

German Jewish Flyers in the First World War

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The Holocaust has cast a long shadow over this moment in history, but for many Jews the experience of the First World War was not defined by anti-Semitism, which was also prevalent in other countries at the time including Britain, but rather by a profound sense of commitment to the German

fatherland. Moreover, it was hoped that the long denied societal and civil equality under the Second Reich would be attained through such loyalty, patriotism and heroism. These hopes were shattered and the contribution by Jews to the German Army was not recognised, either during the war and its aftermath, and quickly descended into slurs and allegations, with age-old claims of disloyalty resurfacing and persisted in public discourse throughout the Weimar Republic.

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In 1924, at the height of a public defamation campaign blaming German Jews as shirkers and saboteurs in connection with Germany's defeat, a remarkable book titled Jewish Flyers in the World War (*Jüdische Flieger im Weltkrieg*) was published about the experiences of Jewish

"flyers", being those serving in the newly-formed German Air Force across a number of flying specialities including pilots, observers and aerial gunners. The book's author was Dr. Felix A. Theilhaber (1887-1956), a young Jewish doctor who had studied medicine in Berlin and Munich and answered the call to duty, serving his country in a number of military hospitals on both the Eastern and Western fronts. He had previously visited Palestine and remained committed to the establishment of a Jewish homeland for the remainder of his life. Theilhaber was decorated with the Iron Cross First Class in April 1918.

Theilhaber thought that the contribution of these "Jewish Flyers" would provide a convincing argument as to the devotion of Jewish servicemen as a whole to Germany and the pilots corresponded with him through letters in which they wrote about their experiences at war, including photographs to illustrate their stories. The contribution of patriotic and courageous Jews to the war effort was an uncomfortable truth for the Third Reich, which attempted to ban the book and others like it.

The cover of the book featured the picture of a pilot seated in

a swastika-adorned Siemens Schuckert SSW D.III fighter aircraft, probably taken 1917. The flyer used the swastika as good luck symbol and as a personal emblem, at a time when it had not yet acquired the tragic significance attending it today. Did Dr. Theilhaber use the photograph to mock the Nazi Party that had just come to prominence or, perhaps, just as a visual claim that Jews were an integral part of the German nation? The image has become somewhat synonymous with the book.

The pilot in question was leading ace, Fritz Beckhardt, who was born in Wallertheim in Hesse in 1889. He fought on the Western front until 1916 and, during this time, earned the Iron Cross, First and Second class. In 1917, Beckhardt transferred to the air service for pilot training and after graduation he joined a field aviation unit (*Feldflieger Abteilung*), performing long range reconnaissance over the enemy's lines. He later received advanced fighter pilot training and served with distinction wherever he was stationed, being one of only 16 known aviation recipients of the prestigious Silver Merit Medal of the Princely Hohenzollern House Order.

At the end of the war in November 1918, Beckhardt's five strong single-seat fighter squadron (*Kampfeinsitzerstaffel*) was ordered to stand down and surrender their aircraft to the Allies. They refused and flew to neutral Switzerland and



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Beckhardt, upon landing his swastika-adorned aircraft, was taken into custody by the local authorities.

Beckhardt returned home to become a popular grocery store owner in Wiesbaden and in response to the growing anti-Semitic tendencies he became an important member of the Reich Association of Jewish



Veterans (*Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten*). By the late 1930s, the situation in Germany had deteriorated into Nazi-fuelled anti-Semitism and in 1936, he drove two Jewish brothers named Frohwein to the Belgian border so they could flee the Gestapo. The Frohweins later opened a kosher butchery in Golders Green.

In 1937, Beckhardt was accused of having sexual relations with the family maid. This race offence (Rassenschande) against a non-Jewish "Aryan" woman resulted in his conviction and imprisonment for a year and nine months. After his time in prison, he was taken into protective custody

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at Buchenwald concentration camp in October 1939. Ironically, we only know Beckhardt's final victory count as a fighter pilot due to the SS, who recorded it when he was released from prison in March 1940.

His release was facilitated by Hermann Goering, who had been petitioned by Berthold Guthmann, an attorney in Wiesbaden, and another Jewish ex-flyer. Goering, one of most powerful men in the Third Reich, was a fellow fighter pilot with 22 combat victories and Beckhardt would have been under his command in 1918. Unfortunately, Guthmann was not destined to be saved and died in Auschwitz in October 1944. Interestingly, another Jewish fighter pilot, Willie Rosenstein, had received assistance from Goering in 1936 when he sought to immigrate to South Africa.

Beckhardt and his wife arrived in Britain in May 1941, both their children having arrived with the Kindertransport in 1939. He returned to West Germany in 1950, and fought for the restitution of the family

property and their business.

Theilhaber's book was a largely forgotten work since the destruction of German Jewry that culminated in the Holocaust. In 1933, he was arrested by the Gestapo for the research he was carrying out in the field of reproductive science and after his release decided to immigrate to Palestine. In the midst of the Second World War, Theilhaber was one of the founders of Kupat Holim Maccabi, one of the four health services currently active in Israel.

Long out of print and hard-to-find, *Jüdische Flieger im Weltkrieg* was republished in revised and annotated form in 2019 by Cross & Cockade International, the First World War Aviation Historical Society, as part of its remit to bring forgotten works to the attention of the public. The Society rebranded as the Great War Aviation Society in 2022 and the writer is a Committee member.

This new English edition has adapted a translation by Adam M. Wait and drawn on dedicated research, to provide readers and researchers alike with a work of vastly expanded scope and detail. It includes a comprehensive and updated appendix that lists by name well over 200 known German Jewish flyers and furnishes details of their military service, lives and fates. The editors, Elimor Makevet and the late Dieter H. M. Gröschel, M.D., had collaborated on this project



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since 2005 and were assisted by many researchers of aviation history.

German Jews fought bravely for their homeland during the First World War and their stories should not be forgotten.

Jewish Flyers in the World War is available direct from the Great War Aviation Society website at www.greatwaraviation.org for

£20. Just follow the links in the shop tab or search for the book title and enter FLYERS24 in the discount code box for an exclusive offer to buy this historically important book for just £10 plus postage.

