

Defiance: Those who did not “wait for God”

Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Edward Zwick, screenplay by Zwick and Clayton Frohman, based on the book by Nechama Tec

Archival footage of the 1941 invasion of Belarus in the Soviet Union by Hitler’s forces opens *Defiance*, the new movie by veteran American filmmaker Edward Zwick. Within weeks the German occupation had horrifying consequences: the murder of 50,000 people while another one million awaited death or deportation.

Zwick’s film recounts how in the summer of that year, four Jewish brothers, Tuvia, Zus, Asael and Aron Bielski, escape a massacre in their village that results in their parents being killed. Soon after, the brothers learn of the deaths of other loved ones, including Tuvia’s wife and infant daughter. The brothers flee into the Belarusian forest to begin assembling a resistance group.

The movie is based on the true story of the Bielski clan, from a farming community in Belarus, and their organization of the largest Jewish partisan unit in Eastern Europe during the Second World War; all told, more than 20,000 Jewish fighters participated in such bands.

In *Glory* (1989), Zwick brought to light a relatively little-known and quite important chapter of the US Civil War, the story of Robert Gould Shaw and the first all-African-American volunteer company. The director, to his credit, has once again turned his attention in *Defiance* to a significant and all too obscure historical episode. The movie is based on the 1993 book by Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, and was years in the making.

When the Germans drive into Belarus as part of the invasion of the USSR in June 1941, the brothers have a price put on their heads. They are identified as potential enemies by both the SS and its local collaborators.

As the Nazis terror progresses, Tuvia (Daniel Craig), Zus (Liev Schreiber), Asael (Jamie Bell) and the much younger Aron (George MacKay) flee into the Naliboki Forest. When news of the “Bielski Otriad (Detachment)” spreads, others join, and the fledgling group begins its harrowing fight for survival. (“This is the one place in all of Belarus where a Jew can be free.”) They battle the elements and prepare to take on the Germans while conducting dangerous food and munitions raids. At one point, they sabotage a Nazi-held police station to obtain medicine for a typhus

epidemic.

Tuvia wants to save as many Jews as possible, including the sick and the elderly. He argues with the rabbi in a ghetto who advocates passively “waiting for God.” The ghetto’s residents decide to follow the partisan, shedding, as they make their escape, the infamous yellow stars from their clothing. In the forest encampment, Tuvia adeptly marshals every skill to meet the harsh realities. A watchmaker, for example, starts repairing guns. The education of children continues—if the body cannot be nourished, mind and soul must be.

Rules are established: everyone will work, women will fight with the men and, to ease the community’s burden, pregnancies are forbidden.

An encounter with Soviet forces, also fighting in the forest, produces a split between Tuvia and Zus. The latter believes that defeating the Germans militarily is more important than surviving the occupation, as monumental a task as the former might be. Critical of what he terms Tuvia’s “politics of diplomacy,” Zus joins up with the Soviet unit. A fierce combatant, he refutes the Soviet commander’s notion that “Jews don’t fight.” Zus also challenges the anti-Semitism he discovers in the Soviet militia from the standpoint of a loyal citizen of the USSR.

Tuvia (“Our revenge is to live”) leads the defense of the camp, which is growing and must constantly shift locations. In addition to starvation and disease, the first winter also brings internal dissent.

During a German onslaught that forces the community to face mortal challenges (a holy man in the group tells God, “Choose another people. Take back the gift of our holiness”), the Bielskis are reunited. A title that serves as the film’s epilogue explains that under their protection, the lives of over 1,200 people were saved.

The story of the Bielski partisans is a remarkable one. According to one account: “At its height, the Bielskis’ forest village consisted of long, camouflaged dugouts for sleeping, a large kitchen, a mill, a bakery, a bathhouse, two medical facilities, a tannery, a school, a jail, and a theater. Tailors, seamstresses, shoemakers, watchmakers, carpenters, mechanics, and experts in demolition provided the 1200-member community with necessary skills, and about 60 cows and 30 horses [supplied] food and transportation.

“Many of the men served as part of the armed contingent which secured food and engaged in sabotage and even the murder of German officials, while many others, including the women, the elderly, and the handicapped received the benefits of the community which protected them, despite the difficulties they presented when it was necessary to travel to new locations.... The local Jewish population of the cities and towns dwindles while the forest community grows ever larger.” The commentary acknowledges that the Bielskis were aided by the audacious efforts of many non-Jewish allies.

In the production notes for *Defiance*, Zwick states he wanted to counter the “popular iconography of the Holocaust,” which in his view “has mostly been one of victimization.” He says that it’s “important to add complexity to that notion—to understand that there is a difference between passivity and powerlessness, that the impulse to resist was always present.”

These sentiments find expression in the dynamism of the performances delivered by Craig as Tuvia and Schreiber as Zus, who together overwhelmingly carry the movie.

Unfortunately, during moments when the tension lets up and the dialogue returns to the “everyday,” the film resorts to fairly stale Hollywood conventions. Melodramatic love scenes—inserts that seem inappropriate to the setting and circumstances—are irritating as is the interplay between the religious Shamon (Allan Corduner) and the intellectual Isaac (Mark Feuerstein)—“You annoy me, therefore I am.” One feels this kind of material is written by contemporary Americans of a certain social background and outlook. The movie regains its stride when it centers on the fundamentals of the narrative.

Defiance survives its sometimes pedestrian tone and personality due to a serious and honest attitude towards its principal subject matter. The film’s deep feeling for the Bielski saga allows it, partially at least, to transcend its historical simplification, a feature that especially shapes the movie’s stereotypical characterizations.

On this score, the portrayal of the Soviet soldiers is the most suspect. Given the consolidation of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which made use of anti-Semitism as part of its nationalist appeal and its campaign against Trotsky and the Left Opposition, there is no reason to doubt the existence, perhaps the revival, of anti-Semitism in the Soviet military’s ranks. However, the film’s depiction of the Soviet troops as a drunken, anti-Jewish and dehumanized horde seems out of line and may speak more to the views of the filmmakers than to the complex historical forces at work.

After all, the defeat of the German forces at the most immense cost to the Soviet population was not simply a military question, much less a testament to the Stalinist leadership, which proved itself, before and during the war, criminally incompetent. (It had, of course, wiped out the leading and most talented cadres in the

Red Army during the purges of the late 1930s, leaving the Soviet military unprepared for the German offensive.) Despite all the crimes and grievous errors of the bureaucratic stratum, the conquest of power by the workers and peasants in October 1917 still provided the fundamental impulse for the immense struggle to repulse the Nazi-led forces.

Further, *Defiance* never addresses the question of why it was that the Bielski partisans were not only the largest of the Jewish resistance groups, but also the most successful in saving lives. While geography played a role—a rural, forested area versus an urban setting—the answer must also lie in political-historical factors.

Less than 20 years before the German invasion of Belarus, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic—established in 1919—became a founding member of the USSR in 1922. The working class in Russia was only able to conquer power in 1917 by winning the support of the majority of the oppressed nationalities throughout the old Russian Empire. The Bolsheviks proclaimed the equality and sovereignty of all the Soviet peoples to allay any suspicion of a continuation of Great Russian chauvinism (a policy later overturned by Stalin). It is again worth noting that in the film, Zus invokes this legacy of equality when opposing anti-Semitism among the Soviet forces.

If the spirit of resistance was readily accessible to the Bielskis, it must have had something to do with the fact that the Belarusian working population had experienced the October Revolution and the three years of civil war against foreign, counter-revolutionary invaders from 1918 to 1921. This is a closed book for the filmmakers, who are more comfortable with the theory of the hero as an abstract type.

Zwick and his colleagues also never pose another complex question: granted that these human beings, through almost superhuman effort, survived an apparently hopeless situation, how was it that they found themselves in this tragic situation in the first place? To answer that, which seems an entirely legitimate question, one would have to refer, at least briefly, to the chain of events that led to the rise of Stalinism in the USSR and the victory of fascism in Germany. Instead, the extraordinary occurrence is treated in isolation.

For all the weaknesses, however, there is an unusual urgency in *Defiance* that connects itself to the present.



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