Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front

The German Infantry's War, 1941–1944

Jeff Rutherford

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By 1944, the overwhelming majority of the German Army had participated in the German war of annihilation in the Soviet Union and historians continue to debate the motivations behind the violence unleashed in the east. Jeff Rutherford offers an important new contribution to this debate through a study of combat and the occupation policies of three frontline infantry divisions. He shows that while Nazi racial ideology provided a legitimizing context in which violence was not only accepted but encouraged, it was the Wehrmacht's adherence to a doctrine of military necessity which is critical in explaining why German soldiers fought as they did. This meant that the German Army would do whatever was necessary to emerge victorious on the battlefield. Periods of brutality were intermixed with conciliation as the army's view and treatment of the civilian population evolved based on its appreciation of the larger context of war in the east.

JEFF RUTHERFORD is Assistant Professor of History at Wheeling Jesuit University.

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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 Deutsches 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 Wippermann, *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. Variously described 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 Edele 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 solider 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.

generalized to the remainder of the army.[47] Dismissing ideology as the primary cause of the barbarization of war in the Soviet Union, he called for a more nuanced approach that examines the "military situation, patterns of behavior, [and] motives of Wehrmacht units and soldiers."[48] Concurring with an approach that downplays the importance of ideology, Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer have recently written that "the majority [of the men] had little interest in ideology, politics, world order and the like; they didn't fight the war out of conviction, but rather because they were soldiers and combat was their job."[49] They argued that "abstract issues such as the 'Jewish world conspiracy,' 'Bolshevik subhumanity' or even the 'National Socialist Racial Community' only marginally played a role. These soldiers were no ideological warriors as most were completely unpolitical."[50]

The responsibility of combat troops for war crimes has also been challenged by Fritz and Christian Hartmann. Fritz concludes that while the German Army's success created the preconditions necessary for the war crimes that defined the Third Reich, "relatively few of the active perpetrators were *front troops*":

> the worst of the crimes with which the *Ostheer* was associated – the murder of the Jews, the shooting of political officials, the systematic starvation of prisoners of war, the colonial exploitation of food and raw materials, and participation in forced labor roundups – were largely perpetrated by occupation and security units.[51]

Hartmann's exhaustive analysis of three frontline and two rear-area divisions through early 1942 argues that frontline troops simply had neither the time nor the opportunity to wage a criminal war of extermination. Since the tasks of "forward" combat soldiers centered on waging war this meant that the criminal undertakings of "mass murder, forced recruitment [of workers] and the exploitation of the land . . . were not genuine tasks of [these] troops" and instead were carried out by rear-area units as well as SS formations and other civilian agencies.[52] While several "crimes of the front" – such as implementation of the Commissar Order – did occur,

[47] Rolf-Dieter Müller, "Die Wehrmacht: Historische Last und Verantwortung. Die Historiographie im Spannungsfeld von Wissenschaft und Vergangenheitsbewältigung," in Rolf-Dieter Müller and Hans-Erich Volkmann (eds.), *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität* (Munich, 1999), pp. 3–35, here pp. 18, 11.

[48] Ibid., p. 12.

[49] Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt, 2011), p. 14.

[50] Ibid., p. 393.

[51] Fritz, *Ostkrieg*, p. 481.

[52] Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 466, 467; Christian Hartmann, "Wie verbrecherisch war die Wehrmacht?", in Hartmann, Hürter, and Jureit, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte*, pp. 69–79, here p. 74; Hartmann, "Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht?", p. 47.

Hartmann argues that either the number of victims was relatively small or the patterns of behavior were too varied to implicate all soldiers in a war of extermination.[53] Similarly to Fritz, his argument transfers the overwhelming majority of the army's guilt onto rear-area security and occupation formations.[54]

Two important studies which examine rear-area units, but nonetheless deal with issues germane to this study, are Theo Schulte's analysis of a rear-area command and Ben Shepherd's investigation of security divisions. Schulte argued that "continued participation in the war [by German soldiers] was often in spite of rather than because of Nazi ideology."[55] Though Shepherd places more weight on the importance of ideology, both emphasize tangible factors, such as the training of the soldiers, their lack of firepower, or their lack of manpower, in explaining why these units committed atrocities.[56] Here, situational factors – i.e. the use of terror as a means of pacification when faced by superior numbers and firepower – proved more powerful in motivating German actions than did ideology. Clearly, the questions of combat-unit participation in war crimes and the motivations for it remain open.

III. Continuities in German history: the Prusso-German Army and "military necessity"

As this historiographical discussion indicates, most historians have looked to the immediate Nazi period in trying to unravel the army's participation in the war of annihilation. This is a result of recent trends which have highlighted the ruptures and breaks in the history of the German nation-state, especially within the context of the twentieth century. The rise of cultural, linguistic, and postmodernist thought effectively ended the idea of constructing an all-encompassing narrative of German history. Such new approaches to history led Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer to contend that the "instability of the German condition" needs to be made "the pivotal concern of historical reconstruction."[57] In order to do this,

> such an approach needs to break through the crust of a single narrative to recover the multiple subjects that make up a national history. Dissolving

[53] Ibid., p. 47. [54] Hartmann, "Wie verbrecherisch war die Wehrmacht?", p. 73.
[55] Theo Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (Oxford, 1989), p. 294.
[56] Ibid., pp. 264–84, the quoted sentence is from p. 267; Ben Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 226–8.
[57] Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton, 2003).

the single overarching story of the nation into multiple histories permits the recovery of a sense of the nation's fractures and of the labors in joining and orchestrating them.[58]

This emphasis on the conflicts and fissures in recent German history, however beneficial for understanding the contradictory impulses and development of Germany during the tumultuous twentieth century, runs the risk of divorcing the Nazi period from earlier periods of German history.[59]

Recent work has suggested that the past century needs to be kept in the context of the *longue durée* of the earlier epochs of German history. "Ideas, institutions, and politics" have existed "across significant political ruptures" throughout German history and it is the continuities that thread their way through the Prusso-German Army and its development, thinking, and practices during the existence of the unified Reich that are essential in understanding the behavior of the Wehrmacht during the war in the east.[60] An examination of the army from 1870 to 1945 is a necessary complement and, in some ways, corrective to the recent historiographical trends that center on the importance of ideology and situational factors and have pushed other possible explanations for the German Army's participation in the war of annihilation to the side. A more profitable avenue of investigation would be one which looks not only at the war itself but also at the institutionalized practices of the German Army as they developed during its history; here, the issue of "military necessity" looms large.

German military thought evolved in reaction to the new demands of war that emerged during an age of volatile nationalism, mass armies, and industrialized warfare. Small, professional armies no longer decided matters amongst themselves on the battlefield; warfare had evolved into one between warring societies. The German experience between 1870 and 1945 highlighted the Prusso-German Army's increasing intervention in matters that had once remained far outside its purview. The Franco-Prussian War confronted the Germans with the reality of irregular warfare while the Third Supreme Army Command's virtual seizure of power during the last years of the *Kaiserreich* highlighted the army's attempt to mobilize society behind the war effort. The creation of the Ober Ost military state (named after the title *Oberbefehlshaber Ost*, the supreme

[58] Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past*, p. 17.
[59] See Helmut Walser Smith's contributions to the forum "The Long Nineteenth Century," *German History* 26 (2008), pp. 72–91.
[60] Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 9–10.

German commander in the east) in the occupied Baltic states during the First World War involved the army in an unprecedented project of constructing a new, "civilized" and "Germanized" state.[61] Events on the Eastern Front during the Second World War dramatically illustrated the much more far-reaching power and aims of the German Army; here, "the administration, security and exploitation of the occupied territories became increasingly important within the conduct of war in the age of 'total war.'"[62] Military victory thus hinged not only on battlefield performance, but also on controlling civilian populations and mobilizing them behind the war effort; thus the notion of military necessity retains real importance in explaining the German Army's behavior.

General Julius von Hartmann, a former cavalry officer, provided perhaps the most precise and useful definition of military necessity in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War. Hartmann believed that all military logic pointed to the "great, final purpose of war: *the defeat of the enemy's power, the overcoming of the enemy's energy, the overwhelming of the enemy's will*. This *one* goal commands absolutely, it dictates law and regulation. The concrete form of this law appears as *military necessity*."[63] In other words, the absolute importance of achieving victory on the battlefield overrode all other considerations: triumph was to be attained at any cost. This led Hartmann to claim that "modern war targets the entirety of the military character and includes general damage to the enemy ... misery and torment should not be spared the enemy – they actually serve to break his energy and conquer his will."[64]

The growing importance of society in conflict – as the Franco-Prussian War made abundantly clear – meant that any irregular resistance needed to be immediately quashed. Drawing upon the experiences of Wellington and Napoleon with guerilla warfare, Hartmann wrote that "both men resorted to terrorism as soon as people's war increased."[65] He thus believed that civilian

> excesses can only be reined in when their paroxysm is met with drastic means. If individuals are hit hard, as warning examples to others, that is certainly

[61] Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 54.
[62] Hürter, "Die Wehrmacht vor Leningrad," p. 384.
[63] Julius von Hartmann, "Militärische Notwendigkeit und Humanität," *Deutsche Rundschau* 13 (1877), pp. 453–4, quoted in Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, 2006), p. 123. Hartmann's emphasis.
[64] Quoted in ibid., p. 124.
[65] Quoted in Manfred Messerschmidt, "Völkerrecht und 'Kriegsnotwendigkeit' in der deutschen militärischen Tradition," in Manfred Messerschmidt (ed.), *Was damals Recht war ... NS- Militär- und Strafjustiz im Vernichtungskrieg* (Essen, 1996), pp. 190–229, here p. 195.

deeply regrettable, but this harshness is a healthy and preserving good deed for the whole. Where there is popular uprising, *terrorism* becomes a necessary military principle.[66]

For Hartmann, the necessity of victory legitimized the use of any and all means due to the "elemental character of war."[67]

Hartmann's rather pitiless discussion of anti-partisan measures reflected the experiences of the Prusso-German Army during the Franco-Prussian War. Following the defeat of the French Army at the battle of Sedan, French irregulars sprung up throughout the country and began harassing German troops. This affront to the Prusso-German Army's professionalism led to the implementation of drastic measures designed to smash the *francs-tireurs* (guerilla) movement. Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, Chief of the Prussian General Staff, noted that "experience has established that the most effective way of dealing with this situation [guerilla activity] is to destroy the premises concerned – or, where the participation has been general, the entire village."[68] Moltke also ordered the taking of hostages as a deterrent to sabotage activities.[69] The use of collective measures – the punishment of a community or hostages when the actual perpetrators could not be identified – became the basis of German anti-partisan policy at this time and remained so up through the Second World War. Though the Germans resorted to terror tactics of this type during the Franco-Prussian War, on the whole, the army nonetheless maintained a relatively "disciplined restraint" in their dealings with French civilians.[70]

After the war, Moltke wrote that "their [*francs-tireurs*] gruesome work had to be answered by bloody coercion. Because of this, our conduct of war finally assumed a harshness we deplored, but which we could not avoid."[71] Such actions could not be averted because Moltke believed that modern war demanded measures directed against all of an enemy's resources to achieve a quick and decisive victory, including "finances, railroads, food and the prestige of the government."[72] In other words,

[66] Quoted in Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, p. 124. Hartmann's emphasis.
[67] Messerschmidt, "Völkerrecht und 'Kriegsnotwendigkeit'," p. 196.
[68] Quoted in Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (New York, 1991), p. 378.
[69] Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 118–19.
[70] Examples of German collective measures are found in Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870–1871* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 238, 264–5, 279. For further instances of German behavior towards civilians suspected of guerilla activity, see Mark R. Stoneman, "The Bavarian Army and French Civilians in the War of 1870–1871: A Cultural Interpretation," *War in History* 8 (2001), pp. 273–93, here pp. 271–8. The judgment on the Prusso-German Army's general behavior is from Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, p. 379.
[71] Daniel J. Hughes (ed.), *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, 1993), p. 32.
[72] Messerschmidt, "Völkerrecht und 'Kriegsnotwendigkeit'," p. 195.

Moltke himself converted to the belief that war had transformed into a "struggle for existence," one that men could not regulate as it was part of God's divine order.[73]

As Isabel Hull has so brilliantly detailed, the policies enacted on the spur of the moment during the Franco-Prussian War were both institutionalized into the army's official doctrine and kept alive through "memory and myths" in the officer corps and the enlisted ranks.[74] While many of these practices enshrined in army policy actually contradicted existing international law, the majority of the military leadership believed that "the exceptionality of war rais[ed] it above law," and, due to this, military professionals should be allowed to wage war to a victorious conclusion, no matter the cost, without outside interference.[75]

Such thinking was encapsulated in a 1902 General Staff publication on the laws of war entitled "Customs of War on Land."[76] The document began with the following statement:

> A war led with energy cannot simply be directed against the combatants of the enemy state and his fortifications; rather, it must try to destroy the entire spiritual and material resources thereof in the same way. Humanitarian claims, i.e. the protection of people and goods, can come into question only insofar as the nature and goal of the war allow.

It continued by stating that "immersion in the history of war will protect the officer from excessive humanitarian notions, as it will teach him that war cannot be waged without certain severity; rather, the one true humanity often lies in its ruthless application."[77] "Leniency" towards civilians was a type of "cruelty against one's own troops" as it only increased the length of the war and consequently led to higher casualties.[78] So already at the turn of the twentieth century, segments of the German military leadership demanded a ruthless waging of war against not only the enemy's armed forces, but its society as well. Each individual strand of this set of policies would be utilized in increasingly radical fashion in the occupied Soviet Union during the 1940s; clearly, a real continuity wove its way through the Prusso-German Army's thinking during its existence.

The evolution of the army's antiguerilla policies outside the bounds of international standards was only radicalized during the opening days of the First World War by the "*franc-tireur* myth."[79] John Horne and Alan

[73] Ibid. [74] Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 119–30, the cited phrase is from p. 119.
[75] Ibid., p. 123.
[76] Quoted in Messerschmidt, "Völkerrecht und 'Kriegsnotwendigkeit'," p. 193.
[77] Ibid., pp. 194–5. [78] Richter, *Krieg und Verbrechen*, p. 11.
[79] John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven, 2001), p. 94.

Kramer have painstakingly re-created this myth as it spread throughout the ranks of the Imperial German Army during its advance in the summer and fall of 1914 in Belgium and northern France. The memories and myths of guerilla activities during 1870–1 had been passed down to the soldiers of Kaiser Wilhelm II, and when invading German troops were faced with tense or unexplainable situations they lashed out at the civilian population.[80] Unlike the Franco-Prussian War, however, collective measures became the order of the day during the opening months of the war in the west, despite the fact that there appears to have been no *franc-tireur* activity during this time period.[81] In the east, German behavior towards popular resistance during the occupation of present-day Ukraine proved strict but relatively benign.[82] Occupation practices in both Belgium and the Baltic region, however, pointed towards the future development of the army's occupation policy. In the west, German practices led to a rapacious exploitation of the Belgian economy, with well over 100,000 Belgians deported for labor in either Germany or the army.[83] Actions in Lithuania, however, proved far more comprehensive. Instead of merely administering the area as an occupying power, the army attempted to construct "a monolithic military state"; in other words, German officers "aimed to impose their own form and order on the lands, then to use the lands to the fullest extent towards the final, long-range goal of progressively making over the territory."[84] At the root of this program, however, stood the notion that "the interests of the army and the German Reich always supersede the interests of the occupied territory."[85] The attempt to extract the area's resources led to a "statistical psychosis" as the Germans tried to requisition all the goods

[80] The deep impression made on the German Army by the irregular war of 1870–1 led at least one Reserve Bavarian Infantry Regiment during the First World War to hand out ropes to every third man in its platoon for hanging expected *francs-tireurs*; see Thomas Weber, *Hitler's First War: Adolf Hitler, the Men of the List Regiment and the First World War* (Oxford, 2010), p. 27.

[81] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914*, pp. 435–9, identify some 130 incidents of ten or more civilians being killed for alleged partisan attacks. For an analysis of the German invasion of the west in 1914 that integrates German treatment of civilians into the narrative of military events, see Holger Herwig, *The Marne 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle That Changed the World* (New York, 2009).

[82] For a brief overview of German occupation policy in the east during the First World War, see Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Munich, 2008), pp. 25–34. On Ukraine, see Stefan Karner and Wolfram Dornik (eds.), *Die Besatzung der Ukraine 1918: Historischer Kontext – Forschungsstand – wirtschaftliche und soziale Folgen* (Graz, 2008); and Winfried Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918: Von Brest-Litowsk bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Munich, 1966).

[83] Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 230–42.

[84] Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, pp. 7, 54.

[85] Ibid., p. 66.

necessary for the army's well-being.[86] Though this "military utopia" failed to come to fruition due to the crumbling of the *Kaiserreich*, the example of Ober Ost certainly served as a model for later German occupation policies in the east.[87]

Once the war ended, however, the chaos and confusion in the east that followed led to a round of brutal fighting between German troops; Freikorps units; Baltic, Polish, and Russian nationalists; and Soviet sympathizers.[88] German complaints about the communists who acted as "barbarians" and utilized "insidious combat methods" resulted in "numerous massacres by the Freikorps against real and alleged communists in the conquered Baltic cities and areas in which thousands of victims fell."[89] Here, the Prusso-German Army's traditional means of applying maximum violence to quash irregular warfare contributed to a merciless struggle on Germany's eastern borders, and this proved to be an important way station on the road to the unrestrained use of force that characterized the German Eastern Front during the Second World War.

Both during and after the war, Allied propaganda made much use of the atrocities committed in the west. In response, the German Army vigorously defended its policies, which had the effect of "reaffirm[ing] its doctrine of the illegality of enemy irregular warfare" during the interwar period and providing "one strand of its descent into lawlessness and barbarity during the Third Reich."[90] In the period stretching from 1870 to 1920, violent anti-partisan policies that stood outside accepted international law became enshrined in German military thinking. Such developments in the "military culture" of Wilhelmine Germany need to be considered when examining the behavior of the Wehrmacht in the Second World War.[91]

The implications of military necessity therefore led to the development within the Prusso-German Army of a ruthless attitude towards guerillas

[86] Ibid. [87] Ibid., p. 7.

[88] On the Freikorps and their activities in the German east, see Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front*, pp. 227–43; Hagen Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik 1918–1920* (Boppard am Rhein, 1969), pp. 101–201; Robert L. Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany, 1918–1923* (Cambridge, 1969); and Annemarie H. Sammartino, *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East, 1914–1922* (Ithaca, 2010), pp. 45–70.

[89] The first quotation comes from Heinz Guderian, the second from Hermann Hoth, and the third from the historian Johannes Hürter. See his *Hitlers Heerführer* for all three quotes, pp. 89–90. The German Army's determination to use all means to destroy communist enemies on its frontiers was complemented by its policies directed towards internal communist movements. The use of military force against revolutionaries in the immediate postwar period is examined by Dieter Dreetz, Klaus Gessner, and Heinz Sperling, *Bewaffnete Kämpfe in Deutschland, 1918–1923* (Berlin, 1988). I thank Adrian Wettstein for suggesting this line of thinking.

[90] Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, p. 425.

[91] Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 93–8.

and the civilian society from which they arose. Military necessity also had ramifications for the army's operational performance. As it attempted to secure Germany's position in a seemingly hostile Europe, the army increasingly focused on achieving military victory through a decisive campaign predicated on speed and concentrated aggression that utterly devastated the opponent. Robert Citino has termed this quest for the *Vernichtungsschlacht* (battle of annihilation) as "the German way of war."[92] According to Citino, a quick victory was seen as desirable due either to the diplomatic situation at the time or to the balance of forces opposing the German Reich. These "front-loaded" wars would allow the German Army to conceal its relative weakness and crush its enemies before their weight could be brought to bear on the battlefield.[93] Such thinking certainly did not materialize overnight in the post-1870 period – as evidenced by the battles of Königgrätz in 1866 and Sedan in 1870 – but the German Army increasingly fixated on *the* decisive battle as the solution to all of its problems following the ascension of Alfred von Schlieffen to Chief of the Great General Staff in 1891.[94] Under Schlieffen's command, the army prepared to knock France out of the war immediately following the opening of hostilities before turning to deal with the Russian colossus to its east.[95] The seeming necessity of quickly dispatching the French on the battlefield also played a role in the use of terror against any perceived resistance: in order to ensure that its ambitious timetable was met, the army mercilessly dealt with any hindrances.[96] The all-consuming desire to achieve a Cannae-style victory

[92] Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS, 2005).

[93] Ibid., p. xiii; Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 174–8.

[94] On Prussian planning for the war with Austria, see Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 20–1; on the Franco-Prussian War, see Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, pp. 41–64; Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War*, pp. 43–4; more generally, see Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian War Planning* (Providence, 1993); and Jehuda Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport, 1986).

[95] While Terence Zuber has challenged the notion of a defined Schlieffen Plan, the existence of a military doctrine that could have fostered such an aggressive plan remains unchallenged. For opposing viewpoints on the Schlieffen Plan, see Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning 1871–1914* (New York and London, 2003); and Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans, and Gerhard P. Groß, *Der Schlieffenplan: Analysen und Dokumenten* (Paderborn, 2006). See also Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, 1984), pp. 107–56, as well as Hull's penetrating analysis, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 159–81.

[96] Hew Strachan, "Time, Space and Barbarisation: The German Army and the Eastern Front in Two World Wars," in George Kassimeris (ed.), *The Barbarization of Warfare* (New York, 2006), pp. 58–82, here p. 68.

influenced not only German planning on the continent but also its colonial operations in Africa.

The narrow focus on military triumph triggered a genocidal campaign against the native population in German Southwest Africa in 1904.[97] Hull has convincingly argued that the army's need to maintain its professional reputation led it to brush aside any political attempts at ending the revolt. Instead, it insisted on achieving a battle of annihilation in the field that not only led to unnecessary German casualties but also resulted in the near total extermination of the Herero and Nama tribes. Decisive operations had become such a critical component of both German military operational thought and its institutional culture that all other considerations – especially the treatment of rebellious civilians – merited no thought.

The unprecedented totality and violence of the First World War transformed the notion of military necessity within the German officer corps, particularly amongst those junior and field-grade officers who would later command Hitler's army in the Soviet Union. "A new understanding that the scale and severity of this war made unusual demands" emerged which the "traditional 'trade of war'" no longer sufficed to explain. In the place of older forms of thinking, a newer notion of military necessity arose, one which "appeared to legitimize itself with the renunciation of earlier practices in this existential war between peoples."[98] According to Johannes Hürter,

> the new image of war was determined by the use and consumption of all resources of the warring nations. To balance these efforts, it seemed that the occupied territories demanded exploitation. Considerations towards the foreign civilian population needed to retreat behind "military necessity."[99]

The advent of this type of warfare not only helped usher in a new, more radical notion of military necessity, but also forced the army to significantly modify its own practices in hopes of achieving total victory.

Fulfilling the requirements of military necessity not only meant that the German Army single-mindedly strove for victory on the battlefield; it also meant that when faced with the threat of professional failure, the army would undergo fundamental transformations to ensure a successful outcome. Nowhere is this more apparent than during the First World War when the nature of the fighting forced the army to modify significantly its institutional structure. During the first decade of the twentieth

[97] For the most concise examination of this theme and a solid discussion of the campaign in Southwest Africa, see Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, pp. 5–90.
[98] Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, p. 84. [99] Ibid., p. 85.

century, sections of the German officer corps realized the necessity of expanding the army in order to keep pace with French and Russian rearmament, but the majority of the officer corps blanched at such a prospect, preferring to maintain the officer corps's aristocratic nature.[100] Due to unprecedented numbers of casualties as well as the need for a more technologically literate officer corps, the German High Command forfeited the noble exclusivity of the officer corps, opening the doors to thousands of middle-class candidates, even though they did not originate from the "desired classes."[101] The quest for final victory was deemed important enough, however, for the officer corps to weaken its collective standing within the state.

Not only did combat in the Great War force the army to dilute the aristocratic nature of its officer corps, but it also caused it to embrace what has been termed "a military machine-culture."[102] Having suffered horrifying losses during the first two years of war, Hindenburg and Ludendorff's Third Supreme Command radically reconfigured German doctrine; now "the optimal use of weapons alone shaped command and deployment ... [and] even organized the co-ordination and co-operation among units."[103] In this new understanding of war, "machines (machine guns and artillery) were the bearers of combat," not the man.[104] Michael Geyer notes that "the formation of a military machine-culture and the instrumental organization of units undermined the very essence of the Prusso-German military institution and profession, traditionally based on uniformity, hierarchy and

[100] Holger Herwig argues that the army's decision not to expand by two or three army corps in 1912–13 was due to a "fear that this would undermine the social cohesion of the officer corps"; see his *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (New York, 1997), p. 19. See also Martin Kitchen, *The German Officer Corps, 1890–1914* (Oxford, 1968), p. 31. For the classic look at the Imperial German Army as a reactionary force more concerned with political and social power than with military efficiency, see Bernd F. Schulte, *Die deutsche Armee 1900–1914: Zwischen Beharren und Verandern* (Düsseldorf, 1977). For a powerful challenge to this perspective, see Dieter Storz, *Kriegsbild und Rüstung vor 1914: Europäische Landstreitkrafte vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Hamburg, 1992).

[101] The phrase is German war minister General von Heerigen's, quoted in Holger Herwig, "Strategic Uncertainties of a Nation-State: Prussia–Germany, 1871–1918," in Williamson Murray et al. (eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 242–77, here p. 262.

[102] Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945," in Peter Paret (ed.), *The Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 527–97, here p. 543; Gerhard P. Groß, "Das Dogma der Beweglichkeit: Überlegungen zur Genese der deutschen Heerestaktik im Zeitalter der Weltkriege," in Bruno Thoß and Hans-Erich Volkmann (eds.), *Erster Weltkrieg, Zweiter Weltkrieg: Ein Vergleich* (Paderborn, 2002), pp. 143–66, here p. 149.

[103] Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945," p. 541.

[104] Groß, "Das Dogma der Beweglichkeit," p. 149.

subordination."[105] This new focus on machines and the soldiers who operated them "gave unprecedented freedom of action to soldiers and non-commissioned officers, and an extraordinary independence to the lower echelons of front officers."[106] Local officers of middling rank – not those located far to the rear of the front – were given the responsibility and initiative to launch their own counterattacks, a striking departure from the traditional practice of the army.[107] The initiative displayed by these lower-level officers and NCOs drove the 1918 spring offensive and this command situation "decreased the influence of the middle and higher leadership as much on the battle as on the troops" and "reduced the possibilities for influence and control over the soldiers."[108]

Once again, the German Army demonstrated the importance of military necessity – the drive for victory no matter the cost – within its military culture. In an attempt to defeat the Allied powers on the battlefield, the Prusso-German Army willingly restructured not only its officer corps but also its fundamental approach to combat. These sweeping changes resulted in the army transforming from a bastion of aristocratic power to one that emphasized the initiative of junior officers and non-commissioned officers and increasingly exploited the technological know-how of the middle class. In other words, the need for victory overrode all political and social considerations.

This emphasis on military necessity continued during the early years of the Weimar Republic when some officers began thinking about the necessity of a *levée-en-masse* defense with all of its revolutionary implications. Fearful that a Polish or French invasion could not be stopped by conventional means, "Young Turk" planners explored "harnessing the powers of society" and fighting a *Volkskrieg* (people's war) in its most complete and horrifying sense.[109] These officers realized that the small, aristocratic, and mobile Reichswehr created by Colonel-General Hans von Seeckt within the constraints of the Versailles Treaty could not successfully wage a professional, offensive war in Germany's strategic situation.[110] Joachim von Stülpnagel instead advocated unleashing German society in a large-scale guerilla war against the invaders, hoping that the attrition suffered by the enemy would allow the smaller German Army to then defeat it on

[105] Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945," p. 543.
[106] Ibid., p. 544. [107] Groß, "Das Dogma der Beweglichkeit," p. 149.
[108] Ibid., p. 152.
[109] Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945," pp. 557–64.
[110] For a recent and persuasive examination of this issue, see Gil-Li Vardi, "Joachim von Stülpnagel's Military Thought and Planning," *War in History* (17) 2010, pp. 193–216.

the field of battle.[111] While these ideas never became doctrine in the interwar army, they do highlight how at least some important officers believed that even the most cherished beliefs traditionally held by the army – such as the professional nature of war – could be sacrificed in the name of military necessity.

During the age of total war, the notion of military necessity proved decisive in determining the army's structure and thought. In order to achieve victory against more powerful adversaries, the army developed a doctrine based on the application of overwhelming force in rather limited campaigns, and this guided its conduct during the wars of unification, in the colonies, and through the opening rounds of the First World War.[112] When irregular opposition proved threatening to German goals, the army responded with ruthlessness in an attempt to terrorize the local population into submission, as the experiences of the Franco-Prussian War, the Herero Revolt, and the First World War demonstrated. Once the army's rather antiquated social structure proved unable to master the challenges posed by machine warfare, it dramatically reworked both its social hierarchy and its tactical doctrine so that it could triumph on the battlefield. And finally, the contradictions between the army's traditional beliefs and the reality of the interwar situation led some prominent officers to suggest the unthinkable: a German people's war. As these examples indicate, the concept of military necessity remained the foundation of all Prusso-German military planning.

The focus on speed and daring only increased during the interwar period and the Second World War itself, when new technologies, such as the tank and tactical aircraft, emerged as a possible means to minimize Germany's very real economic and numerical weakness vis-à-vis its enemies.[113] The invasions of Poland and especially France amply demonstrated the potential of technology when skillfully exploited, as German troops dislocated and destroyed the enemy's armed forces at an unprecedented rate of speed. It was during these operations that the emphasis on mobility reached new, unheard-of proportions: instead of units operating according to a systematic plan, the advance frequently degenerated

[111] Ibid., pp. 199–200.

[112] For an incisive examination of this theme, see Dennis Showalter, "From Deterrence to Doomsday Machine: The German Way of War, 1890–1914," *Journal of Military History* (64) 2000, pp. 679–710.

[113] Robert Citino, *Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920–39* (Boulder, 1999); Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare," pp. 584–7; Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power* (Princeton, 1984); James Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS, 1994).

into a competition between ambitious field commanders, who continually drove their units ahead without any regard for their superior orders.[114]

The planning and actual course of operations for the invasion of the Soviet Union witnessed the merging of these two separate, yet related, issues, or, as Michael Geyer has so succinctly written, "Barbarossa showed the fusion of technocracy and ideology in the context of competitive military planning."[115] A military culture that demanded victory at all costs was now charged with defeating a much larger country, both in terms of population and land mass, in an extremely short period of time. In order to achieve this victory, the Wehrmacht jettisoned any considerations that could interfere: these ranged from rational military planning to humane treatment for civilians and prisoners of war.[116] Therefore, the operation was based on a "conduct of war that encouraged the uninhibited, strictly achievement-oriented use of force, unconstrained by the rules of war."[117] This campaign witnessed the culminating developments in both military culture and doctrine in the Prusso-German Army. In order to achieve victory, the army was prepared to use any and all means against the Red Army and Soviet society as a whole. The evolution of this particular technocratic military mind-set ensured that war against the Soviet Union would have been fought as a particularly savage affair even without the influence of National Socialism. The fact that the Nazi regime not only encouraged but demanded a brutal campaign radicalized already present tendencies within the army; ideology injected venom into an already bubbling cauldron, ensuring the army's complicity in the war of annihilation.

IV. The Wehrmacht and the Third Reich

The German Army's place within Nazi state and society existed on two levels, one of which has been well served by historians and one of which

[114] Michael Geyer, "Restorative Elites, German Society and the Nazi Pursuit of War," in Richard Bessel (ed.), *Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Comparisons and Contrasts* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 144–5. These themes of competition, insubordination, and the emphasis on speed all clearly emerge in what is perhaps the finest example of operational history in print: Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* (Annapolis, 2005).

[115] Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914–1945," p. 587.

[116] The literature on German planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union is enormous; three of the more important contributions are Ernst Klink, "Die Landkriegführung," in Boog et al., *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, pp. 246–328; Robert Cecil, *Hitler's Decision to Invade Russia 1941* (London, 1975); Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East*, pp. 33–104.

[117] Michael Geyer, "War, Genocide, Extermination: The War against the Jews in an Era of World Wars," in Jarausch and Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories*, pp. 111–48, here p. 138.

requires further investigation. In terms of the former, the relationship between the officer corps and the state has received a tremendous amount of attention and will not be covered here.[118] The breadth and depth of coverage devoted to this aspect of the army's relationship with the Nazi state has not been equaled by an examination of the Wehrmacht as a conscript army, or, in other words, its relationship with Nazi society. Any work that grapples with understanding and explaining the actions and, more importantly, the attitudes of German soldiers during the war with the Soviet Union needs to be mindful of the larger context of the Nazi state.[119] The men who filled the ranks of the Wehrmacht during the Second World War were not, by and large, long-term professional soldiers but were instead civilians drafted into the army during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Some attempt therefore needs to be made to examine German society during the Nazi regime and the effect the state had on both society and individuals. As previously mentioned, German mobilization practices tied formations to one specific *Wehrkreis*, or military district, and this allowed the division to retain a sense of *Heimat*, that untranslatable word that refers to a community, ranging in size from a small village to a region or even a nation, that shares a particular set of traditions and values, which the area's inhabitants believe set them apart from neighboring communities, regions, or states.[120]

As James Sheehan has argued, Germany was actually a rather decentralized state before the Nazi *Gleichschaltung* of the 1930s and the constituent parts of the Reich continued to celebrate their own unique cultural differences even following Nazi attempts to centralize and homogenize the state.[121] Thus the soldiers who fought in the Wehrmacht

[118] The two fundamental studies of this relationship remain Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination* (Hamburg, 1969); and Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *Das Heer und Hitler: Armee und nationalsozialistisches Regime 1933–1940* (Stuttgart, 1969). A recent overview of this topic is found in Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, pp. 123–55. Other important works that touch on various aspects of the Wehrmacht leadership's relationship with the Nazi state during the early 1930s include Michael Geyer, *Aufrüstung oder Sicherheit: Die Reichswehr in der Krise der Machtpolitik 1924–1936* (Wiesbaden, 1980); Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *The Army, Politics and Society in Germany, 1933–1945* (Manchester, 1987), pp. 16–53; Wolfram Wette, "'Rassenfeind': Antisemitismus und Antislawismus in der Wehrmachtspropaganda," in Walther Manoschek (ed.), *Die Wehrmacht im Rassenkrieg: Die Vernichtungskrieg hinter der Front* (Vienna, 1996), pp. 55–73; and MacGregor Knox, *Common Destiny: Dictatorship, Foreign Policy, and War in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2000).

[119] A point made by Gerhard Weinberg at the Southern Historical Association's 2009 meeting.

[120] For discussions of *Heimat*, see Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley, 1990); and Alon Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

[121] James Sheehan, "What Is German History? Reflections on the Role of the Nation in German History and Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* (53, 1) March 1981,