

Crimes of the Wehrmacht: A Re-evaluation

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Abstract: Of the up to eighteen million men who served in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War, ten million were deployed at one time or another between 1941 and 1944 in the conflict against the Soviet Union, a theatre of widespread and sustained mass violence. In order to determine how extensive complicity in Nazi crimes was among the mass of the regular German soldiers, it is necessary first of all to define what constitutes a criminal undertaking. The sheer brutality of the German conduct of war and occupation in the Soviet Union has overshadowed many activities that would otherwise be rightly held up as criminal acts.

Keywords: Wehrmacht, criminality, mass violence, occupation, Second World War

Introduction

The advances made over the last two decades in our understanding of German occupation policies in the Soviet Union and the crimes committed there by the Wehrmacht, the SS, police forces, the civil administration, agricultural authorities and NSDAP agencies have been immense, yet the discussion in serious scholarship regarding the extent of Wehrmacht participation in atrocities on both an individual and a collective level could not be more divided. Christian Hartmann revisited the discussion with his study of five German divisions on the eastern front in 1941 and 1942, which concluded that criminal conduct was largely a feature of rear-area security formations and not the front-line units, which made up the greater part of the troops deployed in the east. Hartmann even wonders whether the Wehrmacht can be regarded as a perpetrator organisation of the National Socialist regime at all.¹ Though Hartmann certainly

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1 Christian Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg: Front und militärisches Hinterland 1941/42* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009), p. 802.

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deserves credit for devising the kind of scheme that helps make sense of the different structural and situational factors that could help determine a particular unit's propensity for criminal behaviour, his conclusions contrast starkly with those reached by Dieter Pohl in his analysis of Wehrmacht policies in the Soviet Union during the entire three-year occupation. Pohl found that the number of divisions deployed on the eastern front in which no war crimes were committed was 'low' and added that members of the Wehrmacht may have constituted the majority of those responsible for mass crimes carried out on the part of the German Reich.²

Of the up to 18 million men who served in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War, ten million were deployed at one time or another between 1941 and 1944 in the conflict against the Soviet Union.³ It was in the eastern theatre of war that the military struggle was most brutally fought and in which more of Nazi Germany's mass crimes were committed than on any other front. The total number of Soviet dead comes to a staggering 27 million people.⁴ As approximately 11.5 million of these were members of the Red Army killed in action, according to recent Russian figures, the majority of the dead – around 16 million non-combatants – comprised civilians and unarmed, captured soldiers.⁵ What can we say, then, about the proportion of Wehrmacht soldiers fighting on the eastern front involved in war crimes? Rolf-Dieter Müller concludes that the percentage of German soldiers stationed on the eastern front involved in war crimes was 'if anything smaller still' (*eher noch geringer*) than the estimated five per cent of German soldiers involved in war crimes in occupied Italy.⁶ The contrast between this figure and the estimate subsequently attributed to Hannes Heer could scarcely be greater. According to Heer, '60 to 80 per cent' of German

2 Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941-1944* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008), pp. 348–349.

3 Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 12–13, 16, fn. 29.

4 John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 40–41; Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 790; Peter Jahn, '27 Millionen', *Die Zeit*, 14 June 2007, p. 90 <<https://www.zeit.de/2007/25/27-Millionen-Tote>> [accessed 3 January 2019].

5 See Lev Lopukhovskiy and Boris Kavalerchik, *The Price of Victory: The Red Army's Casualties in the Great Patriotic War*, trans. by Harold Orenstein (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2017) for the total figure of 14.6 million Red Army dead, including more than three million POWs who died in German captivity. The total of 27–28 million Soviet dead corresponds to German estimates; see the literature cited in the preceding footnote.

6 'Gegen Kritik immun', Interview by Gerhard Spörl and Klaus Wiegrefe, *Der Spiegel*, 23/1999 (June 1999), pp. 60–62 (p. 62).

soldiers who fought on the eastern front participated in war crimes.⁷ Though Hartmann neglects to cite a specific figure himself, he makes it clear that he shares Müller's view.⁸ In his study *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*, the American historian Stephen G. Fritz repeated the figure of five per cent.⁹ How credible is a figure of five per cent or less? In his review of Fritz's book for the journal *German History*, Jeff Rutherford responded: 'Such a low estimate is simply untenable, as numerous studies have demonstrated front line troops' involvement in enforcing the starvation policy, rounding up slave labourers, waging a ruthless war against alleged partisans and, as [Fritz] himself points out, carrying out scorched earth retreats.'¹⁰

Rutherford cites some important contexts here, in which German troops committed war crimes. The ruthless anti-partisan war and scorched earth retreats are two of the five major complexes of crimes examined by Hartmann in his aforementioned study *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg* and frequently cited in discussions of Wehrmacht criminality.¹¹ Rutherford's remaining two examples, on the other hand, are rarely addressed: the enforcement of the starvation policy and the rounding up of slave labourers. Both tasks – the systematic starvation of civilians and prisoners of war, and the abduction of men and women for deployment as forced labourers – constitute by any standard war crimes.¹²

This brings us to a key argument overlooked in the current literature and the main focus of this article: the sheer brutality of the German conduct of war and occupation in the Soviet Union has overshadowed many activities that would otherwise be (rightly) held up as criminal acts. In identifying what might be categorised as 'secondary crimes', our understanding of what constituted criminal

7 Klaus Wiegrefe, 'Abrechnung mit Hitlers Generälen', *Spiegel Online*, 27 November 2001.

8 Christian Hartmann, 'Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht? Überlegungen zur Struktur des deutschen Ostheeres 1941–1944', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 52.1 (2004), 1–76 (p. 71); Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, pp. 12–13.

9 Stephen G. Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p. 482.

10 Jeff Rutherford, 'Review of Stephen G. Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*', *German History*, 30.3 (2012), 476–478.

11 See Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*. The other complexes examined by Hartmann are the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war, the genocide against Soviet Jews and the implementation of the Commissar Order. See also 'Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht?'

12 See the relevant provisions in the Hague Convention (II) on the Laws and Customs of War on Land, 1899, and the Hague Convention (IV) on War on Land and its Annexed Regulations, 1907: *The Hague Conventions and Declarations of 1899 and 1907*, ed. by James Brown Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1915).

behaviour is enhanced, while the number of perpetrators is significantly expanded. As many of the examples below will reflect, such crimes often constituted a less overt breach of the international laws of war and, in some cases, exhibited a less direct relationship between the perpetrator's action and the victim's suffering, but these considerations do not ameliorate the criminal responsibility of the German soldiers involved. The examples – addressing sexual violence, theft and starvation, and coerced and forced labour – draw in part on recent advancements in scholarship, providing fresh insights into new areas of criminality, but are largely based on a reconceptualization of the day-to-day reality of life for the average *Landser* on the eastern front. After the discussion of different types of 'secondary criminality', this article examines the following aspects: first, the situational framework provided by environmental and institutional factors on the eastern front; second – in an excursus on major war crimes – the interaction between perpetrators and bystanders, and the role played by spectators in legitimising murders and other atrocities; finally, the importance of ideology, political ideas and National Socialist beliefs in the actions of the soldiers.

Sexual Violence

As recently as 2005, the social psychologist Harald Welzer noted that we know relatively little about 'the exploitation of sexual opportunities by the powerful occupying soldiers'.¹³ Historian Waitman Beorn concluded for the eastern front: 'The power dynamics alone suggest that any relationship between a Jewish woman and an occupying soldier was at least partially exploitative.'¹⁴ Whilst 'exploitative' is not the same as 'criminal', some of these 'relationships' most certainly *were* criminal, and included rape and sexual slavery. Even the divisive exhibition *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht: 1941–1944) organised by the Hamburg Institute of Social Research, which has been criticised for presenting the Wehrmacht as a 'criminal organisation',¹⁵ did not address the subject of rapes perpetrated by German soldiers due to a

13 Harald Welzer, *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005), p. 199.

14 Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 167.

15 See, e.g., 'Gegen Kritik immun', p. 62.

lack of written sources.¹⁶ It is unclear how widespread this phenomenon was because the Nazi authorities prosecuted Germans for ‘racial mixing’, whilst victims and witnesses were frequently killed.¹⁷ In order to protect privacy and honour, female survivors were reluctant to speak about this type of assault.¹⁸ As a result of more recent research carried out by Regina Mühlhäuser, however, we now have a much clearer idea of the nature and extent of acts of sexual violence committed by German soldiers in the Soviet Union.¹⁹ Sexual violence against Soviet women was no rarity. In some occupied localities, *all* the women were raped by German soldiers. In several cases, entire units participated in extreme acts of sexual violence.²⁰ The command of the German Ninth Army noted in early August 1941 the distinct increase in ‘plundering’, ‘rape etc.’, even in the combat zone.²¹

As in most military codes of law, rape in the Wehrmacht was officially a crime under the classification of ‘crimes and offences against morality’. Yet, in the years between 1939 and 1944 only 5,300 members of the Wehrmacht were charged with sexual crimes. In fact, the number of convictions peaked in 1940 and then went into decline until 1943. By removing the compulsion to prosecute lawlessness, the notorious Jurisdiction Decree Barbarossa of May 1941 effectively prevented the punishment of most sexual violations in the war against the Soviet Union, even though the decree nominally categorised ‘grave actions that are caused by a lack of sexual restraint’ as punishable offences.²² In fact, in the words

- 16 On this see the interview with the historian Hannes Heer and the social psychologist Harald Welzer: ‘Ein Erlebnis absoluter Macht’, *DIE ZEIT Geschichte*, 2 (2011), pp. 88–94 (p. 94).
- 17 Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht*, p. 132; examples in Hans-Heinrich Nolte, ‘Vergewaltigungen durch Deutsche im Rußlandfeldzug’, *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte*, 10.1 (2009), 113–133.
- 18 Wendy Lower, *Hitler’s Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013), p. 232, n. 104.
- 19 See Regina Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen: Sexuelle Gewalttaten und intime Beziehungen deutscher Soldaten in der Sowjetunion, 1941–1945* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2010). See also the discussion in Beorn, *Marching into Darkness*, pp. 164–173, and Waitman Wade Beorn, ‘Bodily Conquest: Sexual Violence in the Nazi East’, in *Mass Violence*, pp. 195–215.
- 20 Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen*, pp. 74, 144. See also Alex J. Kay, ‘Review of Regina Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen: Sexuelle Gewalttaten und intime Beziehungen deutscher Soldaten in der Sowjetunion, 1941–1945*, *sehpunkte. Rezensionenjournal für die Geschichtswissenschaften*, 11 (2011), <<http://www.sehpunkte.de/2011/11/19814.html>> [accessed 8 May 2017].
- 21 See Felix Römer, ‘Im alten Deutschland wäre solcher Befehl nicht möglich gewesen’: Rezeption, Adaption und Umsetzung des Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlasses im Ostheer 1941/42’, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 56.1 (2008), 53–99 (p. 86).
- 22 For the text of the so-called Jurisdiction Decree Barbarossa, see Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau (hereafter BArch-MA), RW 4/v. 577, fols. 72–75, ‘Erlass über die Ausübung der Kriegsgerichtsbarkeit im Gebiet “Barbarossa” und über besondere Massnahmen der Truppe’, 13 May 1941, here fol. 75: [...] schwere Taten, die auf geschlechtlicher Hemmungslosigkeit beruhen

of Christian Hartmann, nothing had such an enduring influence on 'the conduct of the *Ostheer* [eastern army] and in particular its troops at the front' as the Jurisdiction Decree Barbarossa.²³ Felix Römer notes that the decree provided 'the pseudo-legal basis for German policies of violence on the eastern front',²⁴ and adds that 'the creation of a lawless region through the abolition of obligatory criminal prosecution' as a result of the Jurisdiction Decree Barbarossa made this 'a deeply radical order that was to form the basis of German tyranny in the occupied Soviet Union'.²⁵ In practice then, the main criterion that prompted criminal prosecution in the Wehrmacht, rather than respect for any legal framework, was the perceived threat to *Manneszucht* (military discipline), which was the most important edict of German military life and was especially important for Nazi Germany given its preoccupation with the autumn of 1918 and the breakdown of military discipline leading to mutiny. In 1941, sexual crimes were officially prohibited, but the regulation was seldom enforced and many officers viewed the conduct of their soldiers as a 'natural' outcome of privations of deployment in the war and the absence of brothels (at that time) in the east.²⁶ Beginning in 1942, Wehrmacht brothels soon became a fixed feature of larger towns and cities in the occupied hinterland. It was hoped that they would lead to a reduction in instances of sexually transmitted diseases and, according to the Wehrmacht High Command, prevent 'unwanted bastards', in which 'Germany [had] no interest'.²⁷

Not all forms of sexual contact involved physical violence or even the threat of coercion, since the desperate conditions created by the German occupation forced countless Soviet women to solicit themselves for food. Furthermore, many women – especially young women – opted to work in military brothels rather than be subjected to deportation to the Reich and the feared labour deployment there. For example,

[...] The decree was reproduced as Nuremberg document 050-C in: International Military Tribunal, *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof, Nürnberg, 14. November 1945 – 1. Oktober 1946*, vol. 34 (Nuremberg: Sekretariat des Gerichtshofs, 1949), pp. 252–255.

23 Hartmann, 'Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht?', p. 54.

24 Römer, "Im alten Deutschland", p. 54.

25 Felix Römer, 'The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies: The Army and Hitler's Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front', in *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, ed. by Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford and David Stahel (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012), pp. 73–100 (p. 76).

26 Birgit Beck, 'Sexual Violence and its Prosecution by Courts Martial of the Wehrmacht', in *A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937–1945*, ed. by Roger Chickering, Stig Förster and Bernd Greiner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 317–331 (pp. 320–322, 326–327).

27 Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen*, pp. 214–239 (p. 214).

around 85 per cent of the women who were solicited for the Wehrmacht brothel in the central Ukrainian city of Poltava were still virgins according to a medical examination.²⁸ The result allowed German soldiers to believe that their actions were consensual and therefore freed them of any guilt. Yet, as one German soldier observed of the women who sold themselves for sex: 'Some of them had babies, but they did not have enough food to feed themselves or their young. So, for a loaf of bread, one could have a good night with them. Some of my comrades took advantage of the women's plight; they had their good night.'²⁹ Another soldier, William Lubbeck, noted that the same process was common in his regiment: 'Putting a loaf of bread under their arm, these men would head for a certain area a couple of miles behind the front where there were hungry Russian women or girls who would willingly exchange sexual favours for food. [...] I knew of no one who was reprimanded or punished for engaging in this type of act.'³⁰ In March 1942, the Army High Command noted: 'In larger towns, a clandestine, completely uncontrolled brothel trade has developed in many places.'³¹

Theft and Starvation

Beyond sexual criminality and exploitation, the question of soldiers' guilt must extend to include actions that were deemed to be of 'military necessity' during the Barbarossa campaign and which later became standard practice throughout the German *Ostheer*. Included in the May 1941 army administrative regulations for the occupation of Soviet territories was a directive entitled 'Guidelines for Booty, Confiscation and Exacting of Services' (*Richtlinien für Beute, Beschlagnahmung und Inanspruchnahme von Dienstleistungen*), which translated into the open exploitation of the occupied areas for the army's benefit. In recognition of the enormous burden carried by the motorised transport columns, the Army Quartermaster-General *Generalmajor* Eduard Wagner, issued his own 'Order for the Securing of Booty during Operations'

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 224–225.

29 Werner Adamczyk, *Feuer! An Artilleryman's Life on the Eastern Front* (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot, 1992), pp. 199–200.

30 William Lubbeck with David B. Hurt, *At Leningrad's Gates: The Story of a Soldier with Army Group North* (Philadelphia, PA: Casemate, 2006), p. 113.

31 Qtd. in Theo J. Schulte, 'The German Army and National Socialist Occupation Policies in the Occupied Areas of the Soviet Union 1941–1943' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1987), p. 182: 'In größeren Orten hat sich an vielen Stellen ein heimlicher, völlig unkontrollierter Bordellbetrieb entwickelt.'

(*Befehl für Erfassung der Beute bei Operationen*). This was intended for army and corps commands and aimed at keeping the operations moving by utilising captured stocks of vital resources and materials such as foodstuffs, motor-vehicles, fuel, horses, wagons and ammunition.³²

The great need to supplement the existing supply system was not limited to the utilisation of captured Red Army equipment, but extended to the plunder of the local populace. German soldiers ruthlessly looted the impoverished countryside, sometimes out of need, but also out of a desire for personal enrichment. The process also involved countless acts of wanton destruction, especially if nothing of value could be located. Importantly, even before the war, many Soviet peasants had lived at subsistence level and the consequence of the rampant German looting was for some an eventual death sentence. Konrad Jarausch tellingly wrote home: 'Everyone is constantly looking for "booty".' He then noted that even in such a poor country it was still possible to get honey and kilos of butter.³³ Likewise, after observing a collapse of the supply system in his area of operations, Franz Frisch remarked: 'we were on our own. Whatever little there was to be taken, we took.'³⁴ Helmut Pabst wrote about how he and his comrades looted onions and turnips from people's gardens and took milk from their churns. 'Most of them part with it amiably,' he wrote home in a letter, but he also made clear his indifference to the suffering of the local people: 'Willingly or unwillingly, the country feeds us.'³⁵

Soviet peasants naturally sought to protect their precious winter food stocks by hiding them and claiming they had nothing left to give, which in some cases was also the truth, but to many German soldiers this constituted 'resistance' and forestalled any feelings of sympathy for their plight. As Willy Peter Reese wrote: 'We saw the hunger and the misery, and under the compulsion of war, we added to it.'³⁶ He then continued:

32 Ernst Klink, 'Die militärische Konzeption des Krieges gegen die Sowjetunion', in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, ed. by Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, vol. 4: *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983), pp. 190–326 (pp. 257–258).

33 'Das stille Sterben...': *Feldpostbriefe von Konrad Jarausch aus Polen und Russland 1939–1942*, ed. by Konrad H. Jarausch and Klaus Jochen Arnold (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008), p. 311.

34 Franz A. P. Frisch, with Wilbur D. Jones, Jr., *Condemned to Live: A Panzer Artilleryman's Five-Front War* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane, 2000), p. 95.

35 Helmut Pabst, *The Outermost Frontier: A German Soldier in the Russian Campaign* (London: William Kimber, 1957), pp. 18–19, 39.

36 Willy Peter Reese, *Mir selber seltsam fremd: Die Unmenschlichkeit des Krieges. Russland 1941–44*, ed. by Stefan Schmitz (Munich: Claassen, 2003), p. 57.

The cooks slaughtered cattle and pigs on the way and requisitioned peas, beans, and cucumbers everywhere. But the midday soup wasn't enough to get us through our exertions. So we started taking the last piece of bread from women and children, had chickens and geese prepared for us, pocketed their small supplies of butter and lard, weighed down our vehicles with flitches of bacon and flour from the larders, drank the overrich milk, and cooked and roasted on their stoves, stole honey from their collective farms, came upon stashes of eggs, and weren't bothered by tears, hand wringing and curses. We were the victors. War excused our thefts, encouraged cruelty, and the need to survive didn't go around getting permission from conscience.³⁷

Werner Beermann was similarly oblivious to the plight of Soviet civilians, writing home in a letter: 'No food, no fuel, no post, yes, everything was lacking; you can't even imagine it. Well, we didn't starve to death; whatever we needed was always taken from the peasant villages.'³⁸ Yet for Soviet civilians the need to survive at the margins of subsistence living was a question of life and death, which was not the case for the Wehrmacht. German soldiers did not want to experience hunger, while the civilian population was confronted with starvation. As one man wrote after German soldiers looted his home: 'We had saved a few scraps of food – a little butter, a small amount of meat and some white bread. Naturally, everything has now been stolen from us.'³⁹ The looting of peasant homes held very real consequences in the long winter months when food stocks were depleted and people starved, but German soldiers typically took no responsibility for this and in fact continued to supplement their own rations with whatever remained to be plundered.⁴⁰ Many Soviet peasants, especially those in Ukraine, had already seen or experienced the torments of hunger in their own lifetime and knew that starvation was only the most direct consequence of their diminished food stocks. Malnutrition greatly increased the danger of life-threatening illnesses and disease, particularly for the old, weak

³⁷ Reese, *Mir selber seltsam fremd*, p. 62.

³⁸ *Soldat Werner Beermann Feldpostbriefe 1941-1942*, ed. by Hartmut Beermann (Raleigh, NC: Iulu, 2012), pp. 155-156: 'Keine Verpflegung, kein Benzin, keine Post, ja alles blieb aus; das könnt Ihr Euch gar nicht vorstellen. Na, verhungert sind wir nicht, soviel war in den Bauerndörfern immer noch zu holen.'

³⁹ Qtd. in Michael Jones, *The Retreat: Hitler's First Defeat* (London: John Murray, 2009), pp. 76-77.

⁴⁰ See examples in Jeff Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front: The German Infantry's War, 1941-1944* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Jeff Rutherford, 'The Radicalization of German Occupation Policies: Wirtschaftsstab Ost and the 121st Infantry Division in Pavlovsk, 1941', in *Nazi Policy*, ed. by Kay, Rutherford and Stahel, pp. 130-154; Norbert Kunz, 'Das Beispiel Charkow: Eine Stadtbevölkerung als Opfer der deutschen Hungerstrategie 1941/42', in *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte*, ed. by Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter and Ulrike Jureit (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), pp. 136-144.

and very young. Whether death resulted from starvation or complications brought on by undernourishment, the cause was the same and the role played by everyday German soldiers, even if at times unwittingly, cannot be ignored. Even soldiers who did not participate in the looting benefited from their comrades' actions, thus reinforcing the legitimacy and indeed desirability of the acts themselves and, in turn, functioning as a further incentive to their officially sanctioned theft.

The burden of guilt for the perpetrators was often largely avoided because the suffering and high mortality rate among Soviet civilians was neither the intended result of their actions, nor something that German soldiers remained to witness. A rationalisation of their actions was not difficult to achieve: Soviet peasants had always been poor and were used to dealing with scarcity; it was war and beyond their control; retreating Soviet troops were to blame. Whilst their actions led to mass starvation and also, frequently, to death, the role played by German soldiers was less immediate than, for example, in the execution of real or imagined partisans or massacres of Jews, which is why secondary crimes have largely been ignored in discussions of Wehrmacht criminality in the east. The end result, however, was very often the same. The difference was a subjective one: unlike other criminal activities, the vast majority of German soldiers in the east, including many non-participants in the looting, partook of eating stolen foodstuffs and therefore circuitously contributed to the Soviet loss of life without incurring any sense of guilt or wrongdoing. Tellingly, Ivan Ivanovich Steblin-Kamenskii, a Russian interpreter serving with the German 206th Infantry Division, noted in his diary in March 1942:

All in all, it is very hard for me to see this new, unknown face of the German soldier, without any human feeling. Having more than is needed for nutrition, he then takes away the last [food] from women and children. I'm completely overwhelmed, shocked, insulted, and yet I can do nothing and have to serve with them.⁴¹

With the practice of looting food from the local populace well established, German soldiers had no compunction about plundering other essential items as the campaign extended into the colder months. By October 1941, with the temperature dropping below freezing at night, Russian homes were again raided for winter clothing, which the army could not supply to its troops. Franz Frisch recalled: 'The winter conditions

⁴¹ Diary entry recorded on 30 March 1942 in the village of Burtsevo. The diary remains unpublished and was made available by the family to Oleg Beyda. We are grateful to Oleg for passing on this excerpt to us.

drove German soldiers to ransack peasant homes looking for anything to supplement their uniform. We used bed covers, tablecloths, curtains, anything at all to provide a layer of warmth.⁴² The process of dispossessing Soviet civilians was both ubiquitous and ruthless. Helmut Günther noted: ‘The time of the large-scale “procurement” had started [...] every unit’s main concern was to maintain its own stock of material, even if not by the most ethical means.’⁴³ More to the point, Willy Peter Reese wrote in his journal: ‘Any woollen garments we found became ours. Blankets, scarves, pullovers, shirts and especially gloves we made off with at any opportunity. We pulled the boots off the old men and women on the street if ours were wanting.’⁴⁴ Soldiers rationalised their actions because, while they were fighting in the bitter cold, Soviet civilians could, in theory, remain in their warm homes. However, German forces destroyed thousands of homes and, indeed, entire villages (more than 600 in Belarus alone),⁴⁵ forcing countless civilians to become refugees. Dire food shortages resulting from German requisitioning had the same effect, with untold numbers dying as a result of weakness, fatigue and exposure to the elements. Even at this point civilians were exploited by soldiers who stole their valuable sleighs, leaving them unable to transport their last, most valued possessions. As Walter Tilemann recalled from the winter of 1941/42: ‘No one was interested that the sleighs were also essential for the Russian people. In this terrible winter all pity had literally turned to ice.’⁴⁶

Front-line troops also contributed to this inferno, often encouraged by their superiors. The commander of the Third Panzer Army, Georg-Hans Reinhardt, wrote home to his wife on 5 January 1942:

As ever, I’m utterly delighted with my outstanding troops; they’re standing fast and repulsing all attacks. I’ve even just received the report that units (once again from Weimar/Gera) crossed over to the enemy early this morning under cover of darkness, attacked a village, burned it down and, after killing more than 100 Russians, returned with booty and 50 prisoners. Splendid!⁴⁷

42 Frisch, with Jones, Jr., *Condemned to Live*, p. 94.

43 Helmut Günther, *Hot Motors, Cold Feet: A Memoir of Service with the Motorcycle Battalion of SS-Division “Reich” 1940–1941* (Winnipeg: J. J. Fedorowicz, 2004), p. 189.

44 Reese, *Mir selber seltsam fremd*, pp. 63–64.

45 Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), p. 955.

46 Walter Tilemann, *Ich, das Soldatenkind* (Munich: Knauer TB, 2005), p. 152.

47 BArch-MA, N 245/2, fol. 14 (letter dated 5 January 1942): ‘Freude, restlose Freude machen mir wie immer meine hervorragenden Truppen, sie stehen fest und weisen alle Angriffe ab. Eben wird sogar gemeldet,

As temperatures continued to drop in November 1941 and the German advance came to a halt in many places, peasants near the front, who had earlier been stripped of their food and winter clothing, were now forced out of their homes, often with no place else to go. Henry Metelmann, a soldier in Army Group South, wrote of how his unit acquired shelter in the freezing conditions:

Our orders were to occupy one cottage per crew, and to throw the peasants out. When we entered 'ours', a woman and her three young children were sitting around the table by the window, obviously having just finished a meal. She was clearly frightened of us, and I could see that her hands were shaking, while the kids stayed in their seats and looked at us with large, non-understanding eyes. Our Sergeant came straight to the point: 'Raus!' [Out!] and pointed to the door. When the mother started to remonstrate and her children to cry, he repeated 'Raus!', opened the door and waved his hand towards the outside in a manner which could not be mistaken anywhere. [...] Outside it was bitterly cold [...] I watched them through the small window standing by their bundles in the snow, looking helplessly in all directions, not knowing what to do. [...] When I looked back a little later, they were gone; I did not want to think about it anymore.⁴⁸

Metelmann may have expressed unease about the practice, but there were many German soldiers for whom the bitter cold and extreme fatigue extinguished any sensitivity towards the people they rendered homeless. Other soldiers felt no compassion at the best of times and denounced Slavic peoples as backward and even dangerous enemies. Wilhelm Prüller's diary relates the ruthlessness of the expulsion process.

You should see the act the civilians put on when we make it clear to them that we intend to use their sties to sleep in. A weeping and yelling begins, as if their throats were being cut, until we chuck them out.

Whether young or old, man or wife, they stand in their rags and tatters on the doorstep and can't be persuaded to go. [...] When we finally threaten them at pistol point, they disappear [...].⁴⁹

dass Teile (wieder aus Weimar/Gera) heute früh im Dunkeln ihrerseits zum Feinde gegangen sind, ihn ein Dorf überfallen, abgebrannt haben und nach Totschlagen von über 100 Russen mit Beute und 50 Gefangenen zurückgekehrt sind, grossartig!

⁴⁸ Henry Metelmann, *Through Hell for Hitler* (Havertown: Casemate, 2005), p. 35.

⁴⁹ *Diary of a German Soldier*, ed. by H. C. Robbins Landon and Sebastian Leitner (London: Coward McCann, 1963), p. 108.

No doubt many Soviet peasants could well guess at the fate that awaited them and their families without shelter during the coldest months of the year, with temperatures dropping as low as minus 40 degrees. In a letter home to his wife, the commander of Panzer Group 4, Erich Hoepner, who would later be executed for his part in the July 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler, casually wrote about 'throwing people out' (*Herauswerfen anderer*) to make accommodation available for him and his staff.⁵⁰

Even in American captivity after the war in Europe had already ended, far away from the cold and privations of the eastern front, the pitilessness of some German soldiers was still in evidence, as the following conversation between Corporal Karl Huber and Private Walter Gumlich illustrates:

H: Someone came and stole the cow from a Russian, and the Russian defended himself. And then the Germans hanged fifty or a hundred men and women, and they remained hanging there for three or four days. Or they had to dig their own graves, and then stand at the edge of the grave, and then they were shot and fell in, backwards. Fifty to a hundred men and even more. That was 'retribution'. But it didn't do any good. Or set fire to the villages. [...] Partisans were, of course, dangerous, we of course had to defend ourselves against them, but that was something completely different. [...]

G: Oh, please, these were wartime operations. They're not really criminals.

H: When entire families are exterminated and children shot at, and so on, the family literally wiped out? We're guilty when the military takes a peasant's last piece of bread, steals it, without any right whatsoever or any kind of order.

G: Skip it!

H: Hey, don't defend them!⁵¹

⁵⁰ BArch-MA, N 51/9, fols. 72–73 (letter dated 21 September 1941).

⁵¹ Qtd. in Felix Römer, *Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht von innen* (Munich: Piper, 2012), p. 427: 'H: Da ist irgendeiner gekommen und hat einem Russen die Kuh geklaut, und da hat sich der Russe verteidigt. Und dann sind von den Deutschen fünfzig oder hundert Mann und Frauen aufgehängt worden, und die sind drei bis vier Tage hängengeblieben. Oder sie haben sich Gräben schaufeln müssen, und dann am Rande des Grabens aufstellen, und da sind sie erschossen worden und sind gleich rückwärts reingefallen. Fünfzig bis hundert Mann und noch mehr. Das waren "Vergeltungen". Aber das hat doch nichts genützt. Oder die Dörfer angezündet. [...] Partisanen waren natürlich gefährlich, gegen die hat man sich natürlich verteidigen müssen, das war ganz was anderes. [...] G: Ach, das sind doch Kriegsoperationen gewesen. Das sind doch keine eigentlichen Verbrecher. H: Wenn man ganze Familien ausrottet und auf Kinder schießt, usw., die Familie buchstäblich umlegt? Da sind wir

While Soviet peasants were certainly the most numerous victims of such German behaviour, they were not even the most vulnerable. Columns of captured Soviet POWs were deprived of boots, coats and anything of value, which greatly reduced their chances of survival in the dreadful conditions of German POW camps. While numerous German letters make reference to German troops looting enemy soldiers, few say anything about what their defenceless captives were left with to protect themselves against the cold. For many the only limit to such activity was concern for their own well-being, as Siegfried Knappe noted, 'we did not dare wear the heavier quilted jackets for fear of being shot as a Russian'.⁵²

Coerced and Forced Labour

German soldiers worked closely with employment offices and General Plenipotentiary for Labour Deployment Fritz Sauckel in the systematic recruitment of millions of Soviet civilians to work in German industry and agriculture, often by employing methods of extreme brutality. Civilians were also put to work in the towns and the countryside of the occupied Soviet Union itself or sent to one of the many forced labour camps set up by local army commands throughout the area of operations.⁵³ By May 1944, Army Group Centre's zone of operations, which contained some 1.9 million Soviet civilians, had no less than 300,000 performing directly military tasks.⁵⁴ The Wehrmacht was furthermore responsible for the illegal forced labour of captured Soviet prisoners of war. Over a million were transported to the Reich for this purpose but Soviet POWs were also deployed in the occupied eastern territories, for example clearing the battlefield or in road construction.⁵⁵ Here

schuldig, wenn das Militär ohne irgendwelches Recht oder irgendwelchen Befehl dem Bauer das letzte Stück Brot weggenommen hat, gestohlen hat. G: Lass doch! H: Ach, verteidige die nicht!

52 Siegfried Knappe with Ted Brusaw, *Soldat: Reflections of a German Soldier, 1936-1949* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992), p. 230.

53 Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht*, pp. 305-319; Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, pp. 449-501.

54 Nicholas Terry, "Do not burden one's own army and its hinterland with unneeded mouths!": The Fate of the Soviet Civilian Population Behind the "Panther Line" in Eastern Belorussia, October 1943-June 1944, in *Kriegführung und Hunger 1939-1945: Zum Verhältnis von militärischen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Interessen*, ed. by Christoph Dieckmann and Babette Quinkert (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), pp. 185-209 (p. 190).

55 Reinhard Otto, Rolf Keller and Jens Nagel, 'Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene in deutschem Gewahrsam 1941-1945: Zahlen und Dimensionen', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 56.4 (2008), 557-602 (p. 562); Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht*, pp. 212-215.

average German soldiers saved themselves heavy labour and menial domestic tasks by putting POWs and civilians to work for them. In a letter home from late 1943, Georg Scharnik explained how, before a retreat, any Soviet men of military age were seized and put to work in the rear building roads. This, he explained, saved German soldiers work and prevented the men from being conscripted by the Red Army.⁵⁶

Other soldiers expressed delight when Soviet civilians were located near to their camp so they could serve as a workforce. 'Sometimes we have luck. There are still civilians. They must sew my buttons, warm water, wash [...] they do it willingly.'⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, such enthusiasm was absent from the account of Anna Nosova, who spoke of having to wash hundreds of German uniforms covered in blood and lice.⁵⁸ Even more exploitative was the forced recruitment of Soviet women for labour in Germany, which Birgit Beck's research suggests could sometimes be avoided if the women consented to work as Wehrmacht prostitutes.⁵⁹ German institutions in the east became so reliant on Soviet slave labour that, as late as July 1944, Army Group Centre felt able to request a workforce of 100,000 complete with equipment for the construction of redoubts. Work was to begin in a mere two days.⁶⁰

Exploitative behaviour extended to almost every aspect of the Wehrmacht's advance through the Soviet Union, with profound implications for the survival of anyone in the area of German occupation. Moreover, these conditions were created by the average rank and file German soldiers of the *Ostheer*, not a select few. Their behaviour adversely impacted on untold numbers of Soviet civilians, reducing them to the barest means of subsistence and often resulting in their deaths. The mortality rate is impossible to calculate, but the demands made by average German soldiers on the Soviet population were staggering. In addition to the aspects already discussed, German soldiers requisitioned local medical facilities and medicines, plundered

56 Martin Humburg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges: Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten aus der Sowjetunion 1941-1944* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), p. 143.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 165.

58 Laurie R. Cohen, *Smolensk under the Nazis: Everyday life in Occupied Russia* (Rochester, NY: Rochester University Press, 2013), p. 73.

59 Birgit Beck, 'Rape: The Military Trails of Sexual Crimes Committed by Soldiers in the Wehrmacht, 1939-1944', in *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. by Karen Hageman and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford: Berg, 2002), pp. 255-273 (p. 267).

60 *Okkupation, Raub, Vernichtung: Dokumente zur Besatzungspolitik der faschistischen Wehrmacht auf sowjetischem Territorium 1941 bis 1944*, ed. by Norbert Müller ([East] Berlin: Militärverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1980), pp. 321-322, 'Anforderung von 100 000 Arbeitskräften zum Stellungsbau durch das Oberkommando der Heeresgruppe Mitte' (Doc. 133), dated 8 July 1944.

factories for equipment and tools, seized vital farming machinery for the army's use, burned any settlements thought useful to partisans and typically showed little or no regard for the well-being of civilians caught up in the fighting.⁶¹ Such actions may not have immediately resulted in the deaths of the victims, nor might their deaths have even been the intention of the soldiers, but the result nevertheless stemmed from the actions of German troops in the east. The point here is not to equate these deaths with the much discussed 'direct' criminality of the Wehrmacht – involving acts of outright murder and execution – but rather to acknowledge that a deadly, indirect criminality involving a much larger percentage of the *Ostheer* also existed. Indeed, if we take into account all forms of criminality – from the plundering of Soviet homes and the exploitation of local resources to rape and sexual slavery – it would be reasonable to conclude that a substantial *majority* of the ten million Wehrmacht soldiers deployed at one time or another in the German-Soviet War were involved or complicit in criminal conduct.

Environmental and Institutional Factors

In order to understand the indirect criminality of the *Ostheer*, it is important not only to take account of what the soldiers did but also how it was possible for them to do it. Hannes Heer has described it as a process of how 'amorality became normality'.⁶² Warfare on the eastern front constituted a process of brutalisation, which resulted from a transformative event in which men experienced first 'shock' and then 're-normalisation'. Importantly, German soldiers on the eastern front were not simply engaging in warfare but in a systematic war of extermination in which not only the rules of civil society were being repudiated but also the basic codex of armed conflict. The brutalising effect of their experiences, and often their own actions, initially induced a sense of shock, brought on by a loss of orientation, the duration of which varied from soldier to soldier. Men wrote home of becoming 'a different person', of being forced to 'completely readjust' and of experiencing 'inner change'. Another wrote that he had been forced

61 On the treatment of Soviet civilians in combat see: Adrian E. Wettstein, 'Urban Warfare Doctrine on the Eastern Front', in *Nazi Policy*, ed. by Kay, Rutherford and Stahel, pp. 45–72 (pp. 56, 64).

62 Hannes Heer, 'How Amorality Became Normality: Reflections on the Mentality of German Soldiers on the Eastern Front', in *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944*, ed. by Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), pp. 329–344.

to 'throw overboard several principles held in the past', while others spoke of a new 'split consciousness'. The shock, however, soon passed, as the daily exposure to unparalleled violence became, out of necessity, normalised.⁶³

In identifying this process, Heer was able to point to German soldiers' descriptions of themselves as having become 'hard', 'indifferent' and 'heartless'.⁶⁴ One soldier wrote: 'It's like growing a shell around you that's almost impenetrable. But what happens inside this shell? You become part of a mass, a component of a relentless whole which sucks you up and squeezes you into a mould. You become gross and insensible. You cease to be yourself.' Another man simply reflected: 'I have forgotten myself.'⁶⁵ In a letter home sent on only the sixth day of the military campaign, August Sahm struggled to find the words to describe what he was enduring:

Since 22/6 we've been in combat and I really can't describe what I've had to go through. Attack—dig in—artillery fire—attack again. I'm writing to you from a foxhole. Since the start of the fighting I haven't washed or shaved...

I can't begin to express what I feel. If I only saw some meaning in it all! I simply can't come to terms with it. The only thing that I do is—try to hold on from minute to minute in this maelstrom of strange, unknown forces.

How it hurts, one's own suffering—and even more that of others.

Human beings are swept away, fall like withered leaves—human beings.⁶⁶

Sahm's letter captures the 'shock' of exposure to everyday violence and constant death, but as William Lubbeck observed: 'Over time, war hardens your heart and leads you to do brutal things that you could never have imagined yourself doing in civilian life.'⁶⁷ Likewise, Willy Peter Reese wrote of developing an 'armour of apathy' that he used to protect himself 'against terror, horror, fear, and madness, which saved me from suffering and screaming'. Yet Reese noted that this same apathy 'crushed any tender stirring within me, snapped off the shoots of

63 Hannes Heer, 'How Amoralty Became Normality', pp. 331–332.

64 Ibid., pp. 331–332. See also Klaus Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten – nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis – Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996), pp. 315–316.

65 Heer, 'How Amoralty Became Normality', p. 332.

66 Christiane Sahm, ed., *Verzweiflung und Glaube: Briefe aus dem Krieg 1939–1942* (Munich: Don Bosco Medien, 2007), pp. 40–41.

67 Lubbeck with Hurt, *At Leningrad's Gates*, p. 112.

hope, faith, and love of my fellow men, and turned my heart to stone.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the 're-normalisation' process was a coping mechanism aimed at dealing with the shocking brutality of the war in the east, yet the price was a radical desensitisation towards violence, allowing for indirect actions of blatant criminality to pass for normality.⁶⁹

Whatever the extent of the Wehrmacht's culture of violence and the acceptance of amorality within its ranks, there were of course those who considered the behaviour of the majority as, at the very least, problematic and perhaps even criminal. How are we to understand their position and why did they not act on their good conscience? Thomas Kühne's work on comradeship within the German army suggested that shame culture dominated the Wehrmacht. According to Kühne, in shame culture the adoptive norms of a soldier's community takes on the highest form of moral authority, surpassing any others that may have preceded it. Shame culture is grounded in the fear of exclusion, exposure and disgrace, which the community imposes on any individual who does not submit to its rules. The controlling gaze of the majority reaffirms and rewards positive behaviour towards the community and its social mores, but its shaming culture is what defines it, ensuring a negative consequence for any member who departs from its norms. It teaches one to conform, to be inconspicuous, to participate and to be content in doing so. The reward for German soldiers on the eastern front was the safety and acceptance of the unit, which was a vital and irreplaceable form of emotional support.⁷⁰ Comradeship was as sacrosanct as family, protecting its members as fiercely

68 Reese, *Mir selber seltsam fremd*, p. 182: 'Der Panzer der Fühllosigkeit, mit dem ich mich gegen Schrecken, Grauen, Angst und Wahnsinn gewappnet, der mich nicht mehr leiden und aufschreien ließ, erdrückte die zarten Regungen im Innern, knickte die Keime von Hoffnung, Glauben und Menschenliebe und verwandelte das Herz in Stein.'

69 A similar process is identified in studies of perpetrators of mass atrocities, as Johanna Ray Vollhardt and Maggie Campbell-Obaid have observed: 'As the moral exclusion of victim groups, as well as violence against them, progresses, new norms are established, and this violence is normalized in society. Additionally, people can become habituated to violence and desensitized after an initial period of shock and physical discomfort.' Johanna Ray Vollhardt and Maggie Campbell-Obaid, 'The Social Psychology of Genocide and Mass Atrocities', in *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*, ed. by Arthur G. Miller (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016), pp. 159–184 (p. 168).

70 Thomas Kühne, 'Male Bonding and Shame Culture: Hitler's Soldiers and the Moral Basis of Genocidal Warfare', in *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 55–77 (p. 62); Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 29. For similar findings regarding Reserve Police Battalion 101 see Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001 [1992]).

as it opposed outsiders,⁷¹ but this also created a daunting barrier to anyone seeking to oppose the amoral behaviour that the majority endorsed and practised.

While there was an internal pressure to conform within the soldiers' units, there was also a dominant perception of an external environment characterised as 'lawless territories' in which 'harsh measures' were not only regarded as permissible, but indeed as an absolute necessity. In establishing 'law' according to their own system of 'order', however, the soldiers often ignored their own role as aggressor in precipitating this anarchic state of affairs.⁷² The organised and disciplined staging of executions of partisans, offering a feeble guise of legality to what were often nothing other than summary reprisals,⁷³ contrasted starkly with the stories of chaos and disorder in the occupied areas that circulated among the soldiers at the front. Beyond any racial prejudice against Slavs, horror stories of partisans (real and imagined) quickly led to a siege mentality that fed a profound distrust of the Soviet population and transformed the soldier-civilian relationship. German troops in every instance became enforcers of 'law and order' – whatever they decided that to be and however much that differed between individual soldiers. It was a system open to flagrant abuse and, while the murderous consequences of this autonomy have formed the basis of most studies, it must also be acknowledged that such an environment also fostered a ubiquitous culture of secondary criminality, supporting all manner of non-lethal, but no less criminal, corruption and abuse of power by the soldiers.

If internal and environmental pressures helped facilitate this behaviour, one must also acknowledge institutional power, which, although diminishing individual agency to some extent, forms an important framework for how soldiers understood and experienced

71 Thomas Kühne, 'Comradeship: Gender Confusion and Gender Order in the German Military, 1918–1945', in *Home/Front*, ed. by Hagemann and Schüler-Springorum, pp. 233–254 (p. 245).

72 Historians Jörg Baberowski and Klaus Jochen Arnold have both presented this as an explanation for German crimes in the east and erroneously suggested that external factors supposedly beyond individual soldiers' control account for the Wehrmacht's war of annihilation. See Jörg Baberowski, 'Kriege in staatsfernen Räumen: Rußland und die Sowjetunion 1905–1950', in *Formen des Krieges: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Dietrich Beyrau, Michael Hochgeschwender and Dieter Langewiesche (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), pp. 291–309; Klaus Jochen Arnold, *Die Wehrmacht und die Besatzungspolitik in den besetzten Gebieten der Sowjetunion: Kriegführung und Radikalisierung im 'Unternehmen Barbarossa'* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005). In response to this see Alex J. Kay, 'A "War in a Region beyond State Control"? The German-Soviet War, 1941–1944', *War in History*, 18.1 (2011), 109–122.

73 Theo J. Schulte, 'The German Soldier in Occupied Russia', in *A Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West 1939–1945*, ed. by Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 274–283 (p. 278).

the war in the east. The German army was overwhelmingly conscripted; volunteers are estimated at numbering only about ten per cent, meaning that the army's induction and training programmes had to transform 'average men' into battle-ready soldiers.⁷⁴ The advantage the German army enjoyed was that its recruits had already spent years in paramilitary organisations such as the Hitler Youth or the Reich Labour Service. Yet even these could not always prepare the men for the fearsome demands of German military training, which built a first-rate fighting force but, as Stephan Fritz has observed, 'aimed ultimately at control and motivation on the battlefield.'⁷⁵ Likewise, British historian Richard Holmes has argued: 'There is a direct link between the harshness of basic training and the cohesiveness of the group which emerges from it.'⁷⁶ The German army exhibited powerful cohesion, high levels of motivation and strict control, which was forged in battle even before the invasion of the Soviet Union. Such strong institutional culture proved extremely resilient, especially when confronted with a land and people that were perceived as foreign, dangerous and inferior. As German historian Wolfram Wette has noted, the brutalisation of the German military institution led among the men, 'to the dramatic loss of a feeling of individual responsibility and personal guilt, as well as the deformation of their sense of humanity and justice.'⁷⁷

If the army's institutional culture perverted individual responsibility in the east, it was reinforced by Nazi racial ideology, but also impacted by what Jeff Rutherford has termed 'military necessity'. In essence, Rutherford's study has shown that the German army was willing to do whatever was necessary to preserve its combat efficiency and emerge victorious on the battlefield. This is the first theory to explain the otherwise contradictory behaviour in German army policy, where the same unit could initially act with relative benevolence towards an occupied population and later display utter ruthlessness. The essential ingredient, according to Rutherford, could not simply be ideology, but rather the perceived needs of the unit or the men themselves.⁷⁸ Accordingly, 'military necessity' is not a rigid concept, any more than

74 Wolfram Wette, *Die Wehrmacht: Feindbilder, Vernichtungskrieg, Legenden* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2002), p. 158.

75 Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), p. 13.

76 Richard Holmes, *Firing Line* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), p. 47.

77 Wette, *Die Wehrmacht*, pp. 158–159.

78 Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide*, p. 7.

indirect criminality is. In both cases there are grey areas, degrees of complicity and blurred lines. Yet the troops were clearly capable of enacting whatever was necessary to ensure their own needs came first and, in the process, any concern for the local population was often absent.

Spectators as Perpetrators

Not only was there a willingness on the part of German soldiers on the eastern front to perpetrate acts that indirectly led to enormous suffering and high mortality rates, there was also a clear enthusiasm for lending their support to more immediate acts of murder, namely as spectators at massacres (and other atrocities). This passive acceptance of the killing process among the soldiers gave legitimacy to the murders, while providing another forum for soldiers to participate indirectly in the war of annihilation. Christian Hartmann has correctly concluded that the number of ‘members of the Wehrmacht, who articulated their disquiet about the Holocaust, or even resisted it’, was ‘even smaller’ than the size of the group directly involved in implementing the genocide of Jews. He adds, however: ‘This means that we are dealing here with a broad, apparently indifferent middle section.’⁷⁹ Yet to what extent was the broad middle section really indifferent? There is a legitimate school of thought that regards those who photographed and filmed the mistreatment, degradation and murder of Jews as *active* participants in those atrocities, and the act of taking photographs and making films as ‘a distinct form of violence’, in the words of Gerhard Paul.⁸⁰ The perpetrators engaged in an interaction with the photographers and cameramen ‘by presenting them the humiliated and naked victims like trophies’. They orchestrated executions, beatings and other abuse not just in front of the camera but also *for* the camera.⁸¹

This conception of culpability has been extended to include bystanders, thus encompassing a vastly greater proportion of regular

79 Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 661.

80 Gerhard Paul, ‘Lemberg ‘41: Bilder der Gewalt – Bilder als Gewalt – Gewalt an Bildern’, in *Naziverbrechen: Täter, Taten, Bewältigungsversuche*, ed. by Martin Cüppers, Jürgen Matthäus and Andrej Angrick (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2013), pp. 191–212 (pp. 205–208). See also Petra Bopp, ‘Images of Violence in Wehrmacht Soldiers’ Private Photo Albums’, in *Violence and Visibility in Modern History*, ed. by Jürgen Martschukat and Silvan Niedermeier (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 181–197; Bernd Hüppauf, ‘Emptying the Gaze: Framing Violence through the Viewfinder’, in *War of Extermination*, ed. by Heer and Naumann, pp. 345–377.

81 Paul, ‘Lemberg ‘41’, p. 207.

German troops than the inclusion of photographers and cameramen already does. As Harald Welzer notes in respect to massacres carried out in the German-occupied east, 'spectators are not passive: their presence and obvious interest constitute a framework of social confirmation surrounding the shooting operations. And even the individual spectator can reassure himself, through the simple presence of other spectators, of the legitimacy of his curiosity.'⁸² Thus, what we have here is a case of mutual reinforcement, for shooter and observer alike, to the effect that what each of them does is acceptable.

To the average observer, however, the onus of moral responsibility (to the extent that such a concept was even considered) lay exclusively with the shooters and even decades after the war few appear to have accepted any degree of personal accountability in spite of acknowledging having been present at executions carried out by the Wehrmacht.⁸³ Once again, in the mind of the average German soldier, his own role in the crime, and the passive support he lent to it, passed guilt-free. Accordingly, attendance at executions was typically high and was treated as a form of officially sanctioned entertainment; a spectacle at which to marvel as well as relish the feeling that 'justice' was being served. Indeed, the photographic evidence suggests that numerous observers enjoyed themselves enough to pose smiling for their comrades' photos.⁸⁴ Such 'execution tourism' – resulting in a 'pornography of death'⁸⁵ – not only made the *Landser* an accessory to the crimes he witnessed, but provided an unmistakable lesson in the German disregard for the value of Soviet life and the widely-accepted consequences for actions deemed to constitute 'resistance' to the German occupation.

Sometimes this disregard extended even to fellow German soldiers condemned by the Wehrmacht justice system. Corporal Alexander Topp recalled in July 1945 the ambivalent reactions among comrades from his unit who had voluntarily attended the execution of four German soldiers:

82 Welzer, *Täter*, pp. 205–206. See also Paul, 'Lemberg '41', pp. 205–206, citing the example of sexual voyeurism as a form of approval of what is taking place.

83 See the many personal testimonies in the documentary film directed by Ruth Beckermann, *Jenseits des Krieges* (Austria: Josef Aichholzer Filmproduktion, 1996).

84 *Vernichtungskrieg, Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941-4: Ausstellungskatalog*, ed. by Hannes Heer (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1996). See also the discussion in Michael Verhoeven's documentary film *Der unbekanntes Soldat* (Germany: Studiocanal, 2007).

85 Schulte, 'The German Soldier in Occupied Russia', p. 275. On 'execution tourism' see also Römer, *Kameraden*, pp. 399–402.

T: And my comrades said that they wouldn't have volunteered had they known that it involved Germans, then they wouldn't have volunteered. Some of them did it out of curiosity, I only know one thing, that only a single individual was there who repeatedly volunteered; all others volunteered only once and then it was over. They wanted once to have been present.⁸⁶

Some soldiers evidently felt such a craving for sensation at the spectacle of death that they seized the opportunity more than once to visit executions like they would an entertainment show. Among these men was, by his own admission, 19-year-old Lance Corporal Meinhard Dreher, who 'attended executions on two occasions'. On the first occasion, Dreher had been assigned to a 'deterrence platoon', where he evidently acquired a taste for it and then went a second time of his own free will:

D: A deterrence platoon, approximately 40 men always had to attend the shooting, with the rifle slung on, then we heard attention, eyes to the left, and then it started, splat. The pole was in place, and we had to stand there and watch exactly how he sagged together. One of our own comrades from the platoon. Wanted to run away; desertion. And the other time I was just there and went to watch it, we were allowed to attend.⁸⁷

As Felix Römer has observed, there was no room in such accounts for empathy with the victims.⁸⁸

Criminality for German soldiers on the eastern front was thus a series of gradations, not a black and white distinction between onerous guilt and virtuous innocence. The culpability of the soldiers varied from direct complicity in acts of mass murder to a more qualified – but often no less deadly – set of actions, which indirectly led to widespread death throughout the occupied Soviet territories. Most German soldiers already fell into these categories; the remaining men's typical response was a passive acceptance – and thus condoning – of their comrades and their criminal behaviour, which offered support and reinforcement to the whole system of violence. A photograph found

86 Qtd. in Römer, *Kameraden*, p. 400: T: Und die Kameraden sagten, sie hätten sich nicht gemeldet, wenn sie gewusst hätten, dass es sich um Deutsche handelt, dann hätten sie sich nicht gemeldet. Einige haben es aus Neugierde gemacht, ich weiß nur das eine, dass nur ein Einziger da war, der sich immer wieder gemeldet hat; alle anderen haben sich nur einmal gemeldet und dann war es aus. Sie wollten mal dabei gewesen sein.'

87 Ibid.: 'D: Ein Abschreckungszug, ungefähr 40 Mann mussten immer bei der Erschießung bei sein, mit dem Gewehr umgehängt, hieß es stillgestanden, Augen links, und dann ging es los, Batsch. Da hat der Pfahl gestanden, und da haben wir stehen müssen und genau zusehen, wie der zusammengeknackt ist. Ein eigener Kamerad aus dem Zug. Wollte ausreißen, Fahnenflucht. Und das andere Mal bin ich so beigewesen und habe mir das angeguckt, da konnten wir hin.'

88 Ibid., p. 401.

on the body of a dead German soldier showed a group of company commanders sitting behind a large sign that read: 'The Russian must die, so that we [can] live' (*Der Russe muß sterben, damit wir leben*).⁸⁹ While not every member of the *Ostheer* can be condemned as a war criminal, it is at the same time unlikely that many could claim to be entirely innocent.

Ideological Convictions

If the majority of German soldiers serving on the eastern front were involved in some form of criminal behaviour, does this mean that the mass were also Nazis? In his exceptional study *Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht von innen* (published in English translation as *Comrades: The Wehrmacht from Within*), Felix Römer presents his evaluation of the interrogation reports, moral questionnaires and bugged room conversations of several thousand Wehrmacht soldiers in US captivity at Fort Hunt, Virginia – the largest and most substantial collection of personal testimonials of German soldiers in the Second World War yet known.⁹⁰ The more than 3,000 prisoners were predominantly ordinary German and Austrian soldiers: more than one in two of them was an enlisted man; almost every third was an NCO; and approximately every sixth an officer, though generally only from the subaltern ranks up to captain.⁹¹ They thus constituted a representative segment of the Wehrmacht. Römer convincingly demonstrates how ideology played at most a subordinated role *in the consciousness* of most members of the Wehrmacht.⁹² This does not mean that political ideas and National Socialist beliefs did not have any influence on the soldiers. Römer's analysis reveals that nationalism, militarism and loyalty to Hitler were part of the basic mental configuration of the majority of the ordinary soldiers, and the 'virtues' and interpretative models by which they were guided were in part impregnated by National Socialism. Beyond such basic convictions, however, most of them thought in political terms in less complex categories, without deeper theoretical foundations. For the mass of them, it was above all success and failure that ultimate-

89 Qtd. in Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda during World War II* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 123.

90 See Römer, *Kameraden*, pp. 21–25.

91 *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42.

92 On this see *ibid.*, pp. 60–110.

ly counted in the assessment of politics and the actions of the state.⁹³ Ideological convictions counted among the basic certainties that were commonly taken for granted by the soldiers. The largely internalised nationalism and militarism of the vast majority of the soldiers established a fundamental loyalty to the state that was more deep-rooted than the frequently superficial political opinions. In contrast to the oft vague ideas that the soldiers had of National Socialist ideology, these elementary convictions were deeply grounded, long-term cultivated mentalities that were so self-evident as to be scarcely pondered or questioned, least of all when at the front.⁹⁴ The letters sent home by German soldiers from the eastern front likewise demonstrate that they had taken on board a great deal of their Nazi 'education'.⁹⁵ Michaela Kipp concludes from her analysis of thousands of such letters that the indoctrination to which the soldiers were subjected could only work if it was compatible with their everyday convictions.⁹⁶

This absence of *overt* ideology in the aforementioned transcripts of bugged room conversations between Wehrmacht soldiers led Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, in their bestselling book *Soldaten: Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (published in English translation as *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying*), to excessively play down or even dismiss the potency of convictions and ideas in accounting for the enormity of German deeds and the nonchalance of so many perpetrators and witnesses documented in the transcripts, and to prematurely conclude: 'These soldiers are no "ideological warriors", but rather in most cases wholly unpolitical.'⁹⁷ Though Neitzel and Welzer deserve credit for bringing to the debate a range of additional factors more common to soldiers and military culture generally, Johannes Hürter is right to warn against generalisations: 'If the same soldierly patterns of behaviour really always manifest themselves in the specific area of war,

93 Such a pragmatic rationale is also highlighted in Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide*.

94 See Römer, *Kameraden*, pp. 60–110; Browning, *Ordinary Men*, pp. 176–184.

95 See Jürgen Förster, 'Zum Russlandbild der Militärs 1941–1945', in *Das Russlandbild im Dritten Reich*, ed. by Hans-Erich Volkmann (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994), pp. 141–163.

96 Michaela Kipp, 'The Holocaust in the Letters of German Soldiers on the Eastern Front (1939–44)', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9.4 (2007), 601–615 (p. 605). See also Michaela Kipp, *Großbreinemachen im Osten: Feindbilder in deutschen Feldpostbriefen im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2014).

97 Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2011), pp. 14–15, 17, 393: 'Diese Soldaten sind keine "Weltanschauungskrieger", sondern meist völlig unpolitisch' (p. 393).

even in the perpetration of crimes, then the war of the Wehrmacht loses its special character, even in its worst excesses on the eastern front.⁹⁸

Illustrative of Felix Römer's findings, on the other hand, are the results of the US opinion polls conducted over the course of 1944 among the Wehrmacht soldiers held captive at Fort Hunt. There was approval for the person of Adolf Hitler among almost 64 per cent of those interrogated by the Americans. Among the soldiers born in or after 1923, i.e. those who were ten years or younger at the time of the Nazi takeover of power, the rate of approval for Hitler was more than 74 per cent. Thus, three out of four members of the youngest generation – who were aged between 17 and 22 in the final year of the Second World War – continued to hold faith with Hitler, even at this late stage of the war.⁹⁹ These findings complement the results of a survey of 1,400 Austrian former members of the Wehrmacht conducted after the war.¹⁰⁰ Asked to name the four most important aims of the Wehrmacht, 78.4 per cent of those surveyed said 'more living space', 62.1 per cent the 'struggle against Bolshevism', 41.6 per cent the 'struggle against world Jewry' and 36.3 per cent 'racial purity'. These percentages – citing not just a selection but the *four main objectives* of the Wehrmacht in the eyes of those surveyed – demonstrate that its members by no means perceived the Wehrmacht as a purely military apparatus free of ideology. On the contrary, the Wehrmacht was for its troops an instrument of the National Socialist regime that not only strove to accomplish its military but also its ideological and political objectives, such as the 'struggle against world Jewry' and 'racial purity'. Asked for their personal opinion, 26.4 per cent of the former soldiers surveyed stated that 'the Jews' had been the main culprits of the outbreak of the Second World War. As the political scientist Walter Manoschek rightly points out, given that anti-Semitic attitudes were something of a taboo in the post-war period, also in Austria, it seems plausible that this

98 Johannes Hürter, 'Vorwort', in *Kameraden*, pp. 9–15 (pp. 12–13). See also the points made in MacGregor Knox, 'Review of Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*', *sehpunkte. Rezensionjournal für die Geschichtswissenschaften*, 12.3 (2012) <<http://www.sehpunkte.de/2012/03/19936.html>> [accessed 8 May 2017].

99 See Römer, *Kameraden*, pp. 81–82.

100 On this and the following see Walter Manoschek, "Wo der Partisan ist, ist der Jude, und wo der Jude ist, ist der Partisan." Die Wehrmacht und die Shoah', in *Täter der Shoah: Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?*, ed. by Gerhard Paul (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002), pp. 167–185 (pp. 177–178). The results of the survey can be found in Josef Schwarz, Christian W. Haerpfer, Peter Malina and Gustav Spann, 'Österreicher im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Bewußtseinsstand von österreichischen Soldaten in der deutschen Wehrmacht 1938–1945' (unpublished final report for the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, Vienna, 1993).

percentage might have been considerably higher at the time when those surveyed were still members of the Wehrmacht.¹⁰¹

The fact that it was possible even for soldiers who were critical of National Socialism to commit war crimes and other atrocities is demonstrated by the example of the aforementioned Willy Peter Reese. The following excerpt is from a poem he composed in 1942:

Murdered the Jews,
marched to Russia
as a roaring horde,
oppressed the people,
fought in blood,
led by a clown,
we are the envoys
of what's known everywhere
and waded in blood.
We carry the flags
of the Aryan ancestors:
they suit us.¹⁰²

At the same time, however, he describes how his unit shot Soviet prisoners of war, murdered civilians, burned down villages, looted homes and forced captive Russian women to dance naked. In September 1943, after his unit had laid waste to villages and killed people on the retreat, he wrote: 'I crack under this guilt – and hit the sauce!'¹⁰³

In seeking to achieve a fuller understanding of the nature of the war Nazi Germany waged against the Soviet Union and its peoples, we would be better served by not confining our conception of criminal conduct to a small selection of the most heinous crimes. Widening our gaze should not lead us to draw the conclusion, however, that the

101 Manoschek, "Wo der Partisan ist, ist der Jude", p. 178. On the knowledge of German soldiers about mass executions of Jews, as documented in the letters they sent home from the eastern front, see also Kipp, 'The Holocaust'.

102 Reese, *Mir selber seltsam fremd*, pp. 242-243: 'Die Juden ermordet, / als brüllende Horde / nach Rußland marschiert, / die Menschen geknebelt, / im Blute gesäbelt, / vom Clowne geführt, / sind wir die Gesandten / des allwärts Bekannten / und waten in Blut. / Wir tragen die Fahnen / der arischen Ahnen: / sie stehen uns gut.'

103 *Ibid.*, p. 9: 'Ich breche unter dieser Schuld zusammen – und saufe!'

majority of regular soldiers fighting on the eastern front were die-hard Nazis. Nor should we conclude that the majority of these men committed criminal acts *eagerly*, or even willingly. What a broader gaze will reveal, however, is that the ‘war of annihilation’ in the East was not just Hitler’s war or that of the Wehrmacht High Command, but also of the ordinary German and Austrian soldiers.

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