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Tracing the Resurrection of a Reputation: How Americans Came to Love the German Army

Unusually, I want to begin with a personal anecdote. In 1995 I was a graduate student in Vienna researching my dissertation. Through great good fortune I was able to join a friend chaperoning Austrian teenagers on a field trip to London. I found myself accompanying the students as they ventured across London to museums, galleries, and stores. During one shopping expedition, my friend and I lagged behind our charges and surveyed the selection of fine frozen foods. Ahead of us, a pair of English stock boys whispered and laughed as the Austrians passed by. Suddenly, one of the employees walked out into the aisle and performed a credible goose step behind the girls for several seconds while simultaneously extending his arm in a Hitler salute.

Being teenagers, the girls didn't notice. I did and briefly exchanged some unpleasant words with the young man, who clearly couldn't understand why I was sticking up for people he had misidentified as Germans. The mocking ended quickly (if a bit reluctantly) and we went on our way.

I start with this story because it contrasts so directly with the American attitudes toward the German army explored by Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies II in their *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture*. The book is a fascinating immersion into a simple but important question: How did the German soldiers who fought on the eastern front during World War Two become hero figures to so many Americans? The authors address a narrow topic and investigate it thoroughly. Precisely because they frame their question so narrowly, they leave ample room for other scholars to explore. Accordingly, American historians, military historians, and perhaps historians of genocide will want to read this book. But they will do that with notepads (or laptops) handy, scribbling down ideas for future research projects as they go.

The book breaks down into three sections. In the first, the authors summarize the prevailing American view of Germany and the German military (and SS) during and immediately after the war. They review newspapers, magazines, and other sources to show that American public opinion viewed the Soviets sympathetically while seeing Germany and its soldiers as enemies and war criminals. In my opinion, this is the best and most convincing part of the book. The extensive survey of reports and articles about the Soviet Union demonstrates clearly reporters' successful attempts to present the Soviet Union as honorable and its people as similar to Americans. The subsequent discussion of the post-war trials shows how widespread knowledge of German wartime misconduct was. American opinion is aptly summarized with the words of Dwight Eisenhower, who wrote his wife toward the end of the war that "the German is a beast.... God, I hate the Germans" (p. 75) and who in 1944 advocated "exterminat[ing] all of the general staff" (p. 40).

Toward the end of the decade, however, attitudes toward the German army changed decisively. They did so for two broad reasons. First, the advent of the Cold War changed the geopolitical climate significantly. The need to integrate West Germany into the new alliance system meant rethinking accepted narratives about the Second World War. Only by erasing memories of Germans as fascist and criminal could Americans see them as allies and friends. Just as important, a campaign by German officers to defend the German army and soldiers against accusations of war crimes and dishonor proved enormously successful. This effort took several forms.

First, many German officers worked closely with the American army to produce reports and histories about the German army's war against the Soviet Union. With the West's strategic planning increasingly assuming that

any new world war would begin with NATO forces giving ground in Europe, precisely the same kind of war the Germans had fought from 1943-45, the American army solicited these reports to learn how to wage such a campaign effectively. Closely coordinated by the prominent German general Franz Halder, the Germans produced hundreds of manuscripts. The U.S. Army thought these materials extremely useful and distributed them widely.

Secondly, the publication of memoirs by German officers played an important part in changing perceptions of German soldiers. Written mostly by formerly high-ranking German generals, these accounts were widely read by American officers and politicians. While these authors don't seem to have coordinated as explicitly as in the production of military manuscripts, the messages the memoirs convey remain remarkably similar. The German army, according to these officers, was at least apolitical and, for some, actively disassociated from the Nazi Party. The incompetent leadership of Hitler and the Nazis sabotaged the army and the German war effort. General after general argued that Germany would have won the war except for the meddling of amateurs in affairs about which they knew little (while Smelser and Davies don't use the words, they are essentially recounting the creation of a second "stab in the back" legend). Even with this political interference, the army had fought valiantly and lost only because the Soviet army vastly outnumbered the German. The memoirs also insist the German army had fought the war honorably and had been unaware of any atrocities. In instances where awareness could not be denied, they accused rear-area police or SS forces as having initiated and conducted the atrocities as an honorable army fumed powerlessly. Indeed, they claim the German army treated Russian civilians and prisoners of war well throughout the war, in alleged contrast to the bad conduct of the Soviet army.

Finally, Smelser and Davies address memoirs written by front-line soldiers and novels about these men. These books concentrate heavily on the fear and adrenaline of combat, the emotional impact of losing friends and superiors, and the exhaustion of constant retreats. Precisely by focusing on battlefield events, they portray German soldiers as "ordinary men," uninterested in and unmotivated by politics or race, rather simply trying to survive. Atrocities (at least by Germans) simply don't appear in these memoirs.

The broad outlines of this argument are familiar, but Smelser and Davies add a degree of detail that is both persuasive and enlightening. It's clear American soldiers and leaders read these memoirs and this reading played a

significant role in reversing images of the German army. Moreover, the authors do a thorough job discrediting the claims made by the German officers in their memoirs, which can no longer be viewed as even minimally respectable. It is less clear how the broader public responded to the German message. The authors make some effort to measure how ordinary Americans responded to these memoirs by discussing the types of presses that published these accounts and the blurbs that appeared on back covers. But they could go farther in this direction. There's no reference to public opinion polling data, for instance, nor to sales figures nor is there an attempt to do a demographic analysis of readership (admittedly a challenging task). Consequently, it's more difficult to assess changing perceptions of the German army among ordinary Americans.

The same dynamic exists in the third section of the book. Here, Davies and Smelser examine the emergence of a community of writers, "war-gamers" and re-enactors who became devotees of the German army and its campaigns in the east. As far as it goes, this is insightful and exciting research (if sometimes too detailed for some tastes). Smelser and Davies astutely identify a set of sources historians have rarely tapped and survey it thoroughly. They identify a set of authors and speakers (whom they label "gurus") who have been exceptionally influential in presenting a heroic, sanitized picture of the German army in the east. In a path-breaking discussion, they examine the iconography and mechanics of war games published in the 1970s and 1980s to show how they presented gamers with an honorable and heroic German army. They have thoroughly convinced me of the existence of a community of "buffs" who have made a fetish of the German army as super-efficient and super-heroic (although it would be helpful to compare games set on the eastern front with other games). The difficulty comes in understanding how influential this image was. The authors don't really identify how large the community is (it's unclear, for instance, when they cite Web site views, whether these are total views or unique visitors) and whether the views of war-gamers and re-enactors have spread outside their group. Moreover, by focusing the discussion mostly on the 1970s and 80s, they leave unclear how the creation of vast networks of computer gamers have affected this community. As early as 2002, for instance, the *New York Times* wrote about games like *Day of Defeat* which allowed players to take the part of German soldiers and used Nazi symbols and characters in a way that attracted a neo-Nazi following.[1] It's unclear what kind of following war games like *Panzerblitz* (one of several cited by the authors as widely influential) have

had since the rise of computer gaming and whether this has reinforced or redirected the communities highlighted by the authors.

What is most interesting and potentially valuable about the book is the broad framework the authors offer to explain the trends they have identified. They suggest Americans have created two separate but similar “myths of the lost cause” as lenses through which to view their past. The first, obviously, relates to the South and the Civil War. The second identifies German soldiers from World War Two as good people fighting unwillingly for a bad cause. It encourages Americans, precisely because it represents German soldiers as fundamentally honorable, to focus on the battlefield rather than atrocities. And it offers them a coherent narrative explaining why the United States was suddenly allied with its former enemies and opposed to its former allies. This is a rich and thought-provoking interpretation, well worth more exploration than the authors give it.

Here we come back to my story about the British stock boys and the Austrian girls. The authors do what they set out to do and do it, for the most part, convincingly. But they miss the chance to dig deeper. They don’t attempt to explain (and never intend to) why American attitudes diverged so clearly from those of another NATO ally of Germany, the British (as I believe they did). Why would British teenagers mock girls they believed to be German while American teenagers stayed up late searching the Internet for the most realistic recreations of Wehrmacht boots and caps? More broadly, as I read, I kept asking for more. It would be fascinating, for in-

stance, to have dived into visual and oral culture before and after the war in the way John Dower does in his book on perceptions of Japan and Japanese soldiers, *War Without Mercy* (1987). The authors take some steps in this direction but could have gone much farther. Similarly, they rarely address the influence of movies and television. Given how many of my students refer to the History Channel as the “Hitler Channel,” it seems this would offer a rich set of sources that would flesh out the authors’ interpretations. In particular, one wonders if the recent spate of Holocaust and war movies touched off by Steven Spielberg (both the branch emerging from *Schindler’s List* [1993] and that from *Saving Private Ryan* [1998]) changed American impressions of the German war effort at all. Finally, and entirely appropriate for this list, they don’t even begin to suggest how this study might shed light on the aftermaths of other genocides and military conflicts.

This should not be taken as criticism. All authors hope their work will prompt other historians to wrestle with the issues they identified. Davies and Smelser have given us an interesting and persuasive study. It is likely to be most influential, however, in prompting historians to further investigate the ideas they engage here for the first time.

Note

[1]. Jonathan Kay, “Defying a Taboo, Nazi Protagonists Invade Video Games,” *New York Times* (January 3, 2002), <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/01/03/technology/defying-a-taboo-nazi-protagonists-invade-video-games.html>, accessed September 2, 2010.

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