“The Jews in the Army”—On the Origins and Pervasiveness of a Prejudice

SOURCE DESCRIPTION
This text titled “The Jews in the Army" was written by Alfred Roth, who concealed his identity by using the pseudonym Otto Armin, a combination of the first names of his two sons. It was published in early 1920 by Munich-based Deutscher Volks-Verlag and had a print run of 10,000 copies. The publishing house had only been founded on April 1st, 1919 as a spin-off of J.F. Lehmanns Verlag, and it was run by Dr. Ernst Boepple, a close associate of Julius Friedrich Lehmanns. Its list mainly included expressly antisemitic publications. Roth had previously published a six-page essay titled “The Jews in the Army” under the pseudonym Dr. Hans Friedrich which appeared in the December 1919 issue of the “All-German-völkisch monthly for the German people,” Deutschlands Erneuerung, published by J.F. Lehmanns. His original plan to subsequently publish individual chapters of his book as broadsheets could apparently not be realized. Roth’s single intention in his writing is to portray the German Jews’ participation during the entirety of the First World War as shirking and deliberate breaking of German morale. This explanation of the German army’s collapse, which defamed Jews and picked up on latent anti-Jewish resentment, was frequently employed in anti-republic agitation, and it was readily believed by large parts of the lower middle class and middle class in particular.

The “Committee for War Statistics”
At the beginning of the First World War, at a time of almost unanimous national enthusiasm, many Germans, and among them a large number of Jews, volunteered for military service. A large segment of the Jewish population hoped to prove their patriotism by going above and beyond the call of duty as well as by their readiness to sacrifice their lives. They also hoped to disprove the prejudice of their supposed unfitness for military service held not just in antisemitic and conservative circles and to thus overcome one of the still existing social barriers. During the war, Jews were indeed promoted to the rank of officer in the Prussian army. By the fall of 1914, however, their initial euphoria had waned. In the army antisemitic resentment became increasingly noticeable. At the front, signs of the growing isolation of Jewish soldiers became ever more apparent. In the spring of 1915, several Jewish and German-Jewish organizations felt the need to establish a joint “committee for war statistics.” [1] It was headed by the director of Berlin’s Office of Statistics, Prof. Dr. Heinrich Silbergleit, and was tasked with compiling reliable material on the actual participation of Jews in the war.
The census of Jewish soldiers

In the meantime, the War Ministry received an increasing number of mostly anonymous complaints about supposed Jewish shirking. On October 11, 1916, the Prussian Minister of War, Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, commissioned a census of Jewish soldiers at the front, in rear-area support units, and in the garrisons, making explicit reference to “complaints” from the population constantly being submitted to the War Ministry. With this “Jewish Census” ["Judenzählung"] the ministry indubitably budged to rising antisemitic sentiment within the army and at the same time provided an outlet for it, while the statistics were ostensibly compiled in order to invalidate the numerous anti-Jewish accusations and defamations. The Prussian Minister of War’s undertaking was just as questionable and controversial in its goals as it was amateurish in its execution. Jewish associations as well as single Jewish individuals intervened with their own publications and personal appeals at the War Ministry and the Reich government. Neither an amendatory ordinance of November 11, 1916 nor the replacement of the Minister of War and classification of the statistics were able to repair the damage done, especially since the War Ministry failed to acknowledge the contribution to the war effort made by German Jews.

Alfred Roth

Alfred Roth, author of the pamphlet “The Jews in the Army,” played a major part in the radicalization of antisemitism in Imperial Germany and during the First World War as well as in the early postwar period, first in his position as officer in the division for education and social matters in the Hamburg office of the German National Union of Commercial Employees (DHV) [2], then as secretary and president of the antisemitic “Reichshammerbund” association (named after the journal "Der Hammer") and finally as a board member of the All-German League [3]. In 1919, Roth became executive director of the German National Protection and Defiance Federation (1919–1922) [4], one of the most important institutions of völkisch, antisemitic socialization in the Weimar Republic. The main office of both the “Reichshammerbund” and Protection and Defiance Federation[5] were located in Hamburg. Roth was able to make use of the War Ministry statistics and correspondence, which he had been given access to in an act of indiscretion, although Jewish organizations and individuals had been assured by the War Ministry that the files would remain classified in its archive. Moreover, Roth had numerous newspaper articles on the behavior of Jews during the war at his disposal, the collection of which had been one of the tasks the “Reichshammerbund” set itself at the outbreak of the war.

Antisemitic explanations of the military defeat

The preface itself explains the purpose of this whole account, namely to highlight the supposed underlying reasons why the First World War ended with the collapse of Imperial Germany despite its “heroic strength and disposition” and to magnify the so-called Jewish question into a matter of “the destiny of our people.” The author employs an image broadly used in antisemitic propaganda, the Jew as “a blood-sucking parasite feeding off the body of the people”. His conclusion ends similarly. Not only does he use the old, antisemitic label of “nomad”, he also refers to a quote by historian Theodor Mommsen from the third volume of his “History of Rome” repeatedly cited by antisemites. In this quote, he characterized Judaism as “an effective leaven of cosmopolitanism and of national decomposition.”[6] By making this reference, Roth holds the
Jews ultimately responsible for the German defeat.

The supposed favoritism towards Jews

The next section of the text aims at denouncing the “incredible preferential treatment” of Jews on all levels. Roth accuses the Jews of being underrepresented at the frontlines and among casualties while they had been favored for deferrals and deployments at home “in egregious fashion.” He tries to prove this by manipulating isolated statistical series from the so-called “Jew Census” ["Judenstatistik"] and by printing numerous documents from the War Ministry correspondence and the disparaging characterization contained therein. At the same time, he aims to refute previously published Jewish accounts of the Jewish contribution to the war effort. He criticizes these for their “glorification” of Jewish soldiers and casualties as well as for their general “insolence” and “insane haughtiness” in the face of actually existing “scandalous circumstances.”

Flaws in Roth’s statistic

Roth presents the validity of the statistic as beyond question from the outset. The general rebuff of “groups with an agenda” in the section titled “Judenstatistik” at least suggests that the census was carried out under questionable and unverifiable circumstances. While the census itself thus hardly represented a sound basis, the interpretation of the compiled data was, as sociologist Prof. Dr. Franz Oppenheimer wrote in his detailed 1922 analysis “Die Judenstatistik des preußischen Kriegsministeriums” ["The Jew Census of the Prussian War Ministry"], “the biggest statistical scandal any government ministry was ever responsible for.”[7] For example, the figures Roth gives for the number of Jews among the German population is consistently far too high while the number of Jewish frontline soldiers given is much too low. Nor does he make the slightest attempt to compare the German Jews to the general German population in terms of their demographic, economic, and social structure or to consider the social spectrum of Jewish soldiers in general. No comparison is drawn between the size of the relevant age groups between 19 and 47 years, who were eligible for military service and which were smaller among Jews than among other Germans due to differences in local populations, among other things. Moreover, clear differences in terms of education levels and professions between these population groups led to a larger number of Jews being needed in vital positions in trade, banking, and propaganda, serving as doctors and medics in rear-area support units as well as often being deployed in the military administration; for Roth, these merely served as further proof of “Jewish shirking.” In those cases where Roth had to admit that a high number of Jews had joined the military as volunteers and that Jewish soldiers had received many decorations, he either denigrates the soldiers’ motivation or explains their numerous decorations as the doing of Jews in the military administration. Roth’s manipulative and defaming strategy is particularly evident in his treatment of casualties. In it, he claims the Jewish population numbered 615,000, a highly exaggerated number since there were about 550,000 Jewish Germans at the time, while quoting the number of Jewish casualties much too low as 6,000, a number which he claimed to have calculated based on Jewish sources. Finally, Roth interprets the fact that the statistic remained classified and the omission of an official acknowledgement of Jews’ contribution to the war effort as evidence that the War Ministry, too, believed the statistical documents to be proof of the Jews’ lacking commitment and defeatism during the war. He ends his
pamphlet by openly holding the Jews responsible for the German collapse.

Objections to Roth’s pamphlet

Roth’s rabble-rousing statements, which were propagated at public meetings and by numerous flyers distributed by his organization, the [8], were immediately opposed by countless, not exclusively Jewish voices by their own, independently compiled data. In 1921, the Committee for War Statistics [9] published a statistical study authored by statistician Dr. Jacob Segall, head of the Bureau of Jewish Statistics [10] with Berlin’s Philo-Verlag publishing house entitled “Die deutschen Juden als Soldaten im Kriege 1914-1918” [“The German Jews as Wartime Soldiers 1914–1918”], which was based on a sound, if not large-scale, survey and a valid, verifiable method of interpretation. According to this study, German Jews counted for about 100,000 soldiers in active military service, ca. 80,000 frontline soldiers and ca. 12,000 casualties, which was roughly proportional to the percentage of non-Jews participating in the war. After careful review, these findings were confirmed in a 1932 publication commemorating “Die jüdischen Gefallenen des deutschen Heeres, der deutschen Marine und der deutschen Schutztruppen 1914-1918” [“The Jewish Fallen Soldiers of the German Army, the German Navy, and the German Colonial Troops 1914–1918”] published by the German-Jewish War Veterans’ Association [11] in the epilogue written by its president Leo Löwenstein.

The deeply rooted prejudice of “Jewish shirking”

No amount of factual information and education could prevent the spread of the prejudice of “Jewish shirking,” however. Jews had previously faced accusations of “unfitness for military service and shirking” by antisemities during the wars against Napoléon of 1813–1815 and particularly during the French-German War, which Roth explicitly points out in his pamphlet. Now this accusation was reinforced in connection with the so-called stab-in-the-back myth in particular. Thus it became an antisemitic line of argument often employed by völkisch, National Socialist, and conservative circles. Ernst von Wrisberg, who as former director of the General War Department [12] had a major share in the execution of the “Judenstatistik,” in 1921 published its data in the second volume of his memoir titled “Erinnerungen an die Kriegsjahre im Königlich Preußischen Kriegsministerium”, thus underpinning his conviction that the Jews had played an extraordinary part in the German collapse. Erich Ludendorff, first Quartermaster General during the war, named “Jewish shirking” as one reason for the German defeat during Hitler’s 1924 trial for high treason before the People’s Court in Munich. Adolf Hitler, too, declared it a main cause for the breakdown of morale in the German military in the first volume of “Mein Kampf.” The Jewish campaign to refute this myth in print, as demonstrated by the German-Jewish War Veterans’ Association on both the regional and national level, continued until the end of the Weimar Republic and beyond. However, it didn’t stand a chance in the face of an ever deepening rift in politics and society, the fatal beginnings of which were marked by the “Jewish Census” [“Judenzählung”].

Select Bibliography

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Abwehrvereins, Düsseldorf 1977.
Jacob Rosenthal, „Die Ehre des jüdischen Soldaten“. Die Judenzählung im Ersten Weltkrieg und ihre Folgen, Frankfurt am Main et al. 2007.

Selected English Titles

Notes
[1] Ausschuß für Kriegsstatistik
[2] Deutschnationaler Handlungsgehilfenverband
[5] Schutz- und Trutz Bund
[8] Schutz- und Trutz Bund
[9] Ausschuß für Kriegsstatistik
[10] Bureau für Statistik der Juden
[12] Allgemeines Kriegsdepartement

About the Author
Uwe Lohalm, Dr. phil., born 1939, was academic director at the Research Centre for Contemporary History in Hamburg from 1987 to 2004. He wrote numerous publications on the history of völkisch movements and the persecution of Jews and on administrative, social and health politics in 20th Century Hamburg.

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