Referat paper
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Women in Dror: From the Youth Movement to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising – Roles and Status

Introduction

Youth movements have been widely examined in the historiography, particularly with regard to their ideological foundations, organizational structures, and social roles within Jewish society in interwar Europe and during the Second World War.[1] Scholars have also paid considerable attention to youth movements operating in Warsaw during the Nazi occupation of Poland, including their participation in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the structure of their internal hierarchies, and the phenomenon of so-called "double leadership."[2] In addition, several studies have focused on prominent female figures such as Zivia Lubetkin and Havka Folman Raban.[3] However, despite this scholarly attention, the existing literature does not provide a systematic analysis of the responsibilities and status of women within a single youth movement.

This paper examines the Dror youth movement and aims to reconstruct the various roles and positions occupied by women within its organizational structure. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender relations within Jewish youth movements and to broader discussions in Holocaust historiography and gender studies. In particular, the paper explores how women participated in both leadership and everyday activities and how their involvement challenged contemporary assumptions about gender. The analysis demonstrates that women in Dror frequently held key organizational and logistical responsibilities that were essential to the survival of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The study is based primarily on the memoir *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt* by Zivia Lubetkin, which serves as the principal source for examining the internal dynamics of the movement, while also engaging with relevant secondary literature. At the same time, reliance on a single testimony has its limitations. As Lubetkin herself notes, she describes primarily what she personally witnessed,

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[1] See Shmuel Krakowski, "The Jewish Youth Movement Underground in Poland," in *Zionist Youth Movements during the Shoah*, ed. Asher Cohen and Yehoyakim Cohavi (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).
[2] See Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994); and Avihu Ronen and Dafna Itzkovich, "Feminine Leadership and Dual Leadership in the Jewish Resistance Organizations in Poland," in *Heroines of the Holocaust: Reframing Resistance and Courage in Genocide*, ed. Lori R. Weintrob and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (New York: Routledge, 2025), 30-43.
[3] See Anna Nedlin-Lehrer, "Women in Dror and Gendered Experiences of the Holocaust," in *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Nešťáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021), 123–41; and Lori R. Weintrob, "The Leadership Lessons of Zivia Lubetkin," in *Heroines of the Holocaust: Reframing Resistance and Courage in Genocide*, ed. Lori R. Weintrob and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (New York: Routledge, 2025), 44–56.

which results in only partial information about the activities and contributions of other female members of the movement. Moreover, her frequent use of the collective "we" makes it difficult to distinguish her individual role, except in those passages where she explicitly recounts her own actions. Nevertheless, the memoir contains scattered references to other women and their assigned responsibilities, which, although fragmentary, provide valuable material for reconstructing the roles women played within the Dror movement and later within the Jewish Fighting Organization (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa, [ŻOB]).

The Dror Youth Movement

Jewish youth movements differed from one another across the various periods of their activity and their geographical spread throughout Eastern and Western Europe. These differences were reflected in their ideological outlooks and political orientations, their social composition, the extent to which they emphasized the preservation of Jewish identity or supported assimilation, as well as in their approaches to settlement in Eretz Yisrael.

The Dror youth movement was a socialist-Zionist organization whose name, meaning "freedom," reflected its ideological commitment to social transformation and Jewish national revival. The movement originated in Kyiv on the eve of the First World War, when a group of Jewish youths organized under the name *Et Livnot* ("A Time to Build") in 1914.[4] Following the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Bolshevik seizure of power, many members left Russia and relocated to Poland, where the movement continued to develop. Although some leaders initially sought to establish Dror as a political organization, its primary focus gradually shifted toward educational activities and the preparation of Jewish youth for pioneering life in Palestine within the framework of HeHalutz.

In 1926, the youth movement Freiheit ("Freedom"), closely associated with Dror, was founded. It primarily attracted Jewish youth from working-class families, who comprised roughly 85 percent of its members. The movement expanded rapidly in Poland, growing from about 3,500 members in 1926 to nearly 18,000 by 1936.[5] Many of its members participated in HeHalutz training programs that prepared them for immigration to Palestine and for participation in the kibbutz movement. In the late 1930s, many branches of the movement were forced to operate clandestinely as political repression intensified. Around the same period, Dror merged with Young HeḤalutz as part of a broader process of organizational consolidation within the pioneering movement.

Zivia Lubetkin notes in her memoir that on December 31, 1939, a group of active members of Freiheit–HeHalutz met in Lvov. This gathering constituted the first convention of the movement organized in the territories annexed by the Soviet Union after September 17, 1939. During the meeting,

[4]Eli Tzur, "Dror," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed March 22, 2026, https://encyclopedia.yivo.org/article/1685.
[5] Tzur, "Dror."

the participants decided to continue their activities under the name "The Organization of Socialist-Zionist Pioneer Youth Dror" ("Freedom"), or simply "Dror."[6] The name was subsequently accepted by their comrades operating in the German-controlled zone. Under the new wartime conditions, Dror was forced to reorganize its activities and soon became one of the leading underground youth movements in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Beyond its historical development, examining the internal life of the Jewish youth movement helps illuminate how responsibilities were distributed among its members, including the roles assumed by women. Within the movement, young people of both sexes participated in a wide range of educational, social, and cultural activities, from meetings in local clubs to outdoor excursions and hikes. Like many other movements, Dror was founded on the idea of egalitarianism. Gender equality was therefore generally taken for granted, as it stemmed from the broader ideological belief in the equality of all human beings.[7] This principle created new opportunities for young Jewish women to assume leadership roles. As Daniel Kupfert Heller notes, "the possibility of empowerment … may have been one of the reasons that youth movements proved immensely popular among Jewish girls and young women."[8] In this context, such shared spaces of interaction often enabled girls to hold certain advantages over boys. Because most members were under eighteen, girls tended to display a higher level of maturity.[9] Consequently, they frequently assumed important responsibilities within their groups, and some later advanced to leading positions within the movement.

Activities after the German invasion in Poland and in the Warsaw Ghetto

Jewish youth movements continued many of their distinctive activities during the first period of the Second World War (1939–1942). In many cases they proved remarkably resilient, adapting to the new conditions of war and ghettoization more successfully than many adult organizations. In several ghettos their activities even expanded, at times surpassing the scope of their prewar work.[10] Within this framework, youth movements also became important arenas in which young women could assume new responsibilities and leadership roles.

Only a few months before the outbreak of the war, the Twenty-First Zionist Congress in Geneva had already anticipated the possibility of disruptions. It had elected an alternate Central Committee

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[6] Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1981), 14.
[7] Avihu Ronen and Dafna Itzkovich, "Feminine Leadership and Dual Leadership in the Jewish Resistance Organizations in Poland," in *Heroines of the Holocaust: Reframing Resistance and Courage in Genocide*, ed. Lori R. Weintrob and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (New York: Routledge, 2025), 32.
[8] Daniel Kupfert Heller, "The Politics of Jewish Youth Movement Culture in Interwar Poland's Eastern Borderlands," in *Polish Jewish Culture beyond the Capital: Centering the Periphery*, ed. Halina Goldberg and Nancy Sinkoff, with Natalia Aleksiun (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 236.
[9] "Poland: Women Leaders in the Jewish Underground During the Holocaust," *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive, accessed March 22, 2026, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/poland-women-leaders-in-jewish-underground-during-holocaust.
[10] "Poland: Women Leaders in the Jewish Underground During the Holocaust."

composed entirely of women, intended to assume leadership in the event that male members were drafted into the Polish Army.[11] Although this alternative leadership functioned only partially during the chaotic first weeks of the occupation, the growing prominence of women soon became evident.

Among the first delegates sent from the Soviet-occupied territories and Vilna to the German-occupied areas of Poland were several women, including the Dror leader Frumka Plotnicka, who arrived on September 27, 1939. Plotnicka later asked Lubetkin to return to Warsaw, where she joined the core of the Dror underground.[12] Operating from "its den in a popular soup kitchen at Dzielna Street, which served both as residence for the urban commune and the site of diversified movement"[13] they worked out new activities under the oppressive conditions of the General Government.

As Israel Gutman observes "kitchens in the urban clubs ... were actually run by women living in the movements hostels" and "were open to any hungry person."[14] Indeed, during the first period of occupation, when Jews were expelled to Warsaw from provincial cities and towns – leaving tens of thousands homeless and wandering the streets without food or water – Frumka Plotnicka volunteered to assist these displaced individuals. Providing humanitarian aid quickly became a central focus of the movement and the hostel of Dror at Dzielna gained a reputation throughout Warsaw as a place of refuge, "where a group of people led by Frumka gave counsel, encouragement, and help."[15] While humanitarian aid might appear to correspond to traditionally "feminine" roles, under the conditions of persecution it also involved significant organizational capacity and exercised considerable public influence.

Beyond meeting immediate material needs, the Dror leadership also focused on the psychological well-being of Jewish youth. The movement aimed to cultivate an image of Jews as active and informed participants in the broader world, preparing the younger generation for a postwar future in which they would be called upon to guide and lead their people.[16] In this context, the Dror leadership "defined their roles and duties," with women taking on active responsibilities across a variety of domains. The movement's work encompassed three key areas: identifying escape routes to Palestine, organizing educational and cultural programs such as the Dror High School, and establishing training farms.[17]

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[11] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, 11, 20.
[12] Ronen and Itzkovich, "Feminine Leadership and Dual Leadership in the Jewish Resistance Organizations in Poland," 33.
[13] Israel Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, trans. Ina Friedman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 135.
[14] Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 124.
[15] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, 47.
[16] Gutman, *Resistance*, 127.
[17] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, 48.

From the very first day of the German occupation, as Zivia Lubetkin notes in her memoir, "we carried on a never-ending search for new ways to reach the Land."[18] One of the leading figures in these efforts was Frumka Plotnicka, who discovered an escape route to Slovakia, while Leah Perlstein continued to search for additional routes and identified key points for border smuggling. Perlstein also took responsibility for managing incidents that arose along the way. When the first group of Jews sent to the Slovakian border was captured by the Nazis the following day, she began negotiations and rescue operation, doing everything possible to secure their release: "Leah immediately went to speak with some Jewish officials, among them Moniek Merin, the head of the Bendzin Judenrat and later of all the Judenraete of the Zaglembie province, and succeeded in freeing our people..."[19] This demonstrates that women in the movement were not confined to supportive roles but could confront established Jewish leadership structures and exercise independent authority.

Lubetkin herself was constantly involved in a range of negotiation processes. She negotiated with Polish employers to secure seasonal agricultural work for Jewish youth, ensuring their survival even after the establishment of the ghetto. Within the corridors of the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), she handled welfare distribution and other administrative matters. Hanna Gelbard notes that Lubetkin was "exhaustingly dealing with obtaining aid for comrades, transit permits, exemption permits from labor camps, fighting for our principles…"[20]

By highlighting these examples, this paper does not suggest that men were not similarly active; rather, it emphasizes that the determination of these young women made them central to efforts to navigate Jewish youth life under the harsh conditions of occupation and the ghetto.

The presence of women was also notable in the new farms established by the older members of the youth movement as communes, such as Kibbutz Dror in Będzin and the Czerniaków farm near Warsaw, which was managed by Leah Perlstein. She ran it "with much skill and devotion... She was treated with the admiration and respect by all, including the Gentile work leaders and even Germans who visited."[21] By doing so, this young woman exposed not only remarkable managerial experience and knowledge but also outstanding interpersonal skills, enabling her to maintain a delicate balance in the relations – even with persecutors. Such a combination was rare and highly valuable under ordinary circumstances, let alone in wartime, and was hardly expected from a young woman of her age.

While Perlstein's leadership exemplified expertise and diplomacy at the local level, other women, like Lubetkin, carried comparable responsibility in managing the movement's broader

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 49.
[20] Lori R. Weintrob, "The Leadership Lessons of Zivia Lubetkin," in *Heroines of the Holocaust: Reframing Resistance and Courage in Genocide*, ed. Lori R. Weintrob and Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz (New York: Routledge, 2025), 46.
[21] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, 56.

organizational and financial affairs. To support and protect its youth members, Dror raised funds for social and educational programs. Owing to her position as secretary and treasurer of Dror–HeHalutz, Zivia Lubetkin managed welfare funds for several youth movements and became, in her own words, "the address for all secret correspondence with foreign countries."[22] The historian Neima Barzel has described this role as being akin to that of a "Secretary of State."[23] Lubetkin's two-year correspondence with Natan Schwalb, a member of the Gordonia and the HeHalutz representative in Geneva, demonstrates her insistence on maintaining centralized authority. In these exchanges Lubetkin emphasized that "mine is the only address for the family."[24]

However, her memoir does not present this authority as a purely personal achievement. Throughout the text Lubetkin rarely emphasizes her individual role and instead repeatedly highlights the collective efforts of the movement. For example, she describes the organization of the first underground Jewish seminar of the movement using the collective formulation "we organized," refers to the publication of the Dror newspaper in Yiddish and Polish as "we began publishing," and recounts the establishment of a school by noting: "Our original intention was to establish a high school to teach secular and Jewish subjects to members of our movement."[25]

According to her testimony, Lubetkin did not participate directly in teaching. Nevertheless, she was clearly among those who developed the initiatives and worked actively toward their implementation. As such, she stood "at the center of strategic decision-making"[26] and, in doing so, challenged conventional gender expectations of the time. Some women, though, served on the teaching staff, including Perla Levi from Łódź, Zelmanowska, and others. Members of the Dror movement also joined the staff of the primary school established by the Poalei Zion Party. One of the young women worked with Janusz Korczak, while another joined Aharon Koninski, who ran a large children's home at 13 Mylna Street.[27] Thus, alongside their male counterparts, women were instrumental in sustaining educational initiatives and shaping the movement's wartime culture.

These extensive educational and cultural activities required the reorganization of the movement. In addition to its central headquarters in Warsaw, the movement also established branches in provincial centers, demonstrating its continued operational capacity despite the extreme conditions. Two or three leaders were assigned to each branch, and, in accordance with the movement's egalitarian principles – and reflecting their demonstrated managerial skills – some young women were appointed

[22] Weintrob, "The Leadership Lessons of Zivia Lubetkin," 47.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Bella Gutterman, *Fighting for Her People: Zivia Lubetkin, 1914–1978* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2014), 147.
[25] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, 68.
[26] Weintrob, "The Leadership Lessons of Zivia Lubetkin," 53.
[27] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, 71.

along with men. These included Hana'leh Gelbard in the Warsaw region, Regina Litewska in Częstochowa, and Rivka Glanz in Lublin.[28]

The work of maintaining contact between distant branches was carried out by movement liaisons (shelihot / shlihim), also known as *kashariyot*, most of whom were young women.[29] They were assigned to this role, largely because they were less likely to be subjected to the "circumcision test" at German checkpoints.[30] Another important factor in the liaisons' selection was their Aryan appearance and fluency in local language, which allowed them to pass convincingly as Polish women rather than as Jews. Because the majority of Jews in Poland were raised within tightly knit Jewish communities, their customs, language, social norms, and ways of interacting differed significantly from those of non-Jewish Poles. Consequently, as Nechama Tec observes, most Polish Jews "felt like strangers in the world of the other."[31] In contrast, many young women who later served as couriers had greater familiarity with the non-Jewish world, having grown up in Polish neighbourhoods or attended Polish schools, which made them more accustomed to the daily routines, social patterns, and cultural practices of their Catholic neighbours.[32]

Yet liaisons were also chosen for their skills, and their gender did not limit their scope of action. On the contrary, "the gender ascriptions were consciously used and the pronounced femininity was turned into both a disguise and technique for operating in traditionally male areas."[33] Exploiting prevailing gender assumptions, Dror women could appeal to male chivalry – for example, by asking men to carry heavy suitcases – thereby enabling them to move hidden shipments of ammunition.[34] Dror also assumed that the German authorities were less likely to suspect women of involvement in illegal activities. As a result, Jewish women were often able to move and operate more freely than men.[35]

Among the most prominent figures who carried out these tasks in Dror were Frumka Plotnicka, Lonka Kodzibrodska, Tema Schneiderman, Rysia, and Frania Beatus and Havka Folman Raban. They

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[28] Ibid., 56.
[29] While "liaison" and "courier" are the most commonly used terms in the literature and primary sources – and will be used interchangeably here – they do not fully capture the scope of these young women's work. As Anna Nedlin-Lehrer observes, such terms risk reducing their accomplishments to mere message delivery. For this reason, other scholars have adopted alternative designations: Lenore J. Weitzman uses the Hebrew term *kashariot*, Sharon Geva prefers "spearheads," and Avihu Ronen refers to them as "emissaries" or "delegates." In Ronen's case, this terminology may reflect the fact that he focuses primarily on the early stages of their activity, before their responsibilities expanded significantly.
[30] "Poland: Women Leaders in the Jewish Underground During the Holocaust."
[31] Nechama Tec, *When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36.
[32] Lenore J. Weitzman, "Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust," *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive, accessed March 22, 2026, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kashariyot-couriers-in-jewish-resistance-during-holocaust,
[33] Anna Nedlin-Lehrer, "Women in Dror and Gendered Experiences of the Holocaust?" in *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Nešťáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021), 126.
[34] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*,78.
[35] Nedlin-Lehrer, "Women in Dror and Gendered Experiences of the Holocaust?", 134.

initially travelled as emissaries in the traditional sense, carrying out different tasks for the movement. The liaisons assumed "the main burden of transmitting information between the various branches of the Movement. They encouraged and organized, searched for suitable sites for farms, prepared the ground for a kibbutz, distributed newspapers and books, accompanied members to the Slovakian boarder, set up partisan bases and developed extensive aid programs for those who survived ghettos."[36]

Moreover, couriers were often required to stay at their assigned locations for several days or even weeks to engage with local leadership on ideological and educational matters, supervise local educational initiatives, organize and conduct theoretical seminars for senior branch members, and more. In essence, they acted as direct representatives of the central leadership, embodying its programs, ideas, and operational practices. In this capacity, the emissaries resembled senior staff officers in a military organization more than an ordinary underground courier.[37]

Their work was associated with considerable risks, which, naturally increased "as time passed and the prohibitions, edicts, and Jews-hunters multiplied."[38] The death penalty imposed by the Germans on Jews found outside the ghetto greatly heightened the danger faced by the liaisons, yet they continued to travel. As the isolation of Jewish communities deepened, their responsibilities also expanded considerably. These women proved indispensable, and their work was of great importance, as Lubetkin notes, "from the very first days of the occupation until the last days of Polish Jewry."[39] Emanuel Ringelblum, the eminent historian who organized the underground archive in the Warsaw Ghetto, wrote about their bravery: "These heroic girls... are a theme that calls for the pen of a great writer... They are in mortal danger every day. … Without a murmur, without a moment of hesitation, they accept and carry out the most dangerous missions. … Nothing stands in their way. Nothing deters them."[40]

What distinguished Dror's female liaisons from most other members of the organization was their direct exposure to German atrocities. On one occasion, Havka Folman Raban was sent to Treblinka to verify rumors that had reached the Warsaw Ghetto. Upon arriving at the railway station in the nearby town, she overheard local Poles discussing events in the extermination camp and mentioning the distinctive smell coming from the crematorium.[41] By bearing witness to such atrocities, these women moved far beyond the expectation limits traditionally imposed on young women in prewar Jewish society.

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[36] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, 79.
[37] "Poland: Women Leaders in the Jewish Underground During the Holocaust."
[38] Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, 137.
[39] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt,* 81.
[40] Emanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emanuel Ringelblum*, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), 273.
[41] Nedlin-Lehrer, "Women in Dror and Gendered Experiences of the Holocaust?", 137.

In general, the activities of the liaisons placed them at the intersection of communication, logistics, and strategic planning within the underground network and gave them "a central role in changing strategies of the youth movements towards the German occupation."[42]

The work of the couriers thus illustrates the broader scope of women's participation within the Dror movement during the early years of the war. In the period between 1939 and 1942, women in Dror were active in three main spheres: organizational leadership, logistical coordination, and welfare-educational initiatives. Their involvement not only reflects the wide range of challenges the movement faced during a period of existential crisis but also demonstrates women's remarkable ability to engage in multiple tasks simultaneously, overcoming numerous obstacles with determination and efficiency.

The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

The situation changed fundamentally with the onset of mass deportations of the Jews from Warsaw. Until that point, the common goal shared by the Jewish population and the underground youth movements was survival and the preservation of physical existence in the face of Nazi brutality in the ghetto. The activities of youth movements leaders demonstrate that, as Gutman puts it, their attention was "largely turned inwards."[43] They were primarily concerned with addressing the educational challenges created by wartime conditions and with strengthening ideological and personal ties with young people in Eretz Yisrael, while also searching for possible escape routes there.

Once the massacres began, however, a new understanding of the situation emerged. Members and leaders of the youth movements were among the first to interpret the unfolding events accurately. They recognized that the violence they were witnessing was not a temporary episode but part of a systematic plan for the total physical annihilation of European Jewry.[44] At this stage, youth movements adopted the concept of armed resistance and began to act accordingly. In doing so, they increasingly came into conflict with the Judenrat and the Jewish police in the ghettos. Although these institutions represented the official Jewish authority, they remained subordinated to German rule and were compelled to implement Nazi policies that discriminated against and persecuted the Jewish population. In this way, even if not intentionally, the youth movements gradually assumed a leadership role within the broader Jewish community.

In her memoir, Lubetkin presented the "cause of self-defense" as a moral imperative, emphasizing the need to "see the truth for what it is: The Germans want to annihilate us. It is our duty to organize ourselves and struggle for our honor and the honor of the Jewish people."[45]

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[42] Gutman, *Resistance*, 128.
[43] Israel Gutman, "The Youth Movement as an Alternative Leadership in Eastern Europe," in *Zionist Youth Movements during the Shoah*, ed. Asher Cohen and Yehoyakim Cohavi (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 10.
[44] Gutman, "The Youth Movement as an Alternative Leadership," 15.
[45] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt,* 91.

This understanding took concrete form on July 28, 1942, one week after the deportations began, when representatives of the pioneering youth movements – Hashomer Hatzair, Dror, and Akiva – met at the Dror hostel on Dzielna Street and decided to establish the Jewish Fighting Organization (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa, or ŻOB).[46]

As Lubetkin later recalled, for the movement, "it was a new turning point. All our cultural activity was now subverted to military training."[47] The group began producing wall posters and manifestos, encouraging Jews to go into hiding, and sending liaisons to the "Aryan sector" to obtain weapons. Now more than ever, couriers were required to travel between ghettos. They transported "the sorely needed guns from town to town and smuggle[d] them inside the ghetto walls. The Germans made thorough searches, but the liaisons succeeded in deceiving them by hiding the weapons on their bodies or inside the loaves of bread."[48] Once again, young women stood at the forefront of these dangerous clandestine activities.

The creation of the fighting organization and the reorientation of its goals also led to a redefinition of women's tasks within the movement. After the beginning of deportations from the Warsaw Ghetto, the ŻOB decided "to smuggle Jewish youth into the forests to join the partisans," since the organization "had more potential fighters than we could muster weapons for."[49] Among those sent were "about seventy fighters to the Hrubieszow area, all but one of whom were members of Dror… Almost all of them were killed, including… Pesia Furmanovowicz, Diva Levin, Ruth Szklar…"[50] Because these women are mentioned only briefly in Lubetkin's memoir, it is difficult to determine the specific roles they played within the fighting units. Nevertheless, their inclusion among the fighters indicates that they were regarded as legitimate members of these units and were prepared to participate directly in the movement's armed struggle.

At the same time, women also played a role within the leadership structures that coordinated resistance in the Warsaw Ghetto. The responsibility for organizing resistance was entrusted to Mordechai Anielewicz, Miriam Heinsdorf (Hashomer Hatzair), Israel Kanal (Akiva), Yitzhak (Antek) Zuckerman, and Zivia Lubetkin (Dror).[51] Describing the intensity of the work during this period, Lubetkin wrote, "We would run like madmen from meeting to meeting."[52] Like her male counterparts, she took an active part in the detailed planning of future operations and met with the leaders of the ghetto's major political parties and movements. Although she did not hold a clearly defined formal

[46] Gutman, *Resistance,* 152.
[47] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt,* 98.
[48] Ibid., 80.
[49] Ibid., 118.
[50] Ibid., 119.
[51] Ibid., 130.
[52] Ibid., 106.

leadership title, her extensive involvement and the responsibilities entrusted to her indicate her high status within the Jewish Combat Organization.

Bella Gutterman argues that Lubetkin's position within the leadership of the ŻOB was likely connected to her efforts to unite the Zionist pioneering youth movements both during the organization's initial formation and later as it expanded to include additional groups and organizations within the ghetto.[53] Her position may also reflect a broader feature of leadership within the Jewish underground – namely, the prominent role played by women in systems of "dual leadership," in which a man and a woman jointly guided the movement. This arrangement, which appeared in several ghetto undergrounds, was partly rooted in the structure of youth movements, where male and female leaders were often perceived as the group's "father" and "mother."[54] In many cases, these partnerships were also shaped by personal relationships and romantic bonds between the leaders themselves, reinforcing the sense of a close-knit "family" within the movement.

Within Dror, such a partnership developed between Yitzhak Zuckerman and Zivia Lubetkin. Although this form of leadership was not strictly hierarchical and did not involve a clear division of authority, certain gendered tendencies were nevertheless visible: Zuckerman often occupied operational or command roles, while Lubetkin frequently articulated the uprising's moral and ideological purpose.[55] For example, Havi Dreifuss notes that Anielewicz "often needed Lubetkin's help to ease tensions with ardent Dror activists in his area."[56]

When the Nazis launched a new round of deportations of the remaining 50,000 Jews from Warsaw on January 18, 1943, a ŻOB group under Zuckerman's command prepared an ambush, hiding inside buildings to attack the Germans. Lubetkin emphasized that women participated in the action alongside the men, armed with a small number of grenades and pistols as well as "our own original weapon – light bulbs filled with sulfuric acid."[57]

A broader revolt – The Great Uprising – followed three months later, during which women were also involved directly in combat. One of the women in the unit, Zippora Lerer, upon encountering the Germans, leaned out of a window and hurled bottles of acid at the enemy below. The attackers were so astonished to see a Jewish woman taking part in the battle that they reportedly cried out in surprise: "Eine Frau kämpft!" (A woman is fighting!).[58]

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[53] Gutterman, *Fighting for Her People: Zivia Lubetkin,* 178.
[54] Ronen and Itzkovich, "Feminine Leadership and Dual Leadership in the Jewish Resistance Organizations in Poland," 37.
[55] Ibid., 39.
[56] Havi Dreifuss, "The Leadership of the Jewish Combat Organization during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: A Reassessment," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 31, no. 1 (2017), 14.
[57] Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt,* 150.
[58] Ibid., 187.

The scale of women's participation becomes particularly clear in surviving records. According to the list of Warsaw Ghetto fighters sent to London in November 1943, 58 of the 253 identified combatants were women – approximately 25 percent, a proportion unmatched in other known underground fighting organizations.[59] However, none of the twenty-two ŻOB combat units was commanded by a woman.

Lubetkin may appear as a partial exception: during the battles she assumed command on several occasions, searching for shelter in the burning ghetto, helping organize the rescue of fighters through the sewer channels, and coordinating other urgent tasks. She also acted as a liaison between different resistance groups. At night, she moved between bunkers across the ghetto, passing on information as well as messages and orders. Nevertheless, these actions did not involve strategic decision-making during the course of the fighting itself; rather, they reflected on-the-spot leadership and logistical coordination in extreme circumstances.

Thus, while women formed a substantial and indispensable part of the Warsaw Ghetto resistance – as couriers, organizers, and fighters – the structure of the underground leadership largely preserved gendered distinctions that limited their access to formal command positions.

Conclusion

To sum up, the experiences of women in the Dror youth movement and the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising demonstrate that young Jewish women were central actors in both organizational and combat spheres of the underground. From educational programs and liaison work to direct participation in armed resistance, women exercised authority, strategic initiative, and moral leadership in ways that challenged contemporary gender norms. At the same time, the persistence of formal gender hierarchies within the ŻOB underscores the complex interplay between ideology, social expectation, and practical necessity in shaping leadership structures. By highlighting both the agency and constraints experienced by women, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered dynamics in Jewish youth movements and resistance, revealing the indispensable but often under-recognized role women played in sustaining collective survival and defiance during the Holocaust.

[59] Ronen and Itzkovich, "Feminine Leadership and Dual Leadership in the Jewish Resistance Organizations in Poland," 36.

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