

The Treblinka Uprising – The Uprising of the Prisoners of the Extermination Camp Treblinka in August 1943

Key enquiry questions and learning from topic study.

- Developing learning about the Holocaust that goes beyond Auschwitz
- Highlighting the key theme of resistance in the Holocaust
- Exploring the role of women in the Treblinka Uprising

Historical Background to the Treblinka Uprising

- The penal labour camp (Treblinka I), primarily for (ethnic) Poles, was located near the village of Treblinka (Summer 1941 to July 1944). In circa May 1942 construction began on Treblinka II, which became operational with the start of the deportations from the Warsaw ghetto (mid-July 1942). Treblinka II was located by the Malkinia-Siedlce railway line, close to the Wolka Okraglik village, to where survivor Samuel Willenberg first escaped after the uprising.
- Treblinka II was purposely built as an extermination camp, where most people who went died within hours of arrival. There was no attached slave-labour complex, just a small prisoner work force to sort the property of deportees, act as camp servants, and facilitate the killing process (cutting women's hair, emptying the gas chambers, burying bodies, then later burning corpses).
- From July 1942 to August 1943 approximately 870,000 Jews were killed at Treblinka II, with estimations that less than 100 survived WW2. In addition, approx. 2,000 Roma were murdered there. Treblinka II was the camp with the second biggest death toll after Auschwitz and was the deadliest camp involved in Operation Reinhardt; an operation responsible for killing approximately 1.7 million Jews. Treblinka I and II were entirely separate and not part of the same complex.

The Deportations to Treblinka II

- From August to November 1942, approx. 346,000 Polish Jews were deported from the Radom district and about 33,300 from the Lublin district to Treblinka.
- By February 1943, over 110,000 Jews had been deported from Bialystok District ghettos.
- In March 1943, the first Jews arrived at Treblinka from Greece and Macedonia Escapes:



Konskie Jews being deported to the death camp of Treblinka. Poland 1942. Unknown Author, [Public Domain via Wikimedia commons](#).

A number of Jews managed to escape from transports en route to Treblinka. A handful managed to escape after being selected for the small prisoner workforce, generally hidden in piles of deportees' belongings transported out of the camp by train, or from external work units (such as cutting branches in the forest). The Jewish and Polish resistance alerted the outside world to what was happening at Treblinka by smuggling out reports based on information provided by escapees.

The Uprising

- Planning for an uprising / mass escape began late 1942 / early 1943.
- Prisoners stole arms and weapons after duplicating the key to the armoury.
- The uprising broke out on August 2, 1943, with wooden buildings set on fire, and c700 of 840 prisoners participating in an attempt at mass escape.
- Numbers vary considerably in sources. It is estimated that 200-300 got beyond the camp perimeter. Most escapees were soon killed and only a small number are known to have survived until after the war.
- The gas chambers were not made of wood, and therefore remained intact and were used after the uprising until they were dismantled by the remaining prisoners, who were then shot after it was completed. To hide evidence, and deter visitors, a farmhouse was constructed on the site, occupied by a former Ukrainian guard.



Smoke from Treblinka II from a fire set by prisoners on 2 August 1943, during the Uprising. Photo taken by Zygmund Sombadzki and presented by Franciszek Żabecki during trial in Düsseldorf in 1964. [Public Domain via Wikimedia commons.](#)

It was the intention of the Nazis that death camps like Treblinka II were to remain secret and so little documentation is found, but due to Jewish resistance these plans were unsuccessful, and oral testimonies exist that are of great importance

Samuel Willenberg's testimony in his book *Revolt in Treblinka* about escaping the camp

'Reaching the fence, a horrifying sight greeted me: masses of human corpses strewn between the tank obstacles. Dead prisoners stood erect like tombstones; thick masses of human bodies leaned against the obstacles and the barbed wire fences... machine gun fire continued to rain relentlessly from the guard towers. As I skipped across the bodies of my dead comrades, I suddenly felt a jolt of pain in my leg and a sharp blow. My shoe filled with blood. I had been hit in the leg. Limping, I reached the railroad track, crossed into the forest, and resumed running.'

Willenberg also made sculptures to commemorate the victims of Treblinka and said it shows *'the heroism of the Jews in trying to destroy Treblinka.'*

Command at Treblinka II



- At Treblinka II there were 25 to 35 police officials and SS guards and police with the first commandant being Dr Irmfried Eberl who was dismissed in August 1942, which led to SS Captain Franz Stangl replacing him.
- In addition there were approx. 100-120 'Trawniki men' as guards, who were mainly Ukrainians and ethnic Germans.
- After the uprising, deputy commandant Kurt Franz was given responsibility for overseeing the liquidation of the camp and covering up the traces of the genocide.

Role of women in the Treblinka uprising

- Women's experiences during the Holocaust in general are not as explored as men, nor are there as many testimonies, and this remains true with Treblinka II
- Women were involved in the critical spaces of resistance at Treblinka II involving the infirmary, the kitchen, storage building and barracks where they assisted in carrying messages between these spaces. For example, Bronka Sukno worked at the tailor shop and was a courier in planning the resistance; while Dr Irena Lewkowska was the camp prisoner doctor and assisted prisoners when she could and helped the resistance.
- Women provided information about the changing guard visits as well as concealing arms for the uprising in the kitchen – many testimonies fail to mention how this area mostly consisted of women.
- By the beginning of 1943 approximately 50 women were working in Treblinka, although only a few survived

Testimony of Eliahu Rosenberg on his experience in Treblinka and on the treatment of women and children

'First of all, they sent the women to the gas chambers. They were put in a barrack. They undressed and their hair was sheared... in the Himmelstraße (path to the gas chambers) stood Germans and Ukrainians with dogs which bit the women in every part of their bodies, and then they went into the gas chambers... It was terrible to hear the screaming, the agony of the women and children. They would cry "Mame" "Tata!" but a few minutes later they would choke to death.'

Testimony of Yankel Wiernik in his book *A year in Treblinka* about his participation in the uprising

'We silently bade farewell to the spot where the ashes of our brethren were buried. Sorrow and suffering had bound us to Treblinka, but we were still alive and wanted to escape from this place where so many innocent victims had perished. The long processions, those ghastly caravans of death, were still before our eyes, crying out for vengeance. We knew what lay hidden beneath the surface of this soil. We were the only ones left alive to tell the story. Silently, we took our leave of the ashes of our fellow Jews and vowed that, out of their blood, an avenger would arise. Suddenly we heard the signal - a shot fired into the air.

I grabbed some guns and let fly right and left, but when I saw that the road to escape stood open, I picked up an axe and a saw, and ran. At first, we were in control of the situation. However, within a short time pursuit got under way from every direction, from Malkinia, Kosow and from the Treblinka Penal Camp. It seemed that when they saw the fires and heard the shooting, they sent help at once.'

Summary of key dates and figures

- From its construction to when the camp was dismantled, an estimated 870,000 to 925,000 people died at Treblinka II mostly Jews, but also Roma, Soviet POWS and Poles.
- The Uprising occurred on August 2, 1943, where 200-300 inmates managed to escape out of roughly 800, but records show a very few survived to the end of the war.
- Women played a significant role in the Uprising including concealing arms for the revolt, notifying inmates of guard visits and relaying messages between prisoners in different areas of the camp.
- In autumn 1943, the camp infrastructure was systematically dismantled to remove all material traces of it, lupine was planted, and a farm erected on the site to deter the curious. The farm was inhabited by a former Ukrainian guard and set on fire in July 1944. The site was liberated by the Soviet Red Army at the end of July 1944.



This image is of Dr. Berek Lajcher, a Jewish prisoner in Treblinka and was a leader of the Uprising in August 1943, where he killed. This photograph is from before the war from his time at university, in Warsaw. Unknown Author. [Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons.](#)



The commemoration of Treblinka. There are approx. 17,000 granite stones in the symbolic cemetery around the main memorial at Treblinka II, 221 bear names of destroyed communities. Only one stone bears the name of an individual, dedicated to Janusz Korczak and the orphans (1978).

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Map of the extermination camp Treblinka II from [Muzeum Treblinka](#)

Key Resources for Teacher Subject Knowledge Development

- Yitzhak Arad, The Operation Reinhard death camps: Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka. Indiana University Press; Vad Yashem, 1987 [Expanded and updated second edition, 2018]. Useful for background knowledge on how Treblinka was part of Operation Reinhardt. The book also explores the role of women prisoners.
- Yankel Wiernik, A year in Treblinka. New York: American representation of the General Jewish Workers' Union of Poland, 1945 – This book gives a good first-hand account of the Treblinka camp, especially the uprising. This resource would be useful for a teacher's further reading. Accessible cheaply via Kindle. Published 1944 in Polish, Yiddish and English.
- Samuel Willenberg, Revolt in Treblinka. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Skorpion, 1992 – This resource is by one of the last survivors of Treblinka who also participated in the uprising. As such it provides in depth knowledge on the revolt and how it was planned and executed. It would be useful if teachers wanted to use first-hand accounts. See also on Yad Vashem's website the [Interview with Samuel Willenberg, Survivor of the Treblinka Death Camp.](#)
- Chad Gibbs online lecture [Locating Women in the Revolt: Gender and Spaces of Resistance at Treblinka.](#) Useful for more knowledge about the role of women in Treblinka and in the uprising. An article summarising the lecture can be found here. See also Chad Gibbs, [The Conversation, Defying the Holocaust Didn't Just Mean Uprising and Revolt: Remembering Jews' Everyday Resistance on Yom HaShoah and Year-round](#) (11 April, 2023), and [Testimonies and Resistance at Treblinka: Reflections from 2020–2021](#) [Breslauer, Rutman, and Anderson Research Fellow Chad Gibbs.](#)

There are a number of accessible webpages produced by the historians / staff of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw – based on archival materials and current research, see, for example:

- Anna Majchrowska, [A man escaped from Treblinka... The story of Jakub Krzepicki](#) – includes photographs, and a map Krzepicki drew after escaping and returning to the Warsaw ghetto. The most extensive, and influential account by an escapee. Krzepicki joined the Jewish Combat Organization, and probably died in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.
- Przemysław Batorski, [“We saw ourselves already outside the gates of the inferno”](#). Treblinka uprising through the eyes of Jankiel Wiernik – Wiernik was the author of the first published account of the uprising (1944, Warsaw and New York)
- Przemysław Batorski, [“Treblinka must cease to exist.”](#) Account of the rebellion at the extermination camp on August 2, 1943 – includes part of Samuel Rajzman’s account

Further Online Resources:

- [Bronka Suko – Prisoner T2](#). Brief exploration of the role of women at Treblinka and summary of testimony from Bronka Sukno, one of the only women survivors, and her life there. This resource would be useful to teachers when exploring the role of women in Treblinka.
- [2nd August 1943: The Treblinka Uprising](#). Short summary of event by the Holocaust Educational Trust. [The Image of Treblinka in the eyes of Samuel Willenberg](#) (January 2020) – exhibition catalogue with images of Willenberg’s sculptures of Treblinka.

Resources for the Classroom

- [2 August 1943: Uprising of Prisoners at Treblinka. Holocaust Memorial Day Trust](#). This resource gives a good summary of Treblinka I and Treblinka II, and their differences, as well as the Treblinka Uprising itself, and it is easily understood by young people. It outlines essential knowledge for the uprising from how Treblinka was constructed to how the revolt occurred. Another blog on this website includes work on resistance and rescuers which would further highlight the crucial theme of resistance.
- [Treblinka. Holocaust Encyclopaedia](#). United States Memorial Museum. This resource shows the key facts of Treblinka, simplifying the events for students. It not only provides information on the uprising itself, but also goes into detail about the location and topography of Treblinka, as well as the deportations and staff there. There are also hyperlinks on this article to maps of Treblinka, photographs, oral histories and

personal stories of people who survived Treblinka. This allows teachers to humanise the victims and survivors and to foster in depth knowledge of what happened.

- [Treblinka II. Muzeum Treblinka.](#) This resource contains a map of Treblinka II as well as recent photos of Treblinka in present day, showcasing the memorial to the victims who died there. This is useful to show how barely anything remains of the original structure due to the attempts of German authorities to cover up evidence of the genocide that occurred there. This resource also connects to a timeline of Treblinka that is easily understood by students. There are hyperlinks to more information on the uprising itself and a list of prisoners who survived.