

Comrades Betrayed: Jewish World War I Veterans Under Hitler. By Michael Geheran. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2020. XVII + 294 pp. £27.99 (hardback).

In 1942, the Nazi regime deported, the Jewish businessman, Philipp Manes from Berlin to the ‘privileged camp’ of Theresienstadt. Manes, who had served in the German army in the First World War, managed to keep a detailed diary of his life in the concentration camp. Given the appalling conditions and the depravity of his situation, one of the most surprising entries in his diary came in the summer of 1944. On hearing the news that the Prussian Zeughaus museum had been badly damaged in an Allied bombing raid, he remembered fondly ‘the atrium with the flags’ and ‘the beautifully carved stairs leading to the hall of fame’ (194). Three months after mourning the loss of Prussia’s military museum, Manes was gassed in Auschwitz, one of more than six million victims of the Holocaust. In this powerfully written book, Michael Geheran grapples with the question of why many German-Jewish war veterans, like Manes, maintained a strong affinity to Germany, while at the same time being persecuted by other Germans.

Across six chronological chapters, Geheran sets out to explain the Jewish war veterans’ deep bond to Germany. The narrative starts with the outbreak of hostilities in 1914. Chapter One covers the key markers of the war, from early enthusiasm through the Jewish census of 1916 to eventual defeat. What becomes clear from Geheran’s analysis is that the shared experience of frontline combat ‘led to the formation of powerful bonds’ (9) between Jews and other Germans. As he then goes on to explain in the second chapter, battlefield camaraderie remained strong in the post-war world. During the Weimar Republic, German Jews often belonged to regimental associations and other veterans’ associations, while the ex-soldiers in the *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten* forged strong links to the German military and other war veterans’ groups. Demonstrating their wartime sacrifice also offered a means to fight rising antisemitism. The rise of the Nazis, the subject of the third chapter, imperilled the lives of all German Jews. Yet, some Jewish veterans enjoyed exemption from the early antisemitic legislation and maintained links to former comrades. This situation, as Geheran suggests, was confusing and led Jewish veterans to assume that they could prosper ‘as a tolerated, protected minority’ (90).

A lot of the material in these first three chapters will be familiar to readers from the earlier work of Greg Caplan, Brian Crim, Tim Grady and Derek Penslar. Geheran adds texture to this existing literature, but the general narrative is well-known. Geheran really comes into his own in the second half of the book when he turns to discuss the experience of Jewish war veterans from the mid-1930s through until the end of the Second World War. In these final three chapters, the book draws on a wealth of under-utilised source material to pepper the reader with new insights and observations not only about the German-Jewish war veterans, but about the particularities of the Nazis’ genocidal campaigns more generally.

Chapter Four opens with the death of President Hindenburg in August 1934, which is often seen as the catalyst for an intensification of Nazi antisemitism. Geheran, however, is keen to stress that Jewish ex-servicemen, who had been ‘raised and socialized in the culture of the German military’ refused to accept persecution and continued ‘to assert themselves publicly’ (91). He records numerous examples of Jewish veterans fighting back against slurs, verbal abuse and even physical attack. When Siegbert Gerechter heard antisemitic jokes in a Hamburg café, for example, he made it clear to his assailant that as a former soldier he would not countenance such abuse. Even after the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in September 1935, the Jewish veterans could find some support from other German war veterans. The retired field marshal, August von Mackensen, urged Hitler to show leniency towards severely wounded Jewish ex-servicemen, while a few Jewish war veterans managed to maintain private networks with their former comrades.

This narrative of ever-increasing persecution coupled with small moments, where Jewish veterans were recognised as such, continues to inform the discussion in Chapter Five. The November 1938 pogrom targeted all Jews regardless of military service. Yet, on the ground, as Geheran shows, a few Jewish war veterans managed to evade arrest; a former comrade might tip them off or even ignore instructions for their arrest. When the Nazi regime started to deport German Jews to the east, few exemptions were made for the Jewish war veterans. With other Jews, they were rounded up, sent to ghettos and eventually to their deaths. However, the occasional intervention on behalf of the former Jewish soldiers still occurred. Most noticeably, a handful of high-ranking members of the Wehrmacht argued that heavily decorated and war wounded Jewish veterans should be spared deportations because of their earlier war service. Such requests, though, only really had the effect of legitimising the murder of other Jews. The regime now knew that it could exempt some war veterans ‘while pursuing the rest without eliciting too much public disapproval’ (146).

The book’s final chapter explores life in the Theresienstadt camp, the destination for those Jewish war veterans who at least initially managed to avoid deportation further east. By this stage, it was the less the case that their military status proffered privilege, but more that their identities as former soldiers filtered into individual coping strategies. Having lived through the depravities of the battlefield earlier in their lives, many veterans drew on their wartime experiences to cope with the hardships of camp life. Maintaining personal cleanliness, order and dignity, for example, allowed them to retain a sense of self-esteem. On other occasions, Jewish veterans played a prominent role in camp police forces, which again provided an outlet to perform their diminished military masculinity. Yet, none of these individual strategies could protect them from death. In 1944, the Nazis, fearing Jewish resistance, disbanded the Theresienstadt camp police force and sent its members to Auschwitz.

On one level, then, Geheran’s study clearly highlights the sheer brutality of the Nazis’ genocide that swept even the most patriotic of German Jews to their deaths. On quite another level, though, this is a book about the formative experiences of the First World War. Individuals, whose lives that had been shaped in conflict, remained forever connected to their memories of frontline combat. Geheran’s book certainly adds further depth to the history of the German-Jewish war veterans. Its real significance, however, lies in the final three chapters. Here, Geheran meticulously investigates how Jewish veterans’ relationship to the war and to former comrades could lead to certain ‘privileges’, but all too often also to their destruction.