

Hannes Heer. *Vom Verschwinden der Täter: Der Vernichtungskrieg fand statt, aber keiner war dabei*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2004. 395 S. EUR 22.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-351-02565-6.

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## Murder without the Murderers

During the 1990s, “ordinary” Germans regularly took center stage in the academic discourse about the Nazi past. Christopher Browning’s “ordinary men” and Daniel J. Goldhagen’s “willing executioners” were not all fanatical members of the National Socialist Party, as many agents of the Holocaust had previously been portrayed: many were “ganz normale Deutschen.” Popular memory also underwent an apparent shift during this time, particularly in Germany, with a new focus on “ordinary” perpetrators. The infamous traveling exhibit, “War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944,” better known as the *Wehrmachtausstellung*, which opened in 1995, played a crucial role in this transformation. The exhibit aimed to destroy the myth of the “clean” Wehrmacht, whose members acted with decency and honor, even on the Eastern Front. “Normal” soldiers, the exhibit proclaimed to nearly a million visitors as it traveled through Germany and Austria, had also participated in the Holocaust.[1]

In *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*, the ever-polemical Hannes Heer, one of the creators of the exhibit, returns to what he views as a pivotal moment in the process of coming to terms with the Third Reich. The story of this exhibit is, of course, well known. Created by the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, it sparked controversy and, on occasion, riots, wherever it opened. The *Wehrmachtausstellung* depended largely on visual evidence to drive its message home. It included approximately 1400 photographs of shootings, hangings, and other atrocities carried out in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union. Many of the photographs were

taken by the *Landser* themselves, almost as “souvenirs” of their war experiences. At the time, one journalist wrote: “The photographs prove [it], normal Wehrmacht soldiers were involved.”[2] But for critics of the exhibit, the photographs did not prove anything quite so definitely.

In 1999, the exhibit was closed down temporarily after historians like Bogdan Musial claimed that some of the photographs had been falsely attributed to the Wehrmacht. A commission of historians, while confirming the fundamental thesis of the display, discovered that 20 of the 1400 photographs depicted Soviet crimes, that is, murders by NKVD, rather than the acts of German soldiers. The director of the Institute, Jan Philipp Reemtsma, then closed down the exhibit for good, quickly parted company with Heer, and, eventually, opened a fundamentally revised version of the exhibit entitled “Crimes of the Wehrmacht: Aspects of the War of Extermination 1941-1944.”

Heer sees this revised *Wehrmachtausstellung* as symptomatic of Germany’s shifting memory culture, the subject of *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*. In Germany today, Heer argues, the memory of the Third Reich coalesces more and more around the idea of Germans as victims, particularly of the Allied bombings, rather than Germans as the agents of genocide.[3] The perpetrators themselves have disappeared from the story. In their place, we have, his subtitle suggests, a war of extermination in which no one actually took part.

In eight chapters, Heer angrily denounces several recent (and some not so recent) attempts to erase or rein-