

Jens Westemeier. *Joachim Peiper: A Biography of Himmler's SS Commander*. Atglen: Schiffer Publishing, 2007. 224 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7643-2659-2.

Reviewed by Jeff Rutherford (Department of History, Wheeling Jesuit University)
Published on H-German (November, 2007)



A Soldier Like Any Other? The Career of Waffen-SS Standartenführer Joachim Peiper

When first contacted to review this title, I was a bit perplexed. The book's publisher produces works of German military history primarily for the World War II buff. The majority of its catalog either deals with technical aspects of weaponry or translated works of popular German authors. While certainly useful in their own right, such books are generally not reviewed or even acknowledged in the academic world. Westemeier's book, examining the life of Jochaim Peiper, a tank commander in the 1st Waffen-SS Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, whose notoriety stems from the murder of American prisoners of war at Malmedy during the Battle of the Bulge on December 17, 1944, breaks out of this mold, however, and is indeed a serious, if not always successful, attempt at re-evaluating the life and career of Peiper. This is Westemeier's second attempt to grapple with Peiper, after *Joachim Peiper, SS-Standartenführer. Eine Biographie* (1996). The author states that in that study, he had become "entranced with his subject" and ended up "disseminat[ing] some of the classic Peiper myths" (p. 7). After several more years of research, however, Westemeier has revised his earlier conclusions. He believes that he was "misled on purpose. Like some other historians, as well, I was duped to [sic] a picture of the Wehrmacht, the Waffen-SS and Peiper that was carefully constructed by SS apologists and the *Erlebnsgeneration*" (p. 7). This sentence is a telling example of both the book's tone and its presentation; at times, the book verges on a polemical attack on Peiper. I shall return to the question of presentation later in the review. Westemeier has several main points of emphasis. First, he is determined to prove that units under Peiper's command committed war

crimes in both the eastern and western theaters of war. Second, he tries to show that Peiper was not the brilliant military commander of revisionist lore but rather a single-minded, brutal leader who focused exclusively on achieving the objective, regardless of the cost to the men under his command. Third, Westemeier attempts to link the tank commander to the Holocaust from the very beginnings of the program of mass murder. While he generally succeeds in the first two cases, the third instance rests on much shakier ground and one frequently feels that Westemeier is trying to atone for his earlier, more hagiographical look at Peiper's life.

The most effective chapter of the book—"The War Crimes of Peiper's Units"—painstakingly recreates the Malmedy Massacre as well as the destruction of the Italian village of Boves and the murder of twenty-four of its inhabitants. Westemeier effectively juxtaposes Peiper's postwar testimony on these war crimes with contemporary evidence that highlights the half-truths and outright lies Peiper used to save his skin. The author asserts that ideological indoctrination of the Waffen-SS leadership was the primary determinant of SS units' behavior during the war. While certainly not a novel insight, it nevertheless seems on the mark. The most glaring omission of this catalog of war crimes concerns the activities of Peiper's Leibstandarte men in the Soviet Union. The various incarnations of the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler spent a great deal of time on the Eastern Front and while Westemeier does mention that Peiper's battalion acquired the nickname the "Blowtorch Battalion" for its frequent burning down of Russian villages, he fails to provide more than

one or two examples of such actions. It is clear that the Wehrmacht committed the majority of its war crimes in the *Vernichtungskrieg* against the Soviet Union; unfortunately, Peiper's activities in the East receive short shrift in Westemeier's examination, due in part, perhaps, to his reliance on western language sources.

In his description of Peiper's military style as combining "arbitrariness, anarchy, [and] lawlessness," Westemeier has broken no new ground (p. 201). As Charles Sydnor, Jr. demonstrated nearly thirty years ago, Waffen-SS units regularly took extraordinarily high casualties throughout the war, due in part to poor training and in part to the ruthless and ideologically-driven belief that SS troopers would triumph in battle no matter the odds.[1] Here, the author examines the literature produced by authors whom he terms apologists for Peiper and the Waffen-SS, contrasting their sympathetic portrayal of Peiper and other such officers with archival material. Westemeier demolishes the picture of Peiper as a man concerned with the well-being of his soldiers. The SS officer emerges as a callous commander who wasted the lives of his soldiers in hastily planned, poorly executed attacks.

Perhaps the most controversial claim Westemeier makes (at least judging by the twelve pages devoted to this book on the message boards of a popular Wehrmacht website) is his linking of Peiper to the Holocaust. Here, the author focuses on the years between 1938 and 1941, when Peiper served on the personal staff of Heinrich Himmler, including a two-year stint as First Adjutant to the Reichsführer SS. Westemeier writes that "as Himmler governed his 'SS Empire' like a micromanager, and reserved all decisions to himself, Peiper was familiar with all of his affairs" (p. 37). This knowledge included the planning for the murder of European Jewry, a plan that Westemeier claims was already an "implied order for the SS by the end of 1938 at the latest" (p. 38). Such an assertion certainly falls outside the growing historical consensus, which dates the decision to initiate the Holocaust to the summer of 1941. Westemeier further weakens his case by providing information extraneous to his argument. Case in point is his discussion of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. As part of Himmler's entourage, Peiper visited the camp in January 1941. The day consisted of inspecting the female SS guards and the prisoners themselves. Westemeier then details crimes committed at the camp in the following years, with special emphasis on numerous medical experiments, which has nothing to do with Peiper, who by late 1941 had already moved into combat commands in the field. West-

meier also alleges that "Peiper already knew in the summer of 1941 that [Rudolf] Höß was ordered to expand Auschwitz for the extermination of European Jews;" this statement immediately follows a paragraph in which the author writes that Himmler informed Höß of this mission secretly, without his adjutant Peiper in the room (p. 53). Such a contradiction does little to advance the author's case. Obviously, it is extremely likely that Peiper was aware of the Final Solution, due to his close working relationship with Himmler. Westemeier, however, wants to show that Peiper's knowledge of the Holocaust means that any attempt to label him an apolitical soldier is utterly absurd. Such a position is simply illogical.

To the millions of men (and women) serving the Nazi state in the occupied eastern territories, the opening stages of the Holocaust were an open secret. Army officers and enlisted men were not only aware of SS Einsatzgruppen activities during Operation Barbarossa; some actively assisted the murder squads. The murders of those deemed undesirable by the regime became such a matter of common knowledge in the army that some commands, such as Army Group South, ordered troops to refrain from participating in or photographing mass executions carried out by SS forces. Westemeier's discussion of the 1st SS Cavalry Regiment's anti-partisan operations during the summer of 1941, a mission that served as a cover for the liquidation of Jews behind Army Group Center, needs to be complemented by at least a mention of the Army's frequent recourse to similar "anti-partisan" operations later in the war. In this respect, Peiper indeed may have been like any other soldier: someone who not only knew of and/or witnessed atrocities but participated in war crimes himself.

Though the medium of biography has proven itself valuable in examining historical issues, the genre is also prone to various hazards. The most pervasive problem is an author's identification with his or her subject. Westemeier admits to this problem with his first biographical study of Peiper; in this second investigation, he adopts a position of profound distaste that borders on condescension. He repeatedly describes Peiper as Himmler's "darling" or "personal darling," which strikes me as a poorly chosen, even patronizing description. A biography can also be weighted down with the most mundane and irrelevant details of the subject's life. By including passages on Peiper's presence at the interrogation of Georg Elser (who attempted to assassinate Hitler in November 1939) or at the presentation of the Knight's Cross to panzer ace Michael Wittman, the author has done nothing to increase our understanding of Peiper; rather, this extra-

neous material diverts the reader's attention from the more important issues.

On a technical note, the layout of the book makes the narrative hard to follow at times. The author frequently uses long quotations and the book's spacing repeatedly leads to confusion about whether the author or another source is speaking. Finally, the translation of the book from the original German is less than polished. Phrases such as "untactical military leadership" or "but through their historical development, this 'harmless' SS horsemen picture is strongly questionable" are typical of the uneven, somewhat jarring prose (pp. 40, 18).

The Waffen-SS was certainly a major component of Himmler's SS and its attempt to construct a racial imperium in occupied Europe. Not only were a large per-

centage of its officers and NCOs rotated between concentration camps and front-line units; many of its formations committed war crimes in both eastern and western Europe. Peiper, who worked closely with Himmler during the opening stages of the Holocaust and whose combat formations murdered civilians and prisoners of war throughout Europe, certainly is emblematic of organization's criminality. While Westemeier provides enough evidence to demolish the myth of an "apolitical soldier" doing only his duty, his polemical and tendentious argument detracts from the overall effort.

Note

[1]. Charles Sydnor, *Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Jeff Rutherford. Review of Westemeier, Jens, *Joachim Peiper: A Biography of Himmler's SS Commander*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13921>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.