nazi extermination camp.

By October 1, 1943, only 2,000 Jews remained alive in the Minsk ghetto (Ehrenberg and Grossman 1980, 181). Three weeks later, the final German assault began. Over the next four days patrols ferreted out any survivors found in the rubble. They were either shot on the spot or loaded in trucks and taken away for execution. Searched houses were destroyed with grenades to kill anyone that might still be hiding and to keep the buildings from being utilized again. On the ghetto’s final day, only 26 Jews were known to be hiding in the wreckage (Ainsztein 1974, 483).

During the time of the Minsk ghetto, nearly 80,000 Jews confined within its barbed wire fence perished at the hands of the Nazis (Smoliar 1966, preface). Still, according to records at the Minsk Museum of the Great Patriotic War, nearly 10,000 Jews escaped from the ghetto and fled to the surrounding forests due to the efforts of the combined underground organizations and the partisans (M. Treister, personal communication). This was the largest number of Jews saved during the war by resistance groups operating in Nazi-occupied territory (Ainsztein 1974, 484). There is no estimate of how many of them survived the war, which continued to rage on Russian soil for another nine months. However, thousands of the Jews who fled Minsk successfully reached partisan *otriads* operating in Byelorussia. Over 600 men, women, and children, including Mikhail Treister, the 15-year-old ghetto escape guide, were part of Shlomo Zorin’s all-Jewish 106 Family Detachment (Ainsztein 1974, 485).

Roza Lipskaia, too, took refuge with the 106. By summer 1943, with the situation in the ghetto becoming untenable, Lipskaia was desperately seeking a means of escape.
from Minsk. Finally, at the end of July, the Frunze partisan brigade sent a female guide, Tsilya Klebanova, to Minsk in an attempt to move Lipskaia and a small group to safety. The party consisted of Lipskaia’s Group of 10, her son, Felicks, and a few relatives, for a total of 16 people (E. Tsirilina, personal communication). The group escaped the ghetto in August by cutting a fence wire, then followed a railroad line from the city to the countryside. Two persons in the group did not survive long once the group escaped the city. A woman died suddenly during the arduous trek and a man simply disappeared from the group. “We just turned around and he was gone,” said Ekaterina Tsirilina, one of the remaining 14 people in the group. On August 25, after weeks of searching in the forests, the group found Zorin’s all-Jewish 106 Family Detachment. All survived the war.

Like Lipskaia, Tsypa Botvinik had requested that the underground allow her to flee the ghetto to the partisans. Her request, like those of many other women working in the Minsk resistance, was denied. As she would write after the war, “I insisted to be sent to a partisan’s unit, but was refused and told that it was not time yet to send women there” (Botvinik 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus). She continued to work in the warehouse until May 1943, when it became increasingly dangerous for her to stay in Minsk; by that time, the Germans knew she was central to the smuggling operation. She managed to elude the Germans in Minsk until June, when she was taken to the forests and joined the Frunze brigade. Even as she fled from the German pursuit, Botvinik managed to take with her to the partisans bolt actions and firing mechanisms from 40 weapons and five complete guns (Botvinik 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus). In addition, she carried a fully functional Czechoslovak-made gun and ammunition she claimed as her own once she joined the Frunze brigade (Smoliar 1966, 87).
Botvinik was not satisfied with fulfilling the expected traditional woman’s support role of cooking, laundering, and ministering to the sick and wounded. Rather, she actively participated on many missions, including the first partisan attack against the main railway line adjoining Minsk’s freight depot. There her group successfully detonated an explosive charge and derailed a 22-car train. Following that attack, her group set mines under railroad tracks near the Zielionoje station and derailed a troop train. A month later, they mined tracks near Kirshovka station and destroyed a train with 12 flat cars loaded with personnel carriers (Smoliar 1966, 88). For her work, Botvinik was awarded the order of Partisan of the Great Patriotic War, 1st Degree medal (Botvinik 1945, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus). In excess of 500,000 Russian citizens fought as partisans during the war (Fowler 2001, 108). With fewer than 60,000 awarded the Partisan 1st Degree medal was one of the rarest orders given for service during the war.

Bronya Gofman, after fleeing the print plant and now hiding at a safe house, learned the Gestapo had discovered her identity and was closing in. Before the Gestapo could locate the safe house, she was forced to move to a second location occupied by another woman. The woman had a lover, a German officer, who frequented the flat and immediately became suspicious of the new arrival. After only a short time, Gofman had to move again. With German soldiers on patrol, no identification papers, a curfew preventing movement under cover of night and a “typically Jewish” appearance, Gofman was at extreme risk for discovery. Still, the underground managed to move her to a third safe house, where she remained for two more weeks. At long last, Gofman said, a partisan group “came with a milk cart with large containers. I dressed up like a peasant
and pretended I was with this milk. I was able to escape!” (B. Gofman, personal communication). Fleeing with the partisans, she joined a detachment in the forests outside Minsk, where she remained for the course of the occupation.

Gofman’s work set the stage for continued publication of the underground newspaper. Named Zvezda (The Star), the ghetto underground was able to produce four editions using three locations in the ghetto before publication ceased in late 1942. From that time on all newspaper and flyer publications were done by forest partisans and smuggled back into Minsk for circulation. (Epstein 2008, 162).

In early 1942, Nadezhda Shusser asked Gebelev for permission to escape the ghetto and join the partisans. Her initial request, too, was denied. Later, on March 10, word came that she was allowed to leave for the forests. Two hours before Shusser was to depart, instructions arrived ordering her to continue work in the ghetto and instead send another from her Group of 10. In November 1942, Hersh Smoliar, who by now had escaped Minsk and joined the partisans, sent a guide to the ghetto to lead Shusser, her daughter, and a small group of Jews to safety. Once in the ghetto, the guide was intercepted by a member of the underground who withheld the information from Shusser and instead used the guide to take himself and his family to the partisans. Finally, on May 1, 1943, Shusser was able to enlist the aid of a young boy familiar with escape routes to lead her and about a dozen other people to the Staroselsky Forests west of Minsk. As they attempted to leave the ghetto they were stopped by a German guard, who demanded their papers. As the guard momentarily stepped away to enlist aid, Shusser and her daughter slipped away and back into the ghetto. On July 1, Shusser found an 11-year-old girl who claimed to know a safe route out of the city and to the partisans. Taking the risk, Shusser
and her daughter, led by the young girl, managed to escape the ghetto, evade the Germans in Minsk, and make it to the country. After two days, they came to the forests, where they were found by members of the Parkhomenko partisan otriad. After a short time, Shusser was sent to the Jewish 106 Family Detachment where she joined others from the ghetto underground, including Hersh Smoliar and Roza Lipskaia. Shusser and her daughter remained with the 106 until the liberation of Minsk, then returned to the ruined city.

In October 1944 Shusser appeared before a Communist Party committee in an attempt to reinstate her membership, having destroyed her membership papers during the occupation. She presented a signed statement from Hersh Smoliar, the surviving leader of the Minsk ghetto underground, attesting to her participation and effectiveness in the resistance. This was the only written statement of support known to be given by Smoliar for a member of the underground—indicative of the key role Shusser had played in the ghetto underground (Shusser 1944, National Archives of the Republic of Belarus).
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Jewish resistance activities against German extermination policies in European ghettos and concentration camps during World War II have been well documented and studied since the end of the 1939-1945 conflict. However, until much more recently, less information was available about Jewish resistance in the Soviet Union. Prior to the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, few studies had been made on any Jewish uprising against the Nazi occupation on Russian soil.

In the *Proceedings of the Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance*, detailing presentations at a 1968 meeting of Holocaust scholars held in Israel, virtually no mention is offered on Russia’s Jewish uprising against the Nazi occupation. To that time, perhaps the most prominent work available on the Jewish resistance in Russia was Hersh Smoliar’s 1966 *Resistance in Minsk*. That publication, in English, was a translation of his original 1946 Yiddish language recollections on the Minsk ghetto underground. Beyond Smoliar’s first-person, primary resource work, much of what was available was largely nonreferenced publications on the Russian Jewish resistance such, as editor J. N. Porter’s 1982 work *Jewish Partisans: A Documentary of Jewish Resistance in the Soviet Union During World War II*. Even M. Barkai’s 1954 Hebrew language publication *Seifer*
Milchamot Hagetaot, with its extensive overview of wartime Jewish resistance in Eastern Europe and parts of German-occupied Soviet Union, makes no mention of Minsk. Reissued in 1962 in English translation as The Fighting Ghettos, Barkai’s work was one of the earliest publications to offer a wider view of Jewish resistance during World War II.

However, since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, access to heretofore restricted archives and individuals involved with Jewish partisan and ghetto resistance activities has become increasingly more available. By 1995 Belarusian Holocaust scholar L. Smilovitsky had accessed that country’s wartime archival information and begun writing on the Minsk ghetto resistance. His offering revealed not only a cogent resistance organization existing within the ghetto and linked to the partisans, but the presence of Jewish women as key members of the underground.

In a July 1995 tour of former sites of the Minsk ghetto with Jewish partisan Felicks Lipskii, this researcher became aware of the wartime resistance. During a return visit to Minsk in August 1999 for funded research, video interviews were conducted with a number of Jewish men and women participants in the partisan and underground resistance. Many individuals interviewed related knowledge of, or direct wartime contact with, persons identified in previously published historical material as prominent members of the Minsk ghetto underground organization. With this information, it was becoming apparent women were playing important roles ranging from lower-level organization to high-level operational planning and execution. During a third trip, in August 2001, this researcher studied primary resource documents from the wartime-era Belarusian national archives. Again, many of these documents referenced a core group of women conducting
work vital to the resistance and critical to the operation of the ghetto underground. More recently, Epstein’s 2008 *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941-1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* added to the information base created in earlier research.

With Belarusian archives now near fully accessible, additional research can be conducted into many aspects of the wartime Jewish resistance, the Minsk ghetto underground, and women’s roles in both. In addition, archival records located at Israel’s Yad Vashem and The Ghetto Fighter’s House and in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, combined with newly available German wartime military documents, offers unprecedented opportunities for researchers.

For nearly 50 years after the end of World War II, Russia’s Great Patriotic War, the story of Minsk’s ghetto underground was virtually unknown beyond those taking part in that resistance. However, the stories of the Jewish resistance success and heroism, and the women and men involved, could not remain hidden forever. In the 1990s some of the earliest study began of this, until then, virtually unknown aspect of the Holocaust. By 2001 this researcher had conducted multiple trips to Belarus studying the Jewish resistance and ghetto underground. Perhaps most important to this research were multiple videotaped interviews done with Jewish participants of the partisans and ghetto underground. These visual documentations of the conflict remain some of the earliest, and perhaps sole, visual historical recollection of these women’s and men’s participation in the Jewish resistance. In doing these interviews and archival research, names such as Roza Lipskaia, Tsipa Botvinik, Nadezhda Shusser, Dora Berson, and Emma Rodova continued as prominent for association at the top levels of organization, planning, and execution of the Jewish underground resistance in the Minsk ghetto. Additionally, other
women made important contributions to the fight against the German occupation. It is clear then, by this research and by work done by others, that not only was there an ongoing and significant Jewish resistance but that a large portion of it was dependent upon the contributions of women.
References


I lived in Minsk for four years before the war, but I was born in Vitebsk. I came to Minsk in 1937 [when I was] 23. [When the war started] I was married and living with my husband and daughter, who was born in 1939. I just took care of my child. I didn’t work.

[When the invaders came to Minsk] the first German arrived on a motorcycle and stopped just in front of my house. The Germans gathered up all the Jewish people. When someone asked what you will do with the Jewish people, they said, “You will be kaput.”

There was a large order for all the Jewish people to go into a ghetto. To gather in one place. The Germans arranged a special district. Everyone who did not live in that district had to move. My husband lived within the territory of the ghetto so we didn’t have to move. But we had to take families from other districts into our flat. There were three families living in our flat. Five of us and six or seven others. We didn’t know the others, they were told to live with us.

The first thing [the Germans] did was make everybody wear the sign of the Jews. They made everyone wear the sign and gave everyone a job. I was a cleaner. [At this
time] my husband was away from the ghetto. On his trip he was walking back to Minsk when he met some workers who told him everyone had left Minsk. There was bombing along the way so many people could not escape. We heard he was walking on the road, but because he didn’t come back we thought he was dead. [But] he came back in 1945 after the war. He had joined the army and was in the far east working on planes. My daughter died and the parents of my husband also died, so I was by myself.

There was a huge raid in the ghetto. This was when my daughter died. I decided I must escape because I was on my own. On the 20th of November 1941 there was a raid. [The Germans took] everybody—men, women, children. I did not have any documents. I knew I had no chance, so I wanted to escape through the barbed wire. I thought that during the pogrom nobody would be brave enough to escape. I thought this would be the perfect day. The police and others were very busy. I was very, very careful, and like a cat I escaped through the wire.

I escaped with a plan. I went to the printing house where my husband’s relatives lived. His uncle was a tailor. The uncle was Jewish, but he wasn’t in the ghetto. The fascists needed tailors, but eventually they killed him. I stayed at his place and asked him if he could get me a job. He had a friend who worked in the printing house. The friend went to the Germans and told him I was his wife and needed a job. I became a cleaner. I was washing and cleaning. I was like a chambermaid.

I worked there until July 1942. But I was also participating in the underground movement. One day I met a man who also worked in the printing house. He was also a Byelorussian. He asked me, “Do you believe in the victory of our army?” I replied, “Of
course I believe, because there is no use to live without faith.” So he said “Then you must help us.”

They started to give me tasks. The first order was to distribute the underground newspaper. A friend who called me his wife, his friend Boris Pupka was working with printing texts, and I gave him texts to print. Nobody knew about the underground movement but they needed for people to find out about the movement to organize and fight. We needed to get some printed material from the print house to the partisan groups.

It was very difficult to steal anything from the print house, but I was the chambermaid and I was in charge of the keys. The underground knew I had the keys, so it became my responsibility to steal all the material. I had to meet people [from the underground] from time to time to give them paper. They had to say key words to me [to identify themselves]. They would ask me if I could tell them where a quiet street was. I would tell them, “Go to the left.” It was very dangerous. Germans were everywhere. They could notice what we were doing.

One day we got a task to print a newspaper, so people could know what was happening. It was a very difficult and dangerous task to print this in the printing house. It was not possible to do this during the day, it was so dangerous. I could only do this during the night, but I was afraid they would notice what I was doing. I told the printing chief’s wife that I had no time to wash during the day so I must stay at night. She said it was okay. There were other Jews involved, and we did the printing in the basement.

We worked quietly in the basement. We had a single lamp for light that we had to keep covered to keep other people from seeing the light. We could not stay there for a long time. We worked every night but only for a short time. It took us one month to make
one paper. Now we have computers. But then we had separate letters to make the words. We had to set each group of words into a frame.

We started to distribute the papers to the people. The Germans soon learned of the papers, but first thought the papers came from Moscow on the plane. Then we started to work on the second newspaper. The Germans were not idiots, and they decided to learn where the papers were from. They began to learn about the letters, so they could recognize them, and decided it was printed in this print house.

The Gestapo questioned Pupka, who was the main printer and also Jewish. They sent for him and started to ask him questions. He pretended not to know anything. He thanked the Germans for the job he had, that he liked it very much. He pretended to be unaware. The Germans recognized the printing, but he said he didn’t know anything. Another man was involved with the underground, and he was also a printer. He told us they recognized the printing but they were not sure, so we must be very careful.

Two days later the Gestapo came for Pupka. There was another man who worked there. He was a Byelorussian. He came up to me while I was cleaning and said the Gestapo is here. I had to pluck up all my courage and be brave to decide something very quickly. I went to Pupka and said, “Boris we must run away. The Gestapo is here.” We went into the yard; there were many Germans around but they didn’t take any notice of us. We kept going through the gate until we were in the street. We began to walk along the street, but Boris wanted a coat so he wouldn’t look so noticeable. He went back to get a coat and the Gestapo took him. Near what is now the Academy of Sciences we had a flat that the conspirators used. I waited there for Pupka, but he never came. I never saw him again.
I spent two days at the flat alone until the owner of the flat, who was also a participant in the underground, found out about the arrests at the printing company. He came and said that now he knew I was there because the Gestapo was looking for me everywhere. They closed all the ways out of the printing house. He made me move to another flat because it was very dangerous to stay where I was. I moved to the other flat and stayed four days there with another girl who was there. I stayed with this girl until a German officer who was in love with that girl came and he asked me what I was doing there. The other girl told the German officer that I was the wife of a friend that was out of town and she was taking care of me during that time. Later in the evening, when a person from the underground heard about this story, he said that I could not stay here anymore and moved me to another spot. It was very dangerous to move along the streets, because there were so many Germans around and I looked typically Jewish. But we were lucky and got to another flat.

I was hiding for two weeks in the other flat until some partisan group came for me. They came with a milk cart with large milk containers. I dressed up like a peasant and pretended I was with this milk. I was able to escape.

We went west and moved to the partisans group. There were two groups of about 30 people. Sixty people in all. There was a group of soldiers who were surrounded during the blockade. They organized the first partisan camp. After that they began to grow as people from the villages joined and the underground sent people who made the partisans grow. There were men and women, less women than men. The people, after they got this newspaper, they found out there were these groups. They tried to join these groups and fight.
It was difficult for women to live in the partisan groups. It was cold and we slept on the ground. After a while we built these huts made of wood, like tents, but it was still cold and frosty. After a while we dug down into the ground. It was cold and wet. It was very difficult for women. Another problem was that the men were young and the women were too. Many became wives and husbands and made families. I got married and made a family too. The rules were very strict. If a woman was married, you had to respect her. I lived with my husband for 53 years.

In 1945 my first husband came back. We met together, my first husband, my second husband, and me. We had a very serious talk. We decided it was up to me. I decided to stay with the second husband since we had experienced so much hardship and good times. We were together during the war, so I stayed with him. This is the story.

Figure A-1: Interviewing Bronya Gofman (right), with the researcher, Minsk, Belarus. August, 1999. Photograph by Sara Alloy.
Liubov Yefivnovna Tsukerman is my name. [I was born in] Minsk 1923 [and] have lived in Minsk my entire life. I was 18 when the war started. I had a brother, we were twins. We were in school in the 10th year. We were in class taking exams when we heard about the war. The teacher of geometry entered class. She was pale like a leaf. She announced the war had begun. The children did not realize what this did mean and could not imagine what war was. We still continued to finish the exam. I got excellent marks.

Just before the war started my mother and younger sister went to Novgorod to visit my mother’s brother. My father, my twin brother, and my sister were all here in Minsk when the war started. The bombing started in Minsk even while we were taking our exams. We couldn’t understand how the fascists could enter our country. My father was a great patriot, and he said it was not possible for the fascists to invade.

The bombing was all over. It was like a shower of bombs. I went into a building to escape, but the bombs were falling everywhere and destroying many buildings. I waited until the bombing stopped and went to my house. There were many holes from the
bombs. We could not stay where we were, so we decided to move in the direction of Mogilev. It was difficult to do because there were old people.

We were running away from the town. We got to the Mogelovski motorway in the direction of Moscow. We got about halfway, but my grandmother and grandfather couldn’t move anymore. We couldn’t leave them. Then the Germans came to that area. My mother and younger sister were evacuated into Russia by my uncle, so they were safe. The rest of us were still here.

We had to move back to Minsk by the fascists’ orders. We found our house was destroyed; everything was ruined. We only had what things we had taken with us. We all had to go to the ghetto like all Jewish people.

A friend of a neighbor of mine, Olga Botchevista, lived outside of the ghetto. She was a member of the underground movement. The friend and I gathered clothing and other stuff to give to her. We sneaked out of the ghetto and gave clothes we gathered to Olga. Olga gave these things to the partisans.

We started right after the war had begun. The people started to cooperate then. During the 10 days the people had to sign up for the ghetto, we were in contact with Olga. She liked me because I looked like a Russian girl. She liked me very much, so that’s when we started to work together.

The way of living was that no one supported us. All we had was what things and clothes we had from before the war. Children, not old people, because it was too difficult for them, sneaked out under the wire and went to the Russian district and exchanged clothes for food.
One day, me and my sister and my cousin and a group of young people sneaked under the wire and went to exchange some things for food. But some betrayers told the Germans that some Jewish children were exchanging clothes. The Germans stopped us and started to ask for documents. We knew if they saw any documents that said we were Jews they would kill us, so we never took any documents with us. There was a German man with a chain around his neck, an SS man. He started to speak German. I had learned German in school, so I could understand everything he said. I realized we would not survive. I thought we would not get back to the ghetto. The German soldier said leave the clothes here and bring the documents. We would have been happy to leave the clothes without showing the documents. Then he changed his mind and started to put bullets in the gun. He started to load the gun when suddenly another German soldier arrived, someone of higher rank. He asked the first soldier, “What are you going to do?” The SS man said, “These are Jewish people. They came here to exchange things and I want to shoot them.” And he said, “What for?” He came up to me and said, “That’s not a Jewish girl,” because I had fair hair and blue eyes, so he said, “Let them go and they will bring the documents like they agreed the first time.” This man told him, because he was the commander.

During this couple of minutes I remembered all my life. I was only 18 but they were going to shoot me. I was very frightened, and I remembered everything. I said goodbye to everybody. They let us go and told us to get out of here. We were leaving, but I had a feeling that we would get shot in the back. After that I couldn’t sleep quietly for months. That was the way we lived, by exchanging things. It was very risky.
One day I was going to visit Olga. I found out she was in prison. This was to be the last time we gathered clothes for the partisans. After this, Olga promised to take me and her son and her sister with her small child and we were going to join the partisans. That was after this last task. But Olga and her whole family got arrested. I lost all of my connections.

I found out that all of this family had been imprisoned. Then they all were hung on gallows in different parts of the town. At first I didn’t believe it. When I went to see her, I didn’t recognize her. She was beaten to death. When in prison they questioned them, and they were violent. The Germans were guarding all over; you couldn’t even let a tear go out of your eye or say a word. All the time Olga was hanging, she had a sign around her neck, “We are partisans and we are killing Germans.”

Her neighbor next door was a betrayer. Olga knew she wasn’t honest and told everybody to stay away from her. This neighbor, she betrayed. She gave information about Olga. Not only Olga and her family was hung but also two soldiers from the partisan group that came to get clothes and take us away. The betrayer gave information about them so it was Olga and her family and two soldiers.

At this time there was raid after raid happening in the ghetto. We started to search for some connections to the partisans to get away from the ghetto. I had another friend whose mother did not look Jewish. She looked like a Russian woman. She spent a lot of time in the Russian district. I found from her that the partisans were in the direction of Slutsk.

The woman who did not look like a Jew, her daughter, and me, we decided to escape from the ghetto. We went to Slutsk. On the way, we met some gypsy woman. She
came up to me and said let me tell you your fortune. Not to the woman, not to the daughter, but only up to me. She said, “You’re going to have a very hard way. It will be hard but you will survive. You will be alive, and that is all.”

We were going along the Slutsk motorway. There were different lorries going along with food for the Germans. The drivers were Russian people. We stopped one of the lorries, and the man agreed to take us onboard. We gave him some clothes and didn’t say anything. There were some Russian people also going somewhere. We were stopped by the German guard post. The Germans started to ask, “Who are these people? Where are you going?” The driver answered, “Some people who asked me to give them a ride.” The Germans said to prepare to show the documents. But we didn’t have any documents. We knew he would kill everybody. He got to everybody but me, when suddenly it began such a shower. Just before he went to check my documents, it started to pour rain. It was like G-d saved us. He couldn’t check the documents anymore, because it was pouring. Even if he got in the driver’s place, he couldn’t. He let us go. It was another time I remembered my life but everything was okay.

We got to the village and started asking people if any partisans appeared in this place. The people told us, yes, they had, but they have taken away clothes from us because they didn’t have anything. We needed to get away from the Germans to join the partisans. We stayed with a woman and next day came some partisans and we joined them. For two weeks they were asking us questions and checking us to make sure we were not betrayers or fascists. Then we joined and we were in these partisan groups. Me and my friend Lita were the only two Jewish girls, but they treated us okay. We did women’s stuff. We cooked. We washed. We helped in the hospital, because there was not
a lot of medical help. We were also guards and slept very little, three hours each night. Our camp was not very big. But five or six small camps formed a brigade. Every brigade had something like a thousand and a half people.

We had to move all the time. We were pressed. We were hunted by the Germans. There was a surprise raid. The Germans attacked with tanks. There was a sudden alarm. We didn’t have any cars or trucks, only horses and carts. We got into the carts. We could see the tanks coming. We all ran in different directions. We ran to the hill above the river and then down the hill into the river. I got undressed and prepared to swim across the river. My friend Anya, who was with me, could not swim. I could swim very well, but I couldn’t leave Anya, so I came back. We hid in the weeds growing out of the river off the riverbank. They were quite high, and we hid in these plants. Another problem was the river was full of leeches and they stuck all over us. It was a problem to clean ourselves from these things. We hid in the water for a whole day until it got quiet. It was just the two of us because all the others had run away. Suddenly, we saw an old man in a boat. We were sure he was not involved with the Germans, so we asked him to take us to the other side of the river. It was very early in the morning when we started to cross. We had to watch for lights, because the Germans had put guards on all the roads to hunt for partisans. On the other side of the river there was a big oak tree. The boatman suggested we lie under this tree and he would try to find some partisans to save us. By the end of the day, he was able to find partisans. Our partisan group thought we were not alive anymore. They were very happy to see us.

It so happened that I survived, but this whole war destroyed my family. My mother and younger sister survived because they were in the village of Prunza but
grandfather’s cousins and all died during the war. I thank G-d I did not. The partisans treated me very well and helped me after the war. I found my mother and younger sister. I found a job.

Figure B-1: Interviewing Liubov Tsukerman *(left)*, with Tatiana Romanovich, interpreter, Minsk, Belarus. August 1999. Photograph by the author.
Appendix C


Figure C-1: Cherlova application. Courtesy of National Archives of the Republic of Belarus.
Translation of Cherlova application

Explanatory Note

On June 5, 1941, I was on my way to the village of Kopeiko, Rudensk district, to pick up my child to evacuate with him. I found my 2-year-old child very sick. It was impossible to go with him. I had lived in this village with my parents-in-law until November 29, 1941. I could not stay longer and went to the city. At the beginning there, I did not have a job and anything for a living. I was forced to find a job.

In February 1942, I began to work as a cleaning woman at the field hospital station Kolodishchi. Working there, I made contact with the underground organization that was in touch with the partisans unit Znamya. I had received special orders through this connection. They were fairly serious and risky because had to be carried out in the garrisons.

In June 1943, I went directly to a partisan unit.

I was a candidate member of the Communist Party. I buried my member’s card (No. 055556) in the village when I had to leave.

After liberation in that area by the Red Army, I went to village but couldn’t find my card.

(Signed) Cherlova
Statement from Belarusian Communist Party recertifying Cherlova for membership.

Figure C-2: Communist Party statement. Courtesy of National Archives of the Republic of Belarus.
Translation of Communist Party statement.

Communist Party Belarus
From the excerpt of the meeting, October 5, 1945

Cherlova, Liubov Markovna was born in 1917. A candidate member of the Communist Party since 1937.

Before the war she had worked as an economic planner.

From June to December 1941, she had lived in the village of Kopeiko, Rudensk district, region of Minsk.

From December 1941 to February 1942, she had lived in Minsk. Did not have any job.

From February 1942, to June 1943, she was working as a cleaning woman in the Germans’ hospital at stations Slepyanka and Kolodishchy.

From June 1943 to July 1944, she was a common soldier in the partisans unit Znamya brigade Razgrom.

Since August 1944 to present time, she has worked as an (economic) planner.

She has award medal Partisan of the Great Patriotic War (2nd Degree).

Resolution: Cherlova had lived in the occupied territory since October 1942. She helped partisans of Slutsk zone with information and medical supplies while living on the occupied territory up to the time she joined the partisans unit.

Taken into account that she was active in the Germans’ rear area, she can keep her membership in the Communist Party.

(signed) Secretary P.K. Korolev

[Official stamp of National Archives of the Republic of Belarus listing location of document in archival files]
Appendix D


Figure D-1: Shusser application Courtesy of National Archives of the Republic of Belarus.
Translation of Shusser application.

Explanatory Note

I, Shusser, Nadezhda Grigoryevna, was born in 1898. A member of the Communist Party since 1920. I worked at the sewing factory up until 1 a.m. on June 25, 1941. I went out of Minsk at night on June 26 in the direction of the Moscow highway. At 10 a.m., bombing of this highway began. I turned right with a group of people in the direction of Gorodishche to take a train. At this time, German bombing of the highway was very strong. In the evening, we ran into big tank landing. Germans were everywhere around. I was wandering the forest trying to find the way. Many times I was under bombing, but by July 7 I was forced to go back to Minsk.

I tried to find members of the Communist Party there to contact them. I met one acquainted woman. Together we started to organize a group of communists, and by September 1941 there were 20 people in this group. We decided not to work for the Germans, sabotage their orders, not to turn in radios but instead bury them, and destroy members’ cards of the Communist Party, so in case of arrest Germans will not get them. Also we agreed to keep conspiracy. We met with the members of the underground committee Mikhail Gebelev and Efim Stolyarevich (real name Smoliar, Grigoriy Davidovich) who worked as a stoker in the hospital in the ghetto. We were meeting him there.

Since the beginning of November, I had worked only according to the assignments of the underground party’s committee. For conspiracy we used only trusted liaisons. One of my liaisons, Emma Rodova, was killed by the Nazis in prison.
At that time I was head of the Group of 10, and we carried out different tasks. Some of them were make contact with intelligentsia (doctors, engineers) in ghetto, find fonts for printing, go to work on Germans’ factories that supplies war front. In December, 1941, I was assigned to organize a group of 15 to sabotage on the plant Bolshevik that provided only for the front. At the same time we provided warm clothes and gloves for the partisans. As a head of a Group of 10, I personally was responsible to prepare people for partisans units and only those who really could be trusted. Due to that, I was in touch with Grigory Rubin and Vladimir Kravchinsky.

I had contact with Frunze brigade since September 1942. Those contacts were interrupted often, as many liaisons were killed. I resided in ghetto up to June 1943. In June I went to West. At first I was in the Parkomenko partisans unit. In September, I was instructed by the underground committee to go to the Family Partisan Unit No. 106. I had been in charge of the Communist Party’s organization of that unit since October 1943.

After partisan units joined with the Red Army, I returned to Minsk with my 15-years-old daughter. My husband has been fighting at war from its very beginning. He has awards from the government. My son was killed in Stalingrad.
Hersh Smolier statement to Belarusian Communist Party in support of Shusser application.

Figure D-2: Smolian statement. Courtesy of National Archives of the Republic of Belarus.
Certificate

I’m writing this reference for Shusser, Nadezhda. It is to confirm that she had very strong contacts with the underground organization of the Communist Party in the city of Minsk. As an authorized person of this organization, I gave her assignments very often. She was head of the Group of 10 (party’s unit). She executed all tasks orderly and scrupulously (in good faith). Shusser organized the group of people to work on Germans plant for massive acts of sabotage there and to supply partisans with warm clothes.

Shusser actively helped to supply partisans unit with underground printing houses.

After I got special party’s order and left, Shusser was appointed by the committee as a head of underground job in ghetto.

(Signed) H. Smoliar

Party’s bynames: “Efrim Smoliarevich,”

“Skromny”

At present time responsible editor of the local newspaper The Voice of Selsnin

[Official stamp of National Archives of the Republic of Belarus listing location of document in archival files]
ЗАКЛЮЧЕНИЕ

на члена ВКП(б) ЛУССЕР, Михаила Соломоновича,
представляю: 1) то, что с 1931 года, Соломонович Луисер, Михаила Соломоновича, был включен в списки участников ВКП(б) и стал членом партии в 1933 году. 2) Тот, кто подписывает настоящий документ, подтвердил, что Луисер Михаил Соломонович был включен в списки участников ВКП(б) и стал членом партии в 1933 году.

4 мая 1941 года.

Директор товарищества "Русская".

Иванов.

Приложение 1.

Согласно документам, Луисер Михаил Соломонович был включен в списки участников ВКП(б) и стал членом партии в 1933 году. Он активно участвовал в работе партии, был ответственным за различные задачи по организации работы, включая финансовые вопросы.

Приложение 2.

Документы, подтверждающие участие Луисера Михаила Соломоновича в деятельности ВКП(б) и его активную роль в партии.

Приложение 3.

Документы, подтверждающие участие Луисера Михаила Соломоновича в организации работы партии.

Приложение 4.

Документы, подтверждающие участие Луисера Михаила Соломоновича в финансовой деятельности партии.

Приложение 5.

Документы, подтверждающие участие Луисера Михаила Соломоновича в работе по организации работы партии.

Приложение 6.

Документы, подтверждающие участие Луисера Михаила Соломоновича в организации работы партии.

Приложение 7.

Документы, подтверждающие участие Луисера Михаила Соломоновича в финансовой деятельности партии.

Приложение 8.

Документы, подтверждающие участие Луисера Михаила Соломоновича в работе по организации работы партии.
Statement from Belarusian Communist Party recertifying Shusser for membership.

Page 2.

Figure D-3: Belarusian Communist Party statement. Courtesy of National Archives of the Republic of Belarus.
Translation of Belarusian Communist Party statement.

Resolution

About Application from Shusser, Nadezhda Grigoryevna to replace her member’s card of the Communist Party instead of one that had been destroyed.

As Shusser said, at 12 a.m. June 24, 1941, she left her factory. On June 25, she with her daughter went in the direction of Moscow’s highway.

On June 26, she was near Smolevich. Because of German bombing, she turned to the direction of Gorodishche. In the evening on this day, they ran into big German tank landing.

On June 27, they spent night in forest. On 28 and 29, they were near railroad to take train, but it was impossible because of bombing. On June 29, she got to Smolevich.

From July 1 to July 7, they were wandering in the forest trying to run away from the Germans but were forced to return to Minsk. She came to her apartment in Minsk on July 10, 1941, with her daughter.

On August 1, 1941, Germans established ghetto and Shusser’s apartment was located in that region. She had not worked until she got instructions from the members of the underground party’s organization Gebelev, Smoliar, Baturina, and others.

Following to their orders she was working in October 1941 in the state farm, then from December 1941 to February 1942 at the plant Bolshevik. From March 1942 to June 1942 on the railroad. From February to June 1943 she worked on Ostland Firm.
While working, she also managed periodically to carry out assignment to put children in Russian orphanages to save them from pogroms. At the same time she was head of the Group of 10 in the ghetto.

As confirmed by documents, since September 1941 Shusser was in touch with the underground organization and its members Baturina, Gorohova, Gebelev, Smoliar, Feldman, before they went to the partisans unit.

Shusser wanted to go to partisans but did not get permission from the underground organization (from Gebelev). On March 10, 1942, permission was received but was changed two hours prior to her leaving. New information came through the liaison Emma Rozova (sic). It said that Shusser had to stay and send another person from her Group of 10.

In November 1942 Smoliar sent liaison to pick up a group of people including Shusser with her daughter. This instruction was hidden from her by the man (Kisel-Komarovsky) who got it. He took his family instead and went with the liaison.

Shusser again resumed her efforts to find the way to get out from ghetto. On May 1, 1943, with the boy Lenya as a guide and with some reliable people Shusser went in the direction of the Staroselsky Forest. On May 2, this group of 12 was stopped by Germans. When one of the Nazis went to make a report, Shusser ran away and went into hiding in ghetto for a few days.

Only on July 1 she found a guide, the girl 11 years old, to take her daughter and then her on July 3 to the partisans. She was in the Parhomenko partisans unit in the family unit No. 106.
Shusser had been in charge of the Communist Party organization of this unit until Red Army came.

She burned her member’s card in August 1941.

As confirmed by the documents, Shusser helped partisans with important information and underground printing houses. Living in ghetto she was brave propagandist. Following the orders from underground organization she worked at the Germans’ plants to harm them.