Zsolt Balla becomes first German military rabbi in more than a century

People in the issue

(Hendrick Schmidt/DPA via AP)

The German military got its first rabbi in over a century on June 21, with the inauguration to the post of Hungarian-born Zsolt Balla at a synagogue in Leipzig.

The German government in 2019 approved a proposal by the Central Council of Jews to restore religious counseling for Jews serving in the armed forces. "This was unthinkable for decades and still can't be taken for granted," said Central Council head Josef Schuster. "That's why we have all reason to be happy and grateful today."

Many Jews fought for Germany in World War I, and dozens of rabbis are known to have performed pastoral work in the military. After Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, the Nazis excluded Jews from all spheres of public life, later murdering millions

in the Holocaust.

Schuster said Balla would ensure that Jewish soldiers can serve in the military in line with their religious rules, along with teaching non-Jewish soldiers about Judaism's traditions and holy days, thereby helping reduce prejudice.

According to German news agency dpa, there are about 300 Jews in Germany's 180,000-strong Bundeswehr. About half of the country's military are Christian, while 3,000 are Muslim.

Previously, the German army had only Catholic and Lutheran chaplains. There are plans to introduce Muslim religious counseling in the future. —Associated Press