



Stephen G. Fritz. *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995. x + 299 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-1920-5.

Reviewed by Larry V. Thompson

Published on H-German (September, 1996)

Stephen Fritz of East Tennessee State University presents a study focusing on the men who actually fought the war for Germany rather than on those who planned and led it. Utilizing the recollections of several "little men," Fritz charts the course by which they first became *Landser*s, then combat veterans, and how those who survived subsequently remembered their war years. In ten chapters that cover basic training reminiscences, initial reactions to combat, adaptations and accommodations to violence and barbarism, philosophizing about the vagaries of war and its many faces, and the protestations of idealism that sustained them throughout the struggle, Fritz seeks to capture the "everyday life" experience of the common German soldier under combat conditions centered largely on the eastern front—the theater in which he reminds us approximately eighty percent of all German soldiers served. Drawing exclusively upon published memoirs, letters, diaries, and oral histories, this is a view of the war as seen from below and which seeks to assess "the nature of men at war" (p. vii). However, the human nature revealed in these combatant testimonies is, Fritz admits, "subtle, complex, and contradictory in its message" (p. 5).

So, too, in places is this work. Without providing much detail about the individuals whose recollections he uses, Fritz identifies them as "ordi-

nary Germans" (p. viii)—a sensitive description at present thanks to the controversy concerning its application in the works of Omer Bartov and Christopher Browning, and more recently of Daniel Goldhagen—which requires greater precision than the author provides. Fritz apparently equates "ordinary" with "representative"—that is, these *Frontsoldaten* are to be taken as a cross-section of German society. Indeed, Fritz indicates that they came from a "variety of social, economic, and educational backgrounds" (p. 3). Just how much these social, economic, and educational backgrounds varied remains obscure, which makes rather perplexing the later conclusion that these "ordinary Germans" had become Nazified (p. 242) while serving in the army, especially since Fritz insists earlier that as civilians in uniform they brought with them National Socialist values and/or agreement with Nazi goals they had internalized as children and young adults.

Were the *Landser*s in sympathy with National Socialist goals even before entering the army? This study lacks the necessary evidential base to accept this generalization as unconditionally valid, but Fritz argues that "An army—and the men within it—cannot be completely separated from the value system that produced it" (p. 9), and the record emerging from related studies similarly suggests that this generation of Germans did in-

deed accept the goals of Nazi territorial expansion, shared the Nazi aim of destroying Versailles, supported the quest for a *Volkgemeinschaft*, and accepted that Bolshevism was a political enemy to be vanquished on racial as well as political grounds. Fritz maintains that the Nazification of the army explains why the soldiers willingly accepted so much personal hardship, fought so tenaciously, and remained loyal to Hitler. Yet, much of the study indicates that while the army ultimately introduced large doses of Nazi racism to the troops, especially as manpower and weapons technology became scarce, the racism proffered was not much needed since the men, no matter their civilian backgrounds, were predisposed to believe in it. In this sense, Fritz agrees with Bartov--the army was Hitler's. Letting them speak for themselves, Fritz demonstrates that they needed little encouragement from the army to become or to remain willing instruments of National Socialist policies. Their loyalty to Hitler and his policies was, of course, most graphically proven on the eastern front where spatial and racial ambitions combined to sanction appalling behavior.

It is with the war in the East that Fritz engages the study's central theme--the nature of men at war. His recognition that the *Landers* were eager rather than reluctant warriors for National Socialism persuades him that the soldiers ultimately were both victims as well as perpetrators of a war without limits. They became victims because their ideological convictions helped justify bestial behavior toward a dehumanized enemy who quickly retaliated with similar behavior. This, in turn, spawned fear, rage, and frustration within the *Landers* whose response was invariably to escalate rather than reduce the barbarity. In consequence, the soldier's idealized goals, such as achieving social and economic stability for Germany, devolved into perversions of butchery and pillaging on a horrific scale. Fritz recognizes, as others have, that the circumstances surrounding the war in the Soviet Union helped create conditions that triggered brutality on both sides. His

Landers experienced the fatigue, filth, hunger, extremes of heat and cold and the fear, rage, blood lust, and emptiness which permeated the campaign's physical and emotional environment. These circumstances notwithstanding, Fritz argues that more than the environment lay behind this behavior. The soldier's words revealed that a culture of racism existed among the troops, although surprisingly and inexplicably, the *Landers* made relatively few direct references to the antisemitism which legitimated and promoted their savagery. As Fritz argues, this war was waged for ideals about German cultural and national greatness which required the elimination of Jewish-inspired Bolshevism and racially inferior Slavs with little concern for the methods employed.

Fritz thus presents a composite portrait of the German combat soldier's nature as one of instrumental brutality directed toward a higher purpose. Many viewed their service as heroic if not noble, despite existing under conditions which bred widespread cynicism that their efforts might not be appreciated or even understood by those for whom they fought. Idealistic, often full of self-pity, fearful but angry at the enemy because the pursuit of his extinction revealed the animal in themselves, the *Landers* instinctively knew this war made them different if not special in the eyes of others. While this portrait has been sketched before by others, such as Christian Streit, Theo Schulte, and Bartov, Fritz should be commended for demonstrating that ideology cannot be ignored or minimized in favor of circumstances when explanations for the barbaric nature of the war in the East are attempted. That circumstantial explanations provide only limited understanding for barbaric behavior becomes quite clear when one recalls that barbarism did not evolve as the campaign wore on; it coincided with the campaign's initiation. It received organizational sanction by the Army High Command's acceptance of the infamous "criminal orders" and the near universal compliance exhibited by senior officers in

the field to the execution of them. It occurred long before hunger became pervasive, before partisans constantly menaced the troops, or before the deterioration of physical conditions. In fact, it began while Germany was winning and it continued even after victory clearly became impossible.

Concentrating as he does on the "everyday life" of the *Landsers*, Fritz is not unaware, however, that their utterances stressed their "victimization"--their suffering at the hands of a cruel destiny; they did not display much remorse or regret for their abominable behavior toward "inferior" races. As Fritz notes, some soldiers were sickened by the brutality surrounding them, but he does not, and given the limitations of his evidence -- the writings of men aware of military censorship and perhaps understandably reluctant to share with loved ones or friends the realities of their conduct --cannot gauge whether their revulsion or misgivings were merely atypical. All that can be demonstrated is that, for whatever reasons, some German soldiers were "not with the program," but that most appeared to be willing participants in pursuit of Nazi goals, no matter how inhumane the means. Unavoidably, *Alltagsgeschichte* is both particular and impressionistic, and this study is no exception to these limitations. Fritz makes no claim to have clarified or revised any or all of the war's larger context. He succeeds in adding to our understanding of the behavior of men in combat. Perhaps inadvertently, given the book's publication date, he also contributes to the interpretive firestorm recently ignited by Daniel Goldhagen's claim to have discovered what motivated "ordinary" Germans to perform "extraordinary" acts of racism in the service of National Socialism. For this reason alone the study merits attention. However, it also makes available in English a considerable number of combat recollections from German veterans previously unknown to a wider audience. The excerpts included and the conclusions drawn from them will be especially valuable in English-speaking military circles.

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Citation: Larry V. Thompson. Review of Fritz, Stephen G. *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.

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