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Matthew Brzezinski, *Isaac's Army: A Story of Courage and Survival in Nazi-Occupied Poland*. New York: Random House, 2012. Pp. xx, 472. ISBN 978-0-553-80727-1.

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Isaac's Army has garnered much critical acclaim, as most reviewers have focused on the richly woven tale of the book's protagonists—three Jews who spent most of the war fighting in Warsaw. Twenty-four-year-old Isaac Zuckerman, his future wife Zivia Lubetkin, and teenager Simha Ratheiser formed the core of the Jewish Fighting Organization, which played a lead role in mobilizing Warsaw's Jews against the Nazi occupiers. But journalist Matthew Brzezinski¹ does more than simply tell the story of their battle for survival. He has added much to the historical record about Poland, the Jewish population of Warsaw, and the Second World War. Specifically, he debunks the tenacious myth that most of Poland's Jews rolled over and died during the Holocaust that followed the German and Soviet dismemberment of their country in September 1939.

Brzezinski shows that there was in fact an active Jewish resistance movement from the earliest days of the war. Previous work on the subject has concentrated on the two large-scale uprisings in Warsaw, while *Isaac's Army* stresses the continuous nature of the resistance, as Jews in Poland, and particularly Warsaw, engaged in a daily fight for survival. Although Brzezinski duly recounts how their fellow Poles, even fellow Jewish Poles, often undermined the resistance fighters, his book does not dwell on the crimes Polish citizens at times committed, nor seek to extend blame for the severity of the Holocaust beyond Nazi Germany. Rather, it finely balances the betrayals of Poland's Jews by their countrymen against the many sacrifices of countless non-Jewish Poles who risked their own and their families' lives to help Jews. Brzezinski also fearlessly highlights just where and when Polish Jews worked for their German tormentors, hoping vainly to improve their own chances for survival.

Brzezinski demonstrates that, though they needed to rely on each other for survival, the various Jewish resistance groups at times actually worked against each other, even late in the war. And, far worse, at a critical stage of the occupation, when the industrial slaughter of Polish Jews was just ramping up, a key group of Jewish elders obstructed the efforts of younger Jews to organize for their people's common defense. The older generation, like many Jews elsewhere in Hitler's Reich, could not believe or accept what the Germans had planned for them, despite their experience of virulent European anti-Semitism before the war. For instance, in December 1941, Mark Edelman, a Jewish grave digger from a small Polish village, managed to escape from the Chelmno extermination camp. He promptly went to Warsaw's massive Jewish ghetto to tell others what the Germans had done to Jews rounded up from their villages. He nonetheless failed to rouse Warsaw's Jews to action.

His story was entirely outside the Jewish experience. Pogroms, Jews could understand. They had ample historic precedent...What the grave digger described was not a pogrom. It was more sinister, cold and clinical in its lack of emotion and reliance on technology. "People were unable to believe that they could be killed like that," Edelman remembered.

The grave digger was brought before an assembly of skeptical Ghetto elders, Judenrat [Jewish Council] members, and senior relief agency managers to relate his tale. "Impossible," Zivia recalled one indignant speaker declaring, dismissing his account. "Something like this could never happen in the heart of Europe, in Warsaw." (146)

Such a thing was indeed happening "in the heart of Europe." Only a few, like Isaac and Zivia, with their pitifully limited resources, began planning to defend themselves and their people. But, without the united sup-

1. His other books include *Casino Moscow: A Tale of Greed and Adventure on Capitalism's Wildest Frontier* (NY: Free Press, 2001), *Fortress America: On the Frontlines of Homeland Security—An Inside Look at the Coming Surveillance State* (NY: Bantam, 2004), and *Red Moon Rising: Sputnik and the Hidden Rivalries that Ignited the Space Age* (NY: Times Books, 2007).

port of elders and community leaders, their efforts were simply not enough. Thus, when the Nazis began to liquidate thousands of men, women, and children, no viable response force stood ready to protect the Jewish population. As a result, the Nazis slaughtered millions of human beings with astonishing ease, virtually annihilating the Jewish population of Poland before the vast majority could even decide whether to flee, hide, or organize and fight.

In looking closely at the basic battle for survival under Nazi rule, Brzezinski creates a wonderfully detailed narrative featuring people whom we can easily identify with as they make almost daily life-or-death decisions. In the process, he implicitly poses his readers one simple question: What would you have done in a similar situation—run, hide, or fight (as he specifies the three most realistic options)? In short, he invites the reader to engage fully with the horrors endured by the book's heroes. We know, of course, what the war's terrible outcome was for Poland's Jews, but, by telling so vividly the stories of a few individuals, Brzezinski heightens our sense of the tension, suspense, and fear suffered every day in Warsaw's ghetto. Finally, in confirming that fighting—fierce fighting at that—was the preferred option for a significant number of Jews, *Isaac's War* definitively demolishes the myth of a complete and abject Jewish surrender to Nazi hatred.