

Erwin A. Schmidl. *Habsburgs jüdische Soldaten: 1788–1918.* Wien: Böhlau Verlag Wien, 2014. 246 S. gebunden, ISBN 978-3-205-79567-4.

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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (November, 2016)

“Habsburgs Jüdische Soldaten, 1788–1918”, is a somewhat expanded version of Erwin Schmidl’s 1989 book “Juden in der k. (u.) k. Armee, 1788–1918”, with an updated scholarly apparatus. In this new volume, Schmidl presents an interesting and balanced narrative about Jewish soldiers in the Habsburg armed forces. Schmidl integrates his narrative into the development of the Habsburg military as well as within the transformation of Jewish life in the Habsburg Monarchy from the late eighteenth century through its demise in 1918 and even beyond. He enlivens the narrative with many examples from the experiences of Jewish soldiers and officers, and the volume benefits as well from appendices, including the speech of traditionalist Rabbi Ezekiel Landau in late eighteenth century Prague sending Jews off to the army, and the memories of David Neumann, a Jewish soldier in World War I, as well as many pictures of Jewish soldiers.

Austria was the first country in Europe to allow Jews to serve in the military, although the British and the Dutch did allow Jews into their colonial forces somewhat earlier. The decision to recruit Jews owed much to Emperor Joseph II’s enlightened views and his desire to make his Jews useful to the state. In 1788, Joseph overcame opposition and ordered that Jews too were eligible for conscription, if only in supply units, not combat units. Such a decision was only possible because of the new centralization of military control

and recruitment, including the centralization of supply, which had previously been contracted out (often to Jews). Conscription at that time was not universal, and only a few Jews actually served in the army in the late eighteenth century, especially after Joseph II’s successors allowed Jews to buy their way out of military service and exempted Hungarians altogether. Such exemptions ended, however, during the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century, when the army needed more men. Indeed, during these wars about 36,000 Jews served in the armed forces. Moreover, Jews now could serve in the infantry, not just in supply units, and so they participated in combat as well. There were also a few Jewish officers in the Napoleonic Wars.

In the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century Jews regularly served in the military, even as officers, but they still suffered some discrimination. For example, army leaders thought that Jews possessed a lower level of military ability than other recruits, so they would not let them serve in the artillery or cavalry. Most Jews in the army were in the infantry, the “train” (supply units), the medical corps, or military administration. In addition, fearing that Jews might desert, the army in 1805 forbade Jewish soldiers on leave from wearing civilian clothes or even going home. At the same time, however, the army did try, as much as possible, to accommodate the religious needs of Jewish soldiers. Small groups of Jewish soldiers

were allowed to cook kosher food for themselves, although that became more difficult when the army started to provide food on the battalion level in military barracks. The army also allowed local Jewish communities to care for sick Jewish soldiers and bury the Jewish dead, and it tried during peacetime to relieve Jews from heavy work on the Jewish Sabbath and holidays. Of course some military commanders thought kosher food was unhealthy, and they regarded requests to observe Jewish rituals as an excuse to evade military duties. In 1866, about 20,000 Jews served in the Habsburg armed forces, including about 200 Jewish officers.

The creation of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary in 1867 brought with it much liberal legislation, including Jewish emancipation and universal conscription. The number of Jews in the military and the number of Jewish officers naturally increased. By 1902, there were about 60,000 Jews in the armed forces, 3.9 percent of the total, almost exactly the percentage of Jews in the total population. Contrary to antisemitic charges, most Jews did not serve only in supply, medical, or administrative units. Most Jewish soldiers served in fighting units, disproportionately in the infantry. Indeed, Schmidl does an excellent job providing a balanced account of the Jewish experience in the Habsburg army. He demonstrates how the army would not tolerate nationalist and religious conflict, including overt antisemitism, even insisting, for example, that reserve officers could not refuse to duel with Jews, even if they did so at university. Thus, in contrast to civilian life, Jews did not generally experience antisemitism in the army. Yet Schmidl also presents many exceptions to this rule. Indeed, the decline in the number of Jewish reserve officers in the early twentieth century may have been due, he thinks, to antisemitic pressure not to accept Jews in some regiments. He also does a good job explaining why few Jews served in cavalry, artillery, or light artillery (Jäger) regiments or the navy even after these were opened to Jews. He admits that prejudice may have

played some role, especially in the cavalry, but he also points out that the navy mostly recruited in Dalmatia, Croatia, and the coastal provinces, and the Jäger in Tirol and Styria, all areas where few Jews lived, while the cavalry mostly recruited from the rural population. He also reminds us that Jews were over-represented in military administration because a high percentage of Jews had secondary school and university education and they knew German and other languages.

Schmidl's chapter on Jewish officers nicely reveals the significant ways Jews found full acceptance in the Habsburg armed forces. In 1897, 197 career officers were Jews, almost all in combat units, although, possibly due to rising antisemitism, in 1911 only 109 Jews served as career officers. Schmidl traces the careers of several of these officers, many of whom rose to the rank of major general or higher. In addition, many Jewish converts and men of partial Jewish origins also pursued careers as military officers, and a few Christian officers even converted to Judaism, usually with no problems for their careers. Some Christian officers married Jewish women, an interesting alliance of status and wealth in most of these cases. More significantly for Jewish acceptance, 18 percent of all reserve officers in the Habsburg army in the late nineteenth century were Jews (in a country in which 4 percent of the population was Jewish), in contrast to Imperial Germany, where virtually no Jews served in that capacity. During World War I, these Jewish reserve officers played a significant role, especially since a very large number of career field officers were killed in the first months of the war. Altogether about 300,000 Jews served in the Habsburg army during the war.

Schmidl concludes his volume with a brief history of Jewish war veterans after World War I, many of whom shared the values of other veterans, and the terrible fate during the Holocaust of those Jews who had fought valiantly for Austria-Hungary during World War I. Many went to the

deportation trains wearing their medals. In a poignant touch, Schmidl mentions that one group of Jews had to create their yellow stars from old Habsburg black and gold flags.

“Habsburgs jüdische Soldaten” confirms that Austria-Hungary and its armed forces treated Jews fairly. Schmidl also does well to remind us that army life was difficult for everyone. As a social historian, I would have liked more attention to the lived experience of Jewish soldiers in the armed forces, although the sources are probably very sparse for most of the period under discussion. For this new version of his study, it also might have been nice if Schmidl had done further research in the military archives to flesh out many of his points. Still, this is a useful volume with many good insights.

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Citation: Marsha Rozenblit. Review of Schmidl, Erwin A. *Habsburgs jüdische Soldaten: 1788–1918*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. November, 2016.

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