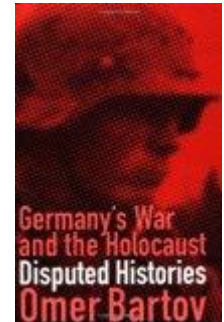


Omer Bartov. *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories.* Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003. xxi + 248 pp. \$21.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-8681-4.



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Published on H-War (April, 2004)

A Hierarchy of Genocides

The volume of scholarly literature published on the twelve-year Third Reich is beginning to approach that on the Roman Empire. Yet it represents but the tip of an iceberg when compared to the works produced for popular consumption. The History Channel on cable television has been referred to as "The Hitler Channel." Nevertheless, new interpretations, new emphases and even new documentation seem likely to continue to confront scholars for eons yet to come. As a result, while we are considerably better informed about various aspects of the Third Reich, we have moved progressively further from a consensus since the fall of the Third Reich in 1945.

Omer Bartov is pre-eminently known for his contribution to the military history of the Third Reich; in particular his *Hitler's Army* and *The Eastern Front, 1941-45*, outline and critically analyze what he considers the three foremost issues in the study of Nazi Germany. They are the Holocaust, the relationship between the German military and the regime, and the influence of the Second World War and the genocide of Jews upon

postwar identity and the politics of memory. Overall, the volume adds little to scholarly knowledge on any of them.

In spite of the title, only a relatively small proportion of the volume is devoted to the Second World War. A chapter entitled "Savage War" states the obvious, that "War played a central role in Nazi ideology" (p. 3) and re-debunks the myth of the German armed forces somehow or other being uninvolved in the mass murder of civilians in the course of the invasion of the Soviet Union. Another chapter, titled "From Blitzkrieg to Total War," emphasizes the psychological aspect of the Blitzkrieg strategy and argues against the notion that the strategy was adopted in response to a domestic crisis limiting armament in depth. Here a swipe is made at military historians in general and those of Germany in particular, for focusing upon actual battles and generally ignoring the political and social context of war. German military historians are further indicted for a tendency,

attributed to Ranke, to believe that documents reveal truth.

The scholarly purpose of the volume is not easy to fathom. It is not based on primary research, other than through accumulated knowledge. In fact, the essence of the book is already published reviews of the works of others. The basic theme is an insistence upon "the centrality of the Holocaust in the history of Nazi Germany" (p. 144) (although, on p. 112, the destruction of Jewry is downgraded to "a major goal of Germany's war-time policies"). To that end he rejects the argument of Götz Aly that the Holocaust was only an element in a grander plan to transform the demographic structure of Eastern Europe, to create a new Germany through the seizure of territory. There is no doubt that Hitler intended to realize such an objective. His megalomania even extended to eventually ruling the world. Circumstances, however, limited the realization of his ambition to the mass slaughter of Jews, along with Gypsies, Commissars, and others deemed undesirable. In the same vein, the author is critical of most German studies of the concentration camps for a focus on such facilities in general, to the neglect of those devoted to mass killing, and for largely ignoring the victims of the genocide. Criticism is particularly leveled at Wolfgang Sofsky's *The Order of Terror*, for analyzing the concentration camp as an institution divorced from its purpose.

A substantial proportion of the volume is devoted to Daniel Goldhagen's controversial *Hitler's Willing Executioners* and his view of the Holocaust as the expression of a pervasive "exterminationist" anti-Semitism in Germany. Bartov sees merit in this approach; although he is critical of Goldhagen's avoidance of consideration of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, in involving "the industrial killings of millions of human beings in factories of death, ordered by a modern state, organized by a conscientious bureaucracy and supported by a law-abiding, patriotic, 'civilized' society" (p. 135). The context mentioned in the quota-

tion could only have been provided by Germany, to express an "exterminationist" anti-Semitism that was pervasive throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

The author provides a stimulating discussion of the differing reception of Goldhagen's work in the United States (enthusiasm with no enduring impact), Germany (broad acceptance by the younger generation and rejection by the old), France (more concerned with coming to terms with the Vichy past), and Israel (what's new?). It is regrettable the analysis was not extended and deepened, as a contribution to knowledge.

A review is included of the controversial exhibition "War of Extermination: The Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-44," which toured Germany and Austria between 1995 and 1999. Another chapter reviews Viktor Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness*, the diaries of a Jewish German intellectual living in Dresden who, thanks largely to his non-Jewish wife, survived the appalling everyday anti-Semitism of the Third Reich.

The central theme throughout is the presumed uniqueness of the genocide known as the Holocaust. One wonders why it is necessary to distinguish the mass murder of Jews from the other murderous activities of the Nazis, such as those of "Gypsies," homosexuals, and commissars with the Red Army. "Gypsies," for example, were simply perceived as "an offensive mix of asocial behavior and racial impurity" (p. 112). Most Rom, including many who were murdered, did not fit within even the Nazis' very broad definition of "asocial" and/or were not of "mixed race." To an extent a response to those German historians who argue that all ethnicities are capable of, and some have committed, genocide, the effort to claim uniqueness for the Holocaust has the consequence of a rather unseemly hierarchy of genocides.

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Citation: John Perkins. Review of Bartov, Omer, *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2004.

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