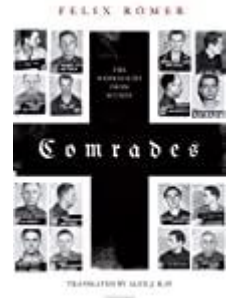


**Felix Römer.** *Comrades: The Wehrmacht from Within*. Translated by Alex J. Kay. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Illustrations. viii + 383 pp. \$94.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-879709-8.



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**Published on** H-War (December, 2021)

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With *Comrades: The Wehrmacht from Within*, Felix Römer has made a valuable addition to the ever-growing library on World War II, the Third Reich, and the Wehrmacht. Written in 2012, it is now available in English, thanks to Oxford University Press's 2019 translation by Alex J. Kay (himself an outstanding historian of the era). *Comrades* is another corrective to earlier myths surrounding the intersection of the three topics mentioned above: any German successes were due to Teutonic militarism, Nazi politicization, superior tactical small groups, and so on. In case there was any doubt, Römer makes clear that the Wehrmacht was no monolith but, like all militaries or large organizations, was made up of a complex combination of diverse individuals.

Römer's primary source materials are approximately 102,000 pages of interrogation reports, questionnaires, transcriptions of eavesdropped conversations, and other documents involving about three thousand German prisoners of war (POWs) held temporarily at Fort Hunt, Virginia (a classified facility on the bend of the Potomac

between Alexandria and Mount Vernon). Although a small sample of the nearly seventeen million men who wore Wehrmacht uniforms, these records are a demographic goldmine: they cover all three branches of the German military plus the SS, and provide name, age, hometown, pre-service occupation, rank, duty position(s), and other personal information.[1] Something about the men unearthed during early POW processing or Atlantic transit caused them to be separated from the group and sent to Hunt for two-three weeks of specialized handling (for example, a man who had worked at the Me-262 factory before being called up). Both American captors and Römer's research assistants had numerous checks and balances to confirm or deny the veracity of the Germans' stories. For example, immediately following an interrogation session, the captors eavesdropped on what the man told his cellmate, and men were constantly shuffled among cells to see if or how their stories varied by audience.

*Comrades* is organized with an introduction and a conclusion, plus eight core chapters titled

“Captivity,” “Ideology,” “Soldierly Ethos,” “Comradeship,” “Fighting Spirit,” “Troop Leaders,” “Fighting and Killing,” and “War Crimes.” Römer has done an excellent job of blending the subjective with the objective; for example, he combines quotes and anecdotes with analysis of how often interrogation subjects mentioned certain topics or words. The Americans photographed just about every POW in stripped-down uniforms, and Römer includes many of these US Army Signal Corps images beside the appropriate narrative. It is often haunting to see the man’s face as we read his story. Except for the usual well-known and high-ranking servicemen, we simply are not able to make such personal connections with the vast bulk of Wehrmacht servicemen.

Römer begins *Comrades* with a private story of his own: his own grandfather had survived 99 percent of the war, starting in September 1939, only to be killed on May 3, 1945, years before the author was born. The grandfather’s brother, Römer’s great uncle, became a surrogate but went into emotional lockdown upon hearing the word “Russia.” With this personal background, and following the lead of social scientists and mentors Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, Römer launched into his project. It is worth pointing out here that most of these POWs were captured during the last two years of the war, starting around the defeat in North Africa and leading to the Italian and north-west European campaigns. With the exception of a few sailors or airmen taken prior to May 1943, most of the men encountered here fell prisoner after the easy or “fun” (their word) victories of the war’s early stages had long passed (p. 165).

Like any military, the Wehrmacht drew its manpower from a representative cross section of the Third Reich’s male population. However, Römer shows undisputable evidence of Prussian/German militarism. We see the apathetic and the average, the self-important die-hard, and the technically proficient technician. But dating from at least the founding of Bismarck’s Second Empire,

“soldiering” is what the average German male did, and that is just about all the men at Fort Hunt spoke about ... all the time. Sure, there were plenty of socialists or pacifists or intellectuals who resisted this tendency, and this is not to say that soldiering meant behaving like the bloodthirsty anthropomorphic “Hun” gorilla of the famous World War I poster. Many a grandfather or father had fought in 1870-71 or 1914-18, and even if they did not, as a minimum they had some experience with barracks life or the reservists’ autumn maneuvers. The men who fill Römer’s pages could not escape this legacy, not even the factory worker drafted in late 1944 who surrendered at the first opportunity without firing a shot (and there are plenty of these here). The rarity of this sort of behavior makes it the exception that proves the rule.

The men we meet in *Comrades* had countless motivations for fighting in the first place and for continuing to fight when the situation looked, and indeed was, objectively hopeless. Their reasons would not be that unusual in any other military or nation: sense of duty, tradition, patriotism, peer/societal pressure, nationalism, and on and on. But these Germans just kept going, even if they had lost faith in Adolf Hitler, knew that the V-2 rocket was “all shit,” or simply understood that the Wehrmacht was getting beat everywhere and retreating on every front (p. 174). As we know, in 1945 there would be no general collapse as in 1918, and Römer’s subjects tell us why. A principal explanation is that these men were all about the here and now: how good their unit leaders were, how their sector of the front held out, the quality and quantity of their food, etc. It did not seem to matter to them that Germany’s war in general was in shambles; that was a problem for higher headquarters or whom I call “future Fritz.” The facts that the regiment down the road was failing, or that in 1944 surviving a mere three U-boat sorties made one an “alter Kämpfer,” did not affect how the man felt or thought here and now.

They would keep on because that is what German society expected of them.

All the other factors that went into individual or institutional calculus, covered in the appropriately named chapters, will be familiar to students of Maximian von Fretter-Pico, Martin van Creveld, Omer Bartov, or Ben Shepherd.[2] Nazi political indoctrination certainly played a role: the SS fought a little harder (but was that superior manpower and equipment or higher calorie food?) and those raised in the Hitler Youth showed more willingness to die, but SA Stormtroopers drafted in large numbers late in the war seemed to have poor fighting qualities. Likewise systemic anti-Semitism was very present, but genocide or indiscriminate killing of women and children seemingly existed mainly in rumors about other units or sectors of the front. A constant and uniform theme, however, is the distinction between the eastern and all other fronts. The brutality of the Nazi-Soviet War is carried throughout *Comrades*, as are the fighting qualities of the Red Army soldier compared to his Western counterparts.

According to Römer, the Wehrmacht denies easy categorization with one exception; age, education, politics, class, or region never seem to count as much as whether or not the man came of age during the Weimar Republic. Older men who had served in World War I (usually field grade officers) and younger ones of the Third Reich generation always come off as more willing to fight and die than those too young for the Great War or already mature by 1933. An added benefit of *Comrades* is what it teaches us about the Americans, the other key players in the book. One interesting point is the Yanks' construct of "Nazi" and "anti-Nazi" POWs, which the Germans considered completely false. While the Americans went so far as to create separate camps for their two (imagined) populations, their captives considered all their countrymen simply "Germans."

*Comrades* is not without its occasional faults. Better editing could have eliminated a few anec-

dotes and quotes being recycled two-three times, while more than once Allied aircraft are called "jets." Although I applaud avoiding amateurish "Denglish," the Panzer Lehr Division is awkwardly translated as Tank Training Division. These minor problems notwithstanding, Römer's work is essential reading for those trying to understand the minds of Hitler's military.

#### Notes

[1]. An equivalent facility established in Tracy, California, for Japanese POWs promptly closed down due to lack of subjects. The British had a similar program that recorded conversations of German and Italian POWs they had captured, but they did not keep the extensive demographic data such as Römer exploits here.

[2]. Just to name a few: Maximian von Fretter-Pico, *Missbrauchte Infanterie: Deutsche Infanteriedivisionen im osteuropäischen Großraum 1941 bis 1944. Erlebnis-skizzen, Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse*, (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1957); Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982); Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Ben Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

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**Citation:** Robert Kirchubel. Review of Römer, Felix. *Comrades: The Wehrmacht from Within*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2021.

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