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Hannes Heer, Klaus Naumann, eds. *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944.* Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995. 685 pp. DM 68.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-930908-04-2.

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The Wehrmacht: A Criminal Organization?

The history of Nazi Germany continues to generate considerable public and academic attention. In 1996, Daniel J. Goldhagen's "Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust" created an extraordinary hoopla in the media on both sides of the Atlantic. Though commercially successful, Goldhagen's work was castigated by most scholars. At the same time, an exhibition titled "Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941-1944" (War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht) has caused heated controversies in Austria and Germany. Under the auspices of the Hamburger Institut fuer Sozialforschung, this exhibition has been traveling through various Austrian and German cities since March 1995.[1]

As a major mainstay of the Nazi regime, the Wehrmacht participated in the implementation of Hitler's genocidal policies directed at Gypsies and Jews and carried out mass killings of the Slavic populations in Poland, Serbia, and the Soviet Union. In addition, the Wehrmacht was responsible for the death of more than three million Soviet POWs. During the last two decades or so the bulk of historical research has largely focused on the responsibility of the upper echelons of the Wehrmacht in genocide and atrocities. However, recent works, particularly by Omer Bartov, have unearthed disturbing evidence about the participation of many ordinary German soldiers in war crimes.

The volume under review presents twenty-nine contributions grouped thematically into five sections. The first and longest section ("Verbrechen") consists of eight essays on specific crimes perpetrated by the Wehrmacht. In the second section ("Formationen"), the authors analyze the atrocious behavior of various units of the Wehrmacht. The third section ("Krieger und Kriegerinnen") contains seven essays on such diverse topics as a psychological profile of Field Marshal von Manstein or the role of women in the Wehrmacht. The three essays in the fourth section ("Tribunale") deal with responses of judicial authorities in East and West to crimes of the Wehrmacht. And finally, in the last section ("Erinnerung"), five contributions address the role of the Wehrmacht in individual and collective memories in Germany after 1945. Although most of the essays are of a high quality and very informative, space does not permit a detailed discussion of each essay.

In the first essay, Walter Manoschek documents that it was the Wehrmacht, and not the infamous Einsatzgruppen, that initiated and carried out the mass murder of the Jews and Gypsies in Serbia. Most of the troops stationed in Serbia at any given time came from the "Ostmark" (Austria). On the basis of newly accessible sources from Belorussian archives, Hannes Heer shows the active participation of rear area troops of the German army in the Holocaust in Belorussia. These troops were largely composed of middle-aged men unfit for frontline duty. In some cases, however, Heer goes out of his way and attributes massacres to Wehrmacht units that were in fact perpetrated by SS and Police formations, and in other cases he misidentifies the ethnicity of the victims.[2] Heer's second essay critically re-examines the issue of "Partisanenkampf" (anti-partisan warfare). In 1941-42, an organized and well-equipped partisan movement did not exist in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. The Wehrmacht responded to the slightest indication of sabotage and other subversive activities with draconian measures. Time and again innocent and defenseless civilians regardless of age and sex were slaughtered by the hundreds or thousands. As Mark Mazower

demonstrates, the behavior of Austrian and German soldiers in Greece was influenced by the barbarous warfare that many had experienced on the Eastern Front. Minor partisan activity would lead in many cases to indiscriminate "Suehnemassnahmen" (reprisals) against Greek towns and villages. The Wehrmacht treated not only the subjugated populations of Eastern Europe and in the Balkans with contempt and brutality. Menachem Shelah shows the perfidious behavior of German soldiers toward their former comrades-in-arms of the Italian army between September and November 1943. In willful violation of the laws of war, numerous Italian officers and men were summarily shot after their surrender. Michael Geyer contributes an excellent case-study of a massacre perpetrated by troops of the Fallschirm-Panzer-Division "Hermann Goering," a Luftwaffe ground unit, in northern Italy in June 1944. Geyer provides the perpetrators' context of social, military, and motivational factors that resulted in the eradication of a small village and the killing of its entire male population. Yet, it should be noted that the "Hermann Goering" was an elite unit and with other crack units (paratroopers, panzer troops, Waffen-SS) showed a particular inclination to kill civilians indiscriminately.[3]

In the second section, Margers Vestermanis's essay shows the involvement of the Kriegsmarine (navy) in the massacres of Jews. In the harbor town of Libau, Latvia, the first chief of the Ortskommandantur (local military command) was a navy officer, and navy personnel provided the executioners for the first mass shooting of Jews in that area in the summer of 1941. Next, Bernd Boll and Hans Safrian follow the bloody trail of the German Sixth Army to Stalingrad. In September 1941, after the city of Kiev had been taken, the Sixth Army provided logistical support for Sonderkommando 4a of Einsatzgruppe C that resulted in the slaughter of some 34,000 Jews at Babi Yar. The authors create the impression that Sixth Army enthusiastically collaborated with the Sonder- and Einsatzkommandos. Yet, Alfred Streim has argued, after sifting through all the available evidence, that this was true only for the commanding general, the staff officer for enemy information and counterintelligence (Ic), and a few Ortskommandanturen. Most of the staff and units of Sixth Army had refused to cooperate with Himmler's Weltanschauungskrieger.[4] Theo J. Schulte offers a counterpoint to what he calls the "new orthodoxy." His case study of "Korueck 582" (Kommandant des rueckwaertigen Armeegebiets/commander of army rear area) reveals that non-conformistic behavior of German soldiers did exist in a barbaric environment. Schulte cautions against preconceived notions of endemic brutality in the Wehrmacht.

In the third section, Christian Gerlach attempts to demonstrate the complicity of Henning von Tresckow and other officers in atrocities. These men plotted against Hitler and eventually tried to kill him on 20 July 1944. Gerlach's essay is perhaps the only unconvincing contribution to this volume. Clearly, as a staff officer in Army Group Center, Tresckow had knowledge about the crimes being perpetrated by Wehrmacht, Police and Waffen-SS, but Gerlach does not provide documentation for his assertion that Tresckow did approve of those crimes.[5] Klaus Latzel discusses the perceptions of Wehrmacht soldiers as reflected in "Feldpostbriefe" (field post letters). He points out that whereas in World War I German soldiers had deplored and criticized the living conditions of the populations of Eastern Europe, during World War II the populations themselves were denounced. At the same time he cautions against problematic generalizations about the attitudes of Wehrmacht soldiers based on small and unrepresentative samples of letters.

Although a number of German generals were tried and convicted by the Allies after 1945, the OKW (Army High Command) and the Wehrmacht escaped from being declared criminal organizations. The fourth section opens with an essay by Manfred Messerschmidt. He analyzes the so-called "Denkschrift der Generaele" (generals's memorandum) for the Nuremberg Trials by von Brauchitsch, Halder, von Manstein and others about the role of the Wehrmacht in WWII. In this memorandum, the former generals claimed that a) the Wehrmacht did not cooperate with Hitler, b) the Wehrmacht did not participate in crimes, and c) the Wehrmacht had no knowledge of crimes perpetrated in the hinterland against POWs, Jews, and other civilians. Thus the myth of the "saubere" Wehrmacht was born. This myth was not demolished when judicial authorities in East and West Germany took over the responsibilities for persecuting crimes committed under the Nazi regime. As Alfred Streim shows, a "Schlussstrich-Mentalitaet" ensued in both Germanies when former Wehrmacht officers were needed for rearmament.

The 1950s saw the emergence of a veritable industry of memoirs by former high-ranking Wehrmacht officers. Particularly Guderian's and von Manstein's memoirs, whether in the original German edition or in English translation, are still being relied upon in popular accounts and even some academic works about World War

II. Friedrich Gerstenberger calls them "strategische Erinnerungen," selective tales which are devoid of any references to criminal behavior of German soldiers or the responsibility of officers for outrages perpetrated by troops under their command.

I have two major criticisms of this volume. Unfortunately, an essay on crimes of the Wehrmacht in Poland is conspicuously absent. One historian, Juergen Foerster, has recently argued that the brutalization of German soldiers started in Poland, the barbarization of warfare, however, in the Soviet Union.[6] On the other hand, Dieter Pohl sees a tremendous eruption of collective violence already during the invasion of Poland in 1939 bearing similarities with the conduct during Operation Barbarossa.[7] According to Polish historians, some 20,000 persons fell victim to mass executions or massacres between 1 September 1939 and 25 October 1939. Of 764 mass killings with 25 victims or more, 311 were carried out by Wehrmacht units.[8] It seems not far-fetched then to suggest that the conduct of the Wehrmacht in Poland set the precedent of what was to come on a larger scale in the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union.

The amount of ink wasted on the faddish but insignificant topic of Wehrmachtshelferinnen is annoying. Instead, a comparative perspective might have been more useful. Various volunteer legions from German-occupied countries fought alongside the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS under the motto of a "European crusade against Bolshevism." These units can serve as "control groups," thereby allowing scholars to compare how men from different nationalities and of differing ideological predispositions behaved when exposed to the same conditions. For example, a recent work documents, among other things, the involvement of Danish volunteers in atrocities.[9] Also, the Italian army carried out numerous reprisals, shootings of hostages, and massacres during anti-partisan operations in the Balkans from 1941 to 1943.[10]

In sum, this volume is a much welcome addition to the growing literature on Wehrmacht crimes. It validates, perhaps unintentionally, Ernst Nolte's famous dictum about the history of Nazi Germany as a "past that will not pass away."

Notes

[1]. Compare now Angelika Koenigseder, "Streitkulturen und Gefuehlslagen: Die Goldhagen-Debatte und der Streit um die Wehrmachtsausstellung," in *Geschichtswissenschaft und Oeffentlichkeit: Der Streit um Daniel J. Goldhagen*, ed. Johannes Heil and Rainer Erb (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), pp. 295-311.

[2]. For corrections see Christian Gerlach, "Deutsche Wirtschaftsinteressen, Besatzungspolitik und der Mord an den Juden in Weissrussland, 1941-1943," in *Nationalsozialistische Vernichtungspolitik: Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen*, ed. Ulrich Herbert (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), pp. 284-285, fn. 74.

[3]. For an overview see Friedrich Andrae, "Auch gegen Frauen und Kinder," in *Gehorsam bis zum Mord? Der verschwiegene Krieg der deutschen Wehrmacht–Fakten, Analysen, Debatte, ZEIT-Punkte Nr.3/1995*, ed. Theo Sommer (Hamburg: ZEITVERLAG, 1995), pp. 34-38.

[4]. See Alfred Streim, "The Tasks of the SS Einsatzgruppen," *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, 4(1987): p. 311.

[5]. See Peter Hoffmann, "Tresckow und Stauffenberg: Ein Zeugnis aus dem Archiv des russischen Geheimdienstes," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 July 1998, p. 8.

[6]. Juergen Foerster, "Complicity or Entanglement? Wehrmacht, War, And Holocaust," in *The Holocaust and History: The Known, the Unknown, the Disputed, and the Reexamined*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 271.

[7]. Dieter Pohl, "Die Holocaust-Forschung und Goldhagens Thesen," *Vierteljahreshefte fuer Zeitgeschichte*, 45 (1997): p. 44.

[8]. Czeslaw Madajczyk, *Die Okkupationspolitik Nazideutschlands in Polen, 1939-1945* (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein Verlag, 1989), p. 28.

[9]. Claus B. Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Peter Scharff Smith, _Under Hagekors og Dannebrog: Danskere i Waffen-SS (Copenhagen: Achehougs Forlag, 1998).

[10]. Brunello Mantelli, *Kurze Geschichte des italienischen Faschismus*, trans. Alexandra Hausner (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1998).

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