

Sabine Hank, Hermann Simon, Uwe Hank, eds. *Feldrabbiner in den Streitkräften des Ersten Weltkrieges*. Berlin: Hentrich und Hentrich, 2013. 624 pp. EUR 48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-938485-76-7.

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German Jews to the Front

As the centenary of the First World War fast approaches, historians have rightly asked whether there is anything fundamentally new to be learned from this period of intense historical reflection. This marvellous document collection, which has been several years in the making, helps to put such fears to rest. The editors, Sabine Hank, Hermann Simon, and Uwe Hank, are all attached to Berlin's Centrum Judaicum, which houses the files of the former Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden. The book follows in the footsteps of two equally significant publications on the history of German Jews and the First World War. In 2002, the Centrum Judaicum published a collection of soldiers' letters from former Jewish orphans and in 2004 an overview of the Jewish military cemetery in Berlin Weißensee.[1]

The focus on this occasion is on the army rabbis who served in the German military during the First World War. The Franco-Prussian War had already witnessed four German rabbis at the front. The big difference in this later conflict was in scale. Forty-five rabbis and assistant rabbis served in the army, some of these for almost the entire war. The numbers may have increased, but then so had the military dimensions. As a result, there were still far too few army rabbis to cover the various front lines. Leo Baerwald, himself an army rabbi, even remarked somewhat ironically that trench warfare had "brought a little relief to the job" as it meant less traveling (p. 238). Nonetheless, with almost one hundred thousand Jewish soldiers wearing German military uni-

form during the four years of conflict, at times some men had to forego religious and pastoral support despite the best efforts of the army rabbis.

The book fits into a growing body of literature on German Jews and the First World War which collectively has added considerable depth to this previously under-researched aspect of Jewish history.[2] For a long time, studies of the conflict that even mentioned the presence of Jews in the military tended to focus on the rise of anti-semitism through the course of the war.[3] More recent studies, from David Fine and Thomas Weber amongst others, have sought to challenge this perception, suggesting that in many instances antisemitism formed only a marginal aspect of the German Jewish war experience.[4]

Hank, Simon, and Hank's book takes a similar approach to Peter Appelbaum's recent publication on the same subject in that it consists primarily of a selection of documents on the army rabbis.[5] The advantage of this is that it allows readers to pick their own way through the ongoing historiographical debates. Certainly some of the material in the book seems to add weight to the narrative of rising wartime antisemitism. The rabbis were privy to complaints that Jewish soldiers had been passed over for promotions or decorations. Indeed, the army rabbis agreed that one of their frontline duties was to provide comfort and support for soldiers who found themselves victims of antisemitic insults. The infamous Jewish census (*Judenzahlung*) of 1916, of which much has

already been written, also features prominently in the documents. Siegfried Klein, who served on the western front, summed up the feelings of many, when he wrote “on the whole the sense of indignation and exasperation amongst the Jewish soldiers is enormous” (p. 285).

Yet other documents in the book suggest the very opposite. The army rabbis’ relations with their Christian colleagues were apparently always excellent. They often shared duties and stepped in when one or the other was unable to perform burials or to visit the war wounded. A spirit of congeniality also seemed to flow through discussions between the rabbis and the military leadership, particularly during the early years of the war. Many letters in the collection describe occasions where high-ranking officers went out of their way to support the army rabbis, providing them with buildings for Jewish festivals, for example, or inviting them for lavish meals. In essence, then, the book provides evidence to support both sides of the historiographical debate: antisemitism was a fundamental part of some Jewish soldiers’ wartime lives, but for many others it appeared only at the periphery.

Just as the book can be read in terms of German Jews’ varied experiences of the First World War, the documents can also be used to shed light on a range of different historiographical issues. For example, the letters and reports contained in the book reveal much about ordinary soldiers’ experience of combat. In their roles as religious leaders, the army rabbis witnessed the horrors of the front line but from the position of noncombatants. Their reports, therefore, are filled with descriptions of the blood and bodies that often littered the battlefield. Even when they were behind the lines, a lot of their time was spent dealing with the detritus of battle, either burying the dead or tending the wounded. After spending three nights in a military hospital “listening to the moaning of a 120 men,” one rabbi complained that his own nerves were completely shot (p. 365).

Besides the social history of warfare, there is also much to be gleaned from the documents in terms of the inner workings of the German Jewish communities. There was clearly some prestige attached to military duty, as a number of leading personalities served as army rabbis, including Leo Baeck and Martin Salomon-ski. A useful biographical section at the start of the book details the lives of these men, along with the careers of their lesser-known colleagues. Here, a wonderful collection of images of the rabbis at war accompanies each of the different life histories. However, it is in the large document section, which is made up of individual let-

ters as well as minutes of the army rabbi conferences, where most of the detail on the German Jewish communities comes through. The relationship between the Federation of German Jews (Verband der deutschen Juden) and the army rabbis forms one repeated theme. From their internal discussions, it is clear that the rabbis were keen to direct their operations at the front themselves, but they were continually drawn to the Federation. Not only were many complaints from Jewish soldiers filtered through the Federation, but the organization also supplied the rabbis with prayer books and other essential religious artifacts.

Considering the editors’ affiliations, it should come as no surprise to learn that the vast majority of the book’s documents hail from the archival collections of the Centrum Judaicum. And if anything, the book provides a reminder of just how comprehensive the Berlin institution’s holdings are. The editors, though, have managed to integrate some material from other archives and perhaps most impressively have dug out photographs and other documents held in private hands. It should be noted, however, that despite these efforts, the book still contains only a portion of the source material that exists on the army rabbis. Leo Baeck’s regular reports for the *Gemeindeblatt der jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin* are absent, as is a lot of Aron Tänzer’s correspondence held in the Leo Baeck Institute and Stuttgart’s Hauptstaatsarchiv. The editors have also concentrated on material stemming from the pens of the rabbis themselves, rather than from the military or the main Jewish communal organizations.

As the focus is primarily on Centrum Judaicum sources, the question could be asked as to whether a book is the most appropriate format for presenting this material to a wider audience. With the growth of digital technology, there is an increasing move towards electronic repositories, freely available online. In the field of German Jewish history, the digital newspapers collected on the Compact Memory site and the Leo Baeck Institute’s Digibaek project have led the way. Opportunities to search large document collections by keywords and to engage both an academic and a public audience clearly offer advantages over printed document collections, which is the case with the book under review.

None of these reflections, however, need detract from what is a very impressive book that is the product of considerable archival work. It will undoubtedly appeal to scholars researching twentieth-century German and Jewish history as well as to those engaged in the study

of the First World War more generally. Hopefully the careful work that has gone into bringing this document collection to fruition will provide the foundation for other scholars to explore afresh this crucial period of twentieth-century European history.

Notes

[1]. Sabine Hank and Hermann Simon, eds., *Feldpostbriefe jüdischer Soldaten 1914-1918* (Teetz: Heinrich & Heinrich, 2002); Sabine Hank and Hermann Simon, eds., “Bis der Krieg uns lehrt, was der Friede bedeutet.” *Das Ehrenfeld für die jüdischen Gefallenen des Weltkrieges auf dem Friedhof der Berliner jüdischen Gemeinde* (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2004).

[2]. Gregory Caplan, “Wicked Sons, German Heroes: Jewish Soldiers, Veterans and Memories of World War I in Germany” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2001);

Ulrich Sieg, *Jüdische Intellektuelle im Ersten Weltkrieg: Kriegserfahrungen, weltanschauliche Debatten und kulturelle Neuentwürfe* (Berlin: Akademie, 2001).

[3]. See for example: Clemens Picht, “Zwischen Vaterland und Volk: Das deutsche Judentum im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse*, ed. Wolfgang Michalka (Munich: Piper, 1994), 736-55.

[4]. David J. Fine, *Jewish Integration in the German Army in the First World War* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012); Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment, and the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[5]. Peter Appelbaum, *Loyalty Betrayed: Jewish Chaplains in the German Army during the First World War* (Edgware: Vallentine Mitchell, 2013).

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