

Ethics and the Film *Defiance*

partisan: *n. a member of an organized body of fighters who attack or harass an enemy, especially within occupied territory; a guerrilla.*



Daniel Craig as Tuvia Bielski and Alexa Davalos as Lilka from *DEFIANCE*.
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INTRODUCTION TO GUIDE

The movie *Defiance* (2009) depicts the incredible but true story of the Bielski brothers, Tuvia, Zus, Asael, and Aron (played by Daniel Craig, Liev Schreiber, Jamie Bell, and George MacKay) who, against all odds during World War II, survived in the forest, fought the Germans, and saved approximately 1,200 Jewish lives.

The movie is rated R, mostly for violence. The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation (JPEF) recommends that parents, guardians, or educators view this movie with their teens and engage them in a discussion of the film, using this guide.

The Bielskis faced ethical decisions that would be unfathomable to us. They were forced to live in the forest at a time when the fabric of society—with all of its morality, ethics, and laws—had crumbled around them. They were forced to make difficult life and death decisions, and quickly—their own lives depended on it.

The questions posed in this guide are meant to provoke and facilitate discussion about difficult ethical dilemmas, to help teens process and better understand the film, and to engage them in critical thinking about the intricacies and nuances of some of the important issues that are raised in the film.

CONTEXT

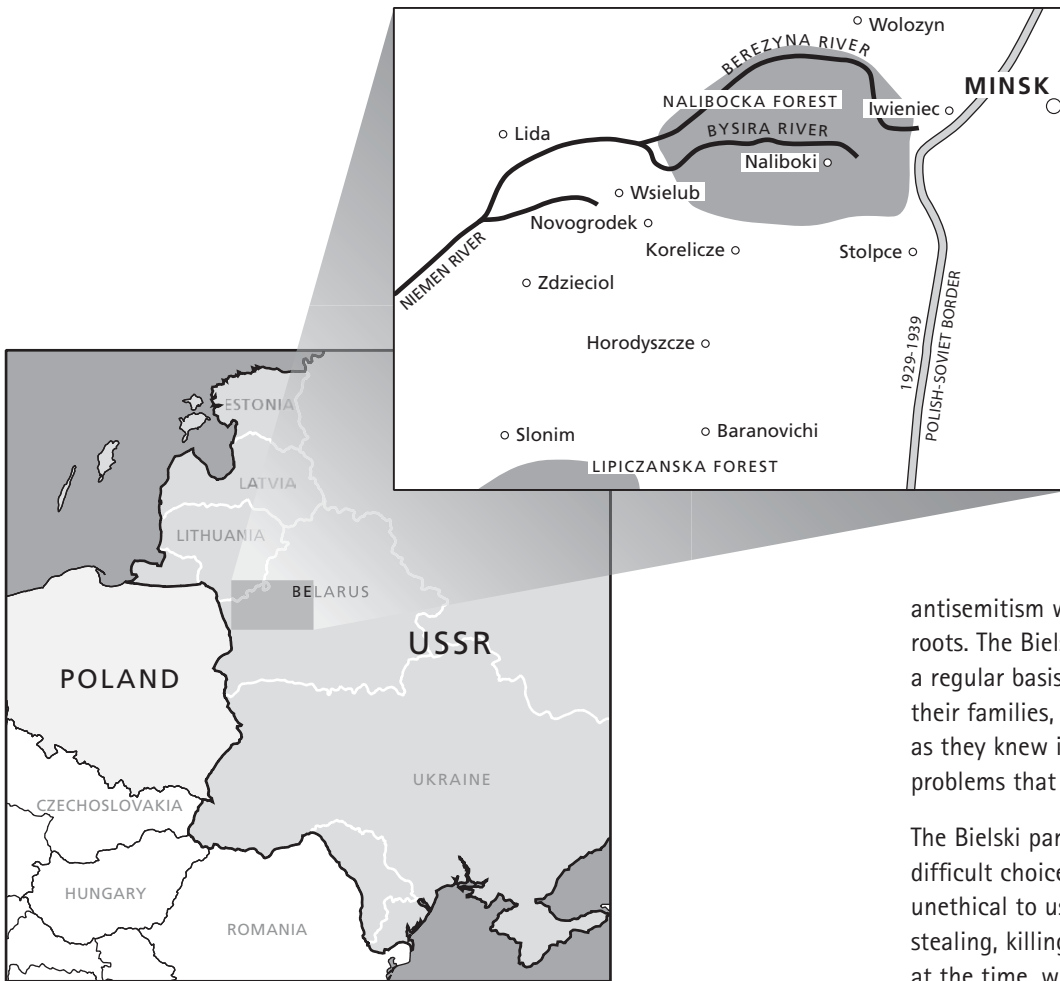
From a small village in what is now the Republic of Belarus, the Bielski brothers escaped the Germans, who murdered their family and most of the Jewish inhabitants in their village. They escaped to a nearby forest and created a refuge for other local Jews there. But the Bielskis did more than hide and save lives; they emerged from the trees on horseback, sub-machine guns strapped to their shoulders, attacking German soldiers and their collaborators. In time, the forest settlement became like a small town, complete with shoemakers and tailors, carpenters



Teaching with 'Defiance'

This guide can be used with JPEF's multimedia curriculum for the film 'Defiance', starring Daniel Craig and Liev Schreiber. For additional resources and information, go to:

www.jewishpartisans.org/defiance



MAP OF AREA: Approximate activity of Bielski partisans in Eastern Poland (now Belarus) during war. Source: *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, by Nechama Tec. Oxford University Press, 1993.

and hat makers. It became a central square for social gatherings, a tannery that doubled as a synagogue, and even a theater troupe. Ultimately, the Bielski brothers saved the lives of 1,200 Jews and killed more than 300 enemy soldiers.

The Bielskis were part of a larger military presence. There were hundreds of thousands of partisans all over Europe, fighting the Germans and their collaborators in at least ten occupied countries. Many partisans were former soldiers who escaped German camps, or civilians who took up arms against the enemy. In all, an estimated 30,000 Jews fought as partisans, the majority in Soviet-controlled areas during World War II.

The only way the Bielskis could survive was by making an alliance with the Soviet partisans who were also operating in the forests. Soviet partisan units were mainly comprised of Red Army soldiers who scattered in the wake of the June, 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union. It is important to note that the Bielskis were not just tough; they were also cunning. Along with a great deal of luck, these qualities enabled them not

only to survive, but to rescue others.

Defiance reveals the intricacies of the Bielskis' experience, and portrays the difficult ethical dilemmas the brothers struggled with on a daily basis in order to survive. It is important to remember that the Bielskis were living through a war and that they were on the front lines. Their lives were in constant danger every day—not just as partisans, but as the ongoing targets of a violent

antisemitism with hundreds of years of historical roots. The Bielski partisans struggled for food on a regular basis, and witnessed the destruction of their families, loved ones, and their entire lives as they knew it. They were constantly faced with problems that had no simple solution.

The Bielski partisans had to make incredibly difficult choices that would normally be seen as unethical to us during ordinary times—such as stealing, killing, and taking revenge—but which, at the time, were often necessary for their very survival.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The goal of this study guide is to give parents and educators a variety of tools to facilitate a discussion after watching the film, delving into the day-in, day-out moral dilemmas that the Bielskis faced in the forest, and analyzing how those ethical issues are relevant to our lives today.

The guide focuses on three critical actions taken by the Bielskis and thousands of other Jewish partisans throughout the war: Stealing, Killing, and Taking Revenge.

Each section is divided into four parts:

- **Introduction** - background on the issue
- **Discussion Questions** - to engage teens in thinking about the issue at hand
- **Text** - an excerpt from a religious or historical text which illuminates, complexifies, and contextualizes the issue
- **Descriptions** - further clarification and discussion of the issue, sometimes followed by more questions

A: STEALING

Introduction

Early in the film, there is a scene in which some of the Bielski partisans are in search of food. They find a milkman delivering several large containers of milk to the Germans. The partisans steal the milk for themselves, but decide not to take all of it, leaving the milkman with something to give the Germans so that he would not be punished.

Discussion Questions

- *Do you think the Bielskis were justified in stealing food from the milkman? Why or why not?*



Tuvia Bielski (played by Daniel Craig in *Defiance*). Date unknown. Source: Novogrudek, *The History of a Jewish Shtetl*, www.novogrudek.com.

Text

The *Torah* (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) has a general principle that frames many of Judaism's subsequent laws that relate to the ethics of war. This principle is called "pikuach nefesh"—the healing of the soul—and claims that the preservation of a human life is the most important law of all, and that almost any other law may be violated in order to ensure that life is preserved.

This concept is derived from two different verses in *Leviticus* (the third book of the *Torah*): "You shall keep my decrees and my laws that a person will do and live by them, I am G-d." (*Leviticus* 18:5) and "You shall

not stand by the blood of your fellow." (*Leviticus* 19:16).

The Rabbis from the *Talmud* (a compendium of centuries of Jewish law and thought) derive from these verses that one must do everything in one's power to save a life, even if it involves violation of one or more of the commandments. This would mean that while the Bible says that it is wrong to steal, if one is stealing to save a life, it is permissible.

Additional Discussion Questions

- *What do you think is the meaning of verse 19:16 in *Leviticus* "You shall not stand by the blood of your fellow"? Have you ever been in a situation*

in which you've seen something done to another person that made you uncomfortable? How did you react?

- *Is there a discrepancy between *Leviticus* 18:5 and *Leviticus* 19:16? What happens when there is a discrepancy between the law to live by G-d's decrees and the law of self-preservation? How would you decide when it is justifiable to take the law into your own hands?*
- *Do these verses change the way you feel about how the Bielskis treated the milkman? If so, how?*

Later in the film, the same milkman leads German soldiers to the Bielski partisans' secret location in the forest, forcing the camp to flee in terror.

- *Should the Bielskis have killed the milkman to prevent what happened? Why or why not? How do the verses from *Leviticus* (above) inform your opinion?*
- *It is not known whether or not the milkman was a willing Nazi collaborator or if he was forced to give them the location of the Bielskis' camp. Would knowing this influence your answer? How?*

B: KILLING

Introduction

Partisans had to kill their enemies and take responsibility for the related moral and practical issues surrounding this on a regular basis. Clayton Frohman, co-writer and co-producer of *Defiance*, worked closely with the film's director and co-writer Edward Zwick, and was on location in Lithuania throughout the filming, acted in the film, and participated in the film's editing process. Clayton answered some of JPEF's questions about the Bielskis and the making of *Defiance*.

Description

JPEF: How did the Bielski partisan unit treat their enemies—the Germans and their collaborators?

CLAYTON: We understand that the Bielskis regularly killed Germans and those who collaborated with them.

Their point was to discourage villagers from turning in Jews to the Nazis. Once they found a collaborator, they'd kill him, kill his entire family, burn his house, and put up a sign that read, "This is what happens to the collaborators."



Zus Bielski (played by Liev Schreiber in *Defiance*) after the War. Approximate date 1944-1945. Source: USHMM

CLAYTON: Their actions were sometimes as vicious as the Nazis and this actually attracted us, Edward [Zwick], and me, to them—this differentiated them from other groups of Jews during the Holocaust.

Six million Jews were murdered with the assistance of local Nazi collaborators. These locals were a key part of their strategy, and many participated with the Nazis in the murder of Jews, or provided the Nazis with critical information about their whereabouts. Locals, not Nazis, were responsible for the death of the Bielski's parents and family members. Not all locals worked with the Nazis, however; many helped the

partisans and many more were instrumental to the survival of countless Jews.

Text

The Talmud, in tractate Sanhedrin page 73a, states: "*Haba lehorgecha, hashkem lehorgo*"—if someone is coming to kill you, rise to kill them first.

From a Jewish perspective, you are OBLIGATED to defend yourself and protect your life if it is in danger. However, according to Jewish law-makers, led by the 12th century rabbi and philosopher Maimonides, if you kill someone who could have been stopped by lesser means then you are guilty of murder. Meaning, if someone is chasing you with a gun, and you could stop them and save your life by shooting them in the foot, then if you kill them, it is considered murder.

Discussion Questions

- Were the Bielskis justified in treating collaborators in the way they did? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the assertion that the Bielskis were "sometimes as vicious as the Nazis?"
- Is there a difference between the word "kill" and the word "murder"?
- Does the context of wartime change how these texts on ethics can or should be understood? Should ethical laws be the same in war and peace?

Description (continued)

JPEF: How does *Defiance* portray the Bielskis' moral tension about taking lives?

CLAYTON: Tuvia's mantra is, "We will not become like them." Zus, his brother, says, "But we can kill like them."

The spine of the movie is this dialectic, this tension between them. Many of the ethical issues of the movie are—do we become as nasty, as vengeful, and as bloody as the Nazis. The Bielskis grappled with this notion of "we don't want to become them, and yet we have."

Text

President Barack Obama, in his 2009 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech said:

"Make no mistake: Evil does exist in the world. A non-violent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason."

And Simon Trakinski, a Jewish partisan from Lithuania that JPEF interviewed, said, "Evil only recognizes stronger evil."

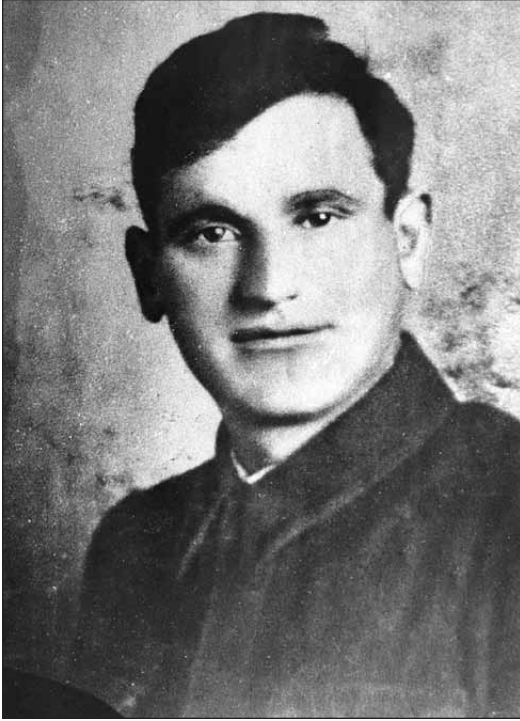
Discussion Questions

- Contrast President Obama's statement with that of Simon Trakinski: How are they similar? How are they different?
- Do you think non-violent resistance could have stopped the Holocaust? Why or why not? Under what circumstances is armed resistance more appropriate than non-violent resistance (include examples of civil-rights struggles, wartime and genocide)
- Who do you agree with: Tuvia, who said, "We will not become like them" or Zus, who said, "But we can kill like them"? Why? Can the two statements be compatible with each other? In what ways?
- Clayton implies that the Bielskis may have survived because they responded with evil to evil, and in some way "became like them." Do you agree? Give an example from the movie that expresses this.

C: TAKING REVENGE

Introduction

The Bielskis witnessed the murder of their families and friends, and the destruction of their entire world. They killed Germans not only in self-defense or because they were fighting a war; but also as a result of raw emotion and revenge.



Asael Bielski (played by Jamie Bell in *Defiance*) was killed during the battle of Koenigsberg in 1944 while fighting in the Red Army. Approximate date 1943-1944. Source: USHMM

Text

There are conflicting ethical perspectives in various religious traditions and cultures regarding revenge.

The Jewish tradition seems to offer paradoxical perspectives. In Leviticus 19:18, the Torah states, "*You shall not take revenge or bear any grudge against the children of your people,*" arguing that revenge is wrong.

On the other hand, in Exodus (the second book of the Torah) 21:24, it says, "*An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.*" (Shemot 21:24). This verse seems to encourage revenge, though it is almost always

interpreted metaphorically by Jewish commentators (monetary compensation for a loss, rather than exact revenge).

A famous Christian perspective is found in the Gospel According to Matthew, Chapter 5, Verses 38-42, quoting Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, saying: "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*"

Another perspective is elucidated by Jared Diamond, in his article in the *The New Yorker* magazine (April 21, 2008) about modern tribes in Papua New Guinea, in which he describes their culture of taking revenge. He quotes a New Guinean Highlander named Daniel, who takes

revenge on the man who killed his cousin, Soll. In describing why he took revenge, Daniel says, "I wanted to obtain vengeance myself, even if it were to cost me my own life. I had to ask myself, how could I live through my anger over Soll's death for the rest of my life? The answer was that the best way to deal with my anger was to exact the vengeance myself."

Discussion Questions

- *What is YOUR gut reaction about revenge? When is it right? When is it wrong?*
- *Put the four quotations above into your own words. Which resonate most with you? Why?*
- *What potential benefits does revenge have? What potential harm can it cause?*
- *Have you ever wanted to take revenge? Have you ever acted on it? What was the situation? In retrospect, was it "right"? How did it make you feel?*

Description

JPEF: How did you portray the Bielskis experience of revenge in the movie?

CLAYTON: We had a scene we wrote where they capture a scout with paperwork that the Germans were about to launch an assault into the forest, to root out the partisans and put an end to the partisan movement.

What happens in scene is this terrified Nazi scout is thrown into the camp, and a group of partisans surround him with rocks and guns and hatchets, and they taunt him.

The group is descending on the scout as Tuvia examines the documents, which inform him that the Germans will be leading a raid on their camp in two days.

It was a group effort, and the group, in full view of everyone else in the camp, took out all of their revenge and pain and anger on this scout. "This is for my mother. This is for my father. This is for my brother." He's beaten to death by the crowd.

There are moderates and hot-heads in the group. Some people ask Tuvia to intervene. The scout says, "I have a wife and kids," and one of the Jews says, "So did I."

CLAYTON: The partisans didn't let anyone go. What were they going to do, take them prisoner? Feed them when they could hardly feed themselves?

JPEF: What was it like for you to be an actor in that scene?

CLAYTON: I had a rifle—a rubberized one, which I was bringing down on the guy's neck. I felt that if I gave way to my own violence, I could break this guy's neck. But it's a movie. He's a stuntman. The level of violence that could be created as a group is astounding. Group behavior is different from individual behavior. Things you wouldn't do as an individual you could do in a group. I felt that.

Text

Irving Janis, a 20th century research psychologist famous for his theory "Groupthink," about the characteristics of group behavior, wrote in his book *Victims of Groupthink* that one of the eight characteristics of "groupthink" is: "An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions."

Another characteristic of "groupthink" described by Janis is: "An illusion of invulnerability, shared by most or all the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks."

Discussion Questions

- What role does "groupthink" play in this scene described by writer Clayton Frohman?
- Do you think the scout would have been treated differently if only Tuvia had caught him? What about if Zus had caught him?
- How do you think that "groupthink" may have helped the Bielskis and the Partisans?

Description (continued)

JPEF: What role did the filmmaker's ethics play in shooting this scene?

CLAYTON: We'd filmed the scene a number of times, and, after a day of shooting this, we were all exhausted, and felt like we'd killed someone. So Edward said: "Let's shoot this again, and this time, once you've finished the frenzy of killing, come up out of circle of violence, and have a moment of guilt and remorse."

So we shot that moment of remorse and awareness.

Then we added a third element—Tuvia walks through the camp afterwards, and various people refuse to meet his eye. We were trying to portray a communal sense of guilt, and a feeling that Tuvia, our leader, did nothing to prevent this murder.

A movie is written three times—by the writer, by the director on the set, and by the editor in the editing room; the editor decides which take best communicates the intention. Steve Rosenblum, the editor of *Defiance*, said "Forget that remorse stuff. They'd kill him and forget about it and start eating."

Then we consulted with the real Bielskis—sons and daughters of Tuvia and Zus. Zvi Bielski, Zus's son, said, "There was no remorse. My father's only regret was that he didn't kill more Germans."

Discussion Questions

- *Imagine that YOU are the editor of Defiance, creating a film that reflects your own ethics. How would you choose to portray this scene?*
 - A. The group kills the scout and gets on with their lives afterwards*
 - B. The group starts to beat him, and then stops itself before it is too late*
 - C. The group starts to beat the scout, and then Tuvia stops them*
 - D. The group kills the scout and then can't believe what it has done*
 - E. The group kills the scout, and when Tuvia walks by they are angry at him for not stopping them*
- *Why would you portray that scene in the way that you've chosen? Why did you choose your answer over the other answers?*
- *Describe how your choice connects to your own personal sense of ethics.*
- *Describe how the ethics of the filmmakers can influence the telling of a historical situation. Is this a problem in filmmaking? If so, why?*

Description (continued)

JPEF: What was the final decision in the editing room?

CLAYTON: As you see in the movie, that moment of remorse was cut. But there was a sense that something had happened to the group, and Tuvia hadn't prevented it.

This is what we dealt with. The movie has a lot of those moments. It's not black and white. It's not a film in which the Jews are good guys and the Germans bad guys all of the time—we wanted to portray that in any moment you could be a good or bad guy. We're all capable of all these things.

A Final Text

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of England, recounted the following story on November 8th, 2008, in his weekly thoughts on the Torah portion:

Judea Pearl, father of the murdered American journalist Daniel Pearl, was in London while these [recent antisemitic attacks on synagogues in England] were taking place.

His son had been brutally murdered in Karachi after confessing: "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, and I am Jewish."



Daniel Pearl, journalist.
Date unknown

Judea has taken his son's death and turned it into a mission to perpetuate the values for which he lived. He has instituted scholarships to bring young Pakistani journalists to America. He has put together a marvelously affirmative book in which well-known Jews talk about what Judaism means to them.

And he has initiated a series of dialogues with the Islamic scholar Akbar Ahmed, in order to show that Jews and Muslims can live together in mutual respect. Why, I asked Judea, had he gone down this road of dialogue?

"I refuse," he said, "to give Daniel's killers a victory. If I were to repay evil with evil, hate with hate, I would be letting them make me a little like them. Only by repaying evil with good do we defeat it."

Discussion Questions

- *How is the context of Judea Pearl's experience of losing his son different to the Bielskis losing their parents?*
- *How is Judea Pearl's attitude different from that expressed by Simon Trakinski's when he stated that "evil only recognizes greater evil"? Which resonates with you?*
- *How do Judea Pearl's actions inform your understanding of and perspective about revenge?*
- *Do you think that the story of the Bielski brothers, and the excerpts and quotes you have read about taking revenge, will affect your life in any way? How might this story inform the choices you will be making throughout your own life?*
- *Why do you think the film (and the book it is based on) is called Defiance? How is 'defiance' different from 'vengeance'? How is it different from 'survival'? What acts of defiance can you point to in this film?*

SUMMARY

We hope that the texts and discussion questions in this guide have helped you to develop a more nuanced perspective on the difficult ethical dilemmas featured in the movie *Defiance*, and have led to discussions that enabled a deepened understanding about these issues, as well as the difficult choices that you will face in your own lives.

The Bielskis are featured on the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation's website, along with the stories of many other partisans. For more information, visit www.jewishpartisans.org.

This Discussion Guide written by Maya Bernstein, Director of Education and Leadership Initiatives at Upstart Bay Area; edited in consultation with David Monblatt.

More Information on the Jewish Partisans

The Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation recommends these resources for further information:

Films & Video

- *Defiance*, directed by Edward Zwick. A Paramount Vantage release (2008), available online or on DVD.
- To see a video of Aron Bell, the last surviving Bielski brother, talking about his brother Tuvia, go to www.jewishpartisans.org/partisans
- *A Partisan Returns: The Legacy of Two Sisters*, directed by Mitch Braff (2008): www.jewishpartisans.org/films
- *The Partisans of Vilna*, directed by Joshua Waletzky (1987).

Books/Guides

- *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, by Nechama Tec. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- *The Bielski Brothers: The True Story of Three Men Who Defied the Nazis, Built a Village in the Forest, and Saved 1,200 Jews*, by Peter Duffy, Harper Collins, 2004.
- *Daring to Resist: Jewish Defiance During the Holocaust*, by Yitzhak Mais (ed), Museum of Jewish Heritage, 2007.
- *Tuvia Bielski JPEF Study Guide*: www.jewishpartisans/resist

Websites

- *Teaching with 'Defiance' and Bielski Partisans Resource Page*: www.jewishpartisans.org/defiance
- *Defiance film official website*: www.paramount.com/movies/defiance
- *Novogrudok: History of a Jewish Shetel*: www.novogrudok.com