

THE EASTERN FRONT,
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GERMAN TROOPS AND
THE BARBARISATION
OF WARFARE

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Omer Bartov

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To my Mother and Father

Jen, or humaneness, is a way to be followed
‘In fear and trembling
With caution and care,
As though on the brink of a chasm
As though treading thin ice’ (Confucius, *Analects*, 5:3)

‘The era of the Hitler regime, with its gigantic, unprecedented crimes, constituted an unmastered past . . . for the rest of the world, which had not forgotten this great catastrophe in the heart of Europe either, and had been unable to come to terms with it.’

(H. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 283)

*Geschichte: Staub und Altäre, Jammer und Notzucht.
Und jeder Ruhm ein Spott auf seine Opfer.
Wahrhaftig: Schöpfer, Schöpfung und Geschöpf sind widerlegt durch
Auschwitz.
Das Leben als Idee ist tot.
Das könnte der Angang einer grossen Umkehr sein, einer Erlösung
vom Leid.
Es gibt nach dieser Einsicht nur mehr eine Schuld: Fluch dem, der
Leben schafft.
Ich schaffe Leben ab, das ist die aktuelle Humanität, die einzige
Rettung vor der Zukunft.*

(R. Hochhuth, *Der Stellvertreter*, p. 198).

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Preface

When I began reading German history, I was struck by the great elasticity of meaning which some key terms assumed in the hands of historians, particularly regarding the Third Reich. ‘The Germans’, for example, were portrayed either as all Nazis or as having had almost nothing to do with the ‘criminal clique’ which had somehow succeeded in coming to power; ‘the generals’ were either counted in with the Nazi leaders of the state or, on the contrary, depicted as the last bastion of resistance to National Socialism; ‘the Eastern Front’ featured in some accounts as the main theatre of the war, where the Russians had sacrificed millions of their people in pushing back the Nazi invader set upon enslaving and destroying them, whereas for many West Europeans and Americans it remained an unclear and baffling sideshow. It was often much more convenient to remember what were perceived as the chivalrous battles in the West and in North Africa, where there had apparently been decent chaps on both sides, though unfortunately some were led by rather more unpleasant characters than others.

This was a very disturbing state of affairs for a young student of history. The memoirs of German generals insisted that they had put up a fair and professional fight; Western military historians thought that they were even better behaved than during the First World War; the Russians described them as beasts. I felt increasingly confused. Moreover, there seemed to be much disagreement on the character of the German army. Who, for instance, represented it – the generals, the officer corps, the rank-and-file? What was the relationship between the army and the Nazis? Was it an ideologically committed, fanatic party army, or was it a professional, cool, aloof organisation, efficient, disciplined and ‘correct’ in its dealings with the enemy?

It would be, of course, unjust to claim that other historians have ignored this problem till now. On the contrary, many recent and excellent studies have dealt precisely with the question of who supported the Nazis, what did the Third Reich look like seen from within, how many people knew about or were involved in the genocidal policies of the regime, how influential anti-Semitism was and so forth. But the army was neglected; it was left either to the military historians who were concerned with its tactics and arma-

ments, or to the political historians who focused on the relations between the generals and the regime. The soldiers were forgotten, subjected only once in a while to generalisations which nobody could prove or correct.

This is the reason why it seemed to me appropriate to write a study based on a 'view from below' of the German army in the East, in an attempt to reach down as far as possible to the lowest levels of the military, and to analyse carefully all the data found there with the aim of tackling such questions as the attitudes, education and conduct of the soldiers as they manifested themselves on the battlefield itself. This, then, can almost be seen as a regional study of the military; instead of concentrating on a town, or a district, I have selected a number of combat formations which fought on the Eastern Front and tried to learn about them as much as was possible from their own divisional and personal files. Although limited in scope, I hope that this study will shed light on some issues which have till now remained rather obscure.

This study was first written as a DPhil thesis at St Antony's College, submitted to Oxford University in April 1983. I have, however, made some substantial revisions in most parts of this work, particularly in Chapter 3 and the Conclusion. A great number of scholars have rendered me their assistance both in the writing of the dissertation and in its subsequent revisions. First and foremost I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisors, Dr Tim Mason and Mr Tony Nicholls, without whose wisdom and friendship I could never have even launched this project. Mr John Ridge gave me much of his time and expertise in working with the computer. My examiners, Professors Michael Howard and Volker Berghahn, made numerous helpful suggestions for revisions of my thesis. Dr David Blackbourn and Dr Richard Bessel kindly invited me to deliver a paper on my work at the London Institute of Historical Research where further useful comments were made. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the members of the *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungssamt* in Freiburg, and particularly Dr Wilhelm Deist, have all shown much interest in my progress, as has Professor Klaus-Jürgen Müller of the Bundeswehr Hochschule in Hamburg. Special thanks are due to Dr Bernd Wegner and his wife as well as to Mrs Kwiet and her son, Professor Konrad Kwiet. In Israel I would like to extend my thanks to all members of the Department of History at Tel-Aviv University, and particularly to the Chairman, Professor Zvi Yavetz, as well as to Professor Shlomo Ben-Ami, Walter Grab, Yehuda Wallach, Saul

Friedländer and Shula Volkov. This research could not have been undertaken without the friendly co-operation of the staffs of the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg, the Bundesarchiv-Zentralnachweisstelle in Kornelimünster, the Deutsche Dienststelle (WASt) in Berlin and the Berlin Document Centre. Financial support was given me by Tel-Aviv University, the German Historical Institute in London, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Rothschild Foundation and the Fulbright Educational Exchange Grant; I wish to thank them all.

This book was written at Princeton University, to which I had been kindly invited as a Visiting Fellow in the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies. I would like to thank all the members of the History Department for their friendship and advice, and especially Professors Lawrence Stone, Arno Mayer, Theodor Rabb, David Abraham and Sheldon Garon. Notwithstanding this long list of friends and advisers, I hasten to add, of course, that they should bear no responsibility for the opinions expressed in this book. Any attempt to express in a few words the great debt which I owe to those who have helped me most is doomed to failure; let me just say that only they, Mary J. Picone and my parents, know how much they deserve my gratitude.

Princeton

O.B.

List of Abbreviations

<i>AFS</i>	<i>Armed Forces and Society</i>
<i>AJS</i>	<i>American Journal of Sociology</i>
BA-MA	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg i. B.
Dulag	Durchgangslager (POW transit camp)
GD	Grossdeutschland (Regiment, later Division)
Gen.Lt.	Generalleutnant (Lieutenant General)
Gen.Maj.	Generalmajor (Major General)
Gen.Oberst	Generaloberst (Colonel General)
GFP	Geheime Feldpolizei (Secret Field Police)
Hiwis	Hilfswillige (Russian volunteers in the Wehrmacht)
HJ	Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth)
Hptm.	Hauptmann (Captain)
<i>HWJ</i>	<i>History Workshop Journal</i>
I.D.	Infanteriedivision (Infantry Division)
I.R.	Infanterieregiment (Infantry Regiment)
<i>JCH</i>	<i>Journal of Contemporary History</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Modern History</i>
Lt.	Leutnant (Second Lieutenant)
MFO	Mitteilungen für das offizierkorps (Information for the Officer Corps)
MFT	Mitteilungen für die Truppe (Information for the Troops)
<i>MGM</i>	<i>Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen</i>
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party)
NSFO	Nationalsozialistischer Führungsoffizier (National Socialist Leadership Officer)
Oblt.	Oberleutnant (Lieutenant)
Obstlt.	Oberstleutnant (Lieutenant Colonel)
OKH	Oberkommando des Heeres (High Command of the Land Forces)
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (High Command of the Armed Forces)
<i>POQ</i>	<i>Public Opinion Quarterly</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
<i>PSQ</i>	<i>Political Science Quarterly</i>
Pz.Div.	Panzerdivision (Armoured Division)

RAD	Reichsarbeitsdienst (Reich Labour Service)
Rgt.	Regiment
SA	Sturmabteilung (Storm Troops of the Nazi Party)
SD	Sicherheitsdienst (Secret Police of the SS)
SS	Schutzstaffel ('Defence Squad' of the Nazi Party)
VfZ	<i>Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte</i>