Meeting a Historian:
A Short Reflection

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I have been familiar with the concept of historiography since I began studying history at the university level, but "Dismantling the Myths of the Eastern Front" was the first purely historiographical paper that I wrote. Using Geoffrey Megargee's 2004 work *War of Annihilation* as a starting point, I traced the debate over the German *Wehrmacht*'s complicity in war crimes on the Eastern Front during World War II. After completing the paper, I felt that I had a good understanding of historiography and how to go about historiographical writing. In December 2017, Megargee visited Virginia Tech to give a lecture on the *Wehrmacht*'s complicity in war crimes, and agreed to an interview with me and VTUHR Editor Grace Hemmingson. I used the opportunity to ask him how he sees himself in the historiography of the Eastern Front and how he approaches historical research. The conversation I had with him both confirmed and clarified aspects of historiography, and left me with a better understanding of the discipline as a whole.

One thing about this interview that I found gave me a better understanding of historiographical writing was that Megargee only specifically mentioned one scholar by name that I read for my paper. I had heard historiography defined as the "history of history," but this interview gave me a better understanding of the symmetry between primary research and historiography. When historians analyze the past, we look at sources and draw connections between them to map out change over time. Historians may draw drastically different conclusions about the same events, depending on what sources they used or even their own background. Historiography is much the same way: the conversation that a researcher may see a given scholar as being a part of is not necessarily the same one that the scholar sees himself in. Thinking about historiography like this makes it seem less like a completely different thing than doing original research, and makes it easier to incorporate one into the other.

War of Annihilation was groundbreaking in that it examined Nazi racial policy and Nazi military strategy as inextricably linked, where they had previously been studied separately. This speaks to a general tendency among historians to keep their fields separate—here military historians studied the military strategy and genocide scholars

MEGAROEE
Geoffrey P. Megargee
WAR OF ANNIHILATION
INSIDE HITLER'S HIGH COM
HITLER'S WILLING EXECUTIONERS
ORDINARY GERMANS AND THE HOLOCAUST
DANIEL JONAH GOLDHAGEN
ADAM TOOZE
MARK MAZOWER
HITLER'S EMPIRE
THE WAGES OF DESTRUCTION
BLOODLANDS
STALIN
THE HOL

studied the racial policies. *War of Annihilation* shows that combining fields or specialties can lead to fresh perspectives on a topic that give a better understanding of it. In my own paper, I considered Christopher Browning and Omer Bartov's works to be speaking to the same question as Megargee, though they may not immediately appear to be doing so. Browning and Bartov examined why individual soldiers would have engaged in war crimes, and both noted that a military culture encouraging racial hatred of Slavs played a role. That observation leads to the question of why that culture existed, and Megargee offers an answer: military strategy was planned according to Nazi racial policies. All three examined the question of why the *Wehrmacht* engaged in war crimes, but at different levels.

Many of the issues that Megargee talked about in the interview will be familiar to students. He talked about issues pertaining to researching and writing history, such as problematic sources, a total lack of sources, and even historical circumstances affecting how and what we can write about. Many of these are matters that history students may have wrestled with at some point. His perspective on problematic sources is particularly instructive, as I think there is a tendency to want to just ignore them. Dr. Megargee's discussion of these problems gives valuable insight into how a professional historian deals with these problems. It is also simply comforting to know that these are not problems that only students face. My discussion with Dr. Megargee gave me new insights into how a professional historian carries out the same tasks that undergraduates do in their classes, including researching, writing, and interpreting other historians' work. I highly recommend that anyone who gets the chance to interview a historian should take it.

Interview with Dr. Geoffrey Megargee

Interview Conducted on December 7, 2017 by Andrew Kapinos and Grace Hemmingson

Dr. Geoffrey Megargee received his M.A. in History from San Jose State University and his Ph.D. in Military History from Ohio State University. He currently works for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. His current project is compiling an encyclopedia of Nazi camps and ghettos, which currently number around 44,000 sites. Megargee is the author of Inside Hitler's High Command *and* War of Annihilation, *which both deal with Germany's role in World War II.*

— The Editors

Kapinos: The paper that I was working on was about the Eastern Front of World War II, and ended up being mainly about the Wehrmacht's complicity in war crimes. How would you place yourself in the historiography of that debate?

Megargee: Well, I'm certainly not going to say that I was the first, there were historians, especially in Germany, back in the 60s and 70s who were well aware of what the Wehrmacht did in the East. It came up in the Nuremburg trials; this shouldn't have been news for anybody. Of course, the Germans were very successful at planting this myth that actually the army hadn't done anything wrong. They were busy fighting a war while the SS was doing all this nasty stuff, and that myth caught on. So I think that I was one of the first [historians] in the United States, not necessarily to address that fact, but to really combine it with the military operations. The two subjects have tended to be treated separately. The crimes on the one hand, and then especially the non-army crimes, and then the war on the other. Military historians weren't terribly interested in the crimes, Holocaust historians weren't terribly knowledgeable about the military. I came to Holocaust studies with a background in military history, so it was a natural fit for me. Now, there have been some other folks who have done work along those lines, although still I don't see a whole lot of strong crossover, in understanding the basics of military tactics, the operations, and how the crimes affected all of those things, and vise-versa.

Hemmingson: Which scholars particularly do you think [your work is] most in conversation with? Was it with the military side of it or were there particular scholars that helped you come across this topic? Or more broadly, how did you come to this topic?

Megargee: My dissertation was on the German High Command in World War II, and really almost nothing about the crimes. I was only vaguely aware of the military's involvement in the crimes, or the details of the crimes themselves. Then, in 2000 I started working at the Holocaust Memorial Museum and when the opportunity came up, the way that second book came about, was the editors approached me, and asked me to write a book about the German High Command and the invasion of the Soviet Union. I said "that's fine, but I would really like to work the crimes into this since I'm working in this place." So Peter Black, I remember, was the one who sort of outlined for me what the Wehrmacht had done; as I say, I knew very little about it. Peter Black was the senior historian at the museum at the time, and he gave me some bullet points and I started doing some reading. Jürgen Förster was actually someone who had helped me with the dissertation and he also had written a lot about the crimes, so I read a lot of his work and talked to him about it. But for the purposes of that book, I don't recall that there were too many scholars who I actually had to talk to, I obviously did a good deal of reading. And I ran the manuscript by a couple of people.

Hemmingson: Did you attend conferences during the writing of the book?

Megargee: Oh yes, sure. I'm trying to remember if I ever presented, I mean, I presented about the Wehrmacht's crimes at the Society for Military History, at the German Studies Association, there's also something called the international Commission on Military History that has a conference every year and I presented there.

Hemmingson: Did you get helpful questions or ideas from the conference situation that helped you develop your arguments?

Megargee: I believe I did, but it's all kind of a blur. The book was finished in 2006, so we're talking almost fifteen years ago that all of this took place.

Kapinos: You talked a little about the accounts of the German generals in both *War of Annihilation* and *Inside Hitler's High Command*, mentioning that they did a really good job of painting their role in the war as having just been military. Do you think that there's any value to those accounts in scholarly debates now, or does the deliberate or unintentional misleading information in there make them completely unusable?

Megargee: Oh, I think they're useful. I think just about anything is usable if you go at it with the right attitude. How does that joke go – "everyone has a use in life, you can always be a bad example." The generals give away – they can be very good if you read Manstein or Guderian or something like that, they can be very good [for finding out] the details of operations. If that's what you're looking for, then that's certainly a good source to go to. Frankly, there isn't a whole lot in there on the crimes, it's not even so much in their memoirs that they said, "we had nothing to do with this," in places they do, the Commissar Order, for example, Guderian talks about that one and lies through his teeth. But for the most part they just sort of leave it out. But there are times when they give things away without meaning to, and I'm thinking more of the military side at this point. [...] I remember Guderian talks about the July 20th assassination attempt, and it's clear, even though he's not coming out and saying "boy, I'm glad they failed," he does say something to the effect of "if these men had succeeded in killing the Führer, they simply would have stained the German officer corps with this crime for the rest of its history." Okay, would that have been so awful?

Hemmingson: Do you ever run into Holocaust deniers?

Megargee: Very rarely, fortunately. I can remember one or two times in lectures when I'm talking about the crimes of the Wehrmacht, I remember there was one guy who was trying to say "oh well, weren't they just following orders?" and things of that nature. Even then, he wasn't really denying anything. So no, I've never run into a David Irving or anybody of that ilk who tries to stand up and say "this was all lies and it never happened." And I'm thankful for that. My name appears on some right-wing German website somewhere, or used to, this was about eight years ago...aside from that, I've stayed below the radar.

Kapinos: Probably good.

Megargee: I don't mind the fight if it comes to me, but I'm not looking for it. I'm perfectly happy to, if somebody does come to me and say "this isn't true," well, okay, I'll be happy to sit down with you for as long as you want and take you through all the records, show you exactly what this is all based on. We have, and to the extent that I have seen questions connected with my project, it's been about the numbers of camps. There are some people who simply refuse to believe the numbers we're coming up with. We're up to about 44,000 camps that we're covering in the Encyclopedia. If you count all the ones that we are either unable to cover, or that don't fit within the rubric of this project, I'm not sure what the total would be; close to 100,000, I suspect. Because the Germans, they used camps for everything.

Kapinos: I studied abroad in Latvia last summer, and we went to a couple of different camps that were there, that I had never heard of; I don't think anyone there had ever heard of, at least not in our group. They had them everywhere. They weren't the same big complexes, but still a camp. This is another [question] relating to historiography, at what point would you say that a historical work, a book or a journal article or whatever, goes out of date and isn't really usable anymore? Are there some that have more staying power than others?

Megargee: Oh, I think there are definitely some that have more staying power than others; I mean, there are some that are no good right from the start. There are some that they simply get supplanted by more recent research. I can think of my own example, *Inside Hitler's High Command*, when I first stumbled across that topic, when it was suggested to me, I was a brand-new history student. I really knew nothing about the field, being a historian, or anything. I was put in touch with this retired historian who gave me a list of possible master's thesis topics. I said "oh, German High Command, no one's ever done that? I'll do that," – little knowing what I was getting into. But there had been, I can think of at least two works that addressed that directly, but in both cases, they relied almost completely on the memoir literature. They were not exactly putting forward the myth, but, in some respects, they really were. Especially the part of the myth that said that Hitler was to blame for everything; that came through pretty strongly. One of those was Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, which was pretty much hagiography. The other was Cooper, it was called *German Army, 1933-1945*, which wasn't quite as bad, but still, he hadn't really done his homework. He hadn't gotten into the primary records very much. At some point someone will probably come along and expand on what I did. I hope they won't find too much that's wrong with it, but... I figure that if a book or an article is fundamentally correct, then it will remain useful even if people expand upon it or explain what was going on in greater detail, whatever it might be.

Kapinos: I ask the question because I find that in undergraduate work a lot of my professors keep us to things written in the last twenty years, or the last twenty-five years. In terms of historiography, I think it is to keep us more up-to-date with what's going on, so that we're not dealing with something that has already been covered.

Megargee: I think that makes sense. In a way...when I started my master's work, the professor I was working with had me reading stuff that had been written back in the '60s and '50s, pretty much to see what had been written. Not that I was going to depend on it all that much, but I think there's value in understanding the progression of thought on a particular subject. But, if you have a limited amount of

time, and assuming that you are able to stay away from the current things that aren't any good, I think it's worthwhile to [limit yourself to recent books and articles] ...I know of some books written in the last twenty, twenty-five years that I just wouldn't recommend to anybody. That said, it's probably a good approach.

Kapinos: For the historiography class, we did look a little farther back. I was looking at Browning, Bartov, Peukert...

Megargee: I don't think of those as being that far back! (Laughter) Now, Bartov is an interesting case. I know Omer, he's a great guy, he's extremely intelligent [...] definitely worth reading.

Hemmingson: How would you say, when you're approaching different types of sources, what kind of conclusions can you build and what would be considered reaching?

Megargee: It's so hard to speak generally about that.

Hemmingson: That's true.

Megargee: I'm thinking for example of one particular – I don't know if this is going to fit, but just let me think out loud for a moment – in the latter half of 1940, the Germans obviously faced a strategic question: they've just beaten France – which floored them; they didn't see that coming – and they had to figure out what to do next. Are we going to invade Britain? Are we just going to attack Britain from the air? Are we going to go into the Mediterranean? Are we going to form alliances with France, or Spain, or Italy – what are we going to do now? Most of the works that I read would focus on one thing or another, according to the topic that the author was covering, or their own predilections. So somebody would say, "oh, he was focusing on the Mediterranean, let's look at all of the things he was looking at there; he was looking at Gibraltar, he was looking at Suez..." and somebody else would say, "oh, he was focusing right from the start on the Soviet Union," "No, he was going after Britain..." I saw all of those things as I looked at the sources. Trying to step back and put myself in his position, what was he going to do next...and I know that there have been definite improvements made on my interpretation. Adam Tooze, for example, he's fantastic; he's written an economic history – and I wonder how many people have looked at the title and go, "uh, economic history, I don't know about that..." – but he understands the strategy, he got it better than I did. But I think it was a period of strategic confusion, and I think the other people who looked at one particular issue or another were, in essence, stretching the evidence beyond what... it wasn't so much stretching the evidence, so much as ignoring some of it. If you say that he's going after Russia exclusively, then you have to figure out how to explain the fact that for months they bombed Britain,

and built up an invasion force, and all of that, and did things in the Mediterranean. It didn't fit together well. So I think that's one way in which evidence can be...misused is too strong a term, but everyone has their particular topic. I hardly said anything about the crimes [in *Inside Hitler's High Command*], and that was a very important strategic issue. It wasn't that I was leaving aside this separate topic. I didn't understand at the time the influence that the crimes had on strategy; the influence that German ideas about race and space had on what they were trying to do, or I would have at least made it clear that this was something that should be addressed more directly.

Kapinos: What do you think about the value of oral histories?

Megargee: I think they are very valuable. I don't reject any particular kind of source, but you have to understand its limits. I did a paper years ago, that I still have not gotten around to expanding for publication, on the psychology of memory. How we form the memories, how we recall the memories. And how that fit with the statements that the German generals made after the war. It's tempting to say that oral histories really aren't worth very much, because it's clear that our ways of perceiving things are flawed to begin with; everybody knows this from all kind of examples, you get five different people seeing the same event and you get six different accounts. So right from the start, there's a problem with perception, and then memories get overlaid on things, people hear other people's stories and incorporate those into their own, it's a very, very tricky kind of evidence to use. But really what that means, I think... I mean, for one thing, there are some kinds of events, some things that you just can't find any other kind of evidence for. I interviewed a couple of, well, they weren't generals at the time, they had been relatively junior officers in the High Command, and used their accounts for things like: "what kind of exercise did you get? What was your day-to-day life like? How much sleep did you get?" that sort of thing, you're just not going to find that in any other source. You do what you can to find corroborating evidence, documentary evidence, but documents are flawed, too. And I think the key is, and this is what I tell contributors to the Encyclopedia or to my researchers, who will come to me and say, "well, we just have this one source for this, and I think it might be flawed. Should I use it?" and I say, "Absolutely use it, but in the footnote, make sure you point out that this is your only source, and that it's flawed, and that there might be other interpretations." As long as you're honest about it; as long as people can look at what you're doing and say, "okay, that's the best they could do with that," there shouldn't be a problem. Now, if you come out and say "this is absolutely how it was" and your source is either hidden or you just have this one source, then people are going to have a problem with it.

Hemmingson: To switch gears a little bit, I wanted to ask you [how you

became a historian]?

Megargee: I had my undergraduate degree in history, in '81, but I was going into the Army. And as far as I was concerned at that point, I was going to be an army officer as a career, and that was that. After four years of active duty, I decided "no, I'm really not suited to be a great military commander, so I'm going to try something else." So after I got out, I was in sales for a while, and I really was awful at that. And then for about a year I was in property management, and that wasn't working out either, and a friend of mine said "well, if you had to pick – irrespective of how practical it is – if you had to pick, what would you like to do?" and I said "history." I knew that I liked history, and this was at a point, this would have been in '87, when the newspapers were filled with these stories of "oh, there's going to be this great demand for professors; we've got floods of new students coming in, a lot of people retiring, there's going to be positions opening up all over the place," so I thought "okay, great." And I was in California at the time, and the only school still accepting applications was San Jose State. This is where the serendipity started to work in. I went to San Jose State, I enrolled there – of course, all of those newspaper articles were wrong, that disappeared very quickly. But I got in there, I was fortunate enough to be in a seminar with a professor – it was a very small department, there were only about seven or eight of us in this seminar with all different kinds of subjects – but she sat down with each one of us and said, "you are not gong to spend seven years getting your master's; you're going to get out of here in two. So what you're going to do right now is identify a topic and start planning to work on it."

She asked me what kind of history I wanted to study, and I really didn't have a clue, except military history. I'd always liked military history, so I said, "military history." She put me in touch with another professor, Charles Burdick, he was the one who gave me that list of master's thesis topics, and I went "oh, German High Command, okay." That served me for the master's thesis, and I was able to continue it – I enrolled at Ohio State and did that for the dissertation. I was really, really nervous as graduation was approaching, because basically I had studied military history and European history, and the job market was not good then, I'm not sure that it's even as good now, but it was not looking good. And I just had some lucky breaks: my advisor got me a job with a commission in Washington – that was temporary, but it got me to Washington, and then abut a year later the job opened up at the museum; they liked me and they hired me. I never had to go through the meat market at the AHA. And I've been there ever since. So, it was sort of a combination of the right skills, right time, right place. The museum didn't even say what the job was when they advertised it, they just said they were looking for someone who knew European history and was fluent in German. That was as much as they said until the

interview, where they said "we've got this encyclopedia project that we want somebody to do."

Hemmingson: And that's turned into a big project.

Megargee: Yes. When we started, I was told by the senior historian at the museum that we would be looking for somewhere around 5,000 or 7,000 sites. We started to dig and the more we dug, the more we found, and it kept growing. For a while, we were at 20,000 and it seemed to be holding there for a while, and then we got into another category and it blew through the roof. I think we're at about the max now.

Kapinos: When did you learn German?

Megargee: I took introductory German about three times; I took it in junior high school, in college, and then as a grad student, and by the time I was a grad student I knew that I was doing German history so I continued with it, went through intermediate German. But the thing that really made a difference was living for two years in Germany, in a student dorm where I had to speak German all the time. And doing research in German language documents and that sort of thing, so that was what really solidified it.

Kapinos: I would think that opens a lot of doors to sources.

Megargee: Oh yes, absolutely. I think anyone who is not doing a strictly American subject [needs to know a foreign language]...I know that at Ohio State, the diplomatic history branch of the department did not require its graduate students to have a foreign language, and all of us in military history – who had to have two – thought that this was insane. I mean, you can read the American diplomatic cables, but it usually involves other countries. It seems to me it would be good to read what they're saying, too. I think knowing a foreign language is a big plus, and heck, it got me my job. That was one of the things they said later really impressed them, was my ability to translate documents. They gave me a test: they gave me this SS Einsatzgruppe report and said "translate this." I did better than anyone else in the pool, so that helped.

Kapinos: You talked a lot in your book about how the circumstances of the Cold War shaped the narrative of events on the Eastern Front. With historical events impacting the sources available, how do you think that impacts historiography?

Megargee: If I understand your question, it has a very basic effect. If events are such that documents get destroyed – for instance, you can contrast the German and Japanese cases at the end of World War II. Germany: we and the Soviets overran the place and captured millions

and millions of documents, which we shipped back to our respective archives. Now, what went into the Soviet Union largely disappeared for a long time, we only had access to our own – and only a few historians had access to it here – but still, it was there. Now with the Japanese, the Japanese surrendered when we were still hundreds or thousands of miles away from their shores. And we told them "don't destroy any of your documents" – that worked well [said sarcastically]. I'm not a specialist in the Japanese case, so I don't know what might be missing, but my understanding is that a lot of it was destroyed. Anything that was, for instance, related to the Emperor's involvement with crimes, that all went bye-bye.

Kapinos: How do you work around that in scholarship? If you know that that kind of thing just isn't available?

Megargee: Sometimes you can't. There are subjects that you can't do, because there are no sources; fascinating questions that will forever remain unanswered, unless something turns up. A lot turned up when the Soviet Union collapsed, at least temporarily, but there are things that we will never know. And that gets at fundamental questions of what is history? The simple answer is everything that happened in the past. Well, in a sense, no, it's not. It's everything that we can understand and analyze about what happened in the past. Even then, one could argue that it's the important stuff that happened in the past. What Benjamin Franklin had for breakfast on June 30th, 1776: probably not that important.

Hemmingson: Maybe a related question is how can you use secondary sources? For instance, a scholar's background influences the type of history that they write. So how can you turn secondary sources into primary sources that can tell you something about how historians approach history differently?

Megargee: Well, if you're doing a study of a particular scholar or school of scholarship, then the secondary sources become primary sources in that sense. I think it's very important to understand where that scholar is coming from, and the times in which he or she lived. There was a big change in our approach to the American Revolution, for example, during and after the Vietnam War because historians began to look at it as a counterinsurgency, or insurgency and counterinsurgency, rather than as a conventional war. They were shaped by what was going on in their own time, and wanted to answer those same sorts of questions for an earlier period. So in that sense I think it's crucial. It can be hard to dig that kind of information out sometimes; some of it is conjecture. And it obviously involves another layer of work that you have to do. But to understand who the major authors were that wrote on the subject that you're writing on, it's very important. Where they came from, what they studied – and this applies even to extreme cases, like

David Irving for example. A lot of people up until the Irving-Lipstadt trial, said "well, it's too bad that he's gone off on this Holocaust denial thing, because he's really a very good historian." And then in the course of the Irving-Lipstadt Trial, they had a team of expert historians go through all of the histories that he had written and discovered just how seriously he had distorted, and deliberately misused, sources. He ignored sources, or used parts of sources out of context to back up the point that he was making. If you ever want a lesson in the misuse of history, read the trial record of the decision in the Irving case, because it was pretty blatant. After that, serious historians really didn't take him seriously anymore. He had said for example, that 100,000 people had died in the bombing of Dresden, and a lot of people took that as gospel for many years. But no, not anywhere near that, far less than half of that. He got this figure that somebody had pulled out of the air and decided, because he was sympathetic to Germans, and somewhat hostile to what the allies had done, that's what he used.

Kapinos: We talked a lot about using sources that disagree with us in our classes. You have to either change your thought or argue which evidence is more important to account for it as an exception. But you can't just omit.

Megargee: You have to account for it somehow, no doubt about it. To the extent – I don't know if you've ever read *The Landscape of History*, I highly recommend that. It's a fairly quick read; it deals with how historians go about their craft, and one of the subjects that the author addresses is whether or not history is a science. And of course, a lot of people will say "no, it's not a science because you can't do experiments, you can't replicate anything, it doesn't deal with chemicals or things of that nature." His argument is that it is a science, in the same way that astronomy or paleontology or geology are sciences. We can't run an experiment to see what happens when a black hole collapses or something like that, we have to run thought experiments. We have to look at the evidence we have and in our own minds come up with a plausible explanation based on what we have. As long as that explanation is plausible, and you make clear what sources you're using to come up with it, then yes, this is a scientific endeavor. Other scholars can look at what you did and say "well, here's his or her conclusion, and here are the sources they used and yes I think that makes sense" or "no, it doesn't." [...] I think we all do our best. There is no absolute objectivity in history; we are all shaped by who we are, and the times we live in. History starts with questions, and there are some questions we just don't think to ask.