

Joseph W. Bendersky, *The "Jewish Threat:" Anti-Semitic Politics of the U.S. Army* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 538 pp.

Perhaps one of the most famous postwar quotations of General George S. Patton was his derogatory reference to Jewish Displaced Persons as being sub-human.<sup>1</sup> Statements such as this were often cited as aberrations; in addition to being one of the U.S. Army's most successful field commanders, Patton was also known for his tactless behavior. Yet, in a well-written and densely noted text, Bendersky reveals that attitudes such as Patton's were common among officers in the United States Army during much of the twentieth century.

Bendersky begins his analysis with a synthesis of the world view of U.S. Army officers, demonstrating how they accepted the Social Darwinism prevalent among much of the educated upper classes at the dawn of the twentieth century. Such a revelation should not be too surprising. Military officers tended to come from upper-class families, in the U.S. and Europe, and it was these classes that tended to accept and promote social Darwinism and the pseudo-scientific concepts of race. In addition, many army officers were Southerners, where Jim Crow laws reinforced common racial assumptions.

Bendersky then develops a sophisticated analysis of the impact of World War I upon the thinking of the select group of officers in army military intelligence. It was this group, which to Bendersky was the core of the army intelligentsia, who would advise on policy formulation, that not only accepted the most grotesque antisemitic notions, but then adapted these ideas to the American scene. Of particular interest is Bendersky's analysis of the post 1919 "Red Scare," in which military intelligence officers linked subversion to "foreign elements" within the urban landscape (i.e., Jews) and then claimed that all unrest was part of a Judeo-Bolshevik conspiracy to undermine the American way of life. Army military intelligence went one step further and even formulated plans for the suppression of urban anarchy through military intervention.

During the 1920s many of these officers, both on active duty and retired, engaged in covert surveillance of various Jewish organizations, such as the Joint Distribution Committee, the American Jewish

Committee, and various relief organizations, in contravention of the law. The levels of paranoia about a Jewish conspiracy were fueled by the publication of that most famous forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which an army intelligence officer obtained prior to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The publication of an American edition by Henry Ford in 1920 merely added to the developing sense of panic. The superficial relationship between *Protocols* and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the association of American Jews with liberal causes, and the racial assumptions of the U.S. Army officer corps provided all the proof some would need that America was under assault. Some officers continued to use the *Protocols* as a guide even after it was unmasked as a forgery.

Ironically, Bendersky is able to reconstruct the mindset of these antisemitic officers, along with their plans and various paranoias, through their own detailed and meticulously categorized correspondence. Obviously these men did not feel that their efforts were in any way a threat to American democracy. Rather they regarded alien Jews as the threat, justifying any actions taken to prevent their insidious infiltration of the U.S. as part of their responsibility to national security.

How widespread were these ideas and related activities? Although Bendersky does not provide a quantitative breakdown on the entire officer corps, he does make a convincing argument that such beliefs were pervasive among the elite officers who served in military intelligence, consulate attachés, and those who had access to the highest echelons of the government. Almost all of these men had one thing in common; they were graduates of the U.S. Army War College. As such, his chapter on officer education at the U.S. Army War College makes chilling reading. Bendersky not only dissects the curriculum, but even the student exams and notebooks. He then follows the careers of some of the teachers and students.

The most profound impact of these antisemitic offices came during the 1930s and into the stormy days before Pearl Harbor. Although many of these men were critical of Nazism – and it needs to be noted that few officers were fans of the Nazis – they nevertheless did not have much sympathy for persecuted Jews or for many of the victims

of German aggression. Indeed, some military attachés hoped for a war between Hitler and Stalin. Fundamentally, the chapters on the 1930s and after reveal that the attitudes of much of the officer corps remained unchanged since 1919. Thus thousands of Jewish refugees found their requests for asylum blocked or stalled by the U.S. military attachés' fear of communist spies, or at least the dilution of the American melting pot by inferior races.

Bendersky's analysis of the army officer corps through World War II and into the postwar era makes it clear that Patton's comment about Jews was not an isolated event. Their antisemitic ideas colored how they regarded the survivors of the Holocaust and their subsequent treatment of the remnant of European Jewry. Certainly the advent of a truly mass army, which included a number of Jews, tended to blunt the more public manifestations of such racist ideas, yet they did not erase them.

Most studies of institutional or intellectual bigotry in the U.S. military focus on the treatment of African Americans.<sup>2</sup> Bendersky's book adds an important dimension to our understanding of racial prejudice in the U.S. military. During a time of fundamental transformation in American politics and society, the U.S. Army remained one of the bastions of antiquated notions about race.

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## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Leonard Dinnerstein, *America and the Survivors of the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>For example, see James Westheider, *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).