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*The Revolt of Treblinka: Recovering the Lost Heroism of the Jewish People*  
PCA Poster Session at East Stroudsburg University, 2010

When French Jew Jean-Francois Steiner published his Holocaust narrative *Treblinka*, France erupted in controversy. Steiner's accusation that the majority of Jews were complicit in their own extermination enraged some scholars, while others praised the twenty-eight year old journalist for the book's power to transform French thought concerning Jewish heroism. Essentially, the purpose of *Treblinka* is to engage his contemporaries—the Jewish youth—about the heroism of those who had the courage to lead a revolt at the extermination camp Treblinka. Steiner accomplishes this by setting up a contrast between characters who exhibit heroic qualities and the characters' foils, prisoners who abdicated from life and Nazi officers who were coldly inhuman.

Scholarly literature concerning *Treblinka* both criticizes and commends the novel. Samuel Moyn wrote a book documenting the French controversy surrounding the book, citing both proponents and critics of *Treblinka*. He concluded that Steiner achieved what few Holocaust writers before his time could: he composed a work about an extermination camp with a focus on bittersweet restoration instead of crippling loss. According to Moyn, *Treblinka* embraced the tragic spirit of the Holocaust yet provided Jewish readers with a reason to be proud of their past.

Critics Barbara Foley and David Bond approached *Treblinka* from a different angle. Foley labeled Steiner's work a "social realistic novel" that portrayed the general truth about the history of the revolt, placing the book in a camp that does not perfectly fit the category of fiction. Bond (2008), who analyzed *Treblinka* from a literary point of view, disagreed. In his article "Jean-Francois Steiner's *Treblinka*: Reading Fiction as Fact," Bond argues that Steiner did in fact employ fictional techniques, but he did so in a way that "awake[s] in the reader an awareness of truth" (p. 378). American scholarly responses to the book are no more uniform than that of the French.

In choosing a setting for the novel, Steiner sought a historical portrayal of true Jewish heroism. He finally settled on the *Treblinka* revolt because he believed chronicling the event could restore honor a race crushed by the events of the Holocaust. He rejected narrating the Warsaw uprising and mirrored its ineffectual portrayal of heroism in his description of the liquidation of the Vilna ghetto in the beginning of *Treblinka*. Essentially, Steiner turned to the *Treblinka* revolt because its leaders demonstrated Jewish heroism in its fullness; they revolted because of their desire to leave witnesses behind to narrate the legacy of the *Treblinka* Jews.

Ironically, the characters in *Treblinka* exhibit Steiner's heroic qualities initially by accepting the reality of their desolate situation. Choken, one of the principal leaders of the revolt, displays this heroic quality of accepting the dismal reality of the death camp. Throughout the novel, Choken constantly reminds his fellow conspirators that the goal of the revolt is not revenge, but to free witnesses who could testify to the Jews' heroism. This need for witnesses sets Choken apart from most the camp's inmates, who have given up their pursuit of life.

Kurland, another revolt leader, displays heroism of a different sort. He challenges the other inmates to pursue passionate living even in the midst of such a deathly environment. He holds that "life, no matter what it is like, must be lived, and...to live is not merely to survive; it is to laugh, to think, to write" (Steiner, 1967, p. 14). Kurland composes plays in his attempt to cling to his humanity, and this brave quality exemplifies heroism because Kurland too chooses to pursue life and reject death.

The definition of heroism crafted by the characters in *Treblinka* achieves far more than idealization of the Jews. Steiner used the novel to answer his own shame about the issue of Jewish complicity during the Holocaust and explain to his contemporaries that some Jews did resist the Nazi regime. Steiner's need to tell their story has been carried on by others, and today the Jewish Educational Partisan Foundation celebrates Jewish heroes of the Holocaust. For the Jews of *Treblinka* resisted far more than their Nazi oppressors. They resisted death itself, and by doing so demonstrated in the most extreme of manners their worth as heroes of the Holocaust.

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## Poster Image References:

- Image 1: <http://www.babelio.com/auteur/Jean-Francois-Steiner/23404>
- Image 2: <http://www.chapitre.com/CHAPITRE/fr/BOOK/steiner-j-f/treblinka,971777.aspx>
- Image 3: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/images/Treblinka%20station%201943.jpg>
- Image 4: <http://www.seahorse-design.com/wordpress/?m=200610>
- Image 5: [http://www.jewishpartisans.org/t\\_switch.php?pageName=about+outreach](http://www.jewishpartisans.org/t_switch.php?pageName=about+outreach)
- Facts from the timeline extracted from: <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/ar/treblinka.html>