

2010

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Recommended Citation

Biro, Zackary, "A New Direction of War: The Ethnic War Waged by the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe" (2010). *Volume 18 - 2010*. Paper 18.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-18/18>

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A New Direction of War:

The Ethnic War Waged by the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe 1939-1942

By Zackary Biro

While the ethnic war waged in Eastern Europe during World War II was originally thought to be solely conducted by the German S.S. of the Nazi Party, the involvement of the German regular army (Wehrmacht) is revealed to be more significant than previously understood. Through careful scrutiny of photographic evidence, the author takes an alternative look at the Wehrmacht's relationship to Nazi leadership and the S.S., as well as its involvement in some of the most brutal episodes of ethnic warfare in World War II.

By the middle of the twentieth century Europe was certainly not a stranger to war. European nation states had been engaged in warfare for centuries, and the First World War in the second decade of the twentieth century saw killing on a scale never before realized. Despite these realities World War II brought with it a new kind of warfare on a massive scale. For the first time in European history, ethnic minorities and undesirables became targets of systematic violence and murder in a new age of total war. As the perpetrators of the murder of millions of European Jews and socially marginalized people, the National Socialist Party of Germany enforced these policies of ethnic total war. For the majority of the second half of the twentieth century, historians considered the Wehrmacht, Germany's armed forces from 1935 to 1945, to be free from the responsibility for the genocide. A certain image of "clean hands" became the common perception of the German people and the Wehrmacht in the post-World War II era. Most people have perceived the Wehrmacht as passive participants in the S.S.'s murdering of European Jews. It was assumed that the Wehrmacht officers and soldiers carried out orders without reflecting a sense of ideological agreement for the actions they were committing, and only passively participated in the murders by staying out of the way of the S.S. In light of recent evidence, particularly from the German World

War II exhibition *War of Extermination: The Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-1944*, historians have been rethinking the influence of the Wehrmacht in the murder of Jews in Russia.

Recent historians looking at the evidence are divided as to how passively or actively the Wehrmacht participated in these murders. Historians such as Wolfram Wette, a professor of modern history at Albert-Ludwigs-University, and Stephen Fritz, a professor of history at East Tennessee State University, believe in the Wehrmacht's voluntary participation in the brutalization and unwarranted murder of Eastern Europeans. Wette and Fritz see the Wehrmacht as an organization that took the Nazi idea of the ethnic inferiority of Eastern Europeans and Jews to heart. Other historians, like Richard Evans, a professor of history at the University of Cambridge, see the Wehrmacht as a passive player in the murders. It seems convenient to place the actions of the Wehrmacht into one of these two camps. However, the evidence shows that the Wehrmacht played an active role in the ethnic war in Eastern Europe while only the senior officer corps of the Wehrmacht embraced the Nazi ideas of ethnic hierarchy. During the first years of the war on the Eastern front, the Wehrmacht senior officer corps exhibited behavior that displayed a willingness to exterminate ethnic and political enemies of the Third Reich, but individual examples within the Wehrmacht's junior officer corps also display a passive attitude towards the murder of Eastern Europeans.

Among Nazi Germany's many acts of aggression in World War II were the invasions of Poland in September 1939 and the Soviet Union in June 1941. Photographic evidence has arisen that documents war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht during the invasion of Poland in 1939. The first photograph depicts the execution of approximately three hundred Polish prisoners of war by the Wehrmacht's 15th Motorized Infantry Regiment in Ciepielow, Poland on September 9, 1939. The photograph depicts several Polish prisoners of war after the Wehrmacht placed them in a trench and shot them (see Figure 1).¹ Another photograph of the event shows the careful planning and organization taken by the Wehrmacht in the execution of these prisoners of war.² The actions taken by the Wehrmacht against people classified as prisoners of war blatantly violated the Hague Regulations of Warfare. The Hague Regulations were conceived after a series of conferences held in 1899 and 1907, and covered many topics including the proper treatment of prisoners of war. These regulations were recognized by over forty nations, including Germany. In fact, the Service Manual of the German Wehrmacht in World War II contained the regulations of land warfare established at the Hague Conferences. The Hague Regulations directly deal with the correct treatment of prisoners of war. Article 4 of the Regulations, Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, says that "prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not



Figure 1

of the individuals or corps who captured them. They must be humanely treated. All their personal belongings, except arms, horses, and military papers remain their property.”³ The photograph shows that the Wehrmacht executions of Polish prisoners of war were clear violations of these international regulations. In comparison, the Wehrmacht’s treatment of British and American prisoners of war on the Western front was quite different. The Wehrmacht placed British and American prisoners of war into camps where they were mistreated. Unlike the Polish prisoners of war, however, the Americans and British were not systematically murdered.⁴

The invasions of Poland and the Soviet Union were characterized by the brutal destruction of armies in the field of battle. These countries also became the site of a type of total war that the Germans exercised on a new level. Nazi Germany conducted a war “directed not only against another army, but against parts of the civilian population as well.”⁵ The war in the east became a war of systematic annihilation for Germany. Jews and Russian political partisans became the targets of German military personnel and were killed or forced into labor camps. Despite what Wolfram Wette calls the “legend of the clean hands” of the Wehrmacht, recent evidence brought to the foreground of the discussion points to the Wehrmacht as a prime

player in acts of genocide in Poland and Russia. Most prominent is the evidence provided by the photo and document exhibition entitled *Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation 1941-1944*.

This photo exhibition first debuted in Germany during the mid-1990s, and it helped dispel some of the myths surrounding the Wehrmacht and the legend of their “clean hands” with regards to their involvement in the acts of genocide against eastern Europeans and Jews. Among the various photos and documents in the exhibit are numerous photos of groups of Wehrmacht officers and soldiers engaging in the execution of Russian Jews and political partisans. The first of these photographs comes from a collection of photographs that depicts public executions in the city of Minsk on October 26, 1941. Officers of the 707th Infantry Division of the Wehrmacht carried out the executions. The executed were eight men and four women who were killed for being alleged Russian political partisans. These men and women were in fact members of a Russian resistance group that housed wounded Russian soldiers. The men and women were

These civilians were shot in an empty rail car factory not because they were guilty of a crime. They were killed because the Wehrmacht saw Serbs as enemies of Nazi Germany.

paraded through the streets of Minsk before they were hanged wearing signs that indicated they had fired at German soldiers.⁶ The photographs of the event show the alleged partisans being marched through the streets before one of them was hanged (see Figure 2).⁷ These two photos demonstrate that the Wehrmacht soldiers were not only present at these executions but that they were the individuals who organized and carried them out.

The photo exhibition also provides more photographs that document the systematic killing of Eastern Europeans by the Wehrmacht. On October 13, 1941 Serbian resistance fighters engaged the 717th Infantry Division of the Wehrmacht in

combat in the town Kraljevo. The fighting lasted several days and the Wehrmacht took citizens of the town hostage in an attempt to force the Serbs to surrender. When the resistance fighters continued their attack, the Wehrmacht responded by shooting 300 of the Serbian villagers. After the fighting ceased in Kraljevo, the Wehrmacht murdered between four thousand and five thousand male civilians in a nearby rail car factory.⁸ The photographs taken at various stages of the mass shooting are evidence of the killings organized by the Wehrmacht. Here the photographs depict the deliberate killing of civilians who were not necessarily Serbian partisan freedom fighters. These civilians were shot in an empty rail car factory not because they were guilty of a crime, but because the Wehrmacht saw Serbs as enemies of Nazi Germany (see Figure 3).⁹

The German Claus Hansman documented a Wehrmacht-initiated execution of Russian political partisans in the city of Kharkov in modern Ukraine:

The first human package . . . is carried outside. The limbs are tightly bound . . . a cloth covers his face. The hemp neckband is placed around

his neck . . . he is put on the balustrade and the blindfold is removed from his eyes. For an instant you see glaring eyeballs . . . then he wearily closes his eyelids, almost relaxed, never to open them again. He now slides slowly downward, his weight pulls the noose tight, his muscles begin their hopeless battle. The body works mightily, twitches, and within the fetters a bit of life struggles to its end . . . Each one bears a placard on his chest proclaiming his crime . . . Partisans and just punishment.¹⁰

The Wehrmacht was guilty of the murder of Jews in Eastern Europe as well as ethnic Serbs. In July, 1941 Hungarian forces fighting in cooperation with the German military forced several

thousand Hungarian Jews out of Hungary. The Hungarian soldiers forced the Jews across the border into the city of Kamenez-Podolsk in the Ukraine, which was under control of the Wehrmacht at the time. The Wehrmacht was unable to house or feed the several thousand Hungarian Jews, so Major Hans Georg Schmidt von Altenstadt and other members of the local Wehrmacht leadership held a meeting to decide the fate of the Jews on August 25. Friedrich Jaekeln, commander of the Higher S.S. and Police in Russia South, told Altenstadt that he hoped the “liquidation of these Jews would be carried out by September 1, 1941.”¹¹ Jaekeln’s statement was merely a suggestion since the Wehrmacht had no orders to kill civilians or Jews. The S.S. also did not have the authority to issue any such orders to the Wehrmacht. Altenstadt decided that the removal of the Jews would be necessary even though he had no obligation to execute them. Over the course of the next four days, the Wehrmacht in Kamenez-Podolsk shot the entire group of Hungarian Jews. Not only were the Hungarian Jews executed but all the Jews in the local area were murdered as well. The total number of Jews executed by the Wehrmacht in the city of Kamenez-Podolsk was around 23,600.¹² The photographs of the event show the organization of the Jews into lines and groups so that members of the Wehrmacht could systematically murder them.¹³

It should not be assumed that the Wehrmacht executed 23,600 Jews because of an order given by the S.S. commander Friedrich Jaekeln. In fact the S.S. Einsatzgruppen and Security Service commandoes were given explicit control and



Figure 2

responsibility for “carrying out measures with respect for the civilian population.”¹⁴ In short, the S.S. was designated as being responsible for the extermination of unwanted groups within the civilian population. Moreover, Wette says that while direct and specific orders were drawn up that called for the cooperation between the Wehrmacht and the S.S., the same orders gave the S.S. “sole responsibility for carrying out their mission.”¹⁵ Major Hans Georg Schmidt von Altenstadt and the Wehrmacht in Kamenez-Podolsk were not responding to any order given to them to execute the 23,600 Jews. The Wehrmacht took it upon themselves to commit the executions.

Junior officers and noncommissioned officers of the Wehrmacht did not embrace the sense of racial superiority that the Nazi leadership tried to instill in them.

These instances of murder and genocide demonstrate that the Wehrmacht assumed a very active role in the ethnic violence directed against Eastern Europeans and Jews. In doing so, the senior officer corps of the Wehrmacht overstepped the German high command’s established boundaries and roles that made the S.S. responsible for carrying out the executions. The Wehrmacht also violated the Hague Regulations in their treatment of prisoners of war and civilians. The participation of the Wehrmacht in the execution of groups of Eastern Europeans is undeniable based on the photographic evidence. Now the question of what led the Wehrmacht to overstep their bounds must be answered. The orders given to the Wehrmacht were simply to assist the S.S. by giving them “marching orders, food, and shelter.”¹⁶ The high Nazi leadership never required the Wehrmacht to participate in the execution of unwanted groups of Eastern Europeans, and so the overzealous actions of the Wehrmacht must be accounted for, whether the culprits were high ranking or not.

The motivation for the acts of genocide committed by the Wehrmacht cannot be found in the junior officer corps or the lower ranks of the

Wehrmacht. The writings of lower level members of the Wehrmacht show a lack of hatred and motivation to murder the ethnic enemies of Nazi Germany. Before the invasions of Russia in 1941 and Poland in 1939 members of the Wehrmacht were already showing a conflict of interest between the Nazi political ideas of ethnic hierarchy and their own convictions. Some soldiers of the Wehrmacht, like Albert Bastian, found it difficult to reconcile Nazi ideas of ethnic hierarchy with older German stances of toleration. “I was in despair. Although my father opposed my teacher . . . I respected my teacher. And here was my father, a friend of Jews. I just couldn’t figure

it out.”¹⁷ Helmut Schmidt was another soldier in the Wehrmacht who never showed any inclinations towards wanting to execute the Nazi Party’s ideas of ethnic cleansing. Helmut wrote that he “had no real ambition as far as the military was concerned . . . Then the war started. As young as I was, I only hoped that the episode wouldn’t last long.”¹⁸ Another junior officer, Hans Herwarth von Bittenfeld in the Wehrmacht reflected on what it meant to be part of the Wehrmacht: “My oath of loyalty was not a concern to me. I swore an oath to Germany. And I had the distinct feeling that Hitler had already broken his oath several times by then. I sensed that Hitler was a menace to Germany.”¹⁹

This evidence from Wehrmacht soldiers seems to run contrary to the conclusions of Richard Evans. In his book *The Third Reich at War*, Evans argues that the Nazi ideology and their policies of ethnic violence took root in the junior officer corps of the Wehrmacht. Evans says that “the intermingling of Nazism with a more traditional kind of nationalism was strongest amongst the youngest and most junior troops.”²⁰ Evans argues that the emerging group of young officers and young soldiers in the



Figure 3

late 1930s and the early 1940s were extremely impressionable. Evans thinks that junior Wehrmacht officers easily accepted Nazi ideology, which allowed them to commit acts of genocide in Russia. The previous testimony from the noncommissioned officers and junior officers of the Wehrmacht does not seem to follow the pattern of behavior among Wehrmacht junior officers that was described by Evans. Members of the Wehrmacht's junior officer corps, like Hans Herwarth von Bittenfeld, were not easily persuaded by the ideals of the Nazi Party. During Operation Barbarossa, Hans Herwarth von Bittenfeld was a junior officer in the Wehrmacht. He classified the genocide in Russia as a "stupid" and "inhuman treatment of the population."²¹ These accounts show that the junior officer corps of the Wehrmacht did not possess the ruthless hatred of Russian and Jews to aggressively pursue acts of genocide in Russia.

After breaking the non-aggression pact with Russia, Nazi leadership began to force the subhuman image of the Serbs and Russians on the German people and the lower ranks of the Wehrmacht through the use of propaganda that displayed the need "to wipe out the species of subhuman Red."²² Wette recognizes that the Nazis based this propaganda "less on knowledge" and more on "negative stereotyping and prejudice."²³ Nazi leaders used this stereotyping to try and eliminate any inhibitions German soldiers would have had towards killing Serbs, Poles, or Russians.²⁴ As expected, the Nazis perpetuated stereotypes they instilled in the Wehrmacht and the German people before the war were tested when the war began. As Wehrmacht soldiers be-

gan to come into contact with Eastern European soldiers and citizens, the conceptions of Russian soldiers began to change. Marlis Steinert explains in her book *Hitler's War and the Germans* that "the daily contact with the eastern worker, who showed himself to be intelligent, technically talented, and likeable caused the real breach in this carefully created image of the enemy."²⁵ Steinert recognizes that the common German and the lower levels of the Wehrmacht identified with the common Eastern European and saw him as a comrade. This is hardly the attitude that would have resulted in the common Wehrmacht soldier actively pursuing the execution of Eastern Europeans. The close contact between Wehrmacht soldiers and Eastern Europeans alleviated the artificial hatred planted by the Nazi leadership in the Wehrmacht ranks.

With experience in battle, many Wehrmacht soldiers even began to admire the courage of the Russian soldiers. In a 1942 letter Helmut von Harnack noted, "the extreme modesty of the personal needs of the Russian soldier, who in his

Major Hans Georg Schmidt von Altenstadt not only ordered the execution of a group of Jewish refugees sequestered in Kamenz-Podolsk, but also the entire local Jewish population. He did this without receiving direct orders to execute either group.

mixture of doggedness and toughness possesses an enormous power of resistance."²⁶ After an initial admission that Russians were "a people that requires long and good schooling in order to become human," a private in the Wehrmacht admired the "often superhuman, purposeless resistance of encircled groups" of Russian soldiers.²⁷ Members of the Wehrmacht also felt sympathy and regret for the victims of murder. In a 1941 letter, Kurt Vogeler said that "at no time in [the world's] existence has there been a war that can be compared with this current one . . . The poor, unhappy Russian people! Its distress is unspeakable and its misery heart-rending."²⁸ In a letter from the same year Heinz Kuechler commented

on the how brutally the Wehrmacht conducted the war in the east when he wrote, "all evidence of humanity appears to have disappeared in deed and in heart and in consciousness."²⁹

Other Wehrmacht soldiers understood and commented on the brutality of their actions. One private in the Wehrmacht believed that "none will remain unpunished by this war, each will get his just desert, in the homeland as at the front."³⁰ Other soldiers saw the destruction of German cities as the punishment for the crimes of the Wehrmacht. Johannes Huebner stated it plainly when he said, "Death is the wages of sin."³¹ These views of admiration of Russian soldiers and the remorse for the brutalization of Russian civilians were not the cause of the war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht. Junior officers and noncommissioned officers of the Wehrmacht did not embrace the sense of racial superiority that the Nazi leadership tried to instill in them.

Unlike the lower levels of the Wehrmacht, the senior officer corps did not show any significant

signs of resentment for the actions of genocide in Eastern Europe. In fact, one of the examples that even resembles resentment among the general staff comes from Lithuania after fifteen hundred Jews were executed in 1941. Franz von Roques, commander of the Army Group North Rear Area, and Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb contemplated sterilizing the remaining Eastern European Jews instead of committing mass murder.³² This event suggests that Wehrmacht officers were aware of the killings and had enough influence to prevent them from occurring. It also shows that any sort of resentment found among the Wehrmacht officer corps could not prevent ethnic violence completely since Roques

and Leeb saw mass sterilization as an acceptable alternative to murder.³³

The actions of the Wehrmacht during the first years of World War II can be attributed to an overzealous senior officer corps that embraced the racial aspects of the war in Eastern Europe. These officers were willing to step over the limitations placed on them by Nazi leadership because of their strong ideological connections to the views of the Nazi Party. Wette attributes the strong connection between the Wehrmacht officer corps and Nazi leadership to the shared importance of war to the state. Nazi leadership was ready and willing to engage in warfare to ensure the survival of a strong German state. Senior Wehrmacht officers shared this view of the importance of warfare. Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of Staff of the Prussian army from 1858 to 1888, believed that "Peace is a dream, and not even a good one; war is a link in God's world order."³⁴ Moltke represents a strong tradition of war amongst the German people that praised the German warrior in his passionate struggle to expand Germany's borders. General Hans von Seeckt made a connection between the importance of war and the inferiority of Eastern Europeans when he said that Jews and Communists didn't share the same views with the ethnic Germans on the importance of war.³⁵ This agreement in ideology was part of a larger movement within the Third Reich that resulted in the submission of Wehrmacht generals to the will of Hitler and high Nazi leadership. Wette recognizes the political power and autonomy of the Wehrmacht generals, but he says that they saw political pluralism as a weakness in government: "The military leaders rejected democracy because they regarded it as a weak form of government, and they welcomed the reestablishment of an authoritarian state under Hitler."³⁶ This submission to the will and ideology of Nazi authority is what caused the leadership of the Wehrmacht to take matters into their own hands on the front.

The cases of brutality and murder committed by the Wehrmacht were the result of decisions made by the Wehrmacht senior officer corps. The Wehrmacht was not supposed to

act as execution squads in the campaign against Russia, yet Major Hans Georg Schmidt von Altenstadt saw things differently. He not only ordered the execution of a group of Jewish refugees sequestered in Kamenz-Podolsk, but also the entire local Jewish population. He did this without receiving direct orders to execute either group.³⁷ One of the photographs from the execution of alleged Russian political partisans in Minsk even depicts the final acts of preparing the prisoners to be hanged being carried out by Wehrmacht officers.³⁸ Wehrmacht officers committed these acts partially because they "wanted to show their 'Fuehrer' just what model national socialists they were."³⁹

In September, 1941 General Max von Schenkendorff, Commander of the Rear Area Army Group Center, ran a training program for company level officers on how to conduct warfare against the Russian partisans. The training program taught Wehrmacht company officers that "the Jew is the partisan, the partisan is the Jew."⁴⁰ This view is part of an older set of propaganda messages used in the mid-1930s to portray Soviets and Jews as threats to the world, which subsequently caused senior officers like Schenkendorff to pursue the active persecution of Jewish citizens. Wehrmacht generals may have been able to maintain an ethnic view of the war because they were not in constant contact with common Eastern Europeans. Lower-level Wehrmacht soldiers were able to see the true nature of the Eastern Europeans and make connections

with them while the senior officer corps of the Wehrmacht remained distanced from the enemy and their own soldiers.

The first-hand involvement of the Wehrmacht in the murder of Eastern Europeans during the campaigns against Russia and Poland is undeniable. The photographic evidence of Wehrmacht war crimes confirms the active participation of the Wehrmacht in an ethnic war that many thought only the S.S. Einsatzgruppen were responsible for. Other accounts of Wehrmacht soldiers and officers have indicated the existence of a complex relationship between Wehrmacht personnel and their conception of Eastern Europeans. Noncommissioned officers and junior officers who were in constant contact with Eastern Europeans were able to draw their own conclusions about the people Nazi leaders had labeled as ethnically inferior, while the Wehrmacht generals remained rooted in Nazi ethnic ideology. The recent conclusions that historians have made in the last few decades have challenged the popular conceptions of responsibility for the events in Eastern Europe between 1939 and 1942. Currently, many people hold the common Wehrmacht soldiers responsible for these events, and while they certainly deserve their share of the blame, these events were not caused by desire of individual soldiers to murder ethnic enemies of the Third Reich. Instead, the execution of Eastern Europeans was the result of Wehrmacht generals taking matters into their own hands and overstepping their bounds.



"It Comes From Underground and In Between" by Samantha Rivera