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Were There Jews in the Nazi Army?

A historian says thousands of Hitler's soldiers had mixed heritage. Does it matter?

By DANNY POSTEL

By his own admission, Bryan Mark Rigg was not professorial

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Colloquy Live: Read the transcript a [live, online discussion](#) with Bryan Mark Rigg, author of *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers: The Untold Story of Nazi Racial Laws and Men of Jewish Descent in the German Military* (University Press of Kansas).

material. A poor student with attention-deficit disorder, he flunked first grade. Twice, in fact.

Now, the 31-year-old professor of history at the online American Military University, who recently received a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge, has just published a book on Nazi Germany that some historians are calling pathbreaking. This month, the

University Press of Kansas releases *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers: The Untold Story of Nazi Racial Laws and Men of Jewish Descent in the German Military*, on which Mr. Rigg has been laboring since his sophomore year of college.

Controversy has shadowed his work for years. Articles about Mr. Rigg's research in the London *Daily Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* in late 1996 and 1997 -- when he was just starting graduate school -- brought it exceptionally high visibility for such an embryonic dissertation. It also brought him into contact with the people who would form the core of his study: the several hundred soldiers of partly Jewish origin in the Nazi military who told him their extraordinary stories.

Michael Berenbaum, former director of the Research Institute of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and editor of *Witness to the Holocaust* (HarperCollins, 1997), calls *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers* "startling and unexpected." An "invaluable contribution," he says in a blurb for the book, it "is bound to discomfort all those who work in the field," and has much to teach "even the most experienced of scholars."

Other historians see Mr. Rigg's work as sensationalistic and distorted, and its author as publicity-hungry. The broadcast of a feature about the book on NBC's *Dateline* in June is unlikely to assuage those critics. In any case, the highly anticipated publication is sure to throw many readers for a loop and spark a vigorous discussion among scholars.

Mr. Rigg says he "couldn't have done it" if he were a more traditional historian. He went to extraordinary lengths to collect the oral testimonies of more than 400 soldiers in the Nazi army, persuading them to give him their personal documents: army papers, personnel files, government letters,

diaries -- documents, he and others believe, that no one had examined before.

What surfaces in those papers, and in Mr. Rigg's in-depth interviews, is a glimpse into how the several thousand men of partial Jewish origin who served in Hitler's army saw themselves -- how they felt about their Germanness, their Jewishness, the war, the Holocaust, and their own participation therein. Mr. Rigg estimates that there were upwards of 100,000 such "*Mischlinge*" -- German for mixed-blood or half-breed -- as they were known in Nazi parlance, and possibly as many as 150,000, a calculation that some of his critics regard as wildly overblown.

The key to his research was gaining the confidence of his subjects. That is what opened a door to the heretofore largely obscure chapter in 20th-century history that he has unearthed. It is a story that had not been told in systematic fashion, until now.

Discouraging Words

Embarking on his research as an undergraduate at Yale University, Mr. Rigg received more than his share of discouragement. Don't bother, his professors told him. There may be a smattering of such individuals, they said, but hardly a critical mass. How would you find them? And even if you could, what purpose would it serve?

Henry Turner, a professor of history at Yale who wrote *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power* (Addison-Wesley, 1996), was one of the naysayers. "I didn't think it could be done. I told him he was wasting his time. Where would one find the evidence?"

Such disparagement, Mr. Rigg says, is what drove him on. With every brushoff, he became more determined to prove his professors wrong, no matter what the cost. "I did the whole thing on a dare," he says in his robust Texan drawl.

What began as a desire to prove something to his professors became something larger, however. The more he learned about these soldiers -- and how little-known their part in the war was -- the more passionately he began to feel that the chronicling of their history depended on him.

"If I didn't tell these stories," he says, his voice rising with enthusiasm, "nobody would."

That passion for his subject -- and his subjects -- comes through in *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers* but radiates even more powerfully in conversation. Mr. Rigg's study is as much a personal quest as an academic matter. While in Germany in 1992, studying language at the Goethe Institute and doing research into his family origins, Mr. Rigg happened upon some records indicating that his mother's ancestry included Jews. For a boy from a Protestant "Bible church" in Fort Worth that came as a shock.

But Mr. Rigg welcomed the news, and eventually even got his churchgoing mother interested in the family's Judaic roots, of which the family had been entirely unaware. (Hanging in her suburban Dallas house is a placard that says "Shalom, y'all!") In order to learn about the Jewish tradition -- not something he was versed in at the Fort Worth Christian Academy -- Mr. Rigg

later went to Israel and enrolled in a yeshiva, where he studied Judaism and intensive Hebrew.

His Jewish ancestry was not the only discovery Mr. Rigg made in Germany that summer. One evening, he went to see the movie *Europa, Europa*, the harrowing story of Shlomo Perel, a German Jew who escaped his homeland after the Nazis seized power, made his way east to the Soviet Union, was captured by the German army, and then, to save his life, assumed the identity of a non-Jewish German soldier.

Sitting next to Mr. Rigg in the theater that night was an aging man who helped translate the dialogue for him. Later, over drinks, the gentleman related his own story, which bore more than a passing resemblance to Perel's. One-quarter Jewish, the man had served in the *Wehrmacht* on the Russian front.

That evening was it for Mr. Rigg; the seed of curiosity had been planted. Picking a dissertation topic often comes at a late stage in one's doctoral program -- indeed, for many, excruciatingly late -- but Mr. Rigg had, in effect, decided on his topic the summer after his freshman year.

Race Against Time

When he got back to Yale he began to map out his senior essay. If he could locate more Jews or part-Jews who had served in the German army and chronicle their stories, he thought, he would have his paper. But he was up against the clock: Such men, if they existed, would be near the end of their lives.

Though he was able to identify only a handful of living *Wehrmacht* veterans of Jewish descent by the time he was a junior, he secured money from Yale to spend a year in Germany between his junior and senior years. Determined to track down at least 30 such men, he shouldered a video camera, a laptop and small printer, and a duffel bag, and bicycled from town to town all over Germany.

That was characteristic behavior, say several of Mr. Rigg's professors, who have been struck by his tenacity. Paula E. Hyman, a professor of history at Yale and author of *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (University of Washington Press, 1995), recalls a paper that he wrote for her in which he cited a number of State Department documents. When she asked him where, precisely, he had found his sources, he told her matter-of-factly that he had gone to Washington and consulted the original papers. "Most undergraduates don't do that," she says with a chuckle. "That was when I realized that he was very serious about his research."

Over the next two years, by reading the scarce literature in German on the *Mischlinge* and doing news-database searches, he was able to document 30 men and contact them. Almost without exception, they welcomed him into their homes, let him interview them, and showed him their papers and personal documents from the war.

Often he felt as if he were being ushered into the innermost chambers of their lives. Several veterans revealed things to him about their histories and experiences that they'd never told even their wives or children. Many had hidden their partial

Jewish ancestry -- and their anguish over that tortured identity -- from their families. "Please don't let my wife know," several of his subjects pleaded -- with their wives in the next room.

"These were things some of them hadn't discussed for 50 years," says Mr. Rigg.

Perhaps most helpful of all, virtually all of them offered the names of others for him to interview, then helped him find them. The project was mushrooming. Thirty subjects eventually became 430.

Mr. Turner, the initially skeptical Yale professor, recalls Mr. Rigg's appearing at his office door in January 1994, 20 pounds lighter. "He had a huge rucksack that he dropped on the floor and started pulling these documents out of it -- documents people had been *giving* him. And I said, 'Okay, I give up. You can write that as your senior essay.'"

Suddenly Jewish

As bizarre as it might seem that people of Jewish origin could have taken up arms in Hitler's army and acted on behalf of a regime bent on slaughtering Jews, the story is more complicated and ambiguous than that -- which is where much of the controversy comes in.

German Jews, unlike many of their Eastern European counterparts, tended to be highly assimilated. Most of them were educated, professional, and urban. They saw themselves -- and, until the National Socialist takeover, were largely seen -- as German, as part of the national culture. Indeed, many of them had served in the German military in World War I. They were patriotic. Some were even antagonistic toward the Eastern European Jews who began to migrate to Germany after the war, seeing them as backward, parochial, and insular.

By the early 20th century, intermarriage was not unusual. Thus the appearance of numerous *Mischlinge*, as they came to be known by the Nazis. For many *Mischlinge*, serving in the *Wehrmacht* was a matter of survival -- a way of fitting in rather than sticking out, a potential shield against extermination. For others, however -- particularly those with more tenuous Jewish roots -- it was an expression of genuine nationalism. Not that they subscribed to Nazi ideology, but they felt a deep loyalty to the German nation and wanted to serve it, Mr. Rigg argues.

When the Nazis took power and undertook to create the racial state, there was a good deal of confusion over what exactly to do with these *Mischlinge*. According to the Nuremberg racial laws of 1935, anyone with one Jewish grandparent was, in the eyes of the Reich, a Jew -- in possession of bad "blood" and ultimately eligible for killing. At the same time, however, the Nazis made exceptions for many *Mischlinge* soldiers, seeing them as useful servants in the war effort.

Besides, many such *Mischlinge* had demonstrated ample loyalty to the German state. What to do with them?

With the enactment of the racial laws, those *Mischlinge* who had never considered their part-Jewish provenance of much significance were forced into a shocking awareness of their "Jewish" identity. What did it mean for an assimilated -- in many cases baptized -- German, with one or two Jewish

grandparents, to be told that he was "Jewish," and therefore not "German"? *Mischlinge* identity was further complicated by Jewish religious law, known as Halakhah, according to which Jewish identity is matrilineal: If your mother is Jewish, so are you; if just your father is Jewish, you are not, unless you convert.

For the Nazis, *Mischlinge* were of questionable "Aryan" provenance. As Mr. Rigg puts it in his book, "Similar to Halakhah, Nazi doctrine said Jewishness is inherited" -- with the difference that Hitler didn't care which side the Jewish "blood" came through.

But how did the *Mischlinge* identify themselves? That is a question, Mr. Rigg believes, that has been largely ignored. The scant attention paid to the subject has been based on official Nazi discourse on the one hand, and Halakhic debate on the other. He saw a need to explore what these German citizens thought and felt themselves, to document their experiences in their own words. In so doing, he hoped to fill a void in the historical record.

The answers he found in his 1,000-plus hours of interviews were at once illuminating and perplexing: all over the map, yet a compelling collective testimony.

One man he interviewed had lived in a Nazi-imposed Jewish ghetto and witnessed several executions of Jews. He joined the anti-Nazi resistance, only to find himself later serving as a cook in the Nazi army. His sergeant saved his life, helping him conceal his Jewish ancestry.

Others Mr. Rigg interviewed knew nothing of the Final Solution -- the Nazi plan for liquidating the Jewish population -- until late in the war, when they began to learn of some of their own Jewish relatives' being butchered. The turmoil this caused many of them was unbearable.

'Not a Bombshell'

"I can't imagine what difference [this research] would make," says Peter Gay, a professor emeritus of history at Yale and author of *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin* (Yale University Press, 1999), who was one of the professors who discouraged Mr. Rigg early on. "I could be quite unimaginative, but I just don't see it." Mr. Gay declines to elaborate.

David Cesarani, a professor of modern Jewish history at Southampton University, in England, and editor of *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* (Routledge, 1994), concurs. Mr. Rigg's research, he says in an e-mail message, is "of little significance to understanding either the Third Reich or the persecution and mass murder of the Jews."

What's more, he contends, it's "unoriginal." Even if Mr. Rigg has added "detail" to existing knowledge, he says, the thesis itself is nothing new. "The paradoxes of Nazi policy are well known."

"This is not a bombshell," says Raul Hilberg, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Vermont and author of *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 1996). "We have known that there

were thousands of [*Mischlinge*] in the German army." He views Mr. Rigg's claim that there were upwards of 100,000 of them as "preposterous."

"This mathematics escapes me," he says. "Great caution is required here."

Mr. Rigg says he based his figure on birth records, mixed-marriage rates, and assimilation figures (both those who converted to Christianity and those who ceased identifying themselves as Jews), and consultations with statisticians and mathematicians. "It is a conservative estimate," he says.

While he is not the first scholar to have written about the *Mischlinge* -- there have been journal articles and monographs in German -- his supporters point out that never before has there been a book-length study of the subject in English. Neither has there been a systematic oral history of the *Mischlinge*, a canvass of their personal testimonies.

"I think it addresses a very important point -- that the racial ideology of the Nazis was unworkable even in their own hands," says Mr. Turner. The racial policies of the Third Reich were supposed to be objective and automatic, but Hitler was so obsessed with "Aryan blood" that he would turn away from running the war and the Holocaust to specify the policies and work them out -- sometimes, down to the individual level, approving some cases, rejecting others. Mr. Rigg's book, Mr. Turner says, gets to the heart of the matter.

"It's certainly original," says Christopher R. Browning, a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). Obtaining as many interviews as Mr. Rigg did is highly unusual in studying Nazi history, he says. In examining "the lived experiences" of the *Mischlinge*, Mr. Browning says, the book will "illuminate a dark corner" of history and provide a "texture of one aspect of life under the Third Reich that we know very little about."

Jonathan Steinberg, a professor of modern European history at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *All or Nothing: The Axis and the Holocaust 1941-1943* (Routledge, 1990), was Mr. Rigg's dissertation supervisor at Cambridge. The doctoral research is "like no other Ph.D. I've ever read," he says. And Mr. Rigg is like no other student he has ever had. He was "knocked over" when he first saw Mr. Rigg's room, "full of all these iron crosses and pictures and personal letters and diaries and bits of uniforms." The student had "collected this stuff" not as part of his Ph.D., Mr. Steinberg says, but in a "personal quest."

Indeed, Mr. Steinberg was so taken by the array of documents that he wanted to see it preserved. He contacted the German government and arranged for Mr. Rigg's expanding collection to be housed in an official archive, where it would be properly secured and could serve as a resource for further research. The Bryan Mark Rigg Collection is now at the *Bundesarchiv-Militararchiv*, in Freiburg.

"Is it of earth-shaking significance? No," says Ms. Hyman, the Yale history professor. But "most doctoral dissertations, most historical research -- if they tell an interesting story, can we

expect much more?"

Stop the Presses

One recurring criticism of Mr. Rigg has to do with his having gone to the news media with his story while he was still a graduate student. The effect of disclosing his research to the press, says Southampton's Mr. Cesarani, was galvanic. "This is not the way most historians behave -- least of all Ph.D. candidates."

Mr. Hilberg echoes that concern, calling Mr. Rigg a "publicity hound."

It wasn't Mr. Rigg's idea to go to the press -- it was Mr. Steinberg's. "The problem was that he had no way of reaching his potential interviewees," the dissertation supervisor says. They were "strewn all over Germany," most of them unaware of Mr. Rigg's existence. "There was no registry of them, no way he could get to them -- unless he went public."

So, in 1996, Mr. Steinberg contacted a reporter at the *Daily Telegraph*, a former student of his, and arranged a meeting for Mr. Rigg. The ensuing newspaper article, which reached Germany, occasioned several hundred letters. People with similar stories to tell, but who had said nothing for decades, suddenly wanted to talk. (There was one additional motivation for going to the press, Mr. Rigg says: By laying claim to his research in public, he hoped to avoid being scooped by another scholar.)

"This is in no way an ordinary Ph.D." and should not be compared to one, Mr. Steinberg says. With no archive, no list of names, Mr. Rigg had no choice, his adviser says, but to "rest almost entirely on the good will" of his subjects, who gave him their personal records. "How was he to find them otherwise?"

As for the academic quality of Mr. Rigg's work, Mr. Steinberg says it has passed "the highest possible scrutiny."

What's in a Title?

It's not the mere fact of Mr. Rigg's having taken his findings to the press that irks some critics. Richard J. Evans, a professor of modern history at Cambridge and author of *Lying about Hitler* (Basic Books, 2001), says in an e-mail message that while he regards the new book as an important contribution, he thinks that its author and publisher are engaging in sensationalism by giving it a "wholly misleading title."

Even many of the book's enthusiasts are unhappy about its title. "They weren't 'Jewish soldiers,'" Mr. Steinberg says. "It's a gimmick."

As Mr. Rigg's study itself demonstrates, most of his subjects never thought of themselves as Jewish. What does it mean to label them that way?

"It is to become complicit in the Nazis' own racist doctrines," says Omer Bartov, a professor of history at Brown University and author of *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

Mr. Rigg himself wanted the word "Jewish" to appear in

quotation marks in the title, he says, precisely to convey a sense of the label's problematic nature. But his publisher persuaded him to drop the quotemarks, he says. The "provocative, shocking" title was a self-conscious act on the part of the Kansas press, he says -- one that, in the end, he's comfortable with.

The Road Ahead

The controversy isn't likely to derail Mr. Rigg. He has already completed another volume, about the writing of his first one, tentatively titled *In Search of Hitler's Jewish Soldiers*. As for his professional future, he's uncertain -- and ambivalent.

With the stir he and his book are about to make, academic offers could be forthcoming. While his full-time teaching job with the for-profit American Military University, based in Manassas, Va., allows him the flexibility to work from home, spend time with his infant daughter, and promote his book, it's unclear whether it is the sort of career he wants in the long term.

But getting his Ph.D. was more of a means to do the research and write the book, Mr. Rigg says, than a ticket to an academic career. While he is in no way shy about the attention he is receiving, he wrote the book, he says, simply to tell the stories of the men he has discovered.

"It took a kid from Texas" to tell this story, against the advice of some of the most prominent scholars in the field, he says. *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers* could prove to be his academic oeuvre, he adds. "I might not have another scholarly book in me."

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