

## The View from My Window: The Ethics of Using Violence to Fight Fascism

I never expected to see Nazis marching below my apartment. Witnessing a scene drawn so thoroughly out of the past evoked more puzzlement than fear. As I watched them, marchers and counter-protesters alike, I wondered where I stood in the chaos. I knew that, as a Jew, the people below hated my very existence, but five stories up looking out from my window I felt invincible. I had the gift of detachment that my ancestors lacked when they too saw Nazis assembled outside of their homes. Gradually, confusion turned to anger. I felt a strange rage that was political in nature, and yet somehow intensely personal. Here was the incarnation of evil as taught to me by literature, ideology, and whatever collective memory my people may be said to have. I wanted desperately to turn my righteous indignation into action. Heat built up in my right arm, and a question formed in my mind: should I throw something at them? I cracked open my window and looked down, wondering what was the most appropriate thing to hurl at a Nazi. A water balloon? A brick? A copy of *Night*? Contemporary life hadn't prepared me to answer that question. I scanned my room and found nothing that felt right. Any missile I might choose still carried with it the weight of violence, which I was unaccustomed to wielding. In the end, like so many before me, all I could think to do was watch. As their parade passed the corner I found myself questioning if I should have done something. I have not stopped asking myself that since.

Every now and then, my home erupts into violence. Since I have lived in the city of Berkeley there have been about half a dozen riots and political clashes, repeating in familiar patterns. Fascists and anti-fascists push and pull on one another with sticks and shields, while tear gas swirls all around. Eventually order is restored, a few arrests might happen, and people move on. More often than those clashes are peaceful protests where the left, and occasionally the

far right, makes its presence known. Sometimes they march in the streets, and one time they did so right below my window.

The conflict feels antiquated. Politically it would be more at home in the 1930's. Tactically it is almost comedic. Skirmishes seem to parody ancient phalanxes meeting on the field of battle, as if both sides were desperately looking for their own little Thermopylae. These scuffles bare little resemblance to the cataclysmic battles of the last century. Still, sitting by my window, I thought of the millions of people that have fought against fascism. Less than a century ago men younger than me were signing up to put themselves in front of Nazi bullets. From Catalonia to the Volga, the entire continent of Europe holds the bodies of those who fell in the struggle to stop fascism. Confronted with its ideological resurgence right below my window, I had to wonder if I was a coward for doing nothing.

The possibility of political violence is rarely considered yet ever present. It is the great dark sea that lies beneath the ice of our democratic society. We act unaware of it, but with enough pressure the ice begins to crack. When confronted with the specter of Nazism, many of us are forced to ask at what point does violence in retaliation to fascism become justified? This is a question that must be answered by those of every identity that fascism threatens, but here I will consider it in my own context, as an American Jew. Thinking about the question of violence and considering the history of the Jewish people, my mind is inevitably brought back to the same place: Warsaw.

~

The events that happened in the Warsaw Ghetto during the spring of 1943 have a unique position in the history of the Holocaust. Since September 1942, the Nazis had been rounding up Jews from the Ghetto and deporting them to the death camp at Treblinka. Over time, a small resistance had developed, as those remaining in the Ghetto stored weapons and built bunkers underground. On April 19<sup>th</sup>, the first day of Passover, the Nazis marched in to liquidate the Ghetto, but they were met with fierce resistance. For one month, thousands of Jews fought as the SS burned the Ghetto to the ground. Few escaped, but those that died did so fighting. This story is presented proudly in almost every telling of the Holocaust. The flash of anger in Warsaw shines too brightly amidst the darkness of despair to be ignored. It is in its contrast to the desperation inherent in our typical mental image of the Holocaust that the Uprising gains its power. Historian Samantha Baskind writes that it “satisfies a desire for those of us who were not there in the abyss, to grasp on to something less horrific.”<sup>1</sup> At its root, this is the same desire to take action that I felt seeing Nazis in the present day, but extended back into the historical narrative.

When such heroism takes place, it feels almost wrong to wonder about its justifiability. Yet, if we are to apply it to today, the ethics behind the Uprising must be examined. Fighting back was an act of self-defense in response to the assured threat of deportation and then death. However, even an act of self-defense can be questioned. Ethicist Daniel Statman writes that in an instance of genuine self-defense, justifiability is dependent on whether or not violence can save the defender, the so called “success condition”.<sup>2</sup> The resistance fighters were facing an aggressor that sought their total destruction, and they knew that they would be unable to save their lives. In the words of Mark Edelman, one of the few surviving resistance leaders, “We knew perfectly

---

<sup>1</sup> Baskind, Samantha. “The Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Is About Much More Than Just the Uprising.” *Time*, 18

<sup>2</sup> Statman, Daniel. “On the Success Condition for Legitimate Self-Defense.” 665

well we had no chance of winning. We fought simply not to allow the Germans alone to pick the time and place of our deaths.”<sup>3</sup> Viewed strictly from the question of whether or not their actions could yield a successful self-defense, resistance was wrong.

Even so, the Warsaw uprising was clearly just, for there are other conditions for ethical self-defense. Success was never an option, but the Uprising’s purpose lay not in survival or strategy. It was a demonstration of dignity in the face of extermination. In such conditions, the fighters were justified in wishing to, as Edelman would say, choose their own deaths, and to do so by fighting the aggressor. This is what Statman terms a defense of honor, which, if there are no other options available for success, is justified.<sup>4</sup> Fatalism did not prevent the fighters from desiring, and achieving, heroism. It is not just the modern reader of history that is awed by the struggle in the Warsaw Ghetto. The members of the resistance themselves were well aware of the incredible nature of their fight, and sought above all to show the world their strength of spirit. The symbolism of the fight was so important that one of the fiercest battles of the Uprising took place simply to ensure that the Polish flag flew above Warsaw.<sup>5</sup> Yitzhak Zuckerman, another survivor, declared, “This isn’t a subject for study in a military school. [...] If there’s a school to study the human spirit, there it should be a major subject.”<sup>6</sup> The aim of the uprising was not strategy, but honor, and in terms of honor it was undoubtedly justified.

~

---

<sup>3</sup> “Obituary: Marek Edelman.” *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 4 Oct. 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Statman, 667

<sup>5</sup> Arens, Moshe. *Flags over the Warsaw Ghetto: the Untold Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Gefen Pub. House, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Yitzhak Zuckerman ("Antek"), Barbara Harshav, ed., trans., *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), p. xiii.

75 years after the Uprising, the world has changed beyond belief. As the walls of the Ghetto begin to crumble, the heroism that lived and died within them is receding further into history. The Third Reich is long gone, but Nazism has demonstrated a perverse resilience. In the United States, as in Europe and elsewhere, we have seen a recent resurgence of groups espousing fascist ideology and anti-Semitism.<sup>7</sup> However, America today is a far cry from the Warsaw Ghetto. By and large, Jews are equal members of society. We are protected by the law, rather than made its victims. Our nation is not under the yoke of an occupying authoritarian power. America is a genuine, if imperfect, democracy, where the right to speak out and vote against fascism belongs to all. It is frightening to remember that all these things were also once true in the lands that fell under the Nazi flag, but that does not mean we are inevitably on the same path. With Nazis marching in the streets again, our question is how to stop ourselves from repeating the past. Had the attitudes of the fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto pervaded earlier, could everything have been prevented? There are many who think so, and they have taken action.

As the far right has grown, so have those who seek to stop them through violence. Such activists are many and varied, but they are generally unified under the label of anti-fascists, or “Antifa” for short. They have clashed with Nazis in the streets of Berkeley, just as they have done in Portland, Charlottesville, and around the country. To some, this action is categorically unacceptable. After one clash that occurred in Berkeley, columnist Marc Thiessen wrote in *The Washington Post* that Antifa was the “moral equivalent of neo-Nazis.”<sup>8</sup> Antifa’s detractors often make this same equivalency, but it is one I cannot accept. Instinctively, I know that there is a difference between those who wish to see the eradication of my people and those who wish to stop it. Still, being superior to their enemy does not absolve anti-fascists when they are willing to

---

<sup>7</sup> Beirich, and Buchanan. “2017: The Year in Hate.” The Southern Poverty Law Center, 11 Feb. 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Thiessen, Marc A. “Yes, Antifa Is the Moral Equivalent of Neo-Nazis.” *The Washington Post*, 30 Aug. 2017.

resort to violence. Others have said that Antifa's actions are wrong by evoking the history of peaceful movements for social change.<sup>9</sup> Though I admire the strategy of non-violence, I likewise cannot endorse a view of exclusive pacifism. Fascism was defeated in the Second World War through force of arms, and the claim that violence is never justified under any circumstance feels like a betrayal of the history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Instead, the justification for violent action against neo-Nazis today must be vigorously prosecuted in the context of our time.

As in Warsaw, the ethics of self-defense are our guide. Members of Antifa itself generally describe their actions as a form of self-defense. Mark Bray, author of the *Antifa: The Anti Fascist Handbook*, and perhaps the only public intellectual that defends using violent action against neo-Nazis, has described his perspective as being supportive of "community self-defense" rather than offensive violence.<sup>10</sup> Some would question this claim based on Antifa's willingness to use force even when not in immediate danger, but Antifa sees their self-defense as necessarily pre-emptive. Unlike Warsaw, Antifa's actions are not a last ditch battle against an unstoppable foe, but rather an effort to prevent that foe from arising. For myself, as well as members of any community that is the target of Nazi aggression, I believe this can indeed be called self-defense. There is no doubt that if they had enough power neo-Nazis would seek the total destruction of certain peoples, just as their predecessors did. Given the inherent aggression of fascism, efforts to fight it are likewise inherently defensive. Still, the mere fact that it can be called self-defense does not necessarily mean using violence is justified.

As an act of self-defense, the possibility of success must again be considered. These are the grounds on which Antifa activists themselves typically justify their actions. Bray argues that

---

<sup>9</sup> Chenoweth, Erica. "Violence Will Only Hurt The Trump Resistance." *The New Republic*. N. p., 2017. Web. 11 Dec. 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Benjay Sarlin "Antifa Violence Is Ethical? This Author Explains Why." *NBC News*. N. p., 2017. Web. 11 Dec. 2018.

the collapse of certain neo-Nazi groups today and in previous decades that occurred once Antifa movements arose demonstrates success.<sup>11</sup> Such a view, however, is highly selective. One can equally point to any number of incidents in which violent anti-fascist organizations were unable to stop the rise of Nazis, such as in Weimar Germany, to make the opposite conclusion. If a Nazi group splinters into irrelevance there's simply no way of knowing if violent counter action was responsible for their decline or if legitimate legal authority, nonviolent action, and internal failures were the cause.

We do know for certain that violent anti-fascism can be used to give a platform and sympathy to the far right. Protest historian Zeynep Tufekci writes that “anything that looks like street brawls helps fascists consolidate power. 'Many sides' is their core tactic. [It] works.”<sup>12</sup> I cannot help but remember the days after violent Antifa action stopped the far right provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos from speaking at a venue in Berkeley. Thousands of cameras descended on our city, framing Antifa's actions as a question of free speech. Yiannopoulos and others of his ilk were able to describe themselves as defenders of the first amendment, rather than mere peddlers of hate. From a limited perspective, Antifa's action in Berkeley was a success in that it stopped Yiannopoulos from speaking, but in the long-term it had the opposite effect as intended. Physically denying a platform for anti-Semites to speak only gives them a platform for sympathy. Noam Chomsky offers perhaps the best description of Antifa, characterizing them as “self-destructive” because their violence legitimizes the far right forces they are trying to fight.<sup>13</sup> If self-defense is also self-destructive, then it is cannot be justified on the basis of the success condition.

---

<sup>11</sup> Bray, Mark. *Antifa: the Antifascist Handbook*, 107

<sup>12</sup> Benjay Sarlin "Antifa Violence Is Ethical? This Author Explains Why." *NBC News*. N. p., 2017. Web. 11 Dec. 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, Steven. “Noam Chomsky: Antifa Is a 'Major Gift to the Right'.” *The Washington Examiner*, 17 Aug. 2017.

If violence against fascism is not a successful means of self-defense, could it at least be an honorable one? When I was sitting by my window that day and wondering if I should throw something at the Nazis below, I did not think that any change would come about from doing so. I wanted to throw something because I felt the need to do more than passively bear witness to evil. I do not doubt that the members of Antifa would disagree with me and claim that their actions can produce success, but I suspect that honor is an important part of their motivation as well. Political violence can be enormously appealing. It is a potent concoction of lowly rage and high-minded ideals that draws power from both the best and worst aspects of humanity. Non-violence does not fully capture that same feeling. In the words of one Antifa supporter, calls for peaceful action seem to say, "Just sit on your hands and wait for it to pass."<sup>14</sup> The context is different, but Antifa activists today share a common goal with the fighters in the Warsaw Ghetto: the demonstration of heroism.

It is the difference in context that changes the justifiability. In the Warsaw Ghetto, the only choice was between fighting for honor or dying at Treblinka. In that world, feats of heroism were worthy. However, the members of Antifa are much more like me, sitting at my window and wishing to act while still safe from serious harm. In the contemporary struggle against fascism, using violence is a choice, not a necessity. There are many who realize this, and have chosen non-violent action. At every protest I have seen in Berkeley, peaceful activists vastly outnumber violent anti-fascists. Even members of Antifa often rely extensively on peaceful means of protesting and political organizing as well as violence.<sup>15</sup> Refusing to use force does not mean sitting on your hands and waiting.

---

<sup>14</sup> Chenoweth, Erica. "Violence Will Only Hurt The Trump Resistance." *The New Republic*. N. p., 2017. Web. 11 Dec. 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Bray, 168

I understand the feelings of those who fight Nazis in the street, but I do not believe it is right to join them. I am not like the warriors of the Warsaw Ghetto. I have not faced the pressure of extermination under which genuine heroism is formed, and as such I have no right to claim their methods. I once questioned whether I was a coward for not pelting the neo-Nazis beneath my window, but in that situation demonstrating courage was never a possibility. Until violence is being visited upon us, no one has the right to fight for honor. My resistance, and that of all people, must befit the present, not the past.

~

Watching Nazis march beneath me, it seemed impossible to imagine any other moment. I had thought that my choice was between acting violently while I still could, or doing nothing forever. As that moment recedes, I have realized there was a third option. I could have taken the anger I felt and channeled it into peaceful resistance. My regret now is not that I stayed my arm, but that I remained aloof in my window while others protested peacefully outside. It would be naïve to think that those marching in neo-Nazi parades could have a change of heart from such efforts, but I am more concerned with those who are not marching for anything. We must convince the apathetic to care, and stop those who are walking down the path of hatred before it becomes too late.

Fascism does not respect the principles of liberal democracy. It detests freedom of speech and assembly. It respects only power, and hates those who have none. Unburdened by ethics, fascists will use force against anything that stands in their way. It is for these reasons that some suggest fascism can only be fought with violence, but it is also why I believe we must fight it

with peace. Fascism is so antithetical to tolerance and freedom, that if they are protected hate can never grow. If in the past such values have given way to fascism, then that is only the more reason to defend the principles of liberal democracy today. The best weapons against hatred are words and ballots. Though this method lacks the heroism of the Warsaw Uprising, it is the only way we will see victory. If in the future I am proven wrong, and the world is met once more with a fascist threat that is actively prosecuting the extermination of my people and others, then I hope that the spirit of Warsaw can be found again. Until that day, we must have faith in our common humanity.

On October 27<sup>th</sup> of 2018, this faith was tested. A neo-Nazi gunman attacked a synagogue and killed 11 people in the worst attack on American Jews in our history. I, like millions of other Jews, was suddenly made to consider my place in this country, much as I had sitting by my window a year prior. Once again, I was forced to ask myself the same question about violence. However, my answer has not changed. In the period after the massacre there was an outpouring of love that served as a reminder of how many in this country reject the evils of fascism. The righteous few are no more – now there are righteous millions. It is they who remind us American Jews that we are not prisoners in a Ghetto, but a part of a nation. I know that the strength in the hearts of my countrymen is greater than the strength of my arm. So long as that is true, fascism can be defeated without violence.

## Bibliography

- Baskind, Samantha. "The Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Is About Much More Than Just the Uprising." *Time*, 18 Apr. 2018.
- Statman, Daniel. "On the Success Condition for Legitimate Self-Defense." *Ethics*, vol. 118, no. 4, 2008, pp. 659–686., doi:10.1086/589531.
- "Obituary: Marek Edelman." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 4 Oct. 2009.
- Yitzhak Zuckerman ("Antek"), Barbara Harshav, ed., trans., *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), p. xiii.
- Arens, Moshe. *Flags over the Warsaw Ghetto: the Untold Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*. Gefen Pub. House, 2011.
- Beirich, and Buchanan. "2017: The Year in Hate." The Southern Poverty Law Center, 11 Feb. 2018.
- Thiessen, Marc A. "Yes, Antifa Is the Moral Equivalent of Neo-Nazis." *The Washington Post*, 30 Aug. 2017.
- Bray, Mark. *Antifa: the Antifascist Handbook*. Melville House Publishing, 2017.
- Nelson, Steven. "Noam Chomsky: Antifa Is a 'Major Gift to the Right'." *The Washington Examiner*, 17 Aug. 2017.
- Chenoweth, Erica. "Violence Will Only Hurt The Trump Resistance." *The New Republic*. N. p., 2017. Web. 11 Dec. 2018.
- Benjay Sarlin "Antifa Violence Is Ethical? This Author Explains Why." *NBC News*. N. p., 2017. Web. 11 Dec. 2018.