

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen G. Fritz. *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. Illustrations. xxiv + 640 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3416-1.

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In his thoughtful and beautifully written history of Nazi Germany's war against the Soviet Union, Stephen G. Fritz has two ambitious and important objectives. Fritz aims in the first place to provide a narrative that, while still structured by the unfolding of military operations, seamlessly integrates military events with the ideological convictions, economic imperatives, and social conditions that did so much to shape the course of the war. Fritz also seeks to illuminate the ways in which the war in the East (the *Ostkrieg* of the book's title) radicalized Nazi policy toward the Jews, producing the Holocaust and shaping the pace and manner by which it developed. Aimed chiefly at upper-division undergraduates and lay readers interested in military history and the Holocaust, this book will also be helpful to historians of genocide who want to improve their understanding of the larger context in which the Holocaust was embedded.

Fritz efficiently develops the ways in which the war provided the necessary ideological context for the radicalization of Nazi Jewish policy into genocide, beginning with Adolf Hitler's worldview, from which both the Holocaust and the war in the East sprang. Hitler saw the Jews as Germany's deadly and implacable enemy, protagonists of a worldwide conspiracy that controlled the nations of the world partly through the manipulation of the financial system, and partly by a strategy of divide and conquer, fostering class conflict by promoting Marxism. The 1918 revolution, supposedly fomented by Jewish socialists, had (in Hitler's view) caused Germany to lose the First World War; throughout his political career, Hitler was driven by a burning thirst for revenge against those he blamed for this national humiliation, Jews foremost among them. Hitler's fear and hatred of Jews fused with a second strand of his thinking, racial Darwinism, to provide the necessary context for the Holocaust and the war against the Soviet Union. Hitler saw history as a Darwinian struggle for survival among races, in which inferior races would be exterminated. To survive this merciless struggle, Germany needed more industrial ca-

capacity and natural resources, and fertile farmland to feed a larger population, the better to produce the weapons and breed the soldiers for future wars. Germany could gain land and resources by attacking and destroying the Soviet Union, annexing huge swaths of land, and killing or driving out the "inferior" Slavic inhabitants. Destroying the Soviet Union was both necessary and desirable for a second reason: as the world's only Communist state, it was presumably governed by Jews, and constituted the center of a worldwide "Judeo-Bolshevik" conspiracy that posed a permanent and deadly threat to Germany. At its ideological roots, Fritz notes, the war against the Soviet Union was thus also a war against the Jews.

Most German élites, including the professional military, probably did not subscribe to all tenets of Hitler's worldview. However, most held a racist contempt for the Slavic peoples, were ferociously anti-Communist, and accepted the identification of Jews with Marxism that had been the stock in trade of the German Right since the 1890s. This overlap between Hitler's thinking and theirs made it easy for them to accept his decision that the war against the Soviet Union would not be a conventional war fought by normal rules, but rather an ideological war of extermination in which the German forces would show no mercy. This war of extermination, in which military and economic functionaries planned the deliberate starvation of tens of millions of civilians, provided the radicalizing context in which the regime's Jewish policy could evolve into the most ambitious and thorough program of genocide ever seen. In a war in which tens of millions would perish in combat or from famine, outright murder of the people who were blamed for this war would be seen as unremarkable.

In tracing the lethal evolution of Nazi Jewish policy over the course of 1941, and establishing its relationship to military events, Fritz hews closely to the synthesis provided by Christopher R. Browning, with important contributions by Jürgen Matthäus, in *The Origins of the Fi-*

*nal Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939–March 1942* (2004). Until a still undetermined point in the late winter or spring of 1941, German policy aimed only at expulsion of all Jews under German control to some inhospitable location where a huge fraction of them would necessarily perish; Madagascar figured prominently in one variant of these plans. As planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union proceeded, some ill-defined region of this country was imagined as the destination for these unfortunates. Although these expulsion plans were inherently genocidal, and Polish Jews were starving in the ghettos in which the Germans had confined them, the Nazi regime still refrained from outright murder. The Germans crossed this critical threshold with the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941.

Following close behind the invading armies, mobile murder squads, in a total strength of well over thirty thousand men, descended on Jewish communities and proceeded to shoot Jewish males of military age in very large numbers.[1] This rupture of the inhibition against murder may rank as the single most important turning point in the evolution of Nazi Jewish policy into the Holocaust. Yet we do not know when the decision for it was made, or why. About all we can reliably say is that Hitler—given his very active role in all major decisions concerning policy toward the Jews—made the decision, probably in vague and general terms which his eager subordinates fleshed out. For the men who did the shooting, and for the army officers who provided logistical and other support to the shooting squads, the killings had the stated purpose of “pacifying” conquered territory by eliminating anyone who might foment partisan warfare or engage in sabotage. Thus Jews were only one of several listed target groups; among the others were civil and military Communist Party commissars. However, the explicit and constant equating of Jews with Communism quickly made them the most numerous victims of the death squads. Fritz effectively develops this connection between alleged military necessity and the slaughter of Jewish boys and men, demonstrating the terrible culpability of the regular army, which welcomed the killings with enthusiasm. However, it bears repeating that although this rationale for the murders was consistent with Hitler’s beliefs about Jews, we cannot assume that it constituted his principal motive or that of Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, who formed the shooting squads and unleashed them on the Jews of the Soviet Union.

During the second half of July 1941, a scant four weeks after the war had begun, some of the shooting squads crossed another threshold: from shooting only males of military age, to exterminating entire Jewish

communities, man, woman, and child. Over the coming weeks, at different times in different places, all of the shooting units made this transition to the policy of murdering all Jews on Soviet territory. On July 31, the regime took another important step, although its meaning has been debated: Himmler’s deputy, Heydrich, was charged with developing a plan for the “final solution of the Jewish question” in Europe. Browning sees Heydrich’s brief as nothing less than conducting a “‘feasibility study’ for mass murder of European Jewry.”[2] In Browning’s reconstruction of events, Heydrich and Himmler’s planning from above merged with varied initiatives on the ground to produce the basic decision for the Holocaust by the end of October, and the chief method for perpetrating it, murder by poison gas in death camps. Hitler’s biographer, Ian Kershaw, sees the July 31 charge to Heydrich differently: as authorization to plan for the expulsion of these Jews into the conquered Soviet Union, assuming death on a genocidal scale, but with most deaths not resulting from outright murder.[3] In Kershaw’s interpretation, the transition to total extermination as policy happened only when military setbacks led a frustrated Hitler to give up on expulsion as a solution. Although Fritz follows Browning’s chronology and interpretation of Hitler’s decision making, he uneasily straddles the competing readings of Heydrich’s marching orders, concluding that Heydrich’s “feasibility study,” if implemented, “would result in the mass death, one way or another, of European Jews” (p. 108).

Echoing Browning, Fritz attributes the twofold radicalization of Jewish policy in July 1941 to Hitler’s “euphoria” over Germany’s stunning military triumphs during the first four weeks of the invasion, triumphs that seemed to portend imminent victory. Fritz persuasively argues that Hitler, in the flush of apparent victory, now felt capable of fulfilling his historic mission of undoing the shameful defeat of 1918, rewriting history on a racial basis, and destroying the demonic Jewish enemy. Hitler’s expansive comments to subordinates in mid-July, envisioning a radical reordering of Soviet territory on racial lines, suggest that Hitler enjoyed a feeling of unlimited possibilities. This thesis fits Browning’s interpretation of Heydrich’s instructions: a feasibility study for solving the “Jewish problem” by wholesale extermination, a means previously not contemplated, and thus a bold innovation of which a man like Hitler might be proud.[4] However, the expansion of shooting to include all Soviet Jews, including women and children, complicates the picture, especially after one incorporates insights from Peter Longerich’s biography of Himmler, *Heinrich Himmler: Biographie* (2008, English version published in 2012),

which Fritz does not cite.

The shooting squads never received a single order to expand the killing to include women and children, but rather a mix of mostly verbal and some written orders, some vague and contradictory, usually delivered personally by Himmler on visits to their area of operations. In Browning's and Fritz's dating, it took until mid-August for all shooting units to understand this escalation of the killing, in Longerich's account until early October. If Hitler was seriously contemplating, already in July, the systematic murder of European Jewry, why would Himmler not ask for—and receive—clear authorization to speed up the murder of Soviet Jews? If he had done so, why would there have been no single and unambiguous verbal order, transmitted at the nearest opportunity to all shooting units by courier? The gradual and haphazard process by which the scope of the murders expanded supports Longerich's thesis that Himmler took it upon himself to step up the killing without clear authorization from Hitler, as a way of enhancing his authority and that of his SS over police and security matters in the conquered territories. Longerich argues that Himmler acted in the reasonable expectation that Hitler, having expressed approval in *general* terms for some kind of genocidal outcome, would retroactively approve his actions.[5] It seems plausible to speculate that Himmler escalated the shooting in this piecemeal fashion so that he could gauge Hitler's reaction as the shooting squads reported their expanded death tolls to Berlin. If Hitler objected, Himmler could always rein in the shooters and claim that they had misunderstood his verbal orders.[6] Longerich's argument about the escalation of the shooting does not undermine the thesis that victory euphoria radicalized policy, but it does tend to support Kershaw's more cautious reading of the July 31 instructions to Heydrich: a direction to plan for expulsion, rather than for something that resembled the Holocaust. A charge to plan for expulsion, which included the expectation of a massive die-off in the East, is more consistent with Longerich's thesis of a vaguely genocidal expectation which Himmler fulfilled in pursuit of his own empire building. Altogether, this is Longerich's strongest evidence for his claim that the policy of murdering every Jew in Europe was never really "decided," but rather emerged through so many small increments that it was not fully in place until April or May of 1942, as opposed to being embraced by Hitler and his top aides already before the end of October 1941 (Browning and Fritz) or in November or early December (Kershaw).[7]

Like Browning, Fritz argues that a second round of victory euphoria, from mid-September through mid-

October, radicalized Hitler's thinking and allowed the convergence of several developments to produce, by the end of October, the decision for complete extermination. Army Group North finished the task of cutting off Leningrad in early September, and on September 16, German tank armies completed the encirclement of Soviet forces at Kiev, leading to the surrender of 665,000 Soviet troops. Operation Typhoon, planned as the final German drive on Moscow, scored smashing successes during the first half of October, including the encirclement and capture at Vyazma and Bryansk of another 673,000 enemy soldiers. The second half of October once again found Hitler speaking expansively of his historic destiny to vanquish Germany's Jewish nemesis: "We are getting rid of the destructive Jews entirely.... I feel myself to be only the executor of history"; "When we exterminate this plague, then we perform a deed for humanity, the significance of which our men out there can still not at all imagine"; "We are writing history anew from the racial standpoint" (p. 178). Already in mid-September, buoyed by the victories near Kiev and Leningrad, Hitler took a step that he had refused to take in mid-August: setting in train the deportation of Jews from Germany and the Czech lands to ghettos on Polish and Soviet territory. As these ghettos were overcrowded, officials on the spot radicalized policy by either murdering the arriving German Jews or killing local Jews to make room for the newcomers. Other initiatives by lower-ranking officials pioneered murder by engine exhaust gas or by cyanide (at Auschwitz). These and other initiatives from below fused with Hitler's signals from above to produce the policy we know as the Holocaust: the attempt to systematically murder every single person of Jewish ancestry in Europe.[8] As usual, Fritz is admirably efficient and concise in this section of the book, but this part seems slightly rushed and compressed, and he could have fleshed out the initiatives of lower-ranking officials a little more thoroughly.

Fritz also examines the sharp acceleration of the murder of Jews that took place during the second half of 1942. He links this shift to the war effort partly by invoking Hitler's renewed optimism about victory; partly by observing that Reich Director of Labor Fritz Sauckel had solved Germany's labor shortage by importing slave labor from conquered territories (thus rendering Jewish slave labor redundant); and partly by referring to the food shortages that afflicted German-controlled Europe until bountiful harvests in the fall of 1942. Fritz suggests that the regime chose to secure Germany's food supply by accelerating the murder of Jews, often referred to as "useless eaters" (pp. 224-226). His thesis seems emi-

nently plausible, but the documentary evidence is scant and none of it comes from the machinery of the Final Solution, nor does Longerich mention this concern as part of Himmler's motivation. Instead, Longerich argues that Himmler sped up the killing, just as he accelerated all his other projects for the racial reordering of Europe, because early German successes in the 1942 campaign led him and Hitler to expect imminent German victory. Himmler saw in this victory a decisive moment in which he could further expand his power and that of his SS empire. Longerich also argues, fairly persuasively, that revenge for the assassination of Heydrich, who died of his wounds on June 4, was not just an excuse for the acceleration of the killing, but rather a significant motive.[9]

Turning now to the bulk of the book, a military history of the eastern front, I will limit my comments to a summary of what seem to be Fritz's principal arguments, since I lack a background in military history sufficient for evaluating the contribution of his work to the scholarly literature. It has to be said at the outset that Fritz achieves his primary goal, seamlessly integrating operational developments with ideological imperatives and economic considerations. His exploration of logistics, which frequently imposed fatal limits on German operations, is especially thorough.

Could Germany have defeated the Soviet Union?—Fritz prudently refrains from giving a yes-no answer to a counterfactual question, but allows that Germany's last "slim" chance at victory, in 1942, was squandered when Hitler divided his forces in an attempt to reach simultaneously objectives that could only be accomplished serially. His masterful exposition of the 1941 and 1942 campaigns and the gross mismatch of resources between the combatants suggest that Germany's defeat was as close to inevitable as anything in history can be. The German invasion of 1941 was predicated on the assumption that one sharp blow would cause the Soviet state to collapse like a house of cards. Once the Soviets failed to cooperate with this plan, and Soviet troops fought on—sometimes even after being surrounded—with astonishing valor and grim determination, Germany's doom seems to have been sealed, even if it took the Soviet Union almost four years of hard fighting to reach final victory. In his early successes, Hitler was lucky in his opponent: Stalin could not believe that Hitler would invade, despite alarming intelligence to the contrary, and consequently refused to let his generals make better defensive arrangements.[10] For example, he refused to let his generals withdraw from Kiev in September 1941, resulting in the encirclement and capture of 665,000 troops.

His meddling also ruined the Soviet forces' opportunity for a devastating counterattack against the Germans in December 1941.

Fritz presents an interestingly mixed assessment of Hitler's merits as a military commander. Some of Hitler's decisions, later decried by his generals as irrational when they sought to restore their own reputations, make more sense when economic imperatives are factored in. However, with his controversial stand-and-fight order of December 1941, which Fritz finds defensible in tactical terms, Hitler inaugurated a fateful pattern, which persisted to the war's end, of depriving his front commanders of all autonomy. This micromanaging "stripped his generals of the flexibility and command initiative that had been the key to German operational success" (p. 205).

Fritz touches on other interesting topics, more in passing: the significant role played by partisans in undermining the German war effort; the valuable point that although the eastern front remained the most important front in the war to the very end, the *threat* of a second front in Western Europe began in 1943 to force Hitler to divert resources from the war against the Soviet Union; the crucial role played by Lend Lease aid, including 450,000 trucks and jeeps, which made possible the Soviet forces' new operational mobility beginning in 1944; and a concise and helpful assessment of the eastern front's relative importance among the varied theaters of World War II in Europe. Fritz also offers some interesting thoughts on how Germany, although badly outmanned and outgunned, could fight on until May 1945, a good two years after most informed observers (and much of the German public) knew that the war was lost. Here he anticipates many conclusions reached by Kershaw, who published a book-length study addressing precisely this question, only a few weeks after Fritz's volume appeared, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944-1945* (2011). To some of the factors that Kershaw explores—sharply increased repression within Germany, Nazi leaders' sense that they had "burned their bridges" through their genocidal policies, and brilliant efforts by Albert Speer and other technocrats to keep the German war economy alive—Fritz adds a military factor that Kershaw leaves out: the cautious strategy of Germany's opponents of advancing on a broad front.

All in all, Fritz does an admirable job of explaining to the lay reader how the war in the East provided the necessary context—and frequently a vital catalyst—for the evolution of Nazi Jewish policy into what the perpetrators called the Final Solution of the Jewish Question. Fritz

has provided us with what may be the most comprehensive single-volume treatment of the eastern front in the English language. Thoroughly researched, carefully reasoned, clearly structured, beautifully written, fully accessible to the lay reader, and at times nothing short of riveting, it deserves to be widely read.

## Notes

[1]. Browning counts three thousand members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, eleven thousand men in twenty-one battalions of the Order Police, and twenty-five thousand men under Heinrich Himmler's direct control in his "Kommandostab Reichsführer-SS," although it is unclear whether all twenty-five thousand were actively involved in the shooting, in Christopher R. Browning, with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 229-233. In addition to the *Einsatzgruppen*, Fritz counts twenty thousand in the Reserve Police and Order Police, plus eleven thousand SS, presumably part of Himmler's *Kommandostab* (p. 70). Peter Longerich counts, in addition to the three thousand in the *Einsatzgruppen*, twelve thousand in the Order Police and nineteen thousand directed by Himmler's *Kommandostab*, in Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: Biographie* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2008), 539-540.

[2]. Browning, *Origins*, 315-316.

[3]. Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions That*

*Changed the World, 1940-1941* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 460.

[4]. This speculation about Hitler taking pride in a radically new policy is mine, not Browning's.

[5]. Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 548-552, 557-558, 766-767.

[6]. This is speculation on my part, not Longerich's.

[7]. Browning, *Origins*, 370-373; Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, 173-181; Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, 464; and Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 559-560.

[8]. Gerhard L. Weinberg has persuasively argued that Hitler was determined to destroy every Jewish population on earth, but that most Nazi planning did not go beyond Europe simply because that marked the limit of what was feasible in the short term. However, Fritz's work and all others cited here refer to an extermination program focused solely on Europe, and do not mention Hitler's ambitions concerning the world after victory would be won in Europe. Weinberg, "A World Wide Holocaust Project" (paper delivered at the conference "Global Perspectives on the Holocaust," Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN, October 21, 2011).

[9]. Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 587-589, 662.

[10]. Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, 243-297; and Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, 78-80.

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