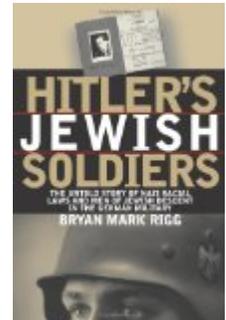


Bryan Mark Rigg. *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers: The Untold Story of Nazi Racial Laws and Men of Jewish Descent in the German Military.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xxi + 433 pp. \$16.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7006-1358-8.



Reviewed by David J. Fine

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Bryan Mark Rigg's *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers* uncovers a wealth of oral history and personal documents relating to German soldiers of partial Jewish ancestry who served in the Wehrmacht. Rigg interviewed hundreds of these men labeled "*Mischlinge*" by the Nazi regime. He sought and received access to many of their personal records, both in their possession and in military and government archives. By tracing their histories through interviews and documents, Rigg is able to reconstruct the historical experience of the "*Mischlinge*." His fascinating discussion nonetheless occasionally leaves the reader wanting.

Law, like most cultural edifices, is defined by its boundaries, and the boundaries are often gray. A clear legal definition of who is a Jew was required by the Nazi state, guided by a basic principle of discrimination against, and ultimate extermination of, the Jews. And yet, given the centuries of Jewish integration in Germany, it was not always clear who was a Jew and who was not. The first two chapters of Rigg's work analyze the various definitions of Judaism, both full and partial, from the Jewish and Nazi perspective. The third

chapter offers a useful overview of Jewish assimilation in Germany as well as Jewish participation in the German army from the eighteenth century through World War I. But the heart of the book is found in chapters 4, 5 and 6 where Rigg recounts the history of conflicted racial policy vis-a-vis "partial Jews" throughout the period of the Third Reich. While all "non-Aryans" were ordered dismissed from military service in 1933, the status of "partial Jews" did not receive significant clarification until the Nuremberg laws of 1935, which created the categories of "*Mischling ersten Grades*" (first degree), which included those with two Jewish grandparents, and "*Mischling zweiten Grades*" (second degree), or those with one Jewish grandparent. Three or four Jewish grandparents made one a *Volljude* regardless of religious confession. But the attempts at clarification only created more difficulties. Various orders over the years commanded the expulsion of "partial Jews" from the Wehrmacht. Some orders distinguished between first and second degree "*Mischlinge*." Some distinguished between positions of authority in the Wehrmacht and the enlisted ranks. Racial policies in the army relaxed with the onset

of war in 1939, but were enforced anew after the conquest of France. In the final years of the war, the Wehrmacht ordered "partial Jews" still in its ranks to forced labor camps. But some commanding officers are documented as having tried to protect such individuals under their command. In addition, policy confusion persisted due to a system of exemptions under which "partial Jews" could request "Aryanization," which could only be certified personally by Hitler. Rigg documents the surprising amount of time Hitler spent on exemption requests from "partial Jews." Chapters 7 and 8 recount the vagaries of the exemption process. The final chapter addresses the question of the extent to which such individuals serving in the Wehrmacht understood the dimensions of the Holocaust during the war. Rigg argues that while his interview subjects admitted to witnessing acts of deportation, torture, and murder, they did not generally understand that what they witnessed was part of a systematic genocide.

Rigg explores the personal dramas of secrecy, shame, and endless bureaucratic attempts at "Aryanization" that were the common experience of so many of his subjects. Most of the men Rigg interviewed managed to hide their Jewish ancestry for years. Many had various "protections." Marriages to "Aryans," decorated war service, friends in high places, and membership in the Nazi party all served to mitigate persecution. Nevertheless, the stress of carrying a secret, the shame of discovery, the concern for Jewish family members, and the sense of injustice, all mark a particular experience of Nazi Germany that enriches our understanding of the period.

Despite these valuable discussions, however, the very title of the book is a misnomer. The subjects of Rigg's study were not Jewish. With but a few exceptions, they were Jewish neither by their own identity, by Jewish religious law, nor Nazi laws. That is, the very existence of the legal category "*Mischling*" means that even the Nazis recognized that Jewish ancestry was not always the

dominant factor in defining Jewishness. The curiosity of Jews fighting for Nazi Germany, a teaser implied by the book's title, is therefore misleading. These "Jewish soldiers" were self-identified Germans, many of them Nazi party members, a number of them even "proud" anti-semites. According to Jeremy Noakes's 1989 seminal essay (upon which Rigg bases his work), less than 10 percent of first degree "*Mischlinge*" and only 1.2 percent of second degree "*Mischlinge*" considered themselves Jewish.[1] It is disappointing that Rigg does not explore the nature of their identity beyond Nazi legal definitions. While acknowledging that the term "*Mischling*" itself is derogatory, Rigg himself consistently uses it throughout his book. The use of the term, especially without quotation marks, strikes me not only as glaring but also as an uncritical ascription of identity. "*Mischling*" is a pejorative legal fiction based upon racist assumptions that can tell us much about Nazi ideology and policy but little about the people whom it describes. The extent to which a group can be formed by being collectively targeted by an oppressive regime is an interesting question. However, Rigg notes again and again that almost every one of his subjects thought his case was unique. Such individuals knew of the existence of other "partial Jews" but thought that their own circumstances were special, hence undermining any collective identification. But Rigg must believe that there was some kind of group consciousness, otherwise there is no subject for the book besides the group or its individuals as objects of Nazi laws. The claim of unique experiences applies to the final chapter on knowledge of the Holocaust. In that chapter, Rigg reports that, with few exceptions, none of the men he interviewed had any idea that the discrimination, abuse and massacres they saw were part of an overall systematic attempt to destroy German and European Jewry. The fact that they all claim, fifty years after the fact in oral conversations, that they thought that what they saw constituted aberrations should not be terribly surprising. Here a discernable pattern

develops. The overwhelming majority of Rigg's subjects are quick to assume the experience of being victimized and yet are reticent to assume any knowledge of (or needless to say, responsibility for) the horror that went on around them.

While Rigg's study uncovers fascinating threads of archival and oral history, it does not add to the historiographical interpretation of Nazi Germany except in showing how concerned Hitler was with particular points of racial doctrine and how that concern was translated and executed by military command and in the ranks. Rigg, while expanding our knowledge of the military experience, does not differ in his understanding of the "*Mischling*" experience from Jeremy Noakes's 1989 essay that served as the starting point for Rigg's research. This book will be of interest to students of the Wehrmacht and Nazi racial policy. It falls short of exploring the bigger questions of the role of Jews in supporting the Nazi state or of German soldiers' acknowledgment of their role as perpetrators in the Holocaust.

Note

[1]. Jeremy Noakes, "The Development of Nazi Policy Towards the German-Jewish 'Mischlinge' 1933-1945," in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 34 (1989): p. 294, Table II.

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