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GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation (review)

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the smaller towns, some southern Jews, including Jacob and Emma Mordecai, kept a Jewish tradition alive.

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GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation, by Deborah Dash Moore. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004. 352 pp. \$25.95.

One of this book's endorsers aptly depicted it as the American Jewish version of Tom Brokaw's "greatest generation." Deborah Dash Moore's work manifests a similar uplifting inspirational tone of American triumphalism and exceptionalism, while simultaneously, I would add, suffering from the same deficiencies characteristic of this kind of history. Inspired by public events surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, Moore set out to examine the neglected role of Jews in the U.S. armed forces during that conflict, as most previous studies of this era focused on the home front and the rescue of European Jews. Unlike Brokaw's popular history, however, Moore presents her work as a cultural study of the momentous transformation of American Jewish identity arising out of military service. According to Moore, this "war intensified the interdependence of the men's American and Jewish identities" (p. x). It is both a Jewish and an American story as she attempts to disclose and then integrate the Jewish chapter into the greater American historical narrative. A recurrent theme is that this experience also legitimized the "Judeo-Christian tradition" among Americans generally. From objects of prejudice typical of longstanding and deeply entrenched antisemitism, Jews (together with Catholics) now earned recognition as integral parts of American democracy and its religious values.

Moore's book is essentially a well-written, captivating story of fifteen Jewish young men, one of whom is her father. She recounts their transition from fairly isolated, parochial Jewish communities into the diverse, often alien and antagonistic, culture of the American military to overseas service and, for some, combat. Coming from diverse economic, religious, and ideological Jewish backgrounds themselves, these young men discovered their commonalities and differences with each other as well as with their non-Jewish comrades. Sometimes this occurred dramatically, as with overt antisemitism or cultural shock over army meals, and at other times in subtle nuanced ways, as they absorbed military values that equated masculinity with fighting. One significant difference between Jews and non-Jews is that the former fought not only as

Americans but as Jews. For Jews, it was always about Hitler, whereas for other GIs Pearl Harbor provided more motivation and inspired hatred of the enemy. Moreover, Jewish GIs' intense identification with and concern for Holocaust survivors was not shared by their fellow soldiers. And in light of the Holocaust, Jewish GI reactions to defeated Germans were complex, ranging from vengeance to compassion for the plight of individual Germans, while most soldiers soon developed sympathetic relations with the Germans. Throughout all of this, Jews learned to demand the rightful place they deserved as citizens. Rabbis tactfully but persistently fought for religious recognition and equality in the armed forces. Moore argues that Jews in combat demolished the stereotype of Jews as weaklings and cowards unable or unwilling to defend their country.

Military experience, Moore argues, also instilled confidence in these Jews as it taught them how to fight for their rights during and after the war. Moore contends further that this new activist, militant spirit led American Jewish veterans to identify with fighting Zionists in Palestine and thereafter the heroic military triumphs of Israelis. Some Jewish veterans involved themselves in the struggle against antisemitism and/or in the civil rights movement; others merely returned to the normalcy of busy private family lives and careers. But social progress could not be reversed. The relationship between Jews and their fellow Americans would never be the same again.

Despite its repetitive theme of "identity," this book's scholarly contribution is limited. These biographical oral histories basically provide examples of what scholars have already concluded on most key issues. One can question whether fifteen oral histories, supplemented with memoirs, letters, and autobiographies of others, are a sufficient foundation for a study that claims to discover the identity transformation of an entire generation of American Jews with broad implications for the society as a whole. The author herself identifies so closely with her theme and her individual subjects that the required scholarly detachment is lacking. There does not appear to be any attempt to critically assess her sources, whether autobiographical or official government policy statements, which research has shown often bear little resemblance to the true attitudes or activities of the military. Moore conducted no research into military records. Neither does she address such controversial, complex, issues as Jews in combat systematically or in any depth. Providing examples of Jewish combat service and assuming that therefore the stereotype of the cowardly Jew disappeared from army thinking or the public mind is not adequate, considering the available archival evidence to the contrary. There are also inconsistencies. Throughout the work one receives the impression that major changes had been distinctly made in religious and social acceptance by 1945,

whereas other statements and conclusions suggest that, though World War II was a watershed, such societal transformations the war set into motion would gradually be fulfilled in coming decades. And Moore overemphasizes wartime service as the cause of this great transformation at the expense of other factors occurring within American society generally, as well as the American Jewish community, resulting from mutually reinforcing societal and attitudinal changes coming out of the progressive Roosevelt era.

As illustrations of the wartime service of Jewish GIs, Moore's book will enhance a popular audience's understanding of Jewish-American culture and history. These soldiers deserved to have their story told. And as an oral historian, Moore tells it well. A systematic study of Jews in World War II based upon broad empirical data and examining significant issues beyond those of identity and other hallmarks of cultural studies is, however, yet to be written.

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