

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.



Reviewed by Kristin Semmens

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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 mo-

ment 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 reinterpret the Nazi past. Heer opens his book by looking at the second *Wehrmachtausstellung*, greeted by newspaper headlines as "more context, less emotion" and "the return of the text" (p. 12). The number of photographs had indeed been reduced; the new exhibit contained only half as many as the original exhibit. Moreover, instead of snapshots taken by "ordinary" soldiers, formal portraits of Wehrmacht generals now predominated. Clues about the supposed mentality of the perpetrators, foregrounded in the first exhibit by way of diary entries, letters, memoirs, popular novels, etc, were also missing.[4]

The rest of the book catalogues further examples of how the Nazi past has been blurred, its tracks covered up ("*verwischen der Spuren*"). Chapter 2 examines the destruction of archival records by the Wehrmacht itself. Chapters 3 and 4 take up a prevalent theme of the first exhibit, the mentality of the perpetrators. They look at the wartime diary of a soldier, several *Feldpostbriefe*, and the memoirs of Ernst Jünger, among other sources. Chapter 5 focuses on the censorship of,

and publishers' alterations to, novels about the war by Heinrich Böll and Erich Maria Remarque. It ends with Peter Bamm's novel, *Der unsichtbare Flagge*, which upheld the myth of the clean Wehrmacht. Somewhat jarringly, Chapter 6 then returns to the original *Wehrmachtausstellung*, discussing visitors' comments and a film about spectators' responses. Chapter 7 is an attack on Bogdan Musial, one of the most vociferous critics of the original exhibit. Heer denounces Musial's scholarship and exposes his antisemitism (see p. 269), noting that Musial goes so far as to question the singularity of the Holocaust and the responsibility of the Germans for it (p. 273).

Chapter 8 jumps to the German bestseller *Der Brand* by Jörg Friedrich, a history of Germany under the Allied bombs. Here, the perpetrators are Churchill, Harris, Roosevelt and various Bomber Groups, British and American (p. 281). Problematic for Heer is Friedrich's contention that the bombing sites were completely "innocent," that they had "seemingly no place" in the war of extermination (p. 283). Even more disturbing are the terms Friedrich uses for the bombings: extermination and massacre. In short, Heer suggests, as others also have, that Friedrich equates the bombing of Germany with the Holocaust.

It is indisputable that, in the minds of many Germans, the "crimes" committed *against* them (as the bombings are often stylized) have often overshadowed those committed *by* them under Hitler. And Heer's anger at this phenomenon is certainly palpable throughout *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*. But how much of the discourse centering on German victimhood is actually "new" or unique to the first years of the twenty-first century? From *Stunde Null* onwards, Germans told themselves "war stories" that focused on their own suffering rather than that of Jews or other Nazi victims.[5] The idea of the "missing" perpetrators also has precedents. Over a decade ago, for example, the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial Center constructed an exhibit critiqued

as a display of "extermination without the exterminators," murder without the murderers.[6] In fact, most of the events Heer describes predate the shift in German memory culture that he claims is currently taking place. What then is specifically new about it? Heer also fails to address why academic history has remained largely untouched by this supposed shift. For, as a recent H-Net review remarks, amongst professional historians there is now a "burgeoning sub-field of 'perpetrator research.'"[7]

Even if we accept Heer's view that popular memory of the Third Reich today differs qualitatively from the perpetrator-centered variety of the 1990s, we are still left with questions as to why that change has happened and why now. Is it a backlash against the previous focus on the culpability of the "ordinary" German? Is it connected to the sixtieth anniversaries of events like the bombing of Dresden or the end of the war in Europe? Is it merely symptomatic of the ebb and flow of memory itself, which, as Sigmund Freud reminds us, is "inherently revisionist, an exercise in selective amnesia"?[8] Heer provides few answers and thus offers few new insights into how Germans are dealing with the Nazi past. This is neither to say that Heer's conclusions are incorrect, nor is it to suggest that emphasizing German suffering over that of the Germans' victims, is somehow justifiable; it is simply to note that we have heard his refrain many times before.

Notes

[1]. Some moments of these debates were captured on H-German and can be viewed at <http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/other/wehrmacht.htm>.

[2]. Günter Härbst, "Wehrmacht-Ausstellung: 'Ich habe sie schon gesehen'," *Das Bild* 13 (February 1997).

[3]. On related issues, see H-German forum on World War II bombing, at <http://www.h-net.org/>

[~german/discuss/WWIIbombing/WWII-bombingindex.htm](http://www.h-net.org/~german/discuss/WWIIbombing/WWII-bombingindex.htm).

[4]. Readers can view this second exhibit online at <http://www.verbrechen-der-wehrmacht.de/docs/home.htm>.

[5]. Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[6]. Ingrid Strobl, "Vernichtung ohne Vernichter: Ausstellung im Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz," in *Das Feld der Vergessen: Jüdischer Widerstand und deutsche "Vergangenheitsbewältigung"*, ed. Ingrid Strobl (Berlin: ID-Archiv, 1994).

[7]. Claudia Koonz, review of Gerhard Paul, ed. *Die Täter der Shoah: Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2002), in H-German, 11.5.2005, located at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-German&month=0505&week=b&msg=cy%2bFkOk0RofUay2eKGw>.

[8]. Quoted in Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, "Introduction," in *The Myths We Live By*, ed. Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 7.

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