

Star of David in the German armed forces

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Gideon Roemer-Hillebrecht dons his skullcap for prayers and on special occasions when he wears his army uniform. But he hides his Jewish headgear under a hat when he takes a walk. For security reasons, he says.

"I've come to fear being recognised as a Jew," says the 42-year-old. Unthinkable for many Jews, Roemer-Hillebrecht serves as a staff officer in the German armed forces.

He says he feels more secure there than "outside" because the armed forces try to nip any indications of anti-Semitism in the bud.

The army's top soldier, Inspector General Wolfgang Schneiderhan, sees the presence of Jews in the military as a signal of hope and an indication that "no terror will come from German uniforms ever again".

Roemer-Hillebrecht is a member of the Federation of Jewish Soldiers, known under its German acronym BJS. It was founded in 2006, about 68 years after the Nazis started their pogrom against the Jews and instigated the dissolution of the Federation of Jewish Soldiers on the Front.

The reaction has been positive, according to Roemer-Hillebrecht, except from neo-Nazis who have made disparaging remarks about it on their internet websites.

One comment wished the Taliban good luck in chasing Jews serving with the German armed forces in Afghanistan, according to Roemer-Hillebrecht. Others warn of a "Jewish-isation of the armed forces" and a "danger to the German army" caused by its leadership "that stands to attention to the Jewish press", he says.

About 100 000 Jews fought for Germany during World War I. Thousands were decorated for bravery and 12 000 were killed in action.

"The Nazis tried to wipe out the memory of Jewish soldiers," according to Michael Berger, chairperson of the BJS. They ignored their achievements, removed their names from memorials and presented an image of "Jewish shirkers", he says.

Today, anything that could lead to "restoring the disgraced honour of Jewish soldiers is a thorn in the flesh" of right-wing extremists, he says.

Memory

One of the goals of the BJS is to cultivate the memory of Jewish soldiers who took up arms for Germany. They are an important component of German-Jewish history, according to Berger, who has written a book on the subject -- *Iron Cross and Star of David*.

Jewish youths down to the third generation of those persecuted by the Nazi regime are exempted from compulsory military service in Germany. Other Jews will not be called up if they don't want to take up arms.

The first Jew to join the German armed forces after the war was Michael Fuerst, who enlisted in 1966. Today there are an estimated 200 Jews among the 250 000-strong Bundeswehr, as the armed forces are collectively known.

There is a greater number of Muslim and Buddhist soldiers, but no exact figures are available because

the military does not keep statistics on the religious affiliation of soldiers.

Jewish soldiers often feel they are caught between two worlds, says Roemer-Hillebrecht. This is not the fault of the army, which tries to make allowances if it is informed about special meal requirements or working on the Sabbath, he adds.

According to Berger, many Jews can "understand with their reason but not necessarily with their emotions" that today's democratic armed forces are not to be compared with those of the Nazis.

Today there are army barracks that bear the names of Jewish officers in order to keep alive their memories and serve as a reminder of their fate.

One is named after Julius Schoeps, a Prussian Guards officer, who as a doctor tended to wounded soldiers during World War I. He received several citations and was promoted.

In 1942, the Nazis deported him to the Theresienstadt ghetto in what is now the Czech Republic. He died a short time later of an untreated disease. -- Sapa-dpa

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