The Wehrmacht and its involvement in war crimes on the Eastern Front

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The trends in historical research on the topic of the Wehrmacht’s involvement in war crimes and genocide have been intimately connected with the overall political, intellectual and social moods and contexts of postwar Germany. The storm of controversy sparked in 1995 by the touring exhibition War Crimes of the Wehrmacht indicated that for many Germans, there was a reluctance to accept the truth that had been firmly established decades earlier by a variety of scholars: that German soldiers were heavily involved in the organisation and implementation of the Third Reich's criminal policies on the Eastern Front. The reason for this reluctance can be found in the pervasive notion of the Wehrmacht’s ‘purity of arms’ which had been perpetuated through cultural memory since the end of the war. In this view, the SS (Schutzstaffel) and the SD (Sicherheitsdienst) were responsible for most, if not all of the crimes committed by German forces on the Eastern Front, while the Wehrmacht, despite its vast and ubiquitous presence in the occupied territories, had remained a professional and ‘untarnished’ fighting force. The first aim of this essay is to examine how postwar trends in historical writing contributed to this notion of a ‘clean’ Wehrmacht, and second, to explore the ways in which the re-evaluations on this topic that emerged from the mid-1960s have contributed to the discourse and debates concerning victims and perpetrators of the Third Reich.

From the fall of the Third Reich in 1945 until the late 1960s, it was widely believed, by both historians and members of the public, that the German armed forces of the Second World War, the Wehrmacht, had maintained professional, decent and soldierly conduct in the campaigns on the Eastern Front. Accompanying this view was the belief that while the Wehrmacht rank-and-file had fought bravely and honourably in a purely military operation, any atrocities committed by German forces in the East were either mere ‘excesses’ or could be attributed almost entirely to the operations of the SS and the SD in the rear areas.¹ Not that this topic was given much attention during the

¹ Jurgen Forster, “Complicity of Entanglement: Wehrmacht, War, and Holocaust.” In The Holocaust and History: The Known
immediate postwar years. Indeed, the idea of studying the Eastern Front beyond the realm of pure military strategy, tactics, politics and economics, was highly taboo in West Germany. Moreover, the political, ideological and social contexts of this early postwar period, along with methodological approaches to military history, actually contributed to the flourishing of this notion of the Wehrmacht's 'untarnished shield.'\(^2\)

The emergence of the Cold War following the defeat of the Third Reich was particularly conducive to the development of this idea in postwar historiography for two primary reasons. First, as the Western Allies wished to gather information on the strategies and tactics employed by the Red Army and the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, various German generals were interviewed and encouraged to write their own account of military events.\(^3\) This focus on strictly military aspects of the war in the East meant these generals escaped close questioning regarding war crimes, and when such topics were mentioned, they had the opportunity to either feign ignorance or provide their own apologetic explanation. In presenting accounts of their own experiences, the officers invariably attempted to distance themselves from the Nazi regime, and were highly concerned with projecting an image of the Wehrmacht that was respectable and soldierly.\(^4\)

Furthermore, the heightened tensions during the early phase of the Cold War meant that the Western Allies wished for a rearmed and strong West Germany to provide a loyal bulwark against communism. Thus the new armed forces, the Bundeswehr, required the experience and knowledge of those who had served in the Wehrmacht. It was therefore necessary to distance the soldiers from the legacy of Nazism and its crimes of the Second World War as much as possible and help reintegrate veterans back into postwar West German society.\(^5\) More broadly, the process of rebuilding West Germany during this period of rapid breakdowns in international relations relied in part on resurrecting a notion of German national identity. The stability of such a notion rested on a narrow definition of those who could be labelled a Nazi perpetrator or collaborator. Labelling the Wehrmacht a criminal

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\(^4\) Volker Berghahn, “Preface,” in Ibid., p. xiii.
organisation would likely have placed this project in jeopardy as it would have been perceived as a condemnation of as many as twenty million German citizens who had served in the Wehrmacht from 1939 to 1945.\(^6\)

Depictions of German soldiers as brave and honourable defenders of the fatherland who fell victims to both the Nazi regime and to the Red Army, as found in former Wehrmacht generals' memoirs, became embedded in the cultural memory of the Federal Republic as they provided a means by which Germans citizens could at the same time remain proud of military achievements, and remember their own experiences of suffering in the war.\(^7\)

Western historians writing about Second World War during the late 1940s and the 1950s generally accepted the notion of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht. One reason was that this conformed to their perspective of how the war was fought on the Western Front, where both sides had mostly adhered to standard conventions and laws of warfare.\(^8\) For West German scholars in particular, a more fundamental, but still partial reason was the lack of available materials in the archive base. The Western Allies had captured many thousands of Nazi and military documents at the end of the war, yet they were only returned to West Germany, and thus available to German scholars, in the mid-1960s.\(^9\) More significant, however, was that in the absence of available documentary evidence regarding the Wehrmacht’s conduct on the Eastern Front, many historians relied heavily on the above mentioned testimonies of participant German generals.\(^10\) This can be seen in the British military historian Liddell Hart’s work *The Other Side of the Hill*, which appeared in 1948.\(^11\) In this work, Hart interviewed a number of leading Wehrmacht officers and from this information he concluded that the German General Staff had little to do with Hitler’s policies of aggressive war, and that many of those who inhabited the upper echelons of the Wehrmacht maintained persistent opposition to Hitler and


\(^{9}\) Bartov, “German Soldiers and the Holocaust,” p. 163.


\(^{11}\) Berghahn, “Preface”, pp. xii-xv.
National Socialist ideology.\textsuperscript{12} Hart also used accounts from occupied western Europe in presenting the notion that the German Army on the whole displayed better conduct than SS troops, and on occasion even Allied troops.\textsuperscript{13}

Retired German officers also had more a direct impact on the direction of military historiography in the postwar period. The Historical Division of the United States Army offered many German officers the opportunity to contribute to a military history of the Second World War, overseen by former German chief of the army general staff Franz Halder.\textsuperscript{14} This project presented the Wehrmacht and its leadership as victims of Hitler, and also maintained that the strategic goals of the armed forces were always separate and distinct from the political and ideological goals of the regime.\textsuperscript{15} This was reiterated in the former general Erich von Manstein's account of the war in the East.\textsuperscript{16} While his memoir mainly focused on strategy, tactics and major military operations, Manstein detailed his encounter with the infamous Kommissarbefehl, the directive that all political commissars of the Red Army were to be shot immediately by Wehrmacht troops upon capture. Manstein wrote that he saw the Kommissarbefehl as ‘utterly unsoldierly,’ and thus refused to implement it, a decision that was also endorsed by many of his superiors.\textsuperscript{17}

As previously indicated, the acceptance and perpetuation of the notion of the Wehrmacht's 'purity of arms' in early postwar historical research was due in part to the methodology employed by many military historians. Omer Bartov has argued that although these works often provided useful documentary material, they had a tendency to be apologetic accounts of the war in the East.\textsuperscript{18} Moreover, in terms of historical methodology, these works tended to be traditionalist and conservative in their approach, and thus held to the implicit assumption that use of official documents and personal accounts inevitably led to accurate portrayals of the past.\textsuperscript{19} Also problematic was the lack of interest in military affairs from social, intellectual and cultural historians, which meant that the study of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front was left to military historians who were unwilling to connect purely

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 12.
\textsuperscript{14} Wette, The Wehrmacht, p. 229.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p. 229.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., pp. 179-180.
\textsuperscript{18} Omer Bartov, "Whose History Is It, Anyway? The Wehrmacht and German Historiography," in War of Extermination, p. 404.
'military' aspects of warfare, such as strategy and tactics, to the distinct social issue of atrocities and criminal conduct.\textsuperscript{20}

The image of the Wehrmacht presented in late 1940s and 1950s historical writing began to be challenged in the mid to late 1960s by a group of more critical military historians. From the mid-1960s onwards, an increased focus on the accumulated evidence meant that earlier postwar assumptions could be refuted almost entirely by a number of historians actively interested in this field of research.\textsuperscript{21}

The numerous Nazi documents captured by the Western Allies after the war were returned to West Germany by the middle of the 1960s. These were eventually transferred to the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv where they became open to systematic research by scholars willing to examine the history of the Wehrmacht.\textsuperscript{22} During the course of the 1960s, West German historiography moved away from an apologetic discourse heavily concerned with detailing the various ways in which Germans had been victims during the war, and historians instead began to focus on a more critical study of German wartime perpetrators and their victims.\textsuperscript{23}

A seminal study that helped initiate further historical research into the crimes of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front was Hans-Adolf Jacobsen’s contribution to the 1965 work \textit{Anatomy of the SS State}, titled the ‘\textit{Kommissarbefehl} and Mass Executions of Soviet Russian Prisoners of War.’\textsuperscript{24} In this analysis of the ‘Commissar Order,’ Jacobsen argued that military directives and orders were inextricably bound up with National Socialist ideology goals. Jacobsen, by providing analysis of primary source documents, also showed that the Wehrmacht leadership, the OKW and the OKH, had considerable involvement in the organisation and planning of the \textit{Kommissarbefehl} in the months prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{25} Jacobsen particularly emphasised the general discomfort that this order, along with other so-called ‘criminal orders’ that disregarded military law, caused many army commanders, and provided documentary evidence of orders that aimed to intervene and alter details

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, pp. 404-405.
\textsuperscript{22} Wett, \textit{The Wehrmacht}, p. 252.
of the original orders. In assessing the actual implementation of these orders, Jacobsen stated that the evidence suggested that approaches varied from a strict adherence to complete disregard.\(^{26}\)

Theo Schulte, while stating that Jacobsen's study was 'muted' in its critical assessment of the military, acknowledged that this work, along with the pioneering, revisionist studies of Klaus-Jürgen Müller and Manfred Messerschmidt that appeared in 1969, marked the emergence of a new 'school' of German research on the Wehrmacht.\(^ {27}\) Indeed, this school can be characterised by its focus on the various ways in which the Wehrmacht became embedded and assimilated into the National Socialist system and absorbed its ideology.\(^ {28}\) Other important texts that appeared in their wake included Norbert Müller’s study on the Wehrmacht's role in the occupation government, in which he argued that the military was complicit in all atrocities committed on the Eastern Front. The significance of Müller’s study can be seen in the fact that this was the first attempt to provide a systematic study of the Wehrmacht’s polices of occupation in the East by utilising communist sources from both East Germany and the Soviet Union.\(^ {29}\) Further advances were provided in 1978 by Christian Streit’s in-depth analysis of the Wehrmacht’s maltreatment and murder of Red Army prisoners of war, Keine Kameraden, and in 1981 by Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm’s study of the Wehrmacht’s collaboration with the Einsatzgruppen mobile killing-squads of the SS and SD. These investigations both took a highly empirical approach, digging deep into archival sources and utilising the available documentary evidence, and thus bringing to light a fuller and more terrible picture of Germany’s war and occupation in the Soviet Union.\(^ {30}\) Streit’s book, while not the first to engage with the topic of Soviet POWs, provoked a great deal of controversy in the Federal Republic as it provided an emotionally charged account of an area that had generally remained taboo since the war. According to Streit, the Wehrmacht not only collaborated with the Einsatzgruppen, but also furthered the escalation of extermination policies.\(^ {31}\) Moreover, by arguing that the gradually intensified implementation of 'criminal orders' helped prepare the way for the systematic killing of Jews and other members of the

\(^{25}\) Ibid., pp. 518-520.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., pp. 521-522.


\(^{29}\) Schulte, The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia, pp. 8-9.


\(^{31}\) Michael Burleigh, Confronting the Nazi Past: New Debates on Modern German History (London: Collins and Brown, 1996),
population, Streit also provided an early example of the ‘cumulative radicalisation’ of Nazi genocidal policy.\textsuperscript{32} In this way, Streit argued that the Wehrmacht, rather than being somehow pressured into carrying out these atrocities, was itself heavily responsible for both the planning and the implementation of the \textit{Vernichtungskrieg} in the East. The commonly perceived division between the German military and the \textit{Einsatzgruppen} was thus revealed as almost non-existent.\textsuperscript{33}

The historiographical changes that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s thus initiated a process of investigation in which previous assumptions, especially those concerning the Wehrmacht’s relationship with the Nazi regime and its conduct on the Eastern Front, were systematically challenged by historians willing to delve into and examine the archival material available. However, while the notion of the Wehrmacht's ‘untarnished shield’ was established as baseless, debate continued over the causes and scope of the Wehrmacht's involvement in war crimes and atrocities. Methodological approaches towards research on the Wehrmacht changed once again during the 1980s, as scholars began to explore questions and areas that they thought had not been sufficiently addressed by previous studies.\textsuperscript{34}

In 1985, the Israeli historian Omer Bartov provided new insights regarding the nature and conduct of the Wehrmacht in his study of German soldiers on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1944.\textsuperscript{35} Bartov thought that previous works, while firmly establishing the involvement of the Wehrmacht in criminal policies in the East, had been limited in their employment of a traditional methodology, their focus on the upper spheres of the military and single issues. According to Bartov, this meant that knowledge regarding the actual situation and experiences of the lower level troops on the ground was purely speculative or relied on the accounts of generals.\textsuperscript{36} Bartov’s own study thus sought to study the German Army in an approach to historical research ‘from below’, with a focus on a small segment of ordinary troops and lower level NCOs on the Eastern Front. This provided details of how factors such a harsh conditions and ideological indoctrination contributed to the ‘barbarisation’ of German soldiers, a process through which acts of brutality towards civilians and prisoners of war were

\textsuperscript{32} Schulte, \textit{The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia}, pp. 17-18.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 18-19.
\textsuperscript{34} Bartov, “German Soldiers and the Holocaust,” pp. 167-168.
\textsuperscript{35} Omer Bartov, \textit{The Eastern Front, 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare} (London: Macmillan, 1985).
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 4.
legitimised and encouraged. Bartov also argued that this process also helped facilitate the Wehrmacht’s collaboration with the Einsatzgruppen in carrying out the criminal orders of the Nazi regime across the Eastern occupied territories.

Similarly to Bartov, Theo Schulte saw the need for historical research on the Wehrmacht to lower its gaze and focus on the actions and experiences of troops on the ground. In his 1989 study, Schulte focused on the activity of German soldiers and the implementation of atrocities and war crimes in the occupied rear-areas of the Soviet Union. According to Schulte, ascertaining the actual role of the Germany Army in the implementation of National Socialist occupation policies was particularly problematic. He thought that while Bartov’s approach had indicated the potential that could be found in a ‘history from below’ of the Wehrmacht, what was needed was a more integrated approach that sought to examine the ‘dialectical relationship’ between the policies of the Nazi regime and the soldiers on the ground. While Schulte acknowledged the large role that ideological indoctrination played in the motivation of soldiers to commit atrocities, he thought that the Wehrmacht’s organisational structure and the brutal nature of war in the East were even more significant as conditioning factors as they were in turn exploited by the higher command to justify the use of extreme violence against the civilian population and prisoners of war.

The trend of studying the Wehrmacht ‘from below,’ especially from the early 1990s onwards, eventually became manifest in the highly controversial exhibition War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944, which first toured German and Austrian cities from 1995 until 1999 and again in the early to mid 2000s. In the wake of the German unification and the end of the Cold War and following the breakthrough studies of the 1980s, German historiography of the 1990s was dominated by discourses that focused on studying the various manifestations of German perpetration of crimes during the Nazi period. The Crimes of the Wehrmacht exhibition, organised by the Hamburg Institute for Social research, featured photographic material, letters and diaries that provided evidence of

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37 Ibid., pp. 4-6, 143-145.
38 Ibid., pp. 143-154.
40 Ibid, pp. 24-27.
41 Ibid., pp. 285-291.
numerous brutal acts carried out by German soldiers on the Eastern Front.43 While the criminal nature of Germany’s war in the East had been widely accepted among historians since the 1970s, the German public had remained attached to the notion of the ‘untarnished’ Wehrmacht since the end of the war. Upon visiting the exhibition they were confronted with material that directly challenged this notion in fundamental way.44 Most shocking to many visitors was the evidence that the Wehrmacht was not only directly involved in mass killings of civilians, POWs, and partisans, but also in the implementation of the Final Solution.45

The general reluctance among Germans to accept the involvement of regular soldiers in the crimes of National Socialism, and in particular the Holocaust, has been directly linked to the debates over the ways in which postwar Germany has ‘come to terms with the past.’46 While acknowledging the crimes of the Third Reich, postwar Germans had sought to define the category of ‘perpetrators’ as narrowly as possible. However, the historical discourse prior to and following the 1995 exhibition, with its increasingly detailed picture of the extent and nature of the Wehrmacht’s involvement in crimes on the Eastern Front, questioned long-held assumptions concerning who and who was not a perpetrator or collaborator in the Third Reich.47 While a majority of Germans accepted a picture of the Holocaust that emphasised the bureaucratic, industrial mass-murder of the death camps, the Wehrmacht exhibition depicted the other side of the Holocaust, one that Germans could not as easily distance themselves from. It showed the face-to-face, day-to-day round-ups, mass executions, hangings and shootings, and the individuals who ordered, witnessed and participated in these acts.48 At a fundamental level, the exhibition represented what was becoming ever clearer in the historiography: that the war in the East was in almost all aspects bound together with National Socialist policies of extermination. The exhibition thus forced many members of the German public to revise their notions of the Wehrmacht’s ‘purity of arms’, a historical myth which had until then survived in public cultural

45 Bartov, “German Soldiers and the Holocaust,” p. 72.
47 Wette, The Wehrmacht, pp. 270-274.
memory, despite the efforts of many scholars from the 1960s onwards. 49

In conclusion, the historical debate over the extent and nature of the Wehrmacht’s involvement in war crimes and atrocities on the Eastern Front forms a significant part of the postwar historiographical discourse concerning German perpetration and victimhood. The notion of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht initially flourished due to the political, ideological and social contexts that heavily informed historical research in the early postwar period. Later re-evaluations from more critical historians established that the Wehrmacht had been not only highly complicit in the Nazi atrocities committed on the Eastern Front, but also highly involved in the organisation and implementation of these crimes. Therefore, by exploring the extent to which German soldiers were perpetrators of Nazi criminal policies in the occupied areas, historians from the late 1960s presented arguments that have sought to place the historical writing on the Wehrmacht’s role on the Eastern Front more firmly within a perpetrator-centred discourse, a direction that has provoked controversy in postwar German society.

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