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Jewish Soldiers in Austria(-Hungary)

Hofrat Univ.-Doz. Dr. Erwin A. Schmidl, Wien

23 April 2025 | Austrian Hospice, Salon, Jerusalem

Austrian Jewish Cultural Heritage Lecture in Jerusalem



In 1788, Austria was the first country in Europe to recruit Jews into its armed forces. At first restricted to the formerly Polish province of Galicia and the transport corps, from 1789 it included all Habsburg territories, and Jews were allowed to serve – voluntarily at first – in the infantry. The Napoleonic Wars saw the widening of Jewish military service and the first appointments of Jews first as non-commissioned and then as commissioned officers.

Until the turn of the century, the number of Jewish soldiers rose, reaching with three per cent almost the Jewish percentage of the general population. The number of career officers was small, but included several generals, while almost one fifth of all reserve officers were of Jewish religion. This was possible because the Imperial and Royal Army, as the military instrument of a multi-ethnic empire, cultivated a “supra-national” identity in contrast to the nationalist sentiments of the time, its allegiance being to the Emperor and the state, not to a specific nationality or ethnic group.

During the First World War, ca. 300,000 Jews served in the Austro-Hungarian armed forces, and an estimated 30,000 paid the ultimate price for “Kaiser and fatherland.”

This lecture gives an overview of the evolution of Jewish military service from 1788 on, including the time after 1918.

Erwin A. Schmidl is a historian with a particular focus on Austrian military history. He is President of the Austrian Commission of Military History, a member of the Board of the International Commission of Military History and President of the Austrian Society for Army Historical Research. He was born in Vienna in 1956, earned his doctorate from the University of Vienna in 1981 and his second doctorate (Habilitation) from the University of Innsbruck in 2001. He worked in various positions in the Austrian Ministry of Defence from 1981 through to 2021. From 2012 he served as Director of the Institute for Strategy & Security Policy of the Austrian National Defence Academy. He retired in January 2022.

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Programme

Introduction
Stephan Wendehorst

Jewish Soldiers in Austria(-Hungary) *Erwin A. Schmidl*

Commentary
Michael Silber

Discussion

Venue

Austrian Hospice

Via Dolorosa 37, 91194 Jerusalem

Time

6 p.m.

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In cooperation with the
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