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In the army, again? 80 years after the Holocaust, Germany's Jews consider conscription

Russia's invasion of Ukraine mobilizes unprecedented support for the military among young Jews, though many still can't reconcile themselves with past crimes – or far-right bigotry today

By **JOSHUA SCHULTHEIS**

On a hill overlooking the town of Sonthofen, on the edge of the Bavarian Alps, lies a former school for educating the next generation of the Nazi elite that has been used as a base by Germany's Bundeswehr, or armed forces, since 1956. A few streets away lies a barracks built in 1936 for the Wehrmacht's mountain troops.

Today that barracks is home to a Bundeswehr school for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defense, and it is there that Lt. Levi — one of an estimated 300 Jewish soldiers serving in the German military — is stationed.

Like many German towns, Sonthofen is inextricably linked to the Holocaust — which affected Levi's own family.

"I obviously cannot ignore the history of this place," says the 33-year-old biologist, who asked to use a pseudonym due to the secretive nature of his work for the military.

For Levi, the Bundeswehr is the army of a free and democratic Germany: "The Bundeswehr does not stand in the tradition of National Socialism."

The former Nazi school, he notes, is now known as the Generaloberst-Beck-Kaserne, named after one of the participants in the July 20, 1944, assassination attempt against Hitler.

"That's a kind of simultaneity you have to be able to live with," Levi says.

Born in Estonia, Levi came to Germany with his family in the early 1990s as a Jewish refugee. Two of his great-grandfathers had been killed fighting the Nazis as Red Army soldiers.

Eight decades after World War II, Levi describes himself as a “Jewish German.” And as such, he wants to defend his country and what it stands for.

For a long-time following WWII, the idea of a Jew serving as an officer in the Bundeswehr was considered unthinkable within Germany’s Jewish community. However, with an increasing national push for renewed mandatory conscription and a Jewish community head calling on his constituents to “do their part” for the country, the idea is no longer verboten.

The Bundeswehr was founded in 1955 — only 10 years after the end of WWII, in which the Wehrmacht was instrumental in the murder of 6 million Jews. While the new West German army was part of NATO and committed to democratic values, it did not make a clean break with the past in its personnel: Nearly all of the roughly 15,000 officers in the young Bundeswehr had previously served in the Wehrmacht, and around 300 had been members of the Waffen-SS.

The small Jewish community of the early Federal Republic consisted predominantly of concentration camp survivors and a handful of Jews who had returned from exile. It was barely conceivable at the time that they or their children would ever again serve in a German army — nor were they required to. Jews persecuted under the Nazis and their descendants were granted an exemption: until the abolition of compulsory military service in 2011, they were excused from the draft.

“We are talking about a completely different era than today,” says Josef Schuster, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany.

Since the end of National Socialism, there have been “profound changes” in Germany, Schuster says.

Schuster was born in 1954 in Haifa and moved as a toddler with his parents to the Bavarian town of Würzburg, where they had lived before fleeing the Nazis.

As president of the Central Council, which represents roughly half of the estimated 200,000 Jews in Germany, Schuster is now advocating for a reassessment of the community's relationship with the Bundeswehr.

In a November 2025 guest column for Jüdische Allgemeine, Germany's Jewish weekly, Schuster wrote that the time had come for Jews in Germany to ask themselves the question: "Where do we stand today, 80 years after Nazi rule?"

His answer: at the side of a democratic Germany in which Jews are equal citizens, and of its army, which defends those values.

"When the situation demands it, we Jews as a community must today be ready to do our part," Schuster wrote.

A rabbi in Bundeswehr ranks

A milestone in this rapprochement with the Bundeswehr was the establishment of a military rabbinate in 2021. Rabbi Zsolt Balla became the first Jewish chaplain in a German army in more than 100 years.

Balla calls his role "a privilege" and sees it as an opportunity to help ensure that Germany "remains on the right side of history."

Balla came to Germany as a young man in the early 2000s, where he trained as a rabbi. In his native Hungary, about two-thirds of the Jewish population was murdered by the Nazis and their local collaborators. His mother survived.

Today, Jews in Germany have “a good life, with all the opportunities and challenges that entails,” says Balla. “We must do our part to preserve this society.”

He too sees a shift in attitude within the Jewish community toward the Bundeswehr. While there is no official count of Jewish soldiers in the German military, Balla’s impression is that their numbers are growing.

Jews with roots in the former Soviet Union, he says, tend to have a different, more positive view of military service. They make up 90 percent of the community, after some 200,000 arrived in Germany as refugees fleeing the rising antisemitism in the post-Soviet states following the end of the Cold War.

“Their ancestors often fought in the Red Army,” Balla notes. They also have a particular familial and emotional connection to the war in Ukraine.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, then-chancellor Olaf Scholz coined the term “Zeitenwende,” meaning a historic turning point. After decades of peace, Germany would have to prepare for new threats and rearm. A dramatic increase in the military budget followed.

The Bundeswehr is set to grow from its current 186,000 active soldiers to more than 260,000. Starting in 2027, all young men will be required to register for a medical assessment to see if they’re fit to serve. Military service remains voluntary for now, but according to the government, it could become mandatory again if sufficient recruits cannot be found otherwise.

Anna Zhukovets supports the reintroduction of conscription. A Jewish journalist with Ukrainian roots, Zhukovets says she has long considered

herself a pacifist, but the war in Ukraine has “radically changed” her outlook. Today she is “firmly in favor of destigmatizing the Bundeswehr.”

Zhukovets came to Germany in 2002 with her parents. She was born in 1997 in Mariupol, where her family had lived for generations. Her great-grandmother Eugenia Fleischmacher served as a medic in the Red Army and later became chief physician of the maternity clinic in Mariupol, where Zhukovets herself was born. That hospital now lies in ruins. Like most of the city, it was destroyed by the Russian army in March 2022 in the early phase of the war.

Zhukovets regularly reports for the French-German broadcaster Arte from her birth country and maintains constant contact with Ukrainian soldiers. Their experiences shape her perspective.

“Russia only understands the language of strength,” she charges. She considers it dangerous that many in Germany fail to grasp this. Under Russian occupation, Zhukovets believes, “our freedom, our dignity and our human rights” would be lost.

“Precisely because I am Ukrainian and Jewish, I see a strong, democratic Bundeswehr as the best protection against this threat,” she says.

Echoes from the Holocaust-era still resound today

Not all young Jews in Germany see it that way.

“I would never join the Bundeswehr. I lack an identification with this country,” says Daniel, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid being targeted by anti-Israel activists. “My ancestors were persecuted by Germans, and I have personally experienced antisemitism here.”

After finishing school, Daniel, now in his 30s, went to Israel to volunteer for three years of military service in the Israel Defense Forces — a stint that is mandatory for native Israelis, but not Jews living abroad. He has since returned to Germany, where he is active in a Jewish student organization.

Daniel says that since the deadly Hamas-led invasion of southern Israel on October 7, 2023, and the global rise in antisemitism that followed in its wake, more German Jews are choosing to serve in the IDF. He also believes there remain widespread reservations about the Bundeswehr.

The force's break from the Wehrmacht is mere "lip service," Daniel says, pointing to two barracks in Germany named after Erwin Rommel, commander of the Wehrmacht's German Africa Corps.

Rommel was accused of complicity in the 1944 July Plot, an assassination attempt against Hitler, and forced to commit suicide.

"But before that, his conquests had brought thousands of North African Jews into the hands of the Nazis," says Daniel. "The fact that the Bundeswehr holds Rommel up as a tradition-forming figure is a scandal."

Ron Dekel speaks for many young Jewish adults in Germany by virtue of his office. The 23-year-old is president of the German Union of Jewish Students, which represents young Jewish people and students between the ages of 18 and 35.

"The war in Ukraine has changed young Jews' perception of the Bundeswehr," says Dekel, adding that many have come to accept that Germany must rearm.

At the same time, Dekel says, the question of whether a Jew should serve in the Bundeswehr remains sensitive. “In particular, those whose ancestors were murdered by Germans still find it very difficult to imagine even today,” he says.

According to Dekel, every far-right incident in the Bundeswehr also causes Jews to question whether they would be safe there.

The most recent figures from Germany’s Defense Ministry on right-wing extremism in the army date from 2024, and they showed the problem was growing. Nearly 100 soldiers were discharged that year for far-right activities; in 17 cases it was proven that members of the Bundeswehr had given the Hitler salute. In total, there were 280 suspected cases of right-wing extremism in the armed forces, 30% more than the previous year.

“And what if the AfD were ever in government and appointed the defense minister?” asks Dekel, referring to the far-right populist Alternative für Deutschland party, which holds nearly a quarter of the seats in parliament.

It would be unacceptable for Jews to serve in the army under those conditions, he argues. For Dekel, one thing is clear: Germany’s Jewish community has good reason to be wary of the Bundeswehr.

“Should compulsory service be reintroduced, Jews must have the option of performing civilian alternative service,” Dekel says, emphasizing that there must never be an obligation for Jews to join the Bundeswehr.

Back in Sonthofen, Levi understands why not all Jews share his view of the German military. He too considers it sensible to maintain the exemption for descendants of those persecuted by the Nazis.

And, he says, “far-right incidents in the Bundeswehr are a real problem.”

But it is a problem he does not wish to avoid. As an officer, he will one day command other soldiers. He sees that as an opportunity to make a difference.

“I chose this profession so that there will be fewer right-wing extremists in the Bundeswehr,” Levi says.