

UNIVERSITY OF CANTERBURY

**Executioners of Convenience –
The *Wehrmacht's* Atrocities on the
*Ostfront***

Genocide and Ideology in a War of Annihilation, 1941-1943

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Abstract

This thesis explores to what degree the *Wehrmacht* was involved in atrocities on the Eastern Front and the structures that led to this involvement. The goal is to show that the men of the *Wehrmacht* were incorporated more completely into a genocidal ‘war of annihilation’ than has been previously thought. It will be demonstrated that the *Wehrmacht Heer* on the *Ostfront* cannot be understood as a traditional army conducting a conventional war. However, it was not made up of rabidly anti-Semitic ‘willing executioners’ either. This research is based mainly on perpetrator testimony, including secret POW recordings, official *Wehrmacht* documents and soldiers testimonies. Upon examination of these documents, it becomes clear that *Wehrmacht Heer* units during the *Ostkrieg* were instructed and prepared not only to assist the SS and *Einsatzgruppen* in prosecuting the Final Solution, but also to act independently as a kind of ‘vanguard’ of annihilation in their area of operations. In contrast to existing interpretations however, this thesis will argue that in general soldiers did not commit war crimes due to Nazi indoctrination/ingrained anti-Semitism or through peer pressure and brutalisation but because of indiscriminate rules of engagement set within an extremely rigid military structure, which explicitly equated Jews with Bolshevik partisans while considering Soviet POWs and civilians to be expendable.

211 words.

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List of Abbreviations and Foreign Terms

Aktionen – action, in this context referring to *Wehrmacht/Einsatzgruppen* operations

Barbarossa – codename for German invasion of the Soviet Union, begun 22 June 1941

Commissar – political officer attached to Red Army units at command level

Einsatzgruppen – police battalions attached to SS units, organized as killing squads

Gestapo – Geheime Staatspolizei (Secret State Police)

Heer - Army

NSFO - Nationalsozialistische Führungsoffiziere, Nazi political commissars

OKW – Oberkommando der *Wehrmacht* (Armed Forces High Command)

Ostfront – Eastern Front

Ostheer – Eastern Army

Ostkrieg – Eastern War

SD – Sicherheitsdienst (Security Service), Nazi intelligence agency

Soldaten/Landser – soldier

Sonderweg – ‘special path’, specifically the ‘uniqueness’ of the path of German history

SS – Schutzstaffel, the paramilitary arm of the Nazi party, separate from the *Wehrmacht*

Vernichtungskriegthese – war of annihilation thesis

Volksgemeinschaft – national/peoples community (or racial community)

Waffen-SS – combat SS troops, with a separate command structure to *Wehrmacht* troops

Wehrmacht – German armed forces

Weltanschauungen – worldviews, ideologies

Introduction

Over the last forty years, perceptions of the *Wehrmacht's* involvement in the Holocaust, particularly on the Eastern Front, have changed dramatically.¹ Although early historical interpretations portrayed the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) and *Einsatzgruppen* as fanatically loyal, indoctrinated killers who carried out the genocidal National Socialist agenda, the *Wehrmacht* has typically been seen as a traditional army - understood to have conducted an 'honorable' war.² More recently, however, the *Wehrmacht* has been implicated as a more active player in various crimes against humanity on the Eastern Front, and this traditional view has become untenable.³ Newly declassified archives and fresh perspectives on extant sources reveal disturbing facts about soldiers' attitudes, official *Wehrmacht* doctrine and the extent of the *Wehrmacht's* atrocities in the *Ostkrieg*.

This thesis will explore to what extent German soldiers of the *Ostheer* conformed to National Socialism ideology and engaged in atrocities in line with Nazi racial policy by investigating perpetrator testimony in several chapters. First, it will consider how previous scholars dealt with or failed to deal with the *Wehrmacht's* involvement in the Holocaust, and the source issues relating to the topic. Secondly, soldiers' perspectives on Nazism, racial policy and Jews will be explored using secretly recorded and recently declassified POW transcripts. Using POW transcripts alone, however, does not give enough background on the *Wehrmacht's* war on the *Ostfront*. Official *Wehrmacht* doctrine

¹ Although the *Wehrmacht* encompassed all branches of the military, this thesis will focus on the *Wehrmacht Heer* - the German Army. The terms *Wehrmacht*, *Army*, *Heer* and *Ostheer* are all used in this thesis to refer to the *Wehrmacht Heer* on the Eastern Front.

² Especially the officer corps, tied strongly to the noble military traditions of East Prussia.

³ In particular, Omer Bartov, Hannes Heer and Rolf-Dieter Müller have led revisionist scholarship; see O. Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) and H. Heer, 'Killing Fields: The *Wehrmacht* and the Holocaust in Belorussia, 1941-1942.' *Holocaust Genocide Studies*, Vol.11, Iss.1 (1997): 79-101; R. Müller, *Die Wehrmacht - Historische Last und Verantwortung: Die Historiographie im Spannungsfeld von Wissenschaft und Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999).

must be scrutinized through several key orders and documents drafted and distributed to troops before and during Operation Barbarossa, to show that the *Wehrmacht* was prepared by the Nazi state as a key tool in a genocidal 'war of extermination' on the *Ostfront*. Finally, incidents of *Wehrmacht* involvement in crimes against humanity on the ground in the Soviet Union will be evaluated using post-war soldier testimony, war diaries, memoirs and letters home to assess whether the *Wehrmacht* was more explicitly genocidal in nature than historians and the public have generally believed, and to analyse the nature of these crimes and their relationship to the Holocaust at large.

It will be argued through analysing recorded POW transcripts that attempts to Nazify German soldiers and the *Wehrmacht* itself were not entirely successful. However, despite sometimes ambivalent attitudes to the regime, it appears units of the *Ostheer* committed atrocities on a regular basis. It is clear that blind faith in Nazism and the Führer and rabid anti-Semitism were not to blame for the bulk of *Wehrmacht* atrocities, but a lack of ideological commitment does not appear to have prevented war crimes either. In fact it will be argued that rather than individual or squad ideology the structures put in place governing (and enabling) soldiers' behaviour during the *Ostkrieg* played much more of a role - in particular indiscriminate and unique rules of engagement regarding partisans, Soviet POWs and Jews. Directives from above such as the 'Commissar Order' and the Jewish-Partisan construct framed the conflict in ideological and racial terms as a 'war of annihilation'. These rules of engagement for the *Ostfront* officially released soldiers and officers from the rules of war laid out in the Geneva Convention, completely altering the tone of the conflict and allowing *Wehrmacht* units to act independently to prosecute the Holocaust in the East. Although can be shown that *Wehrmacht* soldiers were not always 'willing executioners', they were executioners of convenience nonetheless.

Historiography and Source Limitations

Intentionalists versus Structuralists

Before delving deeper into the historiography, it is necessary to frame the debate around the Holocaust in broader terms. Most of the scholarship on the Holocaust in the last thirty years has fallen into either the intentionalist or structuralist/functionalist schools of interpretation. Intentionalist historians such as Andreas Hillgruber and Karl Bracher placed emphasis on the central role of Hitler and Nazi ideology in leading Germany towards the Holocaust.⁴ Some intentionalist arguments support a kind of *Sonderweg* interpretation, in which Nazi aggression and anti-Semitism were somehow unique to a German 'national character'.⁵ Structuralist historians included Hans Mommsen and Martin Broszat, who argued that Hitler's will and National Socialist ideology was diffused and diluted through the myriad structures of the Nazi state and military, and these structures are mostly to blame for the Holocaust, rather than Hitler or Nazi ideals.⁶ In this way, the structuralists argue for a kind of genocide through bureaucracy, in which the Holocaust was not ordained from the start, but rather was brought about by a complex series of structures and events.

The intentionalist school has been strongly criticised as being too simplistic and broad in its interpretations, particularly in placing far much emphasis on the role of Hitler.⁷ Conversely, the structuralist school, opposing historians argue, does not appoint

⁴ See K. Bracher, 'The Role of Hitler: Perspectives of Interpretation,' *Fascism: A Reader's Guide*, ed. by Walter Laqueur (London: Harmondsworth Publishing, 1979); A. Hillgruber, *Germany And The Two World Wars* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁵ S. Kattago, *Ambiguous Memory: The Nazi Past and German National Identity* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), pp. 59-60.

⁶ See M. Broszat, "Hitler and the Genesis of the 'Final Solution': An Assessment of David Irving's Theses," in *Aspects of the Third Reich*, ed. by H. W. Koch (London: Macmillan, 1985), 390-429; H. Mommsen, *From Weimar to Auschwitz* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); M. Burleigh and W. Wippermann *The Racial State, Germany 1933-1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 96-97.

⁷ Burleigh and Wippermann, *The Racial State*, pp. 95-97.

enough blame for the Holocaust.⁸ Instead blame is diffused through the structure of Nazi bureaucracy, and so this interpretation often overlooks the motivations of the perpetrators and the suffering of victims.⁹ It is important to note this historiographical dichotomy as it has informed much of the debate surrounding the Holocaust and Nazism, and the historians mentioned in this paper either fit in some way into this continuum, or have been influenced by it. This thesis leans somewhat more towards a structuralist approach, by arguing that structures put in place on the *Ostbeerb* were ultimately more crucial to soldiers' actions than personal ideological convictions (and therefore Nazi indoctrination or ingrained anti-Semitism).

Early Interpretations

The Gestapo, *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) and SS were all condemned as criminal organizations at the Nuremberg Trials, but the *Wehrmacht* was not, thanks in part to impassioned testimonies from German generals and the lack of solid documentary evidence that they were involved in war crimes at the time.¹⁰ The SS in particular became - in Gerald Reitlinger's words - the convenient 'alibi of a nation', taking the blame for the bulk of German war crimes.¹¹ This meant that *Wehrmacht* troops were largely viewed as simple soldiers fighting in a traditional army, which happened to be directed by the Nazi state.

For many years the orthodox historical view held that the *Wehrmacht's* war was waged rather like that of the Allies: in accordance with the Geneva and Hague conventions. This was partly because much of the history was written by military historians, who were interested mainly in the tactics and strategy of the *Wehrmacht*. Omer

⁸ Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 81.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-81, Burleigh and Wippermann, *The Racial State*, p. 96.

¹⁰ The head of the OKW, Keitel, was sentenced to death for war crimes, but he was an exception. See <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/judkeite.asp>.

¹¹ D. Stone, *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 199.

Bartov recounts the example of British military historian Basil Liddell Hart, who was convinced of the ‘gentlemanliness’ of the *Wehrmacht’s* war by *Generalfeldmarschall* von Blomberg, causing Hart to remark that ‘The German Army in the field [in the Second World War] on the whole observed the rules of war better than it did in 1914-18.’¹² Much of the scholarship in the post-war period followed Hart’s line of thinking, with the Wehrmacht being viewed as a traditional army.

‘Ordinary Men’? Browning versus Goldhagen

Christopher Browning’s *Ordinary Men*, while not investigating the *Wehrmacht*, is a very important part of the scholarship on troop motivation. *Ordinary Men* analyses the Hamburg Reserve Police Battalion 101 operating as part of the *Einsatzgruppen*, a paramilitary unit whose purpose was to ‘mop up’ pockets of Jews and racial and political undesirables on the Eastern Front.¹³ Browning proposes that mob-mentality and peer pressure within the unit created an environment in which atrocities became normalised and routine.¹⁴ In this interpretation ordinary, family men became killers not due to hatred or fanaticism, but through a kind of situational ‘group-think’ and eventual brutalisation. In Browning’s words, this ‘brutalization was not the cause but the effect of these men’s behaviour’.¹⁵ While the general experience of Browning’s subjects differs somewhat from that of the *Ostheer* soldiers, as they take place in Poland and within the *Einsatzgruppen*, his findings show that indoctrination and belief in National Socialism were not required for ‘ordinary men’ to commit atrocities on a massive scale.

Daniel Goldhagen went even further in his controversial work *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, analysing in part the same Police Battalion

¹² Von Blomberg was the commander-in-chief of the *Wehrmacht* pre-war, though he later fell out of favour. Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 2.

¹³ C. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, (Harper Collins, 1993), p. 3-8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 180-189.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

that Browning explored. Goldhagen argues, in direct conflict with Browning, that Germans (and therefore the *Wehrmacht* and *Einsatzgruppen*) were innately and historically anti-Semitic.¹⁶ Thus, in a kind of *Sonderweg* interpretation, Germans were uniquely predisposed to anti-Jewish violence and enthusiastically carried out killings due to their hatred of Jews. Goldhagen states that even prior to 1933 fanatical anti-Jewish sentiments were strongly ingrained in Germany and that the men of the *Einsatzgruppen*, coming from this background, acted as ‘willing executioners’ of the Holocaust.¹⁷

Goldhagen’s thesis, however, is deeply flawed and far too general in its scope. He argues essentially that these violently anti-Semitic views were not only held by all Germans, but that they pre-date Hitler. Omer Bartov criticises Goldhagen’s interpretation, countering that it does not take into account the effect of Nazi propaganda and dehumanisation that occurred after Hitler came to power, nor does it provide enough evidence for claiming that all (or most) Germans were in fact anti-Semites.¹⁸ In Goldhagen’s interpretation, Hitler was merely a leader that brought this nascent and rabid anti-Semitism to centre stage in his policies, tapping into the groundswell of popular opinion against the Jews.¹⁹ If this was the case, then why did the Nazis put so much effort and money into anti-Jewish propaganda and promoting the *Volksgemeinschaft*? Furthermore, Browning counters that Goldhagen’s theory of a Germany that was uniquely anti-Semitic and violent before Hitler does not account for the successful denazification of Germany in the post-war period.²⁰

¹⁶ D. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996), pp. 39-43, 184-185, 279.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-212.

¹⁸ Bartov, *Germany’s War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 129-131.

¹⁹ Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, p. 416.

²⁰ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 193.

The Crimes of the Wehrmacht Exhibition and the Vernichtungskriegsthese

Browning and Goldhagen's writings, along with new archival research on the *Wehrmacht* in the 1990s, led to the *Vernichtungskriegsthese* (war of annihilation thesis) which informed the controversial touring exhibition *War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944* in Germany. This exhibition forced the German people to re-examine the perceived 'innocence' of the *Wehrmacht* during the Second World War. The exhibition was highly controversial on its first showings through 1995-1999, and came under attack after several images of Russian POWs were misleadingly labelled as Jews.²¹ An investigation found that the finding of the exhibition was sound and it was pulled from public show for a significant revision where the errors were corrected. The exhibition then ran again after revision from 2001-2004, re-titled as *Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation 1941-1944*.²² It exposed various *Wehrmacht* war crimes in great detail, including direct involvement in the Holocaust, the 'mass death' of POWs, the civilian 'starvation strategy', the indiscriminate partisan war, reprisals and executions.²³

The historian Hannes Heer helped to orchestrate the *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition, and was instrumental in exposing key atrocities featured therein. The exhibition focused on two key massacres of Jews on the Eastern Front, Krivoy Rog and Kamenez in the Ukraine.²⁴ The *Wehrmacht* was implicated heavily in both of these massacres, not only for assisting with rounding up Jews, but also in organising the

²¹ This unfortunate mistake was capitalised on by Holocaust denial advocates, including the denialist *Journal of Historical Review*, who were quick to dismiss the exhibition as fraudulent. See M. Weber, Mark, 'Fraud Exposed in Defamatory German Exhibition', *The Journal of Historical Review*, Vol. 18, No. 6 (1999): 6.

²² *Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation, 1941-1944*, Exhibition Outline, Hamburg Institute for Social Research, pp. 1-3, accessed online: http://www.verbrechen-der-Wehrmacht.de/pdf/vdw_en.pdf.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11, 13-15, 20-22.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

operations and carrying out killings.²⁵ Featuring chilling photographs of crowds of Jews being herded by *Wehrmacht* personnel to the outskirts of the towns to be shot, the presentation left no doubt as to *Wehrmacht* involvement.²⁶

Rolf-Dieter Müller's *Die Wehrmacht*, printed in 1999, continued the trend of the *Vernichtungskriegsthese*, expanding on many of the issues of extermination and atrocity raised by the *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition.²⁷ The historian Omer Bartov also contended that the *Wehrmacht* was a willing participant in genocide, and that the *Wehrmacht* was in fact a profoundly Nazi institution, far from the apolitical force in the orthodox interpretation. Though Bartov rejects Goldhagen's thesis of 'willing executioners,' he posits that *Wehrmacht* soldiers embraced Nazism and that 'the unique features of the Nazi genocidal enterprise illustrate an important characteristic of state-organised industrial killing, whereby the fabrication of elusive enemies makes everyone into a potential killer.'²⁸ He sees the conflict in the East as a brutal, ideologically charged war of extermination, with a largely Nazified *Wehrmacht* participating freely in atrocities.²⁹

Recently, new sources have come to light, taken from transcripts of secretly recorded POW conversations. Many of these recordings are of Luftwaffe personnel, but a large number are captured soldiers from the Heer. The recordings were made in British and American POW camps during and after the war, without the prisoner's knowledge, and so serve as remarkable insights into soldiers' actual mindsets, free from coercion or

²⁵ *Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimensions of a War of Annihilation, 1941-1944*, exhibition outline, Hamburg Institute for Social Research, p. 3, accessed online http://www.verbrechen-der-Wehrmacht.de/pdf/vdw_en.pdf.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷ R. Müller 'Die Wehrmacht – Historische Last und Verantwortung: Die Historiographie im Spannungsfeld von Wissenschaft und Vergangenheitsbewältigung', (Munich, 1999), pp. 3-35, from Shepard, Ben, 'The Clean *Wehrmacht*, The War of Extermination, and Beyond,' *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 52, Iss. 2 (2009): 457.

²⁸ Bartov, 'Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust' *The American Historical Review*, Vol.103, No.3 (1998): 786.

²⁹ See Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 68-69, 78, 83.

self preservation. *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying* collects and translates these sources and gives historians a new insight into the mindset of German fighting men in the Second World War.³⁰

The conversational and candid nature of the secret recordings allows unprecedented access to the thoughts and outlook of men of all ranks in the *Wehrmacht*, and the extent of the atrocities they committed. The recordings are extremely useful in ascertaining the attitude and feelings of average German soldiers towards the Nazis, the Jews and the Holocaust. For the purposes of this thesis these recordings reinforce the disturbing findings of Browning and the *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition, but also allow an insight into the extent to which these soldiers conformed to National Socialist indoctrination. They will be utilised extensively later in this study.

Source Limitations

This research will be based heavily on the testimonies of perpetrators, which although problematic, are in Browning's words the closest we can get to a 'smoking pistol' when studying the Holocaust.³¹ Transcripts of captured German POWs, interrogations, war diaries and memoirs make up the bulk of these testimonies, with many of these transcripts found in translation in *Soldaten* and other secondary sources. Perpetrator testimonies have their own unique strengths and weaknesses as historical sources, which need to be addressed before their use. Those that exist as secretly recorded conversations of German prisoners have a completely different tone and authenticity when compared to court testimonies and memoirs - sources which can be quite obviously biased towards exonerating the defendant or author.

³⁰ S. Neitzel and H. Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying* (Brunswick, Scribe Publications, 2012), Prologues vii-x, pp. 3-7, 45-46.

³¹ Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), p. 36.

Post-war interviews and memoirs are distanced from events by time and the vagaries of memory, but POW transcripts and immediate post-war testimonies describe events fresh in the soldiers' minds, months rather than years ago. These newly declassified sources offer a snapshot of the minds of *Wehrmacht* soldiers (albeit defeated ones) that is unparalleled. The clandestine nature of the POW recordings also means that the soldiers were free to converse on what they wished, without questions being guided by an interrogator (though in some cases an undercover mole was indeed present) or an oral historian. The reactions of the audience at times are as important as the stories related by the speaker, with shock, indifference or laughter often shattering preconceptions. Such peer reaction would be muted or non-existent in oral history or court documents, and provides an additional insight into the perceived norms of the *Wehrmacht* soldiers.

To quote Neitzel and Welzer, when looking at perpetrator testimony 'narratives are as much about relationships as they are about content'.³² Events may be exaggerated or even invented to suit the storyteller's motives, and thus transcripts of conversations must be used with caution. Particulars, such as numbers and places, may blur and distort and key actors may be merged for narrative simplicity. In this case, however, instead of the specifics of stories, it is perhaps more important to look at the *attitudes* of the *Wehrmacht* soldiers to National Socialism and atrocities, and *how* they converse.

These conversations can only give us testimonies of defeated *Wehrmacht* soldiers however, and their conversations need contextualisation and background. Post-war soldier testimony, war diaries, memoirs and letters home are valuable sources which will be explored, but must also be approached cautiously. Many of the authors have a vested interest in distancing or absolving themselves of war crimes, and incriminating truths can

³² Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 104.

often be covered up or downplayed. It is therefore important to discuss the specific weaknesses of using direct perpetrator testimony alone to tell the story of the *Wehrmacht's* war.

It can be argued that by focusing on perpetrator accounts and ignoring victim accounts, particularly in the case of the Holocaust, historians gain a skewed version of the truth. Christopher Browning has strongly advocated – and been criticised for – the use of perpetrator testimony to understand the Holocaust. Browning has replied to these concerns, agreeing that perpetrator testimony can be problematic, but arguing that when treated carefully and backed up with other evidence, it is an extremely useful evidence base.³³ For example, Soviet villagers could hardly be asked to identify their tormenters between SS, *Wehrmacht* or *Einsatzgruppen* – not only were German uniforms broadly similar but most civilian victims could hardly have had any concept of the invaders as anything other than ‘the Germans’. Perpetrator testimony also can be the only extant record in many cases, such as in operations where all victims were silenced.

Nevertheless, to deal with the perceived and real weaknesses of direct perpetrator testimony it is necessary to use a range of other sources. Government documents and other ‘traditional’ archival sources, such as military orders and memos, have a strong historiographical tradition and are easily accessible to the historian. However, they have their own unique limitations. Government and military documents can provide insight into attempts to indoctrinate the *Wehrmacht* or to issue orders, but not necessarily the actual results on the ground. As such, they must be framed by the actions which followed, which again is often extant only in perpetrator testimony.

³³ Browning, *Collected Memories*, pp. 3-17, 35-36. See also *Ordinary Men*, Preface p. xvi-xx.

As a final note, the primary sources used in this thesis are limited to those that can be found in translation. Luckily, as the field is well studied, many documents have been translated into English in source collections, and even more primary sources have been translated by historians and exist in secondary sources. Whenever this thesis quotes from German primary accounts in secondary sources, the secondary sources' translation is used. Where there are multiple translations of the same document; the most recent translation is used.

Soldiers Views on Nazism, Racial Policy and the 'Jewish Question'

The *Ostkrieg* occurred in the context of far reaching cultural issues, some unique to the Third Reich. Latent and promoted anti-Semitism and social-psychological pressures within Nazi Germany framed much of the soldiers' understanding of the world, and membership of the *Volksgemeinschaft* called for a cultural identity which rejected and denigrated the non-German: in particular the Jew and the Bolshevik Slav. Since the defeat of Germany in 1918, Bolshevism and Jewry had been made scapegoats for the travails of the nation, and pre-war National Socialist propaganda handily blended the two into the catch-all term: 'Jewish Bolshevism'.³⁴ By combining the two, the Nazis both concentrated the threat and further demonised the Soviet Union as harbourer of both.

We can see from the attitudes in *Soldaten*, however, that the picture is more complex than a cleanly indoctrinated *Wehrmacht*. While the Waffen-SS, which operated as a military arm of the Nazi Party, was until 1943 made up of volunteers who underwent a significant indoctrination process, the *Wehrmacht* was a traditional conscript army. The *Wehrmacht* in Barbarossa consisted of over three million men, which is an incredibly large sample base and makes generalisation difficult.³⁵ Instead of indoctrination, however, the general attitude demonstrated by these captured soldiers seems to be one of ambivalence.³⁶ Neitzel and Welzer argue in *Soldaten* that soldiers 'did not, in the main, have a political opinion on the National Socialist state, the dictatorship, or the persecution of Jews.'³⁷ Despite sometimes ambivalent attitudes towards the regime, however, evidence shows that soldiers' opinions in general were not strong enough to stop the men from committing atrocities. It will be shown that individual ideology - or

³⁴ Haider, *War Diary*, pp. 336, in Hannes, 'Killing Fields', 80.

³⁵ L. Clark, *Kursk: The Greatest Battle: Eastern Front 1943*, (London: Headline Review, 2012), p. 73.

³⁶ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 226, 231, 248.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

lack thereof - was not an important factor in either preventing or causing the bulk of killings on the *Ostfront*.

Soldiers had varying views on the regime and its racial policies, and their attitudes can give us some background to the actions that came later. However, *Landsers* views can sometimes seem contradictory. One POW, ranting about Hitler's warmongering, lamented that 'I still have no idea of where the Nazis are going to land us in the end. That swine with the brown shirt!'³⁸ then, in the same conversation remarked that 'Our racial policy is excellent, also the Jewish question, and the entire legislation for preserving the purity of German blood. That law is really first-class.'³⁹ This juxtaposition seems odd, but underlines the fact that one did not have to necessarily support or believe in the entirety of the National Socialist cause to embrace Nazi anti-Semitism and racial laws.

Another conflicting account from the POW recordings speaks highly of Hitler's personality cult and German nationalism while simultaneously doubting the Führer's leadership:

Vetter: Whatever you think of National Socialism, Adolf Hitler is the leader and he has given the German people a very great deal up till now. At last we were able once more to be proud of our nation. Once should never forget that [...] Despite the fact that I'm convinced he will become her grave-digger.
Wöffen: Yes, her grave-digger.⁴⁰

Such gloomy predictions can in some part be explained by the POWs situation - imprisoned and defeated - but it drives home the point again that one did not have to be a rabidly devoted Nazi to feel a sense of pride about what National Socialism had achieved. Despite the image of Hitler as Germany's grave-digger, Vetter viewed Hitler as a great benefactor.

³⁸ SRM 45, 10 February, TNA, WO 208/4133, *Ibid.*, p. 231.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ SRA 5835, 22 March 1945, TNA WO 208/4135, *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

Anti-Semitism also comes through in the POW testimony, though it is not clear to what extent it was due to Nazi propaganda or merely the result of a broadly conservative outlook amongst *Wehrmacht* soldiers. In this case it takes the form of blaming opposition to Germany on Jewish influence in other nations:

Holscher: It's very strange that they are always against us.

Holscher: As Adolf said, it's possibly all due to the Jews.

Von Bastian: Both England and America are under the influence of the Jews.⁴¹

This is a continuation of the 'stab in the back' myth, in which Jews were blamed for Germany's defeat in World War I. This myth was used by Hitler as a propaganda tool during his rise to power. It is clear that von Bastian subscribes to this myth; however it is interesting how Holscher doesn't seem so sure, and mitigates his statement by saying 'As Adolf said'.⁴² This could show a respect for the Führer, but some doubt when it came to Hitler's beliefs on Jews. It is possible that the two soldiers show different levels of conformity to Nazi ideology in this regard. However, this is far from the most explicit account of anti-Semitism from the POW transcripts.

Röttlander, an imprisoned *Leutnant*, recounted a story of a friend in the *Wehrmacht* who had been involved in a mass execution on the Eastern Front, in which entire villages were liquidated. Entire communities of Jews were 'driven out mercilessly', then executed in mass graves. The troops then had to cover the bodies in earth, with 'some of them were still moving in the hole, children and all'.⁴³ This kind of work apparently took a toll on soldier's mental state, as the *Leutnant* described afterwards that his friend's nerves were 'absolutely shattered'.⁴⁴ His listener responded sympathetically 'Well, what on earth

⁴¹ SRM 33, 31 January 1942, TNA, WO 208/4136, Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 131.

⁴² It is important to note here that for privacy reasons many of the names used in the transcripts are pseudonyms. For the purposes of this thesis however, this is of little concern.

⁴³ SRM 914 20 September 1941, TNA, WO 208/4139, Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 235.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

can you do if it is ordered by a higher authority?’⁴⁵ The listener’s rhetorical question is telling: clearly this man was no willing executioner.

Another *Wehrmacht* POW, Rudolf Müller, described unknowingly adapting a truck into a movable gas chamber in Russia, then being brought before a German military tribunal for refusing to release the truck to be used for any more executions:

Müller: I was supposed to adapt the truck by installing rubber inserts, I didn’t know what for, so I did it. The truck was sent out and placed at the disposal of local command [...] When the driver returned, he was pale as a ghost...He said, ‘They loaded civilians into the back. Next to me [sat] a SS man with a pistol on his lap who ordered me to drive’[...] After a half an hour, they arrived at a pit [...] He reversed and opened the hatch, and they tumbled out. Dead from the exhaust fumes. The next day, I received orders to deliver the truck to the local command. I said the truck wasn’t going anywhere. So I was brought up before a military tribunal for disobedience.⁴⁶

Müller was obviously disgusted by the use of ‘his’ truck for executions, and his revulsion was enough to prompt him to refuse orders and risk punishment. It could also show that *Wehrmacht* personnel sometimes had to be coerced into helping commit atrocities, though the veracity of the pistol story above must be called into some question. Müller’s cellmate was equally shocked and disgusted by the story, and the revelation that the *Wehrmacht* driver was coerced:

Reibold: Dear God.

Müller: They forced the driver. There was a fellow with a pistol next to him. And they hauled me up on charges.

Reibold: And that’s happening in the name of Germany. No telling what’s going to happen to us.⁴⁷

Clearly Müller and Reibold were unaware of the extent of atrocities on the Eastern Front if the events in this story were in any way surprising. Though Müller was a mechanic in charge of a rear echelon motor pool, rather than a frontline soldier, both

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 236

⁴⁶ Room conversation, Müller-Reibold, 22 March 1945, NARA, RG 165, Entry 179, Box 530, Ibid., pp. 134-135.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 135.

men seem legitimately shamed and disgusted that these types of actions were ‘happening in the name of Germany’. This account also confirms the fact that resources of *Ostbeerb* units in rear areas were approved and requisitioned for use in mass murder by the SS. It also shows us that knowledge of the Holocaust was not necessarily widespread amongst troops in rear areas, and that approval for the Final Solution (or at least the *Wehrmacht*’s role in it) was far from universal amongst *Ostbeerb* troops.

High ranking Officers were also critical of atrocities on the Eastern front.

Generalleutnant Friedrich von Broich lamented the indiscriminate killings of civilians as tarnishing the repute of a once proud German army:

Broich: All we’ve achieved is that our reputation as soldiers and Germans has been completely besmirched. People say: **“You carry out all the orders when people are to be shot, whether it is right or wrong.”** No one objects to the shooting of spies, but when **whole villages, the entire population, including the children, is wiped out [...] as in Poland or Russia, then, my God, one can say it is pure murder.**⁴⁸

Generalleutnant von Broich fits the stereotype of the ‘Good German’ officer, a proud member of a military steeped in rich tradition. He is therefore horrified by orders commanding genocide, the destruction of villages and the killing of children. He is shocked by what he sees as a common *Wehrmacht* attitude of following these orders regardless of moral consequences. But more disturbingly, even as a general he seems to be powerless to do anything to stop it.⁴⁹ If such a high ranking general was powerless to resist, how must enlisted men have felt?

It bears mentioning here the *Wehrmacht*’s strong tradition of harsh discipline and total obedience to the chain of command. Omer Bartov cites these traditions, and the ‘draconian punishments’ applied in cases of disobedience, as significant factors in

⁴⁸ SRGG 782, 21 January 1944, TNA, WO 208/4167, Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 147. My emphasis.

⁴⁹ *Generalleutnant* was a *Wehrmacht* rank equivalent to Major General, or a two star General.

‘maintaining unit cohesion under the most adverse combat conditions’.⁵⁰ Even though Browning asserts that none of the *Einsatzgruppen* men studied were ever executed or punished harshly for refusing to take part in killing actions, refusing to shoot was ‘a very uncomfortable prospect within the framework of a tight-knit unit stationed abroad among a hostile population, so that the individual had virtually nowhere else to turn for support and social contact’.⁵¹ This created an environment in which atrocities, if ordered by generals and officers, were more likely to occur even against the wishes of the troops. These structures of discipline and peer pressure do not absolve *Wehrmacht* troops of guilt, or to say that unordered and wanton atrocities did not happen, but are simply factors in the structure of the *Wehrmacht* that helped *Landsers* become an effective tool in Hitler’s Final Solution on the Eastern Front.

Indeed, not all *Wehrmacht* soldiers reacted with revulsion when confronted with atrocities; in fact some seemed to actively revel in bloodshed. Moving away from POW conversations, a soldier recounts an example in post-war testimony:

Our returning comrades-in-arms tell us that they had to shoot several Jewish families... from smaller villages located in the area around the convent...One of the company...said, in his exact words, ‘Jew brain, that tastes good.’ He said they had just shot Jews, and their brains had sprayed him right in the face.⁵²

It is possible that the statement about ‘Jew brain’ is merely bravado, but shows a level of desensitisation that is hard to imagine even for veterans of the brutal war in the East. It raises questions as to how normalised these kind of violent events against civilians were.

Almost certainly this soldier had committed shootings of Jewish civilians before.

However, recollections like this are not typical, while some may have relished atrocities;

⁵⁰ Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, p. 59.

⁵¹ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 185.

⁵² R. Erren, Testimony p. 33, translated in Heer, ‘Killing Fields,’ 85.

most seemed uncomfortable with them, particularly when they involved women and children.⁵³

An excellent illustration of this comes in the transcripts; interestingly the shooter in this case, Fried, is a member of the *Wehrmacht Luftwaffe*, whilst his conversation partner is Bentz is *Wehrmacht Heer*, though it is not clear if he served on the *Ostfront*.⁵⁴ The incident recounted occurs in Poland.

Bentz: I think we've adopted the wrong attitude to [the] racial question. It's utter nonsense to say the Jew has nothing but bad qualities.
Fried: I once took part in it myself [...] during the Polish campaign [...] An SS captain or whatever he was said: "Would you like to come along for half-an-hour? Get a tommy-gun and let's go."⁵⁵ So I went along. I had an hour to spare so we went to a kind of barracks and slaughtered 1,500 Jews. [...] They had been attacked at night by Jewish partisans [...] I thought about it afterwards - it wasn't very "pleasant."
Bentz: Were there only Jews?
Fried: Only Jews and a few partisans [...] it wasn't very "pleasant".
Bentz: What - you fired, too?
Fried: Yes, I did. [...] There were women and children there too! [...] there were whole families, some were screaming terribly and some were just stupid and apathetic.⁵⁶

The *Wehrmacht Heer* soldier had just finished describing his mixed feelings about the Nazi attitude towards the 'Jewish Question', and is obviously shocked to hear his comrade speak so flippantly being offered a part in an SS execution of Jews. He cannot believe that Fried took part in the killings. The *Wehrmacht Luftwaffe* man, on the other hand, seems to regret the incident vaguely after the fact, only to insult his victims in their final moments. Accounts like show very starkly the diverse psychological and ideological worldviews and opinions these troops held. Wide reaching generalisations about the bulk

⁵³ See Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 146.

⁵⁴ *Soldaten* does not give any details about 'Bentz' other than that his rank, but given that the account is dated April 1943 and he is from the *Wehrmacht Heer* it is logical that he was captured by the Western Allies during the African campaign. If part of the *Afrika Korps*, it is likely that he had not seen service on the *Ostfront*, and thus was not subject to the same rules of engagement, nor fully aware of the level of atrocities committed there - hence his absolute surprise at Fried's assertion.

⁵⁵ The English colloquial term 'tommy-gun' is used repeatedly in the translations of *Soldaten* as a colloquial term for 'sub-machine gun'. In this case it likely refers to the MP35 or MP38 sub-machine gun used by the *Waffen-SS* at the time of the Polish campaign. See C. Bishop, *The Encyclopedia of Weapons of WWII* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 259-260.

⁵⁶ SRA 3948, 16 April 1943, TNA, WO 208/4143, Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, p. 141.

of the *Wehrmacht* being naturally anti-Semitic ‘willing executioners’ are clearly not supported by the evidence.

This assertion is borne out by Nazi policies themselves. In late 1943, Hitler decided that the *Wehrmacht* was not conforming ideologically to his satisfaction, and that he needed his own political officers within the *Wehrmacht* to promote National Socialism and cohesion. This decision led to the formation of the *Nationalsozialistische Führungsoffiziere* (NSFO), who essentially operated as Nazi commissars and ‘leadership officers’ within the *Wehrmacht*.⁵⁷ Hitler’s need to establish the NSFO shows again that political conformity was far from omnipresent within the *Wehrmacht*. Moreover, the NSFO was plagued with problems and opposition and was generally disliked by the army during its implementation.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ R. Quinnett ‘The German Army Confronts the NSFO’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.13, No. 1 (1978): 53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53-55.

Official *Wehrmacht* Policy and Doctrine

Official *Wehrmacht* doctrine for Barbarossa largely went along with Hitler's directive for a 'war of extermination'.⁵⁹ By instituting harsh, far reaching directives on the treatment of partisans and the civilian population in the area of operations, the Armed Forces High Command (OKW) created an environment in which atrocities were not only inevitable, but in line with military doctrine. The OKW can be implicated directly in atrocities on the Eastern Front through these orders, issued before and during Operation Barbarossa. These orders show that the *Wehrmacht* was directed to act as anything but a traditional army; they were given rules of engagement that conformed to a war of annihilation, a conflict in which Soviet civilians and Jews were legitimate targets. Particularly loose rules of engagement surrounding 'partisans' allowed *Wehrmacht* troops essentially free rein to liquidate entire populations (both during their advance and behind the lines), ostensibly in the name of security in occupied areas. These orders, drafted in *Wehrmacht* offices and barracks, would allow the *Ostheer* to take on the role of independent executioners if needed. As it turned out, they would be.

On 30 March 1941, three months before Operation Barbarossa began; Hitler called a conference with major military leaders, including several high ranking *Wehrmacht* generals. The conference was recorded in notes by *Generaloberst* Franz Halder.⁶⁰ In the Führer's words, the coming war in the East would be entirely different to the war that had been fought in the West; as a 'struggle between two *Weltanschauungen* (worldviews)'.⁶¹ Hitler stressed to his generals that they must divorce themselves from thoughts of

⁵⁹ F. Halder, *War Journal of Franz Halder*, II, p. 337, in *Nazism: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts, 1919-1945*, ed. by J. Noakes and G. Prigam (University of Exeter, 1988), p. 1086-1087. Original German available online at <http://www.ns-archiv.de/krieg/1941/halder-tagebuch.php>.

⁶⁰ *Generaloberst* was the penultimate general rank in the *Wehrmacht*.

⁶¹ Halder, *War Journal* p. 337, in *Nazism*, p. 1086.

‘soldierly comradeship’, as the war against the Soviets would be a ‘war of extermination’, requiring absolute ruthlessness.⁶² The immediate ‘destruction of the Bolshevik commissars and intelligentsia’ was a key first step in the invasion, the Führer emphasised, and he warned that if extreme measures were not taken then Communism would only rise again to threaten German security.⁶³

Under Hitler’s influence, the OKW began to draft up several key orders for the invasion, which would shape the conflict. Before the invasion, these documents were circulated down the chain of command to officers and soldiers. The Wagner-Heydrich agreement of 28 April 1941 was one of the first of these, allowing the *Wehrmacht* to work together and assist the *Einsatzgruppen* in its operations ‘mopping up’ Jews and Soviet intelligentsia behind *Wehrmacht* lines as the front advanced, in contrast to the invasion of Poland, where the *Einsatzgruppen* had operated largely independently.⁶⁴ According to the agreement, the *Einsatzgruppen*’s purpose was ‘to protect the rear forces of the army in the conquered territory in the East.’⁶⁵ Since the *Einsatzgruppen* were not a combat outfit, and not trained in military tactics, this pretence of rear area protection was clearly absurd. However, the agreement gave the special police battalions the support of the *Wehrmacht*, who would be called on again and again to assist in these mopping up operations.

The ‘Barbarossa Decree’ was issued by *Generalfeldmarschall* Wilhelm Keitel, Supreme Commander of the *Wehrmacht*, on May 13, 1941. This document relaxed the threat of court martial for German soldiers in the coming war on the Eastern Front, stating that: ‘punishable offences committed against enemy civilians, until further notice,

⁶² Halder, *War Journal*, p. 337, in *Nazism*, p. 1086-1087.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ D. Wildermuth, *Who Killed Lida's Jewish Intelligentsia? A Case Study of Wehrmacht Involvement in the Holocaust's "First Hour"*, *Holocaust Genocide Studies* Vol.27, Iss.1 (Spring 2013): 3.

⁶⁵ G. R. Übershar and W. Wette, eds. *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion 1941* (Paderborn 1984), pp. 288, in *Nazism*, p. 1086-1087, see also Trial of Adolf Eichmann, Session 39, Part 4, available online: <http://www.nizkor.org/hweb/people/e/eichmann-adolf/transcripts/Sessions/Session-039-04.html> .

no longer come under the jurisdiction of the courts-martial and the summary courts-martial.⁶⁶ This decree removed enemy civilians from the protection of military law, effectively giving German soldiers free rein to deal with them as they saw fit. By removing the protection of military law, *Wehrmacht* generals were effectively condoning and encouraging *Aktionen* against civilians.⁶⁷

The 'Commissar Order,' in line with the conference of 30 March, ordered the immediate execution of any captured Soviet political commissars. This order, drafted in May 1941, but not issued until 6 June, proclaimed that 'commissars are the initiators of barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare...they must be shot at once on principle...the protection of POWs guaranteed by international law will not be accorded to them.'⁶⁸ Browning also remarks that this was not limited to army commissars; any civil communist functionaries 'considered to be anti-German' were also to be executed.⁶⁹ This order was a key turning point in *Wehrmacht* policy, as it directly contravened the Geneva Convention and served as an official army approval for the immediate execution of political undesirables by their captors, even if surrendering. It showed that the *Wehrmacht* general staff were preparing for an ideologically charged war against Bolshevism.⁷⁰

Almost simultaneously, another order titled 'Guidelines for the Behaviour of the Troops in Russia' exhorted soldiers to see 'Bolshevism [as] the deadly enemy of the

⁶⁶ 'Decree for the Conduct of Courts-Martial in the District 'Barbarossa' and for Special Measures of the Troops,' May 13, 1941, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., Vol. III, 1946: Document 886-PS, 637. Available online at <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/USSR5.htm> .

⁶⁷ An earlier order signed by Keitel in March also stated that 'The behaviour of the troops towards the population and the tasks of the *military courts* shall be separately regulated, and commanded.' See 'Order #21 Concerning Jurisdiction of Military, SS, and Police Forces During Barbarossa', 'Document 447-PS' *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Vol. III. USGPO, Washington, 1946, pp. 409-413. Available online at <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/USSR3.htm> .

⁶⁸ G. R. Überschar and W. Wette, eds., '*Unternehmen Barbarossa*', pp. 313-314, in *Nazism*, p. 1086.

⁶⁹ C. Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 11.

⁷⁰ This order was controversial amongst several *Wehrmacht* staff, however this did little to stop the execution of those found to be Commissars.

National Socialist German people’, and called for its absolute destruction.⁷¹ This order mirrored the words of Hitler’s earlier meetings with *Wehrmacht* generals, making it clear that the invasion of the Soviet Union called for ‘ruthless and energetic action against Bolshevik agitators, guerrillas, saboteurs, and Jews, and total elimination of all active or passive resistance.’⁷² The wording was clear: Jews were now legitimate targets for military action as much as snipers and saboteurs; marked as partisans by virtue of birth. Defined along the same lines of enemy combatants, they were to be treated as a potential threat and eliminated.

The *Wehrmacht* also issued several orders in country, regarding policy in the occupied areas. Many of these related to the treatment of Soviet civilians, and the so called ‘starvation strategy’. On 2 May 1941 State Secretaries of the Nazi Party concluded that Germany’s war could ‘only be continued if the whole of the *Wehrmacht* is fed from Russia...Tens of millions of people will undoubtedly die of starvation if we take what we need...’⁷³ Officials planned to exploit the occupied territories ruthlessly for Germany’s benefit, with no regards to civilian casualties. In line with this, the *Wehrmacht* OKH issued this directive to troops on 1 November 1941 stating:

In the fight against Bolshevism we are concerned with the survival or destruction of our people...[the] German soldier will be tempted to share their provisions with the [occupied] people. They must, however, say to themselves: ‘Every gram of bread or other food that I [give] to [civilians] I am withholding from the German people and thus my own family [...]’ In the face of starving women and children German soldiers must remain steadfast. If they refuse to do so they are endangering the nutrition of our own people.⁷⁴

⁷¹ ‘Richtlinien für das Verhalten der Truppe in Russland,’ May 29, 1941, Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv), Freiburg: RH 26-252-91, 33, G. R. Ubershar and W. Wette, eds. *Unternehmen Barbarossa*”, *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion 1941* (Paderborn 1984), pp. 300-301, in *Nazism*, pp. 1089-1090.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ W. Michalka, (ed.) *Das Dritte Reich*, Vol. 2, pp. 212-213, in *Nazism*, p. 901.

⁷⁴ S.G. Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p. 172.

Again the conflict is framed in explicitly racial and ideological terms. Soviet citizens must die so that Germans may live. The starvation of Soviets is justified as necessary and prudent as a military measure, to maintain the integrity of *Wehrmacht* supply.

The OKW shaped the *Wehrmacht*'s role in the conflict along with Nazi ideals and the Jewish-Bolshevik construct. *Wehrmacht* Generals explicitly couched the conflict in Hitler's terms, as a desperate war of ideologies which required fresh rules of engagement and the absolute destruction of Jewish-Bolshevik elements. By issuing orders like the 'Barbarossa Decree', 'Guidelines for the Behaviour of the Troops' and the 'Commissar Order', they structured the *Wehrmacht*'s rules of engagement to better suit Hitler's war of extermination. The Wagner-Heydrich agreement enabled the *Wehrmacht* to work more closely with the *Einsatzgruppen*, something that had not occurred in Poland. Through these orders, the OKW framed the conflict as a 'win-or-die' struggle between Germans on one side, and Judeo-Bolshevik hordes on the other. The task of *Ostbeerb* soldiers' was made clear: triumph by any means.

Russian Civilians and POWs

While the *Wehrmacht* will be implicated in actions against Jews, soldiers were also responsible for the deaths of countless Soviet civilians and POWs. The brutality of the German forces towards the civilian population on the Eastern Front is well-known and in keeping with Nazi stereotypes about degenerate, subhuman Slavs. This chapter will show that once Soviet civilians and POWs were viewed as expendable by *Wehrmacht* soldiers, the *Wehrmacht* could no longer be considered a traditional army waging an 'honourable' war. The massive civilian casualties suffered by the Soviet Union are the most obvious indication that this was no ordinary war - but a racially charged war of annihilation in line with National Socialist ideology.⁷⁵ To what extent the soldiers of the *Ostheer* subscribed to this ideology, however, is less clear.

The Partisan 'Threat'

Despite the *Wehrmacht's* anticipation of a large scale partisan harassment behind the lines, actual Soviet partisan activity was limited in the first six months of Barbarossa. The Soviets were taken off guard by the *Wehrmacht's* lightning advance, and large pockets of troops were bypassed, cut off and eventually surrounded.⁷⁶ Janus Zawodny notes that 'ineptness of action (lack of experience) [...] losses, a considerable degree of collaboration with the Germans [and] the collapse of territorial organisations' led to an ineffective partisan movement early on.⁷⁷ Many of these troop pockets surrendered immediately rather than taking the initiative and acting autonomously as a partisan force.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ One estimate sits at 13,700,000 civilian casualties in the Soviet Union D. Lieven, P. Maureen, R. Suny (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Russia: The Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 226.

⁷⁶ J. K. Zawodny, 'Soviet Partisans', *Soviet Studies*, Vol.17, No.3, (1966): 368.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 368-370.

Testimony from R. Erren of the 727th Infantry Regiment backs up this image of a scattered, disorganised partisan force, and describes the reality of the situation in occupied Belarus in 1941:

During the period from the beginning of August until, I think, mid October 1941, our unit performed occupational service in Slonim and in smaller localities in the surrounding area [...] During this period our company had, as far as I can recall, one skirmish with partisans.⁷⁹

One contact with partisans in three months does not give the impression of insecurity or a full scale partisan war. Another testimony from the same unit continues, stating that, instead of partisans, ‘The largest group of persons shot by Schaffitz were Jews and had not the least bit to do with the fighting.’⁸⁰ It seems that the *Wehrmacht* had very little fighting against actual partisans to do behind the lines at all. In fact, Timothy Mulligan argues that the ‘fragmented and largely unpopular partisan movement’ in occupied Soviet territories posed ‘no major threat to the German occupation’ until 1942.⁸¹

Despite this, the troops were told that the threat of Bolshevik partisans was very real. ‘Do You Know the Enemy?’ was a pamphlet distributed to troops in June before the invasion, warning *Landsers* to be prepared to fight dedicated Red Army partisans behind the lines, and of asymmetric partisan tactics like dressing as civilians. ‘Be hard and remorseless whenever you encounter such tactics’, the pamphlet encouraged, continuing; ‘it is irrelevant whether soldiers or civilians are concerned.’⁸² It is easy to see how ordinary soldiers, under combat stresses, constant peril and sometimes extreme deprivations, would come to see the brutal rules of engagement surrounding partisans

⁷⁹ Testimony of R., Erren, p. 32. Testimony of B. (Spruchkammerverfahren), in Windisch, p. 118b, Heer, ‘Killing Fields’, p. 85

⁸⁰ Testimony of B. (Spruchkammerverfahren), in Windisch, p. 118b, p. 1354. Ibid.

⁸¹ Timothy P. Mulligan, ‘Reckoning the Cost of People’s War: The German Experience in the Central USSR,’ *Russian History* 9 (1982): p. 31.

⁸² Handbill *Kennt Ihr den Feind?* BA/MA, RH39 377, in Wildermuth, ‘Who Killed Lida’s Jewish Intelligentsia?’: 7.

and civilians as necessary, particularly when accounting for the years of racial and political indoctrination against the Slavic-Bolshevik menace. The rigid, disciplinary structure of the *Wehrmacht* only reinforced this tendency. It is not a huge step from targeting Soviet civilians indiscriminately as suspected partisans, to seeing all Jews as suspected partisans that must also be eliminated.

Russian POWs

The *Wehrmacht's* treatment of Soviet POWs became increasingly brutal and counterproductive as the campaign went on.⁸³ Konrad Jarausch, a *Wehrmacht* soldier, had the task of guarding many of these POWs. From his letters home, Jarausch was a moderate, intelligent man, and he empathised to some degree with the plight of the Russians, who were clearly being starved in the camps as food was redirected to the *Wehrmacht*. He writes in letters home on the situation and his superior's outlook:

[...] above all there is a constant pressure to economize. We can't satisfy the prisoners' hunger...This afternoon a prisoner was shot in front of our eyes, just as he was struggling through a barbed wire fence to grab a cauliflower from a nearby garden. They had fired warning shots and the guard was certainly right to shoot, but it's made us all reflect on how insignificant a single life is.⁸⁴

The juxtaposition of Jarausch's reflective philosophising and frank justification of the shooting of the starving Soviet prisoner is striking, especially since he shows some empathy for the Prisoners plight. This account shows an attitude where, if regulations are followed, even a regrettable killing can be rationalised and justified as 'right' within set rules of engagement.

⁸³ For official *Wehrmacht* policy on this, see <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/1519-ps.asp> .

⁸⁴ K. H. Jarausch, Letter from Eastern Front, translated in K. H. Jarausch and R., Kohn, *Reluctant Accomplice: A Wehrmacht Soldier's Letters from the Eastern Front* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 274, 280.

However, POWs were still viewed more favourably than the Jews. Jaraus, who obviously lamented the suffering of Russian POWs – contrastingly stated in a letter home on November 6, 1941 that ‘Bolshevism is being ruthlessly stamped out, wherever we encounter it. The same thing goes for the Jewish element. Today in particular I’m under the impression of such actions. Thus the brevity [of this letter]. [...]’⁸⁵ Now while it could be said that his letters were being filtered or coerced in some way, this did nothing to stop him writing favourably and with some sadness about the Slavic soldiers under his guard. It is clear that this man was not without empathy. That empathy, however, did not appear to extend entirely to Judeo-Bolshevik elements. More letters expand on his views, and although he seems to feel some resignation and sadness about the plight of the Jews, his solution is less than empathetic.

But our troops and the prisoners have to put up with so much – Jews barefoot in the snow⁸⁶ [...] There are civilians among the prisoners, many who are just in shirtsleeves - especially the Jews. It would really be the most merciful thing if they would be taken out into the forest and bumped off, as the experts put it. But the whole thing is already more murder than war.⁸⁷

While Jaraus’s feeling for Jews moving past his camps are at best resigned, his solution is reflective of a desensitisation and acceptance of the status quo within the *Wehrmacht*, that is, that the fate of the Jews was sealed as enemies of the Reich. While these Jews have not been killed outright in an *Aktionen*, their fate once captured by the Nazis is grim.

⁸⁵ Jaraus, Letter from Eastern Front, in *Reluctant Accomplice*, p. 319.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 325

Wehrmacht Involvement in the Holocaust on the *Ostfront*

The final test comes in analysing the *Wehrmacht's* actual conduct of war – to what degree did the *Wehrmacht* fight a ‘war of annihilation’, explicitly genocidal in nature? Was the *Wehrmacht's* war fought largely within the confines of the Geneva Convention, with sporadic incidences of war crimes, or was the tone of the conflict one of extermination? Here soldier testimony will be reviewed in detail, particularly in case studies of *Wehrmacht* initiated killings of the Jews in the Belarusian SSR towns of Krupki, Lida and Slonim. It will be shown that while *Wehrmacht* troops showed varying degrees of enthusiasm for the task of killing Jews, they carried out their orders all the same, often independently - either before SS and *Einsatzgruppen* units arrived or in separate actions. Because the *Wehrmacht Heer* was on the frontline, it was the ‘first on the scene’ to begin the Holocaust in the East. It is not the purpose of this chapter to implicate the entirety of the *Ostheer*, over three million men, in the Holocaust.⁸⁸ However, soldiers’ testimonies and attitudes tell of similar actions, and the level of troop brutalisation shows that the execution of Jews was not an unusual task for them. Although the *Einsatzgruppen* were the favoured unit for Jew killings,⁸⁹ it will be argued that the level of *Wehrmacht* participation in the Holocaust was far greater than previously thought.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Clark, *Kursk*, p. 73.

⁸⁹ Nuremberg Documents PS-3257, as cited in *Documents on the Holocaust*, ed. by Y. Arad, Y. Gutman, A. Margalioth (Jerusalem and Oxford: Yad Vashem and Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 417.

⁹⁰ *Wehrmacht* soldiers also benefited directly from the deaths or deportations of Jews. Officers would requisition (loot) stores from purged Jewish homes, and Jewish loot became a legitimised part of the *Wehrmacht's* supply chain. Konrad Jarausch describes in a letter home how normalised this was: ‘We just need to be sure to ‘winterize’ our quarters. Today we got two oil lamps, one for down in the camp and one for our quarters, of course they were from Jewish homes.’ *Of course* the oil lamps were from Jewish families’ homes, the Jews of the *Ostfront* would not need them anymore. Jarausch’s comrades had made sure of that. Jarausch, *Reluctant Accomplice*, p. 271.

The Jewish-Bolshevik/Jewish-Partisan construct in practice.

The Jewish-Partisan construct was established clearly in the more wide-sweeping army orders of Barbarossa, but proof of these orders carrying all the way to ground is demonstrated in the orders of field commanders. *Generalmajor* von Bechtolsheim issued a field order to his troops, the 707th Infantry Division, on September 10, 1941, three months into Barbarossa stating: “The Jewish population is Bolshevik and capable of any attitude hostile to Germany. In terms of how they are to be treated, there need be no guidelines.”⁹¹ This sort of reinforcement of the rules of engagement by officers in the field shows that the orders set down by the OKW were being followed, and it was no doubt necessary for the officers to reinforce them if they were to have an effect on the ground. This shows that the higher *Wehrmacht* orders for Barbarossa were more than just official dogma which could be divorced from soldiers themselves. In face these orders were being passed down to the troops through the chain of command and shaping their actions and mindset directly.

Similarly, *Generalfeldmarshall* von Reichenau, commander of 6th Army in Operation Barbarossa, issued his own secret decree to his troops on 10 October, 1941, four months into the invasion. Known as the ‘Severity Decree’, it also reinforced the High Command’s rhetoric about the duty of *Wehrmacht* soldiers, but in even more politicised and anti-Semitic terms than von Bechtolsheim. Von Reichenau decreed that the German soldier on the Eastern front was not just a warrior but also ‘a bearer of ruthless national ideology and the avenger of bestialities [inflicted upon Germany] and racially related nations.’ Von Reichenau’s soldiers were expected to have a ‘full understanding for the necessity of a severe but just revenge on subhuman Jewry,’ and for the annihilation of

⁹¹ Der Kommandant in WeiBruthenien des *Wehrmacht*s-befehlshabers Ostland/Abt. Ia, Lagebericht, 10.9.1941, BSA Minsk, 651-1-1, p. 25, in Heer, ‘Killing Fields’, 84.

partisan revolts behind the lines ‘which have always been caused by Jews’.⁹² According to von Reichenau’s orders, total ruthlessness in the East was required to secure Germany from ‘Asiatic-Jewish danger’.⁹³ It is clear that von Reichenau took the implementation of a war of annihilation against the Jews and ‘Asiatics’ seriously.

The 727th Infantry Regiment based in Slobin was issued orders stating that ‘all Jews were to be regarded as partisans if they were encountered outside their place of residence.’⁹⁴ As all partisans were to be shot on sight, any Jew leaving their house was an instant target. Another *Wehrmacht* officer recounted - in line with official policy - that ‘[the] Jews are without exception identical with the concept of partisan.’⁹⁵ Clearly the Jewish-Partisan construct was informing *Ostheer* actions on the ground.

Case Study: Krupki

The first case study, Krupki, demonstrates a situation in direct conflict with traditional historiographical views of the *Wehrmacht*. Here we see the *Wehrmacht* operating relatively independently to liquidate the resident Jews of Krupki quickly and efficiently. The accounts show that this was not the first operation of this kind that the troops had undertaken, hinting at an organised system of annihilation with killing protocols organised at the battalion level.

In mid-1941 Krupki was a thriving town in the Belarusian SSR, with a significant Jewish minority. By the end of September 1941, almost all of them had been executed by

⁹² “Field Marshal v. Reichenau, *Order Concerning Conduct of Troops in the Eastern Territories*, 10 October, 1941,” from ‘Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression’. Volume VIII. USGPO, Washington, 1946, pp.572-582, accessed online at: <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/USSR2.htm> . An alternative translation of Reichenau’s decree is present in S. G. Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), pp. 97-98. Original German available online at <http://www.ns-archiv.de/krieg/untermenschen/reichenau-befehl.php> .

⁹³ “Field Marshal v. Reichenau, *Order Concerning Conduct of Troops*, pp.572-582, accessed online at: <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/USSR2.htm> .

⁹⁴ Inf. Rgt. 350, II. Bat., An das Regiment, 18.8.1941, BA-MA, RH 26-221-21, pp. 294-295, translated in Heer, ‘Killing Fields,’ 86.

⁹⁵ Kommandantur des Sicherungs-Gebietes WeiBruthenien/Abt. Ic, Lagebericht, 20.2.1942, BA-MA, RH 26-707-15, p. 4, in *Ibid.*, 88.

the *Wehrmacht* 354th Infantry Regiment. *Unteroffizier* Richard Heidenreich states in his diary that his unit of the 354th Infantry Regiment had assisted the *Einsatzgruppen* in shooting Jews in a POW camp outside Minsk in September 1941.⁹⁶ This was, however, an *Einsatzgruppen* operation. The executions in Krupki were, by contrast, largely instigated and executed by the *Wehrmacht*. Richard Heidenreich described the scene in his diary:

In the evening our Second Lieutenant selected fifteen men with strong nerves [...] We waited for the morning in tense expectation. We were ready at 5 o'clock prompt, and the First Lieutenant explained what we were to do. There were approximately 1,000 Jews in the village of Krupki, and these all needed to be shot today [...]⁹⁷

The task was carried out methodically with full involvement of higher ranking officers.

The unit set about gathering Jews from the town and taking them to the outskirts.

Heidenreich describes what happened next.

After our names were read out, the column marched to the nearest swamp [...] A second-lieutenant and a company sergeant-major were with us. Ten shots sounded, ten Jews were blown away. This went on until all were taken care of. Only a few of them kept their composure. The children clung to their mothers, women to their men.⁹⁸

Another soldier in 12th Company corroborated this account, confirming that ‘shootings were carried out by the 2nd Platoon led by Master Sergeant Schrade.’⁹⁹ 12th Company were later involved in other *Aktionen* in the area as the following diary entry shows:

From [Krupki] we carried out several so-called raids, and our task (mostly at night) was namely to cordon off and comb through the surrounding localities. There the resident Jews (men, women, and children) were taken prisoner and rounded up in the village [...]

⁹⁶ *True to Type: A Selection from Letters and Diaries of German Soldiers and Civilians Collected on the Soviet-German Front*, (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1945), p. 29 from W.W. Beorn, *Descent Into Darkness: The Local Participation of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust in Belarus, 1941-2*, (PhD diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011), p. 72.

⁹⁷ “Diary entry by Senior Private First Class Heidenreich, 12th Company, 354th Infantry Regiment, 62nd Infantry Division, Field P.O. No. 62: *What I went through in Russia*” in *True To Type*, pp. 30-32, “Jewish Virtual Library”, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/krupki.html>. An alternative translation is available in Heer, ‘Killing Fields’, 86.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* An alternative translation is available in Heer, ‘Killing Fields’, 84.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31. Beorn, “Descent into darkness,” p. 83.

The usual procedure in these operations was to alternate with parts of 12 Co.

After the Jews were rounded up...a place was selected and they were shot there [...]¹⁰⁰

The phrase ‘usual procedure’ indicates that the 354th regiment had carried out ‘mopping up’ operations to deal with Jews previously in other towns, and that the cooperation at the company level was routine, possibly alternating due to mental stress on the soldiers. Heidenreich goes on to describe further actions in the area, ‘A couple days later a similarly large number was shot in Kholoponichi [...] I was involved here too [...]’ and it becomes even clearer that Krupki is not an isolated incident, but that other massacres of the same scale occurred soon after.¹⁰¹

Krupki is evidence that the *Wehrmacht* could and did undertake actions against Jews more or less independently. The account shows that by September 1941 at least Heidenreich’s company and another company within the 354th were extremely well organised when it came to liquidating Jewish populations of this size. The procedure was routine enough that a ballot system was in use to rotate the men who had to carry out the killings. This is evidence that the men did not relish the task; while the soldiers did ‘their duty’ as they saw it, they were not bloodthirsty or mindless killers. In fact, psychological stresses on soldiers tasked with executing civilians were high: one of the key reasons that a more ‘sanitised’ answer to the Jewish question would eventually be required.

¹⁰⁰ My emphasis. Strafsache gegen W. Schonemann, LG Koln 24 Ks 1/63, Sonderband K, Zeugen C, K., A., pp. 15f., 19f., 43f.; *ibid.*, vol. 9, Zeugen M., R, pp. 13f., 15f.; *ibid.*, vol. 10, Zeuge N., pp. 154f, Zeugenaussage M., 2.12.1963, pp. 53f, in Heer, ‘Killing Fields’, 84.

¹⁰¹ *True to Type: A Selection from Letters and Diaries of German Soldiers and Civilians Collected on the Soviet-German Front* (London, 1961), pp. 29-32, in *Ibid.*, 84-85.

Case Study - Lida and Slonim

The *Wehrmacht* actions in the Belarusian towns of Lida and Slonim at the end of June 1941 not only contradict the traditional view of the *Ostheer* as a ‘regular army’, but also tell of shocking mistreatment and sadistic torture of Jews by regular *Wehrmacht* soldiers very early in the campaign. The actions in Lida and Slonim occur at the end of June, 1941, several months before the killings in Krupki. Again, it is clearly documented that Jews were killed *en masse* by regular army units. However, in Lida the killings took on another dimension of brutality. Two soldiers in the 161st Division give two different first hand accounts of what occurred:

During the occupation of the city of Lida I was witness to the following incident: The leader of the regiment's mounted troops (Infantry Regiment 336, 161st Infantry Division) had 20 Jewish locals arrested [...] people from 16 to around 60 years of age. When they arrived outside the city limits, they severely mistreated them. They were beaten with rifle butts and tortured with bayonets; blood was flowing from both nose and mouth. Then they had to, under further mistreatment, dig a pit. When it was finished [they] were executed in the presence of all. There was no reason for this killing.¹⁰²

I can still remember how I saw a child grabbed by the head and then shot. The child was then thrown into a hole.¹⁰³

These separate accounts are important because it shows soldiers not only committing atrocities, but revelling in them. It is clear, however, that the observers are disgusted by what they see, perhaps because the killings involve children and the elderly. Such actions show a high level of brutalisation and organisation very early on in the campaign, rather than later, as both Bartov and Browning suggest. Another account illustrates the extent of the killings around Lida, and how they were structured along military terms:

¹⁰² Otto Wormuth, *Außerordentliche Staatliche Kommission für die Feststellung und Untersuchung der Gräueltaten der deutsch-faschistischen Eindringlinge und ihrer Komplizen, und des Schadens, den sie den Bürgern, Kolchosen, öffentlichen Organisationen, staatlichen Betrieben und Einrichtungen der UdSSR zugefügt haben* (From Hannes Heer, *Stets zu erschießen sind Frauen, die in der Roten Armee dienen* [Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995], 18 in Wildermuth, ‘Who Killed Lida's Jewish Intelligentsia?’, 9.

¹⁰³ Testimony of M., Erren, p. 1155, Heer, ‘Killing Fields,’ p. 85.

It is furthermore known to me that our company had to write so-called activity reports for the battalion. For this reason, we carried out patrols in the surrounding area during which Jews were seized and shot. In the reports, this was presented as if these persons had been shot while trying to escape.¹⁰⁴

This details the fulfilment of a sort of ‘Jew quota’ which the company was set, in the form of activity reports - something that was incentivised at battalion level. These soldiers of the *Ostheer* were desensitized extremely quickly - within days - incorporating Jew killing into their regular routines like standard combat patrols. It seems that they are conforming exactly to the rules of engagement set in place to ‘secure’ them.

The Wehrmacht as Part of the Larger Holocaust

Gerhard Erren, the Nazi area commissioner of Slonim, wrote disparagingly in January 1942 of the *Wehrmacht*’s efficiency as a tool of mass murder.¹⁰⁵ However, his critique serves more to underline the real scale of *Wehrmacht* atrocities, even while detailing their limitations:

For a while, the *Wehrmacht* was mopping up the countryside on a grand scale; but unfortunately, only in localities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants.¹⁰⁶

In Erren’s estimation, it seems that if Belarus was made up entirely of towns with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, neither the *Einsatzgruppen* nor the death camps would have been necessary. *Ostheer* units were perfectly capable of dealing with mop up operations in these areas on their own.

Another roundabout indictment of the *Wehrmacht* comes from Wilhelm Kube, the chief of civil administration in Nazi Belorussia, in July 1942:

Through an [...] already reported encroachment of the Rear Area, Army Group Center, our preparations for liquidating the Jews in the area around Glubokie have been

¹⁰⁴ Testimony of H., Windisch, p. 1354, Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Generalkommissar Kube an Reichskommissar Lohse, 31.7.1942, Nuremberg Document PS-3428, Heer, ‘Killing Fields’, p. 79.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

interrupted. The Rear Area, Army Group Center has, without consulting me, liquidated 10,000 Jews whose systematic extermination we had...already planned.¹⁰⁷

Kube is annoyed because the system of extermination of which he is a key part has been bypassed. This shows that by mid-1942, the Nazi structure of annihilation was beginning to move away from emphasis on front line units, and towards the more efficient death camps. The careful bureaucratic chain of death has been bypassed, and to a functionary like Kube, this was inexcusable. However, it shows again the *Wehrmacht* was more than capable of efficiently exterminating large numbers of Jews in rear areas later in the war, independent of the imposed structure of the Final Solution. This was an unintended consequence of preparing the *Wehrmacht* so well for a war of annihilation.

The clearest indication that *Wehrmacht* troops were overstepping their bounds as executioners of convenience comes in the occupied Ukraine. As described by an official in an internal memo, the ‘settling of the Jewish Question’ in Nazi occupied Ukraine was not as simple as in other parts of the *Ostfront*, with ‘[m]any cities [having] more than 50 percent Jews’.¹⁰⁸ Not only was the population of Jews higher, but Jews were integrated into Ukrainian society to a much higher level than in other parts of Eastern Front. In the words of the official:

*[...]these Jews carried out almost all the work in the skilled trades and even provided part of the labour for small - and medium-sized industries [...] [Their] elimination was therefore bound to have profound economic consequences, including even direct effects on the military economy (supplies for troops).*¹⁰⁹

The author is clearly worried, not about the Jews welfare, but on the effect their elimination has had on the occupied economies ability to support the *Wehrmacht*. In his mind, their elimination was counter-productive to the war effort, and *Wehrmacht* supply. He then relates what occurred to remove the Jews:

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Nuremburg Documents PS-3257, as cited in *Documents on the Holocaust*, p. 417.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

[...] systematic shooting of the Jews was carried out by units of the Order Police [...] carried out entirely in public, with the assistance of Ukrainian militia; in many cases, regrettably, also with the voluntary participation of members of the *Wehrmacht*. These *Aktionen* included aged men, women, and children of all ages, and the manner in which they were carried out was appalling. The gigantic number of executions involved in this *Aktion* is far greater than any similar measure undertaken in the Soviet Union up to now. Altogether about 150,000 to 200,000 Jews may have been executed in this section of the Ukraine belonging to the RK [*Reichskommissariat*].¹¹⁰

On September 24, 1941, after this wholesale slaughter of ‘useful Jews’, *Generalfeldmarshall* von Rundstedt, High Command Army Group South, issued a stern reprimand to *Wehrmacht* personnel involved in the slaughter, significantly changing their rules of engagement within the Ukraine:

[The] struggle against tendencies and elements hostile to the Reich (Communists, Jews, etc.), insofar as they are not a part of a hostile military force is, in the occupied areas [in the Ukraine], *exclusively* the task of the *Sonderkommando* (Special Unit) of the [*Einsatzgruppen*] and the SD [...] Individual actions by members of the *Wehrmacht* or participation by members of the *Wehrmacht* in excesses by the Ukrainian population against the Jews is forbidden; they are also forbidden to watch or take photographs of measures taken by the *Sonderkommando*.¹¹¹

This clearly showed that, at least in the Ukraine in late 1941, the *Wehrmacht* had exceeded its remit as executioners of convenience. In order to rein in *Wehrmacht* troops, a change to the rules of engagement had to be made in the Ukraine. By explicitly naming the *Einsatzgruppen* and the SD as the only units *now* to deal with Jews and Communists elements (when not acting as partisans), it is made clear that prior to this point the *Wehrmacht* had been operating under doctrines that allowed them the same freedom to eliminate Jews as these specialised killing units. This had directly resulted in the unintended slaughter of up to 200,000 Jews, regretted by staff not due to the human losses, but because they could have been of short-term use to the *Wehrmacht*'s war effort. By September 1941 in the Ukraine at least, the *Wehrmacht*'s involvement in the Holocaust was officially overstepping the bounds of even the Nazi's brutal racial policy.

¹¹⁰ Nuremberg Documents PS-3257, *Documents on the Holocaust*, p. 417.

¹¹¹ *Generalfeldmarshall* von Rundstedt, “The Struggle against Elements Hostile to the Reich” <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/wehrein.html> .
http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20617.pdf .

Conclusions

The extent to which German soldiers engaged in atrocities in line with Nazi racial policy is clearly more marked than previous historians have thought. Soldiers were not ‘willing executioners’ brainwashed by National Socialist ideals and conditioned by a unique anti-Semitism, however they were part of an invasion that was planned from the outset to target Jews and Soviet civilians. Official *Wehrmacht* doctrine for the *Ostheer* exempted soldiers from punishment for killing civilians and Jews, and removed the restrictions of the Geneva Convention through several key orders and documents drafted by Hitler and top *Wehrmacht* generals. The rules of engagement in practice on the Eastern Front were indiscriminate and brutal; creating an environment that encouraged and enabled atrocities. Actual *Wehrmacht* involvement in the Holocaust is patchily documented, but evidence points to more incidents similar to those that have been recovered in archives and the structures in place enabling genocide are clear. Therefore, the *Wehrmacht* was more explicitly genocidal in nature than historians and the public have generally believed.

The *Ostheer* was clearly integrated fully into the Nazi genocidal project in practice at the local level, rather than simply herding Jews to the SS or *Einsatzgruppen* to deal with; they were an active player in the killings. They carried out mass executions and annihilated whole villages, as well as assisting the *Einsatzgruppen* in killing operations and conducting death marches. They did this not because they were fanatical anti-Semites, as Goldhagen claims, but because they existed within an extremely organised, military framework that expected total obedience, and moreover expected them to kill. To kill is a normalised expectation for a soldier, but in this case the rules of engagement opened the range of legitimate targets far wider than they had ever been before. This framework, combined with culture of strict obedience within the *Heer*, meant that the structures in

place around soldiers were extremely strong and most soldiers seemed to lack the will to oppose them. That is not to say that there were not fanatical Nazis in both the *Wehrmacht's* rank and file and officer corps. There most certainly were, just as there were also non-Nazis who were anti-Semitic, and otherwise 'ordinary men' who tortured and killed out of frustration and brutalisation. The *Ostheer* was a particularly large force, and ideology varied from individual to individual.

In general, however, *Wehrmacht* personnel were not fully integrated into the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and were not fanatical Nazis. Many held to Hitler's leadership, however, and in fighting a war to prevent the spread of Bolshevism and protect the German way of life. With the addition of Jewish-Bolshevik and Jewish-Partisan constructs, the Commissar Order, and other loose rules of engagement set by the OKW, the conflict was presented as a desperate war of ideology and race – a war which Germany had to win by any means necessary. The fact that a 'do-or-die' situation was evidently the case, and not an illusion created by the OKW, drives home the point that whatever their personal opinions, *Wehrmacht* soldiers saw that they had a job to do, and that job was to protect the Reich and win the war by any means necessary.

The destruction of Jews, elimination of suspected partisans and supporters of partisans, and even the wholesale starvation of large numbers of Slavic civilians were couched in terms of absolute military necessity. These orders originated not from individual fanatical officers and men on the ground, but came right from the top - from the traditionally moderate *Wehrmacht* High Command, led by Keitel, to *Generalobersts*, issuing additional genocidal rules of engagement to their specific commands, to *Leutnants* commanding troops on the ground. These orders went far further than the terms set out in the Wagner-Heydrich agreement - not only were *Ostheer* units expected to assist *Einsatzgruppen* and SS operations, they were also expected to deal with suspected Jews,

partisans and Bolsheviks independently in their area of operations, as executioners of convenience. They fulfilled these expectations thoroughly.

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