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Peons to the “greatest generation” filled the airwaves and bookshelves in 2005, as the United States celebrated the brave men (and women) who fought during World War II. Published just in time for the anniversary celebrations, G.I. Jews continues Deborah Dash Moore’s career-spanning inquiry into the substance and strata of twentieth-century American Jewish identity. As she coyly notes in her introduction, though these men might have already found themselves “at home in America,” an allusion to one of her earlier books about second-generation New York Jews, their sense of what it meant to be Jewish and to be American would emerge transformed from the war. G.I. Jews has two principal aims: to illuminate how the war changed American Jewry, and to portray the effect of Jewish men’s wartime service on American attitudes toward religious toleration in general, and toward Jews in particular. Rather than serving as a vehicle of assimilation, she argues, service in the United States military crystallized American Jewish identity. Through their service, moreover, Jewish G.I.’s forced the armed services—and Americans generally—to tolerate and respect Jewish Americans. This book marks an important contribution to—and intervention in—the burgeoning history of postwar American Jews and Judaism. Along with the excellent studies of Mark Dollinger (Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America, 2000) and Eric Goldstein (The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity, 2006), Moore’s book delineates how American Jews negotiated complex questions about where Jewish and American identities overlapped, conflicted, or reinforced one another. Scholars have most often tackled these questions from the perspectives of political and intellectual history. By shifting the focus to social history, Moore personalizes the dilemmas of modern Jewish identity.

Moore animates her argument by chronicling the journeys of fifteen Jewish G.I.’s. Through extensive interviews, published and unpublished memoirs, diaries, and letters, she reconstructs their emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Organized around the various stages of military service, the book takes the reader on a fascinating journey through draft notices and enlistment, basic training, deployment, active duty, and homecoming. The stories are gripping and lovingly told. The inspiration for the book appears to have come from an intimate source. Moore’s father, Martin Dash, left his childhood home in Brooklyn to serve in the Naval Reserves. Though he disappears from the narrative after a few chapters, Dash’s influence pervades the story, as many of the other informants were his friends. Some of the men reappear in multiple chapters, allowing the reader to develop an emotional stake in their safe passage. Without sacrificing her authorial voice, Moore allows the men to speak their stories. Moore’s ability to integrate emotional personal accounts with potent historical argument peaks in a later chapter on the liberation of Nazi death camps. She argues that after seeing survivors, helping DP’s, and witnessing the particular brutalities forced on Jewish
prisoners, neither American Jews nor attitudes toward them would ever be the same. Knowledge of the horrors that the Nazis had visited upon European Jews cemented a new commitment among Jewish G.I.’s to claiming and defending their religious identities. While Moore finds that the war did not transform all of these men into ardent Zionists, she links their service to the expansion of American Jewish organizations in the postwar period. Along with other veterans, they claimed the benefits of citizenship when the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act (the G.I. Bill of Rights) helped many of them purchase houses and obtain educations. And as Jews, they insisted upon more visible, vocal roles on the national and international political stages.

Intimacy with her sources occasionally led Moore to miss, or perhaps intentionally avoid, opportunities for critical analysis. First, like her subjects, Moore finds that being part of the war effort helped many Jewish men discard traditionally Jewish ideals of masculinity in favor of “American” manhood. Moore and her subjects describe Jewish men as typically underweight and overly intellectual. Basic training and a new diet added muscles and pounds, while service gave Jewish men new self-images as fighters, leaders, and patriots. Moore offers numerous anecdotes in which Jewish men’s service helped dispel anti-Semitic myths among non-Jewish soldiers, sailors, and airmen, but she pays particular attention to how Jewish men’s self-perceptions changed. Moore fails to interrogate the masculine ideal to which these men aspired, however. Given the many associations between normative American masculinity, violence, and misogyny, a more nuanced analysis of this aspect of American Jews’ wartime participation would have enhanced the book.

Second, most of Moore’s subjects grew up in New York City’s tightly knit ethnic communities. Though Moore includes material from men who grew up in the South and Midwest, she glosses over how the experiences of a New York City Jew, who had spent most of his life in Jewish neighborhoods, contrasted with that of someone who grew up as a distinct minority. Adjustment to living and fighting with non-Jews might have been easier and thus its effects less profound, for Jews who had spent most of their lives among them.

Despite these minor criticisms, G.I. Jews succeeds beautifully in bringing a transformative chapter in American Jewish history to life. Trenchantly argued and beautifully written, this book will appeal to general readers with interests in the World War II generation and American Jewish history. For scholars, it offers a necessary addition to our understanding of this pivotal moment in the restructuring of American religion.