

Introduction

I. The infantry's war

“This campaign is the infantryman’s war. He wins and holds territory. He combs through the forests, he secures the supply lines, he wins the war.” So wrote Lt. Schmidt, a member of the East Prussian 121st Infantry Division (ID) in early August 1941.¹ His appraisal of Operation Barbarossa as an infantry campaign was certainly correct: while the overall success of the operation primarily hinged on the performance of the elite motorized and mechanized tip of the Wehrmacht,² 107 of the 139 divisions that invaded the Soviet Union marched towards their objectives overwhelmingly dependent on horse-drawn transport for their supply needs.³ The declaration highlights the importance of the individual *Landser* to the German war effort: despite contemporaries’

¹ Tagebuchartige Aufzeichnungen des Lt. Schmidt-Btl. Adjutant, 2.8.41, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau (hereafter BA-MA), RH 37/3905; emphasis in original. German data protection laws prevent the naming of the following types of individual: those still alive, those who died within the previous thirty years, those of whom no proof regarding death exists and who were born within the past 110 years. For this reason, each soldier in this study who falls into one of these categories has been given a pseudonym.

² Strictly speaking, the Wehrmacht (Armed Forces Command) included the Heer (Army), Kriegsmarine (Navy) and the Luftwaffe (Air Force). Within the context of the German military and the war of extermination waged in the east, however, the term Wehrmacht is generally used to describe the army and it is in this sense that the term will be deployed in this study.

³ For a breakdown of the German order of battle on 22 June 1941, see Burkhart Mueller-Hillebrand, *Das Heer, 1933–1945: Entwicklung des organisatorischen Aufbaues*, vol. II, *Die Blitzfeldzüge 1939–1941: Das Heer im Kriege bis zum Beginn des Feldzuges gegen die Sowjetunion im Juni 1941* (Frankfurt am Main, 1956), pp. 188–91. On the armored units’ importance to the invasion’s success, see David Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany’s Defeat in the East* (Cambridge, 2009). On the preponderance of infantry divisions in the German order of battle, see R.L. DiNardo, *Mechanized Juggernaut or Military Anachronism? Horses and the German Army of World War II* (Westport, CT, 1991), p. 38; and Rolf-Dieter Müller, “Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg,” in Horst Boog et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. IV, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Frankfurt, 1996), pp. 141–245, here pp. 209–27.

fixation on the armored units that were racing across the steppes of the Soviet state – a fixation that has indeed persisted until the present day – it was the German infantryman who shouldered the bulk of the fighting, especially with the constant attrition suffered by armored divisions that left them severely weakened by the conclusion of the year.⁴ Lt. Schmidt did not, however, merely focus on the traditional military aims of destroying enemy forces and seizing territory. Due to the German High Command's massive gamble that the Soviet state would crumble after only several weeks of fighting, he and other foot soldiers found themselves carrying out tasks normally set aside for rear-area formations: the securing of communication and supply lines between the front line and their logistical tails as well as apprehending thousands of scattered Red Army soldiers dislocated by the advancing German armor.⁵

Such irregular warfare plagued the invaders from the very beginning of the campaign, as Lt. Schmidt's diary makes clear. On the second day of the operation, he raged against guerilla forces who "seemingly shot out of every house" in the village of Vilkoviszki. Members of his 405th Infantry Regiment responded in the heavy-handed, yet traditional, manner called for by the German High Command: "as every house from which the devious guerillas shot was set on fire, nearly the entire town was burning by evening."⁶

When examined in the overall context of the invasion, these two diary entries illustrate the dual nature of the invasion of the Soviet Union for the German infantryman: on the one hand, the particular circumstances of this campaign forced him to assume numerous other roles in addition to his primary, and extremely arduous, task of fighting the Red Army, while on the other hand, his own political and military leadership considered him "a bearer of an inexorable racial value" in its ideological

⁴ Nearly every major study of Operation Barbarossa written in the first forty-five years after the war, particularly in English, places heavy emphasis on armor operations; see, for example, Albert Seaton, *The Russo-German War, 1941–1945* (Novato, 1993); Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict 1941–1945* (New York, 1985); and Matthew Cooper, *The German Army, 1933–1945* (Chelsea, 1990). One of the primary causes of this preoccupation with armor divisions lay in the postwar popularity of memoirs written by German armor commanders; see, among others, Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York, 1996); Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Novato, 1994); Hans von Luck, *Panzer Commander* (New York, 1989). For a detailed examination of these types of historical and popular writing, as well as the memoirs themselves, see Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 73–156.

⁵ Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der letzte deutsche Krieg 1939–1945* (Stuttgart, 2005), pp. 81–90; Christian Hartmann, "Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht?" in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (52) 2004, pp. 5–10.

⁶ Tagebuchartige Aufzeichnungen des Lt. Schmidt, 23.6.41, BA-MA, RH 37/3905.

war that demanded any and all means to destroy the “Jewish–Bolshevik system.”⁷ In many ways, these two entries penned by the lieutenant encompass the German infantry's war in the Soviet Union.

Historians have provided excellent coverage and analysis of the Wehrmacht during the period stretching from the opening of hostilities to the conclusion of the 1941–2 winter crisis, examining the various operational, ideological, and economic facets of the war.⁸ Unfortunately, the remainder of the war in the Soviet Union has not received the same type of dedicated investigation and the twists and turns of army policy and behavior from 1942 through 1944 are much more difficult to bring into focus.⁹ The tasks faced by the German infantry only multiplied as the war dragged on. Certainly combat remained its first and most important responsibility, but as the conflict transformed from one of movement to one of grinding defensive battles, frontline combat units found themselves burdened with occupying cities, towns, and villages for extended periods of time – and these were tasks that no one within the army had even remotely planned for before the invasion due to the general belief that the campaign would be over in mere months. Now questions such as “improving . . . the hopeless food situation for evacuated Russian civilians” became ones wrestled with by combat divisions as they surveyed the misery – that they themselves had caused – in their midst.¹⁰ This more complicated relationship with civilians that emerged after the conclusion of the winter crisis in early 1942 and which evolved up until the scorched-earth retreats of late 1943–early

⁷ The cited phrases are drawn from Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau's infamous order issued to his Sixth Army on 10 October 1941; as the order corresponded to Hitler's own conception of the campaign, it was later circulated to other units of the *Ostheer*. The order is printed in Gerd Ueberschär and Wolfram Wette (eds.), *Der Deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion 1941: “Unternehmen Barbarossa”* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), pp. 285–6.

⁸ Several recent and important studies that approach Operation Barbarossa from various perspectives include Christian Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg: Front und militärisches Hinterland 1941/42* (Munich, 2009); Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer: Die Deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion, 1941/42* (Munich, 2006); Felix Römer, *Der Kommissarbefehl: Wehrmacht und NS-Verbrechen an der Ostfront 1941/42* (Munich, 2008); Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide and Radicalization* (Rochester, NY, 2012); and David Stahel's three volumes on German operations during the summer and fall of 1941: *Operation Barbarossa; Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East* (Cambridge, 2011); and *Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941* (Cambridge, 2013).

⁹ The most recent and comprehensive study of the entire war from the German perspective is Stephen Fritz's excellent work *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Annihilation in the East* (Lexington, 2011), though Fritz is more concerned with the activities of the upper levels of command than with the war on the sharp end.

¹⁰ Gruppe Rauch, Abt. Ib, Nr. 194/42 geh., Betr.: Ernährung der Zivilbevölkerung, 2. Mai 1942, BA-MA RH 26–123/205.

1944 underlined the fundamental contradiction facing the *Ostheer* (Eastern Army) during the second half of the war: while Nazi propaganda portrayed the Soviet population as an inchoate mass of subhumanity that needed to be scrubbed from the pages of history, the German Army's only chance to achieve victory lay in mobilizing this same population behind the German war effort.

Both forced-labor roundups and anti-partisan operations highlighted this contradiction within the Wehrmacht's occupation policy and the interplay between these two issues set into motion an accelerating violent spiral in which the Germans responded with increased brutality and ruthlessness against Soviet civilians, indiscriminately devastating large swaths of Soviet territory, which in turn led to more people fleeing their homes and joining the resistance. Working under slogans such as "where the partisan is, the Jew is, and where the Jew is, there is the partisan," German anti-partisan policies were frequently indistinguishable from other genocidal policies and smoothly elided into their later scorched-earth retreats.¹¹ Thus, by 1944, the overwhelming majority of the German Army had participated in some way or another in the German war of annihilation in the Soviet Union.¹²

The primary question confronting all historians of not only the Wehrmacht but also the Third Reich is *why* did German soldiers engage in such behavior? How important a role in motivating individuals did an identification with Nazi racial ideology play?¹³ Did other concerns, be they economic or a desire to conform, lead Germans not only to support the Nazi regime but to actively work for it both at home and abroad?¹⁴

¹¹ Cited in Jürgen Förster, "Die Sicherung des 'Lebensraumes,'" in Boog et al., *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, pp. 1227–1287, here p. 1240.

¹² Christian Hartmann concludes his analysis of five German formations on the Eastern Front in 1941–2 by stating that all "were guilty of war and often even of NS-crimes during the first year of the German–Soviet war." Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 792. Christoph Rass writes in his examination of the 253rd Infantry Division that "the soldiers of the 253rd Infantry Division had taken part in a large number of crimes connected" to the war of annihilation; see his "*Menschenmaterial*": *Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront. Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision 1939–1945* (Paderborn, 2003), p. 410.

¹³ For our purposes, Nazi racial ideology will be defined as a belief system that held that the Aryan, German *Herrenmensch* not only were justified in reorganizing the racial structure of eastern and central Europe due to the alleged inferiority of Slavs and other "racial" groups but also righteously demanded the elimination of the mortal Jewish enemy. For more detailed discussions of Nazi ideology and its application, see Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's World View: A Blueprint for Power* (Cambridge, 1981); Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, 2005); and Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge, 1991).

¹⁴ For a controversial examination of materialism as an important bond between Nazi state and society, see Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (London, 2009). On the function of conformity in stabilizing the state, see Peter

For soldiers in the Wehrmacht, such issues are complicated not only by situational factors during their violent existence on the Eastern Front but also by the institutional practices of the organization that dominated their lives: the army itself.¹⁵

This study will look at three frontline infantry divisions – the 121st, 123rd, and 126th Infantry Divisions – and their combat and occupation practices in an attempt to understand not only what policies and practices the army and its soldiers carried out in the Soviet Union but also why they did so. These units were chosen for several reasons. First, all three divisions were mobilized in the eleventh wave in October 1940 and saw their first action during Operation Barbarossa.¹⁶ Each formation was constructed around cadres drawn from pre-existing units originating from the same military districts and was then filled out by new recruits. None of these divisions could be considered elite, with the majority of the enlisted men consisting of civilian recruits – or “ordinary men” – who seem representative of the communities that they called home.¹⁷

Second, each division attempted to recruit men from specific regions within the German Reich. East Prussia, Berlin-Brandenburg, and Rhineland-Westphalia were home to the 121st, 123rd, and 126th IDs respectively. These areas significantly differed from one another in economic development, confessional allegiance, and political orientation, and recruiting territorially from such varied regions had two possible consequences. First, these divisions became microcosms of their geographically and culturally distinct areas, with the rank and file carrying a distinct cultural baggage with them into the service; such different backgrounds could help explain differences in the behavior of the units. Second, the various experiences of the home front during the war affected the soldiers and their conduct at the front

Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2009); on its role in the carrying out of mass executions, see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1993).

¹⁵ For an outstanding examination of this issue, see Rass, “Menschenmaterial”, pp. 205–330.

¹⁶ On mobilization, see Mueller-Hillebrand, *Die Blitzfeldzüge 1939–1941*, pp. 76–81; and Bernhard Kroener, “The Manpower Resources of the Third Reich in the Area of Conflict between Wehrmacht, Bureaucracy, and War Economy, 1939–1942,” in Bernhard Kroener et al., *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. V/I, *Organization and Mobilization of the German Sphere of Power* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 966–1000.

¹⁷ The phrase was first coined by Christopher Browning in his groundbreaking study *Ordinary Men*. This is a major drawback of Omer Bartov’s highly influential work. In his two monographs, *The Eastern Front 1941–1945: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* (London, 1985) and *Hitler’s Army* (Oxford, 1992), Bartov focuses on two first-wave divisions and one which rapidly attained the level of an elite division, and this emphasis limits the applicability to the rest of the army.

in diverse ways and this also helps explain the range of behaviors displayed by the three divisions.¹⁸

Third, each unit fought for the majority of the war in Army Group North, with the 121st ID and the 126th ID capitulating in Latvia as part of Army Group Kurland in May 1945 while the 123rd ID was sent to Ukraine in fall 1943, where it disintegrated during the fighting of early 1944. Of the three army groups that invaded the Soviet Union, Army Group North has been the least well served by historians. Both Army Groups Center and South won more spectacular successes and suffered more devastating defeats than their northern counterparts and have consequently received the lion's share of scholarly and popular attention. With the exception of the siege of Leningrad, the operational and occupational practices of the northernmost army group have received very little attention in comparison with the two army groups engaged to its south.¹⁹ While Army Group North's campaigns contained no decisive battles, such as Moscow, Stalingrad, or Kursk, and nor did the military occupation authorities find themselves responsible for a large Jewish population, the nature of Army Group North's war sheds light on an important and relatively neglected topic: the occupation practices and policies of frontline troops and their interactions with Soviet civilians.

The experiences of Army Group North offer the most important examples of long-term occupation by combat soldiers in the Soviet Union due to the nature of war in this theater. With the exception of the six-week advance through the Baltic states in the summer of 1941,

¹⁸ This theme will be discussed in more detail below.

¹⁹ Studies of the siege include Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad*, 2nd edn (New York, 1985); Leon de Goure, *The Siege of Leningrad* (Stanford, 1962); Antje Leetz and Barbara Wenner (eds.), *Blockade: Leningrad 1941–1944. Dokumente und Essays von Russen und Deutschen* (Reinbek, 1992); Peter Jahn (ed.), *Blockade Leningrads – Blockada Leningrada* (Berlin, 2004); Jörg Ganzenmüller, *Das belagerte Leningrad, 1941–1944: Die Stadt in den Strategien von Angreifern und Verteidigern* (Paderborn, 2005); and, most recently, Anna Reid, *Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II, 1941–1944* (New York, 2011). The only full-length operational treatment of the campaign, albeit based primarily on Russian-language sources, is David Glantz, *The Battle for Leningrad 1941–1944* (Lawrence, KS, 2002). Johannes Hürter examines Eighteenth Army and the encirclement of Leningrad; see Hürter, “Die Wehrmacht vor Leningrad: Krieg und Besatzungspolitik der 18. Armee im Herbst und Winter 1941/42,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 49 (2001), pp. 377–440; for a brief overview of German occupation practices in northern Russia, see Gerhart Hass, “Deutsche Besatzungspolitik im Leningrader Gebiet 1941–1944,” in Babette Quinkert (ed.), “*Wir sind die Herren dieses Landes*”: Ursachen, Verlauf und Folgen des deutschen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion (Hamburg, 2002), pp. 66–81. Jürgen Kilian has recently produced a comprehensive examination of German rear-area practices; see his *Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft im russischen Nordwesten 1941–1944: Praxis und Alltag im Militärverwaltungsgebiet der Heeresgruppe Nord* (Paderborn, 2012).

positional warfare (which often closely mirrored the style, if not the intensity, of combat on the Western Front during the First World War) became the norm in Army Group North's area of operations for some two and a half years. From the fall of 1941 to January 1944, the army group administered an area that essentially remained the same throughout the duration of the occupation.²⁰ German troops controlled the same industrial suburbs of Leningrad, the same communities along the Volkhov river, and the same villages and towns in the Demiansk region for two to three years, and this provides a prism through which to examine the development of Wehrmacht occupation practices on the local level in an amount of detail hitherto missing in the historiography. An examination of these three divisions and their combat and occupation practices will allow for a more precise reconstruction of how frontline German infantry divisions behaved during their years of occupation and, just as importantly, why.

This study will argue that while Nazi racial ideology provided a legitimizing context in which violence was not only accepted but encouraged and that it frequently complemented the army's own attitudes, it was the Wehrmacht's adherence to a doctrine of military necessity which proves most useful in explaining how and why the German Army and its soldiers fought the war in the Soviet Union. Various descriptions as "military utilitarianism" or "pragmatism," the concept of military necessity provides the necessary flexibility in understanding the development of policies on the ground in the Soviet Union.²¹ Military necessity should not be understood as a rigid concept, however. At its essence, it meant that the German Army would do whatever was necessary to preserve its combat efficiency and emerge victorious on the battlefield, though how to achieve victory could be understood by various units in different ways. While previous analyses have emphasized an increasing brutalization of German behavior due to the inculcation of Nazi ideological values within the ranks, or have focused on the continual radicalization and application of German violence during the war, these approaches are unable to completely explain the contradictory turns of the army's policy, specifically with regard to occupation as periods of brutality were intermixed with periods of conciliation.

²⁰ Hass, "Deutsche Besatzungspolitik im Leningrader Gebiet 1941–1944," p. 66.

²¹ Timm C. Richter uses the former term in his introduction to his edited volume; see Richter (ed.), *Krieg und Verbrechen. Situation und Intention: Fallbeispiele* (Munich, 2006), p. 15; Mark Edelen and Michael Geyer deploy the latter term in "States of Exception: The Nazi–Soviet War as a System of Violence, 1939–1945," in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 345–95, here p. 377.

In contrast to historiographical approaches that emphasize the ideas of ideology or situation in explaining the attitudes and actions of the Wehrmacht, the notion of military necessity has been rather sparsely utilized. Two exceptions to this trend are studies that examine the activities of army-level formations in the Soviet Union. Johannes Hürter's examination of German policy towards the city of Leningrad in 1941 and the subsequent occupation of the surrounding area emphasized the idea of military necessity, or a "vague military utilitarianism," in explaining both Army Group North and Eighteenth Army's practices.²² While ideology served as a necessary ingredient in the "merciless occupation policies of Eighteenth Army," the "most important motivating force was a military utilitarianism that wanted success in this particular theater of war at any price and by all means."²³ The army viewed the intentional starvation of Leningrad's occupants and the forced deportations of the hungry, poverty-stricken population in the area ringing the city as necessities to ensure "sufficient food and permanent shelters" for German troops and thereby to "save their combat strength."²⁴

Manfred Oldenburg's comprehensive examination of Eleventh Army's occupation policies in the Crimea and those of Seventeenth Army in the Donets basin and the Caucasus in 1942 similarly illustrates the centrality of military necessity to the command structures of these armies and their participation in war crimes.²⁵ Oldenburg persuasively argues that the Wehrmacht fundamentally transformed its behavior towards the surrounding civilian population due to the army's need for both security and supplies; in other words, due to the worsening strategic situation, the Germans enacted more conciliatory policies towards the sections of the civilian population that neither resisted nor fell into categories deemed ideologically dangerous. Such reasoning led to Eleventh Army's active complicity in the murder by the SD (Sicherheitsdienst, or Security Service) of 14,500 Jews in Simferopol in December 1941; here, military necessity – providing food for civilians in order to lessen any resistance and consequent threats to the army's security – smoothly functioned alongside the regime's desire to exterminate Soviet Jewry.²⁶

The approaches of both Hürter and Oldenburg allow for a more nuanced examination of the Wehrmacht's behavior and actions not by

²² Hürter, "Die Wehrmacht vor Leningrad," p. 440. ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 418, 423.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

²⁵ Manfred Oldenburg, *Ideologie und Militärisches Kalkül: Die Besatzungspolitik der Wehrmacht in der Sowjetunion 1942* (Cologne, 2004).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 79–87.

exploring just one approach, but instead by analyzing the interplay between ideology, situation, and the concept of military necessity. Despite their immense importance to the general historical debate, both of these works focus on the headquarters of the respective armies and offer little to no discussion of how frontline troops interacted with Soviet civilians.²⁷ This study intends to fill this gap not only by looking at how German soldiers experienced the sharp end of war, but, by integrating their roles as warrior and occupier into one narrative, it also looks to examine the totality of the German infantry's war in northwest Russia.

An examination of the 121st, 123rd, and 126th IDs clearly illustrates that their policies towards civilians underwent dramatic changes during the course of the war. Operation Barbarossa – the initial invasion of the Soviet Union – was marked by a callous neglect of the overwhelming majority of civilians, who, when thought of at all, were viewed as potential partisans. German behavior towards these very same individuals underwent a dramatic radicalization during the 1941–2 winter crisis when not only victory, but even survival, seemed in doubt; now the divisions ruthlessly exploited civilians for food, clothes, and labor. Following the stabilization of the situation, each of the three divisions began to rethink its occupation policy. The realization that military victory could only be achieved against a larger, increasingly better-armed force through a mobilization of all resources, including civilians, led to the implementation of more conciliatory policies by the Germans.²⁸

While such a revision of occupation practices is only comprehensible through the framework of military necessity, the same focus on military victory led the Wehrmacht to carry out policies that not only contradicted its more agreeable new course, but frequently completely negated their intended effects; here the toxic effect of Nazi racial ideology reinforced more violent interpretations of military necessity, ensuring that hard-line policies remained very much in the mix. The final stage in the evolution of German policy occurred in different phases across the front of Army Group North between 1943 and 1944. As the German Army began its long, arduous, and bloody retreat back to the Reich,

²⁷ For example, Oldenburg devotes a mere three pages to the activities of frontline troops; *ibid.*, pp. 116–19.

²⁸ The contention made by Edele and Geyer that “this more pragmatic approach also turned out to be a far more radical one” is true in one sense as the final development of this policy turned exceedingly violent. During the second half of 1942 and stretching well into 1943, however, the measures enacted by these three divisions under examination proved to be far less violent and arbitrary than previous German practices. See Edele and Geyer, “States of Exception: The Nazi–Soviet War as a System of Violence, 1939–1945,” p. 375.

scorched earth and the creation of “dead zones” became the order of the day in an attempt to limit the military potential of the Red Army. As this brief overview shows, the German war in the east, while certainly influenced by both Nazi ideological beliefs and situational factors, is best explained through the idea of military necessity. But how has the war been understood in the historiography? A brief review of the primary themes and controversies follows.

II. Explaining the German *Vernichtungskrieg*

The Wehrmacht’s criminal activities across occupied Europe have been public record since the various postwar Nuremberg trials.²⁹ Recent work has examined the German armed forces and their behavior across the continent, including France,³⁰ Greece,³¹ Italy,³² and Yugoslavia.³³ Events on the Eastern Front, however, have correctly received the bulk of the attention concerning this issue during the past thirty-five years. Despite this focus, several questions remain open.

Three of the thornier issues include the scale of the Wehrmacht’s participation in the war of annihilation, what types of unit carried out what types of crime, and the motivations behind such atrocities. The explosive 1995 Hamburg Institute for Social Research’s *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944* (War of Extermination:

²⁹ *Trials of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, Germany*, 42 vols. (Nuremberg, 1947); *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10: Nuernberg Oct. 1946–April 1949*, vol. XI, *The High Command Case* (Washington, DC, 1950).

³⁰ Raffael Scheck, *Hitler’s African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (Cambridge, 2008); Thomas Laub, *After the Fall: German Policy in Occupied France, 1940–1944* (Oxford, 2008); Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg? Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44* (Munich, 2007).

³¹ Mark Mazower, “Military Violence and the National Socialist Consensus: The Wehrmacht in Greece, 1941–1944,” in Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944* (New York, 2000), pp. 146–74; more generally, see his outstanding study of the German occupation of Greece, *Inside Hitler’s Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–1944* (New Haven, 1993).

³² Gerhard Schreiber, *Deutsche Kriegsverbrechen in Italien: Täter, Opfer, Strafverfolgung* (Munich, 1996); Michael Geyer, “Civitella Della Chiana on 29 June 1944: The Reconstruction of a German ‘Measure’,” in Heer and Naumann, *War of Extermination*, pp. 175–216; and Carlo Gentile, *Wehrmacht, Waffen-SS und Polizei im Kampf gegen Partisanen und Zivilbevölkerung in Italien 1943–1945* (Paderborn, 2012).

³³ For different approaches to occupied Yugoslavia, see Walter Manoschek, “Serbien ist judenfrei”: *Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42* (Munich, 1995); Klaus Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg in Jugoslawien 1941–1944* (Berlin, 2002); and Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare* (Cambridge, 2012).

Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944) exhibition staked out an extreme position.³⁴ It claimed that “the Wehrmacht did not wage a ‘normal, decent war’, but rather a war of annihilation against prisoners of war, Jews, and other civilians, a war with millions of victims.”³⁵ German prewar directives were “tantamount to a declaration of war against the entire civilian population,” and the process of radicalization that began at the outset of the invasion culminated in 1943 with the formulation of a new war aim: “To wage war against an entire people with the goal of annihilation . . . the Wehrmacht of 1943 had finally become [Hitler’s] Wehrmacht.”³⁶ Ideology was the driving force behind the army’s behavior and this found its most horrific expression in the army’s complicity in the Holocaust: “when it came to murdering Jews, one could count on the Wehrmacht.”³⁷ Its director, Hannes Heer, maintained that somewhere between “60 to 80 percent” of German soldiers committed crimes during the war with the Soviet Union.³⁸

Perhaps the most influential contributions to the debate have been written by Omer Bartov. In a pioneering examination of German combat divisions on the Eastern Front, Bartov demonstrated that they carried out various war crimes due to their attraction to Nazi ideology.³⁹ Expanding his analysis to the Wehrmacht as a whole, he argued that the “troops at the front were the firmest of Hitler’s followers, and the

³⁴ Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (ed.), *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944*, Ausstellungskatalog (Hamburg, 1996). Among the numerous books that examined the exhibition’s reception in Germany and its accuracy, see Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (ed.), *Besucher einer Ausstellung* (Hamburg, 1998); Hans-Günther Thiele (ed.), *Die Wehrmachtsausstellung: Dokumentation einer Kontroverse* (Bremen, 1997); as well as the citations given in Omer Bartov, “The Wehrmacht Exhibition Controversy: The Politics of Evidence,” in Omer Bartov, Atina Grossman, and Mary Nolan (eds.), *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2002), pp. 270–1, nn. 1–4. Several falsely captioned pictures led to the eventual closure of the exhibition in 1999; following a revision of the exhibition, it reopened two years later. For Heer’s take on the closing of the exhibition, see *Vom Verschwinden der Täter: Der Vernichtungskrieg fand statt, aber keiner war dabei* (Berlin, 2004), pp. 12–66; see also Bartov, “The Wehrmacht Exhibition Controversy: The Politics of Evidence,” pp. 41–60.

³⁵ Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (ed.), *The German Army and Genocide: Crimes against War Prisoners, Jews and other Civilians, 1939–1944* (New York, 1999), p. 19. This is a translation of the original catalog, *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 170.

³⁷ Hannes Heer, “Killing Fields: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belorussia, 1941–1942,” in Heer and Naumann, *War of Extermination*, pp. 55–79, here p. 55. His analysis is based on the actions of Wehrmacht Security Divisions and the infamous 707th Infantry Division in the rear of Army Group Center.

³⁸ “Abrechnung mit Hitlers Generälen,” in *Spiegel-Online*, 27 November 2001. Heer claims he was misquoted; see Hartmann, “Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht?” p. 2, n. 4, for a further discussion of this issue.

³⁹ Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941–1945*.

least cynical about his ideology.”⁴⁰ It was this “ideological conviction of the troops” that led to the Wehrmacht’s tremendous staying power in combat, as well as to a policy of unrestrained brutality towards Soviet prisoners of war and civilians in the occupied areas.⁴¹ In combination with a vicious system of military justice, the internalization of Nazi propaganda led the Wehrmacht to wage a war of extermination against Soviet soldiers and civilians alike, and it “finally [became] Hitler’s Army” in the east.⁴²

The contention that combat units were inextricably entwined with war crimes has been buttressed by Christoph Rass’s extremely detailed institutional history of one combat infantry division.⁴³ He argued that

the analysis of the combat practices of an *ordinary infantry division* has made clear that a differentiation between a conventional war at the front and a war of extermination in the rear cannot be made . . . Nearly all elements of National Socialist warfare and extermination policies coincided in the world of these soldiers.⁴⁴

Rass also found the overwhelming majority of war crimes committed by soldiers, such as thefts of livestock or goods or the physical abuse of civilians, to have been “frequently insignificant, unspectacular and marginal,” but “in their connection and totality, they characterized the everyday occurrences of the war of extermination on the front.”⁴⁵

Other scholars, however, claim that combat units, far from being racial warriors, were not actively involved in crimes at the front. Both Stephen Fritz and Rolf-Dieter Müller have claimed that less than 5 percent of German combat soldiers personally committed crimes in the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ Arguing that a new orthodoxy has taken hold which portrays “Wehrmacht soldiers as politically motivated warriors in a racial war,” Müller claims that this is based on several isolated studies then

⁴⁰ Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, p. 169.

⁴¹ Omer Bartov, “Brutalität und Mentalität: Zum Verhalten deutscher Soldaten an der ‘Ostfront,’” in Reinhard Rürup and Peter Jahn (eds.), *Erobern und Vernichten: Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941–1945* (Berlin, 1991), pp. 183–97, here p. 184.

⁴² Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, p. 28. Clarifying his position, Bartov writes (p. 144), “This does not mean every individual soldier was a committed National Socialist; rather, it is to say that the vast majority of troops internalized the distorted Nazi presentation of reality, and consequently felt that they had no other alternative to fight to the death.”

⁴³ Rass, “*Menschenmaterial*.” ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 410. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ Rass, “*Verbrecherische Kriegführung an der Front: Eine Infanteriedivision und ihre Soldaten*,” in C. Hartmann, J. Hürter, and U. Jureit (eds.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (Munich, 2005), pp. 80–90, here pp. 89–90.

⁴⁶ “‘Gegen Kritik immun.’ Der Potsdamer Historiker Rolf-Dieter Müller über die Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg und die Thesen des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung,” *Der Spiegel* (23) 1999, pp. 60–2; Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, p. 482.