



Comrades Betrayed: Jewish World War I Veterans under Hitler by Michael Geheran.

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In Adolf Hitler's racialized Third Reich certain individuals (e.g., the Führer's personal chauffeur, Emil Maurice) and peoples (e.g., the Japanese) deemed to have supplied exemplary services to the Nazi regime were designated as "Honorary Aryans" (*Ehrenarier*).¹ This exalted and preposterous protected status was extended neither to the Jewish dead nor to living veterans of World War I,² even if they had been wounded and decorated for their heroism. Military historian Michael Geheran (US Military Academy³), investigates these men's war experiences, interwar status, and dimming prospects. Their masculine deeds and dutiful performance at the front made non-Nazi civil authorities reluctant, at first, to persecute them. Their misplaced confidence in the honors bestowed on them left them bewildered by pre-World War II popular and governmental anti-Semitic campaigns. Geheran combs their diaries, private letters, and eyewitness interviews, as well as military, police, and Gestapo records to compose his painful footnote to Nazi racism and mass murder.

The 500,000 German Jews in 1933 ranged from orthodox to observant to secular, and some did not even identify as Jewish. A third of them lived in rural areas. Germany's unification in 1871 gave legal equality and rights to all German citizens. Many Jewish families or individuals happily assimilated into the national culture, some converting to the Christian faith. About eighty thousand were veterans of the Great War (6); even if that had not entirely assimilated them into German society, everyone knew they had fought shoulder to shoulder in that losing cause, whether as volunteers or draftees. Their military service gave veterans a new status. The military's "Jew Count" (Nov. 1916), however, was a reminder of German cultural and ideological anti-Semitism, even in the trenches.⁴ Nevertheless, fighter status encouraged hopes of accommodation during the Weimar Republic.

The book's account of Weimar Germany is too thin. While discussing private accounts of Germans openly hostile to Jews, Geheran notes that some made exceptions for men who had fought alongside them in a kind of "microlevel solidarity" (39). The Jew Count embittered many previously patriotic Jewish soldiers. Though numbers were never released, the counting reflected anti-Jewish suspicions rife in the military. Some Jewish veterans were politically conservative, but Christian conservatives and other Germans were inclined (and encouraged) to equate them with socialists, Bolsheviks, and/or international bankers, however illogically. This imagined unholy

1. Cf. the "honorary whites" of South Africa's former apartheid regime.

2. The Austrian epigraphist and refugee Anton Raubitschek told me about this anomaly. This Viennese scholar of Jewish descent, raised Lutheran, granted a PhD by the University of Vienna before the 1938 Nazi takeover, was welcomed by the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study. Just before he died, the Austrian government awarded him the Golden Cross, one minor act of reparation.

3. Where he is Deputy Director of the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

4. No Jew (13) was promoted to serve as an active or reserve officer in the Prussian army (1885-1914), thus cutting them off from a valuable path to social acceptance.

conspiracy fed German myths about why the war had been lost. Nor did 70,000 Jewish refugees escaping Poland and Russia endear the German Jews to any German party. And, too, the growing Zionist movement aggravated racist anxieties. Though he never excuses growing popular anti-Semitism, Geheran does overemphasize displays of trench-friendships of Germans and German Jews at annual memorial services, parades, and beer parties (59). His evidence reveals the fertile prewar material that the NSDAP (Nazi party) cultivated in the Reich.

Nazi party ideology and later state policy (30 Jan. 1933 onward) contradicted older discourses about shared military sacrifices by Jewish survivors from the front. Jewish assurances of German nationalism, voices of German patriotism and military service, and even conversion to Christianity were twisted by Nazi propagandists into efforts to mimic the language and culture of “true” Germans. Jewish merchants sometimes wore their old uniforms to oppose troopers promoting the boycott (Apr. 1933) outside their stores (see dust jacket). Loyal “protest customers” pushed past the party faithful to show solidarity with comrades (65–67). Jews wrote letters to newspapers about Nazi abuses, while that was still possible. Conservative Marshal Paul von Hindenburg admonished the NSDAP for its brutal treatment of Jewish ex-servicemen (but not of other Jews) and won them exemptions from the April civil service laws ejecting all Jews from government positions. Hitler capitulated more than once, to the dismay of more ideologically race-hating fanatics (70). Courts enforced these veterans’ rights. The Wehrmacht frustrated the Gestapo by its “insufficient understanding of the Jewish Question.” But, after Hindenburg died (2 Aug. 1934), Jewish veterans inadvertently (96) reinforced Nazi-fomented stereotypes of Jewish unmanliness by distancing themselves from Jews who had not fought in the war. Being a recognized frontline German patriot was central to their identity (208).

The regime’s 1935 Nuremberg and Military Service laws stripped Jews of citizen rights and eligibility for military service. Only the Wehrmacht had been able to deter the marginalization and demonization of the Jews, including veterans (205). The Kristallnacht pogrom (9/10 Nov. 1938) demolished any remaining sense of security for either Jews in general or assimilated Jewish veterans. Until then, these veterans could proudly wear their Iron Crosses and believe themselves immune to openly proclaimed Nazi racial “purification” measures. Some veterans were arrested, but released on Herman Göring’s order after a public backlash (2). Geheran disputes the prevailing view that Jewish veterans suffered social death as early as 1933. Jews, now defined as anyone the National Socialist Reich identified, persecuted, and murdered as such, soon lost professional status along with their homes and businesses. After Kristallnacht, Jewish veterans were rounded up and assaulted like other Jews. Hitler’s criminal regime then sent them to be worked to death, experimented on, and simply murdered at Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen.

Geheran quotes government officials who sympathized with Jewish war veterans, yet espoused anti-Semitic propaganda and policies. Even baptized Jews suffered from racialized beliefs and their murderous consequences.⁵ Jews were forced to adopt Jewish-sounding first names and forbidden to use the obsequious “Heil Hitler” salutation in government correspondence! (118). Even the military decorations Jewish veterans wore to signal their special status did not for long spare them humiliation, as thugs publicly ripped their medals from their jackets (121). Affirming their German identity was their final act of resistance.

Eventually, no one defended any Jews. Coping strategies based on old military connections became futile. Jewish hopes of outlasting Hitler and his crony government proved unrealistic. The pace of imprisonment, deportation, and mass murder accelerated as German fantasies of victory evapo-

5. Geheran cites scholar Omer Bartov: “numerous assimilated and converted Jews were forced ... to regain the Jewish identity they had relinquished, often just before being murdered for what they believed they no longer were” (195).

rated. Elements of Hitler's *Judenpolitik* legislation required ad hoc adjustment for "sensitive" categories of veterans and mixed marriages (173). Similarly, Hitler had temporarily suspended the state murder of handicapped Germans in August 1941. But nothing, except perhaps transport logistics, slowed the murderous momentum of the Nazis' "final solution" for the eleven million European Jews alive in early 1942.

In late 1941, Adolf Eichmann telexed his Gestapo offices henceforth to exempt Jewish veterans from their round-ups and evacuations—a short-lived reprieve. Many had already been "resettled" in the dumping ground of food-starved, forced labor ghettos of Lodz, Minsk, and Riga (11). *Vernichtung durch Arbeit* (destruction through labor) constituted SS policy blessed by Heinrich Himmler and Hitler.

Jews with former high status or military rank found no mercy at Dachau, Buchenwald, or Sachsenhausen. In late November 1938, Göring had released all frontline veterans—a confusing reprieve. Again, in October 1941, he intervened with the Gestapo to protect two hundred "comrades" from deportation to ghettos and concentration camps. A record of military sacrifice still carried some weight on a case-by-case basis. Meanwhile the Jews of Poland, Latvia, and Ukraine were shot by the thousands, while delivery truckers revved their engines to drown out the sound of gunfire and Jews screaming (171). The German public remained partly shielded from the moral dilemmas posed by the Jews' enforced crowding, starvation, disease, torture, gassings, and shootings on an industrial scale (183–84).

Ex-servicemen were obvious candidates for the Jewish Order Police. They participated in round-ups for the death-camps—but few survived, since "the distinction between collaboration and victimhood was often blurred" (137). Later, Theresienstadt, a devious element of the Wannsee genocidal plan of January 1942, was advertised to Jews, other Germans, and the world at large as a desirable retirement home for high-status Jewish Germans, including three thousand wounded and decorated war veterans (179). But no such idyllic community was contemplated or built for Jews "to live and die in peace." Most did without soap, a change of clothes, blankets, and eating utensils. Fifty-three thousand civilians jammed barracks built for ten thousand. The Reich Security Office actually charged the inhabitants for refurbishing the lice-filled "apartments" and confiscated their assets. Eventually, the Nazis emptied this fortress of deception of its war heroes and deported all men with military training in "work transports" to Auschwitz's death camps or death marches (198–203). Thus the fatherland thanked its heroes.

Very few Jewish World War I veterans survived the Second World War. Most died at the hands of the very German nation they had defended with life and limb. After the war, all Germans liked to think of themselves as victims. No one "knew" of the atrocities committed in their name and by their relatives campaigning in the East. Returning Jews met hostility from those who had confiscated their property. Seeking compensation required long court battles (211) for Jewish World War I veterans and any other Jews who dared return to Germany or Austria. They came to realize that not only Gestapo thugs but the German and Austrian population had perpetrated millions of crimes (213–14) against them.

Michael Geheran's archival research and sharp focus on the fate of the most protected sub-class of the persecuted Jews make *Comrades Betrayed* an invaluable if grim contribution to the history of a depraved government and warped society that murdered as many of its proudly loyal veterans as it could.⁶

6. The book is enhanced by eighty pages of notes, an index, and eighteen photographs, including one of Jewish World War I comrades proudly sporting their battle-won Iron Crosses alongside the mandatory yellow Star of David (fig. 16).