

Jochen Böhler, Robert Gerwarth, eds.. *The Waffen-SS: A European History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xviii + 372 pp. Illustrations \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-879055-6.

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Jochen Böhler and Robert Gerwarth's outstanding edited collection, *The Waffen-SS: A European History*, provides a comprehensive examination of the SS's mobilization of Europe's manpower for the German war effort. The book's content is both more and less than what its title suggests. In contrast to most studies of the Waffen-SS, there is very little on its actual combat experience; at times, the war which the Waffen-SS waged on the battlefield is consigned to the shadows. It does, however, provide coverage of much more than merely the units that fought at the front under the SS runes. Groups that never served in the Waffen-SS (such as the Polish "Blue Police") or were only superficially involved (such as the case of Greece or Spain), as well as the various militias and collaborationist groups that sprouted throughout Europe and fell under SS control, all receive coverage in the volume, making it an invaluable contribution to the literature, particularly in the English-speaking world.

Building on recent studies that look at fascism or the Axis war effort across borders, the editors argue that only a transnational approach allows for fruitful comparisons between the various regions and the individuals who supported and served in the ranks of the Waffen-SS.[1] While the book includes thematic chapters on Nazi racial policy in the occupied east, the experiences of

Waffen-SS veterans in the postwar era, and contemporary memory of the institution throughout Europe, the bulk of the volume examines specific areas across the continent. Chapters are devoted to northern Europe; western and southern Europe; the Baltic States; Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine; the Volksdeutsche from southeastern Europe; and Muslim units from the Balkans and the Soviet Union. Böhler and Gerwarth have assembled an impressively broad group of historians able to work in all of the necessary languages, and each chapter is the collaborative work of two to five historians. This allows for authoritative examinations of areas as diverse as Norway, Albania, Belarus, and Spain and it makes the book a truly ground-breaking study.

Five primary themes emerge throughout the book: the growing incompatibility between German manpower needs and Nazi racial ideology as the war dragged on; the shifting interactions between Germany and the various states and governments throughout Europe over the availability of volunteers for the Waffen-SS; the motivations of those who joined such units; the participation of foreign nationals in the war of annihilation; and finally, how veterans and the memories of their service were understood in the postwar era. Claus Bundgård Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Peter Scharff Smith's chapter on Germanic

volunteers from northern Europe provides an overview of the nearly fifty thousand men who volunteered for the Waffen-SS from the Netherlands, the Flemish sections of Belgium, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and even Great Britain. Due to the ideological belief that individuals from this region possessed an extremely pure “blood lineage” (p. 43), as well as Himmler’s hopes of centralizing his power in a Greater German Reich, the SS worked assiduously to recruit men for German formations, such as the Wiking Waffen-SS division, national legions, and eventually the 3rd (Germanic) SS Panzer Corps. As the authors make clear, the “recruitment of Germanic volunteers to the Waffen-SS from first to last was deeply integrated in the overall ideological visions of the SS.... they were the building blocks of a future Germanic Reich” (p. 75).

Once Germany’s war switched its focus to the east, Himmler and the SS were forced to rethink the importance of racial ideology vis-à-vis Germany’s deteriorating war effort. Peter Black and Martin Gutmann’s chapter on the clash between racial theory and the realities on the ground in the east serves as an excellent encapsulation of an issue that plagued Germany’s leadership through the war. The authors argue that the failure of Operation Barbarossa dramatically altered the SS approach to the make-up of Waffen-SS units; the volunteers from Scandinavia who fit neatly into Himmler’s ideas about racial purity were no longer sufficient for Germany’s needs. Casualties incurred during the invasion of the Soviet Union ensured that Hitler’s maxim “it must be and remain a principle cast in iron: never may it be allowed that others except the Germans bear weapons” (p. 19) was soon ignored. Not only were Baltic formations mobilized, but they were soon followed by Belarusian and Ukrainian units.

The contribution of the Baltic states to the Waffen-SS is examined by Matthew Kott, Arūnas Bubnys, and Ülle Kraft. The authors maintain that Nazi racial beliefs were not merely predicated on

purity of blood, but also included the notion that “an individual of poor racial stock could become truly Germanic by acting as a German would” (p. 121). This lay at the basis of German policy in the Baltic states as part of General Plan Ost; while large segments of the population faced ethnic cleaning, others would go through a process of “transmutation ... into racial Germanics” (p. 123). Such beliefs helped lead to the foundation of the Latvian Legion—if its members would be willing to participate in the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, then the “racially best elements of the Latvian people would be Germanized through combat” (p. 130). According to the authors, the Estonian Narva Battalion’s fighting with the Wiking Division indicated that Estonians could also prove themselves to be “racially ‘Nordic’” (p. 163).

Two groups which seemingly existed at the bottom of the Nazi racial hierarchy, but which were nonetheless extensively utilized within both SS-Police formations and the Waffen-SS itself were the Slavs of eastern Europe and the Muslims of the Balkans and Central Asia. The chapter devoted to Poles, Belarusians, and Ukrainians provides an overview of the 1.2 million Soviet citizens—including 300,000 in the police and 150,000 in the Waffen-SS—who served in German ranks during the war. Leonid Rein’s examination of Belarus effectively highlights the victory of pragmatism over ideology. Despite the utter devastation of Belarusian society during the war—a clear indicator that the region’s inhabitants fell extremely low on the Nazi racial scale—natives were used from mid-1941 in auxiliary police roles to help secure German rule. A growing partisan threat in 1942 led to a mushrooming of their ranks, and as Oleg Romanko and Rein note, this led to the emergence of the Belarusian Home Guard. This more professionalized formation was utilized in antipartisan sweeps alongside regular German units and, following the Red Army’s destruction of German Army Group Center in summer 1944, its remnants were amalgamated into the 30th Waffen-SS Divi-

sion. The largest and most battle-tested Slavic division was the 14th Waffen-SS Galicia Division, composed of Ukrainians. Andrii Boliakovskiy's overview of the division provides an excellent overview of how Nazi policy evolved from treating Slavs as second-class citizens at best to arming them for police duties, with the process finally culminating in the introduction of conscription for frontline units.

Xavier Bougarel, Alexander Korb, Stefan Petke, and Franziska Zaugg examine the Nazi regime's courting of Muslims for the Waffen-SS in Bosnia, Albania, and the Soviet Union. While recent scholarship has indicated that Himmler saw Muslims as emerging from a warrior society similar to that of the Reich, the authors make clear this relationship was only exploited by the Germans during the second half of the war: "it seems that recruiting Muslims was not a genuine ideological goal of Nazi imperialism, but rather a recruiting tactic that was discovered *en passant*" (p. 253). Despite German efforts to mobilize various Muslim communities, "the SS's racism was a major obstacle to the establishment of functioning non-German units" (p. 254). The largest Muslim formation in the former Yugoslavia was the 13th SS Handžar Division, which was primarily deployed within the cauldron of civil war and atrocity in Yugoslavia. Germany's manpower shortages forced it to work with the clan system of Albania, though efforts here proved relatively unsuccessful. More success was found in the Soviet Union where Muslim POWs, as well as volunteers from southern Russia, formed various units before culminating in the establishment of the Osttürkische Waffenverband der SS. Even though numerous Muslim units fought under German control, the authors convincingly argue that "the SS leadership and the German officers did not trust their Muslim soldiers and did not treat them as equals" (p. 283). The racism that lay at the basis of this relationship between Germans and Muslims en-

sured that their alliance proved to be far from mutually beneficial.

Germany's desperate need for manpower led it to view the ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) of southeastern Europe—particularly Slovakia, Croatia, Romania, and Hungary—as necessary manpower (*Menschenmaterial*) for its war effort. The recruitment of these individuals differed from that of the conquered regions; since these countries were waging their own wars alongside of the Reich, Germany could only acquire ethnic German manpower through negotiations. Thomas Casagrande, Michal Schvarc, Norbert Spannenberger, and Ottmar Trașcă examine the development of German policy in this region which supplied more than a hundred thousand soldiers to the Waffen-SS. They illustrate the complex interactions between Germany and its allies—from German encouragement of desertion and illegal emigration to the Reich from Romania to quid pro quo agreements, such as Hungary agreeing to provide Germany with twenty thousand ethnic Germans in hopes of preventing the deployment of a further two hundred thousand Hungarian troops to the front in early 1942. The largest unit to arise from the ethnic Germans of southeastern Europe (particularly from the former Yugoslavia) was the "Prinz Eugen" division, which the German armed forces used for security in the Balkans. By late 1944, Germany's voracious appetite for manpower had only increased and 97 percent of the so-called Banat Swabians from Yugoslavia now served in various German formations, including the Waffen-SS; this was merely the most exaggerated example of Germany's exploitation of ethnic Germans throughout southeastern Europe.

One of the largest questions addressed in the volume concerns the motivations of those who joined the Waffen-SS. True believers in the Nazi agenda—the creation of a racial empire in eastern Europe—were generally found only among ethnic Germans from the Balkans and, more extensively, among volunteers from the Nordic countries; "the

Germanic volunteers and the German Nazis were more politically aligned from the outset than was either group with any of the other non-German Waffen-SS soldiers" (p. 45). Other groups, however, found appeal in different elements within the Nazi message. This was particularly the case with volunteers from Spain, France, Italy, and Greece, examined by Georgios Antoniou, Philippe Carrard, Stratos Dordanas, Carlo Gentile, Christopher Hale, and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas. According to Carrard, "statements about the evils of the Soviet regime abound in virtually every memoir, and they all seem to originate in the attitude that [one member of the Waffen-SS] describes as his 'visceral anti-communism'" (p. 87). They also fought for "the creation of a new man, one whom the brotherhood of combat would have deeply transformed, and who, in turn, would help transform existing society" (p. 84). More generic visions of a fascist future also provided the necessary motivation for Spanish soldiers who, as convincingly argued by Seixas, viewed the Second World War as a continuation of the same struggle begun during the Spanish Civil War. Gentile makes similar claims about Italian volunteers, noting that "anti-Semitism, anti-Marxism, the cult of violence, corporatist thought, and ultra-nationalism" (p. 99) led them to join the German war effort. Greek collaborators also viewed their personal war as one against communism, but, as Antoniou and Dordanas point out, it was much more tangible in a Greek countryside dominated by the communist ELAS (Greek People's Liberation Army) movement.

In the east, anticommunism also proved an important motivation for numerous Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Baltic natives who had suffered under Stalinist rule during the 1930s and the Sovietization of the Baltic states in 1940-41. This was merely one of a larger matrix of motivations for individuals to join German formations in the east. In the case of all three of these areas, it is clear that many who joined security services or offered their support to the Germans did so in the belief

that they were participating in the construction of their own national states and armies. Boliakovskiy persuasively claims that "thousands of Ukrainians who volunteered for the division saw themselves as true patriots" (p. 199) and this formulation could be fruitfully applied to many eastern European volunteers and collaborators. Simple issues of survival were also vitally important in the flocking of Soviet citizens to German power; for POWs, joining a security unit meant escaping the hell of starvation and disease that was a German POW camp, while civilians viewed such employment as a means to provide food for their families at home. Material benefits for joining the SS also proved decisive to ethnic Germans from Hungary and Bosnian Muslims. Perhaps the most mundane, but certainly not the most inconsequential, reason why Europeans joined the Waffen-SS and other SS formations was the attempt to escape a boring and unsatisfactory life and find adventure. This seemed to be the case for some men from France, Sweden, Greece, and Spain, among others.

The question of participation in the German war of annihilation has preoccupied historians of Germany for at least thirty years and the contributors to this volume tackle the question of international complicity head-on. A general consensus emerges from the book that all foreign units were involved with war crimes of one sort or another; this ranged from the Germanic soldiers fighting in the frontline Wiking and French Charlemagne divisions to the security formations consisting of Lithuanian and Belarusian natives. Black and Gutmann state that the mobilized eastern nationalities "played a pivotal role in the most murderous policies of the Nazi regime, particularly the annihilation of the European Jews.... Their presence and engagement made those policies feasible" (p. 41). This assertion meets with broad agreement from other contributors; Rein argues that "the Belarusian auxiliary police played an integral role in carrying out repressive policies in Nazi-occupied Soviet territories" (p. 187) while Kott, Bubnys, and

Kraft make clear that “in 1941 nearly all of the [Lithuanian police] battalions participated in the Holocaust, though their degree of involvement varied” (pp. 125-6). Such complicity also existed in Poland. Jacek Andrzej Młynarczyk’s examination of the Polish Blue Police demonstrates that the 12,500-man police force clearly worked in accordance with German policy through the confiscation of food from both Poles and Jews, their participation in “Jew hunts,” and in assisting German units in ghetto clearances and deportations. As he notes, “the population of the General Government viewed the PP, as an institution, with hatred and fear” (p. 179).

German occupation unleashed various interethnic conflicts and civil wars throughout Europe and in many of these regions—particularly Yugoslavia, Greece, and areas within the Soviet Union—non-German Waffen-SS divisions were deployed in the thick of the violence. The Bosnian Muslim Handžar Division, for example, was born from the maelstrom of ethnic conflict. According to Bouragel, Korb, Petke, and Zaugg, about 8 percent of Yugoslavia’s prewar Muslim population died during the conflict. Realizing that Croatian forces could no longer protect their communities, Muslims turned to Germany, which in turn deployed Muslims in an antipartisan role in Yugoslavia. Inserted into an increasingly chaotic situation, in which their homes and families were threatened, and working within the context of brutal German antipartisan policies, the Handžar division carried out several massacres in early 1944. The ethnic Germans in the Prinz Eugen division found themselves in a similar position in Yugoslavia. Recognizing that a German defeat would result in the end of ethnic Germans’ political and social power in Yugoslavia, the division fought a brutal war against Josef Tito’s Partisan movement, culminating in the massacre of several hundred civilians in the village of Otok in early 1944.

The final theme of the volume examines how Waffen-SS veterans experienced the postwar era,

as well as how the memory of their actions are repackaged in right-wing circles today. Gerald Steinacher, Immo Rebitschek, Mats Deland, Sabina Ferhadbegović, and Frank Seberechts examine the postwar fates in both a national and international context. In terms of the latter, the various trials associated with the military tribunal at Nuremberg, as well as the growing Cold War divide, affected how former members of the SS fared after the war. From a national perspective, the primary issue was one of collaboration; as the authors make clear this was a double-edged sword: “Collaboration was, above all, a source of violence and revenge as well as a justification for exclusion that threatened to prolong the trauma of war in these societies. At the same time, it was an attribution that made it easier for post-war governments and societies to revive narratives of national unity and to express their populations’ desire for retribution” (p. 285).

The chapter includes detailed analyses of how the Soviet Union, Norway, Yugoslavia, Belgium, and Denmark tackled the issue of their nationals’ service in the Waffen-SS and other SS units. Norway’s postwar justice process was one of the most comprehensive in Europe, though it focused more on Norwegians who collaborated with the Germans than what they actually did during the war. This highlighted a general trend across the continent: it was the act of collaboration itself and not the war crimes committed by the individual that led to executions and prison sentences. Yugoslavia followed a similar process, though this was predicated on the idea of unifying the country behind Tito’s victorious Partisans. This was accomplished by dispensing justice to the occupiers and those who assisted them, with the latter described as “only ‘insignificant portions of the indigenous population’” (p. 309); this allowed for the overwhelming majority of the country to move past the wounds of the war and into the new communist state.

The final chapter by Madeleine Hurd and Steffen Werther examines how the Waffen-SS is remembered in contemporary Europe by examining its ceremonial sites across the continent. In their analysis, they chart the evolution of Waffen-SS memory beginning with the HIAG (Hilfsgemeinschaft auf gegenseitigkeit der ehemaligen Soldaten der Waffen-SS, or Mutual Aid Community of Former Soldiers of the Waffen-SS), which formed in the late 1950s and served as “kind of European headquarters for what, after all, had been a Europe-wide SS organization” (p. 333). As Hurd and Werther make clear, the memory of the Waffen-SS diametrically opposed the postwar consensus in Europe that emerged in opposition to the values and atrocities of Hitler’s Third Reich. Prior to the fall of the Eastern bloc, this meant that public Waffen-SS ceremonies were generally small and took place on private estates in order to avoid much larger counterdemonstrations. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, paradoxically provided a jolt to the Waffen-SS’s memory, as foreign nationals who had served in its ranks in the postcommunist states of eastern Europe could now openly celebrate their own struggle against communism during the Second World War. Their discussions of events in Hungary and Estonia and how the flame of memory has been passed down to generations born well after the conclusion of the war emphasize that the alternative narrative of European history offered by Waffen-SS apologists remains a powerful and threatening alternative to the ideas behind the European Union. The legacy of the Waffen-SS is thus, much like its actual existence during the war, one that encompasses Europe as a whole.

Note

[1]. On the Axis units that fought alongside the German army, see Rolf-Dieter Müller, *An der Seite der Wehrmacht: Hitlers ausländische Helfer beim “Kreuzzug gegen den Bolschewismus” 1941-1945* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2007); and the forthcoming volume David Stahel, ed., *Joining*

Hitler’s Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). On the Waffen-SS, see Jan Erik Schulte and Peter Lieb, eds., *Die Waffen-SS. Neue Forschungen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014).

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