**Derek J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military. A History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 360pp**

It is a little known fact that from 1859 to 1938, 58 Jews were able to rise to the rank of general or admiral in the Italian armed forces. Indeed, as Derek Penslar reveals, the performance of Italian-Jewish military officers was not only a source of pride for European Jews, but the Italian army remained an attractive career for some Jewish men even in Mussolini’s fascist state. Penslar’s aim, in this refreshing and engaging study, is to challenge many stereotypes that are still current in academic or public history about the modern Jewish relationship with war. Particularly he demolishes the idea that modern Israel embodies Jewish martial prowess, and does so by recovering for the first time the diverse military experience of the Jewish diaspora before 1948. While the historiography on Jews and war has usually focused on the Holocaust or antisemitism (with the dominant Zionist narrative suggesting diaspora Jews either as passive victims or martyred heroes), Penslar seeks to construct an “alternative narrative of the encounter between modern Jews and the military” (p.19). This especially means assessing how Jewish soldiers and officers behaved and fared in the armies of the major European powers from the eighteenth century until the Second World War. It is an ambitious venture, requiring any historian to resist a simple collective “Jewish narrative” and to highlight the diversity of personal experience; too much of the latter however might produce a long string of personal stories. It is to Penslar’s credit that he deftly manages this balance, teasing out individual Jewish military careers while emphasizing where traditional discrimination might be relevant (or not). Across seven chapters, moreover, we confront as many Esaus as Jacobs – the warriors as well as the meek - not only in Jewish military traditions but also in the ways that Jewish men engaged with the armed forces.

In the most intriguing part of the book, Penslar studies the military context of Jewish emancipation across Europe, when many Jews aspired to integration as loyal citizens of the state. The stereotype might be that of the Jew in Tsarist Russia, persecuted and conscripted, permanently excluded from the Tsarist officer corps, yet in fact, “even in Russia Jewish soldiers possessed manly pride” (p.33) and did not completely baulk at the opportunities presented by the armed forces. In other major European armies in the era of emancipation, the level of discrimination was far less, the rationale for demonstrating loyalty and gratitude far more. By the late nineteenth century Jews were even being integrated into the Ottoman army, while a century earlier it was the Habsburg emperor Joseph II who had been a pioneer in first conscripting Jews into a European army. This offered them just one avenue among many for social integration and meant that by 1900 the reserve officer corps of the Habsburg empire was 18 per cent Jewish. Even so, as Penslar emphasizes, many Jews would have felt conflicting emotions either when they were drafted or when they volunteered for service. All military establishments discriminated against Jews in some form; if antisemitism minimized the number of career officers in the Habsburg army, in the British forces it was social elitism that proved the main barrier to advancement. Yet many obstacles were also thrown up by Jewish men themselves and by the communities from which they hailed. A perpetual refrain from conservative rabbis was whether military service might compromise Jewish values and identity, whether integration was really desirable. And not least there existed wide-spread aversion to military service; Jews were no different to any other conscripts in trying to escape the draft, to secure exemption and live a life not beholden to the state.

Penslar therefore illuminates the diversity of nineteenth-century Jewish “military” experience, ranging from the draft-dodgers to those who might independently resort to violence in terrorist groups like the Russian “People’s Will”. Most convincingly, he challenges the stereotype of the diaspora Jew as passive or meek or heroic, by suggesting a reality of Jewish participation, conformity and acceptance across many officer corps. Nowhere was this clearer than in the French army, where an over-emphasis by historians on the case of Alfred Dreyfus has obscured the widespread phenomenon of Jews opting for an officer career and prospering therein. From some diligent research in the French military archives, Penslar presents a variegated officer corps, where twenty French Jews could reach the rank of general between 1850 and 1940, where many Jewish officers as in Italy remained patriotic and were celebrated for being so. The fact that “they kept their heads down and, in public at least, never questioned the authority or infallibility of the army” (p.119) seems in fact fully to conform with the behaviour of most career officers.

Notwithstanding this apparent integration into some European armies, the persistence of Jewish transnationality (or at least its myth) meant that niggles about conflicted loyalties would never disappear. Here the book is less concerned with how state authorities might question Jews’ patriotism in times of crisis, and more with Jewish internal debates (both community and personal) and the evolving purpose behind any Jewish participation in military conflicts. By the late nineteenth century there was increasing “tension between cosmopolitan patriotism, international Jewish solidarity, and the demands of the Gentile state” (p.139). It manifested itself, for example, in a growing anxiety that Jews from different states might fight and kill each other in modern wars; as well as in the phenomenon of the Jewish businessman or financier who (in crude antisemitic terms) seemed to be serving patriotic interests while profiting internationally from the conflict. For Jews, the transnational war exploded in 1914: Jewish men with conflicting identities now fully participated and the martial Jew was proudly on display in many communities. Penslar suggests that it was particularly Jews from the Central Powers who could interpret this as a “Jewish war”, perceiving their Russian enemy as a long-time Jewish oppressor. His discussion shows that we need deeper research about cosmopolitan Jewish patriotism in the wartime Habsburg monarchy, moving beyond the largely loyalist identity presented for example in Marsha Rozenblit’s *Reconstructing a National Identity* (2001). But Penslar in any case is more interested in the experience of Germany’s Jews and highlights a surprising lack of research in that field. He supplies a counter-narrative to one of discrimination and antisemitism. The German army’s notorious antisemitic “Jew count” of 1916 was actually pre-empted a year earlier, when leading German-Jewish philanthropists and academics gathered their own statistics in order to show that Jews were participating and proving their worth in the military conflict. If antisemitism was never absent from the trenches, the self-image of the German-Jewish soldier emerging from the war was not as a victim but rather that of a militantly masculine patriot who had sacrificed alongside Gentiles for his fatherland. It was an aggressive image, with even a paramilitary edge, that was nourished in postwar Jewish veteran groups in the Weimar Republic; it only turned inwards to the idea of victimhood with the onset of Nazi persecution in the 1930s.

Before the 1948 War of Liberation with its exclusive Jewish purpose, diaspora Jews in fact were already fighting wars on their own terms and not just with a Zionist agenda. Interpreting the Jews’ twentieth-century engagement with war largely through a Holocaust lens has obscured this pro-active and positive experience. As an example of transnational militancy, Penslar singles out the Spanish Civil War where a fifth of the International Brigades were Jewish, where “performance of a Jewish virility and heroism that historically had been tied to national patriotism… was now put in the service of internationalist Marxism” (p.206). The reasons for taking part were naturally diverse, but for all those whose motivation had nothing particularly Jewish about it, there were others who interpreted the conflict as something of a Jewish crusade against Nazism and antisemitism. The same was even more valid a few years later when the Second World War turned into a “global Jewish World War” with Allied and Jewish interests seemingly blended together. There is still no general history of those one and half million Jews who fought on the Allied side, when many from North America fused together a patriotic and Jewish identity in their military performance. Penslar amply demonstrates that this diaspora performance, the expertise as well as the idealism, was vital as the backdrop for Jewish success in 1948. Indeed, he goes further: Israel needed the diaspora Jews, their manpower and their finance, in order to win that war (86 percent of Israeli arms purchased abroad in 1948 was borne by foreign sources).

While this forces us to view 1948 from a broader perspective, the book as whole offers a radical reassessment of the Jewish diaspora’s rich martial heritage. For the non-Jewish specialist or any military historian, there is much to learn here from its transnational approach, its sources, and its incisive analysis of conflicted loyalties, notably how they might be viewed by the state, the community, or the individual. For any modern Jewish historian, Penslar is both provocative and illuminating in his scuppering of well-worn ideas. Not least, as he concludes (p.262), “In military affairs, as in so many other respects, Israel represents a continuation of the diaspora via other means”.

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