

Dereck J. Penslar, *Jews and the Military. A History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2013) p. 360

by Marco Mondini

In his latest book Derek Penslar tackles boldly the history of the presence and participation of Jews in military institutions. He offers the first comprehensive, comparative outlook on a complex topic, covering a very wide time frame and taking into consideration a variety of national scenarios. Since the introduction of mandatory draft service and until the end of Second World War, military service was a matter of great interest for all Jews in the world. There is little doubt that being recognized the right to bear arms and the duty to defend the nation has been central to the history of Jewish communities and individuals in modern times, namely for the decisive role that military service had in the process of emancipation, integration and acculturation. The relevance of the topic in fact stems directly from the interconnection between military service, citizenship and the construction of the virile stereotype; considering the history of the Jews in the military is thus a way to scrutinize both their inclusion as citizens and the evolution of the image of the Jew as effeminate and weak.

To better understand the relevance of these connections between military service/citizenship/manhood it might be appropriate to take a step back, highlighting how – since the years of the Revolution in France, compulsory military service is conceived not only as a duty but also as a privilege. Annie Crepin has brilliantly illustrated in her *Histoire de la conscription*¹ that even the Jacobin armies gathered by Republican France in the 1790s were in reality very far from the theoretical model of the "nation in arms." The idea that all able bodied adult males would be ready and willing to pay the " blood tax " has no basis in the actual behavior of many social segments, neither before Napoleon nor during his long campaigns. This does not prevent the myth of the "nation in arms" - egalitarian and fervent with patriotic sentiment - to establish itself as an ideal model (and an ideology) that underlies and legitimizes the triumph of the revolutionary armies, first, and those of the Emperor Napoleon later on. The successes of the "nation in arms" lead to profound consequences in the European imagination. First and foremost we assist to a celebration of the connection between the national-political community and the citizen through sacrifice (or at

¹ Annie Crepin, *Histoire de la Conscription*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

least the idea of self-sacrifice). On the basis of the exemplary model of the Roman Republic, and largely thanks to the recovery of its heroes conceived as prototypes to imitate, in the Europe of the late eighteenth century the right/duty to bear arms and the right/duty to citizenship are equated. This is, of course, a doctrine firmly rooted in the political tradition of Western Europe; periodically reactivated from the age of modern commentators (like Machiavelli), enamored with classical models and convinced that only a return to the virtues of Solon and Brutus could save from decadence. Of the theoretical positions of the humanists and the *philosophes* the revolutionary state actually maintains the link between political identity and a willingness to sacrifice. A passage that morally legitimates mass armies that march across the continent since 1792: the exercise of legitimate violence regulated by the state becomes progressively a natural element of life for all adult males (at least ideally). The “militarization of masculinity”, to borrow a formula from George Mosse², implies hereafter that the ability to bear arms and to get down on the battlefield is imposed as a founding element of gender identity. Although detested by the peoples subject to it, however socially discriminatory (for most of the nineteenth century military service can be avoided by the rich) and often ridiculed in both fictional and non-fictional publications, conscription quickly established itself as an inevitable and formative phase of male life. The distinction between those who serve and those who instead are rejected becomes a borderline that does not only distinguish the able bodied and those deemed to weak or sickly to serve, but that defines manhood itself.

Penslar’s work is to be situated within this framework. As he states in the first pages of the volume, the privilege of bearing arms, and then to enter with full rights in a community of citizens made equal by the same service in the name of the state, was among the principal pathways to emancipation: “advocates for Jewish rights presented the Jewish soldier as proof that Jews were worthy of emancipation and social acceptance” (p. 1). In a pattern not unlike that of the rest of the European population subjected to the draft, the attitude of many young Jews could be contradictory. On the one hand, the experience of military life could be a very difficult test. The strict discipline of the armies of the nineteenth century, led by officers with a very conservative mentality, and the total disregard of religious obligations within any military circles (albeit not all), could pose a difficult challenge for the young Jewish conscript. On the other, just that clear

² George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: the Creation of Modern Masculinity*, (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

break with the previous life, perceived by many as a kind of forced entry into modernity, could be felt as a “liberation.” This ambiguous dimension is not surprising: it is a mindset not unlike that of other minorities or marginal social segments (like the peasants of southern Italy): hostile to the idea of losing a large part of their youth in the army but often nostalgic for the comfort (relative), the excitement and the new possibilities offered by military life. The literary figure of the young ‘Ntoni, in the novel *I Malavoglia*, by Giovanni Verga, is a good example of this uncertain relationship with the military. The militarization of the Jewish element can be seen as part of the successful process of nation-building, that same process that transformed ‘peasants into Frenchmen’³ would, with some differences, also transforms Jews into citizens.

Conscription was, of course, not the only way in which the Jews of Europe experienced access to military status. There were those that volunteered, that chose the military life as a profession and in so doing testified to their faith in the national cause. In some national cases, the percentage of the offspring of Jewish families drawn to the military profession as a permanent (or at least long-term) condition, led to the creation of an authentic Jewish military tradition. In the Kingdom of Sardinia and then the Kingdom of Italy until 1938, in Austria-Hungary until 1918 and in France until at least the watershed of the Dreyfus case, the numbers of this phenomenon were extraordinary in relative terms (albeit forcibly small in absolute terms), arousing the interest and in some instances also the jealousy of fellow Christians. The importance of this phenomenon - so much in the history of European Jewry as in the history of national military institutions – is testified effectively by a copious scholarly production. From the studies of Erwin Schmidl⁴ and Istvan Deák,⁵ concerning the Habsburg armed forces, to those of Horst Fischer⁶ and Christine Krüger,⁷ on the military experience of German Jews, to that of Philippe Landau⁸ on French Jews and the Great War (to name but a few) specific national cases (with some notable exceptions, on which I will return in the final paragraph) have been studied in depth. From this wealth

³ Eugene Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976)

⁴ Erwin A. Schmidl, *Habsburgs Jüdische Soldaten. 1788–1918*, (Wien: Böhlau, 2014)

⁵ Istvan Deák, *Beyond Nationalism. A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps, 1848-1918*, (New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶ Horst Fischer, *Judentum, Staat und Heer in Preussen*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1968).

⁷ Christine Krueger, *Sind wir denn nicht Brüeder? Deutsche Juden in nationalen Krieg 1870/1871*, (Paderborn: Schoeningh, 2006).

⁸ Philippe E. Landau, *Les Juifs de France et la Grande Guerre: un patriotisme républicain 1814-1941*, (Paris: CNRS Editions, 1999).

of research we can draw an overall view of the phenomenon: between the mid-nineteenth century and the First World War not only the German Jews, French, Russian and those from Austria-Hungary did much less than could be expected to avoid military service, but in many cases worked out a surprisingly homogeneous integration strategy that passed through precisely the experience of the barracks and even through the career in the officer corps, even though in this last case forms of discrimination (although mostly informal) were still significant in some contexts (notably not in Italy).

Penslar faces this complex framework, where the contexts vary wildly both concerning the number and characteristics of the Jewish presence and the dynamics of the military institutions, with two goals. On the one hand, starting with the examination of a vast bibliography, he offers an overall synthesis of these national histories in a chronological development, ranging from the eighteenth century until the 1960s and which claims to offer a transnational and not merely Eurocentric depiction of the problem: «the scope of this book – he writes - spans Europe, the Middle East and North America and a period of some three hundred years from the mid-seventeenth to the twentieth centuries» (p. 3). On the other, however, the volume proposes a more original purpose, connecting the manifold Jewish military experience in Europe to two central issues in the history and culture of the State of Israel: the Zionist aspiration to the creation a new community of warriors to reclaim the ancestral homeland and the founding role of the Armed Forces in the genesis and in the defense of the State of Israel. Penslar sees the Six Days War as the acme of cultural militarization in Israel (culmination of a choral celebration of war and combatants as protagonists of the rebirth and as indisputable centerpiece of the new Jewish history). At the same time it is the moment in which begins the rise of pacifist movements that to chip away at the undisputed consent to the Armed Forces, challenging the symbolic space of the fighters in national imagination. According to a parable that seems similar (only delayed for twenty years) to that of post-heroic Europe⁹, the figure of the Jew in arms seems to go from being central in the drafting of a collective identity proudly free from traditional stereotypes (the cowardly Jew, naturally weak and effeminate) to be progressively more marginal (p. 2).

⁹ James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

To meet his ambitious goals, the author structures his analysis in seven chapters. The first explores, in extremely synthetic terms, the genesis and contradictions of the myth of the “cowardly Jew” in early modern Europe. The second chapter describes how, starting especially with the introduction of new laws concerning compulsory military service in Central and Western Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Jews were involved in the process of militarization of the adult male population. An inclusive process frequently accompanied by a reconfiguration of anti-Semitic stereotypes: to a certain degree the Jew ceased to incarnate the non-male, the effeminate inept that, unable or unwilling to bring weapons for the glory of the nation could not be considered a true man. Chapter three deals with the choice of a military career as a vehicle for social promotion for the Jews of continental Europe, especially in light of the increasing number of Jews serving in various national armies (in Austria-Hungary, France and Italy in particular). The fourth focuses on the transition from the military experience in peacetime to that in wartime, and especially on the conflict between Jewish identity and patriotic devotion. In the name of what values and ideal were Jews willing to fight and potentially kill each other in opposing armies? How were the tensions between transnational religious and/or ethnic identity and the obligations to the newly acquired homelands resolved? The possibility of a clash perceived as fratricidal destabilizes the image (widely idealized) of a solidarity capable of taking precedence over opposing national allegiances. That image will resurface, albeit weakened, at the end of the first World War, in the form of an altogether bland (and unclear in its aims) federative bond between the associations of Jewish veterans formed in diverse countries (the Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten in Germany, the Bund jüdischer Frontsoldaten in Austria, and similar social networks that formed in Hungary, Poland, Lithuania and the United States). The birth of these veteran leagues is undoubtedly one of the most indicative phenomena in the history of the relationship between the Jews and the celebration of their patriotism in arms. They were important not because of their size or their lobbying capacity (on the contrary, these were some of the least impressive associations of veterans that flourished after the war), but for their main purpose: claiming the honor of German (or Polish or Hungarian etc.) speaking Jews in the defense of their respective country. The experience of the Great War is the focus of Chapter 5. In some countries (Germany, Austria and the states of the dual monarchy for example) that moment represents the acme of Jewish military history, the culmination of decades of integration pursued through military service. As for other categories of Europeans (the younger generation, intellectuals), the war is perceived and represented as a test; for the Jewish population it is a test of a different kind: the final proof of the full

integration in and of the undying fealty to the nation-state. This spasmodic desire to be recognized as equals is then destined to give way to the bitter disappointment of the 1920s and 1930s, when the upsurge of anti-Semitism becomes a dominant feature of public life in the countries in which the sacrifice of Jews in uniform had been the highest. The unintended irony of the German-Jewish aviator Fritz Beckardt, ace fighter pilot in Imperial Germany, whose aircraft was decorated with the distinctive emblem of a large swastika, is a good way to remember how the trauma of defeat, the troubled transition from war to peace and the loss of the institutional framework that had guaranteed legal equality, has not only undermined the expectations projected on the idea of the glorious “ultimate test,” it also led to a season (by many perceived as paradoxical and inconceivable) of marginalization and then persecution. The last two chapters of the book, finally, are devoted to the period 1918-1948. They seem to constitute a sort of temporal and cultural appendix with respect to the history that Penslar has traced so far. We have an explosion of different experiences of military life: not just the classical national military service paradigm, but the celebration of sacrifice for a revolutionary ideal (i.e. the Spanish civil war) or the passion for the idea of a new Jewish collective, as seen through the struggles of the Jewish Brigade and later the early nuclei of the Israeli army. The ideal background of these experiences (or at least, that is the reading provided by the author) is that all these new experiences are in some way the expression of an underlying sense of disappointment. The anti-Semitism rampant in much of Central and Eastern Europe already in the Twenties and then the implementation of racial laws by the Allies or satellites of Nazi Germany were a kind of litmus test for the fragility of emancipation in Europe: all this represented a real betrayal especially for those veterans of the Great War that had been the culmination of decades of voluntary submission to the laws of sacrifice for the defense of the fatherland.

The broad portrait offered by Penslar is undoubtedly fascinating, and precisely for his attempt to connect those that until now were seen as fragments of a kaleidoscope of national histories into a single coherent view. The advantages of this effort are quite evident: first, the creation of a comparative social and cultural military history of the Jews of Europe, in which the common elements qualifying the Jewish experience tend to transcend national differences. On the other hand, the inclination to compare and juxtapose very different scenarios, moved by the predetermined belief that there is something that unifies Jewish military experiences across different countries, tends to induce the author to disregard the differences and to emphasize commonalities. The social history of

military institutions has long highlighted that, while establishing institutional and regulatory frameworks very similar in continental Europe between the mid-nineteenth century and 1915, the symbolic importance of national armies could nonetheless vary wildly. For example, the social status of the military in Germany in 1900 was incomparable to that of the military corps in Italy or even France. Yet, in all three cases, in Germany - where there were (informally) significant obstacles and impediments for those Jews wishing access to public office - in France or in Italy the military profession was unanimously and consistently perceived by young Jews as a way to obtain social promotion and, in the cases of the offspring of some of the most prominent families, as a way to gain great status and prestige and to attest to the moral qualities of their community.

To create this ambitious fresco Penslar had to rely heavily on secondary bibliography, and he has certainly to be credited for the wealth and variety of texts that he scrutinized. Mastering such a great volume of information and fully grasping all the subtleties of the various national contexts considered in this ambitious work was not an easy task. Unavoidably, not always this extraordinary wealth of sources and literature is the object of a convincing critique. One of the most obvious considerations accompanying the reading of *Jews and the Military* is the disproportion between the attention paid to the events in Central and Eastern Europe and the information available about the French and Italian cases. The long bibliography accompanying the volume is, from this point of view, truly telling: we see a wealth of works in German and English and a scarcity of sources in French. For the Italian case, in many ways exceptional, the only two works cited are a pioneering essay by Meir Michaelis¹⁰ and a volume authored by the retired general Alberto Rovighi¹¹ on Italian soldiers of Jewish origin, of which the best that can be said is that no serious historian could quote him without great caution. The lack of attention to the Italian case appears bizarre in a research specifically dedicated to the issue of the relations between Jews and military power. The Kingdom of Sardinia from 1848 and the later Kingdom of Italy were, in fact, the scene of one of the most striking manifestations of that race to the career of arms that had characterized significant segments of the Jewish bourgeoisie in Europe. Until 1938, when the Fascist regime put an end to an almost secular vocation, the officers of Jewish origin in the Italian armed forces had been more or less a constant 1% of the total, compared with a

¹⁰ Meir Michaelis, "Gli ufficiali superiori ebrei nell'esercito italiano dal Risorgimento alla marcia su Roma," in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel*, 4 (1972): 20-37.

¹¹ Alberto Rovighi, *I Militari di origine ebraica nel primo secolo di vita dello Stato italiano*, (Rome: USSME, 1999).

registered population of Jewish religion of 1 %. Although this data should be treated with great caution (the very definition of who qualifies as a "Jew" and what form the 'Jewishness' of those officers and soldiers took is the object of much discussion), the over-representation is indisputable, and testifies to a drive towards the military life as a permanent choice that does not have (proportionally) equal in any other segment of the Italian population. The numbers of high ranking Jewish officers, including several Generals and Ministers of War, also appears to be striking if compared to other national scenarios.

Penslar is more interested in other matters. His attention concentrates on those areas where Jewish presence was more conspicuous and his choices also reflect the availability of bibliography in English. This being said, the volume has undeniable merits: he offers a vivid and stimulating comparative picture of the military service of Jews covering three centuries and diverse national settings, from XVIIIth century Europe to the State of Israel. The writing style, the kind of information selected (with an impressive attention to colorful life stories), the propensity for oversimplification, may suggest that it has been written more for a public of students or for the general reader, than for a scholarly milieu. Nonetheless it offers in a concise way a lot of precious information and insightful institutions for the specialist reader as well.

Marco Mondini, Istituto Storico Italo Germanico - FBK (Trento); Università di Padova.