**Not victims: the image of Jews in World War Two**

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When I enlisted in the army I felt I belonged to something big. No longer a military action or operation, but joining a struggle against an international enemy. The fact that I was Jewish made the question of life or death even more pertinent. While all other soldiers in the world’s armies fought for their country and the justness of their regimes, Jews fought for their very existence. When General Patton sent me to liberate American POWs in a tightly guarded camp in German territory, an impossible mission, which to begin with had no chance of success, he chose me as commanding officer because he relied not only on my military capabilities, but he also knew that I was a Jew and would therefore complete my assignment passionately, adhering to my goal more than any other officer. Because revenge means motivation, apparently, he was right. I realized how right he was during the gruelling battle, the attack, and the price we had to pay.[1](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)1. Part of an interview I conducted with the late Major Abe Baum, a decorated Jewish commanding officer in the US Armoured Corps. Baum was sent by Major General George Patton to command the raid on the Hammelburg German military camp in which 900 American POWs were held, among them Patton’s son-in-law. Baum was wounded in battle and lost most of his men. Task Force Baum was considered one of the brilliant lessons in military strategy and warfare on enemy territory. For more on Baum’s operation, see: Moshe Dayan, *Milestone* (Hebrew: *Avnei Derech*, Tel Aviv: Idanim, 1976); and Richard Baron, *Raid: The Untold Story of Patton’s Secret Mission* (New York: Putman & Sons, 1981).View all notes

In this article, I will attempt to reveal why historians and the public are unaware of the story about Jewish soldiers in World War Two, and why has it not been explored and studied sufficiently in academic, historical, military, and educational frameworks. My study attempts to clarify the difficulties encountered in integrating new historical facts, some of them somewhat transformative, into a well-anchored and accepted historical narrative, regardless of inevitable gaps. Before delving into the story of the Jews in World War Two and their historical image, it is important to understand the issue: developmental historicism deals with narrative principles and the past-present continuity, and the distorting effects of the present on accounts of the past, which leads to a deep chasm between facts and narratives. Instead of employing principles for selecting facts, some modernist historicists prefer to tone down the facts to validate narratives.[2](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)2. Mark Bevir, “Why Historical Distance is not a Problem,” *History and Theory* 50, (2011): 24–37.View all notes The psychopathology of memory, the writing of history about the part played by Jews in World War Two, (except for the Holocaust and self-criticism), gave rise to a reflexive check on what we really know about the issue of the Jew as victim. When adopting a standpoint in relation to trauma and heroism, we should be able to ask and answer the question ourselves: why is it patently clear that Jews deserve to be pitied and criticized, but do not merit respect and reverence?

**Introduction**

Since ancient times in the classical world of Greece and Rome, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and even the Modern Age which saw the birth of the Enlightenment, Judaism was identified more with spirituality and abstract representations than with strength and the visible physical manifestations of rituals, adoration, and ceremonies. When Jews did participate in rebellious acts or battles, these were local and of limited territorial scope, devoid of any international context outside the borders of the country or the specific areas in which they took place. History shows that Jews never set out on voyages of conquest, they had no imperialistic or bellicose pretensions to train armies, nor were they perceived as such.

It may well be that one of the roots of separatism, which incorporated a considerable avoidance of the pagan and later the Christian environment, was an outcome of the fact that the Jewish monotheistic faith prohibited statues and pictures and all concrete tangible symbols. Unlike the religions of other peoples in the region, Judaism advocated more investment in behavioral codes and less in the physiological attributes of the human body and its external properties, even though several heroic figures existed, as well as wars and rebellions that served as an inspirational source in later periods. This may explain the fact that in the struggle for the revival of the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine and the realization of the right of the Jewish People to declare their independence in their land, some compared specific battles and commanders, notable for their acts of valor, to historical figures, noteworthy for their outstanding courage. Thus, for example, the *Yishuv’s* Tel Hai battle in Palestine in 1920 soon associated the hero Yosef Trumpeldor – a Zionist *halutz* who has lost an arm in World War One, and could hold a rifle or alternatively plough a field with one arm – with Bar Kokhba – a kind of Canaanite heroic Jewish figure, who maintained the heritage of those who defended their land and protected the freedom of the Jewish people from foreign oppression.[3](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)3. Yael Zerubabel, *Recovered Roots* – *Collective Memory and the Making of Israel National Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 39–59.View all notes Until then throughout all the years of the Diaspora, this type of forceful figure was non-existent, particularly in view of the fact that in the majority of European, Asian, and African countries Jews were permitted to work largely in professions that related to life in their religious communities, and to education, science, commerce and art, and were virtually banned from joining the local armies or the police force. Consequently, their skills as farmers, laborers and landowners were not cultivated. Regardless of the dictates of their religion vis-à-vis physical exposure or training, the Jews were excluded in any event from all spheres of life that demanded physical strength and sportive and battle skills.

In the late nineteenth century, alongside emancipation, the naturalistic and enlightenment movements and the struggles of the European Spring of Nations, Jewish nationalism also emerged and a secular Zionist ideology was consolidated as a national movement.[4](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)4. Itzhak Conforti, “Alternative Voices in Zionist Historiography,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4, (2005): 1–12.View all notes The Zionist discourse placed the masculine body on center stage; one of the ideological principles was based on an analogy between body and nation: reinstating the Jewish nation through rehabilitation of the Jewish body, and establishing the New Jew, strong and upright, to replace the weak and submissive Diaspora Jew.[5](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)5. See more: Yitzhak Conforti, “The New Jew in the Zionist Movement: Ideology and Historiography,” *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 25, (2011): 89–121; and Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881*–*1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).View all notes Zionist leaders, such as Herzl and Nordau, well aware of the prevailing stereotypes which presented the Jew as sickly, feeble, and inadequate, underscored that the source of this perception was not intrinsic to Jewish nature but rather the result of socio-political influences that could be resolved by reviving the Jewish people and transforming it into a productive and independent people that tills the land. They believed that the effeminate and debilitated Diaspora Jews could be rehabilitated by turning them into strong and muscular men, who would work the land and build to restore the *Yishuv* in Palestine. The revolutionary ideology of the Zionist leaders dealt with creating a new type of masculinity, one that was healthy, strong, sexually restrained, men who observed the rules of respectability and dignity, accountable for their fate and the future of the Jewish people.

In his book *Altneuland*, Theodor Herzl created the New Jew in the image of David Litvak, who said in one of his conversations: ‘We content ourselves with making our young people physically fit. We develop their bodies as well as their minds. We find athletic and rifle clubs sufficient for this purpose.’[6](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)6. Herzl Theodor Benjamin, *Altneuland* (Tel Aviv: Bavel [1902] 2004).View all notes This was also Max Nordau’s famous attitude towards the idea of the ‘muscular Judaism’ which he voiced in the Second Zionist congress in August 1898. For Nordau, the Zionist Movement has awakened Jewry to new life, morally through the national idea and materially through physical rearing.[7](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)7. George Lachmann Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York and University of Virginia: Howard Fertig Publishers, 1985); Max Nordau, *His Writings* (Jerusalem: Mitzpe, 1956); Max Nordau, “Liberalism and the New Jew,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27 (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 565–81; Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (New York: Routledge Jewish Studies Series, 2007); and Gavin Schaffler, “Un-Masking the ‘Muscle Jew’: The Jewish Solder in British War Service, 1899–1945,” *Racializing the Soldier* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 375–96.View all notes Nordau’s followers believed that a real change would be administered in Jewish life by choosing the ‘sword morality’ over the ‘book morality,’ extolling Jewish bravery during the days of the Second Temple, and favoring the ethos of fighting over adopting the scholarly and weak image. Accentuating the dimension of Jewish strength had a powerful impact on the Revisionist right-wing camp.

From the early days of the Zionist endeavor the culture of Jewish youth was linked to admiration for the historical Jewish soldiers. They believed that the New Jew will raise up as a courageous soldier, willing to give his life on behalf of the nation in its struggle for independence. This was also the source of inspiration for Jabotinsky’s book *Samson*, written in the mid-1920s; it was not sheer accident when he chose the strapping biblical figure, in whose image he created the New Jew.[8](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)8. Ze’ev Jabotinsky, *Samson the Nazarite* (London: M. Secker, 1930); See also his article: ABC of the Jewish Army (August 9, 1940), *The Jewish Herald* 22, 4.View all notes In the early twentieth century, and after World War I, the secular image – devoid of the familiar stereotype – of numerous young Jews, was shown. They were World War I soldiers who fought in various armies on both sides, as well as rebels active in the socialist movements in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. They aspired to be considered equals, loyal atheists to Mother Russia, the Red flag, the *International*, the Communist Manifesto and the Party.

This is the place to point out another interesting fact regarding the change in the image of the Jew: The scope of Jewish enlistment in the German Army in World War I. The extent of their national loyalty, were extraordinary. The percentage of Jews in the German Army was greater than their proportion in the overall German population. They were considered the best and the most daring of soldiers. From their point of view there was no other option other than enlisting in the army and investing all their efforts in supporting the cause. The Jews were German patriots, proud of their cultural affinity and loyal to the homeland. From the beginning of the twentieth century, numerous Jews enlisted for one-year military service, a plan intended for high-school and higher-education graduates, and later served in the reserves. In accordance with the law, most these ‘one year’ recruits completed their service as sergeants. The overall number of Jews who served in the German Army between 1914 and 1918 was approximately a hundred thousand, 18% of all German Jews. Approximately 10,000 recruits were volunteers. Some 80% of the Jewish soldiers served at the front. At least 12,000 Jews fell in World War One, or were missing in action. Over 20,000 Jews were promoted in rank during the war, some 2000 were promoted to the rank of officer. Thirty-five thousand Jews were awarded medals of courage and bravery. These Jews, former soldiers in the German Army and war veterans, could never have imagined that the day would come when they would be looked upon as undesirable, not to mention vilified, deported, and prey to anti-Semitic rioters, the majority Germans like themselves.[9](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)9. Martin Gilbert, *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 23–42.View all notes

Doubtlessly this new atmosphere bore a considerable impact on the *halutzim*, Jewish revolutionary intellectual young men and women. In the 1920s and 30s, after the Zionist idea became a reality, the more daring among them went to resettle Palestine as farmers and manual laborers. Their objective was to implement an egalitarian ideology in new types of settlements that fell in line with the image of the new, strong, enlightened and adventurous Jew, who advocated the moral conventions of integrity, restraint, and communality. At the time this was the accepted ‘masculine’ norm in Europe which was inundated with movements and historical processes that created the concepts of human liberty, nationhood, nationalism and self-definition. The Jews aspired to integrate into these processes as free human beings with rights.[10](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)10. Ryan Michael Burns, *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, Vol. 5 (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2006), 7–14.View all notes

Against this background, when World War Two broke out in 1939, and later when the Soviet Union and the United States entered the war in 1941, none of the leaders of these superpowers, their allies and their commanders were surprised by the large number of Jews who joined the military ranks, both through compulsory enlistment and as volunteers for all roles and missions. Yet when speaking about Jews in World War Two, in most cases the tendency is to regard them as victims: submissively huddling together in ghettos, closely cramped and shoved into trains carrying them to the death camps, defeated and meekly marching to the gas chambers. They are not perceived as fighters, as fearless heroes who attacked Germans in every possible way, on the battlefield or in military operations. This article will later present heroic stories that complete the missing part of this historical picture.

**Gathering data about Jewish fighters and cross-checking information**

As of 2000, I have been taking part in a wide-ranging study that includes a collection of data regarding the participation of Jews, men and women alike, in World War Two.[11](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)11. Tamar Ketko, *The Jewish Soldier in World War Two*, ed. A. Kasher (Latrun: Yad Lashiryon and the Yehoraz Kasher Commemoration Organization, 2005); and Tamar Ketko, *Separating Memories from Stones* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010).View all notes From databases and studies conducted mainly in the Soviet Union, the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, Holland and Poland, a totally different picture emerges, which undermines the images we have about Jews in the war. I found an overwhelming number of stories about Jewish soldiers, thousands of whom decorated for bravery and declared heroes in the countries in whose armies they fought. Why are they out of context, particularly in Israel? Why is it that when we think about Jews in World War Two we still think automatically about the Holocaust and not about their contribution to the victory over the Nazis?

The idea of examining the story of Jewish fighters in World War Two evolved in the 1990s with the immigration of hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Soviet Union. For the first time, we heard stories of their bravery in battles against the Nazi enemy. In addition, a group of highly influential Israeli reserve generals, who had led the IDF in wars and crucial battles, some of whom had begun their military training in the British Army or in other Aallied forces before the establishment of the State of Israel, formulated a plan. Until that time no interest had been shown in these sources of inspiration or in the experiences of soldiers who had fought in World War Two, and later became the commanding officers of military companies in the early years, during the struggle for the country and the 1948 War of Independence. It is worthy of note that these comprise the first twelve major-generals of the IDF, three chiefs-of-staff, and later two presidents: Haim Herzog and Ezer Weizmann – all of whom had served in the British Army in World War Two. A group of military historians, who had conceived the idea, approached me, and asked me to undertake an in-depth study of the subject, and gather data in Israel and abroad about as many soldiers as possible. After undertaking this national enterprise, the government of Israel appointed me curator of the Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War Two, to become the largest corpus of information in the world on this subject.[12](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)12. The appointment was granted after an official statement made by Israel’s prime minister, the late Ariel Sharon, published on 18.9.2002 (File No. 4490) who gave his blessing and support to the study and to data gathering for building the museum.View all notes

Information gathering followed two main channels: The first was based on hundreds of interviews conducted with veterans, men and women alike, soldiers in all the Allied forces, their majority residents of Israel, but also some who lived in other countries, some through investigations carried out in archives in Warsaw, London and Washington, while others through filmed or recorded interviews. I found these people through organizations of World War Two veterans in various countries, and these directed me to additional sources and curators of museums in Europe, the Soviet Union, Australia, the United States and Canada.

The second channel comprised scientific and research sources written by historians and military historians, who dealt with the recruitment of Jews in all armies throughout the world, either by conscription, or as volunteers, partisans, and underground fighters. Uncovering research sources and cross-checking them with the data I gathered from the soldiers themselves was carried out together and in full collaboration with leading researchers and historians, such as Prof. Martin Gilbert[13](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)13. I met the late Sir Martin Gilbert on several of his visits to Israel and in London about this study, and we collaborated on a comprehensive study for the documentary *Blessed Is the Match: The Life and Death of Hannah Senesh* (Director: Roberta Grossman, 2008).View all notes who wrote dozens of international studies on the subject; Prof. Judy Baumel-Schwartz, an international historian who specializes in women soldiers and the parachutists sent by the *Yishuv* in Palestine; Dr. Yitzhak Arad (Tolka), an expert on Jewish fighting on the Eastern front, himself a partisan who heroically survived, immigrated to Palestine, joined the army as brigadier-general and served for many years as the chairman of Yad Vashem and its senior historian; Brigadier-general (res.) Zvi Kan-Tor, managing director of the museum and leader of the project, responsible for the corpus of information; Colonel Benny Michelsohn, a military historian who specializes in the battles of World War Two, and in the study of the military and strategic aspects of all battles. In addition, there have been dozens of scholars who studied the participation of Jews – each on a specific front.

Until now, thousands of pieces of information, documents, photographs, personal items from the battlefields, have been gathered, as well as stories about the Jews fighting on all fronts. The study continues and the work of gathering data is in full swing, and even though most of the fighters are no longer living, interviews with family members continue. Since the public has become aware of this topic, a change in attitude is apparent.

In recent years, an effort has been made to modify the prevalent perception by highlighting an unknown part of the historic story which has not yet found its place in the pantheon of collective memory about World War Two. Alongside the extermination of six million Jews, about a million and a half Jews enlisted in the Allied armies, and participated in all the important battles that brought about the defeat of Nazi Germany and its collaborators.[14](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)14. Additional data and sources, and links to studies and articles can be found on the website of The Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War Two, [www.jwmww2.org](http://www.jwmww2.org/).View all notes How can one explain the fact that the percentage of Jewish soldiers in foreign armies, relative to their number in the population, was the highest in the world, and yet so little has been mentioned in history textbooks?[15](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)15. Another Source (From my visit there in 2011): Pamela Elbe, “Collections Manager and Archivist,” *National Museum of American Jewish Military History*, Washington, DC.View all notes I will attempt to clarify the difficulties that hinder the integration of new historical facts, some of them quite transformative, into a well-anchored and accepted historical narrative, despite inevitable gaps.[16](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)16. See more sources about this: Gershon Shapiro, *Under Fire*: *The Stories of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988); Pyodor Davidovich Sverdlov, *Jewish Generals in the Soviet Army* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1996); Arcady Timor, ed., *Journal of the Soldiers and Partisans in the War against the Nazis* 16 (Tel Aviv: Bureau of War Records, *AJHS*, 2003); and Yitzhak Arad, *In the Shadow of the Red Banner: Soviet Jews in the War against Nazi Germany* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, and Geffen, 2010).View all notes

**The study of history between past and present: distance and perspective**

Before delving into this historical image, it is important to understand the process of developmental historicism. Recent years have seen new studies in the field of developmental history that deal mainly with analysis of the contemporary language and the symbolic representations through which past events are conceptualized.

Modern historians and philosophers of history after World War Two, such as Hans Georg Gadamer, Mark Bevir, and Mark Salber Phillips preferred to contract the facts to validate narratives, as I often do, particularly in this article. Much of their historical research deals with the nucleus of historical events regarding all aspects and ‘the spirit of the times’ Inspired by his teacher, Martin Heidegger, Gadamer suggested that the distance between past and present is not a barrier that must be crossed, but rather a precondition of all historical interpretation. He also stated that time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged since it separates; it is the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be conquered. This was the somewhat naive assumption of historicism, namely that it is imperative that we transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, and employ its ideas and thoughts rather than our own, and in this manner, proceed toward historical objectivity.[17](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)17. Hans George, *Gadamer* – *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1975), 267–73, 285–90.View all notes

Years later, Phillips and Bevir sought to develop these ideas by adding their theories on historical distance and issues related to perspective. Bevir substantiated his arguments by claiming that the perception of the contemporary language of the past is problematical as it contains the danger of distorting historical facts that in any event we will never be able to give an objective representation, devoid of interpretation and supplements. His method deals with narrative principles and the continuity between past and present, and the distorting effects of the present on accounts of the past. Instead of using narrative principles, this leads to a chasm between facts and narratives.[18](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)18. Bevir, “Why Historical Distance is not a Problem.”View all notes

Phillips argued that distance is not only a matter of time and space, but also of form, affect, ideology, and understanding. Therefore, we need to be cautious in our interpretative work, particularly when we characterize historical narratives and the way in which we should memorize them. Phillips introduces historical distance as a method for including formal, affective, ideological, and cognitive dimensions, each of which plays a role in historical representation, often in varying degrees of intensity. Historical distance is not shorthand for temporal distance, as is commonly believed, but rather indicates diverse strategies employed by historians to achieve effects of proximity and separation. In this expanded sense, he used the term ‘historical distance’ to indicate possibilities for rendering past moments closer and more pressing in order to intensify, for example, the emotional or political impact of an event, as well as to mark the idea of moving away from the historical scene – perhaps to emphasize the objectivity, irony, or philosophical sweep of the historian’s vision.[19](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)19. Mark Salber Philips, “Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance and the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography,” in *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources*, ed. Adam Budd (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 106–17.View all notes Based on these ideas, we need to re-understand some historical facts regarding the Jewish chapter in the military history of World War Two, part of which was distorted and written down and memorized selectively. It is likely that some of unknown stories introduced in this paper will rectify the earlier and well-known narrative.

**Re-checking the victim-hero issue of the Jews in World War Two**

The psychopathology of memory and writing the history of the Jewish part in World War Two, (except for the Holocaust) of all those who attempted to re-examine and criticize the different issues related to the Jewish struggle, resulted in a critical and reflexive check on what we really know about the victim-hero issue. When choosing a standpoint between trauma and heroism, we should be able to ask ourselves why is it so obvious that Jews should be identified more with the traumatic than with the heroic?[20](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)20. Jan Goldstein, “Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past,” *History and Theory* 54, (2015): 419–28.View all notes

Scrutinizing the philosophical and the historical aspects, in most historical and documentary protocols and biographies, Jews were normally represented by spiritual and defensive symbols; abstract ideas and beliefs, such as their bond to synagogue rituals and the Star of David, rather than to classical wars and worldly and combative symbols such as the fist, the sword, the flags, the burning torch, or even the Shield of David, prepared to defend themselves and other nations in times of danger. However, it depends who tells the ‘other’ narrative of the Jewish part in World War Two; how will it affect the historians who are responsible for the formal version of the part Jews played in the destruction of Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1945?

Based on the ideas of Gadamer, Bevir and Phillips about the mandatory perspective for understanding historical processes, and the importance of the distance of time in creating a picture of reality in terms of the past devoid of influences of the present, a question arises regarding the desire of the soldiers themselves to become part of the pantheon of memory. Memory is not assimilated on its own in the history textbooks and the memorial institutions. Someone must make sure that it is there. This is where Bevir and Phillips’ concept of ‘historical distance’ fits in. It is important to examine the principles based on which I wish to reconstruct the historical image of Jews in World War Two in accordance with a different type of ‘etching of memory,’ knowing that there are a considerable number of unresolved issues in this context.

Despite the scenes which the Jewish soldiers witnessed in the final stages of the war when they liberated the cities of occupied Europe and the death camps as part of the Allied armies, the special units, and the supporters of the underground, they nonetheless returned to their countries of origin, the countries that had enlisted them and in whose name, they fought. In other words, the war did not engulf them with a sense of Jewish-Zionist solidarity because of the Holocaust or with a new burst of feelings of a collective belonging to the Jewish people to the extent that they totally identified with its future as a nation that would return to its only homeland, the Land of Israel. It never dawned on them to join the struggle for the establishment of the State of Israel, its army, or to actualize the Zionist vision since the fact that a third of the Jewish people had been annihilated.

To obtain insight on this issue, the distance of time in historical interpretations can be extremely beneficial, and doubtlessly for understanding how the Jewish narrative was articulated among historians in the State of Israel since its establishment until recent years. Their narrative was adopted because it fell in line with the attitude of the leadership of the nascent State of Israel after it was established in 1948 (and even earlier) that invested great efforts in creating the New Jew, one who would fight for their rights, defend his/her resources, work hard and be productive and brave, the antithesis of the exilic Jew.

Even after the Eichmann trial in the 1960s, when the ‘new-survivor-hero’ emerged, it was still the ‘traditional ghetto fighter’ who represented the formal hero of the Jewish chapter in World War Two, fighters and partisans active in Eastern Europe, who constituted only 8% of the Jewish forces in all the armies and partisans in other parts of the world – the Balkans; east and North Africa, and the Special Forces such as commando and espionage units, and hundreds of thousands of Jewish soldiers in the armies who fought Nazi Germany. Until recent years, they have barely been mentioned in national museums or academic researches. To be extremely precise: this article deals with the presence of Jewish soldiers in all forces regardless of the Holocaust, and accordingly, suggests another point of view regarding the traditional victim-hero Jew.[21](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)21. See more: Hanna Yablonka, “The Development of Holocaust Consciousness in Israel: The Nuremberg, Kapos, Kastner and Eichmann Trials,” *Israel Studies* 3, (2003): 1–24; and Dalia Ofer, “History, Memory, and Identity. Perceptions of the Holocaust in Israel,” in *Jews in Israel: Contemporary Social and Cultural Patterns*, ed. Uzi Rebhun and Chaim Waxman (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 394–417.View all notes

**The unknown stories about Jewish soldiers in World War Two**

Jews who did not live under Nazi occupation and were not in danger of being transported or deported, volunteered for or joined the Allied Armies from the age of 18 (at times even younger) to the age of 45, among them married men and women. In all the armies, the majority felt ambivalent loyalty as citizens in their countries and as Jews. To investigate their absence in history in the context I mentioned earlier, I selected four representative stories in support of the main argument in regards to the distorted perception of the ‘traditional Jew’ to reveal hitherto unknown facts, to introduce more aspects of bravery to the historical narrative of World War Two. Each story represents a specific battlefront and mission in various wartime events. In addition, without expanding on this issue in this article, I discovered that many Jewish women participated in World War Two, notably in the Soviet Army, where they constituted approximately 10% of all Jewish soldiers.[22](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)22. More about Jewish women in World War Two: Bracha Habas, *Women of Valour* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1964); Efraim Wicheslfish, *Jewish Women in World War Two* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and the Organization of Partisans, 2000); and Yehudith Kafri, *Zuscha* (Tel Aviv: Keter, 2003).View all notes Before going into detail and providing examples it is necessary to place emphasis on several arguments:

Until the Eichmann trial (1961) the public in Israel and in other countries accepted the weak image of the Jew from ‘there’ (Europe), led helplessly like sheep to the slaughter, while ‘here’ (in Palestine) the ‘renewed Jews’ held guns and shovels. Although the Eichmann trial added new heroic ideas to the lexicon of collective consciousness by preserving human dignity and revealing the struggle to maintain life under all conditions, and even though there were numerous international Jewish organizations that built museums and set up archives devoted to Jewish soldiers in almost all the countries, it remained the survivor versus the hero. Yet, how is it that historians and researchers know so little about this subject, and so little is mentioned in educational programs and syllabuses, books, and public awareness?

Two possible reasons should be considered:

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| (1) | The barrier of communism that threatened the West, and the historical-political problem of admitting that Stalin and the Red Army had determined the war and had played a crucial role in defeating Hitler’s forces. It is reasonable to assume that this is one of the reasons that a story of heroism, such as that of Leopold Trepper,[23](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)23. Leopold Trepper, *My Red Orchestra* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth 1975); Leopold Trepper, *The Great Game: Memoirs of the Spy Hitler Couldn’t Silence* (New York: M.W. Books Ltd, 1983), 171–2.View all notes a Jew who headed the Red Orchestra[24](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)24. A name given by the Gestapo: Communist (Red) spies who ‘sing’ sensitive intelligence information in ‘harmony.’View all notes espionage ring, was never divulged. He was a communist and an intellectual, an expert on Marxism, and a gifted spy who set up an espionage ring of international scope that worked for the Red Army in central and western Europe. The agents, many of whom were Jews, succeeded in uncovering most of the German high command’s operative plans and delivered them to the Soviet Union. The importance of the information that Trepper obtained was unparalleled; it would be impossible to describe what might have happened without it, and without the espionage ring under his leadership. Trepper worked intermittently in Moscow, Brussels and Paris, escaped the Soviet Union’s purges, and managed to deceive his German captors and escape. He survived the Soviet prison and was released after Stalin’s death, and ultimately immigrated to Israel, where he lived in complete anonymity until his death. |
| (2) | Focusing exclusively on those who immigrated to the State of Israel, prior to and after World War Two, and ignoring the fact that most of the Jews who served in the war in different armies, returned to the countries of origin and did not immigrate to Israel, did not define themselves as Zionists, and did not see themselves first and foremost as ‘Jewish soldiers,’ a title that we, the team of historians, saw fit to grant them in order to appropriate them in the ‘international army.’ It is small wonder that except for the ghetto fighters and the partisans, separate chapters have been devoted to the fighters of the *Yishuv* in Palestine who volunteered in the British Army and joined the Allied forces in North Africa and in Europe, such as the soldiers of the Jewish Brigade initiated by Winston Churchill in 1944, and the *Yishuv* parachutists who were trained for various intelligence missions. They were perceived as fighters of the ‘Jewish Army’ of the future State of Israel, in whose name they fought. Hence, it is appropriate to allocate for them a revered place in the historical narrative of the history of the State of Israel that was consolidated in those years, particularly in the years after the war, and in the first decade of the existence of the State. |

This is how the ethos of the parachutists evolved: the British trained 37 parachutists for special missions to be carried out behind the German lines in Europe. Twelve were taken as prisoners of war, and seven were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during their operational activity, and were recognized as heroes and categorically not as victims, even if they were caught and murdered.[25](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)25. The seven parachutists were: Hannah Szenes, Enzo Sereni, Haviva Reik, Rafael Reiss, Zvi Ben-Yaakov, Abba Berdiczew and Pertz Goldstein.View all notes The most well-known among them was Hannah Szenes who became a heroic symbol after she was dropped in Yugoslavia and crossed the border into Hungary where she was caught by the Nazis and imprisoned by the Hungarians who tortured her, executing her by a firing squad in the backyard, while her mother, whom she had so wanted to save, was sitting in the adjacent room. The other soldiers, over a million in number, who returned to their country of origin, or were communists and as such, personae non gratae, were deleted from consciousness and the history books.[26](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)26. Dan Laor, Hannah Senesh an Israel Kastner – Imagery and Contra-Imagery, *Bishvil Hazikaron* 20, (1997): 10–17; Judy Baumel**-**Schwartz, “We Will Remember Them All – The Parachutist Emissaries in World War Two, 1945–1949,” *Katedra* 84, (1997): 107–32; and Judy Baumel**-**Schwartz, *Perfect Heroes: The World War Two Jewish Parachutists and the Making of Israeli Collective Memory* (Beersheba: Ben Gurion University, 2004).View all notes

The study of Jewish soldiers in the Allied Armies continues, however even at this stage it sheds light on thousands of unknown heroic deeds, on crucial military operations in which they participated, and their contribution to science, the intelligence, and the development of weaponry.[27](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)27. Arad, *In the Shadow of the Red Banner*, 175–205.View all notes The recruitment of Jews in all the armies necessitated dual allegiance: as soldiers of the country in whose name and under whose flag they were fighting, and as Jews who were called upon to fight for their very existence. The facts illustrate that there were Jews in almost all non-Jewish partisan units, as well as in all armies and organizations.[28](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)28. Martin Gilbert, *Churchill and the Jews*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2007); Martin Sugarman, and Henry Morris, *We Will Remember Them* (London: Mitchell Vallentine, 2007); Benjamin Michelsohn, “Military Operations and Jewish Soldiers in Battle Fields,” *Shiryon* 33, (2009):6–11; and Kenneth Wynn, *Men of the Battle of Britain* (London: Frontline Books, 2015).View all notes

Furthermore, the loyalty of Jewish soldiers was first and foremost to their military units. However, when Jewish commanders and soldiers set foot in Auschwitz, Majdanek and Dachau, or when Jewish Soviet tank commander**s** conquered Berlin, they were aware of the extent of the Jewish tragedy.[29](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)29. Deborah Dash Moore, *GL Jews: How WW2 Changed a Generation* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2006).View all notes What distinguished them from other soldiers besides their dog tags imprinted with the letter *J* (which would identify them to be buried as Jews)? It was not easy being a soldier in World War Two, but being a Jewish soldier was tenfold more complex and exacting.[30](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)30. See more: Morris Beckham, *The Jewish Brigade: An Army with Two Masters, 1944* – *1945* (New York: Sarpedon Publishers, 1999); and Yoav Gelber, *Jewish Palestinians Volunteering in the British Army during the Second World War* (Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben-Zvi, 1983).View all notes Firstly, due to their Jewish identity they knew that becoming a prisoner of war would mean their death sentence, either because their comrades would betray them, or because they would be quickly examined by their captors. Jewish women were given a pistol or poison so they would be able to commit suicide as their fate was sealed. Secondly, observing Jewish rituals during battle and after a prolonged stay away from home for many years was virtually impossible. Thirdly, while liberating the cities and camps in west and central Europe, they often found themselves involved in insufferable moral dilemmas regarding their behavior vs. the Nazi enemy. On the one hand, they obeyed the orders of their commanding officers, but on the other, they sought to take revenge on all Germans, men and women alike. Nonetheless, the heroic stories outnumber those that show loss of morality, and should be reexamined considering historicism and historical interpretation in this chapter under discussion. As stated earlier, this study presents four selected less known war and resistance stories, which may elucidate the significance of the absence of this chapter in national and international perception, and how they might change the historical and philosophical points of view regarding Jews in World War Two.

The first story is devoted to the Soviet front and the unprecedented number of women recruits: over one hundred thousand Jewish women, between the ages of 17 and 45, joined the Soviet Army without any concessions or professional selection. The Red Army numbered over 34 million soldiers in World War Two, among them over Five hundred thousand Jewish soldiers who constituted approximately 15% of the Jewish population in the Soviet Union (that numbered over Three million people). Approximately 20% of the Jewish recruits were women! The Soviet Union lost over twenty million inhabitants in World War Two, and the number of Jews who fell in the war reached two hundred thousand.[31](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)31. Shapiro, *Under Fire*: *The Stories of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union*; and Arad, *In the Shadow of the Red Banner*.View all notes

Unlike their counterparts in Western Europe and North America, women in Soviet society were far more involved in societal development outside the home, commerce, statecraft, nation-building, and, eventually when the time came – warfare. Moreover, Soviet women went to the eastern front to fight against Germany and its Axis allies in combat roles that included bomber pilots, tankers, machine gunners and grenadiers. Eight hundred thousand women were sent directly to the eastern front, which was a mere fraction of those who had volunteered and were eager to go. Five hundred and twenty thousand of these women served as regular troops in the Red Army, while another 300,000 served in combat and anti-aircraft formations.[32](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)32. Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).View all notes Lydia Litvyak, ‘the White Lily’ a combat pilot, was one of them. On 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union as part of Operation Barbarossa. Within six months two million POWS were taken, thousands of Soviet soldiers were killed each day, and the Germans advanced, nearing the outskirts of Moscow and Stalingrad. Stalin embarked on a tremendous endeavour to expand and empower the Soviet air force. Thus, the summer of 1942 saw the beginning of the recruitment of women for antiaircraft and pilot training. In addition to these courses, women trained to be doctors, tank crew members, military paramedics, parachutists and signallers, and were sent to the front line.

First lieutenant Lydia Litvyak, born in Moscow, began her flight training when she was only 14 years old. After completing her training, she joined the ‘586 squadron,’ a women’s air force unit called the ‘Night Witches,’ and adopted the name ‘Lily,’ as her trademark, which was painted on her aircraft. Her title derives from ‘The White Lily of Stalingrad.[33](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)33. Reina Pennington, *Wings, Women, and War: Soviet Airwomen in World War Two Combat* (New York: Lawrence Kansas, 2007); and Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, eds., *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Oxford, UK: Westview Press, 1998).View all notes She participated in 869 operational flights, accumulated 1300 flying hours, and dropped over 100 tons of bombs with 142 definite hits. On 1 August 1943, Litvyak’s aircraft was attacked by eight German Messerschmitt and was destroyed. Until her death, she managed to shoot down 12 enemy aircrafts. The lily that she so loved was evidently her Waterloo, as it made it easy for the enemy to identify and hit her aircraft. The remains of her aircraft and her body were found many years later. Lydia Litvyak was recognized and decorated as a Hero of the Soviet Union.[34](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)34. See more: Aharon Abramowitz, *The Decisive War: Soviet Jews in Battle against the Nazis* (Kibbutz Givaat Haviva: Moreshet, 1996).View all notes

The second story is devoted to the uprisings in the death camps, and to Alexander Pechersky, commander of the uprising in the Sobibor death camp. During the systematic annihilation of the Jews of Europe and North Africa in the death camps between the years 1943–1944, uprisings and revolts took place led by Jewish men and women prisoners, in the Treblinka, Auschwitz Birkenau and Sobibor death camps. On 15 October 1943, the Sobibor uprising broke out, led by Alexander Pechersky. The rebels killed several SS officers, opened fire and broke through the camp fences.

Alexander Pechersky, who came from the city of Rostov in the Ukraine, fought against the Germans as an officer in the Red Army, and in October 1941 was captured by the Nazis as a POW. In May 1942, after an unsuccessful attempt to escape, he was sent to the Sobibor death camp and immediately began organizing a group of rebels. The operation was carefully planned, so that on the fateful day there was a clear-cut division of roles and a time schedule. The date was decided upon: October 14. Eleven SS men and several Ukrainians were killed during the uprising. Pechersky gathered all the rebels in the kitchen, got up on a table, told the prisoners that most of the German guards in the camp had been murdered, and now there would be no turning back. After Pechersky’s speech, the raid began. The attack was unsuccessful and most of the inmates rushed toward the main entrance and trampled over the guards, while their weapons were no more than a few guns and stones. The great escape into the forest began. Most of the rebels lost their lives due to the landmines that the Germans had planted around the camp. Three hundred prisoners managed to escape, but only 50 survived, among them Alexander Pechersky, who joined the partisans and fought with them in the forests until the end of the war.[35](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)35. Alexander Pechersky, “Memories,” *Moreshet* 10, (1969): 7–33; See more in: Yitzhak Zuckerman, and Moshe Basok, *The Book of the Ghetto Wars* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1954); David Avidan, *The Revolt in the Owls Forest* (Tel Aviv: Books of the 1930s, 1983); and Gideon Greif, *We Cried Without Tears* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999).View all notes

The third story is dedicated to the Jewish French Resistance and the underground forces during World War Two, which includes the special story of women who played a significant role in saving numerous Jews, particularly children, from deportation to the death camps.[36](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)36. Anat Gueta, *The Jewish Army in France: The Zionist Fighting Resistance* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 2001); and Tsilla Hershco, *Fighters in the Dark Will See the Light* – *The Jewish Resistance in France* (Tel Aviv: Cherikover, 2003).View all notes After France was invaded by Germany in June 1940, the country was divided into two parts; the northern region was under German rule, and in the southern part a new French government was established under Marshal Petain, known as the Vichy Government. In 1942 the Germans took control over this part as well, and the first signs of civil resistance to German rule, the *Résistance*, emerged. They joined the *Maquis* partisan groups in extensive battle against the Germans.

The Jewish underground organizations comprised the Jewish Scouts under Robert Gamzon, and the Jewish Army (Armée Juive, AJ), under Lucien Lublin, Abraham Polonski, and David Knut. Judith Markus (Geller) was one of 35,000 Jewish men and women who fought against Nazi forces in France. Judith was born in Paris and when she was 16 years old, as the Germans invaded France in the early summer of 1940, she joined the *Résistance* after she was sworn into the Jewish Army like all her Jewish comrades:[37](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)37. Tsilla Hershco, “The Jewish Resistance in France during World War Two: The Gap between History and Memory,” *Jewish Political Studies Review*, 19 (Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, 2007), 1–2.View all notes

By placing my right hand on the blue and white flag, I pledge my allegiance to the Jewish army and will obey its leaders, in the hope that my people will return and live, and the Land of Israel will be established. It is freedom or death.[38](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)38. Gueta, *The Jewish Army in France,* 40.View all notes

After she was given her underground code name, Jacqueline Gauthier, she became active in many regions in France, establishing contacts with other underground cells in Grenoble, Montpellier, and Marseille. She smuggled out Jewish families, for whom she provided forged documents, on trains, delivered information, money and weapons to members of the *Résistance* in various locations, and repeatedly endangered her life. Judith was captured several times and tortured by the Gestapo and its French collaborators, but she never said a word. Disguised as a social worker and resembling a French woman, she could carry heavy suitcases with domestic articles that would attest to the objective of her travels. In her luggage, she also carried children’s toys, among them a hollow wooden duck, in which she smuggled important documents and money. She saved dozens of families and orphaned children travelling the length and breadth of France, day and night, on trains and on her bicycle, escaping the suspecting and scrutinizing eyes of the Germans, whom she managed to deceive with her beauty and courage. Many of her friends were caught and executed. Judith was awarded the Medal of Liberated France, the Liberation of Paris Medal, and the Resistance Medal.

The fourth story relates to Major General Maurice Rose, son of Polish immigrants, who was the highest-ranking Jew in the American Army and the highest-ranking American killed by enemy fire in the European arena during the war.

Over five hundred and fifty thousand Jews enlisted in the US Army in World War Two. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 it was inevitable that the American forces joined the war. Some 15 million soldiers served in the American Army. Among the Jewish soldiers, some forty reached senior command positions. Jewish soldiers were awarded 49,315 medals for bravery and valour, and citations for their courage.[39](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)39. Steven Ossad and Don Marsh, *Major General Maurice Rose: World War II’s Greatest Forgotten Commander* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2006).View all notes

Major General Maurice Rose served in three armored divisions in North Africa and Europe and as commander of Combat Command A, the 2nd armored division as a brigadier general, and the 3rd armored division as Major General. He was well known for his aggressive style of leadership: under his command, the *Spearhead*, as his division became known, advanced over 100 miles in a single day, a record March in modern warfare, and played a key role in several campaigns. On 30 March 1945, a few miles south of the city of Paderborn in a rural forested area, General Rose was riding at the front of the Task Force Welborn column with his own jeep. Unexpectedly his unit was hit by small arms and tank and anti-tank fire. As the lead tank took a direct hit and was destroyed, General Rose, together with his men, jumped into a nearby ditch with his Thompson sub-machine gun. Realizing that they were surrounded by German tanks they re-entered their jeeps and tried to escape. General Rose continued in his jeep and as he was passing, the Tiger tank wedged the jeep against a tree. The top hatch of the tank flung open and a German soldier appeared, pointing a machine pistol at the jeep. General Rose reached for his pistol to fight back, but the German soldier shot him several times. It is believed that the German tank crew had no idea that the man they had killed was a general because sensitive documents, as well as General Rose’s body, were not removed from his jeep. General Rose was awarded eight Distinguished Service Medals. Rose was buried in the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten.[40](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1462169X.2017.1326370?scroll=top&needAccess=true)40. See also: Isidor Kaufman, *American Jews in World War Two: the story of 550,000 fighters for freedom* (New York: Daily Press, 1947).View all notes

Each of the four stories represents a front, a military unit, and a gender: A Soviet air force combat pilot, the commander of a revolt of prisoners in a death damp, a French woman underground fighter who endangered her life day after day during smuggling, saving, documenting, and forging operations, and an American major general and commanding office of an armored division who became a legend during his lifetime and after his death. In each story emphasis was placed on the manifestation of heroism and military and commanding excellence in order to reinforce the basic assumption interwoven throughout this article: refuting the stereotype of the Jew as weak, fearful, and lacking the potential any potential for courage, and proving that the history of the Jews in World War Two, which is devoted almost in its entirety to the Holocaust, leaves almost no room for a corresponding and heroic chapter devoted to with international fighting and heroism. This is true not only about the way in which Jews are generally perceived, but also to the documents and studies concerning all soldiers in the various armies.

**Conclusion and discussion**

In this article, I sought to demonstrate through stories about the feats of Jewish soldiers in World War Two a significant chapter in history that corroborates the participation and existence of Jewish fighters. Just in recent years has the topic of Jewish soldiers, awarded generals and commanders, and their important contribution to the end of the war, been incorporated in history textbooks, some in Israel and to a lesser extent in other countries. However, this is still far from accurate in depicting the entire military angle of the story. Even though we are aware of the part played by the Red Army in defeating the Nazi forces in eastern Europe, and hence the way in which it became a turning point in the balance of the war, until the 1990s no interest was shown about the communist countries in issues pertaining to Nazi occupation, and little was devoted to what occurred in these regions during World War Two. The communists were perceived as ‘enemies of the Western world.’ They had collaborated with the Nazis until the Soviet Union was invaded in 1941, they were anti-democratic, they were regarded as pro-Arab and supported several Muslim countries, and even today are still distrusted. These facts had considerable impact on the material included in history textbooks taught in elementary and high schools, universities, and teacher training colleges and on historians and public figures in general.

Only after the collapse of communism in most the east European countries, and the changes that took place in governments of the former Soviet Union, the historical picture began to surface about the decisive involvement of the Soviet Union in the World War Two military operations, which also included Jewish soldiers. Yet, when speaking of heroism, in most cases it refers only to several partisan groups and a handful of ghetto fighters as part of Holocaust studies, and does not involve most the Jewish soldiers in the Allied forces. It is worthy of note that most of the Jewish soldiers joined the army voluntarily as loyal citizens of their countries, albeit also as Jews who intended to ‘do something’ to rescue what was left of their people in Europe, or to take revenge. It is likely that this was one of the covert and most pressing issues that prompted such many Jews to enlist in all armies and on all fronts.

In addition, I tried to discuss different standpoints regarding the image of the Jew who is generally perceived as one who avoided fighting, steered clear of courageous actions and struggles or any other type of physical activity, preferring to adhere to the abstract spheres of belief and religion, philosophy, science, art, commerce, and trade. In addition to the sequence of historical upheavals that took place, this image, which was glued to Jews over generations, resulted in being perceived as impotent, a people that adopted patterns of helpless behavior which was manifested in their lack of any response to attacks, accusations, persecution, and the warning signs of imminent annihilation. The image of the Jew as anti-hero and the ‘eternal victim’ intensified as the dimensions of anti-Semitism surged, particularly when dictatorships appeared on the scene, reaching culmination with the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany and the Final Solution.

Nevertheless, as I argued in this article, in the nineteenth century, turmoil that flared up in the circles of the Enlightenment movement regarding human rights and liberty, national definitions, and social equality, which brought about a dramatic change in the ways in which the Jews perceived themselves and their status. Based on a hope that the leverage of this revolution could also bring about change in the attitude of the European environment toward their capacities and strength as educated, resolute, and brave people, they fueled with a passion to achieve progress and integrate into society, like their non-Jewish counterparts. However, World War Two dramatically turned back the clock, as the Jews, with unbearable ease, were once again oppressed, degraded, and annihilated. While young Jews were integrating into the renascent Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine and adapting to it, and others were participating in the struggle for equality in the United States, Australia, and Western Europe after the late nineteenth century waves of immigration from eastern Europe, once again they were being deported eastward, and imprisoned in hundreds of ghettos and death camps – proof of the fact that the Jews had remained the same – oppressed and exploited victims, devoid of character and strength.

Against the background of this conceptual disruption regarding the perception of the Jew, and the formative historical processes, in addition to the perspective of time – it may be understandable why the incorporation of a chapter that deals with the fighting of a million and a half Jews in the various armies, their heroic stories, and their contribution to the annihilation of Nazi Germany – seems almost bizarre on the one hand, but nevertheless imperative in the struggle for changing the image of the New Jew that once again was foiled, on the other.The objective of my wish to reveal the part played by Jewish soldiers in military operations was to complete the picture of the fate of the Jews in the Holocaust, not in order to belittle their inconceivable ability to stand up against the Nazis and their survival as skeletons.

It is critical to prove that those Jews who were fortunate enough not to be sent to the death camps and ultimately annihilated, fought and stormed the front lines of the Nazi enemies with the intention of participating in the greatest war in the history of mankind, and to save, not only the remaining Jews but all human beings, their liberty, and the principles of democracy and enlightenment. Although this may sound hypothetical, the number of Jews who enlisted and volunteered may lead us to think that had they not been imprisoned and annihilated, millions of Jewish soldiers might have joined the various armies, and perhaps shortened, even marginally, the duration of the war against Nazi Germany. The story of Leopold Trepper, the mission of the *Yishuv* parachutists, and the four stories of Jewish soldiers in World War Two which were chosen to represent their resolve and adherence to the cause, both as universal citizens and soldiers in the Allied armies, and as Jews, prove that even against all odds they performed in battle and in operations and rebellions. From the perspective of time it is worthy to include in this chapter of the historical narrative, the interpretations and insights that stem from the analysis of the Jewish story in World War Two, and not leave the image of the Jew as an eternal victim.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

***Tamar Ketko*** has a PhD degree in philosophy of history from the Tel Aviv University. Her researches and lectures focus on the ethical and educational aspects of World War Two, the Jewish resistance, and Nazi Education in the Third Reich. She is the head of the Culture Sciences and High School Education Department and the Curator of the ‘Jewish Soldier in World War Two National Museum.’

**Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Professor Joachim Schlör for his guidance and comments.

**Notes**

1. Part of an interview I conducted with the late Major Abe Baum, a decorated Jewish commanding officer in the US Armoured Corps. Baum was sent by Major General George Patton to command the raid on the Hammelburg German military camp in which 900 American POWs were held, among them Patton’s son-in-law. Baum was wounded in battle and lost most of his men. Task Force Baum was considered one of the brilliant lessons in military strategy and warfare on enemy territory. For more on Baum’s operation, see: Moshe Dayan, *Milestone* (Hebrew: *Avnei Derech*, Tel Aviv: Idanim, 1976); and Richard Baron, *Raid: The Untold Story of Patton’s Secret Mission* (New York: Putman & Sons, 1981).

2. Mark Bevir, “Why Historical Distance is not a Problem,” *History and Theory* 50, (2011): 24–37.

3. Yael Zerubabel, *Recovered Roots* – *Collective Memory and the Making of Israel National Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 39–59.

4. Itzhak Conforti, “Alternative Voices in Zionist Historiography,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 4, (2005): 1–12.

5. See more: Yitzhak Conforti, “The New Jew in the Zionist Movement: Ideology and Historiography,” *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 25, (2011): 89–121; and Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881*–*1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

6. Herzl Theodor Benjamin, *Altneuland* (Tel Aviv: Bavel [1902] 2004).

7. George Lachmann Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York and University of Virginia: Howard Fertig Publishers, 1985); Max Nordau, *His Writings* (Jerusalem: Mitzpe, 1956); Max Nordau, “Liberalism and the New Jew,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27 (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 565–81; Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (New York: Routledge Jewish Studies Series, 2007); and Gavin Schaffler, “Un-Masking the ‘Muscle Jew’: The Jewish Solder in British War Service, 1899–1945,” *Racializing the Soldier* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 375–96.

8. Ze’ev Jabotinsky, *Samson the Nazarite* (London: M. Secker, 1930); See also his article: ABC of the Jewish Army (August 9, 1940), *The Jewish Herald* 22, 4.

9. Martin Gilbert, *Kristallnacht: Prelude to Destruction* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006), 23–42.

10. Ryan Michael Burns, *Historiography: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, Vol. 5 (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2006), 7–14.

11. Tamar Ketko, *The Jewish Soldier in World War Two*, ed. A. Kasher (Latrun: Yad Lashiryon and the Yehoraz Kasher Commemoration Organization, 2005); and Tamar Ketko, *Separating Memories from Stones* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010).

12. The appointment was granted after an official statement made by Israel’s prime minister, the late Ariel Sharon, published on 18.9.2002 (File No. 4490) who gave his blessing and support to the study and to data gathering for building the museum.

13. I met the late Sir Martin Gilbert on several of his visits to Israel and in London about this study, and we collaborated on a comprehensive study for the documentary *Blessed Is the Match: The Life and Death of Hannah Senesh* (Director: Roberta Grossman, 2008).

14. Additional data and sources, and links to studies and articles can be found on the website of The Museum of the Jewish Soldier in World War Two, [www.jwmww2.org](http://www.jwmww2.org/).

15. Another Source (From my visit there in 2011): Pamela Elbe, “Collections Manager and Archivist,” *National Museum of American Jewish Military History*, Washington, DC.

16. See more sources about this: Gershon Shapiro, *Under Fire*: *The Stories of Jewish Heroes of the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988); Pyodor Davidovich Sverdlov, *Jewish Generals in the Soviet Army* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1996); Arcady Timor, ed., *Journal of the Soldiers and Partisans in the War against the Nazis* 16 (Tel Aviv: Bureau of War Records, *AJHS*, 2003); and Yitzhak Arad, *In the Shadow of the Red Banner: Soviet Jews in the War against Nazi Germany* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, and Geffen, 2010).

17. Hans George, *Gadamer* – *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1975), 267–73, 285–90.

18. Bevir, “Why Historical Distance is not a Problem.”

19. Mark Salber Philips, “Relocating Inwardness: Historical Distance and the Transition from Enlightenment to Romantic Historiography,” in *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources*, ed. Adam Budd (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 106–17.

20. Jan Goldstein, “Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past,” *History and Theory* 54, (2015): 419–28.

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