

Ronald M. Smelser, Edward J. Davies II. *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xii + 327 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83365-3; \$21.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-71231-6.

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## Mythbusters: Uncovering the Real Authors behind the Myth of the Eastern Front

It is said that history is written by the winners. In their book, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (2008), authors Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II present a compelling and notable exception to this rule. It is perhaps for this reason alone that the book would be of interest to many. But the detailed analysis presented in the work does much to explain not only why historiography matters, but how US-Soviet relations may still be encumbered by our different understandings of the Nazi-Soviet war, with former German military officers—not a few among them suspected war criminals—playing no small role in creating this misunderstanding.

The myth of the Eastern Front that the authors target can be described as follows: the German army, or Wehrmacht, fought a “clean” and valiant war against the Soviet Union, devoid of ideology and atrocity. The German officer caste did not share Hitler’s ideological precepts and blamed the SS and other Nazi paramilitary organizations for creating the war of racial enslavement and extermination that the conflict became. The German *Landser*, or soldier, as far as conditions allowed, was generally paternal and kind to the Soviet citizens and uninterested in Soviet Jewry. That the German military lost this war was due in no way to its battlefield acumen, but to a combination of external factors, first and foremost Hitler’s decisions. According to this myth, the defeat of Germany on the Eastern Front constituted a tragedy, not just for Germans, but for Western civilization.

The book is divided more or less sequentially into eight chapters. The first section, encompassing the first five chapters, investigates the historical antecedents, the myth itself, and reasons for this myth-making concerning the Eastern Front of World War II. The last three chapters reposition the focus from history and the historical actors who helped create the myth to how this myth is perpetuated, and in many cases celebrated, by the historical gurus, Internet war-gamers, and reenactors of today.

The authors, well versed in the primary and secondary literature of the subject, build a strong argument. Beginning with a brief survey of US-Soviet relations dating back to 1917, the initial chapter goes on to record how the Nazi-Soviet war was covered by the mass media of the United States. During the war years, correspondents for *Time*, *Life*, and other media filled their bylines with tales of Soviet ingenuity and pluck, the military prowess of the Red Army, Soviet industrial might, and sympathy for the Soviet Union’s cause. While there were occasionally more critical pieces expressing American antipathy towards communism, the general tone of the media coverage in the United States was to build bridges of understanding between the wartime allies.

In the following chapter, “The Cold War and the Emergence of a Lost Cause Mythology,” the authors trace the origins of the myth of the Eastern Front in great detail, underlining the primacy of time and space. The immediate postwar period, marked by the realization of

divergent American and Soviet postwar foreign policy goals, meant that the wartime narrative of good-natured, cooperative Soviet allies was no longer usable. The remoteness of the Eastern Front to American operations and its inaccessibility resulted in an ignorance of the true nature of what one German veteran of the conflict described as “for an old warrior a somewhat different war.”[1]

In the following three chapters, the authors describe how a new narrative was created by those who, although vanquished, knew the Soviet Union and Red Army better than their Western counterparts: the officers of the German army and Luftwaffe. To be sure, they were abetted by an American military desperate for information on their Cold War enemy and willing to accept German apologist accounts at face value. A key contributor to this myth, perhaps even its progenitor, was General Franz Halder. As director of the “Control Group” of the US Army’s Operational History (German) section, Halder collaborated with other German generals he recruited to provide American military authorities with accounts of combat and orders of battle on the Eastern Front. These accounts, written in Halder’s eyes by “reliable” German generals, not only provided military insights into the way the Red Army fought. They also offered a platform for the German generals to distance themselves from the shadows of the Nuremberg and other postwar trials. Remarkable in this development is the speed and depth with which Halder and American military authorities joined forces: the US military saw so much value in the studies Halder’s control group was producing that it even shielded Halder himself from prosecution in a German court (p. 65).

As the authors describe, many other factors beyond Halder’s efforts led to the cementing of this myth. By 1955, the desire of the United States to create a new German army to defend the iron curtain had trumped any denazification concerns, allowing for a pronounced continuity between the Wehrmacht and the newly founded Bundeswehr.[2] Draconian reparations and abuse of the German civilian population in the Soviet occupation zone only served to confirm to US leaders the German generals’ portrayals of Soviets as rapacious and barbarous. In contrast, the US military’s policy of rotating occupation troops meant that young American soldiers who had not fought the German army returned after their tour with mostly positive memories of fraternization with German civilians, absorbing German views of the Red Menace along the way. This fraternization between victor and vanquished was not limited to the grassroots level, how-

ever. Many American generals had the utmost respect for the fighting prowess of the German army and, through speaking tours, workshops, and co-authored journals in both Germany and the United States, fostered relationships with ex-Wehrmacht generals.

Some of these generals, such as Erich von Manstein and Heinz Guderian, wrote memoirs about their service to the Third Reich that were celebrated by their Allied counterparts, becoming for a time must-reads in Western military circles. Despite their exculpatory nature and often containing more than a hint of national socialist racial dogma, these memoirs helped to remove whatever doubts remained about Wehrmacht complicity in the war crimes of the Eastern Front. As the authors point out, such generals “conjured up a black-and-white world in which Hitler incorporated evil and they, virtue” (p. 137). So successful were such accounts that, already by 1951, Eisenhower wrote, “I have come to know that there is a real difference between the regular German soldier and officer and Hitler and his criminal group. For my part, I do not believe that the German soldier as such has lost his honor” (p. 75). American military setbacks in both the subsequent Korean and Vietnam wars tended to bur-nish German army credentials in land warfare, occasioning new US studies of the German military in a search for answers to less than desirable outcomes in Asia.

In the final three chapters, the authors turn their attention to how this myth has been received and amplified by what they define as a legion of gurus, war-gamers, romancers, and reenactors of today. The gurus, authors of books popular with romancers, vary in both the quality and topics of their writing, but “ignore[] the charges of serious misdeeds leveled against the German military and ... provide[] an heroic context for the men” they write about (p. 174). A favorite topic of the gurus is the Waffen-SS, which the romancers view as the premier military formation on the Eastern Front despite having been judged at the Nuremberg trials to be a criminal organization. The opportunities that the Internet provides for communication between the gurus, war-gamers, romancers, and reenactors has led to a strengthening of the myth and a dialogue dominated by those who, under the auspices of a no-political celebration of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS, reference Soviet atrocities in Germany but nothing of Wehrmacht nor Waffen-SS war crimes in various theaters of war.

As someone whose first contact with German military history was through the Avalon-Hill board games I played as a teenager, I followed closely, and could only

agree with, the authors' argument to their potential danger to depoliticize a conflict which at its core was a war of racial subjugation and conquest. The authors' analysis of these current-day trends is deep and compelling. When considering the durability of the myth of the Eastern Front, the authors also provide insights that question our own cultural assumptions: "Whereas the American public appropriately honors and commemorates the suffering of the six million European Jews killed by the Germans during World War II, little if any sentiment has been or will be extended to the families of the eight million Red Army soldiers who died fighting the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS or the twenty-two million civilians killed by these military organizations and the killing squads, the Einsatzgruppen, that worked closely with the Wehrmacht" (p. 136).

Certainly, any attempt to debunk the myth of the Eastern Front in contemporary American society would also have to (re)consider the United States' own role in defeating Nazi tyranny. Perhaps another reason for the remarkable life of this myth in the United States? The authors strengthen this line of inquiry by presenting an analogy between the myth of the Eastern Front and the "Lost Cause" myth of the American Civil War (chapter 3), contending that on both occasions, these myths were created for political purposes. In this section, the book illustrates that myth-building is not an isolated endeavor restricted to a particular conflict or time period, but an ever-present search by many for a (more) usable past. Such considerations lead to speculation on how American visions of rapacious, barbarous Soviets from the Cold War—visions partially created and continuously fostered by defeated German military officers—continue to impact the way contemporary American leaders view the Soviet Union's successor state, Russia, today. In short, myths matter.

There is irony in the staying power of the myth of the Eastern Front in American popular culture. The so-called Wehrmacht exhibitions (1995-99 and 2001-04) did much to educate German society about the complicity of the Wehrmacht in war crimes, and to illustrate that in both its goals and the methods employed to achieve them, the war on the Eastern front was anything but a "clean" war. Errors in the captioning of some of the photos led to the closing of the exhibition just before it was scheduled

to arrive in New York—its first venue outside German-speaking Europe. As much rancor as the first exhibition elicited, the second exhibition is generally credited with creating a new consensus in contemporary Germany on the complicity and crimes of the Wehrmacht. One can only wonder what effect the cancelled exhibition in New York would have had on the perception of the Wehrmacht in American popular culture.

This is a book that can be used more effectively by scholars than the general public. For the general public, more context in the book regarding how the Waffen-SS differed from regular German army units in training, equipment, and deployments would have been useful. Additionally, while scholars are sufficiently versed in historic examples of war crimes committed by Waffen-SS units, the lay reader will be faced with more difficulty regarding context, especially in light of the falsehoods appearing daily in Internet website chatrooms. Another minor criticism is the occasional sniping the prose contains when discussing the war gurus and romancers, in which the authors' frustrations with the gurus' and romancers' romantic notions of a valiant German military become palpable.[3]

These minor criticisms do not, however, detract from the overall scholarship and importance of the book. For any researcher of the German army or the war on the Eastern Front, as well as American popular culture, it provides much fascinating analysis on how, far removed from its time and place, the echoes of this war still reverberate.

#### Notes

[1]. Captured German records, LIII Army Corps, Brief 6.7.1941 (National Archives Microfilm Publication T314/1315), National Archives at College Park, College Park MD.

[2]. As the authors point out: "It is interesting to note that in 1955, 100 percent of the Bundeswehr officer corps consisted of former Wehrmacht soldiers" (p. 76).

[3]. For example, see the authors' aside, "Landwehr would like this passage," in the discussion of Raymond F. Toliver and Trevor J. Constables' book *The Blonde Knight of Germany* (pp. 170-173, here p. 173).

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