

DISMANTLING THE MYTHS OF THE EASTERN FRONT: The Role of the Wehrmacht in the War of Annihilation

Andrew Kapinos, Virginia Tech

The English-language historiography of the Eastern Front of World War II is notably sparse until the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the first couple of post-war decades, memoirs written by former generals in the Wehrmacht, the armed forces of the Third Reich, dominated the historical conversation. These memoirs created the myth of the clean and apolitical Wehrmacht, where military operations and genocidal policy were separate. According to this narrative, it was the Nazi leadership and the SS that committed large-scale atrocities on the Eastern Front while the Wehrmacht focused only on winning the war. Anglo-American historians largely accepted these accounts, mainly because of Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union. The experiences of German generals were invaluable insights into Soviet doctrine, and therefore the generals' tendency to downplay their own complicity in Nazi war crimes was largely accepted. Increasing access to German and later Soviet archives in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that this was far from the truth. Recent historical works have demonstrated that genocidal policy and war strategy were inextricably linked. The question of why the Wehrmacht accepted Nazi ideology is more difficult to answer. Historians have applied this question to both the High Command and to the everyday soldiers, with differing conclusions.

The war on the Eastern Front started with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, in June 1941. The Nazis enjoyed early success, pushing deep into Soviet territory throughout the summer. However, they encountered far more resistance than was initially expected. The Wehrmacht suffered high rates of attrition against fierce Soviet resistance around Smolensk, Minsk, and Kiev. Though they were ultimately victorious in all



of those cities, they failed to break the back of the Red Army. Additionally, their logistical situation was dismal, leading to massive supply shortages. Nazi hopes for a quick victory evaporated as their advance eventually stalled outside of Moscow in the center and Leningrad in the North. When it became clear that the Wehrmacht did not have the ability to take Moscow, they attempted further advances through Ukraine and Southern Russia in 1942. Crucial Soviet victories at Stalingrad and Kursk in 1943 ended any chance of a stalemate. The Wehrmacht would not launch any further massive offensives after Kursk. Throughout 1944 the Red Army pushed the Wehrmacht back through Ukraine and Belarus, recapturing the Baltic States and Poland. They pushed into Germany in 1945, capturing Berlin in April and May.

Throughout the war, atrocities and war crimes were frighteningly rampant. Soldiers and civilians alike died in almost inconceivably high numbers. The sheer scale of the battles, widespread hunger, disease, and outright massacres killed between 25-30 million Soviet soldiers and civilians.¹ Prisoners of war on both sides were subjected to harsh treatment and few survived. The killing was so intense that the Eastern Front frequently seemed to be “more murder than war.”² However, popular memory of the war, at least for the first few decades after, viewed the genocidal aspects and the military aspects of the conflict as separate.

The authors represented here have challenged this myth and put the war in a context more representative of reality. Some scholars in the 1990s addressed why “ordinary” Germans who were not ardent Nazis participated in criminal activity on the Eastern Front, and in their analyses recognized a link between criminal activity and official policy.³ Later scholars further explored this link, with Geoffrey Megargee arguing in 2007 that military policy and criminal policy were not separate from each other at all; rather, the Wehrmacht planned and executed the war in the East as a criminal “war of annihilation” from the beginning.⁴ Since then, scholars have examined specific military

¹ Geoffrey Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), xi.

² Stephen Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), xxii.

³ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and the War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

⁴ Megargee, *War of Annihilation*, xii.

orders and detailed the radicalizing effect that the war had on policy.⁵ Today, the myth of the clean and apolitical Wehrmacht has mostly disappeared from scholarly debates concerning the Eastern Front and has been replaced by acceptance of an inescapable link between military operations and Nazi criminal policy.⁶

Hitler's Army directly confronts the myth of the “clean” and “apolitical” Wehrmacht and examines its connection to German society. Instead of accepting the Wehrmacht as separate from Nazi ideology, Bartov examines to what extent the Wehrmacht, both the senior members and the soldiers, were an “integral part of state and society.”⁷ To do this, Bartov examines why the soldier continued to fight even when the war appeared hopeless. Bartov determines that the Nazis created a “distorted perception of reality” among the soldiers through indoctrination that thoroughly demonized the Soviets, making the soldiers believe that they were “defending humanity against a demonic invasion.”⁸ He notes that most soldiers had been workers in the Third Reich who were subjected to years of Nazi propaganda and ideology before joining the army. They likely internalized certain moral stances against communism and the East that made it easier to commit atrocities, especially when those atrocities were legalized.⁹ Bartov makes it very clear that the Wehrmacht was not separate from society or from the Nazi leadership, but “was the army of the people and the willing tool of the regime.”¹⁰ In other words, Wehrmacht policy was reflective of Nazi ideology.

Bartov extends this analytical lens to examine memory of the war in postwar Germany. He argues that postwar interpretations reflect the same ‘distorted perception of reality’ that was a defense mechanism for dealing with the horror of the war and operated to

⁵ David Stahel, “Radicalizing Warfare: The German Command and the Failure of Operation Barbarossa,” in *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, eds. Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012); Felix Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies: The Army and Hitler’s Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front,” in *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, eds. Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012), 73-100; Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, “Conclusion: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization,” in *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, eds. Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012), 314-319.

⁶ This view can be seen in: Fritz, *Ostkrieg*; Megargee, *War of Annihilation*.

⁷ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 3.

⁸ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 10.

⁹ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 7-8.

¹⁰ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 10.

normalize atrocities.¹¹ According to this assertion, Germans viewed themselves as victims in defeat, with soldiers remembering only their own suffering and not that of their victims. On a scholarly level, this connection is particularly visible in the events of the West German *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s. In a very public debate, conservative historians attempted to relativize Nazi Germany and play down the atrocities committed by the regime by comparing them to the Soviet Union under Stalin. The themes mobilized by these historians, that Operation Barbarossa was a defensive strike against Jewish-Bolshevism, that the Wehrmacht was carrying out a noble duty to prevent the spread of communism, and the notion that Germany had a historical mission to guard against the East, were all themes used by the Nazi leadership to justify their brutal policies during the war.¹² These justifications formed the basis for immediate German memory of the war, which spread to Anglo-American historians through the accounts of German generals. The political climate of the Cold War made it even easier to accept the demonized image of the Soviet Union. This all combined to create a highly distorted picture of the war that persisted for decades.

Bartov's claims of a distorted perception of reality fits well with Christopher Browning's interpretation of why men with no previous indications of murderous tendencies participated in atrocities on the Eastern Front. In *Ordinary Men*, Browning seeks to explain war atrocities by evaluating the role of military indoctrination and by utilizing social psychology. He focuses on the records and accounts of Reserve Police Battalion 101, which was not part of the Wehrmacht, but rather the *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police); but his insights into their behavior can be applied to drafted and enlisted soldiers as well. He demonstrates that these men were not victims who were forced through terror to comply with criminal policy. As Browning notes, none of the men in Reserve Police Battalion 101 were ever forced to shoot civilians, nor did they face penalties if they did not.¹³ Nonetheless, many did choose to participate in atrocities. Browning concludes that a combination of factors, including indoctrination, deference to authority, and conformity are to blame for this behavior. Of these, conformity appears to be the most important. The soldiers were far from home in hostile territory; their unit was their only source of support. Refusing to participate on moral grounds could be potentially seen as passing judgement on those who did, which

¹¹ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 183.

¹² For more information on the *Historikerstreit*, see Geoff Eley's summary of the event in "Nazism, Politics, and the Image of the Past: Thoughts on the West German *Historikerstreit* 1986-1987," *Past & Present* 121 (1988): 171-208.

¹³ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 171.

could have alienated them from the group.¹⁴ Deference to authority and legitimation are very important as well. In the Wehrmacht, especially in the East, atrocity was a part of official policy. When criminal activity is normalized in such a way, it makes it even easier to participate.¹⁵ This explanation is very well reasoned, and is chilling for how understandable it is. For the soldiers on the front lines in the East, facing some of the most brutal fighting ever seen, it is not hard to imagine how important the support of the unit was to them. Both Browning and Bartov's works have been incredibly influential in providing an explanation for how otherwise "normal" soldiers were able to commit horrible atrocities during the war with the Soviet Union.

From there, historians have shown that atrocities were more than a consequence of the brutal conditions experienced during the war; atrocities were a strategic goal of the war that were planned from the beginning. Geoffrey Megargee argues in *War of Annihilation* that the enormous death toll, both military and civilian, was a result of "deliberate policies" designed to transform the Soviet Union into Lebensraum, or living space, for the German people. Further, he demonstrates that the senior members of the Wehrmacht were not only aware of these policies, but actively participated in their design and implementation.¹⁶ Stephen Fritz agrees, stating in *Ostkrieg* that Hitler always considered the war against the Soviets as the "right" war; that is, the war that was most important to Nazi ideology and goals.¹⁷ He also agrees that the war was planned from the beginning as a war of annihilation "with the full knowledge and complicity" of the senior members of the Wehrmacht.¹⁸ Fritz further stresses that acquiring Lebensraum was about acquiring resources, especially food.¹⁹ Fritz elaborates further on the Nazi plans for the East. He argues that they were not about typical colonization, but about a "complete agricultural and demographic restructuring" of the East that would require the deaths of over 30 million Soviet civilians.²⁰ Wehrmacht policies were designed to achieve this goal not only through conquering the necessary territory, but through implementing criminal policies and exploiting natural resources.

The differences in the two author's interpretations have more to do with the differing scope of their works; Megargee focuses only on

¹⁴ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 185.

¹⁵ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 161.

¹⁶ Megargee, *War of Annihilation*, xi.

¹⁷ Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, xx.

¹⁸ Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, xxii.

¹⁹ Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, 476.

²⁰ Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, 477-478.

the planning and implementation of Operation Barbarossa, whereas Fritz examines the entire war from 1941 to 1945. Megargee identifies Lebensraum as the goal of the invasion, but does not go into detail on any further goals. Fritz, however, stresses the concept of Lebensraum as part of the preparations for an eventual conflict with the United States that Hitler thought was inevitable.²¹ The vast spaces of the Soviet Union would be needed to provide food and other resources to support this eventual conflict. Additionally, Fritz posits that while the war was always planned as a war of annihilation, the full scale was not anticipated at the beginning.²² As the military situation began to deteriorate in late 1941, the Nazis responded with increasingly harsh policies in an attempt to break down Soviet resistance. When the resistance only increased, military strategy radicalized in turn. The two analyses do not truly conflict with each other; Fritz simply examines a wider timeframe and, therefore, comes to a more complete and detailed conclusion.

David Stahel details the failure of Operation Barbarossa and radicalization of military and annihilation policy in “Radicalizing Warfare: The German Command and the Failure of Operation Barbarossa.” Stahel argues that Operation Barbarossa was poorly planned and based on major misconceptions of both Soviet strength and the nature warfare in Eastern Europe. The Wehrmacht had always relied upon quick, overwhelming victories achieved through blitzkrieg. The success of this tactic in Western Europe gave them false confidence.²³ In reality, the sheer size of the Soviet Union made reliance on a quick victory very risky. Further, Stahel stresses that the Nazis massively underestimated the Soviets’ ability to mobilize and their defense in depth. Early victories gave even more false confidence that the Soviets had been defeated and would not put up significant resistance.²⁴ The Soviets did put up significant resistance, which became more determined the farther the Germans advanced. After the initial blitzkrieg ground to a halt outside of Moscow, the war devolved into a war of attrition that Germany was not prepared to win. They simply did not have the resources or the logistical apparatus to outlast

²¹ Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, 476; Megargee also acknowledges Hitler’s belief that a conflict with the USA was inevitable, though he does not place as much emphasis on this as Fritz; Megargee, *War of Annihilation*, 150.

²² Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, xx.

²³ Stahel, “Radicalizing Warfare,” 19-21.

²⁴ Stahel, “Radicalizing Warfare,” 21-23, 25-26. Stahel also details the constant disagreements between Hitler and the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH) or High Command on strategy that contributed to its inefficiency.

the Soviets.²⁵ The ferocity of the war and increasing desperation on the part of the Wehrmacht forced “cycles of radicalization” that led to “ever bolder initiatives and a general escalation of violence.”²⁶ What started as a brutal war provoked an equally fierce response, producing conditions that led to further brutalization.

The implementation of a set of military directives known as the Criminal Orders is particularly damning to the idea of a ‘clean’ Wehrmacht, as Felix Römer demonstrates in “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies: The Army and Hitler’s Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front.” The Criminal orders were two military directives issued by Hitler in 1941, the Military Jurisdiction Order and the Commissar Order. The Military Jurisdiction Order bypassed typical justice systems for dealing with civilian resistance and instead authorized “collective violent measures” in response.²⁷ The Commissar Order demanded summary executions of Soviet political commissars.²⁸ Overwhelming evidence contained in Wehrmacht records shows that a clear majority of units complied with the orders. Around eighty percent of German divisions in the East carried out executions of commissars for certain.²⁹ The Military Jurisdiction Order was also extensively implemented, with at least half a million Soviet civilians being executed for supposed partisan activities.³⁰ Together, the execution of these two orders demonstrates that the senior members of the Wehrmacht accepted mass atrocity as an official policy. The fact that the orders were issued so early in the war further proves that the war was planned as a war of annihilation. Römer argues that the smaller unit leaders and soldiers complied with the orders not only because they were seen as legitimate, having come from the High Command, but because of defensiveness and conformity. Being deep in the territory of such a thoroughly demonized enemy led to a widespread feeling among the soldiers that they needed to constantly defend themselves. Nearly any resistance, violent or not, was seen as partisan activity that had to be stamped out. Additionally, that paranoia made the support of the unit even more important, leading

²⁵ Stahel, “Radicalizing Warfare,” 29, 39. Especially important was the attrition rate of German panzers, which were vital to blitzkrieg. This loss was a major reason for the loss of momentum that forced the war to devolve into a war of attrition. As Soviet industrial capacity increased, they were able to field more and more tanks, while the Germans could not replace their own tanks.

²⁶ Stahel, “Radicalizing Warfare,” 40; Kay, Rutherford, and Stahel, “Conclusion: Total War Genocide, and Radicalization,” 314.

²⁷ Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies,” 75.

²⁸ Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies,” 76.

²⁹ Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies,” 88.

³⁰ Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies,” 93.

most soldiers to conform.³¹ These reasons- conformity and deference to authority- are nearly identical to those given by Christopher Browning to explain the actions of Reserve Police Battalion 101. Browning's observation that some individuals found ways to mitigate or circumvent the annihilation policies holds true for the Wehrmacht and the Criminal Orders as well, though outright noncompliance with either order was very rare.

The war was waged on such an immense scale that the reasons for it and the events that occurred within it are astoundingly complex. Anglo-American understanding of the war was additionally hindered by the political necessities of the Cold War that that did not allow for positive views of the Soviets. The experiences of German generals were accepted because they were invaluable insights to Soviet doctrine. However, with time and new information available after the fall of the Iron Curtain, historians have reached a consensus that Hitler's racial war of annihilation and the Wehrmacht's military operations against the Soviet Union were far from separate. The 'clean' Wehrmacht never existed. Senior members of the Wehrmacht were complicit in the planning and the implementation of the war of annihilation. Even though the Wehrmacht was not directly involved in the most notorious aspects of Nazi genocidal policy, namely the death camps, they committed their own share of atrocities. The Criminal Orders show that the Wehrmacht leadership embraced atrocity as a way of establishing German control over conquered territory. The "war of ideologies" demanded solutions that produced "maximum benefit with minimum effort," and to the Nazis this meant terrorizing the Soviets into submission through brutal and murderous policies.³² Why individual soldiers participated in atrocities is harder to determine. Browning himself acknowledges that the rationale undoubtedly varied from person to person.³³ The explanation of conformity makes a lot of sense, especially when the atrocities were justified by insidious propaganda that made the thought of defeat "seem equivalent to a universal apocalypse," as Bartov put it.³⁴

The feedback loop observed by Kay, Rutherford, and Stahel, where insufficient planning faced with unexpectedly fierce resistance led to spiraling radicalization of policy, is the key to understanding the war in the East. The war was always going to be brutal; Nazi racial ideology adopted by the Wehrmacht demanded that. But fierce Soviet resistance forced the Wehrmacht to take that doctrine even further. Once the war had devolved into a war of attrition, the Nazis were at a

³¹ Römer, "The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies," 87

³² Römer, "The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies," 77.

³³ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 188.

³⁴ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 7.

major disadvantage due to their deficit of resources and numbers. The Soviets proved to be far more determined and capable than the Nazis had anticipated. They had already committed mass atrocity during the invasion; they had nowhere to hide. Thus, the Nazis resorted to ever-harsher policy, both military and genocidal, to try and break the Soviet resistance. Unfortunately for them, this only made the Soviets more determined to beat them back, forcing even further radicalization of policy. Far from occurring in separate spheres, the operational war and the war of annihilation were one and the same.

Bibliography

- Bartov, Omer.** *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and the War in the Third Reich*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Browning, Christopher.** *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1992.
- Eley, Geoff.** "Nazism, Politics, and the Image of the Past: Thoughts on the West German Historikerstreit 1986-1987." *Past & Present* 121 (1988): 171-208.
- Fritz, Stephen G.** *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011.
- Kay, Alex J., Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel.** "Conclusion: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization." In *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, edited by Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, 314-319. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012.
- Megargee, Geoffrey.** *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007.
- Römer, Felix.** "The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies: The Army and Hitler's Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front." In *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, edited by Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, 73-100. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012.
- Stahel, David.** "Radicalizing Warfare: The German Command and the Failure of Operation Barbarossa." In *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, edited by Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, 19-44. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012.



About the Author:

Andrew Kapinos of Centreville, Virginia is a senior at Virginia Tech majoring in History with minors in Russian Area Studies and War & Society. Andrew's primary research interests include twentieth-century Russia and Eastern Europe, particularly the lasting diplomatic and societal effects of World War II. Andrew will be attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill starting in the fall of 2018 to pursue an MA in Russian and East European Studies. Afterwards, he hopes to work in diplomacy.