

**Wolfram Wette.** *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. xix + 372 pp. \$17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-674-02577-6.



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On July 26, 1945, Wilhelm von Leeb received two brother officers, Heinz Guderian and Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, in his cell at the Seventh Army Interrogation Center. The two wanted to obtain von Leeb's advice and blessing before agreeing to take part in the historical research program that the U.S. Army was then organizing. In the course of their conversation, von Leeb opined that the Americans knew a great deal about *how* the Germans had fought the war, but not so much about *why*--and that German officers needed to treat this subject with great care because, after all, they would not want to say anything that would besmirch the reputation of the Fatherland. Now, thanks to Wolfram Wette's survey of the crimes that the German armed forces committed, especially in the east, we can easily understand the source of von Leeb's concern.

Wette is not the first historian to tell this tale, by any means. As he himself describes in the last part of his book, German historians began to tear apart the myth of the "clean" Wehrmacht as early as the 1960s. Until Wette's work, however, there was no concise, general survey on the Wehrma-

cht's crimes, at least for an English-speaking audience. Thus, his work fills a significant gap in the literature.

Wette begins with some background in the first two chapters. In chapter 1, he covers German perceptions of Russia, the USSR, and Bolshevism; in the second chapter, he addresses antisemitism in the armed forces up to the mid-1930s. Since the late nineteenth century, many Germans had viewed Russia as large but weak, while they also coveted Russian land and saw conflict as inevitable. The arrival of Bolshevism only strengthened those beliefs, while the right in Germany also linked Bolshevism with the Jews. Propaganda along those lines within the military prepared ordinary soldiers for the ideological and racial battle to come.

The third chapter examines the Wehrmacht's role in the murder of the Jews and in other crimes: the generals' broad agreement with Adolf Hitler's antisemitic attitudes, the killings in Poland and Serbia, the preparation of the so-called criminal orders before Operation Barbarossa, and the various measures by which the

Wehrmacht participated in the persecution and murder of millions of Soviet civilians (Jew and non-Jew alike).

Wette then looks at the attitudes of German generals and men, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches to highlight the military's broad agreement with the Nazi world view. He devotes a good deal of space to some of the generals' key opinions. Germany's military leaders had emerged from the First World War believing that war was the legitimate final arbiter of international affairs, that force played a positive role in history, and that another conflict would be required to return Germany to its proper place as a world power. Hitler shared those attitudes, and that was a main reason why the generals--their postwar statements notwithstanding--usually got along with the Führer just fine. Moving to the end of the war, Wette also explains why the German army fought on so long, beyond the point at which defeat was certain. The generals, having experienced military collapse at the end of the last war, were determined not to see it happen again. Tellingly, Wette quotes General Staff officer Günther Blumentritt, who said in 1947 that he was proud of Germans for holding out in the fight against Communism. Apparently, he managed to suppress or ignore any knowledge of the reasons for which Germany had gone to war to begin with, as well as any regret over the huge toll that the Wehrmacht's last-ditch stand demanded, as Wette points out.

In the last two chapters, Wette looks first at the efforts by politicians and former generals to cover up the Wehrmacht's involvement in the crimes, and second at the eventual destruction of the myth they created. Through a concerted public relations campaign (with which most Germans were sympathetic, in any case) Germany's military leaders were able to twist the history of the Nazi period and so avoid blame (and prosecution) for their crimes. They gained quite a head start in

the race for public opinion, and historians have needed most of the last forty years to catch up.

As one would expect of a survey of this sort, most of the numerous citations refer to secondary works or published primary sources. Wette displays a thorough knowledge of the literature, which he has amassed in the course of nearly forty years in the field, twenty-five of them with the Military History Research Institute, when it was located in Freiburg. (He is now a professor of contemporary history at Freiburg University.) There is no bibliography in the work, which is regrettable, but the reader can certainly glean a great deal from the citations.

Wette does miss some points that would have strengthened both the comprehensiveness of the book and the depth of its analysis. Although he covers the army's support for the crimes perpetrated by the SS in Poland, for example, he never mentions that the Wehrmacht carried out its own shootings of prisoners of war and civilian hostages. Nor does he look at the Wehrmacht's role in running many of the forced labor and concentration camps, or in setting up its own detention facilities, including brothels. His description of the "criminal orders" is too sketchy, considering their importance. The death of over three million Soviet prisoners of war receives hardly any attention. He entirely misses the interaction of German strategy and operational doctrine, on the one hand, with genocide, on the other. Of special importance in that regard, the book does not address the German approach to anti-partisan warfare that evolved from 1870 on, which usually emphasized the maximum application of brutality in order to cow the populace into submission. And Wette could profitably have explored the officer corps' attitude toward personal responsibility, an attitude that helped to smooth the way for its cooperation in aggressive war and mass murder.

The book reads very well, in part due to the skillful translation from the German original. The book's organization leaves something to be de-

sired, though. There is no introduction, which leaves the reader wondering what Wette intends to accomplish, how, or for whom. One can safely assume, from the scope of the contents, that the intended audience consists of non-specialist scholars and the broader public. However, the structure of the work does not always serve that audience, and especially the broader public, very well. Wette does not work the material into a clear narrative that a lay reader would find easy to follow. Admittedly, that would be a difficult task, given the subject matter, but it would be worth the effort. At times the chronology is confusing, as, for example, when Wette discusses the orders that Walter von Reichenau and Erich von Manstein issued in November 1941. In part, those orders attempted to justify the killings that were going on behind the lines. From the text, one gets the impression that von Manstein wrote his order first, rather than elaborating upon von Reichenau's. In general, Wette seems to assume a great deal of knowledge on the part of his readers. These organizational problems, together with the gaps in the content, diminish the book's value as a survey of the subject.

One key question deserves some additional attention here: how does Wette assess the Wehrmacht's guilt, over all? A few scholars have promoted the view that all Wehrmacht soldiers were murderers. That certainly goes much too far, and although Wette seems at times to edge toward that position, he stops short. There is no doubt that he holds the senior generals fully responsible for their own complicity, and justifiably so. The picture is more mixed as far as the lower ranks are concerned, as is bound to be the case in any organization that drew in nearly twenty million men and women. Wette maintains that, through conscription, indoctrination, and wartime service, soldiers tended to lose their sense of personal responsibility, their capacity for guilt, and their feelings of humanity and justice. He also points out, based on soldiers' letters, diaries, and memoirs, that they generally accepted

their superiors' world view, especially regarding Communism, and that most of them wanted to remake the world along Nazi lines. Regardless of their views, though, most of them never had the opportunity to commit the worst of the crimes. This is an area, as Wette admits, in which more research is needed.

The basic facts of the Wehrmacht's complicity in war crimes and crimes against humanity are clear. They have been clear to specialists for some time, and in the recent past that awareness has reached a growing proportion of the general public. Wette's book, despite its flaws, will accelerate that process, which is all to the good; anyone with an interest in the period should add it to their library.

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