

## Remasculinizing the Shirker: The Jewish *Frontkämpfer* under Hitler

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the impact of Nazi persecution on the gender identity of German-Jewish veterans of World War I. National Socialism threatened to erase everything these Jewish men had achieved and sacrificed. It sought to destroy the identity they had constructed as soldiers in the service of the Fatherland, as well as the high status they had earned as *Frontkämpfer* (front-line fighters) in the Great War, upon which their sense of masculinity identity rested. Although diminished and disempowered by Nazi terror, Jewish veterans were able to orient themselves toward hegemonic ideals of martial masculinity, which elevated military values as the highest expression of manhood, giving them a space to assert themselves and defy the Nazi classification *Jew*. For the Jewish men who fought in World War I, the Nazi years became a battle to reclaim their status and masculine honor. They believed that the manner in which they handled themselves under the Nazis was a reflection of their character: as men who had been tried and tested in the trenches, their responses to persecution communicated their identity as soldiers, as Jews, and as Germans.

Im vorliegenden Aufsatz wird untersucht, wie sich die Verfolgung unter der NS-Zeit auf die Geschlechtsidentität deutsch-jüdischer Veteranen des Ersten Weltkriegs ausgewirkt hat. Durch den Nationalsozialismus wurde alles, was diese jüdischen Männer erreicht und geopfert hatten, in Frage gestellt. Das galt für ihre Identität als Soldaten im Dienst des Vaterlands ebenso wie für den hohen Status, den sie als Frontkämpfer des Ersten Weltkriegs verdient hatten und auf dem ihr männliches Selbstverständnis beruhte. Trotz des von den Nationalsozialisten ausgeübten Terrors waren jüdische Veteranen aber in der Lage sich an hegemonialen Idealen martialischer Männlichkeit zu orientieren; militärische Tugenden wurden zum Sinnbild von Männlichkeit stilisiert und gaben den Veteranen die Möglichkeit sich—trotz der nationalsozialistischen Stigmatisierung als „Juden“—selbst zu behaupten. Die NS-Jahre waren für die Juden, die im Ersten Weltkrieg gekämpft hatten, um die Aufrechterhaltung ihres Status und ihrer männlichen Ehre. Sie waren überzeugt davon, dass ihr Verhalten unter der Herrschaft der Nationalsozialisten ihren Charakter reflektierte: Als Männer, die sich in den Schützengraben bewährt hatten, war ihre Reaktion auf Verfolgung somit Ausdruck ihrer soldatischen, jüdischen und deutschen Identität.

**T**HE Jewish *Drückeberger* (shirker) was a powerful image in early twentieth-century Germany.<sup>1</sup> Conservative-nationalist circles portrayed Jewish men as feeble, effeminate, and cowardly, as lacking both the physical and moral qualities necessary

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<sup>1</sup>On the origins and variations of the stereotypical term *Drückeberger*, see Volker Ullrich, “Fünfzehntes Bild: Drückeberger,” in *Bilder der Judenfeindschaft. Antisemitismus, Vorurteile und Mythen*, ed. Julius

to become reliable citizens and good soldiers.<sup>2</sup> When the Nazis came to power in 1933, they were thus able to draw on a range of age-old stereotypes about the deficiencies of Jewish men, depicting them as unmanly and warning of their selfish, deceitful, and dishonorable ways. Anti-Jewish propaganda tirelessly repeated the well-worn antisemitic tropes stressing the physical inferiority of Jewish men, the alleged cowardice of Jewish soldiers during World War I, and their unwillingness to risk their lives for the Fatherland. Nazi caricatures depicted male Jews more or less identically: short and stocky, with crooked feet, bent postures, protruding bellies, and bearded, ungroomed faces—the antithesis of the soldierly German male. These representations were calculated: they were intended to remind the German public that Jews were unworthy of emancipation and social acceptance, and that they could never be assimilated into the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community).

Yet, on April 1, 1933, the day of the so-called April Boycott, some Jewish veterans turned these claims on their head. The boycott was the first concerted, nationwide measure undertaken by the NSDAP against the Jewish community, with members of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) picketing entrances to Jewish shops, businesses, and doctors' offices across the *Reich*, intimidating onlookers, and preventing customers from doing business with Jews.<sup>3</sup> But when the SA arrived to take up positions in front of a Jewish department store in Wesel, a small city in Westfalia, its owner, Erich Leyens, was waiting. Wearing the uniform of his old wartime regiment, adorned by the Iron Cross First Class he had earned as an officer on the Western Front during World War I, Leyens positioned himself next to the stormtroopers and distributed leaflets to passersby, decrying the Nazis' treatment of war veterans.<sup>4</sup> This brazen defiance of Nazi authority caused a sensation in the town, as pedestrians stopped to take in the spectacle, many reacting "with open dismay" at the sight of the brown-shirted SA men harassing a former soldier of the Great War.<sup>5</sup> According to Leyens, "Voices were raised, loud and clear, in support of the statement on the leaflet. Men gave vent to their indignation. Women, crying, came up and embraced me."<sup>6</sup> A crowd gathered, and, before long, throngs of "protest customers" pushed their way past the sentries into Leyens's store; by early afternoon, the NSDAP district office ordered the SA troop to pull back. Local newspapers lauded Leyens's "courage" and "self-determination" in challenging his accusers and

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H. Schoeps and Joachim Schlör (Augsburg: Weltbild, 1999), 210–17. For a more general use of the term in military circles, see Ralph Winkle, *Der Dank des Vaterlandes. Eine Symbolgeschichte des Eisernen Kreuzes 1914 bis 1936* (Essen: Klartext, 2007), 263–65; Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription, and Civil Society*, trans. Andrew Boreham and Daniel Brückenhuis (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 65–69.

<sup>2</sup>This attitude is captured in a newspaper editorial from 1908, which condoned the exclusion of Jews from the officers' corps, declaring: "What makes it impossible for Jews to belong to the officers' corps in Germany to this day is not their religion, but their un-German spirit and inherently unsuitable racial qualities." See Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (HStAS), M 1/3 Bü 792, Kriegsministerium: Zentral-Abteilung, "Zur Frage der Juden im Heere," *Neues Tageblatt*, Oct. 6, 1908.

<sup>3</sup>On the April Boycott, see Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, vol. 1: *The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 19–26; Jürgen Matthäus and Mark Roseman, *Jewish Responses to Persecution, 1933–1938* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010), 16–24.

<sup>4</sup>United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives (USHMMA), Centralverein (CV), RG 11.001M.31, reel 101 (SAM 721-1-2321,1200), Leaflet: "Unser Herr Reichskanzler Hitler," March 1933.

<sup>5</sup>Leo Baeck Institute New York (LBINY), ME 170, Erich Leyens, "Unter dem NS Regime 1933–1938. Erlebnisse und Beobachtungen." Leyens's memoir is published in Erich Leyens and Lotte Andor, *Die fremden Jahre. Erinnerungen an Deutschland*, ed. Wolfgang Benz (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 1994).

<sup>6</sup>Leyens, *Die fremden Jahre*, 17.

“proving” his “Germanness,” and the main office of the *Centralverein deutscher Staatsbürger jüdischen Glaubens* (Central Association of German Citizens of Jewish Faith) reminded its constituents that “such firm interventions can be successful, even today.”<sup>7</sup> Wesel was not an isolated case. In several cities and small towns across Germany, Jewish ex-servicemen responded to Nazi intimidation by confronting their aggressors and using their wartime military credentials to “discomfit SA men who stood around with their placards.”<sup>8</sup>

The incident stands in contrast to much of the existing historiography on the Holocaust, which contends that Jewish men were left diminished and powerless by Nazi terror, “prevented from fulfilling their traditional roles of provider and protector,” as women gradually assumed responsibilities normally carried out by men.<sup>9</sup> One of the problems with existing analyses of Jewish victims of the Holocaust, however, is that they give only scant attention to the military background, training, and wartime experiences of veterans.<sup>10</sup> This is a significant omission, for many Jewish men who fought in World War I had been shaped in important ways by their service in the Kaiser’s military. Evidence for this includes the high rate of participation of Jews in the postwar veterans’ movement, their attendance at regimental reunions, and their repeated invocations of their military service in private letters, diaries, and memoirs. The writings of Jews during the Nazi years also yield important information about hegemonic images of masculinity, as well as about how Jewish veterans deployed these images in order to evade or lessen the effects of Nazi persecution.

This article examines the impact of Nazi persecution on the gender identity of the German-Jewish “front generation.” It follows the trajectory of defiance, collapse, and renewal of Jewish veterans’ masculine identities, beginning with their attempts to challenge the claims of Nazi antisemitism after the so-called seizure of power; it then turns to their loss of status after the pogrom of November 1938, and their attempts to salvage, or “remasculinize,” their identities as prisoners in Nazi concentration camps.<sup>11</sup> A special focus is on the changing production of masculinity during the Nazi years, on the ways in which Jewish veterans adapted to shifting circumstances, as well as on the relationships that were most

<sup>7</sup>LBINY, ME 170, “Selbsthilfe eines jüdischen Frontkämpfers,” April 1933 (based on internal CV correspondence, this clipping came, most likely, from the *Weseler Volksblatt*, a newspaper affiliated with the Catholic Center Party); USHMMA, CV, RG 11.001M.31, reel 101 (SAM 721-1-2321,1190-1191), letter from CV regional office in Rhineland-Westphalia (Ernst Plaut) to CV head office in Berlin, April 20, 1933.

<sup>8</sup>LBINY, ME 743, report by Max Plaut on interview with Christian Riecke, n.d.

<sup>9</sup>On the collapse of male gender identities and the “role reversal” of men and women during the Holocaust, see, e.g., Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 73; Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59–62, 229–37.

<sup>10</sup>Exceptions in this regard are Kim Wünschmann, *Before Auschwitz: Jewish Prisoners in the Prewar Concentration Camps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Maddy Carey, *Jewish Masculinity in the Holocaust: Between Destruction and Construction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Anna Hájková, “Ältere deutsche Jüdinnen und Juden im Ghetto Theresienstadt,” in *Deutsche Jüdinnen und Juden in Ghettos und Lagern (1941–1945). Lodz. Chelmo. Minsk. Riga. Auschwitz. Theresienstadt*, ed. Beate Meyer (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2017), 201–20.

<sup>11</sup>On the concept of “remasculinization,” see Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). In the context of twentieth-century Germany, see Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Brian K. Feltman, *The Stigma of Surrender: German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War and Beyond* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

significant to veterans' masculinity. An examination of Jewish masculinities during the Nazi period raises a number of overarching questions. What impact did wartime military service have on Jewish veterans' self-perception of masculinity? How did they engage with normative identities in the performance of their own masculinity? Did war veterans, like other Jewish men, experience a breakdown in their gender identities after 1933? If so, was it possible for them to recover from this "crisis"? Which strategies did they employ to "rehabilitate" their masculine identity? Finally, how did Nazi ideas on race change the hegemonic masculine ideal, and how did Jewish veterans respond to these developments?

In order to answer these questions, this study relies on a broad range of ego-documents produced by Jewish veterans, including private letters, diaries, and memoirs. Such autobiographical sources have limitations, of course: whereas many were written by dispassionate recorders and interpreters of dates, events, and broader historical developments, others were a result of self-censorship, imprecise memory, or anachronistic interpretation. Perhaps the greatest challenge here is deriving objective impressions of gender identity, or of abstract concepts such as "honor" or status, in the private writings of persecuted Jews. One person's response to Nazi persecution does not reveal anything definitive about the attitudes or reactions of others; as sources, therefore, ego-documents often amount to little more than a set of individual, subjective experiences. In order to account for such limitations, this article relies on the "critical mass" approach used by Christopher Browning, who has addressed the subjective nature of ego-documents by looking for corroboration across multiple sources.<sup>12</sup> If several writers mentioned similar behaviors that challenged the claims of Nazi antisemitic propaganda—for example, by wearing their military decorations in public—that is taken to mean that such a response obviously existed beyond the individual case. To be sure, there will be exceptions to nearly every socially conceived notion such as gender. Yet, this approach presents a viable means of evaluating a broad range of sources in order to arrive at some general conclusions about how Jewish veterans used masculinity to defy persecution and develop coping strategies during the Holocaust.

The role of militaries in the construction of gender identities and gender roles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been the subject of extensive research. Through the discursive link between military service, citizenship, and national belonging, it was not just in Germany that the military occupied a central place in society where images of masculine behavior were shaped, a development George L. Mosse referred to as the "militarization of masculinity."<sup>13</sup> In part, this explains why, despite having just waged an unsuccessful war against the Allies, the defeated soldiers of the German army were welcomed back as heroes in 1918, and seen as having passed a collective test of manhood. After surviving four bloody years of fighting in the trenches, the combatants of the Great War saw themselves as a kind of masculine elite. The term *Frontkämpfer* (front-line fighter) itself communicated aggressiveness, resolve, and active participation in battle, distinguishing the "real" soldiers who had faced the enemy in combat from the alleged cowards and shirkers in the rear.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 37–59; idem, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave Labor Camp* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 5–12. Also see Carey, *Jewish Masculinity*, 17–20.

<sup>13</sup>George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 44.

<sup>14</sup>Although initially a term favored by both the nationalist right and the Communists, *Frontkämpfer* quickly entered public parlance after World War I. See Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations: Republican*

Central to this image was a language that implied a specific conception of manhood that was demonstrated through participation in war.<sup>15</sup> These traits were closely linked to bourgeois conceptions of manhood and soldiering; they embodied the masculine image of the rational actor, the stoic warrior, who retained control of his mental faculties even in times of fear-inducing, life-or-death situations. The power of this image was rooted in public discourses on military service and national belonging in Germany, which conceived of sacrifice and the “performance of duty” (*Pflichterfüllung*) as the highest expression of manhood.<sup>16</sup> These narratives enabled Jewish veterans of the Great War to imbue their identities with a moral legitimacy alongside other Germans, and to become potentially equal members of this privileged class of men. Especially after World War I, when antisemites accused Jews of having shirked their duty at the front lines, that status gained precedence over others (such as class, wealth, education, etc.), as Jews consciously engaged in projecting a physically strong, assertive, Jewish male image to discredit the claims of Nazi propaganda.<sup>17</sup>

The central premise of this article is that Jewish veterans oriented themselves toward this normative masculine identity, and that they cultivated a distinctive manner of thinking and acting, whereby courage, self-assertion, and endurance became the measure against which ideal manhood was evaluated. In Germany, the conflation of manhood with military values was hegemonic, meaning that these values were the yardstick against which a man’s masculine worth was measured.<sup>18</sup> They embodied the “most honored way of being a man,” and pressured men to orient themselves toward these ideals—even those men who shunned any association with the military.<sup>19</sup> Mosse’s classic study on masculinity, which relies primarily on postwar literature, newspapers, and military periodicals, charts public

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*War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22–23; Winkle, *Dank des Vaterlandes*, 243–46.

<sup>15</sup>On the concept of military masculinity, see Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John Home, “Masculinity in politics and war in the age of nation states and world war, 1850–1950,” in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. Stefan Dudnik, Karen Hagemann, and John Tosh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 22–39; David H. J. Morgan, “Theater of War: Combat, the Military, and Masculinities,” in *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 165–82. Also see the collection of essays in Paul R. Higate, *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

<sup>16</sup>Ronald R. Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3–29, 179–92.

<sup>17</sup>On Jewish gender identities in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany, see Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, *Geschlecht und Differenz* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014); Derek Penslar, *Jews and the Military: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 188–90; Gregory A. Caplan, “Germanising the Jewish Male. Military Masculinity as the Last Stage of Acculturation,” in *Towards Normality? Acculturation and Modern German Jewry*, ed. Rainer Liedtke and David Rechts (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 159–84; as well as the essays in Benjamin Maria Baader, Sharon Gillerman, and Paul Lerner, eds., *Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

<sup>18</sup>Ute Frevert, “Soldat, Staatsbürger. Überlegungen zur historischen Konstruktion von Männlichkeit,” in *Männergeschichte—Geschlechtergeschichte. Männlichkeit im Wandel der Moderne*, ed. Thomas Kühne (Frankfurt/Main, 1996), 69–87; idem, *A Nation in Barracks*; Birthe Kundrus, “Gender Wars: The First World War and the Construction of Gender Relations in the Weimar Republic,” in *Home/Front: The Military, War, and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

<sup>19</sup>R. W. Connell and James Messerschmitt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–59.

narratives on masculinity, but does not address the tensions and inconsistencies between public discourse and personal experiences. Other scholars, such as R. W. Connell, contend that there is a hegemonic ideal of manhood, which is always dominant and which puts pressure on men to conform to this image, but that this ideal is not rigid, thus allowing individuals to deviate from the hegemonic pattern.<sup>20</sup> This view has been confirmed by recent studies, which show that individuals typically follow different trajectories and rarely, if ever, conform to the hegemonic ideal in its entirety.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding the attention that historians have given to Leyens's performance on April 1, 1933, masculinity is not a homogeneous concept available to or practiced by a majority of men.<sup>22</sup> Jewish veterans incorporated elements of their own background and experience as part of their male self-image, rather than conforming directly to the dominant ideal. The crucial point, however, is that, by orienting themselves toward these hegemonic qualities, Jewish veterans *could* tap in to prevailing discourses on military wartime sacrifice that were universal, affording them a means to assert themselves and challenge the claims of Nazi propaganda—regardless of whether all men could or did act.

### In the Shadow of the *Judenzählung*

German Jews saw World War I as a transformative moment, an opportunity to prove themselves as Germans and break free of the remaining barriers to full equality in German society. As soldiers, they were under immense pressure to disprove antisemitic stereotypes of effeminacy and disloyalty to the Fatherland, and they were determined to demonstrate their mettle as good comrades and “real” men.<sup>23</sup> Like other European militaries in 1914, the German army was a highly gendered institution, both in terms of its enforced homosocial environment, as well as its uncompromising codes of masculinity, which all soldiers were supposed to obey. New recruits were expected to distance themselves from “unmanly” traits such as gentleness and compassion, and they were taught to display bravery and disregard for personal safety, to persevere under severe physical hardships, to retain mastery over their emotions, and to kill when ordered. Especially for members of fighting units, soldiers had to trust each other and steel themselves against fear; it was crucial to demonstrate competence and bravery under fire, to achieve fraternal respect. These were the traits of a good soldier. For Jews in particular, these were qualities they felt they needed to prove to their gentile comrades. To be sure, Jews had this in common with other Germans. Yet, there was a verifiable tendency bordering on an outright consensus among the Jewish combatants that rigorous demonstrations of bravery and conformity could succeed in changing German perceptions of Jewry—to “show them

<sup>20</sup>R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Also see John Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the history of gender,” in Dudnik et al., *Masculinities in Politics and War*, 41–57.

<sup>21</sup>Benjamin Ziemann, “Ambivalente Männlichkeit. Geschlechterbilder und -praktiken in der Kaiserlichen Marine am Beispiel von Martin Niemöller,” *L'Homme. Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 29 (forthcoming, 2018); Carey, *Jewish Masculinity*; Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, “A Soft Hero: Male Jewish Identity in Imperial Germany through the Autobiography of Aron Liebeck,” in Baader, Gillerman, and Lerner, *Jewish Masculinities*, 90–113.

<sup>22</sup>Matthäus and Roseman, *Jewish Responses*, 17–18; Wolfgang Benz, *A Concise History of the Third Reich*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 31; Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 283.

<sup>23</sup>The standard work on German-Jewish military service during World War I is Tim Grady, *A Deadly Legacy: German Jews and the Great War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017). Also see Penslar, *Jews and the Military*, 166–94.

that we Jews are also men and not cowards,” as one Jewish soldier put it.<sup>24</sup> There were, of course, discernible differences between the attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of orthodox, Zionist, assimilated, and baptized Jewish men who went to war in 1914, but this was one thing they all had in common.

The need to combat these stereotypes became all the more pressing as accusations of Jewish cowardice were given new life by the so-called *Juden-zählung* (Jew Count), the infamous census of Jewish soldiers conducted by the Prussian War Ministry in October 1916.<sup>25</sup> Despite statistical evidence that thousands of Jewish men had fought in the front lines, the implications of the Jew Count was egregious, especially after the war. Because the results were never disclosed to the German public, the mere fact that it had been carried out legitimized and reinforced antisemitic stereotypes propagated by the political far right, fueling speculation and wild rumors about the Jewish war record. Accusations of shirking, i.e., claims that Jewish soldiers had collectively sought refuge in comfortable, rear-area postings, whereas “real” Germans died facing the enemy, represented a serious humiliation for Jewish veterans, the impact of which is difficult to overstate. Shirkers were men without honor, cowardly soldiers who were unable to endure the rigors and deprivations of war; they survived by hiding behind the forward ranks, and stood by as others did the fighting. The slur on Jewish masculinity fed into antisemites’ efforts to feminize Jewish men by making it impossible for them to assert their masculinity through performance of military duty, and for thus having risked life and health for the Fatherland. These allegations formed the core element of the *Dolchstoßlegende* (stab-in-the-back myth), and they threatened to tarnish Jewish honor ineradicably.

The accusations that Jews had been cowards, weak soldiers, and “bad” comrades led to the creation in January 1919 of the *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten* (Reich Association of Jewish War Veterans, or RjF), an organization dedicated to fighting antisemitic attacks and preserving Jews’ “honor as German front soldiers.”<sup>26</sup> By the late 1920s, the RjF membership included nearly half of the eighty thousand Jewish veterans in Germany, making it one of the few veterans’ organizations to represent close to a majority of its constituent population. In terms of image and self-representation, the RjF did not fundamentally differ from veterans’ associations of the nationalist right in the way that it narrated and remembered the war experience.<sup>27</sup> It cultivated a heroic style of commemoration that embraced nationalist discourses on the *Frontgemeinschaft*, i.e., the overarching front-line community that had allegedly transcended class, ideology, and religious denomination.<sup>28</sup> It consciously avoided a Jewish victimization narrative that portrayed Jews as the innocent victims of a racist officer corps,

<sup>24</sup>See Fritz Oppenheimer’s letter to his mother of Dec. 10, 1914, in *Kriegsgedenkbuch der israelitischen Kultusgemeinde Nürnberg*, ed. Max Freudenthal (Nuremberg: J. Rosenfeld, 1921), 133–34.

<sup>25</sup>Werner T. Angress, “The German Army’s ‘Juden-zählung’ of 1916. Genesis—Consequences—Significance,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 23 (1978): 117–37; Jacob Rosenthal, “Die Ehre des jüdischen Soldaten”. *Die Juden-zählung im Ersten Weltkrieg und ihre Folgen* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2007).

<sup>26</sup>“Ein Vaterländischer Bund jüdischer Frontsoldaten,” *CV-Zeitung*, May 1919.

<sup>27</sup>The most comprehensive works on the RjF are Ulrich Dunker, *Der Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten, 1919–1938. Geschichte eines jüdischen Abwehrvereins* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1977); Brian E. Crim, *Antisemitism in the German Military Community and the Jewish Response, 1914–1938* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 97–132.

<sup>28</sup>On the nationalist myth of the *Frontgemeinschaft*, see Thomas Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler’s Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 45–69.

and railed against what it believed to be unfounded left-wing attacks on Prussian militarism.<sup>29</sup> It portrayed its members' war memories as "German" memories, and it reflected on the meaning and legacy of the conflict from a nationalist perspective. The RjF vigorously challenged postwar accusations of Jewish shirking, exhorting its members to confront right-wing agitators actively. Its bombastic tone and decidedly assertive public image must be viewed against the backdrop of a community that portrayed itself as unequivocally German and as part of the greater veterans' movement, yet, simultaneously struggled to unburden itself of persisting suspicions of cowardice. The poise, discipline, and self-control that RjF activists sought to project were imagined as the counterpoint to the antisemitic stereotype of the *Drückeberger*. This image exerted a considerable influence on the thinking and behavior of Jewish ex-soldiers prior to 1933, and it also determined how they carried themselves after Adolf Hitler came to power that year.

### Responding to the Nazi *Machtergreifung*

The Nazi seizure of power provoked a crisis, among other ways, in the sense that it prevented Jewish veterans from practicing unhindered their normative gender identities. Loss of employment, and the inability to provide financially for or protect their families, came as a blow to Jewish men, and this had a damaging effect on their sense of male worth. When the Nazis subsequently sought to obliterate Jewish claims for recognition and inclusion based on military wartime sacrifice, Jewish veterans faced yet another crisis. The coping strategies Jewish veterans developed in the first years under National Socialism revealed a great deal about how persecution and loss of status affected their self-image, their identity, and their views of themselves as men. During the April Boycott, they were able to contest the claims of Nazi propaganda by exploiting the positive image of the war veteran to maximum effect. In these carefully staged performances, they aimed to project a pronounced soldierly image, and they presented themselves to the public as comrades and as loyal German fighters. Medals, war wounds, and prosthetic limbs were deliberately exposed to occupy public space and discredit the claims of Nazi propaganda in a highly visible manner. Speaking from the privileged position of the *Frontkämpfer*, Jews could offer an effective rebuttal of Nazi claims of Jewish cowardice, giving voice and visibility to the perspectives of former front-line soldiers who had actually been "there."

The writing and testimonies of Jewish veterans suggest that, in the early years of the Third Reich, many closely oriented themselves toward this gender identity. This was especially true for Jewish men who did not conform to the antisemitic image of the Jew, i.e., those men whose appearance and mannerisms were more "Aryan" than Jewish, and who could therefore more easily exploit mainstream bourgeois narratives of masculinity. Self-assertion gave them a means to challenge the stigma of belonging to the out-group by generating ambivalence on the part of a non-Nazi public that saw the *Frontkämpfer*, irrespective of race or background, as somebody who was to be respected.<sup>30</sup> Siegbert Gerechter, for example, openly challenged another patron in a café in Hamburg after the latter had brazenly

<sup>29</sup>"Unzuverlässige Kritik am aktiven Offiziers- und Sanitätskorps," *Der Schild*, Nov. 1921.

<sup>30</sup>Jürgen Matthäus, "Evading Persecution: German-Jewish Behavior Patterns after 1933," in *Jewish life in Nazi Germany: Dilemmas and Responses*, ed. Francis R. Nicosia and David Scrase (New York: Berghahn, 2010), 47–70.



made antisemitic jokes, an incident that nearly ended in a physical altercation. The man backed down, however, after Gerechter identified himself as a combat veteran and made it clear that he would not stand for such insults.<sup>31</sup> There were nevertheless times when physical violence did break out: according to a report filed by the Beuthen police in July 1934, Curt Kochmann confronted two youngsters after they had shouted at passersby: “get out of the street, you damn Jews.” Kochmann challenged the young men, declaring that, as “a loyal citizen who had served the country in war and peace,” he had the right to go about unmolested. As Kochmann turned to leave, one of the men struck him in the back of the neck, calling out: “as a front soldier, you can still kiss my ass” (the police detained the two assailants, but the outcome of the investigation is unclear).<sup>32</sup> In another case from 1935, Georg Trefousse punched a local Nazi official after the man called him a “dirty Jew.” Trefousse, who had fought in Serbia during World War I, was allegedly forced to pay a bribe to the chief of the local Gestapo office to avoid arrest and confinement in a concentration camp.<sup>33</sup>

Self-assertion was first and foremost a protest against the Third Reich’s antisemitic policies, yet, it was also meant to show the Nazis, as well as the German public, that, as one Jewish veteran put it, “one could not call us cowards.”<sup>34</sup> Their accounts of the early Nazi years suggest that war veterans were not merely concerned about protecting their families and surviving physically, but that they also strove to preserve their honor and their sense of male self-worth. The accounts also reveal something important about Jewish veterans’ embrace of hegemonic, masculine ideals, for, by presenting themselves as active and courageous fighters, the writers invoked the opposite traits that the Nazis ascribed to Jews. To be sure, challenging their oppressors was a tactic driven by necessity, for, with the NSDAP accusing Jews of being “cowards,” “shirkers,” and “traitors to the *Volk*,” it was necessary to show the German people that these accusations were simply not true. German reactions during the April Boycott had made it all too clear just how effective this kind of self-exhibitionism could be by revealing the victims of Nazi terror as former soldiers, men who had risked their lives fighting for Germany. In general, these responses reflected a specific type of masculinity: their male worth was not demonstrated by sheer strength or physique, or by fighting back physically, but instead by boldness, risk-taking, and the ability to stand up for oneself.<sup>35</sup> These were attempts to salvage something of their lost status and manhood, to protect an identity under threat. The significance of acting, despite the inherent danger to self, underscored the very correlation between action and a strong masculine identity.<sup>36</sup> Masculinity was linked to action, initiative, and decisiveness, whereas femininity was associated with passivity, a division that distinguished the *Frontkämpfer* from the rest of the supposedly passive Jewish population. This is, at least, what their writings suggest: by calling attention to their courage and willingness to act, they left no doubt that they had a grasp on the situation and remained in control of their destinies.

<sup>31</sup>USHMMA, interview with Johanna Neumann (daughter of Siegbert Gerechter), Nov. 29, 2012.

<sup>32</sup>USHMMA, CV, RG 11.001M.31, reel 116 (SAM 721-1-2604,1898), statement by Curt Kochmann to Kriminalpolizei Beuthen, July 24, 1934.

<sup>33</sup>Roger Trefousse (grandson of Georg Trefousse), in discussion with the author (by telephone), Dec. 11, 2010.

<sup>34</sup>Harvard University, Houghton Library bMS 91 (126), Edwin Landau, “Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach dem 30. Januar 1933,” 1940.

<sup>35</sup>Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity”; also see Wünschmann, “Konzentrationslagererfahrungen.”

<sup>36</sup>Carey, *Jewish Masculinity*, 53–58.

Another means for Jewish veterans to cope with loss of status was to juxtapose themselves against the younger and inexperienced members of the SA and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS). The fact that these members of Hitler's "elite" had been too young ever to "hear the whistle of a bullet" and "were still wearing their diapers," while the Jewish *Frontkämpfer* had been fighting in the trenches, was used to destroy their credibility as soldiers and as "real" men.<sup>37</sup> These "brutes," "bullies," or "heroes in SS uniform" may have appropriated the outer vestiges of the German military, but their behavior and indecency exposed them as frauds, as ineffectual men who needed to compensate for their lack of masculine gravitas through arrogance and brutality.<sup>38</sup> Although R. W. Connell has argued that masculinities were first and foremost a means to guarantee "the dominant position of men and the subordination of women," these examples remind us that homosocial relationships were crucial as well in the practice of male gender identities.<sup>39</sup> Presenting the Nazis as a male underclass was a key element of the masculine identity of these Jewish veterans, for it allowed them to reestablish a sense of superiority over their oppressors and preserve a positive image of themselves under increasingly adverse conditions.<sup>40</sup>

In the first year after the Nazi takeover, it was still the nationalist and liberal sections of the educated middle classes that populated key agencies in the government, the judiciary, and the officer corps, still largely shaping public discourses about how military service and national belonging were articulated and talked about in public.<sup>41</sup> Jewish veterans consequently retained, so to speak, their mouthpiece, i.e., the forces that emulated and praised traditional patriotic and "soldierly" virtues in civilian society. The open abuse of ex-servicemen evoked deep anxieties about the meaning and worth of "the Fatherland's thanks" and of soldiers' sacrificial losses. "The brazen promotion of wartime military service was the only thing that proved successful in many cases," wrote Alfred Schwerin, who was wounded three times on the Western Front, "because it still generated a certain degree of respect among ordinary Germans, and because, most of the time, the simple, less indoctrinated party member did not know how to respond to this."<sup>42</sup> It was a strategy that frequently saved Jews from arbitrary arrests or detention, when sympathetic officials "recognized [us] as comrades."<sup>43</sup> This was to be expected in a society that cultivated and promoted military values,

<sup>37</sup> Quotes from Bundesarchiv (BArch), R 8005/19, letter from Lissa to Linder, March 27, 1933; Landau, "Mein Leben."

<sup>38</sup> Quotes from Hans Reichmann, *Deutscher Bürger und verfolgter Jude. Novemberpogrom und KZ Sachsenhausen 1937 bis 1939* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998), 274; LBINY, ME 1555, Heinrich Lichtenstein, "Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach dem 30. Januar 1933," 1940.

<sup>39</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 76; also see Carrey, "Jewish Masculinity," 126–27.

<sup>40</sup> For further examples, see Wünschmann, "Konzentrationslagererfahrungen"; Maja Suderland, "Männliche Ehre und menschliche Würde. Über die Bedeutung von Männlichkeitskonstruktionen in der sozialen Welt der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager," in *Prekäre Transformationen. Pierre Bourdieus Soziologie der Praxis und ihre Herausforderungen für die Frauen- und Geschlechterforschung*, ed. Ulla Bock, Irene Dölling, and Beate Kraus (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 128–32.

<sup>41</sup> Hermann Beck, *A Fateful Alliance: German Conservatives and Nazis in 1933. The Machtergreifung in a New Light* (New York: Berghahn, 2009). Beck's study focuses on the shared goals and ideology of the Deutschnationale Volkspartei (DNVP) and the Nazi Party, but largely overlooks the ambivalence and disagreements that persisted between the two organizations.

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Schwerin, *Von Dachau bis Basel. Erinnerungen eines Pfälzer Juden an die Jahre 1938 bis 1940* (Kaiserslautern: Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde, 2003), 95.

<sup>43</sup> LBINY, ME 607, Friedrich Solon, "Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach dem 30. Januar 1933," 1940.

and that accorded an extraordinarily high level of social prestige to the armed forces and to former combatants of the Great War.<sup>44</sup> It was precisely this inconsistency in experience—persecution on the one hand, limited solidarity with the German public, on the other—that obscured the gravity of the Nazi threat and led many to contemplate accommodation with the Third Reich.

Jewish veterans were encouraged as well by the Nazis' initial failure to exclude Jews completely from German public life. The Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, passed on April 7, 1933, expelled all "unreliable" elements, i.e., Communists, Social Democrats, and Jews, from state and federal positions and replaced them with members of the Nazi party.<sup>45</sup> Yet, pressured by President Paul von Hindenburg and other conservatives in the coalition government, Hitler was compelled to add an amendment to the law, the so-called *Frontkämpferklausel* (front-line veterans' clause), which exempted any individual who, "as part of a combat unit, had participated in a battle or engagement, in trench fighting, or in a siege."<sup>46</sup> It also gave immunity to wounded and disabled veterans, former members of the *Freikorps*, and any individual whose father or son(s) had been killed in action during World War I.<sup>47</sup> Although exemptions for veterans employed by the civil service were officially rescinded by the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, protections for Jews employed in the medical and legal professions remained in effect until 1938.<sup>48</sup> The veterans' clause did more, however, than simply allow some veterans to keep their jobs: it established Jewish *Frontkämpfer* as a status group in Nazi Germany.<sup>49</sup> To be sure, this status was relative. It did not bestow upon veterans official power or influence; at best, it offered limited and largely symbolic protections to a community that lived through most of the Third Reich in a state of perpetual crisis. But it defined veterans as a category separate from "ordinary" Jews, a group nominally entitled to special rights, privileges, and exceptions—a dichotomy that eventually entered public discourse in Nazi Germany. Research has shown that the German public increasingly classified people according to National Socialist racial criteria after 1933 (i.e., "Non-Aryans," Jews, "half Jews," *Mischlinge*, etc.).<sup>50</sup> *Frontkämpfer* therefore became an

<sup>44</sup>Winkle, *Dank*, 291–338; Arndt Weinrich, "Die Hitler-Jugend und die Generation der 'Frontkämpfer,'" in *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. Gerd Krumreich (Essen: Klartext, 2010), 271–82; Nils Löffelbein, *Ehrenbürger der Nation. Die Kriegsbeschädigten des Ersten Weltkriegs in Politik und Propaganda des Nationalsozialismus* (Essen: Klartext, 2013), 65–71.

<sup>45</sup>RGBl I, 175–177, "Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentum," April 7, 1933.

<sup>46</sup>The veterans' exemptions were unofficially referred to as the *Frontkämpferprivileg*, *Frontkämpfergesetz*, or, simply, the "Hindenburg Law."

<sup>47</sup>USHMMA, CV, RG 11.001M.31, reel 633 (SAM 721-1-2155,1225), "Memorandum: Zur Begriffsbestimmung des 'Frontkämpfers,'" June 20, 1933.

<sup>48</sup>Medical licenses for Jewish ex-servicemen were not rescinded until July 1938. See RGBl I, 969–970, "Vierte Verordnung zum Reichsbürgergesetz," July 25, 1938, (effective Sept. 30, 1938), and RGBl I, 1403–1406, "Ausscheiden der Juden aus der Rechtsanwaltschaft," Fünfte Verordnung zum Reichsbürgergesetz, Sept. 27, 1938 (effective Nov. 30, 1938).

<sup>49</sup>Status is defined as a group that is differentiated on the basis of noneconomic qualities such as honor, prestige, and religion. See G. M. Platt, "Social Psychology of Status and Role," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Peter Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 15090–95.

<sup>50</sup>Heide Gerstenberger, "Acquiescence?," in *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism: German Society and the Persecution of the Jews, 1933–1941*, ed. David Bankier (New York: Berghahn, 2000), 19–35; Frank Bajohr, "Vom antijüdischen Konsens zum schlechten Gewissen. Die deutsche Gesellschaft und die Judenverfolgung 1933–1945," in *Massenmord und schlechtes Gewissen. Die deutsche Bevölkerung, die NS-Führung und der Holocaust*, ed. Frank Bajohr and Dieter Pohl (Munich: Fischer Verlag, 2006), 15–79.

important status that increasingly informed public discussions about the so-called Jewish Question during the Nazi years, giving veterans a means to defy the category *Jew* and continue to be considered members of a subordinate yet privileged minority.

Although the logical means to respond to Nazi oppression was, for some Jews, to embody the hegemonic masculine ideal, it would be a mistake to imagine that constructions of masculinity were all homogeneous. Not all former soldiers conformed to this image—or were able to translate its ideals into action. Victor Klemperer, a baptized Protestant persecuted as a Jew by the Nazis, had been, in his own words, endowed with a “scrawny,” “hunch-backed” physique from a young age. Passed over twice by the army for failing the required physical examination, Klemperer’s initial rejection by the military left him feeling disillusioned and “deficient.”<sup>51</sup> Although he was later conscripted and served in an artillery unit during the war, the stigma of unmanliness continued to haunt him. After the war, Klemperer shunned the “hurrah patriotism” of the veterans’ associations, and expressed little interest in attending annual reunions of his regiment, but he remained proud of his military service, declaring in 1939: “My rebelliousness and free spirit always combined with a healthy Prussian militarism. My love for the army ... stayed with me until 1933, even longer actually, as I had long hoped that salvation would come from the army.”<sup>52</sup> He retained his job as a university professor in Dresden until December 1935, thanks to his service during World War I. But even after his expulsion, Klemperer continued to receive sympathetic treatment from “Aryan” Germans once they learned that they were dealing with a former veteran of the Great War: from the “friendly, obliging senior official” at the pensions office, to the “paternal” foreman at the cardboard box factory, where he was required to perform forced labor in 1944.<sup>53</sup> Recognition by gentiles was a central element of Klemperer’s masculine identity. Even though he did not embrace all aspects of the hegemonic ideal, he clearly reaped some the dividends this status offered.

The diary of Walter Tausk, a salesman in Breslau, is particularly revealing in this regard. His writings describe an atmosphere of intensifying fear and uncertainty after the Nazi take-over, with the Jewish population increasingly subjected to an outpouring of harassment, humiliation, and physical abuse by members of the Hitler Youth and the SA. Yet, Tausk related these events as a seemingly casual observer; the torment and injustices he described were inflicted upon *others*. As Jews in Breslau faced daily harassment in the streets and were forced out of their professions, Tausk related with pride that he was awarded a medal in recognition of his service in World War I. He further took comfort in knowing that his Aryan clientele had remained loyal; his customers continued to address him using the informal “du,” and fellow war veterans still called him *Kamerad*.<sup>54</sup> During the first year of the Third Reich, Tausk seemed confident that he would not share the fate of the other Jews. “As a front-line soldier, I am a modern-day *Schutzjude* [protected Jew],” he noted in his diary in July 1933, after having witnessed a group of Jews being harassed by the SA: “If these scoundrels come after me, I’ll show them my teeth.”<sup>55</sup> Tausk invoked the

<sup>51</sup>Victor Klemperer, *Curriculum Vitae: Erinnerungen 1881–1918*, vol. I (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1996), 348–49.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup>Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness: A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1933–1945*, trans. Martin Chalmers (New York: Random House, 1998), I:356–57 (Sept. 27, 1940), II:302–4 (March 12–19, 1944).

<sup>54</sup>Walter Tausk, *Breslauer Tagebuch 1933–1940* (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1988), 87 (Oct. 20, 1933).

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 87 (July 3, 1933).

quintessential traits of the soldierly male: determination, vigilance, self-control, and calm nerves in the face of fearful, dangerous situations. He presented himself in writing as an active, rational actor, someone in control of his mental faculties, whose status and temperament gave him the means to avoid the fate of other Jews, who were being victimized by Nazi thugs with seeming impunity. Yet, despite his professed willingness to fight back against his oppressors, Tausk responded to Nazi intimidation by avoiding confrontation with the authorities and withdrawing from public life. He rationalized his inaction in his diary, seemingly consoling himself that “one has to keep one’s mouth shut—otherwise one will end up in the concentration camp Breslau-Dúrrgoy.”<sup>56</sup> His sole act of defiance during the Nazi years was to hang an old Prussian flag from his apartment window in order to show the Nazis that “I was a Prussian, had been a wartime participant at the front, and don’t let others dictate my beliefs.”<sup>57</sup> There was, it seems, a fundamental incongruence between the hegemonic masculine traits Tausk the writer articulated, and his unwillingness, or inability, to put such rhetoric into action.

In theory, then, if not in practice, his status as a veteran provided some space for Tausk to practice certain elements of his normative gender identity. Yet, multiple tensions and contradictions surfaced in Tausk’s writings, as he struggled to reconcile his self-image as a former front-line soldier with the fact that he had been rendered powerless by Nazi persecution. By 1936, after his customers had abandoned him and his financial situation unraveled, he recorded periods of prolonged inactivity that resulted in serious bouts of depression. Deprived of his ability to work—a core element of masculinity—he was gradually stripped of his status and success in the community. And because he was increasingly confined to his apartment, his diary became a kind of private confessional, with Tausk describing a downhill struggle with anxiety and extended periods of inactivity, a situation that left his nerves and self-confidence “totally shot.”<sup>58</sup> Time and again, he emerged shocked and demoralized, pushed to the margins of public German life and increasingly exposed to the effects of Nazi persecution. The torment inflicted by the Nazis was temporarily assuaged by repeatedly reassuring himself that he had been through “far worse during the war,” or by having occasional interactions with Aryan “comrades,” but, by 1938, even they had abandoned him. By then, his diary suggests, he had been diminished by passivity, and his nerves were “fraying,” “at the end,” “broken”—a situation made worse by Tausk’s awareness that he had failed to live up to the standards of militarized masculinity he so cherished.

Taken together, the writings of Klemperer and Tausk reveal that the gradual, incremental persecution of Jews in the early Nazi years forced Jewish men into passivity and inaction, a state at odds with their previous identities as active, respected members of German society. They show further how the concept of hegemonic identity is complicated by an individual’s private writings, which bring to the surface numerous tensions, such as fear, self-doubt, and uncertainty, qualities that were in conflict with the masculinized soldierly identity toward which these men gravitated. Crucially, however, such men may have fallen short of this ideal, but they did not reject it—and thereby profited from its hegemony. This “complicit” form of masculinity, according to Connell, implies a tacit acceptance of its privileges, which,

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 68–70 (April 29, 1933).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 149 (May 16, 1936).

in turn, strengthens and perpetuates the hegemonic hierarchy.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Jews' embrace of the dominant martial values at the time did not weaken antisemitic stereotypes; to the contrary, such behaviors reinforced them. By drawing attention to their status and masculinity, and by benefitting from the attendant privileges, Jewish veterans played a mutually constitutive role in promoting and reinforcing the masculine norms valued by German society during the Third Reich. Their behaviors had the effect of denigrating the masculinity of nonmilitary Jews, thereby reinforcing their subordinate position and condemning them, at least rhetorically, to effeminacy.

By 1935, at the latest, a crucial transformation had taken place in the way in which the regime defined and communicated hegemonic masculinity. Hitler's rule in Germany was uncontested after Hindenburg's death, and the Nazis set out to remake old ideals and construct a new normative ideal based on race. The front experience in World War I, which had been a marker of hegemonic masculinity, no longer shaped public discourses on gender; under Hitler, race became the crucial marker of German male identity instead. The National Socialists' conception of a racially conform *Volksgemeinschaft* upended older notions of inclusion based on status, soldierly performance, or service to the community as a basis for national belonging.<sup>60</sup> As Jewish ex-servicemen were increasingly forced out of their professions, and thus restricted in their ability to earn money and protect their family, it became impossible for them to perform key elements of their normative gender identity. Military service became irrelevant as credible proof of manhood, at least if one were a non-Aryan. Under these circumstances, there was no longer much space for convincing the German public that being Jewish and being German were compatible markers of identity, regardless of whether one had sacrificed for the Fatherland or not. Thus, as time went on, Jewish veterans' performance of masculinity based on the "front experience" was grounded in expectations that had become increasingly irrelevant. The strategy had proved effective in countering the banal stereotype of the Jewish *Drückeberger* prevalent among the nationalist right during the Weimar years, but now they were contending with National Socialist ideology. It had little impact on the new policymakers in Berlin, for whom Jewish veterans were biologically defined enemies of the *Volk*: despite evidence of bravery and past performance of duty, Jewish blood flowed in their veins, a fact that genetically predisposed them to subversive attitudes toward the new National Socialist Germany.<sup>61</sup>

By late 1935, Jews also endured another humiliation: expulsion from veterans' associations.<sup>62</sup> The veterans' community was a site of male status and interaction, and expulsion not only left veterans alienated and humiliated, but also deprived them of a means to

<sup>59</sup>Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

<sup>60</sup>On the emergence of a "new" hegemonic ideal under the Nazis, see Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde. Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristismus und in der deutschen SA* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2002), esp. 660–95; Mosse, *Image of Man*, 155–80.

<sup>61</sup>Among the most important works on Nazi antisemitism are Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Shulamit Volkov, *Germans, Jews, and Antisemitism: Trial in Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67–155; Friedländer, *Persecution*, 87–112; also see the collection of essays in Bankier, *Probing the Depths of German Antisemitism*.

<sup>62</sup>On the expulsion of Jews from the *Kyffhäuserbund* and other veterans' associations during the Third Reich, see Karl Führer, „Der Deutsche Reichskriegerbund Kyffhäuser, 1930–1934. Politik, Ideologie und Funktion eines ‚unpolitischen‘ Verbandes,“ *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 36, no. 2 (1984): 57–76.

assert their status in the community. The non-Jewish veterans' association had taken on the role of a keystone in their socially defined identity; it was a group to which they had understood themselves to belong, and that community's rejection of Jews was particularly damaging to the self-esteem of many Jewish men. In an impassioned letter to the chairman of the *Kyffhäuserbund*, Germany largest veterans' league, Max Schohl explained how the expulsion had left his "sense of German comradeship deeply shaken":

When in the murderous Battle of the Somme artillery fire rained down on my company, none of the men under me, neither enlisted personnel nor officers, asked me if I were Aryan or non-Aryan: all looked in comradely trust to their company commander ... And today, should it be as if all this had simply not happened? Should this comradeship, proven in blood and suffering, simply evaporate into nothing? I cannot and will not believe this, for to do so would rob my life of all meaning.<sup>63</sup>

Schohl never received a response. In hindsight, the Holocaust make such symbolic assertions of identity seem naïve and misguided, and some might argue that the conditions faced by Jews in Nazi Germany had become so dire that any considerations of manliness or honor had by now become insignificant. Of course, like other Jewish victims, the veterans' chief concern was to survive, to protect their families, their property, and their professional status. But they also fought to preserve an identity—to which belonged their masculine worth. That, too, would be put to the test by the Nazi terror apparatus, as we shall see in the next section.

### Under the "Absolute" Power of National Socialism

The ability of Jewish veterans to elude the full effects of Nazi persecution by exploiting the positive image of the *Frontkämpfer*, already severely diminished after 1935, ended abruptly on November 9, 1938. Herschel Grynszpan's assassination of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath in Paris two days earlier was the pretext for a nationwide pogrom against Germany's Jews, over the course of which Nazi party activists set fire to synagogues, vandalized Jewish-owned shops, forced their way into homes and apartments, and physically abused Jewish residents.<sup>64</sup> The violence unfolded in public and on a hitherto unprecedented scale, as tens of thousands of Jewish men, including war veterans, were rounded up and incarcerated in concentration camps.<sup>65</sup> In Pirmasens, Alfred Schwerin described an encounter with his friend Ernst Baer, a former officer, on the morning of November 10. Baer had been beaten so badly that Schwerin hardly recognized him:

I mistook him for an old woman since, in haste, someone had draped a woman's garment over him to protect him from the weather, for it must have been too painful for him to put on his own jacket. Supported by his wife ... the normally tall, erect, and confident man, though trying to hold his head up straight, was completely bent over, dragging his feet. Even as he turned to look at me, I didn't immediately recognize him. Baer was woken up at midnight and lured to the front door by three unknown assailants, who pulled him outside, beat him ferociously,

<sup>63</sup>USHMMA, 2010.242.1, Kaethe Wells Collection, letter from Max Schohl to General von Horn, Nov. 6, 1933. Schohl's letter is also reprinted in David Clay Large, *And the World Closed its Doors: The Story of One Family Abandoned to the Holocaust* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) 36–39.

<sup>64</sup>On the background and events surrounding the events of November 9–10, 1938, see Alan E. Steinweis, *Kristallnacht 1938* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009); Friedländer, *Persecution*, 269–84.

<sup>65</sup>According to official sources, ninety-one Jews were killed and over 7,500 businesses were destroyed. In reality, the number of victims murdered by the Nazis was much higher, especially if one takes into account those who committed suicide. See Friedländer, *Persecution*, 269–84.

then left him in an alleyway. Half dead, he somehow managed to crawl back to his home, where he was then arrested by the authorities.<sup>66</sup>

The brutality described in survivor testimonies suggests that the abuse and public shaming of war veterans were calculated: the aim was to emasculate Jewish men, regardless of status or past achievements, and make clear to the victims, as well as to the German public at large, that all Jews were the same in Hitler's Germany.

More than twenty-six thousand Jewish men were deported to Nazi concentration camps in the wake of *Kristallnacht*, a development that represented a profound loss of status for Jewish veterans as they came face to face with the "absolute" power of National Socialism.<sup>67</sup> If they had once imagined themselves as having belonged to a social elite, they now quickly discovered that acts of bravery performed during the war meant very little at Dachau, Buchenwald, or Sachsenhausen. It did not matter there if one were a former officer who had fought on the Western Front, or a young orthodox Jew from Berlin: each was forced to sleep on the same type of wooden bunk, wear the same clothes, eat the same rations, and wait in the same line to use a latrine. All prisoners, regardless of age, health, or background, were made to stand at attention on the parade ground from morning to evening, sometimes up to twenty hours per day; each morning they had to help carry out the corpses of those who had died the night before. Under such conditions, standing up to the SS was hardly an option for these prisoners, let alone something that might have met with any success. Siegfried Oppenheimer, an inmate at Buchenwald, recalled how a new arrival reprimanded the guards for their behavior as he was led through the camp gates, berating them for their "dishonorable" treatment of a former officer and recipient of the Iron Cross. The man was immediately subjected to a rain of blows by the SS, then dragged to the main parade ground and tied face down on a wooden plank; his shirt was removed, and his exposed back was then lashed twenty-five times, before the assembled inmates, with a thin wooden cane. The man's screams, wrote Oppenheimer, "stayed with me for days."<sup>68</sup> This state of powerlessness engendered an identity crisis among the Jewish *Frontkämpfer*, for it contradicted their soldierly self-conception as active, autonomous agents, i.e., as someone who remained in control of his destiny, regardless of the circumstances; and it deprived them of the ability to act in defense of honor—a key element of masculinity.<sup>69</sup>

Recovery from such a crisis required these men to adapt normative masculine practices to the new circumstances, and, in this sense, the veterans' military background fulfilled a vital psychological and practical need. The fact that they were versed in the language and terminology of the German army, as well as familiar with military drill, commands, and codes of discipline, all helped former soldiers endure the initial shock and adapt to the "extreme" environment of the concentration camp.<sup>70</sup> Many prisoners were overwhelmed during the first days after their arrival, finding it difficult to adjust to the "military way of speaking"

<sup>66</sup>Schwerin, *Erinnerungen*, 32.

<sup>67</sup>Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>68</sup>LBINY, MM61, Siegfried Oppenheimer, "Meine Erlebnisse am 10. November 1938 u. mein Aufenthalt in Buchenwald bis zu meiner Rückkehr am 14 Dez. 1938 nach Bad Nauheim," n.d.

<sup>69</sup>On the concept of male honor, see Suderland, "Männliche Ehre."

<sup>70</sup>Georg Simmel described war as an "extreme" experience. Quoted in Dieter Langewiesche, "Nation, Imperium und Kriegserfahrungen," in *Kriegserfahrungen. Krieg und Gesellschaft in der Neuzeit. Neue Horizonte der Forschung*, ed. Georg Schild and Anton Schilling (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009), 214.



and to the “senseless marching back and forth.”<sup>71</sup> But to veteran Hans Berger, the camp guards merely reminded him of “the worst Prussian noncommissioned officer and sadist combined.”<sup>72</sup> He remembered, from his time as a conscript, the military commands and the proper way to march, and he understood what needed to be done. “Almost all of us had been soldiers, many of us officers,” Hans Reichmann wrote of the other prisoners in his prison block: “We pull ourselves together and stand tall.”<sup>73</sup> The extreme experiences of war became a point of reference for many Jewish former soldiers, who harked back to their time in the army, contrasting the discipline, deprivations, and unpredictability of the camp with the conditions they had faced in the barracks or in the trenches on the Western Front more than two decades earlier.

Some veterans also reclaimed their masculine worth by enduring the hardships of the camp, both physically and psychologically.<sup>74</sup> When Albert Schwerin wrote, looking back on his arrival at the notorious Nazi concentration camp north of Munich, that he had “never ... seen so many men cry as at Dachau,” he was describing these events as an observer, not as a victim.<sup>75</sup> Similar to all the other prisoners deported there after *Kristallnacht*, Schwerin was subjected to unspeakable privations: fear, uncertainty, hunger, illness, as well as severe mental and physical abuse. But he overcame these trials by maintaining his composure and not allowing himself to be cowed into submission. “From the very beginning, I was determined to rise to the occasion, to persevere and make it out in one piece,” Schwerin wrote: “I did not allow anything to keep me down in Dachau: neither the frozen extremities, the despair of the other comrades, or the sinister environment we found ourselves in ... I can think of no other time in my life where my self-reliance and self-confidence had been as strong.”<sup>76</sup> He adapted to the camp: the tight living space, poor sanitation, and lack of privacy did not intimidate him, but merely reminded him of what he had endured years ago in the army. Schwerin’s descriptions of self-confidence and resolve drew an implicit contrast to the helplessness of the other prisoners, who had seemingly resigned themselves to their fate.

The sense of powerlessness and victimization that all the inmates experienced had a damaging effect on male gender identities, yet, the testimonies of the veterans suggest that this shame was mitigated by taking action and not being reduced to mere passivity. Studies by Maja Suderland and Kim Wünschmann have identified endurance as a key component of a revitalized male identity, but veterans also reappraised their masculine role by acting as protectors and father figures to the weaker prisoners. Schwerin described “comforting” several distressed inmates, his perseverance, composure, and calm nerves serving as “a power of example to many.”<sup>77</sup> Much of Heinrich Lichtenstein’s description of Buchenwald relates

<sup>71</sup>LBINY, ME 1046, Kurt Jutro, “Erlebnisse eines ‘Schutzhäftlings’ in einem Konzentrationslager des Dritten Reichs während der Monate November-Dezember 1938,” 1939.

<sup>72</sup>LBINY, ME 46, Hans Berger, “Erinnerungen an die Kristallnacht und meine Erlebnisse im Konzentrationslager Buchenwald,” 1939.

<sup>73</sup>Hans Reichmann, *Deutscher Bürger und verfolgter Jude. Novemberpogrom und KZ Sachsenhausen 1937 bis 1939* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998), 155.

<sup>74</sup>Maja Suderland, *Inside Concentration Camps: Social Life at the Extremes* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 208–11; Wünschmann, “Konzentrationslagererfahrungen”; Anna Hájková, “‘Poor Devils’ of the Camps: Dutch Jews in Theresienstadt, 1943–1945,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 43, no. 1 (2015): 77–111.

<sup>75</sup>Schwerin, *Erinnerungen*, 85.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 79, 84.

how he consoled “countless fellow inmates who were in shock, who could no longer hold themselves together spiritually. We made sure that they cleaned their clothes and shoes ... that they retrieved the rations allocated to them and that they ate and drank.”<sup>78</sup> Invoking his experience as a soldier in World War I and as a prisoner-of-war in France—a “seventeen-month battle with hopelessness that we, as young men, struggled through”—Lichtenstein galvanized many of the weaker prisoners and motivated them to “pull through.”<sup>79</sup> This was a recurring message in veterans’ writings. As experienced men who had been tried and tested in the trenches, they saw themselves as proven leaders and masculine role models, who could instill courage in the “weaker” prisoners. According to Hans Block, several RjF members at Buchenwald organized themselves into an internal “guard troop” that maintained discipline among the rest of the “hysterical” and “deeply shaken” inmates, with an eye to preventing unnecessary altercations with the SS. Those prisoners who did not comply were “made obedient by blows,” if necessary.<sup>80</sup>

Even limited, seemingly self-destructive acts provided a means to alleviate the shame of powerlessness. Kurt Sabatzky recalled how another prisoner, a former officer, endured repeated blows to his face by a sadistic guard, yet refused to submit when “the SS man demanded that he repeat the words: ‘I am a traitor to the Fatherland.’”<sup>81</sup> The inmate’s defiance was considered active in the sense that it would have been easier and far less dangerous for him simply to have acceded to the guard’s demands. Examples such as this remind us that, although the SS considered all prisoners to be emasculated and powerless, their power was not, in the end, “absolute.” The pride expressed by the few men who did act in defense of honor throws light on an important aspect of Jewish agency in the camps, as well as on the correlation between action and masculinity, something borne out in numerous testimonies. Not all veterans had the ability to act, of course. But those who did so saw it as an important element in sustaining a strong male identity.

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On November 29, 1938, Hermann Göring issued an order releasing from the camps all front-line veterans arrested in the wake of the pogrom, thus bringing their four-week ordeal to an end.<sup>82</sup> The other victims of the pogrom remained incarcerated for additional weeks or even months, but the veterans were discharged in early December, an event depicted by Kurt Guggenheim as a moment of redemption:

Suddenly a command is issued from the middle of the crowd: “March in formation!”—and a battle-ready Jewish company of veterans marches in impeccable parade cadence through the gates of the concentration camp, leaving behind them the shocked and dumbfounded faces of

<sup>78</sup>LBINY, ME 1555, Heinrich Lichtenstein, “Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach dem 30. Januar 1933,” 1940.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O1/49, Hans Block, “Buchenwald,” 1938.

<sup>81</sup>Harvard University, Houghton Library bMS 91 (261), Kurt Sabatzky, “Meine Erinnerungen an den Nationalsozialismus,” 1940.

<sup>82</sup>ITS Digital Archive, 1.1.0.2/82340054, Reinhard Heydrich, memo (“Betr. Entlassung von jüdischen Häftlingen, die Frontkämpfer waren”), Nov. 18, 1938. The order was disseminated the following day to all local law enforcement agencies; see Staatsarchiv Würzburg (StAW), LRA Kissingen 3101, order from Gestapo Würzburg to all Landräte, Nov. 29, 1938.

the camp guards and the barely concealed smirks of the camp inmates. Even the noble knight Goetz von Berlichingen could not have bid a more suitable farewell.<sup>83</sup>

A crucial transformation had taken place with *Kristallnacht*, one that changed how masculinity was performed. Self-assertion had been a core element of the veterans' masculine identity, yet, after November 1938, it was *endurance* that mattered: the ability to withstand the wounds inflicted by the SS. This remasculinized identity was grounded in male toughness, which had been central, of course, to their original masculinity, but was now adapted to the new circumstances.<sup>84</sup> In their accounts of their ordeals, veterans often invoked the dominant traits of masculinized soldierly identity: remaining calm and composed in the face of intense pressure, persevering in the face of overwhelming odds, rising above adversity, and refusing to succumb to momentary feelings of helplessness or defeat. This glorification of perseverance, a *sangfroid* of sorts amid an atmosphere of powerlessness, defied the Nazis' efforts to strip Jews of their manhood and honor. It was crucial that, by emphasizing the diminished coping capacity of the other prisoners, the veterans simultaneously drew attention to their own resilience. As they recorded the nervous breakdowns and scenes of "men crying" at Dachau, they did so not as victims, but as onlookers; in fact, they seemed unaffected by the suffering and indignities inflicted upon others. They presented themselves as being tougher, braver, and more adaptable than their overwhelmed coreligionists, who lacked the energy and willpower to adjust to the demands of the camp. Their testimonies suggest, if indirectly, that the Jewish *Frontkämpfer* felt morally superior to the other prisoners, having overcome the fear and deprivations that had, from their perspective, destroyed weaker men.<sup>85</sup>

To be sure, the survivor accounts under study here are not conclusive; the writers had several months, sometimes even years, after 1938 to merge these traumatic memories into a larger, coherent narrative. The themes of endurance, defiance, and defense of honor were a counterweight to the powerlessness that had prevailed in the camps, and a means for the former prisoners to ensure that their ordeal would not be remembered as one of emasculation.<sup>86</sup> This leitmotif served a strategic purpose as well: to preserve the narrative of Jewish heroism. Their accounts were meant to convey that the Jewish *Frontkämpfer* had not been broken; that, despite subjecting them to the most inhumane conditions imaginable, the Nazis had been unable to sever their psychological connection to the former status upon which their masculine identity rested. This was not a final, desperate act of self-delusion, of being lost or helpless while pretending to be in control. Nor was it a peripheral development in the overall strategy of survival. Rather, it was a conscious effort to preserve a masculine identity, a sense of agency; and it is reasonable to suspect that, for many former soldiers, overcoming these ordeals while maintaining one's dignity was synonymous with retaining their masculine honor. "The first three days were apparently the most horrendous of all," Walter Tausk wrote in his diary after meeting several survivors of Buchenwald: "Only

<sup>83</sup>LBINY, AR 1441, Karl Guggenheim, "Der jüdische Widerstand," n.d. The same incident was described by Julius Meyer, who was also a prisoner at Buchenwald; see YVA, 02/407, Julius Meyer, "Buchenwald," 1940.

<sup>84</sup>Jeffords, *Remasculinization*, 51.

<sup>85</sup>Wünschmann, "Konzentrationslagererfahrungen"; Hájková, "'Poor Devils.'"

<sup>86</sup>On the construction and shaping of biographical narratives, see Bettina Dausien, "Erzähltes Leben—erzähltes Geschlecht? Aspekte der narrativen Konstruktion von Geschlecht im Kontext der Biographieforschung," *Feministische Studien* 19, no. 2 (2001): 57–73.

those who had the nerves necessary to endure them (and, for the most part, this was only the case for front-line soldiers) were able to persevere under everything else.”<sup>87</sup>

### The “Paradise” of Theresienstadt

As Jewish veterans faced deportation to Nazi ghettos and concentration camps from 1940 onward, their connection to their former masculine status did not abruptly end. Whether imprisoned at a concentration camp or confined to “Jew Houses” in the Reich (i.e., designated living quarters for Jews), they remained invested in such masculine virtues as the capacity to overcome hardship, protect their families, and retain control over their destinies. They continued to seek validation as brave soldiers and real men, endeavoring to project images of manliness in order to obliterate the Nazi stereotype of the deviant, cowardly Jew. Status remained a key component of the veterans’ self-image during the Holocaust; it was central to understanding how they thought, behaved, and responded to shifting circumstances, even as the so-called Final Solution unfolded around them.

This section examines the Jewish veterans who were “resettled” to Theresienstadt following the Wannsee Conference of January 1942, where the SS decreed that war-wounded and war-decorated Jews would not be evacuated along with the general Jewish population to the “East,” but instead “relocated,” along with other “privileged” categories of German Jews, to Theresienstadt.<sup>88</sup> Despite its status as a “privileged” ghetto, the conditions at Theresienstadt were horrific. The camp was comprised of two fortresses; billets and housing were designed to accommodate a garrison of about ten thousand soldiers and civilians, but, by September 1942, there were more than fifty-three thousand prisoners, all living in a space of roughly one square kilometer.<sup>89</sup> Inmates were forced to sleep on bare floors in the dusty, unventilated upper stories of overcrowded barracks, where latrines and washrooms with running water were often located on a lower floor, or outside. This meant that each use of a lavatory or water spigot required having to descend, and then climb again, countless flights of stairs, which, for disabled or blind veterans, was an excruciating, if not impossible task. “University professors, the war-wounded, decorated officers, wealthy industrialists: all lay on the bare floors of attics, in the sweltering heat, amid the unbearable stench, tortured by lice, dust, and their own feces,” wrote Benjamin Mummelstein, Theresienstadt’s last *Judenältester* (Jewish council elder), who had been responsible for implementing Nazi orders and regulations in the camp.<sup>90</sup> These conditions exacted a devastating toll on the prisoners there: in the space of eight months, from July 1943 to March 1944, the ghetto’s health department recorded that 17 percent of the overall veteran population had perished, mainly from illnesses and infections resulting from malnutrition and a lack of medication.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>87</sup>Tausk, *Breslauer Tagebuch*, 208 (Dec. 11, 1938).

<sup>88</sup>The standard work on Theresienstadt is H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941–1945. Das Anlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012) (orig. published in 1960). Also see Wolfgang Benz, *Theresienstadt. Eine Geschichte von Täuschung und Vernichtung* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2013); Miroslav Kamy, “Deutsche Juden in Theresienstadt,” *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* 1 (1994), 36–53. For an overview of the Wannsee Conference, see Mark Roseman, *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution: A Reconsideration* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002).

<sup>89</sup>Benz, *Theresienstadt*, 38.

<sup>90</sup>See ch. 4 of Benjamin Mummelstein, *Theresienstadt: Eichmann’s Vorzeige-Ghetto* (Vienna: Czernin, 2014).

<sup>91</sup>Adler, *Theresienstadt*, 543.

Like all prisoners, Edmund Hadra was subjected to significant physical and psychological ordeals after arriving at Theresienstadt: fear, uncertainty, anger, hunger, illness, as well as separation from home. Internment also represented a profound loss of status for Hadra, who had been an officer with the Second Prussian Foot Guards from 1914 to 1918. Wounded three times, he had been awarded both classes of the Iron Cross, in addition to the Knight's Cross of the Royal Order of the Hohenzollerns (*Ritterkreuz des königlichen Hausordens von Hohenzollern*), an honor rarely bestowed on an officer of junior rank (he was a captain). Yet, Hadra writes that he was determined to overcome these degradations by not allowing himself to succumb to fear or inaction. After bitterly describing the state of his cramped and dirty living quarters in great detail, he suddenly strikes a defiant tone, admonishing himself for "complaining" and having gotten "soft" since leaving the army: "During the war, I had become used to all manner of things. But the long period of peace undoubtedly softened me up. Back then, during World War, I could sleep on the bare ground; yes, I was even able to fall asleep on the stone floor of a church on one occasion. But today I could not find any peace; my folded hands behind my head made for a lousy pillow."<sup>92</sup>

Hadra remained resolute in the face of such squalor and adapted to the harsh conditions in the camp, a resilience he attributed to the trials he had endured during the war, where he had made it through far worse. As a self-described "old warrior" (*alter Krieger*), he distinguished himself from the rest of the camp population by his ability to persevere, as well as his refusal to admit defeat or complain—at least not openly. Hadra's response is relevant beyond the individual case, for many veterans tended to write about their ordeals in the camp as a moral tale about rebuilding masculinity in the face of seeming defeat. Their writings leave little doubt that survival at Theresienstadt was not a matter of coincidence or luck, but instead attribute the resilience of their authors to the previous war, where they had faced the enemy in battle. "My experiences during the world war," one former officer wrote, "allowed me easily to endure many of the same hardships that caused others great physical and emotional torment."<sup>93</sup> As "old soldiers," they understood the ordeal they faced and knew what had to be done. Harking back to the dangers they had known in the trenches strengthened their resolve to survive their current predicament, to overcome self-pity and lethargy—never to "lay down our arms," as Philipp Manes put it:

We do not want to be resigned to despair. Did we, as we stood at the front and stared so often into the pallid face of death? We stayed upright. Our sacred love of the Fatherland kept us from losing courage. So should it now. Have our German men not boldly and bravely faced the danger of being taken captive in the world war, the barbed wire, the great distance from home? Here we are also prisoners of war, though under better [sic] conditions. We should always think about this!<sup>94</sup>

Despite the trials and degradations, the Holocaust apparently did not sever their psychological connection to their former status as *Frontkämpfer* of the Great War, upon which their sense of masculinity rested. As long as they preserved their honor, they believed, the SS could not defeat them. Viktor Klemperer, who was confined to a "Jew House" in Dresden at the

<sup>92</sup>LBINY, AR1249, Edmund Hadra "Theresienstadt," Teil II (1946).

<sup>93</sup>LBINY, ME 329, Jacob Jacobson, "Bruchstücke 1939–1945," 1966.

<sup>94</sup>Philipp Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär. Tatsachenbericht: Theresienstadt 1942–1944* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2005), 88. An abridged version of the German original has also been translated into English: *As If It Were Life: A WWII Diary from the Theresienstadt Ghetto*, trans. Janet Foster, Ben Barkow, and Klaus Leist (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from the English edition.

time, remarked in March 1942 that World War I still remained the “Jews’ favorite topic,” and this appears to have been the case for many of the German-Jewish inmates at Theresienstadt as well.<sup>95</sup> The “front experience” not only took center stage in veteran writings, but was also a topic of public lectures, which, organized by the camp’s Jewish self-administration, stood at the center of the ghetto’s cultural and intellectual life.<sup>96</sup> The titles of some of the presentations spoke volumes, e.g., “Ten Days at the Somme, July 3–13, 1916,” “Two Days in Lemberg after its Fall,” “Comradeship,” and “The Jewish Soldier over the Millennia.”<sup>97</sup> Hadra gave several talks about his experiences as a German officer, including “The Last Battle of the Marne and [Erich von] Ludendorff’s Error,” which gave a detailed critique of Ludendorff’s strategy during the offensive of spring 1918.<sup>98</sup> These lectures emphasized the Jews’ comradeship with other Germans, their unbroken loyalty to the Fatherland, and their selfless commitment to a higher cause. They were intended to demonstrate that, although the Nazis had deprived them of their former status as German *Frontkämpfer*, they still possessed the same values and strong inner character as they had “back then,” as soldiers fighting for Germany. Studies by Anna Hájková and Kim Wünschmann have pointed out that the repeated invocations of the war years in veterans’ private writings—a constant juxtaposing of their current struggles with the hardships they had overcome “back then”—were an attempt to preserve some semblance of their earlier status, for it was the only connection to their past lives prior to Hitler, when their sacrifices for Germany had been crucial markers of identity.<sup>99</sup> The invocations illustrated the importance of having proven their manhood, the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (which they had been taught to emulate as young men), and the staying power of those formative wartime years.

Maddy Carey’s study of Jewish masculinities during the Holocaust proposes that ghettoization gave Jewish men a space to revitalize their gender identities, for it created new power structures, laws, and authorities that afforded them opportunities to act.<sup>100</sup> This was the case at Theresienstadt, where the hierarchies and organization of the camp made it possible for Jewish veterans to practice key elements of their normative gender roles, which would have been unthinkable in Nazi Germany during the years of persecution. This was arguably most evident in the culture and organizational practices of the Theresienstadt *Ghettowache* (Jewish ghetto police), which was led by a former officer and *Freikorps* member, Karl Löwenstein. Given command of the ghetto’s internal security service in September 1942, Löwenstein imbued the Jewish police with a decidedly military character. He placed other veterans in key leadership positions, equipped the policemen with uniforms and special badges, and trained them in the drill and customs of the Prussian army. In May 1943, he presented his “troop” to senior delegates of the Jewish Self-Administration by staging a military parade through the ghetto. The policemen marched past the assembled members of the *Judenrat* in Prussian-style, close-order military formation, then conducted a wreath-laying ceremony in honor of its “fallen” members, to the accompaniment of the traditional German military hymn, *Der gute Kamerad*. Many of the Czech inmates greeted this blatant

<sup>95</sup>Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness*, II:27 (March 16, 1942).

<sup>96</sup>Prisoners held more than 2,300 lectures at Terezín, and they were an integral part of the cultural life at the camp. See Adler, *Theresienstadt*, 594–604.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid. Also see Manes, *As If It Were Life*, 131.

<sup>98</sup>See Part I of Hadra, “Theresienstadt.”

<sup>99</sup>Hájková, “Deutsche Jüdinnen und Juden”; Wünschmann, “Konzentrationslagererfahrungen.”

<sup>100</sup>Carey, *Jewish Masculinity*, 85–127.

display of German militarism with revulsion. “The police chief,” Egon Redlich noted in his diary, “is very militant. Prussian to the hilt ... He is a dangerous fellow, a typical assimilationist and German to the core.”<sup>101</sup> For Philip Manes, however, one of Löwenstein’s subordinates, the veneration of soldierly tradition struck a positive chord, “a reminder of our time in the military [that] delighted us old soldiers of the Great War.”<sup>102</sup> Other veterans, like Walter Unger, expressed his admiration in a personal letter to Löwenstein, declaring: “Not only I, but all my comrades who were decorated during the war, are filled with deep gratitude and reassurance knowing that a person such as you is at the top of the administration, someone who, according to the very best soldierly traditions, combines performance of duty [Pflichterfüllung] with a total commitment to his subordinates.”<sup>103</sup>

The culture and organizational practices of the *Ghettowache* encouraged the policemen to see themselves as protectors of the Jewish prisoner community, a role that reinforced the link they cultivated between action, self-sacrifice, and a strong male identity. This was also a recurring theme in Manes’s diary. He had not seen front-line action in World War I, but instead been put in charge of organizing and running bookstores behind the lines. The war nevertheless left a deep impression, one that held special significance for him and one upon which he looked back as the “the most interesting period in my life.” He referred to himself time and again in his writings as an “old soldier of the Great War,” revealing that his time in the army was central to his sense of self.<sup>104</sup> Manes saw his confinement at Theresienstadt as a contest for the defense of honor, a means to redeem one’s dignity and self-worth. “On the battlefield and in Theresienstadt,” he wrote, “Jews put their lives on the line, sacrificed themselves for their people, to make life, squashed together in these attics, bearable. They did not talk about it; they did not ask questions. They carried out their mission, and many, who might otherwise have lived, died in the process.”<sup>105</sup> Honor was defined by fearlessly rising to any challenge, by placing the well-being of comrades and the greater community before self—virtues that correlated with perceptions of masculinity.

Another discernable thread emerges throughout Manes’s writing: the struggle to remain German—and thus to preserve an identity that was under threat, or perhaps already lost. Despite enduring two years at Theresienstadt, Manes’s inner sense of being German never wavered. He was dismayed after learning that the *Zeughaus* (arsenal), Prussia’s grand military museum on the Unter den Linden, had been reduced to rubble in an Allied air raid, and with it the great monuments to Germany’s military past: “the atrium with the flags, the guns, the [Andreas] Schlüter masks of the ‘dying warriors,’ the beautifully curved stairs leading to the Hall of Fame.”<sup>106</sup> All of this had left a far greater impression on him “than the boring history teacher who taught us only dates.” Even more devastating to Manes was news of the destruction that British and American bombers were causing to German cities more generally:

<sup>101</sup>See the entry of Nov. 3, 1942, in Egon Redlich, *The Terezin Diary of Gonda Redlich*, ed. Saul S. Friedman (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 82.

<sup>102</sup>Manes, *As If It Were Life*, 103.

<sup>103</sup>USHMMA, Theresienstadt Collection, RG-68.103M, Reel 12, letter from Walter Unger to Löwenstein, Aug. 11, 1943.

<sup>104</sup>Manes, *As If It Were Life*, 103.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 97–98.

That goes right to our hearts—this is our home, our city; our house in which our parents died, where, for half a century, we had experienced joy and sorrow as citizens, and with other citizens ... Our homeland is and remains ours, and whatever evil befalls it also wounds us. We love our parents, honor and respect them even when they chastise us. Should our attitude toward the Fatherland be different? Have we forgotten the poems and songs that we learned in school? I have not, and I do not want to.<sup>107</sup>

Manes wrote this passage just three months before being gassed at Auschwitz. Viewed in isolation, his writings suggest that he perceived his situation with a significant degree of self-delusion, often underestimating the precariousness of his situation at Theresienstadt. Yet, Manes defied the attempts to deprive him of his Germanness, refusing to submit to the Nazi stereotype *Jew* by stubbornly clinging to his German identity. Remaining German was more than a simple coping mechanism to survive Theresienstadt psychologically. It became the ultimate act of defiance, for this was precisely what the Nazis had sought to deprive Jews of from the beginning: an act of autonomy involved in the self-assertion of German identity. His attitude bears a striking resemblance to that of Klemperer, who, under house arrest in Dresden, was “fighting the hardest battle for his Germanness.”<sup>108</sup> As Klemperer struggled to reconcile his identities as a German and as a persecuted Jew, expressions of German nationalism transformed an environment of shame and repression into an act of resistance. He found redemption in defying the Nazis: “I must hold on to this: I am German, the others are un-German. I must hold on to this. The spirit is decisive, not blood. I must hold on to this.”<sup>109</sup> As his world collapsed around him, as he suffered unspeakable abuse from the Gestapo, as he witnessed the deportation of his neighbors, “holding on” to his Germanness became a way to endure the Holocaust psychologically. As his situation deteriorated, reinforcing the notion that it was Hitler’s regime—and not he—that was un-German helped preserve his ruptured German self-image. He abnormalized the Nazis as aberrations of “true Germanness,” and, in so doing, distanced himself psychologically from the terror and degradations, repeating over and over throughout his diary that “the National Socialists are not the German nation, the German nation of today is not all of Germany.”<sup>110</sup> It was an attitude shared by the small circle of Jewish men in Klemperer’s milieu, who continued to reassert German nationalism right up to the moment of defeat. For them, “the war and the uniform were the tie to the wider German world”—“the biggest and best experience, one they always hark back to—as an adventure and as a time of completely shared interests with [other] Germans.”<sup>111</sup> This circle included Klemperer’s friend Willy Katz, a former officer and a “defiant nationalist ... whose love for the German army is ineradicable,” as well as the former *Freikorps* member Stefan Müller, who remained “ardently German even today.”<sup>112</sup> They assured each other that they would emerge from their ordeal with their honor intact, despite the broken promise of the “Fatherland’s thanks.” Fighting in the last war was central to their sense of self; they had willingly fought for Germany, bore scars and medals that testified to extraordinary acts of bravery

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 98–99.

<sup>108</sup> Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness*, II:49–51 (May 8, 1942).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, II:49–51 (May 8, 1942).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, II:88 (June 28, 1942).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, II:193 (July 27, 1943), II:192–194 (Jan. 27, 1943).

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, II:108 (July 26, 1942), II:265–67 (Sept. 30 and Oct. 7, 1943).



in the trenches, and, despite experiencing antisemitism, continued to look back on the years 1914–1918 as “a decent business” and “badge of honor.”<sup>113</sup>

On September 28, 1944, the first of eleven transports departed Theresienstadt, carrying 18,402 persons to Auschwitz, including the supposedly “privileged” former officers and war invalids.<sup>114</sup> Edmund Hadra was spared deportation, but Philip Manes was not. It is impossible to know how Manes reconciled his devotion to Germany in the moments before he was murdered. Still, amid an atmosphere of profound uncertainty, “before we knew of gas chambers,” German-Jewish veterans had waged a personal struggle to remain German.<sup>115</sup> This was a final act of resistance against their Nazi oppressors, without which their attitudes and behaviors during the Holocaust cannot be understood.

### Conclusion

Hegemonic masculine ideals in early twentieth-century Germany, which elevated heroism, participation in battle, and soldierly performance of duty as the quintessential traits of manhood, gave Jewish veterans a space to challenge Nazi racial policy and preserve some form of agency against attempts by the regime to impose its definition of gender and status. As was the case for all Jewish men after 1933, the fundamental concern of veterans was to survive physically, to protect their homes and loved ones. But they also fought to preserve their identity—and to that belonged their masculine honor, which Nazi persecution sorely put to the test. The Nazi years became a struggle for redemption, a battle to reclaim lost status and honor. By embracing the contemporary ideals of martial masculinity, Jewish veterans gave expression to their German cultural sensibilities and to their affiliation with the German military. The success of this strategy was evident in the passage of the Civil Service Law of April 1933, which gave former soldiers a reprieve from Nazi racist legislation. Although the reprieve was both partial and temporary, it gave them a means to challenge claims that they belonged to the “out-group” and to defy “social death”—paths not available to Jewish men who had not served during the last war.

Jewish veterans’ accounts of the Nazi period are a testament to the centrality of wartime military service in shaping their lives. The way they talked and wrote about their participation in the war, their veneration of Germany’s soldierly traditions, and their reassertion of German identity in the darkest hours of the Holocaust is striking: it says something important about the values they embraced and, more crucially, about their identity as “old soldiers” and as “real men.” Describing their ordeals under National Socialism, they often invoked traits associated with the ideal soldierly male: bravery, perseverance, self-control, initiative, and strong nerves in moments of crisis. These were the qualities that had kept them alive at the front lines and that still defined them as men. Their writings suggest that the Jewish *Frontkämpfer* imagined themselves to be the counterweight to the stereotypical *Drückeberger* that Nazi propaganda tirelessly exploited. They were strong, assertive, fearless, and loyal. The two constructions were articulated in a dialogic relationship to each other, one invoking the other as a kind of referent. This dichotomous relationship defined the contours of ideal, as opposed to deficient, manhood: whereas the *Drückeberger* discredited Jewish masculinity,

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., II:48–49 (May 8, 1942); Manes, *As If It Were Life*, 219.

<sup>114</sup>Miroslav Karmy, “Die Theresienstädter Herbsttransporte 1944,” *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* 2 (1995): 7–37; Benz, *Theresienstadt*, 92.

<sup>115</sup>See Part I of Hadra, “Theresienstadt.”

the *Frontkämpfer* embodied the qualities that every “real” German man should possess. This imagery defined the Jewish “front generation” in the years prior to 1933, and it remained integral to who they were under Hitler. Whether confronting Nazi thugs on the streets or enduring the horrific conditions at Dachau or Theresienstadt, defending their honor enabled them to attach meaning to their struggles, to preserve their identity, and to reassure themselves that their sacrifices for Germany a quarter-century earlier had not been in vain.

Their identity also suggested the limits of their agency in defying the Nazis. By 1935, public demonstrations of identity and acts of bravery performed during the war had become increasingly irrelevant. Although Jewish veterans continued to celebrate virtues such as comradeship, heroism, and loyalty, race had, by then, become the dominant marker of male identity in Hitler’s Germany. This development is central to understanding relations among different types of masculinity, which R. W. Connell has identified as dominant, subordinate, and complicit.<sup>116</sup> It further problematizes these categories by reminding us that, even though certain Jewish men saw themselves as having successfully defended their masculine honor by appealing to the dominant image at the time, it did not change the fact that they had been relegated to a subordinate position. After all, the Nazis continued to see them as inferior, unmanly, powerless, un-German, and, ultimately, unfit for life.

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<sup>116</sup>Connell, *Masculinities*, 35–37.