

Rolf-Dieter Müller. *An der Seite der Wehrmacht: Hitlers ausländische Helfer beim "Kreuzzug gegen den Bolschewismus" 1941-1945.* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2007. 280 pp. EUR 24.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-86153-448-8.



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Published on H-German (April, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

The most savage and devastating conflict in modern European history was the 1941-45 German-Soviet War. The struggle, however, did not merely pit German soldiers against their Soviet counterparts. Over twenty European countries and national groups sent contingents of troops to assist the German Wehrmacht in its attempt to destroy the communist state. This "crusade against Bolshevism" drew in a minimum of 3,962,000 men from across Europe, organized in both large national armies from states allied to Germany as well as in volunteer contingents integrated directly into the Wehrmacht--both army and Waffen-SS--itself. In a new, badly needed synthesis that focuses primarily on operational events, Rolf-Dieter Müller examines the contribution of these other European states to the German war effort in the East.

Müller, the director of the Military History Research Office in Potsdam and frequent contributor to that institution's ten-volume "official" German history of the Second World War--*Deutschland und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, which was com-

pleted this year--claims that such a comprehensive examination of Hitler's allies and auxiliaries is needed due to the persistence of two myths. On the one hand, Hitler's continual harangues against the alleged poor performance of non-German units on the eastern front have filtered down into the popular consciousness to such an extent that the efforts of allied armies have been nearly completely discounted. On the other hand, the radical Right in Europe continues to loudly proclaim that the entire campaign was one in which the continent rallied around the idea of destroying the Bolshevik threat, and that the experiences of eastern Europe in the subsequent four decades lend credence to the righteousness of Hitler's cause. Müller effectively destroys the two legends and, in the course of the study, both restores the importance of the Third Reich's allies to its war effort and highlights the various reasons for the involvement of "Hitler's foreign helpers" in the war against the Soviet Union.

The contributions of countries throughout Europe ranged from the 800,000-man conscript

army of Hungary to 4,000 volunteers from Denmark to some 800,000 Russians who served in various capacities within the German armed forces or occupation machinery. In order to make some sense of these various contingents, Müller breaks the book into three sections: the first examines the formal allies of the German Reich; the second looks at the volunteers from neutral and occupied countries in western Europe; and the third and most interesting part considers the actions of the various peoples incorporated into the Soviet Union, including eastern Poland. Such structuring of the book allows it to be effectively used as a reference; anyone interested in the contribution of, say, Croatia would be able to locate the section on the Croats easily. Unfortunately, such a structure also lends the book an encyclopedic feel; each chapter is so self-contained that the general narrative suffers as a result.

Müller forcefully rejects the premise that Germany's allies contributed next to nothing to the fighting in the East. Initially the Germans felt no need to request assistance from their allies, outside of the Finns and the Rumanians. Their hubris led them to believe that the campaign would be won quickly and that the spoils should be kept for Germany itself. A strong belief in the inadequacy of their allies complemented this operational arrogance. With the failure of Operation Barbarossa in the winter of 1941/42 and the consequent heavy casualties suffered by the Wehrmacht, it became clear that those countries so disparaged by the Führer and others in the German military leadership needed to be relied upon increasingly to stabilize German lines within the Soviet Union. Müller's examination of Hungary and Italy detail the evolution of the allies' contribution to Germany's war in the East. Initially, Hitler left Hungary in the dark until the last minute regarding his plans for operations in the Soviet Union. Hungary committed forces to the invasion only after one of its border cities was bombed by a still-undetermined attacker on June 26, 1941. This initial commitment of 45,000 men was increased to

200,000 by the end of January 1942; such an enlargement pointed to the Wehrmacht's inability to launch a second major offensive in 1942 without its allies bearing a much heavier brunt of the fighting. At one point following the Soviet breakthrough during the Battle of Stalingrad, the Hungarian Second Army was responsible alone for a 200-kilometer stretch of the front.

This Hungarian army was supported on its right flank by the Italian Eighth Army. The German High Command had initially decided that the Italian war effort would be more usefully directed towards the Mediterranean and North African theaters of war. Benito Mussolini, however, who was determined to participate in the war against international communism, forced several divisions on the reluctant Germans. By 1942, this reluctance had disappeared and the 230,000-man strong Italian Eighth Army occupied an important position in the German order of battle. Müller concludes that the contributions of the allied armies, specifically Hungary, Italy, and Romania, made possible both the approach to the gates of Moscow in 1941 and the launching of Operation Blue in 1942. While never as well equipped as their German allies or their Soviet adversaries, the allied armies provided the necessary manpower that enabled the Germans to launch successful offensive operations during the early years of the conflict.

Müller also convincingly argues that as early as the "catastrophe of Stalingrad, the Wehrmacht could only delay a breakthrough of the Eastern Front with the help of foreign allies [*ausländische Helfer*]" (p. 244). Guard battalions from the Baltic States, militias from the Ukraine, Russian civilians and POWs integrated into army units as *Hilfswilligen* and Russian army units organized under the command of General Andrei Vlassov all provided the Reich with important military, security, and propaganda benefits.

Müller details Hitler's resistance to employing armed natives from the East, which stemmed

from his long-term plans for ruthless colonization. The defeat on the Volga, however, led even the ideologues within the Reich's administration to realize the necessity of using any and all means to combat the numerically superior Red Army. It was only after the destruction of the German Sixth Army in Stalingrad that Hitler permitted the establishment, for example, of a Latvian SS-Legion. The participation of these countries could reach extremely high proportions: 60,000 Estonians (out of a population of only 1.2 million) waged war with Hitler against the Soviet Union.

The greatest spur to Estonia's unprecedented mobilization was a fear of being re-Sovietized by the approaching Red Army. The desire to be forever free of Moscow played an extremely important role in leading the peoples of eastern Europe to align themselves with the German army. In this respect, the notion of a "crusade against communism" has some basis and such an idea, in fact, probably provided the stimulus for many western European volunteers as well. Even in the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and France, however, political calculations played the most important role in the decision to support Nazi Germany in its eastern campaign. Here, political movements that styled themselves after National Socialism attempted to impress their German overlords by sending volunteers to the East. In Belgium, for example, right-wing extremists in both the Walloon and Flemish national movements tried to use the occupation to create their own new state; sending troops to the Soviet Union formed part of this ongoing negotiation with the Third Reich. In countries allied to Germany, such as Hungary, Romania, and Italy, it was feared that failure to provide sufficient backing would result in being left out of the final peace settlement. This consideration was extremely important for those southeast European countries looking to expand or at least protect their borders.

According to Müller, these political motivations played an important role in the failure of the

Axis powers and other affiliated states to defeat the Soviet Union. German strategy frequently did not correspond to that of its allies, and this divergence caused far-reaching problems. The most noteworthy example concerned the Finns' desire to recapture territory lost to the Soviets during the Winter War, but not to participate in the encirclement of Leningrad or to sever the Murmansk railroad. Inter-allied tension forced German planners to ensure that Romanian and Hungarian forces were never deployed side by side, as it was feared that they would open fire on one another instead of on the Red Army. Another decisive factor in the Axis defeat was the qualitative inferiority of Germany's allies vis-à-vis the Red Army. Recent research has emphasized the growing technological superiority the Soviets enjoyed over the Wehrmacht; when one considers that many of the Reich's allies were outfitted with captured western booty or obsolete German equipment, it should come as no surprise that the allied countries were frequently outclassed and outgunned by their adversaries. One German officer noted that the "medical services of the Slovaks came right out the era of Maria Theresa" and while this case was certainly extreme, it did point to the basic problem of the backwardness that hampered many allied units (p. 101).

One major weakness of the book is found in its treatment of the mentalities of foreign soldiers who fought for the German cause. While Müller provides explanations as to why other European states sent men to fight and die in the Soviet hinterland, he fails to examine sufficiently the motives of the men themselves. This task is undoubtedly difficult, especially for someone who relies nearly exclusively on German-language sources (though a smattering of English, Italian, and Romanian works, among others, are found in the bibliography). It is, however, an important issue, especially due to the war of annihilation prosecuted by the Wehrmacht. Müller notes that diverse nationalities—including Estonians, Ukrainians, Hungarians, Romanians, and Danes—were all uti-

lized in anti-partisan warfare, and when discussing the latter, he states that they did shoot civilians in the course of such operations. Here the question of motivation is paramount: how important were ideological beliefs relative to situational factors in leading allied units to commit war crimes in the East? Were German actions and attitudes decisive in causing such behavior or, as Romanian activities in Odessa suggest, did other nationalities have their own motivations for carrying out such atrocities? These are questions that require much more research before they can be adequately answered, but at least some preliminary discussion of this issue by Müller would have been welcome.

In short, Müller has written a concise yet comprehensive treatment of the military operations of Hitler's foreign helpers in the war against the Soviet Union, restoring the importance of these countries and their armies to the conduct of war in the East. In writing a work that is encyclopedic in structure and scope, Müller has produced a very handy reference on this topic. Well stocked with useful maps and photos, the work provides a very readable account that effectively dismantles myths and legends that have grown up around an important and neglected subject.

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Citation: Jeff Rutherford. Review of Müller, Rolf-Dieter. *An der Seite der Wehrmacht: Hitlers ausländische Helfer beim "Kreuzzug gegen den Bolschewismus" 1941-1945*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

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