

Ben Shepherd. *Hitler's Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. 664 pp. \$18.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-22880-9.

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Ben H. Shepherd's *Hitler's Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* takes a comprehensive look at the German army from the lead-up to the Nazi seizure of power through the end of the Second World War, ultimately arguing that the military was very much a branch of the Third Reich and culpable in Nazi crimes. Shepherd acknowledges this work is not a Wehrmacht history, which would entail studying the Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine.

Hitler's Soldiers is split into five parts, each representing a chronological phase of the German army's history. The first part, covering 1933 to 1939, contemplates the extent to which the army assented to Nazi rule. Shepherd contends that overlap between the Nazis and the conservative officer corps regarding rebuilding the military and a return to world-power status allowed the army to tolerate, if not outright adopt, Nazi goals. The second part focuses on the why the Nazis succeeded so thoroughly at the onset of the Second World War. Shepherd primarily attributes this success to two factors: first, the German army's focus on independent and flexible frontline commanders capable of quick response, known as *Auftragstaktik*, and second, the ineptitude of the various initial enemies, which allowed the German army to exaggerate their capabilities heading

into the period 1941-43, the third part of the book. This section is Shepherd's largest, understandably as many historians have asked why the tide turned against the Nazis in those years. Shepherd's response is multifaceted, but essentially, he contends that the German army was far too confident in its abilities and fundamentally overestimated the extent of its material capabilities at a time when the Allies, having absorbed the initial Axis blows, were beginning to build up resources and gain tactical experience. From here on Shepherd uses his two remaining sections to drive home the point that the German army was culpable in many Nazi atrocities, as the army became victims of a vicious cycle of their own creation wherein military defeats brought on morale defeats, which forced commanders to seek increasingly reckless objectives with questionable long-term gains, only to suffer defeat and worsen morale, starting the cycle all over again. It was in this phase that the German army was its most brutal towards enemy combatants, POWs, partisan fighters, innocent civilians, and even its own soldiers.

Military historians familiar with the wide variety of literature on the German army will not find anything particularly new in Shepherd's book apart from very specific details, as this work is very much a top-down history. Shepherd covers

the infantry, the officers, politicians, and the wide spectrum of historical actors involved in the German army in a history that harnesses institutional, tactical, and sociopolitical methodologies into a cohesive and sound narrative. The true value of *Hitler's Soldiers*, however, is Shepherd's dogged insistence on placing blame for Nazism and its many crimes on the shoulders of the German army. They do not bear all of the blame, but Shepherd firmly argues that the army willingly enabled Nazi ideology in order to gain more material power and a firmer role in society. Eventually the German army was consumed by Hitler's reckless foreign policy and progressively took on the role of perpetrator of atrocity. This book is a must-read for anyone in search of a comprehensive history of the German army, both from a battle-tactics and a military-doctrine standpoint, as well as historians studying complicity and atrocity. Both sets of scholars can find considerable value in this very thorough and important history of the German army in the Third Reich.

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