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The Wehrmacht: Soldiers and Germans During the Second World War

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THE WEHRMACHT: SOLDIERS AND GERMANS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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THE WEHRMACHT: SOLDIERS AND GERMANS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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# Table of Contents

- **Introduction**  
  3
- **Chapter 1 - Primary Source Material**  
  14
- **Chapter 2 - The Wehrmacht**  
  29
- **Chapter 3 - Verbrechen der Wehrmacht (“Crimes of the Wehrmacht”)**  
  44
- **Chapter 4 - Propaganda Directed Towards the Millions of German Soldiers**  
  91
- **Chapter 5 - Honor, Guilt, and the Myth of the Wehrmacht**  
  119
- **Conclusion**  
  138
- **Appendix**  
  143
- **Bibliography**  
  147
The German Army, also known as the Wehrmacht, fought a brutal war on the Eastern Front during the Second World War. These soldiers, under the command of military officials of the Nazi state, vowed to destroy Bolshevism and Jewish populations. By examining letters from soldiers to family members on the German home front as well as letters from families to the men on the front lines, a better understanding of the motivations of war is revealed. Letters of these men and family members present insight into a vast area of research in German twentieth century history. An estimated 20 to 40 billion letters circulated throughout the German armed forces from 1939 until 1945.

In addition to letters, Nazi propaganda and the Hitler Youth greatly contributed to the influx of anti-Semitic and anti-Bolshevik mindsets throughout the military ranks. Due to the events surrounding the end of the First World War, Hitler was successful in creating a vendetta against his European neighbors who betrayed Germany in 1918-1919. Revenge against Germany’s enemies was constantly preached to the German population as well as soldiers serving in the Wehrmacht. These individuals would take their revenge against civilian populations and prisoners of war. The majority of German atrocities took
place on the Eastern Front in Russia after the launch of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941.

The following research does not attempt to describe every German veteran of the Second World War; rather, it is important to realize that war is horrendous under any circumstance and the Second World War proved no different. Additional research, namely in Germany, is necessary in order to develop an even more detailed perspective of the average soldier of the Wehrmacht.
Introduction

The Wehrmacht, or German Army, presents a controversial area of debate among historians due to the recent evidence surrounding these soldiers of the Nazi era. These “ordinary men”, to borrow terminology from author Christopher Browning, are the primary topic of this thesis. Popular post-war opinion of these men placed them into a separate category, away from the malevolent SS forces. The truth is that members of the Wehrmacht were indeed involved with the Final Solution as well as countless atrocities and murders against numerous ethnic groups throughout the Eastern Front. Upon a close examination of memoirs and letters from the front, it is possible to obtain a glimpse into the psyches of these men as well as attempt to understand their brutality toward Untermenschen (“subhumans”). As historian Omer Bartov claims, “the Wehrmacht was the army of the people, and the willing tool of the regime, more than any of its military predecessors.”¹ This is not to suggest that all of the 20 million men who served in German Armed Forces during the Nazi regime were dedicated, indoctrinated Nazis; however, evidence available leads one to imagine that Nazi propaganda did lead many to lead astray from generally accepted codes of military conduct on and off the battlefield.²

Letters from German soldiers present valuable insight into the everyday lives of these men who fought on the front line. Analysis from the average soldier presents a unique view in which the Second World War is perceived. Therefore, this study attempts to explain the reasoning behind these men’s violent behavior as well as the stressful

conditions at the Eastern Front. This relatively recent exploration into the common German soldier is a vast area of research, blending both military and social perspectives into this historical study. While letters present an excellent account of the war, many soldiers who were emotionally scarred from the death and destruction that surrounded them on a daily basis found it difficult to properly express themselves. Stephen Fritz explains, “the very soldiers with the most direct experience of battle remain least able to reflect on that experience in writing, whether because of the magnitude of the trauma they suffered or because of the inadequacy of language...to express what it was they saw and experienced.”³ This is not to suggest that there are no accounts of murder and the horrendous activities on the front; rather, the difficulty was present in many soldiers’ mindsets to distance themselves from such experiences resulting in few explanations in letters.

While many of the excerpts presented in this analysis are borrowed from historians such as Stephen Fritz and Omer Bartov, others represent material that has not yet been published. An estimated 40-50 billion letters were written to and from the front during the course of the war.⁴ The letters obtained for this study are from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. as well as from the National Archives and Research Administration (NARA) located in Maryland. Many of the letters from the Holocaust Museum were translated by Dr. William Meinecke, while the microfilmed letters found at NARA required translation. While hundreds of letters were obtained at NARA, many simply discussed the current situation of the soldier including the weather and his longing for his wife, girlfriend, or family. Emotional discussions

⁴ Fritz, 9.
from the soldiers were sparse, which is understandable when placing the letter in this familial context. Most likely, these men did not wish to burden their family and friends with gruesome details from the front line. What remains a constant theme throughout the majority of letters was a description of the weather situation and brief accounts of enemy engagements.

Other letters obtained from NARA were written from the families of German soldiers. These sources, which are primarily from the later portion of the war, provide an understanding into the daily lives of German people under constant bombardment from Allied aircraft. By February 1945 approximately 350,000 German civilians were killed during air raids conducted by the Allies. There is little doubt that this news from the home front enraged soldiers who were unable to defend their own families. Fueled with revenge and helplessness to aid their fellow Germans, soldiers entered into a disgruntled frame of mind on the battlefield. In this context, reports of murderous rampages from other soldiers demonstrate the desperation prevalent at the front. In addition, the pressure of bombing campaigns in their hometowns, German soldiers continued the fight against the Allies for fear of what would enter into their world if they lost the war. The propaganda spreading horrendous scenarios of death and destruction of the German people was now realized as the bombs continued to drop.

Another common theme throughout many of the letters from family members focused on the tremendous concern for their son or husband fighting. In a letter to Willy Hübner, his family explained: “The main thing is [that] you remain healthy and return

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soon to your family." It is evident that German families, even though they were concerned with the frequent bombing campaigns toward the end of the war, desired to have their loved ones return unharmed by the brutality of the war. Thus, soldiers and their families did not wish to inflict more stress upon one another. This evoked true human compassion between family members during a truly bloody era of German history. As difficult as it must have been, German families remained diligent evoking little evidence of complaints of war time conditions.

Memoirs are important additional sources but require careful evaluation. This is due to a myriad of reasons, such as the current political situation, fear of exposing experiences that could damage the integrity of fellow comrades, and the amount of elapsed time since a particular event occurred. Even though memoirs are valuable sources into this particular area of history, much scrutiny is required when examining them. Many of these works were composed many years and even decades after the conclusion of the Second World War. There is the distinct possibility that an individual’s memory of events could have distorted his experiences, especially when dealing with the violent and brutal nature of war. Guy Sajer’s memoir is one of the most celebrated and debated works from this era, yet Fritz and Bartov use substantial quotations not as a necessary truth of the battles but rather for the emotional and psychological analysis prevalent throughout Sajer’s text.

The Wehrmacht’s innocence remains a difficult topic when studying the Second World War. This was largely due to a myriad of reports that surfaced in the years immediately after the end of the conflict in Europe. John Mosier states that German

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senior military officials may not have fully recognized the horrendous scale of mass murder of the Nazi regime, “it is impossible to argue that they were unaware of the crimes German soldiers under their command committed against their uniformed opponents.”

Directives from Hitler demanded a brutal war in the East, a war in which these officers and generals ordered unto their men. The facts of recorded orders from Berlin, such as the “Leaflet for the Conduct of German Soldiers in the Occupied Territory of Poland” and “Guidelines for the Conduct of Troops in Russia”, support this analysis.

Historians have been required to reexamine past opinions and facts about the conception of the German soldier as a “heroic man for his homeland”. Difficulty lies in separating truth from propaganda that Goebbels constantly spewed forth from Berlin. Siegfried Knappe, in his memoir Soldat: Reflections of a German Soldier, 1936-1949, explained that the news available to the German populace was laced with fabrications, such as explaining “heroic actions” which translated to heavy casualties. As a family member of Gefreiter Friedrich Schüller wrote on December 14, 1944, “You will have received the sad report...that our dear brother Karl died in a ‘heroic deed’ in the East.”

The use of such symbolic terminology, which was apparently understood by the German masses, signified terrible losses for the German military.

Accounts and studies from the Eastern Front lay waste to the “clean hands” myth of the Wehrmacht and, instead, replace it with a far more unpleasant perspective of events. Atrocities and dishonor appear to line pages of historians’ texts who now investigate the true motives and deeds of the Wehrmacht soldiers fighting in the Russian

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7 Mosier, 7.
lands. The fact that a false myth was propagated after the conclusion of the war indicates that dissolving this fabrication has been the topic of much dispute and discussion between scholars. While researching the Wehrmacht, it has been difficult to fight the preconceptions of a noble German fighting for his family rather than for Nazi ideology. Yet, the latter tends to be exactly what these men truly fought for.

Only in the recent two decades have historians begun to examine German soldiers more closely which has led to much controversy concerning the actions and involvement of the Wehrmacht. In 1995, the Hamburg Institute for Social Research traveled throughout Germany with their controversial exhibit entitled “War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-1944.” Due to the immense photographic evidence of Wehrmacht soldiers involved in murderous activities in Eastern Europe, the Wehrmacht entered a new understanding among public opinion.9 The obvious question arises as to why this new information would disrupt so many Germans. Due to politics after the Second World War, it appeared that many Germans as well as the global community desired to view the men of the Wehrmacht in positive terms rather than fanatical Nazis.

Omer Bartov, in his book Hitler’s Army, provided a new understanding of the ferocity that existed in Russia from 1941-1945. In addition, he argues that the Wehrmacht was indeed indoctrinated by Hitler and the Nazi propaganda machine, rather than adhering to the popular myth that the horrendous actions of Germany were committed solely by the SS or Einsatzgruppen. Through an extensive reliance on letters from the front, Bartov demonstrates the ferocity and commitment of average German soldiers to the Nazi regime. Bartov represents an early attempt by historians to explain the darker side of the Wehrmacht as well as disprove the popular myth that these soldiers were

9 Wette, 296-297.
serving Germany and not the Nazi regime. To a certain degree, Bartov’s central argument laid a sturdy foundation for Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* through the indictment of average Germans’ murderous actions during the Second World War.

Stephen Fritz’s book *Frontsoldaten* elaborates on Bartov’s approach to the Wehrmacht via letters. However, Fritz attempts to analyze the men from the grass roots approach that follows soldiers from training to the front line of combat. His primary objective is to analyze the men from the most personal perspective via letters. Interestingly, Fritz’s research leads him to a similar conclusion as that of Bartov concerning the Wehrmacht. Nazi propaganda, harsh training, and brutal conditions at the front combine to create the Nazified Wehrmacht force which committed horrendous atrocities throughout the course of the war. Fritz explains that he was shocked at the evidence (specifically in the title of his last chapter *A Bitter Truth*), but there is little room for apology in his convincing analysis of these men. His work represents one of the most in-depth studies concerning the men of the Wehrmacht.

Wolfram Wette’s book, entitled *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, follows alongside Bartov in which the Wehrmacht is indicted for its mistreatment of POWs and civilians. Much of the reasoning behind this fascinating book was due to the outrage concerning the controversial exhibit entitled *The German Army and Genocide* in March 1995 by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. Wette provides an excellent history of the Wehrmacht and its transformation during the Second World War as well as how Hitler was able to control the military. Wette approaches the important issue of the myth of the clean hands of the Wehrmacht that is just now becoming a topic of interest among
historians. Therefore, he attempts to argue that the Wehrmacht was not innocent in terms of the crimes committed by the Nazi regime; rather, the military willingly worked alongside SS and Einsatzgruppen forces to destroy Jews, POWs and anyone else who was not Aryan.

John Mosier explains in detail the German war machine and the Wehrmacht in particular throughout his book *Cross of Iron*. One of his central arguments illustrates the brutality of the Wehrmacht directed toward their enemy forces. Citing atrocities as early as 1939 in Poland, Mosier demonstrates that the German military lost its honor when officers allowed their men to murder indiscriminately. Although he focuses much more on the militarization of Germany after the First World War, Mosier does create an interesting dialogue dealing with the myths and realities of the Wehrmacht that emerged after the conclusion of the war. Wette and Mosier set out to disprove the popular myth that the Wehrmacht was an innocent force misled by Nazi leadership. He claims that there guilt was far more widespread than once believed and that due to the inadequate indictments of German soldiers at Nuremberg we will never truly know the extent of the Wehrmacht’s guilt.

The men who are presented in this analysis represent the darker side of the war. By no means does this paper attempt to categorize all Germans who fought during the Second World War. Assumptions upon whole groups of individuals lead directly to misconceptions as well as stereotyping. Therefore, this research does not attempt to place a simplistic label on members of the Wehrmacht; rather, an understanding of the men on the front line via correspondence is the primary theme of this analysis. Much of this newly examined material comes from a heavy influence from Steven Fritz’s
groundbreaking work *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II*, which deals directly with the men of the Wehrmacht. When understanding the violence that erupted all across the vast Eastern Front, it is vital to have knowledge of the men’s training and experiences that would lead them to commit such atrocities when Operation Barbarossa was launched on June 22, 1941. Dr. Fritz’s sources were primarily focused on letters and diaries of the average German soldier during their combat and training experiences. Thus, by examining numerous letters and memoirs of former soldiers presents an interesting insight into the mental and physical struggles of the average *Landser* (“German soldier on the Eastern Front”).

When first addressing this difficult topic, the attempt was made to examine the Wehrmacht soldier in a more positive perspective. This has proven difficult when reading numerous eyewitness accounts of their murderous directives towards Jewish populations and Slavic peoples. Throughout the 1930s, the Nazi regime bombarded German civilians, Hitler Youth, and future soldiers with concepts of racial superiority and the notion of the *Volk*. Nationalism thus strengthened the sense of communal welfare rather than individualism throughout Germany, providing the foundation for murder in the name of the Reich.

The incredibly brutal war in the East fully erupted with the onset of Operation Barbarossa (the codename given to the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941). However, it remains important to realize that the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 served as a training ground for German soldiers as well as members of the Einsatzgruppen. Wehrmacht forces aided the SS in the capture of partisans, Jews, and other undesirables. In turn, these individuals were transferred to SS and Einsatzgruppen
units. Therefore, without the aid of the German Army, millions of Jews and Soviet POWs would not have been brutally treated by their German subjugators.

A decisive perversion toward military discipline along with ideological propaganda allowed the Wehrmacht, SS, and Einsatzgruppen to murder millions of civilians and Jews. In a system that promoted hatred of individuals based solely on their race, extermination became a usual commonplace among soldiers. How can these men be held accountable to their action when those in charge encouraged and even ordered such behavior? It proves vital when confronting this issue to read the letters and personal beliefs of the soldiers who committed these horrendous crimes. However, there are those soldiers who did not speak of such atrocities due to the demoralizing effect this would have had upon their families. Others, though, described these crimes in great detail to loved ones which served a very important purpose of maintaining support for the war out of fear of Bolshevism.

How does one define honor and discipline among the army? The Wehrmacht reflected their constant concern for honor and discipline among the soldiers, yet this military ideal systematically broke down as soon as the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 was initiated. Thus, for the generals of the German Army to concern themselves with military honor is in itself a preconceived fabrication of Nazi ideology. Hitler deemed it necessary to rid Europe of Untermenschen, which provided the foundation for military corruption on the battlefield. How can one group, such as the Einsatzgruppen, commit horrendous atrocities while the other, the Wehrmacht, be expected to fight a noble battle for the good of the Fatherland and continental Europe? This dilemma proved difficult to maintain on the battlefield where murder was encouraged and a daily occurrence.
Numerous accounts of German soldiers refer to encounters with partisans throughout the Eastern Front. Many of these partisan forces, thanks to the well orchestrated Nazi propaganda machine, were believed to be Jewish Bolsheviks. This term partisan proved a popular reference to the civilians who resisted the German invader. In essence, the way in which the Germans envisioned their enemies of civilian rank provided many with the excuse to execute these individuals on the spot without any trial whatsoever.

A controversial aspect of the actions of the Wehrmacht needs to be addressed in which many scholars tend to place blame upon the shoulders of the high-ranking Nazi officials operating from offices within the Reich. It is one thing to direct orders from a desk hundreds of miles from the front; however, it is something else to actually perform the ideological programs in the battlefield. As Mosier elucidates, “the officers of the Wehrmacht allowed one of the oldest and greatest armies in the world to descend to the level of thugs in uniform.”\(^\text{10}\) Therefore, without the men of the Wehrmacht, the supposed answer to the Jewish Question would never have been attempted. Soldiers who lived and died at the front must have been swayed by their own personal convictions or biases to execute the orders from Germany. It also seems natural from our [western] perspective to place blame on those in high-ranking positions, yet this would incorrectly assign the Nazi regime’s philosophy to those who directed such brutal pogroms. In the end, it was the men of the Wehrmacht who ultimately destroyed the honor and discipline of the military. Only through their actions, and their actions alone, could the crimes that befell millions of Jews, Slavs, and other Untermenschen have been implemented.

\(^{10}\) Mosier, 256.
Chapter 1:

Primary Source Material

The letters obtained for this study are from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. as well as from the National Archives and Research Administration (NARA) located in Maryland. Many of the letters from the Holocaust Museum were translated by Dr. William Meinecke, while the microfilmed letters found at NARA required translation. While hundreds of letters were obtained at NARA, many simply discussed the current situation of the soldier including the weather and his longing for his wife, girlfriend, or family. Emotional discussions from the soldiers were sparse, which is understandable when placing the letter in this familial context. Most likely, these men did not wish to burden their family and friends with gruesome details from the front line. What remains a constant theme throughout the majority of letters was a description of the weather situation and brief accounts of enemy engagements.

While NARA does offer a glimpse into the immense research possibilities of Feldpostbriefe [translated as “letters from the front”], the majority of German soldiers’ letters remain in German archives. The main problem with these sources is the limited amount of information available to create a clearer understanding of the circumstances surrounding each letter or group of letters. Thus, the letters are preserved in microfilm in their most basic uncensored condition. While this allows researchers to expose the pureness of this information, little more is known concerning the authors of the
correspondence. According to NARA, the letters were captured during the fall and early winter 1944-1945. They were dated anywhere from September 1944 to January 1945. The addresses provided the destinations which included Germany, occupied Poland, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The postal system caused much concern for the families of soldiers due to the increased bombing campaigns throughout Germany as the war prolonged. It was difficult for many family members to determine if their loved ones ever received their letters. Whether this was due to censorship or just circumstantial remains difficult to effectively determine. In a letter to Gefreiter Manfred Schramm, one of his children wrote: “I have not heard anything from you since October 30. I wrote you each week and still nothing has come back.”11 The postal system was interrupted by the constant bombing of major German cities as well as the flow of information to and from the immense front.

Many soldiers’ letters speak of a longing to see their loved ones. One soldier, Obergefreiter Alfred Radner, wrote to his wife on November 27, 1944 that “…it seems so long until I will get to see you on my brief vacation…. [T]he distance gnaws at me the longer I am away from you my dear.”12 As the war progressed, fewer military leaves were granted unto the men at the front which produced these immense feelings of yearning of reunions with loved ones. Another soldier explained to his wife in a letter from November 3, 1944, “Darling, I have a very large longing for you and I always think of you…. I love you so.”13 These emotions emitted from German soldiers are typical of

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13 Illegible name. November 3, 1944. Captured German Soldiers’ Mail (Feldpostbriefe) in Records of the
men away at war and far from their loved ones. In essence this evidence provides the reader with a better understanding of these men who fought for Nazi Germany. The average soldier had families who loved them, missed them, and longed to be reunited with them after the war concluded.

Censorship of letters presents a difficult issue when examining letters from the front. As the war progressed, the military and government censor was too busy and overwhelmed with the approaching enemy to read every letter before they were entered into the postal service. Since the majority of the letters obtained from NARA are from late 1944, soldiers and family members were able to express discontent or dread concerning the deterioration of the war effort. Thus, many letters speak frankly about the conditions at home and on the front, but there is little criticism directed toward the Nazi regime. However, the hopelessness of the war and the inevitability of defeat were evident in this correspondence during the latter portion of the war. In late November 1944, Joseph Surmely explained somberly: “Nobody knows what the next morning will bring. If we will still be able to stop the enemy...that is the question.... Do we have to flee and where then?”

As the Allies encircled the remaining German forces, many soldiers wondered what the next course of action would be.

The ideological war that ensued was well ingrained upon the minds of most Wehrmacht soldiers. Joseph Surmely wrote on November 20, 1944 “I really have no time for thinking. This is the routine from 7 to 7 o’clock [each day]. Thus one is fully used for

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the final victory." Even at this late stage of the war, Surmely still believed in victory over Germany's enemies. One soldier, Alfred Trost, wrote in December 1944: "For the sixth time we are committed to the war. One of the hardest years of struggle lies behind us once again. At all fronts the fight has inconceivably increased." Even as defeat loomed on the horizon, the Nazi regime still maintained the propagandistic phrases in hopes of raising morale. The Office of Strategic Services explained how "the propaganda machine is...making every effort to encourage optimism among the masses, even going so far as announcing victories of the German army before they have...occurred." These critical claims were vital when the war began its downfall after 1942.

Some soldiers bluntly stated their views of Jews and their Russian enemies which were allowed even with possible correspondence censorship. The Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. provided several letters from German soldiers who viewed their enemies from the Nazi perspective. However, it is worth noting that these letters were from the early portions of the war. It would be interesting to note any differences in opinion or preconceived notions from these same men or others throughout the course of the war. Medical corporal Paul Lenz agreed by explaining rather bluntly, "Only a Jew can be a Bolshevik...for this blood-sucker there can be nothing nicer than to be a Bolshevik.... Wherever one spits one finds a Jew." Karl Fuchs described the Russian enemy in August 1941: "There is no troop morale and they are at best cannon

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18 Lenz, Paul, soldier's letter, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
fodder...they are nothing but a bunch of assholes! Everyone, even the last doubter, knows today that the battle against these subhumans, who've been whipped into a frenzy by the Jews, was not only necessary but came in the nick of time... Our Führer has saved Europe from certain chaos." Another soldier, writing on July 28, 1941, explained “recently things have been totally crazy.... All the prisoners I encounter are killed, there's no two ways about it. This has been our motto in the infantry for some time now.” Another soldier, Karl Fuchs, sounding more like a propaganda pamphlet, expressed his hatred for the Russian POWs: “Hardly ever do you see the face of a person who seems rational and intelligent. They all look emaciated and the wild, half-crazy look in their eyes makes them look like imbeciles. [How] could these scoundrels, led by Jews and criminals, want to imprint their stamp on Europe?” Fuchs’ appeared astounded that these so-called criminals could actually believe they could control the European continent. Private Fred Fallnbigl wrote in July 1941, “Now I know what war really means. But I also know that we had been forced into the war against the Soviet Union. For God have mercy on us, had we waited, or had these beasts come to us. For them even the most horrible death is still too good. I am glad that I can be here to put an end to this genocidal system.”

When examining the Wehrmacht’s correspondence, one comes to realize that the men dealt with suffering, horrible front line conditions, fatigue, and an incredible amount of stress. One soldier wrote from the front late in the war that “one must resign oneself.

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19 Meinecke and Skidmore, *Examining the role of the German military*, letters from German soldiers on the Eastern Front.
20 Meinecke and Skidmore, *Examining the role of the German military*, letters from German soldiers on the Eastern Front.
21 Fuchs, Karl, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
22 Fallnbigl, Fred, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Each man is used for the defense of German soil. But...first the enemy must conquer the mountains.” 23 In addition to the conditions at the front, news from home was usually somber particularly in the latter portion of the war. As a family member of Gefreiter Friedrich Schüller wrote on December 14, 1944, “You will have received the sad report...that our dear brother Karl died in a ‘heroic deed’ in the East.” 24 This “heroic deed” was the Nazi propaganda equivalence of heavy losses, such as at Stalingrad during the winter of 1942-1943. Families familiarized themselves with these statements from the Nazi-controlled press which prepared them for news of horrendous losses of German soldiers.

Lack of materiel resulted with the Wehrmacht entering into stalemate trench warfare. It is evident through letters from family members that they knew of the scarcity of accommodations available for the average soldier. In a letter to Karl Wohlfarth, his family inquired: “The place you are now is, as you wrote, a Kaff [“dump” or “hole”]. Is that a small village at the front? What do you have for accommodations or privacy? And how is the food supply?” 25 It is important to understand that this particular individual wrote to Wohlfarth in the latter portion of the war in which basic necessities were in short supply. One soldier explained the living conditions when he stated “since we have no beds, we remained exempted from quartering. As soldiers, we had to accept our


Although this particular soldier willingly dealt with his current situation as a trained soldier, there is a tinge of depression evident in his current state of affairs on the front.

Weather appears many times in letters as a main topic for many soldiers situated on the Eastern Front. Since it is well-known that the brutal Russian winter effectively halted the German advance in late 1941, it is no surprise that weather is discussed at great lengths in numerous letters from average soldiers. One soldier wrote that “the weather is somewhat better. [H]ere it rains this afternoon, but it is okay as long as I can hopefully sleep at night.” As many historians have concluded, weather during the Second World War played an integral part of German operations in Russia. The horrendous cold of winter or torrential downpours could halt troop movements, advances, or retreats.

The psychology of warfare and its effects on soldiers drove many men to become products of their environment. Actions that would have normally appalled these men were not completed without hesitation. One soldier wrote during the initial stages of the invasion into the Soviet Union in 1941: “It’s like growing a shell around what’s almost impenetrable. But what happens inside this shell? You become part of a mass, a component of a relentless whole which sucks you up and squeezes you into a mold. You become gross and insensible. You cease to be yourself.” These men lived a harsh and demanding life on the front lines as death surrounded them on a daily basis. One unnamed soldier on November 17, 1944 wrote how the war “happens in our proximity.

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28 Letter from unnamed soldier, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Nevertheless, we have good hope that we can hold the positions until our counterstrike comes. Then you will see what happens with our opponents. We are naturally prepared for everything here.”29 As one soldier explained regarding the constant explosions and death surrounding him on a daily basis: “You see, one simply changes due to the given state of affairs and then moves on!”30 Soldiers on the Russian Front were forced to stay together due to the situation created early in the campaign as well as the fact that they were isolated in the vastness of Russian territory. An unnamed soldier wrote simply that “cannon thunder is our daily companion.”31

While violence towards civilians, partisan forces, and prisoners of war is the main emphasis of this analysis, letters of German soldiers provide a much-needed evaluation of the average man during a time of war. Letters, rather than memoirs, allow researchers to gain valuable evidence into the mindset of men who committed horrendous atrocities. Due to the sheer volume of letters scripted during the Second World War, my initial primary research is relatively limited when considering the information that has yet to be discovered. However, there are clues in the letters from NARA and the Holocaust Museum which allow for analysis on this difficult and expansive topic.

The most important pieces of evidence are those in which German soldiers openly discuss atrocities by their fellow comrades. Letters and diary entries that deal with this topic provide vital insight into the men of the Wehrmacht. In 1943, Greek civilians were

massacred by German forces. A soldier from this event who served in the elite 1st Mountain Division was questioned in 1971 concerning this event: “[M]ost of the soldiers did not agree with this action...Many said openly that it was nothing but a disgrace [Schweinerei] to shoot unarmed civilians. Others, rather fewer, took the view that they were all a potential enemy so long as they supported the partisans against us soldiers. The argument was so heated that I might almost speak of a mutiny.”

While this piece of evidence is important in the realm of this particular topic, the interview should be scrutinized just as much as memoirs in terms of reality and circumstances after the war. This is not to suggest that this evidence is not valid, though; rather, because this individual disclosed this information more than twenty years after the conclusion of the war, his analysis requires more scrutiny. This is why letters and diaries provide such an important source when gathering data concerning the current mindset of people involved in specific circumstances.

An unnamed soldier fighting on the Eastern Front in July 1941 explained: “This time an end will certainly be put to this God-hating power...evidence of Jewish, Bolshevik atrocities, the likes of which I have hardly believed possible.... You can well imagine that this cries for revenge, which we certainly also take.” Albert Rodenbusch of the 635th Training Regiment involved in an anti-partisan campaign in Belorussia explained an interesting circumstance:

The people from the village provided us with heated rooms and gave us food, so we were very surprised when the company commander later ordered us to burn down the village and arrest the village people...Our company commander ordered us to occupy the village and to kill on sight anyone offering resistance or attempting to flee....We shot about 70 people. Among them also women, old people and children. And then we

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32 Unnamed soldier’s interrogation, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
33 Unnamed soldier’s letter, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
burnt down the village. From the first village we took 14 head of cattle and from the second village 10 head of cattle.\textsuperscript{34}

He continues with more details of another anti-partisan campaign:

On the evening of 29 December 1942 we started our operation in a village. There were no partisans in this village. The people from the village provided us with heated rooms and gave us food, so we were very surprised when the company commander later ordered us to burn down the village and arrest the village people. So 50 inhabitants were taken prisoner.... We were then moved on to another village. It was about 10 or 11 kilometers away. On our arrival we came under fire from rifles. Our company commander ordered us to occupy the village and to kill on sight anyone offering resistance or attempting to flee.... We shot about 70 people. Among them also women, old people and children. And then we burnt down the village. From the first village we took 14 head of cattle and from the second village 10 head of cattle. We then proceeded to the third village. We didn’t come across any partisans there. But we still burnt down the village and shot around 50 people. Even women and children. And then we moved on to the fourth village and did exactly the same as we had done in the other villages. There we shot about 100 people, burnt down the village and made 80 arrests. We took them with us. After we had destroyed all these villages we moved on towards Osipovichi. On our way there we combed the woods in search of partisans.\textsuperscript{35}

Rodenbusch explained in detail the murderous campaign without much emotion concerning those criminals who were executed. His account reads similar to an outline of events with no reflection of the deeds in which he was involved.

After the Second World War, veterans of the Wehrmacht were interviewed concerning their tour of duty. One such veteran stated in an interview:

I was...more inclined to say, alright, it’s not to your taste what they are expecting of you,...but if from the point of view of the state and our philosophy this is required, well for God’s sake, you’ll have to do your duty, you must summon up the necessary understanding to say that this just has to be done. Fulfilling your duty is very close to the spirit of sacrifice...There were things where you simply accepted that you have to

\textsuperscript{34} Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military, letters from German soldiers on the Eastern Front.

\textsuperscript{35} Rodenbusch, Albert, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
participate, because the whole thing, the collective purpose, just requires you to do it.\textsuperscript{36}

Another veteran who was interviewed after the war explained, "Well for me, being a soldierly person means encountering another man with a clean and decent attitude, it means representing viewpoints which conform with universal moral laws. But soldierliness also means showing...courage..., not in the sense that you are brave if you kill your enemy before he kills you, but as a strong inner conviction towards problems you encounter in private and personal life."\textsuperscript{37}

Many of the letters from the soldiers convey extreme thanks to their families and friends for their letters. Any news from home must have greeted these individuals with happiness which could temporarily displace their horrors of battle. Sometimes the thought of knowing ones loved ones were safe and healthy could mean the most to men fighting on the front lines. As one soldier explained in the opening of his letter from November 11, 1944, "Your letter from the 11\textsuperscript{th} was received with much thanks."\textsuperscript{38} One can imagine how difficult it would have been for these men to write to their families if they were constantly engaged in combat with enemy forces. Yet, as the war progressed and bombings of German cities were conducted on a daily basis, letters from home contained frightening realities for the average soldier. More research is required, but this information from the German home front to the soldiers was certainly capable of damaging morale during the latter portions of the war.

\textsuperscript{36} Meinecke and Skidmore, \textit{Examining the role of the German military}, letters from German soldiers on the Eastern Front.

\textsuperscript{37} Unknown soldier interview, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

\textsuperscript{38} Illegible name. November 20, 1944. \textit{Captured German Soldiers' Mail (Feldpostbriefe) in Records of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), 1940-1945}. College Park, MD: NARA. Microfilm (M2112: Roll 1, Frame 628-629).
A large majority of letters obtained from NARA were written from the families of German soldiers. These sources, which are primarily from the later portion of the war, provide an understanding into the daily lives of German people under constant bombardment from Allied aircraft. By February 1945 approximately 350,000 German civilians were killed during air raids conducted by the Allies.\textsuperscript{39} There is little doubt that this news from the home front enraged soldiers who were unable to defend their own families. The families of soldiers presented members of the Wehrmacht with a motive for revenge. The bombing conducted by the Allies weighed heavily upon the average German soldier who was helpless to aid his family and friends. In a letter to Klaus Willems, the author states: “All life is in disorder. We had to move to the ditches at the barrack. Before we were there, we could have been killed by the bombs.... Fortunately no bombs fell.”\textsuperscript{40} In another example, Karl Wohlfarth’s family wrote to him of the terrible news concerning the aftermath of an air raid: “We just saw in the newspaper the attack yesterday on Braunschweig was a very strong "Terrorangriff" ["terror attack", which described bombings] with apparently very heavy damage and many victims; [there] are many dead and thousands of people are homeless.”\textsuperscript{41}

Upon hearing news of the conditions at home, soldiers were surely disheartened and strengthened to fight harder against enemy forces. Alfred Trost wrote “the homeland became the front than in the past war...still victims were added at lives and


\textsuperscript{40} Letter to Klaus Willems. July 31, 1943. Captured German Soldiers’ Mail (Feldpostbriefe) in Records of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), 1940-1945. College Park, MD: NARA. Microfilm (M2112: Roll 5, Frame 309-312).

In addition, the pressure of bombing campaigns in their hometowns, German soldiers continued the fight against the Allies for fear of what would enter into their world if they lost the war. In a letter from the family of Oberjäger Karl Wohlfarth, they speak of a terrifying experience: “Last night at 8:00 enemy aircraft quickly approached and the announcement came on saying that south of Hanover bombs already cracked. Doors and windows were shut and we had to expect the worst. Thank God that we and our environment remained spared.” News such as this caused great concern for soldiers far from home engaged with enemy forces. Since air superiority was lost over Germany, the families of these men were vulnerable to daily bombardments by Allied bombers.

Another common theme throughout many of the letters from family members focused on the tremendous concern for their son or husband fighting. In a letter to Willy Hübner, his family explained: “The main thing is [that] you remain healthy and return soon to your family.” It is evident that German families, even though they were concerned with the frequent bombing campaigns toward the end of the war, desired to have their loved ones return unharmed by the brutality of the war. In a letter to Karl Wohlfarth, his family inquires about his condition: “[H]ow are you? Hopefully well. Did your wound heal completely and do you have no more complaints? You have written

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nothing about your personal condition.”  

Thus, soldiers and their families did not wish to inflict more stress upon one another. This evoked true human compassion between family members during a truly bloody era of German history. A letter from a woman in Berlin to her husband on the Eastern Front, explained: “We think so often of you now when we read about the heavy defensive fights in the newspapers. We are always in constant concern for you!” As difficult as it must have been, German families remained diligent to expose little evidence of complaints of war time conditions. One unnamed soldier wrote home to his wife about his wound and how it was healing. He explains that “my hand is now green and blue…but today it does not cause me too much pain.”

Surrender also proved difficult for German civilians who had been indoctrinated by the Nazi regime about the hardships that would follow if Russia overtook Germany. In a report from G. Edward Buxton at the OSS, he explained via a source in Bern the perspective of the average German citizen toward unconditional surrender:

Here is what is reported to me as the views of a German woman who is a servant in a private family. This person imagines...that the chaos she saw in Germany after the last was will be repeated, plus the inflation in which her family lost everything. In addition, she sees the Jews returning to take over her brother’s business; she sees Russians everywhere, and joins with them the bad elements in her own village, who, after the war, were first Communists, then Nazis, and ultimately Gestapo.... It is not so much her pride as a German which makes her oppose unconditional surrender, as it is the practical certainty which she feels that under such circumstances it would really be better to be dead. She is personally quite sick of Goebbels’ propaganda, but, like a vast number of women in Germany, she feels that

her country's only hope is to cling like death to Hitler and to pray that he may find a way to save the Fatherland.48

Families from home wrote to soldiers explaining their fear of the invading Allies. In a letter to Willy Hübner, the author explained "even if the Russian and Anglo-Americans...should penetrate further, however, all is over.... But the fact that the Russians will come into our beautiful Pommerland, I do not believe it [could happen],...[if so] everything is lost."49 All optimism of a victory has disappeared, leaving the struggle to preserve Germany from the invading enemy armies from all directions.

The letters from NARA represent a unique insight into the research that is required to fully extrapolate a more comprehensive assessment of the Wehrmacht’s role in atrocities. This preliminary research examines an extremely minute sample of letters considering the billions which were written during the course of the war. The sheer volume of German soldiers’ letters from the front during the Second World War helps to demonstrate the immensity of this fascinating research.

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Chapter 2:

**The Wehrmacht**

By that time I belonged to the Victorious Allies, who were all heroes, like every French soldier I met after the war. Only victors have stories to tell. We, the vanquished, were all cowards and weaklings by then, whose memories, fears, and enthusiasms should not be remembered. —Guy Sajer

A good man ought to love his friends and county, and should share their hatreds and their loyalties. But once a man takes up the role of historian he must discard all considerations of this kind. He will often have to speak well of his enemies and even award them the highest praise should their actions demand this, and on the other hand criticize and find fault with his friends, however close they may be, if their errors of conduct show that this is his duty. For just as a living creature, if deprived of its eyesight, is rendered completely helpless, so if history is deprived of the truth, we are left with nothing but an idle, unprofitable tale... We must therefore detach ourselves from the actors in the story, and apply to them only such statements and judgments as their conduct deserves. —Polybius

Although there remains much debate concerning the Wehrmacht’s actions during the Second World War, the historical context of this fighting force must first be explained in order to contextualize the conditions from which millions of German troops derived. From our modern understanding, German soldiers comprised a formidable foe for the Russian Red Army as well as the Western Allies comprising of British, American, and French militaries. The Wehrmacht’s training allowed for strength in both large battalion-sized forces as well as in smaller platoon regiments. From memoirs of soldiers along with

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51 Mosier, 244.
numerous letters from these men, it is evident that the Germans valued victorious outcomes of battle, regardless of the brutality inflicted on the enemy. It may appear severe when learning of the punishments and disciplinary actions of the Wehrmacht, yet these measures allowed the men to become battle hardened veterans of the Eastern Front. Another aspect when viewing the German Army relies upon our understanding that they had a clear objective and fought bravely for the aims of the Nazi regime. These objectives weighed heavily upon the hearts and minds of the soldiers fighting to preserve Germany and rid the European continent of Bolshevism.

In order to completely understand the Third Reich’s war against Bolshevism, it is vital to understand the creation of the Wehrmacht with regards to Hitler and the Nazi regime. Due to the initial chaos after the defeat of Germany after the First World War, Communists and Socialists were competing for power throughout Germany. According to John Mosier, “by January 1919, Germany was in the middle of a civil war, while at the same time it was threatened by external forces. The brutal fighting of those years would set the course of the Wehrmacht, giving it a taste of success and, perhaps more important, a thirst for blood.”

The primary actors in this tumultuous era of German history were the Freikorps. The men of these brutal groups of street fighters worked to bring justice to the streets of Berlin and throughout Germany, working alongside the recently formed National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). The primary goal of the Freikorps was to rid Germany from the Communists and Socialist Democratic Party (SDP) and restore some sort of order to the streets of Germany. It is important to note that these men

52 Mosier, 28.
were oftentimes veterans from the defeated German Army of 1918 who were uncertain about the condition of their country concerning the Versailles Treaty of 1919.

The Treaty of Versailles inflicted a damaging toll on Germany and its people. Not only was Germany’s active military devastated by the casualties of the First World War, but the number of soldiers allowed national defense was greatly reduced. This lack of military protection left the Germans in a state of vulnerability, especially from communists and socialists. In addition to the reduction of the militia, many of the territories occupied by Germany, including those freshly dominated during the war were taken away and put under control by other nations. This severely affected the economy and the confidence of the German people. Another detail of the economy-destroying penance that Germany would have to undergo was paying reparations to other countries that were devastated during the war. In addition to these overwhelming changes, many of the nation’s leaders were put on trial by the Allies.

German officials felt obliged to cooperate with the Allies and their policies due to the post-war economic situation. The main criminal from the Allies’ perspective, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was believed to be guilty of “having initiated a war of aggression.” The Kaiser fled to Holland instead of remaining with his country in its desperate time of need. The Versailles peace treaty included “a list of 854 persons they [Allies] wanted the Germans to surrender.” Germans felt they had no choice except to agree, for an invasion after non-compliance would have potentially robbed them of all their freedom. The Belgians and the French concluded that the trials were not enough to resolve peace of mind to their countries. These two countries were the only representatives of the

54 Kochavi, 2.
League of Nations that “subsequently began trying hundreds of accused Germans in absentia, a process that was halted only after the signing of the Locarno treaty of 1925.” These war trails began in 1921 and further fueled hatred toward Germany by Belgium and France. A country that was once a major world power was now subjected to trials by other countries without sufficient ways to protect their comrades.

At the conclusion of the First World War, Germany became susceptible to foreign political influences, especially those of the communist persuasion. The Freikorps were designed to combat the communist threat in post war Germany. Mosier explains that “it is difficult to find a senior officer of the German army in the Second World War who was not involved at some level with the Freikorps. And in these bloody struggles, the future officers tasted real victory.” Ultimately, the daily brutality prevalent on the Eastern Front derived significant influences from street fighting during the turbulent times after the First World War. Therefore, the men who would comprise the Wehrmacht during the 1930s gained military credentials in defending Germany from outsiders and fighting for a cause considered to decide the future of their nation.

After Adolf Hitler obtained power in 1933, Germany initiated a massive military rearmament program aimed at an eventual conflict with European neighbors. The reality of the military buildup also required a tremendous amount of manpower. We often do not realize the true magnitude of individuals involved in one way or another with the German military throughout the Second World War. “During the Second World War,” as Wolfram Wette makes clear, “approximately 20 million German men—that is, roughly 50 percent of all male citizens—performed military service. Precise figures are hard to

55 Ibid., 3.
56 Mosier, 30.
come by, but if one assumes that between 1 and 2 million of them were volunteers, that leaves between 18 and 19 million who were drafted in other words, forced to serve. This means that the armed forces of the Third Reich were overwhelmingly an army of conscripts, with a relatively small percentage of career soldiers and volunteers." The importance of a volunteer force versus a conscripted force requires a different perspective toward the eventual atrocities committed on the Eastern Front. Why would numerous conscripts act in such a brutal nature? As John Mosier explains:

> In the eighteenth century, it was well understood that armies were repositories not only of military prowess and valor but also of national virtue...War is a dirty business, a series of slaughters in which there is much that is bad as well as horrific. But that does not make the men who wage it wicked. On the contrary; as Frederick the Great told his assembled officers in 1778: ‘Before all things, I prescribe as you most sacred duty that in every situation you exercise humanity on our unarmed enemies. No matter how brilliant or amiable they appear, the officers of the Wehrmacht allowed one of the oldest and greatest armies in the world to descend to the level of thugs in uniform. As von der Marwitz’s epitaph makes clear, when honor is gone, nothing remains. At some point in September 1939, that legacy was massacred and thrown into the ditch along with three hundred Polish soldiers. The army lost more than the war; it lost its honor.

Virtue and honor could not coincide with a campaign based primarily on the utter annihilation of an enemy force and its people.

The German military has been considered among scholars as one of the best fighting forces in the twentieth century. Through rigorous training, the soldiers of the Wehrmacht were quick to adapt to the brutal surroundings from 1941 to 1945. As Guy Sajer recalled:

> Basic training in the infantry, where they send me next, is less amusing than the life of an aviator. The combat course is the most severe physical challenge I have ever experienced. I am exhausted, and several times fell

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57 Wette, 158.
58 Mosier, 256.
asleep over my food. But I feel marvelous, filled with a sense of joy which I can’t understand after so much fear and apprehension. Exhausted, soaked to the skin, we fling ourselves onto our mattresses every evening, overwhelmed by a crushing sleep, without even the energy to write to our families.\textsuperscript{59}

The intensity of training prepared the soldiers for the difficulties of the Eastern Front. Many of the soldiers despised their training instructors, but when they arrived in Russia they understood the reasoning for their harshness of the incessant military exercises.

Initial victories in France and Poland added to the confidence of the army’s potential. As Gottlob Bidermann explains in his memoir, “ecstatic headlines announced that more than 2,582 Soviet aircraft and 1,297 Soviet tanks had been destroyed. Soviet-occupied Poland was being freed from the Bolshevik yoke.”\textsuperscript{60} The illusion of invincibility was later shattered in Russia, but before June 22, 1941, this perspective reigned supreme. Even in the face of certain defeat, German soldiers were recognized for their relentless fighting spirit. As Guy Sajer recalls on the German Army’s retreat from Russia: “Through our panic and despair, an order became a duty. Our adversaries were astonished by the courage of ordinary German soldiers...We performed deeds of astonishing heroism, which demonstrated once again the extraordinary resourcefulness of our soldiers...An army fighting for its life cannot speak of victory.”\textsuperscript{61} Even though they knew defeat was inevitable in the last stages of the war, the Wehrmacht maintained a distinguished fighting spirit that remained in the historical memory. Families from home wrote to soldiers concerning their fear from the invading Allies. In a letter to Willy Hübner, the author explained “even if the Russian and Anglo-Americans...should

\textsuperscript{59} Sajer, 1, 6.

\textsuperscript{60} Bidermann, Gottlob Herbert, In Deadly Combat: A German Soldier’s Memoir of the Eastern Front, translated and edited by Derek S. Zumbro (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 12.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 221.
penetrate further, however, all is over.... But the fact that the Russians will come into our beautiful Pommerland, I do not believe it [could happen]....everything is lost."\textsuperscript{62} From the home front, many families express this feeling of loss concerning the war effort, which was thus transmitted to the soldier fighting hundreds of miles away.

The number of Germans who were involved in the German war machine is astounding. One out of every four German males was in uniform. In addition, many of these men had direct combat experienced that had resulted in victory.\textsuperscript{63} On the eve of Operation Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht had a total strength of 5 million men, and increase from the 3.75 million soldiers of 1939.\textsuperscript{64} It was understood by military officials that this vast number of soldiers was necessary when embarking upon the endless Russian front. Victory needed to occur quickly or the army would become entrenched on a front that would prove too large to occupy even with five million men. Unfortunately for the Wehrmacht, Operation Barbarossa progressed with the dreaded stalemate that many veterans of the First World War recalled all too clearly. As Guy Sajer expressed, "In reality everyone feels considerable emotion. Despite our perfect innocence, the idea of war terrifies us."\textsuperscript{65} The reality of the murderous nature of war became all too clear when the Wehrmacht entered the Eastern Front.

Mechanization of the military was a relatively minute factor when examining the German army. The majority of the military relied on horses and carts as the primary mode of transportation. While tanks were involved in the Blitzkrieg tactics, troops were

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\textsuperscript{64} Keegan, 173.
\textsuperscript{65} Sajer, 11.
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forced to rely upon long marches throughout Russia to reach their destination. As the war trudged on, the Wehrmacht was forced to remain dug in at the front due to the lack of supplies transported to the soldiers. Production levels in Germany simply could not compete with the Allied forces as the war progressed. This created the infamous stalemate that would eventually lead to the defeat of the Wehrmacht in the east. One German soldier, noting in September 1941, explains his feelings concerning the conditions experienced in Russia: “Today three months ago the campaign against Russia began. Everybody supposed at the time that the Bolsheviks would be ripe for capitulation within no more than eight to ten weeks...That assumption, however, was based on a widespread ignorance of the Russian war materiel...We were spoilt by the preceding Blitzkrieg.” This particular soldier realized rather quickly that the fight in the east would continue much longer than previously believed by the high command.

Operation Barbarossa proved costly in terms of casualties, more so than had been expected by Nazi leaders. The Ostheer entered Russia in 1941 with 3,050,000 men organized in 136 divisions. This large force experienced tremendous casualties on such a large scale that it is difficult to comprehend. Within the first year of Operation Barbarossa, approximately 1,300,000 men became casualties in Russia. This devastating statistic represented close to forty percent of the Ostheer’s overall manpower of 3.2 million troops. In a letter to Karl Wohlfarth, his family inquires about his condition: “[H]ow are you? Hopefully well. Did your wound heal completely and do you have no more complaints? You have written nothing about your personal condition.” Soldiers

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66 Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 21.
experiencing the horrors of war would most likely not have desired to cause added strain to their families back home. In terms of this analysis, it is no wonder that families were left to wonder about the condition of their loved ones fighting for Germany.

The question that plagued the military command was how to replenish the losses experienced in the beginning of the campaign. By December 1943 the Wehrmacht in the east contained approximately 2 million soldiers. Logistically determining a solution to replenish the evaporated soldiers was difficult for Wehrmacht leaders. As Guy Sajer angrily wrote:

Generals have since written accounts of these events, locating particular catastrophes, and summarizing in a sentence, or a few lines, the losses from sickness or freezing. But they never, to my knowledge, give sufficient expression to the wretchedness of soldiers abandoned to a fate one would wish to spare even the most miserable cur. They never evoke the hours upon hours of agony, or the obvious resentment of individuals swamped by the herd, in which each man is lost in his own misery, and oblivious of the sufferings of others. They never mention the common soldier, sometimes covered with glory, sometimes beaten and defeated, burdened by the angry remonstrances of the noncoms and by the hatred of another herd of human beings whom it is officially permissible to hate, confounded by murder and degradation, and later by disillusion, when he realizes that victory will not return him his liberty. In the end, there was only the physical crime of war, and the hypocritical and intellectual crime of peace.

Sajer’s attitude toward Wehrmacht commanders demonstrates a consensus of resentment for those who did not understand the common man in the fighting force. The grassroots understanding was more than likely unfathomable for those who constructed attacks sending men to their deaths.

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68 Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 36, 44.
70 Sajer, 215-216.
The new recruits were quickly transferred to the front with condensed training with the objective of filling the recently emptied gaps of the front. Friedrich Reinhold Haag, a company commander, writes on July 12, 1942 from Sevastopol describing the new recruits: “I have experienced again how difficult it is to lead a company into a battle and to sacrifice men while hardly knowing any of them. Then they fall right next to you and one of them cries perhaps: ‘Herr Leutnant, be sure to write home’—and you don’t even know what his name is.”72 The attachment many soldiers felt to their comrades was formed in the beginning of the fighting. When new soldiers entered their positions, it

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72 Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 56.
became difficult to establish new relationships with men who might die the very next day.

Numerous memoirs by former Wehrmacht soldiers describe the harsh stance towards these replacements. The true relationships between soldiers existed with those who fought and were wounded from the outset of battle. Many battle-hardened soldiers displayed indifference to those who had not experienced battle. Guy Sajer explains the differing opinions present on the front line:

If for some the fall of Stalingrad was a staggering blow, for others it provoked a spirit of revenge which rekindled faltering spirits. In our group, given the wide range of ages, opinion was divided. The older men were, generally speaking, defeatist, while the younger ones were determined to liberate their comrades.\textsuperscript{73}

Germans who had witnessed the defeat and repercussions of the First World War were hesitant to feel much enthusiasm while the younger, inexperienced men raised in the golden days of the Third Reich were more willing to risk their lives to destroy Russia. To the Wehrmacht soldier, replacements were simply another soul who would surely fall to an enemy’s bullet.

The Second World War formed incredibly strong bonds between German soldiers. As the war progressed, many soldiers felt unable to relate to those who had not fought on the front line. A soldier on the front line becomes a product of the harsh conditions. One soldier wrote during the initial stages of the invasion into the Soviet Union in 1941: “It’s like growing a shell around what’s almost impenetrable. But what happens inside this shell? You become part of a mass, a component of a relentless whole which sucks you up and squeezes you into a mold. You become gross and insensible.

\textsuperscript{73} Sajer, 55-56.
You cease to be yourself.” As in most circumstances, events are best understood by those who had first-hand accounts. Correspondence of the Wehrmacht proved vital for the maintenance of morale for battle hardened soldiers. These men wrote home to family, girlfriends, wives, children, and friends. Approximately forty to fifty billion letters were authored during the war, with as many as 500 million in some months. With this many letters circulating through the wartime postal service, it proved impossible for the Nazi regime to censor all of them. As Stephen Fritz notes, “the longer the war continued, the less seriously many Landsers regarded the censor. As two of the leading authorities on German Feldpostbriefe (letters from the field) concluded after studying thousands of such missives, ‘the mass of soldiers expressed their opinions and views in a surprisingly open and uninhibited fashion.’ This conclusion may prove shocking due to the reputation of the Nazis, yet many soldiers did indeed express themselves quite honestly via letters.

For many members of the Wehrmacht, the most important aspect of the conflict was those beside them. Guy Sajer expresses this emotion in an excerpt from his memoir:

We felt like lost souls who had forgotten that men are made for something else,...that love can sometimes occur, that the earth can be productive and used for something other than burying the dead.... We were madmen, gesturing and moving without thought or hope.... Lindberg...had collapsed into a kind of stupor.... The Sudeten...had begun to tremble...and to vomit uncontrollably. Madness had invaded our group, and was gaining ground rapidly.... I saw...Hals leap to his machine gun and fire at the sky, which continued to pour down its rain of flame and metal. I also saw the [sergeant]...beat the ground with his clenched fist.... [I] shout[ed] curses and obscenities at the sky. I had reached the edge of the abyss.... When danger...continues indefinitely, it becomes unbearable.... After hours and then days of danger...one collapses into unbearable madness, and a crisis of nerves is only the beginning. Finally, one vomits and collapses, entirely brutalized and inert, as if death had already won.76

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74 Letter from unnamed soldier, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
75 Fritz, 9.
76 Sajer, 194-5, 261.
Sajer’s vivid description of the physical and emotional impact of war presents an important insight into the thoughts of many soldiers. Another persona becomes exposed when faced with an extreme environment on a daily basis.

Soldiers considered their comrades in arms the primary reason for enduring the enduring battles, bombardments, and hardships. The German army understood the importance of organization among the troops in terms of comradery. This systematic placement allowed for men to remain within their original training unit. In addition, once wounded, that individual would return to his unit rather than transferred into a brand new group of soldiers. Morale proved top priority, even if it required more bureaucratic paperwork. The bonds produced in this way ensured a stronger force at the front, which was more likely to remain dedicated to the war. As one soldier wrote, “Loyalty, mutual obligation, a willingness to sacrifice, pride, a sense of duty, even love – these constituted comradeship for the Landser.” Hans Werner Woltersdorf explained, “My unit was my home, my family, which I had to protect.” On a more philosophical level, Eberhard Wendebourg appreciated war because men came “to judge men not by their rank and position, name and honors, but only by their character and performance.... War teaches the true worth of men.”

Under stressful circumstances, people act in ways unnatural to their normal environment, such as Wendebourg suggests. Siegfried Knappe elucidates:

In a combat situation, the soldier is under inhuman stress to begin with, and when he sees a friend he has been sharing his life with suddenly drop because he was shot in the back, it is too much. Men who share combat become brothers, and this brotherhood is so important to them that they would give their lives for one another. It is not just friendship, and it is stronger than flag and country.

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77 Fritz, 148, 157, 164.
Unbelievable courage and heroism becomes natural when those closest to an individual are in danger. The immense bond that evolves during war causes individuals to act in ways they never before imagined.

The life lessons learned under wartime conditions caused soldiers to carry their experiences throughout life. Karl Fuchs believed that his understanding would allow for continued relationships after the war:

[A] great friendship binds us German soldiers together out here. It is this comradesry [sic] and the support that we’re able to give each other that is, in my opinion, the secret behind our incredible successes and victories. This loyalty and devotion to the cause again and again was the decisive factor in many a battle...and this comradeship has been one of the most magnificent experiences out here. This loyalty is the essence of the German fighting spirit. We can depend on each other unconditionally..... Let this loyalty which I’ve experienced out here in comradeship be the foundation of our future life.79

After the war, numerous soldiers held comradesry in high regards. A strong sense of belonging enabled many soldiers to survive the war due to the emotional ties to their fellow soldiers. Due to the catastrophe that now plagues Nazi Germany, it is difficult to imagine that the soldiers of the Wehrmacht were men. As Hans Woltersdorf admitted, ‘We threw ourselves into national tasks with National Socialist idealism, redeemed ourselves.’ Anti-Semitism, anti-communism, Lebensraum—these central tenets of Nazism were all inextricably linked with the Landser’s conception of duty, with his place and role within the vast machinery of war.80 A complicated infrastructure of Nazi ideology and survival tested the men.

The Wehrmacht proved a worthy foe to Allied forces during the course of the Second World War. Determination to rid Europe of Bolshevism and evil fueled the

79 Fritz, 182-183.
80 Ibid., 195.
fanaticism for many soldiers until the last moments of the war. Germany united as a nation under Adolf Hitler and was determined not to repeat the events surrounding the First World War. The war embarked on by Hitler and the Nazis claimed millions of German lives, yet these men wholeheartedly felt they were acting on behalf of Europe and Germany.
Chapter 3:

Verbrechen der Wehrmacht ("Crimes of the Wehrmacht")

People who hated me would pursue me with vindictiveness, seeing in my past only
cupidity and culpable error. Others might someday understand that men can love
the same virtues on both sides of a conflict, and that pain is international. –Guy
Sajer

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing. –Edmund
Burke

The truth must be repeated over and over again; because error is repeatedly
preached among us, and not only by individuals, but by the masses. In periodicals
and cyclopedias, in schools and universities- everywhere, in fact, error prevails,
and is quite easy in the feeling that it has a decided majority on its side. Often,
too, people teach truth and error together, and stick to the latter. –Goethe

In the description of the Brianvillers trail [1772] this sentence: 'The greatest
crimes, far from being suspected, cannot even be imagined.' That is quite true and
derives from the fact that as the magnitude of the crime increases, the more it
rises above the instinctive. The more intelligent it becomes, the more the evidence
disappears. –Ernst Jünger, October 16, 1943

When examining the Second World War, the crimes of the Wehrmacht are often
neglected by scholars. Recently, historians have unearthed evidence concerning the
atrocities of the Second World War. A common understanding is to place sole blame
upon the SS and Einsatzgruppen. However, these extreme groups of the Third Reich
constituted a relatively small percentage of those who did indeed commit murderous fury
upon civilian populations throughout the Eastern portions of Europe. When the crimes of

\[81\] Sajer, 465.
\[82\] Mosier, 1.
\[83\] Ibid., 228.
Nazi Germany are recalled in our modern society, the inclination is to only remember the millions of Jews that were executed; however, the crimes of the Wehrmacht also included military personnel, such as the American soldiers at Malmédy, as well as civilians in occupied regions. No better understanding of the men can be attained than the letters written during their tour of duty.

Crimes were not strictly ordered against enemy soldiers and civilians. As the war progressed and the situation quickly deteriorated, an interesting amount of draconian measures were felt by those who fought for the Third Reich itself. Members of the Wehrmacht were subjected to brutal punishments by military leaders, such as the deadly penal battalions. This perversion of discipline created a drop in morale for the men who knew that the war was already lost. In essence, the generals and Adolf Hitler, through their fanaticism and desperation sacrificed German soldiers for a cause that was doomed after the battle of Kursk in mid 1943.

Letters of the Wehrmacht provide first-hand accounts of opinions and beliefs of the soldiers on the front line of battles. There have been two prominent works written about the men fighting on the Eastern Front: Stephen Fritz’s *Frontsoldaten* and Omer Bartov’s *Hitler’s Army*. Both evaluate the intricate functions of the Nazi military and the soldiers themselves. Many scholars and historians appear more interested in the brutal nature of the SS, or *Schutzstaffel*. While this facet is important, there existed stark differences between the SS and Wehrmacht throughout their ideologies and backgrounds. The SS was deeply involved in the actions of the Holocaust, such as guards at the concentration camps; they also accounted for the elite fighting units on the front line.
working alongside the Wehrmacht. Were the men of the Wehrmacht cold-blooded killers, or were they simply serving their nation's belligerent actions?

Because of Germany's humiliating defeat after World War I, an overwhelming sense of hopelessness and demoralization entered the German mass psyche. After this defeat, morale was lost throughout the German people giving way to malleability of the mind through propaganda. What was necessary for the Germans was for them to feel a "sense of being part of a great mythic force [that] can be extremely important for genocide." Even the feeling of being affiliated with a united purpose does not excuse the accountability of those Germans involved in the myriad cases of mass murder. The fact that the past threatened national morale does not excuse the behavior of those who killed innocent civilians as well as prisoners of war. By searching for an answer to unite a nation in its time of weakness, Hitler and the Nazi party were successful in persuading the German military into committing the eventual slaughter of millions.

In addition to the vast number of civilians killed by the Nazi regime, the casualties among the Wehrmacht were startling. Operation Barbarossa proved costly in terms of losses. In July 1942 approximately 40,000 German soldiers were either killed or missing in action. This number would increase to over 60,000 during the next month.\(^{85}\) Hitler's over confidence in his earlier successes in France in 1940 did not adequately prepare him for the realities of the harsh Eastern Front. The logistics of replacing the staggering levels of manpower losses greatly impacted the German war machine. In the first six months of Barbarossa, Germany suffered approximately 750,000 casualties.


\(^{85}\) Ferguson, 449.
which would become over one million by the end of March 1942. These losses not only hurt the overarching strength of the Wehrmacht but also crippled the high morale of Wehrmacht exhibited in the Second World War previous to 1941.

**Perversion of Discipline**

Military discipline throughout the Wehrmacht enables a better understanding of the events that unfolded as the war progressed, especially when explaining the ensuing atrocities committed by the army. The war in Russia experienced a level of fighting that demanded obedience and loyalty from the soldiers of the German army. Interestingly, the established system of discipline experienced a shift from acceptable to a level of brutality towards German soldiers. The draconian disciplinary actions help explain the murderous actions of the Wehrmacht towards Russian POWs and civilians.

When Hitler gained power in 1933, the Wehrmacht effectively became a tool of Nazi ideology. This suggests that the military worked closely beside the Nazi regime. During the First World War, military discipline was relatively lenient. With the introduction of the Nazis, this all changed. More emphasis was thus placed upon political crimes intertwined with military discipline. Desertion and *Wehrkraftzersetzung* ("undermining the fighting spirit of the troops") were among the political crimes that many soldiers were accused. At the end of the war, approximately 75-80 percent of the soldiers executed had been deemed guilty of these political crimes.

German soldiers had reason to fear repercussions for minor infractions as the war progressed. Within the Wehrmacht, approximately 15,000 to 20,000 German soldiers

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87 Fritz, 90.
were executed for political crimes of desertion or *Wehrkraftzersetzung* (undermining the war effort). In addition, several thousand men were assigned to penal battalions, which proved to be a virtual death sentence. As Niall Ferguson explains:

> Such draconian measures became increasingly important on the Eastern Front when very high casualty rates (up to 300 per cent of the original strength of some divisions) prevented the formation of ‘primary group’ loyalties and desertion rates began to rise. Phrases like ‘most severe punishment’ and ‘ruthless use of all means’ became routine euphemisms for summary executions. By the end of the war, German *Landsers* faced a stark choice: ‘Death by a bullet from the enemy or by the “thugs” of the SS’. As one German deserter who made it to the Russian lines explained in October 1942, the reason more of his comrades did not surrender was fear ‘that if they deserted their families would be punished, that if they were seen trying to cross over they would be shot, and that if they were caught they would be executed.\(^8^8\)

Such predicaments greatly impacted soldiers’ emotional state when fighting an already brutal campaign in foreign territory. While many men fought to preserve Germany and their families, fear that their actions would directly impact not only themselves but loved ones created a fighting force of desperate men determined to persevere.

In times of war the military must retain order in the ranks of enlisted men to carry out the primary objective. However, there remains a vital equilibrium in order to ensure an effective fighting force without resorting to draconian measures of discipline. The Wehrmacht understood the importance of the creation of a primary group of soldiers who fought together, yet as the war progressed and casualties mounted it became more difficult to sustain this primary group. Draconian measures were in place to legitimize Nazi ideology upon the soldiers as well as to simply keep the army intact. As a result of abuse from their superiors, soldiers soon placed their physical and psychological burdens upon the civilian population. Through the soldiers’ actions, as Omer Bartov suggests, the

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\(^{88}\) Ferguson, 539.
men were receptive to the ideological indoctrination and willing to implement Nazi policies.\textsuperscript{89} In the Nazi state, ideology proved more vital to the war effort than the fighting man. To a certain degree, harsh discipline helped create the brutal atrocities to which Nazi Germany has been credited.

This perversion of discipline did not always exist in such a brutal fashion. In fact, the first two years of combat, normal discipline was relied upon. The turning point began during the difficult fighting in the east during 1942. 1942 is significant primarily because it was during this time that the German army first experienced difficulty when facing their Russian foe. Therefore, when times were good normal discipline reigned supreme. It was not until desperation with the war against Russia and constant Allied bombing raids over German cities did the Wehrmacht begin enforcing draconian measures. In addition, the Russian civilian populations as well as prisoners of war were treated accordingly. The levels of cruelty directed toward civilians from German soldiers were properly dealt with, meaning appropriate punishments for improper actions towards nonmilitary combatants. This is not to suggest that crimes against civilian populations did not occur though. With the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, the true racial conflict was initiated. Ideological warfare successfully trumped traditional rules of war. When the primary objective of ones military is the complete annihilation of an entire race, rules and acceptable behavior are no longer relevant factors. The fact remains that the Polish people were viewed as inferior to the Germans; this translated to the prejudiced perspective of Germany’s enemies.

Wehrmacht soldiers fought a fierce war against the Allied forces and much of the reason for this was due to the fear of reprimand from their commanders. Under such

\textsuperscript{89} Bartov, \textit{Hitler’s Army}, 28.
circumstances, soldiers were held to high standards to complete difficult orders in the heat of battle. The consequence of the fear was the brutalization of the soldiers by their commanders. As the frustration for the war effort grew, so did the abuse of civilian populations. These occurrences slowly became integrated into the daily activities of the soldiers, which ultimately meshed prejudice, fear, and brutality together.\textsuperscript{90} Collateral damage involving civilians and prisoners of war was an acceptable risk in the minds of the Nazi leaders in Berlin. In addition, the eradication of the Slavic race was an underlined objective of Hitler’s war aims, so if soldiers took out dissatisfactions on the enemy’s population this was viewed as acceptable.

The Polish campaign effectively set the tone for Operation Barbarossa in 1941. War in Russia meant the destruction of the Slavic population. The rules of war became null and void in the war of racial ideology. The idea of a murderous war clearly set the stage for the true perversion of discipline. How can an army maintain order and military conduct while condoning blatant murder of civilians and POWs? In effect, the bloody and discriminate German campaign in Russia bordered on complete anarchy by which men could commit murder with no reprisal whatsoever.

By September 19, 1939, the army’s commander in chief issued a leaflet entitled the “Leaflet for the Conduct of German Soldiers in the Occupied Territory of Poland”. This statement warned of the presence of enemies of Germany, referring to civilians who were not “members of the German race”. In addition, the commander in chief of the army stated that “the behavior toward Jews needs no special mention for the soldiers of the National Socialist Reich.”\textsuperscript{91} The question that remains so difficult to answer is how could

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 60-61.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 64.
military discipline remain in an already distorted ideological Nazi-controlled state? Truly, Nazi ideology had permeated the fabric of the Wehrmacht as early as the fall of 1939. Poland presented the German soldier with adequate time to become accustomed to the murderous rampage that was largely accepted as a war of extermination. This was soon extended to Russia as common military practice, which even extended to large groups of noncombatants. These civilians were deemed inferior as well as enemies based solely on the basis of racist and political criteria.\textsuperscript{92}

Even though Operation Barbarossa constituted a lack of normal military discipline, the 1939 invasion of Poland began the true perversion of discipline. German soldiers were notified on November 8, 1939, just little more than two months since the beginning of the Polish invasion, that men found guilty of desertion, plunder, and disobedience would suffer severe punishments including the death penalty. When the Second World War came to a close, approximately 13,000 to 15,000 soldiers of the Wehrmacht were executed on ideological-political grounds.\textsuperscript{93} When a territory is occupied, the necessity for military discipline is required; however, when the invading force has a set of ideological standards predetermined, rules become further from the accepted reality. The Wehrmacht set a course that condoned the vicious actions of the Nazi regime and SS while severely punishing soldiers for any of the aforementioned transgressions.

The Western Front and Eastern Front present stark differences in terms of discipline. In the Western theater, crimes, such as theft, murder, and rape, perpetrated toward noncombatants were sufficiently judged. However, in the Eastern theater, these

\textsuperscript{92} Wette, 89.
\textsuperscript{93} Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 96.
similar crimes were largely ignored and even encouraged. The primary reason for such
differences was due to the racial implications dictated by the Nazi regime. Slavic people
were viewed as Untermenschen and believed inferior to the pure German race. It was
extremely rare for German soldiers who killed or mistreated these Untermenschen to be
punished for their transgressions. From the beginning, Hitler made it clear that this
racially inferior group of people should be exterminated. Unless they were Jewish,
Western Europeans were spared from the fate set forth toward the Russians in the East.
An example of how lightly soldiers tried for crimes against Russian civilians is presented
in a report of an unnamed corporal. Private H.K. states:

[I]n June 1940 the case of a corporal, ‘the father of five small children,’
who raped ‘a highly pregnant woman,’ raped a woman over age fifty, and
attempted to rape two others—‘25 June from midnight until 1:00 A.M.!’
Although the eventual punishment was not as severe as the case warranted
(the rapist received two year’ imprisonment), what astonished Private
H.K. at the time was that ‘the soldier in question already had an attempted
rape in Poland behind him’ and, far from being punished, had instead been
promoted in rank. In another example of selective discipline, a Landser
who had killed a Jewish woman in Russia received only six months’
imprisonment for manslaughter.94

Had this offense been committed in France, the sentence would have been dramatically
different. The only time that punishment was ordered was only to maintain military
discipline.95

Another example of the relatively light sentencing was explained in the example
of Major B., who had killed Russian POWs. In 1942, Major B. had shot, bayoneted or
clubbed to death several Russian POWs after they had clearly surrendered. In this
example, there were no Jews involved in the offense, only soldiers of the Red Army

94 Fritz, 97-98.
95 Dressen, Willi, “The Role of the Wehrmacht and the Police in the Annihilation of the Jews; the
Prosecution and Postwar Careers of Perpetrators in the Police Force of the Federal Republic of
Germany,” Yad Vashem Studies 23 (1993), 303.
including a woman. When Major B. was court-martialed, he was given a two-year sentence for four counts of homicide and insubordination at the front. Interestingly, Hitler annulled the sentence and dismissed the case against the perpetrator arguing for his innocence claiming a soldier experiencing the stressful conditions of the front line felt the “urge to kill” as a matter of “faith and inner conviction”. Furthermore, Hitler noted “that virile individuals could not be criticized when, convinced of the uniqueness of the fateful struggle of the German people against the Bolshevik world enemy, they rejected all the commandments of humanity.”\textsuperscript{96} Military discipline was severely hampered at the Eastern Front due to the fact that these types of crimes were strongly encouraged by the Nazi regime.

The Germans were not alone in their extreme measures of harsh military discipline. Josef Stalin’s Red Army instilled a level of fear into Russian soldiers via Order Number 227, also known as “Not a Step Back”. This order issued to Soviet commanders instructed them to shoot any Russian soldier who attempted to retreat from battle. More specifically, the order issued on July 28, 1942 stated the following:

\begin{quote}
We can no longer tolerate commanders, commissars and political officers whose units leave their positions at will. We can no longer tolerate the fact that commanders, commissars and political officers allow several cowards to run the show at the battlefield, that the panic-mongers carry away other soldiers in their retreat and open the way to the enemy. Panic-mongers and cowards are to be exterminated on the spot.

From now on the iron law of discipline for every officer, soldier [and] political officer should be – not a single step back without order from higher command. Company, battalion, regiment and division commanders, as well as the commissars and political officers of corresponding ranks, who retreat without order from above, are traitors to the Motherland. They should be treated as traitors to the Motherland. This is the call of our Motherland.\textsuperscript{97}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{97} Ferguson, 531; Seaton, Albert, The Russo-German War 1941-1945 (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 290-1.
Stalin understood that Russia may well be overwhelmed by the advancing German army and therefore could not under any circumstance back down during any military encounter. Yet, this murderous perspective inflicted much strain upon the average soldier fighting for Russia.

After examining the German system of discipline, it appears evident that the Soviets imitated their enemy’s draconian measures. Weakness demonstrated from officers faced certain court-martial by designated squads on the order of Stalin. Penal battalions and executions became commonplace in the Soviet camp as it did among the German ranks. Fighting in the east proved to spawn violence from a high level of fear, not only for the self-preservation of one’s life, but also for the lives of loved ones. Traditional warfare was abandoned and replaced with violence, namely racial and ethnic, on a truly barbaric scale not yet experienced in twentieth century Europe.

By 1944, harsher measures were established by the Wehrmacht in an attempt to keep soldiers at their front-line posts. The sense of sheer desperation was present in an order Hitler issued to the Stalingrad front in February:

I have found out that during the retreats and evacuations ordered in the last few weeks, there have been some unpleasant and unruly scenes...This is unbearable...The reason for this is that commanders do not make use of all [disciplinary] measures...The harder the times, all the tougher should be the measures by which the commander enforces his will. I therefore demand that every commanding officer and NCO, or in extraordinary situations every courageous man, will enforce the execution of orders, if necessary by the force of arms, and will immediately open fire in case of insubordination. This is not only his right, but also his duty.

99 Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 100.
During this time, it was vital that the Wehrmacht maintain a strong front against the ever-pressing Russian Army that prepared to cross into the recently acquired German territory. Yet, many soldiers of the Wehrmacht understood that the war effort was beginning to fail, and the high command could do little to boost morale at a decisive point during the war.

To a certain degree, the soldiers of the Wehrmacht were transformed by the combination of horrifying battles in Russia and their own commanders. It was this perversion of discipline that effectively numbed soldiers to the brutality of the genocide surrounding them at the Eastern Front. There are pictures of men smiling while civilians lay murdered in the background. Celebrations of the ideological brutality appear to pacify the men under the extreme pressure from commanders. Brutality bred violence, evident by the actions of the soldiers toward civilians.

Perversion of military discipline effectively lowered morale and effectiveness. In Johann Voss’ memoir, he notes an instance where a German penal battalion was clearing a minefield by hand. Voss horrifically explains:

A group of four were standing by the exit, strangely separated, the hoods of their anoraks drawn over their helmets. They carried no weapons, but each had fastened to his chest several kilograms of explosives. They were a detachment from the Regiment’s penal platoon and were given the opportunity to redeem themselves in combat. These were men who had committed some infraction of military discipline, such as laxity while on guard duty, drunkenness, insubordination, or some offense in the rear, such as the misappropriation of government property or harassment of a girl. Their mission was to pick up the mines to make a path across our own mine belt and to clear the way for the demolition team in front of the enemy bunker line. At that moment, I found their presence, their mission, and their unarmed status deeply disturbing, as one could sense the grim enforcement of military discipline. Their presence added to the gloom in the bunker.¹⁰⁰

As this example demonstrates, soldiers similar to Voss were punished for minor infractions with deadly tasks in hopes of redeeming themselves. Penal battalions cast a dark shadow over each soldier at the front, effectively increasing fear of their commanders and hampering the fighting spirit to protect Germany.

**The Wehrmacht’s role in atrocities**

To better understand the situation of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front requires one to examine the outrageous casualty figures. By March 1942, two and a half years since the Germans invaded Poland, the Ostheer Division on the Eastern Front had sustained close to one million casualties. This was roughly one third of the total recruits. In order to compensate for such losses, the Weimar’s Reichswehr was forced to recruit officers at a quicker rate. This caused unqualified men to be sent into the front line, surrounded by men who had been fighting hard for close to three years. Thus, many of the soldiers were now inexperienced and lacking the proper training for the harsh conditions of the Russian campaign. As one battalion stated, “we have too many casualties. The old spirit is lacking.”

Perversion of discipline throughout the Wehrmacht essentially prepared many soldiers to perform the Nazi regime’s ethnic cleansing agenda. Beginning in basic training, the men were taught to ruthlessly deal with the enemies of Germany, regardless if they were civilians, partisans, or Russian soldiers. How could the average German soldier execute unarmed POWs and civilians so indiscriminately? The fact remains that

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the Wehrmacht did indeed cooperate in atrocities further adding to the Nazi regime’s murderous plan.

The average soldier who committed crimes against POWs and civilians presents interesting firsthand accounts into the topic of atrocities during the Second World War. These men lived a harsh and demanding life on the front lines as death surrounded them on a daily basis. One unnamed soldier on November 17, 1944 wrote how the war “happens in our proximity. Nevertheless, we have good hope that we can hold the positions until our counterstrike comes. Then you will see what happens with our opponents. We are naturally prepared for everything here.” Yet, as Stephen Fritz suggests, these men willingly killed for the goals of the Nazi regime. As one Landser noted in this diary: “There is no bitterer death…than a hero’s death…. Is the hero’s death, then, the ideal of this world?” In the analysis of this paper, the role of the soldiers surpasses the simplistic role of criminals. More importantly, what drove these men to commit crimes remains more pertinent to fully understand the outcome of their actions.

103 Fritz, 3-4.
104 Meinecke, William and Gretchen Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military during the Holocaust 1933-1945, Microsoft PowerPoint presentation. From the Pay Book of Luftwaffe Ground Forces:

10 Commandments for the Conduct of the German Soldier at War:
1. The German soldier fights honorably for the victory of his people. Cruelty and pointless destruction is dishonorable.
2. The combatant must wear a uniform or be marked with a special noticeable sign. Fighting in civilian clothing without such a sign is forbidden.
3. No opponents, who surrender, may be killed. This includes even the guerrilla fighter and the spy. They will receive their just punishment before the courts.
4. Prisoners of war may not be mishandled or insulted. Weapons, plans, sketches are to be confiscated. None of their personal possessions may be taken.
5. Dum-Dum Bullets are forbidden. Ammunition may not be adapted into such bullets.
6. The Red Cross cannot be violated. Wounded opponents are to be treated humanely. Medical personnel and field clergy may not be restricted in their medical or spiritual duties.
7. The Civilian population cannot be violated. A soldier may not plunder or destroy with abandon. Historical memorials and buildings which serve as houses of God, or serve science, art, or the general
Another soldier, writing on July 28, 1941, explained “recently things have been totally crazy.... All the prisoners I encounter are killed, there’s no two ways about it. This has been our motto in the infantry for some time now.”\footnote{Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military, letters from German soldiers on the Eastern Front.} From this account, it seems that soldiers were quickly accustomed to immediately execute Russian soldiers upon capture.

Around 80 percent of enlisted German soldiers served on the Eastern Front. When examining the Wehrmacht’s correspondence, one comes to realize that they were soldiers dealing with suffering, horrible front line conditions, fatigue, and incredible amounts of stress. One soldier wrote from the front late in the war that “one must resign oneself. Each man is used for the defense of German soil. But...first the enemy must conquer the mountains.”\footnote{Illegible name. November 17, 1944. Captured German Soldiers’ Mail (Feldpostbriefe) in Records of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), 1940-1945. College Park, MD: NARA. Microfilm (M2112: Roll 1, Frame 265-266).} It is important to remember that the men of the Wehrmacht were human beings who suffered on the front line as others before them. Guy Sajer emotionally explains:

[W]e began to grasp what had happened...We tried to blot out the memory of the...tanks driving heavily over that moving mass of human flesh...We suddenly felt gripped by something horrible, which made our skins crawl...For me, these memories produced a loss of physical sensation, almost as if my personality had split,...because I knew that such things don’t happen to young men who have led normal lives...‘[That’s] how it
is, and all there is’...Something hideous had entered our spirits, to remain and haunt us forever.\textsuperscript{107}

These men were emotionally scarred from the horrible accounts of bloody battle. Fear of the unknown future plagued many soldiers’ thoughts. Dr. Horst Rocholl explained his fear in a letter written on November 21, 1942: “We have not seen the enemy yet.... How large the hostile force is, I do not know.”\textsuperscript{108} To dismiss the Wehrmacht as soulless killers is unjustified, yet these men experienced the same gruesome images of war similar to other fighting men during the Second World War.

The Wehrmacht officials knew what was expected of their forces during the course of the war. The fact that they cooperated with the illegalities of the Nazi regime, illustrates their guilt and knowledge of murder they condoned. Furthermore, orders from the top ranking military officials encouraged the murders of civilians and prisoners of war. In the perverse world of Nazi Germany, military officials reminded the soldiers of honor of the German military, which were now stained with the blood of millions. Interestingly, orders for mass murder and direct obstructions of the Geneva Convention were masked with euphemisms. The Wehrmacht initiated a war of survival and annihilation of the enemy, which included civilians. The Wehrmacht not only accepted Hitler’s war of annihilation but also encouraged this mindset among the troops.

During the fighting on the Eastern Front, the supply lines began to run thin. Lack of materiel resulted with the Wehrmacht entering into stalemate trench warfare. It is evident through letters from family members that they knew of the scarcity of accommodations available for the average soldier. In a letter to Karl Wohlfarth, his

\textsuperscript{107} Sajer, 103-105.
\textsuperscript{108} Ebert, Jens, Feldpostbriefe aus Stalingrad: November 1942 bis Januar 1943 (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006), 79.
family inquired: “The place you are now is, as you wrote, a Kaff [“dump” or “hole”]. It
that a small village at the front? What do you have for accommodations or privacy? And
how is the food supply?”\textsuperscript{109} Conditions were indeed horrible and greatly resembled those
of the First World War’s Western Front. One soldier explained the living conditions
when he stated “since we have no beds, we remained exempted from quartering. As
soldiers, we had to accept our situation.”\textsuperscript{110} A common myth about the German military
during the Second World War was that they were diehard soldiers. However, soldiers
actually experienced a great deal of apathy (\emph{geistig immer Stumpfer}), manpower
shortages, and a tremendous amount of psychological disorders on the Eastern Front.\textsuperscript{111}
Quoting the chronicler of the elite Grossdeutschland Division:

\begin{quote}
Man becomes an animal. He must destroy, in order to live. There is
nothing heroic on this battlefield...The battle returns here to its most
primeval, animal-like form; whoever does not see well, fires too slowly,
fails to hear the crawling on the ground in front of him as the enemy
approaches, he will be sent under...The battle here is no assault with
‘hurrah’ cries over a field of flowers.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

Could this first-hand account of conditions account for the violence commonly associated
with the Wehrmacht? One soldier wrote in June 1940 that “war is and will remain a
condition of existence. A state, a national community, appears to need periods of
fighting, in order to preserve its values and to fulfill its tasks; otherwise it must surrender
them by becoming powerless and weak.”\textsuperscript{113} In essence, the soldier’s life, according to this

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{109} Letter to Oberjäger Karl Wohlfarth. October 15, 1944. Captured German Soldiers’ Mail (Feldpostbriefe)
\textsuperscript{110} Illegible name. November 17, 1944. Captured German Soldiers’ Mail (Feldpostbriefe) in Records of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), 1940-1945. College Park, MD: NARA. Microfilm (M2112: Roll 1, Frame 265-266).
\textsuperscript{111} Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 19.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 27.
\end{footnotes}
particular source, is a natural course of existence for all mankind. Every nation fights to preserve its cultural identity from invaders.

Although the majority of emphasis in this paper is placed upon the Russian theater of war, Poland truly marked the beginning of violations of warfare from the Wehrmacht. The First World War witnessed relatively decent treatment of POWs and noncombatants, adhering to the Geneva Conventions. After the war concluded in 1945, however, Wehrmacht officials insisted that the majority of soldiers had followed the rules of war. These same officials blamed the fanatics of the National Socialist Party who, as they exclaimed, were the real criminals. Yet, as more information has been uncovered in the past decades, evidence suggests that atrocities were far more widespread than the Allies realized. On September 9, 1939, Colonel Wessel commanding the third battalion of the Fifteenth Motorized Infantry Regiment ordered the execution of three hundred Polish soldiers. This example dismisses common explanations that stress of combat resulted in senseless brutality on the battlefield. After the war, Polish researchers discovered approximately fifty similar incidents.\(^{114}\) The fact is that murderous actions continued throughout the war conducted by passive leaders of the Wehrmacht. This analysis demonstrates the far-reaching implication of the Wehrmacht's involvement in atrocities, which were not unique incidents. The invasion of Poland marked the turning point for the conduct of German soldiers in the field and in civilian areas.

As the war progressed and became a more desperate fight against Russia, Hitler directed a murderous order to the Wehrmacht on October 18, 1942. This order instituted the execution of enemy soldiers as policy of the German military. This included "men captured in special operations, the personnel of so-called commando units, were to be

\(^{114}\) Mosier, 229-231.
summarily executed, even if they were in uniform. There is no doubt that this order was carried out: in January 1945, uniformed American soldiers sent to the Balkans who were captured were transported to the Mauthausen camp in Austria and shot.\textsuperscript{115} Could desperation, due to the fact that the war was not progressing as planned, have pushed Hitler and senior officers to issue these statements condoning murder? This might offer one explanation, yet this brutal mentality, as mentioned earlier, was enforced earlier during the Polish campaign in September 1939.

The murderous campaign that ensued in Poland set the precedent for the remainder of the Second World War by the Wehrmacht. In October 1939, Hitler informed senior Nazi officials that order was not the main objective of the Polish campaign; rather, chaos was to run rampant throughout the country. The East was to become an area of relocation and murder of ethnically inferior populations. Halder, the Chief of the General Staff, believed “it was the intention of the Führer and Göring to destroy and eliminate the Polish people”. Hitler realized no legal restrictions would exist between the German and Slavic races, resulting in a murderous campaign.\textsuperscript{116} Thus, it would only be logical for Hitler to approach the situation in Russia similarly to Poland.

France also experienced its share of atrocities by the Wehrmacht, yet they are minor when compared to the Russian Front. On May 13, 1940, Sedan, France was the location of a massacre of ten soldiers who had surrendered to German forces. Even though this incident is negligible when comparing it to the Holocaust, it still presents yet another incident of clear-cut violations of warfare and military discipline by a professional military force. Another atrocity took place on December 17, 1944 at


\textsuperscript{116} Ferguson, 442-443; Trevor-Roper, 8-12.
Malmédy, Belgium, where American soldiers of Battery B of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion were executed by Obersturmbannführer Jochen Peiper’s men. On January 13, 1945, American soldiers recovered seventy-two partially frozen bodies. Testimonies of survivors stated that Peiper had ordered the aforementioned executions of the POWs.\footnote{Mosier, 233-235.}

Crete offers an interesting illustration of German mistreatment of civilians. When the German airborne and mountain troops landed in Crete May 1941, General Ringel ordered draconian actions directed against the civilians. On May 13, 1941, General Ringel ordered his troops to punish any civilians guilty of hostility against German troops. Castelli, a village in Crete, demonstrates the true brutality of German soldiers. On May 24, two hundred civilians were executed for their supposed belligerent actions. Later, on June 3, German forces captured and burned the town of Kandanos also murdering more than 150 residents.\footnote{Ibid., 237-238.} On another occasion in Greece in 1943, civilians were massacred by German forces. A soldier from this event who served in the elite 1st Mountain Division was questioned in 1971 concerning this event: “[M]ost of the soldiers did not agree with this action...Many said openly that it was nothing but a disgrace [Schweinerei] to shoot unarmed civilians. Others, rather fewer, took the view that they were all a potential enemy so long as they supported the partisans against us soldiers. The argument was so heated that I might almost speak of a mutiny.”\footnote{Unnamed soldier’s interrogation, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.} These three examples demonstrate that atrocities were not limited only to SS or Einsatzgruppen units. In addition, Russian civilians were not the only victims of German hostilities.
Hitler determined in the early planning stages of Operation Barbarossa that few rules would bind the soldiers fighting in Russia as was the case in Poland. Addressing his top generals on March 30, 1941, Hitler referred to the war in Russia as a war of extermination. Distributed on May 19, 1941, the so-called “Guidelines for the Conduct of Troops in Russia” required “ruthless and vigorous measures against the Bolshevik inciters, guerrillas, saboteurs [and] Jews.” Drafted by the Army High Command and issued by the Armed Forces High command on June 6, 1944, the “Guidelines for the Treatment of Political Commissars” required the execution of any captured political commissars. The order stated:

> It must be expected that the treatment of our prisoners by the political commissars of all types, who are the true pillars of resistance, will be cruel, inhuman, and dictated by hate.... Therefore, if captured during combat or while offering resistance they must on principle by shot immediately. This applies to commissars of every type and position, even if they are only suspected of resistance, sabotage, or instigation thereto.

This perverse justification set forth by Hitler transmitted throughout the entire Wehrmacht as the appropriate method of warfare. In an OSS memorandum from October 19, 1941, the “orders to the German army are to completely destroy Leningrad even if that city surrenders...since Hitler believes this procedure necessary. Due to the slowness of the campaign in Russia...Hitler has given drastic orders regarding the prosecution of the campaign, which has resulted in many cruelties and unnecessarily high casualties...[which] are said to be disliked among the German people.” The war of ideologies knew no bounds of legalities or mercy.

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120 Ferguson, 442-443.
121 Meinecke and Skidmore, *Examining the role of the German military*; Ferguson, 442-443.
Similar to Poland, German soldiers were briefed on the appropriate conduct during Operation Barbarossa. The approximately three million soldiers received an order entitled “Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in Russia” shortly before the invasion on June 22, 1941. This pamphlet portrayed Bolshevism as a “mortal enemy of the National Socialist German people.” Furthermore, the campaign against Bolshevism required German soldiers “to crack down hard” and “completely eliminate all resistance, both active and passive.” In order to achieve goals set forth by Hitler and the Nazi regime, it was vital to add a certain level of ambiguity to murderous orders. This was done to maintain a certain degree of military discipline while permitting the soldiers a free hand in mass killings of noncombatants. General Hoepner, commander of Fourth Panzer Group, issued an order entitled “Conduct of Operations” on May 2, 1941 that stated:

A. Fundamental principles. The war against Russia is an important part of the German people’s battle for existence. It is the old fight of Germans versus Slavs, the defense of European culture against the Muscovite-asian flood; and the repulse of Jewish Bolshevism. This war must have as its goal the destruction of today’s Russia and for this reason it must be conducted with unheard-of harshness. Every clash must, in its conception and execution, be guided by the iron will to completely and mercilessly annihilate the enemy. In particular, there is to be no mercy for the carriers of the current Russian-Bolshevik system.

Even before Operation Barbarossa launched, military leaders predetermined a brutal war against Russia. The fight against Bolshevism thrust the Wehrmacht to accept Hitler’s foresight and ultimate goal of eradicating opponents of National Socialism.

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122 Wette, 94.
123 Meinecke, William and Gretchen Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military. Translated from the German document: “Grundlagen. Der Krieg gegen Russland ist ein wesentlicher Abschnitt im Daseienskampf des deutschen Volkes. Es ist der alte Kampf der Germanen gegen das Slawentum, die Verteidigung europäischer Kultur gegen...”
More than two months before Operation Barbarossa was launched, Hitler gave a speech to 250 generals of the German military. On March 30, 1941, Hitler denounced Bolshevism, declaring that it was “identified with asocial criminality” and that the future conflict would be a “war of extermination,” focusing on the elimination of both Bolshevist commissars and the Communist intelligentsia. He instructed the German armed forces to “forget the concept of comradeship between soldiers. This war will be very different from the war in the West. In the East, harshness today means leniency in the future.”

Thus, the war in Russia consisted strictly of ideological aims.

How could professionally trained German soldiers condone these draconian measures directed toward the Red Army? Rationalization of the brutality proved vital in terms of self-assurance and legality. The desperation of the ideological war between Germany and Russia presented a demented justification to atrocities committed by soldiers supported by the Nazi regime in Berlin. Private Fred Fallnbigl wrote in July 1941, “Now I know what war really means. But I also know that we had been forced into the war against the Soviet Union. For God have mercy on us, had we waited, or had these beasts come to us. For them even the most horrible death is still too good. I am glad that I can be here to put an end to this genocidal system.”

This individual truly believed that Germany did not initiate the conflict with Russia; however, a noble quality was assigned to German soldiers liberating innocent Russians from their oppressive Bolshevik leaders. Soldiers under the implemented directives of the Nazi regime and top Wehrmacht officials were bound to feel desperate and terrified. As one member of the GD Division

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125 Wette, 91.
126 Fallnbigl, Fred, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
wrote, “Orders are not given any more.... Leadership has reverted to its original form....[This is] a battle for survival.”

The legality of war-time atrocities was an issue addressed by Nazi High Command early in the war. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) issued an order in May 1941 concerning the forthcoming conflict in Russia. Keitel defined the struggle against Russia would indeed be a war against Bolshevism and Jews, where the Wehrmacht should mercilessly pursue these enemies of Germany. In effect, Keitel absolved German soldiers from any legal issues that might arise as a result from their actions. By legalizing murder, the Wehrmacht marched down a path aimed at the destruction of civilians, Red Army soldiers, and other vaguely described enemies of Germany.

The Geneva Conventions, as it stood in 1939, presented certain protections to civilians who were in the path of military action. However, there were exceptions, such as any nation that did not agree to the Geneva Conventions was not protected. Technically, the rules of war only applied to countries that embraced the Geneva Convention. This technicality would later affect proceedings at Nuremberg at the conclusion of the Second World War. Russia did not sign the 1929 Geneva Conventions, so they were not protected under the stipulations of international law. Nevertheless, this does not condone the German mistreatment of Russian civilians; instead, it does offer a perverse defense to the German actions in Russia. Furthermore, the Russian regime under Stalin was notorious for committing atrocities against its own people, especially during the Five Year Plan and Collectivization.

127 Bartov, Hitler's Army, 27.
The mass atrocities committed by the Wehrmacht toward Russian civilians caused many soldiers to view the future with dread if the current campaign failed. Guy Sajer explains: “If we should lose tomorrow, those of us still alive...will be judged without mercy...accused of an infinity of murder...spared nothing.” Another soldier, who had witnessed the senseless slaughter of thousands of Jews in Lithuania, agreed with Sajer by stating quite briefly: “May God grant us victory because if they get their revenge, we’re in for a hard time.” The fact that the Nazi campaign consisted of such blatant murder, it is no wonder that many soldiers knew their fate even before the war came to an official conclusion in May 1945. Albert Rodenbusch of the 635th Training Regiment involved in an anti-partisan campaign in Belorussia explained an interesting circumstance:

The people from the village provided us with heated rooms and gave us food, so we were very surprised when the company commander later ordered us to burn down the village and arrest the village people...Our company commander ordered us to occupy the village and to kill on sight anyone offering resistance or attempting to flee....We shot about 70 people. Among them also women, old people and children. And then we burnt down the village. From the first village we took 14 head of cattle and from the second village 10 head of cattle. 

If the German Army desired cooperation from the Russian people, burning their homes and indiscriminately murdering innocent bystanders was not the ideal strategy. In doing so, the Wehrmacht fueled antipathy throughout Russia strengthening resentment and resistance.

Even Russian soldiers, who knew of their government’s maltreatment of its own people, were astounded in the indiscriminate killing of civilians by the German army. One such Soviet prisoner enlightened German interrogators with the following statement: “We have badly mistreated our [own] people, in fact so bad that it was almost impossible

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128 Ferguson, 543; Bartov, *Mirrors of Destruction*, 236.
129 Meinecke and Skidmore, *Examining the role of the German military.*
to treat them worse. [But] you Germans have managed to do that...Therefore we will win the war.” Even the Soviet Army’s newspaper recounted this sentiment. Ilya Ehrenburg wrote in the Red Star army newspaper: “Do not count days, do not count miles. Count only the number of Germans you have killed. Kill the German – this is your mother’s prayer. Kill the German – this is the cry of your Russian earth. Do not waver. Do not let up. Kill.” From this excerpt of Soviet propaganda, the Red Army appears to offer a strong sense of murderous retaliation for the German atrocities that have afflicted their soldiers and people. Once the Pandora’s Box of barbarism was opened by the Germans, there was no relenting on either side. Were the Soviets justified in their approach to their German counterparts? Fight fire with fire was the mentality of the Russians, which they enforced as policy against the Germans, providing members of the Wehrmacht with plenty to fear. Zinaida Pytkina, a SMERSH interrogator, remembered how she executed a German officer:

It was joy for me. The Germans didn’t ask us to spare them and I was angry...When we were retreating we lost so many 17-, 18-year olds. Do I have to be sorry for the German after that? This was my mood...As a member of the Communist Party, I saw in front of me a man who could have killed my relatives...I would have cut off his head if I had been asked to. One person less, I thought. Ask him how many people he killed – he did not think about this?130

With the introduction of a murderous Nazi ideology, the Russians felt it was their duty to retaliate in the similar fashion, as expressed by Pytkina.

The situation of Russian civilians proved deadly with the invading German forces. Josef Knaim described a typical scene from the Eastern Front in 1941:

One day as I was marching through the village, I heard rustling in one of the houses and went to investigate. A young woman was searching through a bunch of old clothes, probably looking for something to eat. The

130 Ferguson, 544.
residents of this village, Kodorow, were ordered to leave within one hour so that they could hardly take any of their stuff with them. They gave us the order to shoot every civilian we meet here. This woman was terrified to death and pale as chalk. I indicated to her she could continue but she took off running. I did not shoot.\textsuperscript{131}

Agricultural sectors in Russia aided the Wehrmacht and the German people, but left the Russians who worked the land without food. General Georg von Küchler, head of the Eighteenth Army, received correspondence from Eduard Wagner which stated: “Every supply train from the homeland cuts back on foodstuffs there. It is better that our people have something and the Russians starve.” It was deemed forbidden to feed the Russian civilian population. General von Kückler later reminded that the local civilians “belong to a racially foreign, hostile sort.” After this order, Eighteenth Army drove thousands of starving civilians out of the combat zone and into other regions out of the German-controlled territory. The important fact in this example is that the civilians in these areas were already short of food, and had no chance for survival.\textsuperscript{132} According to Nazi ideology, Russian civilians were viewed as \textit{Untermenschen} and deemed to a life of slavery or death.

The perverse disciplinary actions taken toward civilian populations throughout Russia after Barbarossa launched allowed for myriads of murders. Michael Zimmermann elaborates on the punishments for injure or death to German soldiers:

\begin{quote}
Now, for every German soldier or ‘ethnic German’ (\textit{Volksdeutscher}) killed, 100 hostages would be shot; for every German soldier or ‘ethnic German’ wounded, 50 hostages were to be executed. The designated victims were males aged between 14 and 70. The executions were to be
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{131} Meinecke and Skidmore, \textit{Examining the role of the German military}. Excerpt from the diary of Josef Knaim, p. 38.

carried out wherever possible by the same units that had incurred losses in
clashes with the partisans.\textsuperscript{133}

Death followed the advancement of the Wehrmacht throughout Eastern Europe. On
October 16, 1941, General Harald Turner, commander of the military administrative
staff, suggested that an additional 2,200 “hostages” should be executed for ten German
soldiers who were killed by Tito’s partisans in Serbia. The next day, General Turner
wrote to his friend SS Lieutenant General Richard Hildebrandt in Danzig:

About five weeks ago, I lined the first of 600 [Serbs] up against the wall. Since then
we’ve liquidated another 2,000 in a mopping-up operation. In another mop-up we killed
about 1,000 more. And in the meantime, over the past eight days, I’ve had 2,000 Jews
and 200 Gypsies shot. According to the ration 1:100 for German soldiers murdered in a
barbaric manner. Another 2,200 are to be shot in the coming eight days, also almost
only Jews. This is far from pleasant work! But it’s necessary, we’ve got to make clear
to people what it means to dare attack even a single German
soldier. Besides, this is also the fastest way to solve the Jewish question.\textsuperscript{134}

Retaliation on an unfathomable scale was the quick solution on the front line. In addition,
the Wehrmacht further aided in the liquidation of Jews.

While most of High Command was content with the mass executions taking
place, some commanders felt ashamed of the dirty business that had entered into their
ranks of men. The commander of XLVIII Panzer Corps stated to his soldiers after only
three days into Operation Barbarossa that “senseless shootings of both prisoners and
civilians have taken place. A Russian soldier who has been taken prisoner while wearing
a uniform, and after he put up a brave fight, has the right to decent treatment.” Within
five days, the same commander restated his disapproval for the actions of his men by
stating: “Still more shootings of prisoners and deserters have been observed, conducted in

\textsuperscript{133} Zimmermann, Michael, “The Wehrmacht and the National Socialist Persecution of the Gypsies,”
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 122-123.
an irresponsible, senseless and criminal manner. This is murder."\textsuperscript{135} As much as he disliked the actions of his men, the military was too far into the ideological belief to back down from their primary mission of eliminating the enemy by brutal methods.

Partisans, also referred to as guerrillas (\textit{Freischärler}), presented yet another excuse for the Germans to execute large numbers of Russian civilians. Soldiers were ordered on June 22, 1941, the first day of Barbarossa, not to consider partisans as POWs; rather, these insurgents were to be "sentenced by an officer on the spot."\textsuperscript{136} What this insinuated was the immediate execution without trial or imprisonment. These ghastly orders to murder civilians effectively brutalized the consciousness of the average German soldier. Albert Rodenbusch, from the 635\textsuperscript{th} Training Regiment, was involved in an anti-partisan campaign in Belorussia:

On the evening of 29 December 1942 we started our operation in a village. There were no partisans in this village. The people from the village provided us with heated rooms and gave us food, so we were very surprised when the company commander later ordered us to burn down the village and arrest the village people. So 50 inhabitants were taken prisoner.... We were then moved on to another village. It was about 10 or 11 kilometers away. On our arrival we came under fire from rifles. Our company commander ordered us to occupy the village and to kill on sight anyone offering resistance or attempting to flee.... We shot about 70 people. Among them also women, old people and children. And then we burnt down the village. From the first village we took 14 head of cattle and from the second village 10 head of cattle. We then proceeded to the third village. We didn’t come across any partisans there. But we still burnt down the village and shot around 50 people. Even women and children. And then we moved on to the fourth village and did exactly the same as we had done in the other villages. There we shot about 100 people, burnt down the village and made 80 arrests. We took them with us. After we had destroyed all these villages we moved on towards Osipovichi. On our way there we combed the woods in search of partisans.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{136} Bartov, \textit{Hitler’s Army}, 90.
\textsuperscript{137} Rodenbusch, Albert, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Civilians were always suspected of partisan activity, resulting in the deaths of countless innocent Russians who were not resisting Wehrmacht forces. The Grossdeutschland Division clarified to its troops in October 1942 that “men of all ages, good-looking women and particularly young girls and lads and even children,” were being employed as enemy agents; children were supplied with unlikely “stories,” such as that they were looking for their parents, disguising the fact they were a spy. The 12th Infantry tried to dissuade its men from fraternizing with Russian women, claiming they were “mostly Jewish females...whose Jewish origin cannot be seen.” If the men chose to ignore these warnings, surely they would contract a venereal disease, since the Russians were thought to be an unclean race of individuals. Although German soldiers continued to consort with Russian women, the fact remains that these warnings and orders aided the soldiers in viewing civilians as true Untermenschen, not worthy of humane treatment.

The murderous routine of everyday activities was recounted by numerous Wehrmacht soldiers while serving on the Russian Front. Private H.M., a member of an intelligence unit, recalled how:

[A] partisan group blew up our vehicles... [and]...shot the agricultural administrator and a corporal assigned to him in their quarters...Early yesterday morning 40 men were shot on the edge of the city...Naturally there were a number of innocent people who had to give up their lives...One didn’t waste a lot of time on this and just shot the ones who happened to be around.  

The indifference expressed in such accounts demonstrates the perversion of conscience of the average German soldier. Claus Hansmann details the proceedings of the execution of Russian partisans:

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138 Bartov, Hitler's Army, 92-94.
139 Fritz, 50-51.
In a gray, war-torn street in Kharkov. Agitated, expectant faces in pale misery. Businesslike, the men of the field police emerge and tie with oft-practiced skill seven nooses on the balcony railing and then disappear behind the door of the dark room...The first human package, tied up, is carried outside. The limbs are tightly bound..., a cloth covers his face. The hemp neckband is placed around his neck, hands are tied tight, he is put on the balustrade and the blindfold is removed from his eyes. For an instant you see glaring eyeballs, like those of an escaped horse, then wearily he closes his eyelids, almost relaxed, never to open them again. He now slides slowly downward, his weight pulls the noose tight, his muscles begin their hopeless battle. The body works mightily, twitches, and within the fetters a bit of life struggles to its end. It’s quick; one after the other are brought out, put on the railing...Each one bears a placard on his chest proclaiming his crime...: Partisans and just punishment...Sometimes one of them sticks out his tongue as if in unconscious mockery and immoderate amounts of spittle drip down on the street...Then a few laugh, jokes meant to reach those yet above.¹⁴⁰

Such cold-blooded murders were viewed as normal to the average soldier who witnessed such carnage. As one soldier explained regarding the constant explosions and death surrounding him on a daily basis: “You see, one simply changes due to the given state of affairs and then moves on!”¹⁴¹ Acceptance of daily routines and activities were met with similar indifference from many German soldiers. As soldiers, the men were required to adapt quickly to their circumstances and deal adequately with the situation.

Partisan attacks claimed the lives of many German soldiers on the Eastern Front. Whenever German troops were killed in these attacks, draconian punishments were distributed to the nearby civilian population. On November 9, 1941 Walther von Reichenau issued an order after one such attack claimed the life of a regimental commander. The order stated:

¹⁴⁰ Fritz, 51.
All captured partisans of either sex, in uniform or civilian clothes, are to be hanged in public. Any resistance attending their capture or transport is to be broken with the harshest means. All villages and farmsteads in which partisans are housed or cared for are to be called to account through the requisition of all foodstuffs, burning of houses, shooting of hostages and hanging of the guilty, when it cannot be indisputably established that the population defended itself against the partisans and suffered losses thereby.142

Similar retributions were recalled throughout the campaign in Russia. In other instances, the Wehrmacht aided the murderous Einsatzgruppen forces with great fervor. The Wehrmacht knew that the actions of the Einsatzgruppen were not “within the scope of accepted behavior in warfare.”143 Einsatzgruppe A reported in late 1941 that Wehrmacht forces had shot nineteen thousand Jews in northern Belorussia in December of the aforementioned year. In addition, aid from the Wehrmacht continued by transporting prisoners and cordonning off shooting sites.144

The Wehrmacht could not claim ignorance to the overarching goals of the Nazi regime, due to the fact that orders were presented to soldiers to hand over political prisoners and POWs to the SS Einsatzgruppen forces. By handing over prisoners to the Einsatzgruppen units, the Wehrmacht was knowingly sending thousands to their deaths.

As the chief of Security Police and the SD in Berlin noted on August 20, 1941:

The relationship with the German Army is as cordial as it was previously. In particular, Army circles show a steadily growing interest in and understanding of tasks and matters concerning the work of the security Police. This could be observed particularly during the executions. On the other hand, the Army itself endeavors to further the tasks relating to the Security Police. Thus, all offices of the Einsatzgruppe are continually receiving reports from the Army concerning arrested communist officials and Jews.145

142 Megargee, 126-127.
144 Megargee, 126-127.
145 Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military, from the Operational Situation
While the Wehrmacht did not technically pull the trigger in numerous circumstances, they blindly cooperated in blatant atrocities of the regime. Army Quartermaster-General Eduard Wagner stated that "politically intolerable and suspicious elements, commissars and agitators" were to be treated in the aforementioned fashion. In a further aggressive decision, Nazi High Command ordered in September 1941 that any Soviet troops who had been overrun but then reorganized themselves should be regarded as partisans and executed with haste. This order from the top was expressed much more rigidly by frontline commanders by stating soldiers were "totally to eliminate any active or passive resistance' among prisoners by making 'immediate use of weapons'. General Erich Hoepner, the commander of Panzer Group 4, took his orders to mean:

'[E]very military action must be guided in planning and execution by an iron will to exterminate the enemy mercilessly and totally...no adherents of the present Russian-Bolshevik system are to be spared.' The commander of the 12th Infantry Division told subordinate officers: 'Prisoners behind the front-line...Shoot as a general principle! Every soldier shoots any Russian found behind the front-line who has not been taken prisoner in battle.'

In essence, the free license to kill was issued to German soldiers with strong prejudice.

Much emphasis was placed on the killing of prisoners of war by the commanders of the Wehrmacht, but some soldiers had different views than that of the regime. To kill indiscriminately meant a loss of potential Russian intelligence sources. One such soldier who agreed with this analysis was Wolfgang Horn. Although he admitted to shooting "cowardly" Russians if they were slow to raise their hands in surrender, he was astonished to follow his lieutenant's decision to execute prisoners. As Horn states, it was

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Report USSR No. 58 Einsatzgruppe C in Novo-Ukrainka.
146 Ferguson, 443.
147 Ferguson, 443; Bartov, Hitler's Army, 84.
not only “unchivalrous” but also “stupid” because fellow Russian soldiers might have witnessed the lack of mercy demonstrated by the Germans causing them to fight that much harder in the future. Another soldier, Alfred Rosenberg, understood the potential retributions by the enemy. He prophesized “an obvious consequence of [the] politically and militarily unwise treatment [of prisoners]...not only the weakening of the will to desert but a truly deadly fear of falling into German captivity.”\textsuperscript{148} Outright executions of prisoners would have an adverse effect on the current situation on the front line. Officers of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Panzer Division also concurred with Rosenberg: “Red Army soldiers...are more afraid of falling prisoner than of the possibility of dying on the battlefield.”\textsuperscript{149} Even the commander of the elite Grossdeutschland Division petitioned his men to “understand that the ultimate result of the maltreatment or shooting of POWs after they had given themselves up in battle would be...a stiffening of the enemy’s resistance, because every Red Army soldier fears German captivity.”\textsuperscript{150} Yet, these concerns fell largely on deaf ears. Senseless executions appeared to proceed unheeded and ultimately became a way of life for the soldiers on the Russian Front. This is no better expressed than in the following statement by an unnamed German soldier: “We take some prisoners, we shoot them, all in a day’s work.”\textsuperscript{151} This perverse mindset created total anarchy when understanding the dilemma of POWs.

If the Germans were willing to execute at will Russian prisoners, then what stopped the Russians from treating Germans POWs in the precise manner? Compounding

\textsuperscript{148} Ferguson, 542-543.
\textsuperscript{149} Ferguson, 542-543; Bartov, \textit{Hitler’s Army}, 87.
\textsuperscript{150} Ferguson, 542-543; Bartov, \textit{Hitler’s Army}, 88 .
\textsuperscript{151} Ferguson, 542-543; Fritz, 55.
fear from fear became the norm as the fighting intensified. A leaflet issued to German soldiers stated:

Notice: Watch Out! Destroy after Informing the Troops: The Soviet Union, that we strike, has always waged war treacherously and with unimaginable cruelty, as befits the character of Bolshevism. To know their methods is to be forearmed against them. Regard everyone with extreme suspicion. Make adjustments for the following list of their methods of war; you must not be surprised and then you will find the ways and means to counter these:
1 Every kind of gas war...
2 Poisoning of wells, food stuffs, and meat...
3 Mixing grains with poisons. Biological warfare (plague, cholera, typhus)...
4 Parachuting saboteurs dressed as civilians...
5 Red Army soldiers will surrender and then attack, take up the fight again....
6 Ambush small detachments or singular soldiers...
7 Using cattle or residents as cover for Red Army troops and insurgents...
8 Target windows showing light...
9 Set traps for all kinds of motorized vehicles...
10 Treat prisoners sadistically. Every Soldier must know that falling prisoner in the hands of the Red Army means cruel torture and death! 152

What this ultimately created was a constant state of fear of capture from German soldiers. Retaliation ran rampant among the ranks of the Wehrmacht. Fighting to the last man standing and to the last round of ammunition became the true doctrine of the average German soldier on the Eastern Front. The average soldier was extremely fearful of surrendering to the Russians for fear of reprisal. Thus, the only option to the desperate German soldier was to maintain their current position. As Günter Koschorrek explains, the Soviets did not “treat their prisoners in accordance with the terms of the Geneva Convention...We have fought against the Soviets – we can imagine what awaits us in

152 Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military.
Siberia."  This perspective was not limited to a few soldiers; as the war continued, this belief became doctrine.

The treatment of Soviet prisoners greatly differed from their Western European counterparts. In the brutal Vernichtungskrieg, or “war of annihilation”, Germans and Russians fought to the death, even after soldiers on either side capitulated. In this war of annihilation, the SS and Wehrmacht cooperated in the early stages of Operation Barbarossa to establish a backdrop of murder condoned by the Nazi state. Soldiers on the front were ordered to shoot captured Soviet commissars, while the High Command of the Wehrmacht objected little. Russian prisoners of war were starved to death or forced marched until they appeared “more like the skeletons of animals than humans.” Within the first six months of Operation Barbarossa, an estimated two million Soviet POWs had starved to death in German captivity.

The abuse and murder of Russian prisoners proved a recurring theme from the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. Not only was this method so common among German soldiers, but it was also well known to their Soviet enemy. By early 1942, the German 12th Infantry Division warned its troops that Soviet soldiers were “more afraid of falling prisoner than of a possible death on the battlefield.... Since November last year...only a few deserters have come over to us and during battles fierce resistance was put up and only a few prisoners taken.” Due to the far-reaching murderous rampage of the Wehrmacht, it was nearly impossible to maintain any level of secrecy of their deeds from the enemy. The backlash of such a pogrom of sorts resulted in a tougher enemy on

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153 Ferguson, 543.
155 Keegan, 186-187.
the battlefield who sincerely believed it was better to be killed in action rather than taken prisoner and starved to death or outright executed.

The Wehrmacht acquired approximately 5,700,000 Russian prisoners during the Second World War. Of these, roughly 3,300,000 died in captivity, specifically during the first year of Operation Barbarossa. In other words, the POWs starved to death due to the inefficient provisions the Wehrmacht provided for feeding, housing and transporting the immense numbers of captives. The Gross Deutschland Division stated in April, 1943 that as a result of prisoner treatment, there was “a stiffening of the enemy’s resistance because every Red Army soldier fears German captivity.”

As mentioned earlier, the situation for a Russian POW resulted in the strengthening of enemy resistance on the battlefield for fear of becoming a prisoner of German forces. A vicious cycle of retribution heightened the unwillingness of German soldiers to take Russian prisoners, escalating the violence on the battlefield.

The method by which the Wehrmacht dealt with Russian POWs was blatant murder. 12th Infantry’s commander stated: “Prisoners behind the front-line...Shoot as a general principle! Every soldier shoots any Russian found behind the front-line who has not been taken prisoner in battle.” On June 25, 1941, the commander of XLVII Panzer Corps stated in an order to his men: “I have observed that senseless shootings of both POWs and civilians have taken place. A Russian soldier who has been taken prisoner while wearing a uniform, and after he had put up a brave fight, has the right to decent treatment.” This same commander goes on to make a rather ideological statement regarding the mission of Germany and National Socialism: “We want to free the civilian population from the yoke of Bolshevism and we need their labor force.” In essence, this

\[156\] Ibid., 187.
was no implication of a liberating force for the Russian populace; rather, civilians were destined to become slaves for the good of Germany. However, as the commander later determines regarding the lives of Soviet political leaders: “This instruction does not change anything regarding the Führer’s order on the ruthless action to be taken against partisans and Bolshevik commissars.” To free the Russians from Bolshevism required the liquidation of political officers, partisans, and “racially undesirable elements” referring to Jews.\textsuperscript{157} In effect, the ideological goals of Hitler had successfully infiltrated the commanding officers of the Wehrmacht by the early stages of Operation Barbarossa.

Some soldiers felt deeply disturbed by their current situation in Russia when faced with the immensity of death surrounding them. Lieutenant A.B. of railroad construction company 115 wrote in October 1942:

At the moment I am experiencing horrible days... Every day 30 of my prisoners die, or I must allow them to be shot. It is certainly a picture of cruelty...The prisoners, only partially clothed, partly without coats, could no longer get dry. The food is not sufficient, and so they collapse one after the other...When one sees what a human life really means, then an inner transformation in your own thinking happens. A bullet, a word, and a life is no more. What is a human life?’ In the war in Russia, certainly, precious little.\textsuperscript{158}

The feeling of hopelessness expressed by the Lieutenant demonstrates his distaste for his orders, yet he continues his dirty work. From the perspective of the soldier pulling the trigger and ending a human life, Guy Sajer elaborates: “It isn’t easy to kill a man in cold blood...unless one is entirely heartless or, as I was, numb with fear.”\textsuperscript{159} Stephen Fritz explains that “indeed, it almost seemed that acts of cruelty performed in the midst of personal fury were necessary for one’s own well-being, to purge the constant fear and

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\textsuperscript{157} Bartov, \textit{Hitler’s Army}, 84-85.
\textsuperscript{158} Fritz, 51-52.
\textsuperscript{159} Sajer, 299.
\end{flushright}
‘refresh’ oneself psychologically. Atrocities often took place under conditions of severe physical and psychological strain.’

Due to the circumstances of organized chaos orchestrated by the Nazi hierarchy in Russia, murder was encouraged and viewed as a way of life.

Treatment of Russian prisoners of war emphasized a high degree of harshness. Eugen Müller issued an order in July 1941 on Walther von Brauchitsch’s behalf which detailed the treatment of POWs which stated:

The prisoner of war who is obedient and willing to work is to be treated decently. Anyone who acts against this regulation is to be punished in accordance with his offense.

*It is in keeping with the standing and dignity of the German army that every German soldier preserve the distance and the attitude toward Russian prisoners of war that takes into account the fierceness an the inhuman brutality of the Russians in combat. Any leniency or even an attempt to curry favor is to be punished most harshly. The feeling of pride and superiority must remain recognizable at all times.*

This order effectively created an environment of nervous tension for the guards as well as the authority to execute first without any hesitation.

Russian POWs did not stand much of a chance of surviving their captivity. It is suggested than an average of six thousand Soviet prisoners died each day during the first six months of Operation Barbarossa, resulting in over two million deaths by February 1942 or 65 percent.

Amazingly, these statistics presents the first six to seven months of Operation Barbarossa! By January 1942, the war in Russia was only just getting started, with more than three grueling years of warfare. To elaborate, conditions did not improve for Russian soldiers as the war prolonged.

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160 Fritz, 53.
161 Megargee, 62.
162 Ibid., 142.
A genocidal tendency of the Nazi regime toward Russian POWs was present during Operation Barbarossa. The Nazis believed most Slavic populations as racially inferior, but more worthy of exploitative slave labor. As Karel Berkhoff suggests, Ukrainians POWs were often released, particularly in 1941 for their labor. However, those Slavs categorized as Russian were “infected” with Bolshevism and therefore associated as Jews and direct enemies of Germany. Berkhoff states that “Germans who considered treating ‘the Russian’ as a human being were warned that ‘any leniency or even chatting’ would be punished severely.”

Fraternizing with the Russian enemy was met with draconian threats from German High Command.

Conditions for POWs at the camps consisted of insufficient food and housing. Especially in the later portions of the war, if POWs were fed in the camps then the German people were suffering as well from this shortage of food. In addition, the ideological goal of Hitler was the liquidation of the Russian Bolsheviks. Stated in another way, only the minimum nourishment was allotted to prisoners in the hopes that they would ultimately die. With this mindset, it is no wonder that so many millions of Russian POWs starved to death while in German captivity. On September 16, 1941, Reich Minister of the Economy Hermann Göring ordered that the productivity of the “Bolshevik” prisoners should ultimately “determine their upkeep.”

The direct result of such a statement was the further reduction of rations for POWs.

The average soldier was entwined in a brutal world, mostly created by the OKW officials. After weeks, months, and years of witnessing ruthless violence, the soldiers of the Wehrmacht became molded into killing machines lacking the most basic of human

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164 Ibid., 11.
emotions. Stephen Fritz believes that average Landsers were not outraged by Field Marshall Keitel’s endorsement of murder. As Fritz further explains:

The world was seething with death, and its proximity evidently stifled many a soldier’s compassion. War became a job, casual labor, common work, and whom or how one killed didn’t seem to make a great difference. Furthermore, the rank and file of the Wehrmacht were probably more thoroughly Nazified than has heretofore been acknowledged; indeed, average Landser were consistently among Hitler’s strongest supporters. As a consequence, their letters and diaries disclose, there existed among the troops in Russia such a striking level of agreement with the Nazi regime’s view of the Bolshevik enemy and the sort of treatment that should be dealt them that many soldiers willingly participated in murderous actions.\textsuperscript{165}

Even more acutely described are the personal thoughts of Private H. in July 1941 of the progress of Operation Barbarossa: “We’re drawing ever closer to Moscow... Everywhere there is the same picture of destruction...All of whatever Commissars etc. [sic] are taken prisoner or grabbed are shot immediately. The Russians don’t do it any differently. A cruel war here.”\textsuperscript{166} What is so surprising about this excerpt is how calm and accepting the soldier’s attitude toward the atrocities committed by his own army.

The ideological war that ensued was well ingrained upon the minds of most Wehrmacht soldiers. Joseph Surmely wrote on November 20, 1944 “I really have no time for thinking. This is the routine from 7 to 7 o’clock [each day]. Thus one is fully used for the final victory.”\textsuperscript{167} For this particular soldier, the final victory was worth the immense time spent defending Germany from enemy forces. There is little remorse or personal outrage at the orders presented that accounted to murder. Stephen Fritz views this indifference as a subtle “expression of support for the ideological goals of the Hitler

\textsuperscript{165} Fritz, 54-55.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 55.
Along these similar lines, Matthias Jung describes the treatment of Russian civilians after partisans killed eighteen German soldiers: "The whole place, everything [was destroyed]! Totally! The civilians who had done it, all the civilians who were in the place. In each corner stood a machine gun, and then all the houses were set on fire and whoever came out—In my opinion with justice!" Justified retribution for an unidentified guerrilla enemy? Blatant executions of noncombatants were not a scene out of the ordinary. In another example, Fritz Harenberg recalls a brutal scene in Sarajevo. At a Jewish cemetery near his lodgings, "there arrived among us the Waffen-SS...and the Gestapo. And then somebody revealed to the Gestapo that buried in the Jewish cemetery were money and valuable things. The Gestapo drove the Jews together, they had to dig it up. Hauled a lot out of there, found a lot." From this entry, it is clear that these Jews were excavating valuables for the Nazis, yet Harenberg accepted this as business and little more. However, did he necessarily condone this behavior or could it be possible that he felt inadequate to question the proceedings? Geoffrey Megargee suggests that "German officers...valued obedience and loyalty, as do officers in most armies; they did not lightly question their orders or assume authority to which they were not entitled." Silence from soldiers continued as did myriads more of atrocities.

Some Wehrmacht soldiers felt inclined to murder Jews without a direct order to do so on several occasion. Although the military allowed, and even encouraged murder of Russian POWs and civilians, Wehrmacht authorities often had to punish soldier who participated in the murder of Jews without authorization. The XXX Corps of the 11th Army on August 2, 1941, states:

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168 Fritz, 55, 57-58.
169 Megargee, 8.
Special commando units have been charged with this task. Unfortunately, however, in one locality, members of troops units were involved in implementing such an operation. For the future, I am issuing the following order: Only soldiers expressly commanded to do so may participate in such operations. Participation as an onlooker is also hereby prohibited for all members of forces under my command.\textsuperscript{170}

The chaotic environment of violence that Hitler envisioned came into fruition as soon as Barbarossa exploded into Russia on June 22, 1941. Allowing soldiers to indiscriminately murder civilians and POWs created a chaotic background for some soldiers to fully express their bloodlust for Jews.

To reestablish order in a legally chaotic atmosphere was nearly impossible, which helps explain why so many orders were issued by high-ranking military officials concerning the actions of Wehrmacht soldiers. On September 1, 1941, the commander of the Rear Army Area South issued a surreptitious order that stated:

Attacks by members of the Wehrmacht against the civilian population are increasing. Individual soldiers and subordinate commanders are undertaking confiscations on their own initiative or entering private homes under flimsy pretext, appropriating property belonging to the civilian population. Recently, there have also been cases in which soldiers and even officers have, on their own initiative, carried out executions of Jews or participated in such shootings. The tasks of the Wehrmacht in the rear areas are clearly defined. Any independent action that goes beyond these tasks undermines the military discipline and prestige of the Wehrmacht, inducing lack of discipline among the ranks... Consequently, any unauthorized shooting of inhabitants, including Jews, by individual soldiers and any participation in executive measures by SS and police forces should at least be punished by disciplinary measures as a form of insubordination, and by court-martial where deemed necessary.\textsuperscript{171}


\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 302.
It is difficult to establish whether the measures taken by the OKW was to establish discipline or rather to keep silent the crimes committed by the regime. In August 1941, Sixth Army High Command stated:

There are instances where off-duty soldiers have volunteered their services to the SD to assist in the implementation of executions, or have attended such measures as onlookers and have taken photographs. The Army Supreme Command has ordered the following: ‘Participation by army soldiers as onlookers or active participants in executions not ordered by a military superior is forbidden. Any previous photographs of such executions are to be confiscated by disciplinary officers and destroyed. They are prohibited in future. Soldiers who act against this order are to be punished for breach of discipline.’

It is clear that photographic evidence of executions or services not commanded by soldiers’ officers were commonplace enough to warrant a direct warning against such actions.

Psychological analysis aids in understanding why the soldiers of the Wehrmacht participated in atrocities. Peter Loewenberg suggests “there is ample evidence that this generation of German youth was more inclined toward violent and aggressive, or what psychoanalysts call ‘acting-out,’ behavior than previous generations.” Could it be possible that post-war Germany produced this particular generation of Germans? The younger German soldiers followed orders and fervently believed in the Führer, not questioning the ideology of Nazi Germany. Michael Mann proposes that “among the front line Wehrmacht soldiers who murdered civilians and POWs, we might merely find the cruelty of arrogant conquerors or the ferocious over-reaction common among desperate, frightened troops embroiled in a savage war.”

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172 Ibid., 302-303.
174 Mann, Michael, “Were the Perpetrators of Genocide ‘Ordinary Men’ or ‘Real Nazis’? Results from
The Wehrmacht effectively established a close relationship to Hitler and his primary goals of annihilation. Benjamin Segalowitz’s article “The Wehrmacht’s Guilt” explains the relationship between Hitler and the Wehrmacht:

With remarkable skill he [Hitler] knew how to make the Army partner in his secrets, to let it profit from him, and finally to turn it into a partner in the criminal and evil deeds that he perpetrated and to paralyze its moral ability to oppose him. There is no doubt, however, that Hitler preferred to achieve his evil purposes with the help of people who were close to and resembled him, such as the booted men of the S.A. or the S.S., and he also found it useful to allow the Wehrmacht to seem to have clean hands. So long as Hitler succeeded, the leaders of the Wehrmacht gave him a free hand, doing nothing to stop him from carrying out his evil deeds.\(^\text{175}\)

Therefore, the Wehrmacht aided Hitler without question or hesitation. In addition, the leaders of the Wehrmacht and to a degree even the average soldier, escaped the war’s conclusion with the illusion of separation from the extremist Nazi state. Along similar lines, the Wehrmacht enforced the goals of the regime’s anti-Semitic laws in Jewish populations. The Wehrmacht helped register and isolate the Jews, stole their possessions, relocated them into ghettos, and established concentration camps. Whether they were aware of the eventual outcome of murder, the Wehrmacht created an atmosphere which was prepared for the liquidation of Jews.\(^\text{176}\)

An issue that affected many German soldiers was unit loyalty. However, the Germans were bound together by a sense of national pride and brotherhood. But why and how did the German soldier justify fighting for the Nazi machine? Aside from the Nazi propaganda aimed directly at the German people, the soldiers of the Wehrmacht appear to have fought for the soldier next to him at the front line. Immense comradeship led many Germans to fight so hard on the front lines. Due to the tremendous casualty rate in the


\(^{176}\) Ibid., 18.
East as well as the declining primary group of soldiers, many new recruits were thrown in the mix with seasoned veterans. This created, as the war prolonged in Russia, tension and no true sense of a family unit.

Soldiers who had experienced the rigorous training before the war were among the earliest casualties. These men are often referred to as the primary group due to their ferocity and dedication to Germany in the early portion of the war. As this class of troops became fewer due to battlefield casualties, new recruits were quickly, and often poorly, trained to replenish the drive into Russia. One German company commander, Friedrich Reinhold Haag, stated: “I have experienced again how difficult it is to lead a company into a battle and to sacrifice men while hardly knowing any of them. Then they fall right next to you and one of them cries perhaps: ‘Herr Leutnant, be sure to write home’- and you don’t even know what his name is.”

How could the morale remain high when soldiers and their officers did not know each other? This dramatically altered the already tense environment of the front line. Camaraderie, which was vital to the Wehrmacht soldiers, deteriorated as casualties continually mounted.

The situation in which the Germans created for themselves emanated a stronger sense of comradery among the ranks of soldiers. Soldiers on the Russian Front were forced to stay together due to the situation created early in the campaign as well as the fact that they were isolated in the vastness of Russian territory. An unnamed soldier wrote simply that “cannon thunder is our daily companion.”

There was nowhere to flee the horrors of the brutalities of the Eastern Front. As the chronicler of the Gross

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177 Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 56.
Deutschland Division explained, “It is the courage of the desperate [writes the chronicler of the GD], trying to defend what has already been won, the fear of falling alive into the hands of the enemy, and the instinct of self-preservation, which are the reasons for the willingness of the men fighting in the East to make this sacrifice. They do not give up. As expressed by the aforementioned chronicler, the basic fight for survival and fear of capture created a new notion of the soldier. Desperation of the war led to the acceptance of death and destruction, always driving towards an ideological goal.”
Chapter 4: 

Propaganda Directed Towards Millions of German Soldiers

To blame individuals is to forget that politicians are the expressions of public moods which are the masses’ collective dreams. –Hugh Thomas

Whether they are named Scheidemann and Wels, whether Dernburg or Koch, whether Bell and Marx, Streseman and Riesser, whether Hergt and Westarp- they are the same men we know from the time before the war, when they failed to recognize the essentials of life for the German people; we know them from the war years, when they failed in the will to leadership and victory; we know them from the years of revolution, when they failed in character as well as in ability, in the need of an heroic hour, which, if it had found great men, would have been a great hour for the German people- who, however, became small and mean because its leading men were small and mean.

The average German soldier was effectively indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda before he enlisted in the military. Leaflets and other orders were specifically presented to the officers in order to combat negative sentiment of the progression of the war as well as the war aims of the Third Reich. It proved vital to the Nazi regime to constantly bombard the Landser with anti-Bolshevik lectures in the hopes of instilling the immense hatred of their Eastern enemies. Operation Barbarossa was necessary to the much needed Lebensraum that would benefit generations of Germans and extend the boundaries of the Third Reich. The vision of a necessary conflict against the Bolshevist foe created the illusion that German soldiers were fighting for all of Europe as well. The firm belief that

179 Mosier, 108.
180 Loewenberg, 1469-1470.
the German soldier was a freedom fighter of sorts for all of Western Europe provided a
great sense of honor and accomplishment in the face of a devastating war.

The events of the First World War effectively presented the Nazi regime with a
strong ideological platform. The feeling of deception by Allied Forces gave the Germans
a strong motivation for victory. This feeling of betrayal warranted, in the mind of Nazi
supporters, the future conflict with Russia, France, and Britain. Due to the way in which
the First World War ended, the Germans did not feel defeated. Instead, they felt the
Allies cheated them of victory. In addition, there was no true defeat of Germany after
four long years of trench warfare. Therefore, the Nazis created an agenda aimed primarily
at those who brought about the upheaval throughout Germany during the 1920s.

Anti-Semitism coincided with Nazism ever since the early 1930s. The average
Wehrmacht soldier had been indoctrinated close to a decade preceding the Second World
War to believe that Bolshevism was a Jewish phenomenon aimed at the destruction of
Europe. Therefore, the ultimate goal was the annihilation of Jews to destroy Bolshevism.
An unnamed soldier fighting on the Eastern Front in July 1941 explained: “This time an
end will certainly be put to this God-hating power...evidence of Jewish, Bolshevik
atrocities, the likes of which I have hardly believed possible.... You can well imagine
that this cries for revenge, which we certainly also take.”181 One soldier, Wilhelm Prüller,
expressed this sentiment by stating “The political doctrine of Bolshevism...is but a purely
political act of world Jewry.... And just as the Talmud teaches nothing except murder
and destruction, so Bolshevism knows but one science: murder and destruction, cruel and
barbaric murder.”182 Medical corporal Paul Lenz agreed by explaining rather bluntly,

181 Unnamed soldier’s letter, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
182 Fritz, 197.
“Only a Jew can be a Bolshevik... for this blood-sucker there can be nothing nicer than to be a Bolshevik.... Wherever one spits one finds a Jew.” These exaggerated claims unfortunately were direct responses to the years of anti-Semitism preached by Hitler and the Nazi party.

Hitler imagined from the start that the campaign in Russia would be one of violence. Therefore, Nazi propaganda blatantly encouraged extensive use of violence. Hitler, speaking to the Propaganda Ministry in July 1941, stated the need for images of Russian cruelty towards German prisoners to be shown in newsreels throughout Germany to portray the enemy as brutal and inhumane. As Hitler had anticipated, the war in Russia would explode into a “great racial war” to the death. An estimated 600,000 Soviet POWs were executed by the German forces in the first few weeks of Operation Barbarossa. By the end of the first winter, approximately two million Russian prisoners were dead. This tremendous death count was a direct correlation to the propaganda machine in Berlin. Many Wehrmacht soldiers executed surrendering enemy troops simply because they did not desire to accept their surrender. Those prisoners that were taken by the Germans were usually shot shortly after their capture. Any Red Army soldiers who were not executed were unfortunate enough to be imprisoned in camps inadequate to sustain human life, where diseases and starvation claimed millions of lives by the end of the war. Stories of such treatment moved rapidly throughout the Russian ranks, which in turn created a much more fierce resistance force to German occupation.

Wehrmacht soldiers’ dedication to Nazi Germany has presented a difficult issue for historians due to the convoluted image perceived by German generals at the war’s...
conclusion. Were the average German soldiers indoctrinated by Nazi propaganda or did they believe in fighting the good fight for their homeland and family? Surrender was not considered an honorable option for the German soldier. After his capture in December 1941, Lieutenant Rudolf Kohlhoff enlightened American psychologist and interrogator Saul Padover about the possible defeat of Germany:

But I tell you Germany is not going to be defeated. I don’t know how long it will take to achieve victory, but it will be achieved. I am convinced of it, or I would not have fought. I have never entertained thoughts of losing. I could not tell you how victory will come but it will. Our generals must have good reason to fight on. They believe in the *Endsieg* [final victory]. Otherwise they would not sacrifice German blood...The Wehrmacht will never give up. It did not give up in the last war either. Only the civilians gave up and betrayed the army. I tell you, the Americans will never reach the Rhine. We will fight to the end. We will fight for every city, town and village. If necessary we will see the whole Reich destroyed and the population killed. As a gunner, I know that it is not a pleasant feeling to have to destroy German homes and kill German civilians, but for the defense of the German Fatherland I consider it necessary.\(^\text{185}\)

This shocking response presents an extreme position by a German soldier who was not content with losing. Final victory would be won at any cost, according to Lieutenant Kohlhoff. Another prisoner explained to Padover that he was “deeply humiliated for having permitted himself to be captured” and deeply believed he “should have died on the field of honor.”\(^\text{186}\) German soldiers were indoctrinated early in their training and even while in combat, which contributed to their diehard attitude.

German youth of the 1920s viewed Hitler as a father figure with a level of loyalty which never faltered throughout the Nazi reign. As Gerhard Rempel explains, “thousands were absorbed by his dynamic movement before 1933, and millions joined his party after he became chancellor...In a broad sense, all Germans were affected by the Nazi

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 540-541.
\(^{186}\) Ibid., 541.
movement between 1933 and 1945, even though their thoughts and daily lives may not have been entirely determined by official ideology and policy." The necessity of the German youth was vital in completing the goals of the Nazi regime. As Hitler made clear to Hermann Rauschning in 1933:

I am beginning with the young. We older ones are used up... We are rotten to the marrow. We have no unrestrained instincts left. We are cowardly and sentimental. We are bearing the burden of a humiliating past, and have in our blood the dull recollection of servitude and servility. But my magnificent youngsters! Are there finer ones anywhere in the world? Look these young men and boys! What material! With them I can make a new world.

Hitler intended from the beginning of his political career to utilize the youth of Germany. He understood that young, impressionable minds were more susceptible to his extreme political ideology rather than the older generation. The post World War I generation aged ten to eighteen were initiated into the Hitler Youth [Hitler Jugend] where they began their indoctrination of national socialism. Loewenberg explains the disposition of children born during the First World War and the personas created out of this stressful situation:

[I]t is postulated that a direct relationship existed between the deprivation German children experienced in World War I and the response of these children and adolescents to the anxieties aroused by the Great Depression of the early 1930s. This relationship is psychodynamic: the war generation had weakened egos and superegos, meaning that the members of this generation turned readily to programs based on facile solutions and violence when they met new frustrations during the depression. They then reverted to earlier phase-specific fixations in their child development marked by rage, sadism, and the defensive idealization of their absent parents, especially the father. These elements made this age cohort particularly susceptible to the appeal of a mass movement utilizing the crudest devices of projection and displacement in its ideology. Above all it prepared the young voters of Germany for submission to a total,
charismatic leader. But fantasy is always in the end less satisfying than mundane reality. Ironically, instead of finding the idealized father they, with Hitler as their leader, plunged Germany and Europe headlong into a series of deprivations many times worse than those of World War I. Thus, the repetition was to seek the glory of identification with the absent soldier-father, but like all quests for a fantasied past, it had to fail. Hitler and National Socialism were so much a repetition and fulfillment of the traumatic childhoods of the generations of World War I that the attempt to undo that war and those childhoods was to become a political program. As a result the regressive illusion of Nazism ended in a repetition of misery at the front and starvation at home made worse by destroyed cities, irremediable guilt, and millions of new orphans.

It is important to understand that the HJ was under control of the Nazi party, without any outside influence, providing leaders complete control over the young German minds. These children received a uniform and were even sworn in to the program. The success of the Hitler Youth was evident in the dedication of these average Germans during the later portions of the Second World War and in their enthusiasm for ultimate victory.

The goals of the Hitler Youth lay in their ability to build upon the romanticism of youth, rhetoric, and flattery. As Ulrich Greifelt, Himmler’s chief of staff at RKFDV [Reichskommissar für die Festigung Deutschen Volkstums, or “National Commissariat for the Strengthening of Germandom”] headquarters in Berlin, wrote: “Never before did our...youth receive a greater and pleasanter task...Never before...was the task in the German East of such a fateful magnitude and clarity.” Along similar lines, a spokesman for Arthur Greiser, governor of the Warthegau, expressed:

It is the task of youth to open the eyes of the young generation to the racial necessity of our eastern policy and to put in their hands by education the necessary weapons for a clear and uncompromising attitude in the ethnic struggle. Only the young generation, which carries within itself the characteristics for an effective eastern polity and has the toughness to endure, can pursue this struggle in the German East to successful conclusion. The youth of Germany has the means to make a decisive

189 Loewenberg, 1501-1502.
190 Rempel, 68-69.
contribution, through communal education, to the recovery of German blood, which is in danger of being suppressed by hostile races.\textsuperscript{191}

Therefore, the efficient legacy of Hitler and the Nazi regime was to proliferate in later generations of Germans via the current Hitler Youth members. The Hitler Youth defined its role to “prevent the dissolution of German blood among foreign nationalities; [to] win back German blood which has been dissipated among foreign nationalities; [to] support the reception measures in the new regions of the East.”\textsuperscript{192} The objective of the Hitler Youth coincided with the goals of the Nazi regime.

Propaganda pamphlets infiltrated the Hitler Youth, bombarding the members with a myriad of illustrious depictions of Nazi ideology and Hitler. These guides presented the reader with a recapitulation of significant events beginning with the Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. Next, honor, loyalty, obedience, discipline, camaraderie, and sacrifice were stressed for the virtuous German male. In addition, sections were designated for anti-Semitic harangues, blaming Jews for all the world’s problems. This booklet would conclude with the rough blueprints for Eastern Europe’s resemblance of a new social order designated for Germans.\textsuperscript{193} Without the complete obedience of the German youth, Hitler would have had difficulty recruiting individuals to fight his ideological war against Russia. Physical fitness programs, created during the 1930s, paved the way for preliminary military training among the ranks of the Hitler Youth. SS trainers entered WELs [Wehrertüchtigungslager (“Pre-military Training Camps”)] to train the boys of the HJ. At these camps, indoctrination and military drilling were carried out. We fight, we sacrifice, we triumph, proved the ultimate propaganda excerpt for the Nazis. In these

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 142-143.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{193} Rempel, 146-147; Koch, The Hitler Youth, 164.
axioms, future soldiers learned the sacrifice expected of each individual of a fighting unit. The Nazis were able to capitalize upon the young Germans’ sense of idealism. The innocence of youth caused an entire generation of Germans to become incensed with Nazi ideals, which SS recruiters used to their advantage.

The generation of Germans who grew up during Hitler’s reign was a byproduct of the First World War. Many of these children grew up without a father figure or absence of parental guidance, a father who survived the war only to return home defeated, lack of sufficient food and nourishment, and a general chaotic political environment. These characteristics of this particular generation enabled Hitler to take advantage of the extreme post-war circumstances that plagued Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s. Peter Loewenberg states:

[P]sychological symptoms of regression to phases of ego functioning ‘fixed’ by the traumata of a childhood in war included responding to internal personal stress with externalized violence, projecting all negative antinational or antisocial qualities onto foreign and ethnic individuals and groups, and meeting frustrations that would otherwise be tolerated with patience and rationally approached for solutions with a necessity for immediate gratification.

Due to their childhood experiences and environment, these particular Germans were more prone to the encouraged murderous behavior of the Nazi regime, which was precisely what Hitler had intended in order to complete his goals in Russia and in Europe.

The issue of surrender proved difficult for German soldiers who had sworn an oath to Hitler and Germany that they would do no such thing on the battlefield. As the Wehrmacht Oath of August 2, 1934 clearly states: “I swear by God this sacred oath that I shall render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German Reich,

194 Loewenberg, 1458.
195 Ibid., 1463.
supreme commander of the armed forces, and that I shall at all times be prepared, as a brave soldier, to give my life for this oath." It is important to notice that nowhere in the Wehrmacht Oath is there mention of surrender. This was due to the conception that such an action was viewed as treasonous to the Führer and Germany. In April 1945, one veteran of the Eastern Front, Günter Koschorrek stated “in this endgame, some brain-damaged troop leaders... [would] follow Hitler’s orders to the letter and fight to the last round of ammunition.” Unfortunately, Koschorrek was indeed among the minority of soldiers who sincerely felt this way, while others continued to fight to the death even in the last months of the war. The hopelessness that filled the minds of the average German soldier was prevalent during the final stages of the war. In late November 1944, Joseph Surmely explained somberly: “Nobody knows what the next morning will bring. If we will still be able to stop the enemy...that is the question.... Do we have to flee and where then?” When surrounded by enemy forces, Martin Pöppel, an experienced paratrooper, found the option of surrender difficult even in April 1945:

I discussed the situation with the last Unteroffizier. The Führer order was very much in my mind: ‘If a superior officer no longer appears in a position to lead, he is to hand over command to the nearest rank below.’ Personally, I was ready to surrender – me, who had been a paratrooper from the very first day of the war. Yet although the struggle was completely hopeless, men came to me in tears. ‘As paratroopers, how will we be able to look our wives in the face, if we surrender voluntarily.’ A phenomenon, incredible...Then, after long silence, they said that if the ‘Old Man’...thought we should surrender, then they would follow me. [Pöppel was 24.]

196 Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military.
197 Ferguson, 541.
199 Ferguson, 541.
In this incredible testimony, Pöppel no doubt felt the strain of dedication to a lost cause as well as fear of reprimand for abandoning his post.

If a member of the Wehrmacht chose to surrender, there were ample warnings by Nazi propaganda regarding the Russian enemy. To a certain degree, the caution of surrender and promises of death were indeed warranted when remembering the horrible treatment of Soviet POWs by German forces. Many German soldiers believed that to surrender meant certain death at the hands of the Russians. Therefore, it was more logical to fight to the bitter end rather than face imprisonment and unavoidable execution. The irony in this thinking is that the Germans began the merciless killing of POWs. Yet, after years of implementing the strict policy of prisoner killing, some soldiers began to fear the inevitable retribution that would surely await them. Guy Sajer recalled his reaction after killing Russians:

[Later] we began to grasp what had happened...We suddenly felt gripped by something horrible, which made our skins crawl...For me, these memories produced a loss of physical sensation, almost as if my personality had split...because I knew that such things don’t happen to young men who have led normal lives...
‘We really were shits to kill those Popovs [Russians]...’ [Hals said.]
He was clearly desperately troubled by the same things that troubled me.
‘[That’s] how it is, and all there is,’ I answered...Something hideous had entered our spirits, to remain and haunt us forever.200

The fact that Sajer and his comrade felt remorse for killing Russian soldiers who surrendered suggests that he knew the Russians would more than likely react in a similar fashion when faced with surrendering German troops.

Surrender also proved difficult for German civilians who had been indoctrinated by the Nazi regime about the hardships that would follow if Russia overtook Germany. In

200 Sajer, 186-189.
a report from G. Edward Buxton at the OSS, he explained via a source in Bern the perspective of the average German citizen toward unconditional surrender:

Here is what is reported to me as the views of a German woman who is a servant in a private family. This person imagines...that the chaos she saw in Germany after the last was will be repeated, plus the inflation in which her family lost everything. In addition, she sees the Jews returning to take over her brother’s business; she sees Russians everywhere, and joins with them the bad elements in her own village, who, after the war, were first Communists, then Nazis, and ultimately Gestapo.... It is not so much her pride as a German which makes her oppose unconditional surrender, as it is the practical certainty which she feels that under such circumstances it would really be better to be dead. She is personally quite sick of Goebbels’ propaganda, but, like a vast number of women in Germany, she feels that her country’s only hope is to cling like death to Hitler and to pray that he may find a way to save the Fatherland.201

Essentially, the propaganda that bombarded Germans for so many years drove many individuals to sincerely believe that there was no room for surrender. There was only hope in Hitler and his ability to relieve the suffering of the German people from an advancing Russian army.

The primary objective of propaganda is to present a set of specific conceptions of the enemy that manipulates the truth to generate feelings of hatred. Nazi propaganda worked relentlessly to manufacture a false idea of the Russian people so that German soldiers could commit to the ideology of Hitler. Karl Fuchs described the Russian enemy in August 1941:

There is no troop morale and they are at best cannon fodder...they are nothing but a bunch of assholes! Everyone, even the last doubter, knows today that the battle against these subhumans, who’ve been whipped into a frenzy by the Jews, was not only necessary but came in the nick of time... Our Führer has saved Europe from certain chaos.202


202 Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military.
Since the primary goal of Nazi Germany was the enslavement and ultimate annihilation of the Slavic race, propaganda pamphlets attacked the enemy of Nazism. Furthermore, the purpose of such images of Russia was to “inculcate in German soldiers, both members of SS units and the regular troops in Russia, attitudes that would enable them to carry out the program of racial ideology whose core elements consisted of the ‘final solution’ and a German empire in the East.” The defamation of the enemy creates a sense of purpose and hatred in the hearts and minds of those fighting for Nazi ideology.

Racial ideology was the primary drive for the invasion of Russia in June 1941. As Walter von Reichenau, commander of the 6th Army, explained on October 10, 1941:

Regarding the conduct of the troops toward the Bolshevik system many unclear ideas still remain.... Thereby the troops too have tasks, which go beyond the conventional unilateral soldierly tradition [Soldatentum]. In the East, the soldier is not only a fighter according to the rules of warfare, but also a carrier of an inexorable racial conception [volkischen Idee] and the avenger of all the bestialities which have been committed against the Germans and related races.

The leaders of the Wehrmacht believed in their Führer’s view of Slavic people and thus promoted the ideology throughout the ranks of their men. Had the leaders of the military disagreed, there would have been more resistance to killing of noncombatants and POWs. General von Manstein, commander of the Eleventh Army, stated to his soldiers on November 20, 1941:

The Jewish-Bolshevist system must be eradicated once and for all. It must never be allowed to intrude on our European sphere again.... [German soldiers acted] as bearers of an ethnic message and to avenge all the acts of brutality committed against them and the German people.... Soldiers must show understanding for the necessity of harsh measures against Jews [referring to the actions of the SS Einsatzgruppen], who have been the moving force behind Bolshevist terror and must pay the penalty for it.

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203 Wette, 16.
204 Reichenau, Walter von, letter from United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
These measures are also necessary to suppress uprisings, which in most cases are instigated by Jews, at the first sign of unrest.\textsuperscript{205}

General von Manstein clearly supports the murderous actions of the Nazi regime as well as defends the brutal methods that are currently taking place among German troops. Time and again, German High Command feels the need to rationalize Hitler’s war of genocide against Russia. Even more important than the physical fighting was the psychological impact of Nazi propaganda upon soldiers to give justice to the blatant atrocities taking place on a daily basis. Earlier, in October 1941, Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, commander of the Sixth Army, felt the urgency to clarify the extent of force deemed acceptable. He states:

The most important goal of the campaign against the Jewish-Bolshevist system is the complete destruction of its grip on power and the elimination of Asian influence from our European cultural sphere. This means that soldiers will have to carry out missions that go beyond the traditional one-sided military duties. Here in the East our soldiers must not only engage in battle according to the rules of war, but also be the bearers of a relentless ethnic message and ruthlessly avenge the bestialities committed against us and ethnically related peoples.... Hence soldiers must fully accept the necessity for the harsh but just expiation exacted from Jewish Untermenschen. This punishment serves the further purpose of suppressing uprisings behind the German front lines, which experience has shown are always instigated by Jews.... [The mission of German soldiers was] ruthlessly to eliminate the treachery and brutality of non-German individuals and thereby secure the lives of German military personnel in Russia.\textsuperscript{206}

In both of the aforementioned examples, high-ranking German military leaders felt inclined to defend the actions of the Einsatzgruppen as well as the actions deemed necessary of the average German soldier. The Nazis attempted to place as much distance between the perpetrators and victims in the hope that no concerns would arise concerning their questionable actions.

\textsuperscript{205} Wette, 96.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid., 96-97.
The effectiveness of the Propaganda Ministry in Nazi Germany was proven by the myriad of executions of enemy soldiers and civilians. The fact that there were numerous atrocities committed by the German military, SS and Einsatzgruppen included, gives testament to the gruesome reality of success of ideological propaganda upon the soldiers’ psyches. Even in defeat, the Nazi propaganda machine was able to transform it into a successful victory for Germany, as exemplified in the military defeat at Stalingrad in 1943.

Due to the violence associated with fascism, death was celebrated. As Guy Sajer recalls Hauptmann Wesreidau, captain of Sajer and the Grossdeutschland division, stating to his men:

That’s why you’re fighting...You’re nothing more than animals on the defensive, even when you’re obligated to take the offensive. So be brave: life is war, and war is life. Liberty doesn’t exist...Germany is a great country...Today, our difficulties are immense. The system in which we more of less believe is every bit as good as the slogans on the other side. Even if we don’t always approve of what we have to do, we must carry out orders for the sake of our country, our comrades, and our families, against whom the other half of the world is fighting in the name of truth and justice. We are now embarked on a risky enterprise, with no assurance of safety. We are advancing an idea of unity which is neither rich nor easily digestible, but the vast majority of the German people accept it and adhere to it, forging and forming it in an admirable collective effort. This is where we are now risking everything. We are tying, taking due account of the attitudes of society, to change the face of the world, hoping to revive the ancient virtues buried under the layers of filth bequeathed to us by our forebears. We can expect no reward for this effort. We are loathed everywhere: if we should lose tomorrow those of us still alive after so much suffering will be judged without justice. We shall be accused of an infinity of murder, as if everywhere, and at all times, men at war did not behave in the same way. Those who have an interest in putting an end to our ideals will ridicule everything we believe in. We shall be spared nothing. Even the tombs of our heroes will be destroyed, only preserving- as a gesture of respect toward the dead- a few which contain figures of doubtful heroism, who were never fully committed to our cause. With our deaths, all the prodigies of heroism which our daily circumstances require of us, and the memory of our comrades, dead and alive, and our
The willingness to accept one’s own mortality and inevitable death was the message many soldiers received on the front line. In addition, Hauptmann Wesreidau defends the brutality of the campaign and even acknowledges the crimes that will ultimately befall Germany. These men were ready and committed to die for Germany and Hitler’s plight for the destruction of Soviet Russia.

Germans sincerely believed they were embarking on a mission to save all of Europe from Bolshevism. Colonel-General Hermann Hoth, commander of the 17th Army, stated on November 25, 1941:

> It has become increasingly clear to us this summer, that here in the East spiritually unbridgeable conceptions are fighting each other: German sense of honor and race, and a soldierly tradition of many centuries, against an Asiatic mode of thinking and primitive instincts, whipped up by a small number of mostly Jewish intellectuals... More than ever we are filled with the thought of a new era, in which the strength of the German people’s racial superiority and achievements entrusts it with the leadership of Europe. We clearly recognize our mission to save European culture from the advancing Asiatic barbarism. We now know that we have to fight against an incensed and tough opponent. This battle can only end with the destruction of one or the other; a compromise is out of the question.\(^\text{208}\)

Camouflaging a campaign of annihilation with a noble cause to save European culture presented Germans with a sense of a greater cause. This effectively shifted focus off of the brutal reality of Hitler’s agenda to murder millions. If Germany accepted defeat at the hands of the Soviet Army, a global apocalypse would definitely ensue. This mindset

\(^{207}\) Sajer, 216-217.
\(^{208}\) Mazower, 138.
enacted the hardened soldiers of the Wehrmacht, who desperately fought for a convoluted cause.

Illustrated as Untermenschen and not believed worthy of living, the Russians faced a grim future when confronted by the Wehrmacht. In mid-July 1941 a Wehrmacht NCO wrote home from the Eastern Front about the situation:

The German people owes a great debt to our Führer, for had these beasts, who are our enemies here, come to Germany, such murders would have taken place that the world has never seen before...What we have seen, no newspaper can describe. It borders on the unbelievable, even the Middle Ages do not compare with what has occurred here. And when one reads the ‘Stürmer’ and looks at the pictures, that is only a weak illustration of what we see here and the crimes committed here by the Jews. Believe me, even the most sensational newspaper reports are only a fraction of what is happening here.²⁰⁹

Clearly, this soldier was heavily influenced by the bombardment of Nazi propaganda. To discover this mindset in a letter from the front causes great concern when examining the Wehrmacht. If one NCO passionately believed this way, can it be assumed that many more soldiers agreed with this inference? The sad reality was that he was not in the minority. Hitler campaigned and preached a tremendous hatred of all Slavic people since the early 1930s, ultimately converting his message to policy. The primary reason for dehumanization of the enemy enabled the German soldier to murder without remorse. The concept of Untermenschen was vital when attempting to gain support for a primarily ideological war. The more that German soldiers believed they were fighting against a truly evil adversary, murder would surely become an accepted and even encouraged method.

The concept of Untermenschen distorted the psyches of Wehrmacht soldiers, supposedly oblivious to the atrocities their fellow brethren committed from the beginning.

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²⁰⁹ Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 106.
of September 1939. A Wehrmacht major, who passed through the Warsaw ghetto, commented on the Jew’s inhumanity rather than the German’s criminal actions toward Jews:

The conditions in the ghetto can hardly be described...The Jew does business here with the others also on the street. In the morning, as I drove through in my car, I saw numerous corpses, among them those of children, covered anyhow with paper weighed down with stones. The other Jews pass by them indifferently, the primitive ‘corpse-carts’ come and take away these ‘remainders’ with which no more business can be done. The ghetto is blocked by walls, barbed-wire, and so forth...Dirt, stench and noise are the main signs of the ghetto.210

Amazingly, this individual of considerable rank did not stop to conceive that fellow Germans were at the root cause of these peoples’ suffering. In essence, the complete indoctrination of the aforementioned examples demonstrates the extent to which Nazi propaganda was successful in distorting reality.

Hitler illustrated a grandiose struggle for Germany in which the German soldier was the best suited to deal with Bolshevism and Jewish influence. According to Hitler, the German soldier

is the first representative of life in this struggle [for existence], for he has always been the best selection of those people who by their life’s mission and —when necessary—by their loss of life have ensured the life of the others in this and thereby in the next world...No one who has not added to tradition by his own life and action may speak of tradition...Whatever is to be with the life and destiny of the individual, supreme to all of them is the existence and future of the whole...for us all has been revealed what so many will still certainly have to fight for in the near future: the German Volk! The world wishes our dissolution. Our answer can only be the renewed oath to the greatest community of all times. Their aim is German disunity. Our creed [Glaubensbekenntnis] — German unity. Their hope is the success of capitalist interests, and our will is THE NATIONAL SOCIALIST VOLKSGEMEINSCHAFT [“Community”]!211

210 Ibid., 153-154.
211 Ibid., 120-121.
The German soldier was destined for a greater cause on behalf of the Volk and the continuation of the Aryan race. This high level of indoctrination greatly impacted the average soldier, which blurred horrendous atrocities. Along these lines of justification for the war, the officer corps’ news-sheet, *Mitteilungen für das Offizierkorps*, urged commanders in April 1942 to understand that:

[i]n the struggle against the capitalism and imperialism of the English and the Americans and against the world-revolutionary theses of the Bolsheviks the weapons of the Wehrmacht alone will not achieve victory...[which can be gained] only...when the people...confronts the political and ideological theses of the enemy with better political concepts...[S]uch an attitude...is based on the German people’s unshakable sense of loyalty to Führer, Volk and Fatherland, the kind of loyalty which remains absolutely firm in the face of all crises and knows no skepticism...Not only are the economic and power-political bases of our life critically threatened, but the whole spiritual life of the nation, the ethical basis of our cultural and religious concept of the world, truly everything which is great and holy for German men in life and death, all is threatened at the core if we fail to master the enemy...Have the officers burnt this so deeply into their men’s hearts, that each of them knows and sees fully and clearly against what devilish game in the world he has been called into action?...We know that the Devil has been set loose against our land...we are filled with the responsibility to God to defend the land which had been given us, to save His property and to multiply it, and therefore we mobilize not only our weapons...but also the weapons of the soul...The military-spiritual [wehrgeistige, or ideological] leadership of the soldiers has been added to the officers’ duties, because political determination and soldierly feats are a single unity and are indissolubly bound to each other. The more German soldiers are aware of the full extent of the mortal danger which threatens them, the greater will be the conviction and the toughness with which they will confront the dynamics of the Bolshevik revolution with the whole strength of soul and will of National Socialist Germany...In the war, as the Führer has said...the nations are being judged in the Godly court of the Almighty. He who survives this trial will be seen as worthy of molding a new life on earth...What a task!...The officers of the Führer, and the German soldiers whom they lead, a sworn community of the best men of the German blood, carried on by the love, the work and the belief of the German people, are marching to the decision. There beyond hell is burning. May it charge! We shall still win!212

212 Ibid., 123-124.
This example of influential religious ideological propaganda created a noble situation for those Germans fighting the good fight for the glory of God, Germany, and Führer. Additionally, demonizing the Russian Bolsheviks exemplified the good versus evil struggle.

When the war transformed into a defensive campaign after Stalingrad and Kursk, the desperation of the propaganda machine was expressed. In January 1945, the 4th Panzer Division issued a “Front-Credo” (*Frontbekenntnis*) to its soldiers, which embodied the National Socialist *Weltanschauung* (“world view”) and blended it with a pseudo-religious statement of belief:

I PROFESS—in view of my oath to the flag—my front comradeship to my division.

I AM DETERMINED to give my whole strength, my blood and my life in the present decisive battle for the life of my people.

NEVER will I abandon my weapons...

I BELIEVE in Germany. I will also do all in my powers to preserve and to strengthen the spiritual power of resistance of the German people at the front and in the homeland by speech and deed.

I BELIEVE in the German people united by National Socialism and in the victory of its just cause.

I BELIEVE as a National Socialist soldier in my Führer Adolf Hitler.\(^{213}\)

Nazi ideology became the accepted death sentence to those soldiers who embraced this oath. One soldier, Alfred Trost, wrote in December 1944: “For the sixth time we are committed to the war. One of the hardest years of struggle lies behind us once again. At all fronts the fight has inconceivably increased.”\(^{214}\) Sheer desperation was evident in this statement as defeat loomed on the horizon. Additionally, Nazi propaganda was designed to create a false sense of assurance for the German people. The Office of Strategic

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\(^{213}\) Ibid., 134-135.

Services explained how “the propaganda machine is...making every effort to encourage optimism among the masses, even going so far as announcing victories of the German army before they have...occurred.” These critical claims were vital when the war began its downfall after 1942.

Most German soldiers believed in the worthy war in which they were engaged. Hitler was successful in creating enemies, which presented many Germans to believe that the entire world was intent on the destruction of Germany. Rolf Hoffmann wrote in February 1945:

You must know to come to terms with your lot, even if it is tragic.... Everything has an end, even the war.... Then we will again construct a worthy existence. As Eichendorff said: ‘As long as I breathe, I’m not given up for lost.’ So it is with our beloved Fatherland. We have held out for six long years against a world of enemies; we knew only battle and work and battle again. Do we deserve in the end to be smashed and destroyed? We want to trust in the Lord God, that He has not deserted our German people and will give back to it at the end of this mighty struggle its right to life on this earth. That means waiting until a better future is granted us.

Interestingly, this particular soldier believed that God was on the side of Germany, yet Nazi Germany had attempted to destroy organized Christianity.

In order to gain support for the war against Russia, Hitler created the illusion that Germany was under assault from the Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy that would surely destroy all of Europe. The day after Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, Corporal A.N. wrote, “Now Jewry has declared war on us along the whole line...All that are in bondage to the Jews stand in a front against us. The Marxists fight shoulder to shoulder with high finance as before 1933 in Germany.... Through our preventive attack, we again

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216 Fritz, 102.
have the Reds by the nose.... We ourselves know exactly what is at stake in this game. The insinuation in the final sentence of the corporal’s letter suggests the deadly wave of Bolshevism that will destroy all of Europe if Russia is not completely destroyed. Corporal K.G. elaborates, “The great task that has placed us in battle against Bolshevism lies in the destruction of eternal Judaism.... When you see what the Jew has brought about here in Russia, only then can you begin to understand why the Führer began this struggle against Judaism. What sort of misfortunes would have been visited upon our Fatherland, if this bestial people had gotten the upper hand?” It is astonishing that so many average Wehrmacht soldiers could have believed so unabashedly in a myth of Jewish Bolshevism, when in reality, it was deep-seeded in racial hatred.

Among the soldiers, a general fear of Bolshevism was prevalent due to the extensive propaganda network throughout the ranks. Corporal W.F. quite frankly stated in November 1941 that “a complete destruction [of Bolshevism] is...required... [for] if these bestial hordes of soldiers were to fall upon Germany all would be gone that is German.” Another soldier, Karl Fuchs, sounding more like a propaganda pamphlet, expressed his hatred for the Russian POWs: “Hardly ever do you see the face of a person who seems rational and intelligent. They all look emaciated and the wild, half-crazy look in their eyes makes them look like imbeciles. [How] could these scoundrels, led by Jews and criminals, want to imprint their stamp on Europe?” Fuchs’ appeared astounded that these so-called criminals could actually believe they could control the European continent. How could these soldiers truly believe in the lies propagated by Hitler? These troops sincerely believed they were a Godsend for Russians, yet they continually

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217 Ibid., 195.
218 Ibid., 196.
219 Fuchs, Karl, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
executed thousands, if not millions, in the first year of Operation Barbarossa. Hitler was viewed as the savior of Germany and all of Europe. As one soldier commented, “Indeed, the fighting was tough...[but] to those in the homeland we soldiers can only say that Adolf Hitler has saved Germany and thereby the whole of Europe from the Red Army.” When ideologies clash, the outcome is the inevitable destruction of one or the other, with little room for compromise.

More examples of a stern belief in the Nazi regime’s cause were present in soldiers’ correspondence from the front. One Landser exclaimed: “This [battle] is for a new ideology, a new belief, a new life!” Private K.B. stated in April 1940 confidently explained: “We know what ideals we fight for.” Hans August Vowinckel followed up Private K.B.’s statement, reiterating in December 1940, that “Our people stands in a great struggle for its existence and for its mission. We must fight for the meaning, for the giving of meaning to this struggle.... Where our people fights for its existence, that is for us destiny, simple destiny.” Along a similar string of consciousness, Karl Fuchs remarked in May 1941, “An individual is comparatively insignificant in war and yet, individual sacrifice in the struggle for an ideal is not in vain.... We are fighting for the existence of our entire people, of our Volk.... Our vision must be for the future because we are engaged in a struggle that will assure us of the well-being of our...nation.” Martin Poppel noted in his diary, “Our joy in living and lust for life are stronger now than they’ve ever been, but each of us is ready to sacrifice his life for the holy Fatherland. This Fatherland is my faith, and my only hope.” The amount of fervor present in these quotations exposes the true dedication to the Nazi regime and ideology. The fact is that the majority

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220 Fritz, 197.
221 Ibid., 211.
of Wehrmacht soldiers were either indoctrinated over an extended amount of time or simply believed they were fighting a noble cause worthy of sacrifice.

When examining the men of the Wehrmacht, it is important to realize that they did not view themselves as criminals; rather, they saw themselves as good men fighting for the good of Germany if not the entire world. Alfons Heck, a former Hitler Youth leader and soldier, later acknowledged: “I never once during the Hitler years thought of myself as anything but a decent, honorable young German.” How could it be possible that any sane human being would allow themselves to commit the horrendous atrocities that became infamous during the course of the Second World War? When the dark secrets were exposed at the war’s conclusion, many soldiers experienced a convenient amnesia, believing they committed no crimes whatsoever. Denial controlled the thoughts of veterans who could not properly cope with their actions as young men. Many of these men believed wholeheartedly that they were serving their country to preserve Germany. If they were to believe that their actions had indeed been evil and barbaric, all purpose and sacrifice of their comrades would become frivolous. To a certain degree, the average soldier felt bitter and betrayed by Hitler at the war’s conclusion. Yet, it remains difficult to examine this controversial topic when so many of these supposedly innocent men did indeed murder millions. As Siegfried Knappe expressed in his memoirs:

Losing the war...preyed on my mind.... Being captured had always been a real possibility,... but surrendering our country?... I felt stunned now, almost as if I were in someone else’s bad dream. The war had shattered my life and left only a deep void.... It was a feeling of deep desperation.... I spent much of those first three weeks [in captivity] going over Germany’s experience of the previous six years. Where had we gone so wrong? ...I felt that Germany’s claim to the Rhineland, the Sudetenland, and the Polish Corridor had been justified.... Hitler annexed Austria as a result of a plebiscite by the Austrian people. I felt that our invasion of

222 Ibid., 220.
France had been justified because France had declared war on us.... It was only now beginning to dawn on me that our treatment of other nations had been arrogant, that the only justification we had felt necessary was our own.... I had unquestioningly accepted the brutal philosophy that might makes right; the arrogance of our national behavior had not even occurred to me at the time.... What had begun, at least in our minds, as an effort to correct the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles had escalated far beyond anything that any of us could have imagined. In retrospect, I realized that I, and countless others like me, had helped Hitler start and fight a world war of conquest that had left tens of millions of people dead and destroyed our own country. I wondered now whether I would ever have questioned these things if we had won the war. I had to conclude that it was unlikely. This was lesson taught by defeat, not by victory.223

Memoirs present the author with time to analyze and critique past actions and beliefs. As Knappe realizes, although too late, the claims of Nazi propaganda had betrayed their confidence in Hitler and the belief that soldiers as himself were fighting a noble effort to halt the spread of Bolshevism.

The effect Nazi propaganda had upon the average German soldier as well as the German people remains incredibly controversial. Daniel Goldhagen believes “eliminationist anti-Semitism was a German cultural cognitive model that predated Nazi political power, a committed anti-Nazi could be a committed, passionate racial anti-Semite. Killing the Jews was for many a deed done not for Nazism but for Germany.”224 This claim has outraged many veterans and Germans alike in the sense that it is a broad analysis and judgment of an entire nation. Interestingly, though, is the fact that popular opinion did in fact drive Nazi policies. As Goldhagen explains:

[T]he Nazis backed down when faced with serious, widespread popular opposition. Had the Nazis been faced with a German populace who saw Jews as ordinary human beings, and German Jews as their brothers and sisters, then it is hard to imagine that the Nazis would have proceeded, or would have been able to proceed, with the extermination of the Jews. If

224 Goldhagen, Hitler’s Willing Executioners, 399.
they somehow had been able to go forward, then the probability that the assault would have unfolded as it did, and that Germans would have killed so many Jews, is extremely low. The probability that it would have produced so much German cruelty and exterminatory zeal is zero. A German population roused against the elimination and extermination of the Jews most likely would have stayed the regime’s hand.\textsuperscript{225}

In other words, had the German populace taken a firm stand against the annihilation of Jews, the Holocaust might have been avoided.

Apathy and regret of conceivably being blamed, German society as a whole did nothing to even speak out against ruthless degradation and even massacre of the Jewish community. It is simple to place the entirety of blame upon Nazi officials who decided to force this on the people of Germany, but the citizens and even the members of Police Battalion 101 are also to be held liable. The average German should be accountable as well, for “those with knowledge who kept it to themselves, those who kept Nazi society working efficiently, those acquiescing in the anti-Jewish measures and the visible maltreatment and eventual disappearance of the Jews” have ultimately assisted the Nazis in their ultimate goal of attaining the perfect race.\textsuperscript{226} Perhaps hatred bred among Germans and the potential improvement of life was plenty to silently agree to these atrocities. People all over the German-controlled regions knew of the wrongdoings and, in short, did not attempt to alter the situation; rather, they assisted in the extermination as Eley conveys. Maybe the German citizens did not physically pull the trigger, but their complete apathy toward Jewish persecution leaves them holding much responsibility for the deaths of millions.

\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 418.
The people of Poland did attempt to oppose the Nazi regime by boycotting anything German. In addition, the Poles also created an underground court system that sentenced people with German affiliation to "pronounced judgments of infamy." The court commissioners did not sentence those offenders found guilty to death, but rather subjected the perpetrators to public ridicule by head-shavings for the women or floggings for the men. The resistance toward the German annexation unified the Poles by giving them hope in a desperate time of foreign occupation. Sabotage and malevolence to anything German was strongly encouraged and recommended. Acid and gas bombs were only some of the devises used to defy Germany, along with public ridicule of Hitler through satire also aided in the unification of the masses throughout Poland. Germans were born with a sense of loyalty to the state and were taught to loath any opposition. The Polish stand may have given the ordinary Germans motivation to do away with any anti-German behavior. Furthermore, this rationale might have been the justification the Police Battalions needed to obliterate everything non-German.

While Goldhagen remains a controversial individual, he does present an interesting point nonetheless. Therefore, was there any resistance in Germany to the murderous Nazi policies? The solution required all opposition to Hitler and the Nazi Party arrested and placed into camps charged with political crimes, initiating an era of fear. This process began in 1933 as Hitler gained power in Germany, which quickly rid Germany of any potential resistance sectors. In a political system where public opinion

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drove national policies, Hitler understood that it was imperative that he rid Germany of any direct opposition in order to pursue his goals unchallenged.

Nazi ideology played a prominent role in the murders of millions of Jews. Interestingly, as Lozowick explains, “the same ideology which condemned the Jews to death demanded absolute obedience from the murderers. Once the murderers convinced themselves that the interpretation of reality inherent in the ideology was indeed accurate, it may have been easier to act accordingly, to murder.”

The importance was that the end justified the means which required innocent blood to stain the hands of the SS and Wehrmacht. Benjamin Segalowitz proposes that the “German Army accommodated itself to the war of extermination that was waged in ideological guise.” Nazi ideology was followed blindly and justified by the perpetrators as a necessity for ultimate victory.

Germans, through years of Nazi propaganda, had been programmed to view the Jews as unworthy and unequal. “An enthusiasm to kill and remove the object provoking such fear” demonstrates the feelings of the Germans toward the Jews. By placing the enemy in such a twisted perspective, there originates a type of acceptance to such acts of violence that would result during the Nazi Third Reich. As Glass points out, “individuals serve an extermination process willingly because of belief in its legitimacy.”

Throughout years of paranoia distributed by the Nazi propaganda machine, many of these ordinary Germans believed they were truly serving their country and fellow comrades to make Germany greater for the pure race. Jews were perceived to be on the same level as lice, other grotesque insects and vermin that were threatening the German people and their

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229 Lozowick, 232.
230 Segalowitz, 13.
way of life.\textsuperscript{231} If the Jew was seen as dirty, then the urgency to cleanse the streets proved enormous. Many Germans believed that the Jew was similar to that of a disease which must be contained before it had the opportunity of infecting society. Hitler believed that “the Aryan race had become ill, that it had been rendered ill by the Jewish infection.”\textsuperscript{232} This attitude toward the Jews categorized them into sub humans not worthy of German presence. By removing this impurity of society, Germans could feel more secure knowing the unworthy Jew was extracted from the Aryan genetic pool.

\textsuperscript{231} Glass, 6, 81, 83.
Chapter 5:

Honor, Guilt, and the Myth of the Wehrmacht

Its [the Wehrmacht] virtues were magnified, its faults minimized...[I]n the minds of a great many historians, the wholesale murders by the Hitler regime were almost totally the work of the SS. The regular army was simply a helpless bystander to a crime it could do nothing to prevent. – John Mosier\textsuperscript{233}

Too many people learn about war with no inconvenience to themselves. They read about Verdun or Stalingrad without comprehension, sitting in a comfortable armchair, with their feet beside the fire, preparing to go about their business the next day, as usual. One should really read such accounts under compulsion, in discomfort, considering oneself fortunate not to be describing the events in a letter home, writing from a hole in the mud. One should read about war in the worst circumstances, when everything is going badly, remembering that the torments of peace are trivial, and not worth any white hairs. Nothing is really serious in the tranquility of peace; only an idiot could be really disturbed by a question of salary. One should read about war standing up, late at night, when one is tired, as I am writing about it now, at dawn, while my asthma attack wears off. And even now, in my sleepless exhaustion, how gentle and easy peace seems! – Guy Sajer\textsuperscript{234}

When a criminal law is violated through the execution of an official order, the issuing officer is solely responsible. However, the subordinate who obeys the order is subject to punishment as a participant:
1. if he exceeds the order he was given, or,
2. if it was known to him that the superior’s order concerned an act that had as its object a general or military crime or misdemeanor.\textsuperscript{235}

When the Second World War came to a conclusion in May 1945, Allied Forces discovered the horrors that Hitler’s Third Reich inflicted throughout Europe. The Nuremberg Trials encouraged the myth that the SS and Einsatzgruppen were the true

\textsuperscript{233} Mosier, 228.
\textsuperscript{234} Sajer, 223.
\textsuperscript{235} Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military, from the Military Penal Code (Participation).
culprits of genocide rather than the Wehrmacht. In essence, the Wehrmacht were allowed a free pass of sorts when explaining the criminal actions of the Nazi regime. The Hamburg Institute for Social Research released a controversial exhibition entitled *The German Army and Genocide* in March 1995. This presentation brought to light the fact that the Wehrmacht were not innocent or victims during the Second World War. As imagined, this exhibit was not received with open arms due to the fact that Germans had attempted to forget about their recent past and move on from the nightmare that was Hitler’s reign.

The German Army lived in a world of contradictions, such as the conception of honor. The brutal reality of the war presents an army full of dishonor for deeds that directly opposed the rules of war. The Eastern Front experienced the most intensive fighting where a mixture of perverse discipline and an encouragement of mass murders coincided. Yet, once this boundary was traversed there was no turning back. The Wehrmacht entered into a system of killing that was effectively orchestrated by the average German soldier.

At the war’s conclusion, a myriad of German veterans swore they knew nothing of the concentration camps or mass executions of civilians in occupied regions. Siegfried Knappe explains that “as a professional soldier, I could not escape my share of the guilt, because without us Hitler could not have done the horrible things he had done; but as a human being, I felt no guilt, because I had had no part in or knowledge of the things he had done.” In Knappe’s experience, he claimed to not have directly executed anyone, but does this dictate one’s own guilt by association with a criminal organization? He is correct in stating that without the cooperation of the Wehrmacht, Hitler would have been

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236 Knappe, 376.
unable to have even attempted the war of annihilation. News of executions traveled quickly throughout the ranks of the Wehrmacht, leaving few soldiers unaware. Mosier states that “If much of the alleged resistance to Hitler was, in reality, nothing more than passive-aggressive behavior, much of the behavior of Wehrmacht personnel at lower levels can be termed its opposite: a passive acceptance of behavior that was wicked and in most cases illegal. Although often unable to judge the meaning of what they observed, many soldiers were aware of what was happening.” 237 The problem remained in the fictionalized myth that the Wehrmacht were victims of Hitler; yet this passive bewilderment, if we are to believe that is what this was, inadvertently proved the guilt of the German military.

Some historians believe that it was the minority of German soldiers who were truly guilty of any crimes. John Mosier explains that eyewitnesses did not fear for their lives, but there was “little that observers could do about what they saw...simply because the individual often feels helpless to do anything about wrongdoing when it is clearly sanctioned by the institution itself.” 238 The average German soldier uninvolved would be left to complete their duties without interference because of the strong indoctrination of a domineering regime. To go against the commands of the Führer displayed disobedience in a military that was solely based on the understanding of completing one’s objective without question.

Those Germans in the High Command could not escape their association with a criminal institution. Albert Speer stated in his memoirs that he effectively enabled and empowered Hitler although he was not technically guilty of any crimes: “[A]nd yet- I

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237 Mosier, 238-239.
238 Ibid., 239-240.
drove with Hitler under those streamers and did not feel the baseness of the slogans being publicly displayed and sanctioned by the government. Once again: I suppose I did not even see the streamers...it even seems to me that my own ‘purity,’ my indolence, makes me guiltier.”

If Speer’s own guilt by association is any indication, then many of the soldiers who stood by while innocent civilians and unarmed POWs were executed are guilty in the pretext of their own inaction.

The difficulties and stresses experienced by many soldiers on the front enabled many to lose any humane inhibitions concerning mass murder. In this environment, obedience was the ultimate ruler for these men, even if the orders were considered criminal in hindsight. It was this atmosphere that allowed so many perpetrators to abandon any responsibility and personal guilt for their actions. Through the chaos of war, acceptance of murder and death was thrust into the normal daily activities. One unnamed Landser wrote after the war, “[A]s good soldiers we had to fulfill our hard duty.”

Continuing along these same lines of thoughts, another soldier confessed, “I had unquestioningly accepted the brutal philosophy that might makes right.”

It must be explained that this perspective reflects the utmost brutality of the Eastern Front. Another veteran of the Wehrmacht stated in an interview after the war:

I was...more inclined to say, alright, it’s not to your taste what they are expecting of you...but if from the point of view of the state and our philosophy this is required, well for God’s sake, you’ll have to do your duty, you must summon up the necessary understanding to say that this just has to be done. Fulfilling your duty is very close to the spirit of sacrifice...There were things where you simply accepted that you have to participate, because the whole thing, the collective purpose, just requires you to do it.241

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241 Meinecke and Skidmore, Examining the role of the German military.
In Russia, the rules of war were quickly abandoned by both sides who were equally determined to eliminate the opposing army.

Many soldiers felt they did not commit the horrendous atrocities that Germany was accused of during the war. One such soldier, Martin Poppel, persisted:

The vast majority of us were soldiers, often credulous soldiers, but not executioners and not monsters. We had been committed to Germany, but now we had to find new meaning in our lives. Each one of us would have to struggle alone for himself and his family, without being able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other soldiers, without the comradeship...to support us.... [P]ersonal responsibility, which the Führer took away from us, could no longer be avoided.

Poppel proposed that his fellow comrades were not murderers; rather, they acted in the best interest of Germany, which Hitler had recklessly manipulated. As news and reports of the brutal nature of the campaign became public, many of these soldiers were forced to deal with the repercussions of the Wehrmacht’s collective involvement. A Wehrmacht veteran who was interviewed after the war explained, “Well for me, being a soldierly person means encountering another man with a clean and decent attitude, it means representing viewpoints which conform with universal moral laws. But soldierliness also means showing...courage..., not in the sense that you are brave if you kill your enemy before he kills you, but as a strong inner conviction towards problems you encounter in private and personal life.” This insight from the veteran demonstrates how German soldiers believed they acted with honor and discipline during the course of the war, yet there is a tone of self-assurance.

The news of the concentration camps and atrocities committed by the Nazi regime resonated within the psyches of German soldiers. Siegfried Knappe sorrowfully:

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242 Fritz, 222.
243 Unknown soldier interview, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
We had thought of our participation in the war as noble and honorable... I was sickened by this news. I finally decided that my inability to come to terms with it was going to chip away at my mental and emotional strength... so I filed the issue away in a dark corner of my mind... I had to accept the fact that it happened... but I did not have to like it or discuss it... I could not escape my share of the guilt, because without us Hitler could not have done the horrible things he had done... but as a human being, I felt no guilt, because I had no part in or knowledge of the things he had done.²⁴⁴

This appears as a common belief in soldiers’ memoirs after the war.²⁴⁵ As mentioned earlier, this collective amnesia affected all participants in the German military. Yet, is it fair to judge all Germans for the actions of the minority, or, on the other hand, could this denial be attributed to psychological fear and pure disbelief? Another soldier, Alfons Heck pondered that:

[A] civilized, humane people had allowed ourselves to become indifferent to brutality committed by our own government... I developed a harsh resentment toward our elders, especially our educators. Not only had they allowed themselves to be deceived, they had delivered us, their children, into the cruel power of a new God... Tragically, now, we are the other part of the Holocaust, the generation burdened with the enormity of Auschwitz. That is our life sentence, for we became the enthusiastic victims of our Führer.²⁴⁶

According to Fritz and Wette, it appears that many soldiers, such as Heck, became entwined with a unique victim complex. Claus Hansmann expressed his perception as a victim in the following statement: “We are no heroes.... Heroes? What are we? Poor,

²⁴⁴ Knappe, 297-298.
²⁴⁵ Memoirs of Guy Sajer, Gottlob Herbert Bidermann, Siegfried Knappe, and Johann Voss believe they fought honorably during the course of the Second World War. For these veterans to state otherwise would indict their fallen comrades. Most of these memoirs claim innocence, yet there are points in each where a somber tone was expressed by the individual. Sajer was especially remorseful of his actions when dealing with partisans in Russia, asking repeatedly if he would ever be forgiven for his actions. Another common theme present in these memoirs is the bewilderment of the genocidal actions of the Nazi regime. Most of the men appear to have been genuinely shocked by the allegations of the criminal government to which Hitler controlled.
²⁴⁶ Fritz, 225-226.
mistreated, mutilated victims of a nightmare." In essence, these men did not necessarily apologize for the actions of the Third Reich; rather, they chose to feel sorry for themselves as the generation misled by an evil dictator and regime.

Who were these men who are now referred to as perpetrators? Daniel Goldhagen claims:

A perpetrator is anyone who knowingly contributed in some intimate way to the mass slaughter of Jews, generally anyone who worked in an institution of genocidal killing. This includes all people who themselves took the lives of Jews, and all those who set the scene for the final lethal act, whose help was instrumental in bringing about the deaths of Jews. So anyone who shot Jews as part of a killing squad was a perpetrator. Those who rounded up these same Jews, deported them (with knowledge of their fate) to a killing location, or cordoned off the area where their compatriots shot them were also perpetrators, even if they themselves did not do the actual killing. Perpetrators include railroad engineers and administrators who knew that they were transporting Jews to their deaths. They include any Church officials who knew that their participation in the identification of Jews as non-Christians would lead to the deaths of the Jews. They include the by now proverbial 'desk-murderer' (Schreibtischtäter), who himself may not have seen the victims yet whose paperwork lubricated the wheels of deportation and destruction.

Goldhagen makes the bold claim that anyone who enabled the execution of innocent civilians or POWs but did not technically pull the trigger was equally as guilty simply by their association with the Nazi regime. This troubling declaration effectively incriminates all those Germans, Austrians, Lithuanians, and other collaborators who aided the fighting force of Nazi Germany. Our perceptions of these killers requires a different perspective, one in which we understand that the men did not commit their crimes as robots. These individuals had families, were part of society, and performed daily routines of life. Recognizing these facts allows for a clearer comprehension of the perpetrators instead of

247 Ibid., 225-226.
248 Goldhagen, Hitler's Willing Executioners, 164.
labeling them as simplistic cogs of Nazi Germany. In addition, these men were capable of having a conscious and thus understood the difference between right and wrong.

To those German soldiers who sincerely believed they did not commit any crimes, an interesting belief surfaces. Guy Sajer, during his training with the elite Grossdeutschland Division, stated in his memoirs:

Two thousand miles to the west, people were complaining because at certain hours it was impossible to find anything to drink at the Paris bistros. It still makes me laugh to hear how bitterly this abstinence made them suffer. Throughout the war, one of the biggest German mistakes was to treat German soldiers even worse than prisoners, instead of allowing us to rape and steal- crimes which we were condemned for in the end, anyway.\(^{249}\)

Sajer thus takes a strong stand against the supposed guilt that he and his fellow comrades were accused. In a twist of bitter hopelessness, he adamantly denies the crimes that were attributed to German soldiers after the war’s conclusion. Yet, on one occasion when faced against partisan forces, Sajer explains a horrific scene that allows the reader to gain insight into the mind of the average German soldier:

Our Paks were now concentrating their fire on the area immediately surrounding the factory, and the job of cleaning up the people running from the gasoline dump was left to us. The fore-sight of my gun often disappeared in a swiftly moving Russian silhouette. A light pressure on the trigger, a puff of smoke, which for an instant veiled the end of my weapon, and my Mauser looked for another victim. Will I be forgiven? Was I responsible? That young muzhik, already wounded several times, more bewildered than anything else by the lethal uproar whose purpose was an obscure to him as it was to me, who stayed in my sights a moment too long and then tuned ashen and clutched his breast with both hands before making a half turn and falling face down onto the ground- shall I ever deserve pardon for that? Can I ever forget?\(^{250}\)

\(^{249}\) Sajer, 166.
\(^{250}\) Ibid., 234.
The remorse Sajer clearly feels is evident through his constant begging for forgiveness for his actions. Similar occurrences played out on a daily basis for the majority of German soldiers stationed in Russia.

The prospect of guilt weighed especially heavy upon those men involved with the SS. Throughout the war, SS units worked closely with the Wehrmacht. Johann Voss, a member of the Waffen-SS, reflected on his impressions of the concentration camps: “In the agonizing hours, especially at night, when haunted by those pictures, I realize all these people have been held in the custody of men who wore the uniform I wore myself, and that from then on the silver runes will symbolize the guilt for what has been unearthed and still might come to light.” Even though he never served in the concentration camps, fellow comrades in the Waffen-SS did. Interestingly, as the war came to an end and the allegations were doled out to the leaders of Nazi Germany, Voss makes a bold suggestion:

Now, today, I see more clearly how things will go. Aside from the political and military leadership of the Reich, the whole SS, including the combat units of the Waffen-SS, will be indicted as a criminal organization, charged with various war crimes. I don’t fully grasp the meaning of all those accusations, but I understand that we will all be held responsible for the terrible things that have become known. The members of these organizations will be prosecuted and convicted according to the provisions of the Charter of the Tribunal. So, it is official now: we are regarded as a gang of criminals.

From his analysis, the victim complex becomes apparent rather quickly in his own words. Almost in disbelief, Voss knows in his heart that the Third Reich was indeed guilty of the horrendous crimes associated with them, yet he stumbles into a sense of self-pity. Even more disheartening is his later analysis of his own past:

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251 Voss, 2.
252 Ibid., 2.
Again, as so many times before, I return to my memories of our past, a
past which is, they say, our burden of guilt and shame. In spite of all the
terrible reports connected with our name, however, I cling to my
memories with affection and without regret. They are, indeed, my comfort
and refuge, almost a sanctuary where I am safe: safe from drowning in the
sea of hatred and accusations; safe from the loss of self-respect and pride;
safe from that ultimate surrender. For there is nothing monstrous in my
memories of our unit’s past, no acts of crime or shameful deeds, or even
knowledge of the wicked deeds. What I have seen is the commitment of
youth who, in good faith, believed that Bolshevism was their common foe;
a cause that in their eyes was noble, even greater than mere patriotism
because it united young patriots from many countries of Europe. Their
selflessness knew no bounds, not even the boundary of death, as if the fate
of Europe was depending on them, on the individual volunteers as well as
on their combat groups and on the unit as a whole.253

This denial orchestrated by Voss was not an isolated occurrence. Many of the veterans
chose to blame others and feel victimized by the criminal regime to which they were
associated.

The concept of honor among the German military during the Second World War
presents a difficult area. Although there is much primary evidence to suggest brutal
atrocities toward civilians and POWs, memoirs written many years after the war’s
conclusion presents a skewed version of events. Johann Voss explains that “[w]e rated
loyalty very high among the human virtues; it was embossed on our belt buckles: ‘Meine
Ehre Heisst Treue,’ or ‘My Honor Is My Loyalty.’”254 He further explains his service and
his perception of honor among himself and comrades:

As I recall my time with the battalion on Russian territory, I can’t think of
any actions which could have tarnished our battalion’s honor. It is also my
firm belief that this notion is true of the other units. Like all the comrades I
knew, I was proud to serve with this division. Was it only good luck?
Would we have acted dishonorably if confronted with more difficult
situations other than plain combat where friend and foe were clearly
distinguished? I don’t know. I think our sense of honor wasn’t much
different from the sense of honor of any normal military unit. Nor did we

253 Ibid., 7.
254 Ibid., 166.
look down on the Russian soldier; how could we in the face of the battle of Sennozero or, for that matter, the bold encircling maneuver we had just experienced? I think the volunteers’ only ambition was to excel as good soldiers. What we probably had on both sides were human beings who didn’t want to die young, who loved and were loved, and who were ready to achieve something good in so far as they understood it.  

In this excerpt from his memoir Black Edelweiss, Voss claims that he acted in an appropriate manor dictated by military regulations. Was this the truth or has the truth become blurred in light of the Nuremberg proceedings? As Voss explains after the former indictment of the SS:

Coincidentally, early this month after a ten-month trial, the International Military Tribunal has pronounced its verdict and found the Waffen-SS, as part of the Allgemeine SS, guilty of being a criminal organization. So they’ve done it! So, under the law of the victors, the volunteers were a gang of criminals, and their dead have died in disgrace. Even those who were in combat all the time are still held responsible for crimes that happened elsewhere behind the lines, crimes that many survivors of their combat tours find difficult to accept as fact even today. The court, however, has stated that the knowledge of the crimes was general, that the criminal program of the organization was so widely known and implied a slaughter of such a colossal extent that their criminal activities must have been widely known by those who volunteered. Such is the construct of their culpability in the findings of the IMT.  

Therefore, the crimes of Nazi Germany indicted all those who served under the banner of the armed forces. More importantly, Voss states that “the verdict is meant to rob us of our honor, the very last value of which a defeated enemy can be deprived. ‘Ehre verloren, alles verloren.’ (‘Honor lost, all lost.’) Unconditional surrender was not enough; humiliation had to be added to make their victory complete.”

Former soldiers would not wish to admit guilt that would in turn harm their sense of wellbeing as well as

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255 Ibid., 146-147.
256 Ibid., 201.
257 Ibid., 201.
that of their comrades who died in combat. Major Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff’s report from December 1941 stated:

In all conversations of any length with officers, I was asked about the shootings of Jews, without having made any reference to them myself. I gained the impression that the officer corps is generally opposed, one could almost say, to the shooting of Jews, prisoners, and political commissars. In the case of the commissars it is mainly because killing them increases the strength of the enemy’s resistance. The shootings are regarded as bringing dishonor on the German army, and on the officer corps in particular. Officers brought up the question of responsibility for them, in stronger or less strong language depending on the individual’s temperament and disposition. I was able to ascertain that the existing facts have become known in full, and that the officers at the front discuss them far more than was to be assumed.\textsuperscript{258}

From this statement, it is possible to deduce that soldiers did indeed know of the atrocities committed on a daily basis from their comrades. However, honor was still maintained as a high prestige among soldiers on the front, yet this was tarnished as a result of their bloody actions toward POWs and civilians.

The families of soldiers presented members of the Wehrmacht with a motive for revenge. The bombing conducted by the Allies weighed heavily upon the average German soldier who was helpless to aid his family and friends. In a letter to Klaus Willems, the author states: “All life is in disorder. We had to move to the ditches at the barrack. Before we were there, we could have been killed by the bombs.... Fortunately no bombs fell.”\textsuperscript{259} In another example, Karl Wohlfarth’s family wrote to him of the terrible news concerning the aftermath of an air raid: “We just saw in the newspaper the attack yesterday on Braunschweig was a very strong Terrorangriff [“terror attack”, which described bombings] with apparently very heavy damage and many victims; [there] are

\textsuperscript{258} Wette, 200.
many dead and thousands of people are homeless.\textsuperscript{260} Upon hearing news of the conditions at home, soldiers were surely disheartened and strengthened to fight harder against enemy forces.

If we are to believe that the average German soldier realized the brutality of the regime, this would more than likely cause a tremendous strain on their psyches. Kurt Vogeler stated:

The world has seen many great, even violent wars, but probably at no time in its existence has there been a war that can be compared with this current one in Eastern Europe...The poor, unhappy Russian people! Its distress is unspeakable and its misery heart-rending...This era...knows nothing more of humanity. Brutal power is the characteristic of our century...What an unfortunate war is this human slaughter in Eastern Europe! A crime against humanity.\textsuperscript{261}

Another soldier, Heinz Küchler, explained the horrendous condition of the Eastern Front stating “all evidence of humanity appears to have disappeared in deed and in heart and in conscience.” Other soldiers commented upon the bombings of German cities where their families resided. Johannes Huebner stated simply, “Death is the wages of sin.” Harry Mielert agreed with this Huebner: “The quintessence appears to me to be that there is a punishment for a person...who does evil to others.” Private L.B. morbidly noted that “None will remain unpunished by this war, each will get his just desert, in the homeland as at the front.”\textsuperscript{262} Alfred Trost wrote “the homeland became the front than in the past war...still victims were added at lives and property...afflicted by hostile air terror.”\textsuperscript{263}

From these memoir and letter entries it becomes evident that the average German soldier


\textsuperscript{261} Fritz, 52.

\textsuperscript{262} Fritz, 52.

knew that the actions of Germany were illegal and that they would ultimately suffer a great reprisal from their enemies.

**The Myth of “Clean Hands”**

Answers to the extent of criminalization of the German Armed Forces remained difficult for many decades after the Second World War’s conclusion. Until fairly recently, historians and scholars alike have begun to unearth compelling evidence that the Wehrmacht was not as innocent as may have been perceived during the Cold War era. Wolfram Wette states that the beginning of the legend of the Wehrmacht’s “Clean Hands” began with Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz’s (Hitler’s successor) “Wehrmacht Report,” published on May 9, 1945. Dönitz writes:

> Since midnight the guns have been silent on all fronts. On the orders of the Grand Admiral the Wehrmacht has called a halt to the fighting, which had no prospect of success. This marks the end of almost six years of heroic struggle. Those years brought us great victories but also grave defeats. In the end the Wehrmacht succumbed honorably to a vastly great force.

> German soldiers fought bravely for their country, remaining loyal to their oath and performing acts of valor that will never be forgotten. They were supported until the end by those on the home front, who gave their all and made enormous sacrifices.

> The unparalleled achievement of those at the front and at home will be justly acknowledged by the later judgment of history.

> Nor will our opponents fail to show respect for the achievements and sacrifices of German fighting men on land, at sea, and in the air. Every soldier can thus stand proud and tall as he lays down his arms and can set to work with courage and confidence, in the darkest hours of our history, for the everlasting life of our people.

> The Wehrmacht pays homage in this dark hour to its comrades felled by the enemy. The fallen demand our unconditional loyalty, devotion, and discipline toward the fatherland, now bleeding from countless wounds.\(^{264}\)

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\(^{264}\) Wette, 205.
In remembering fallen comrades, the belief that the Wehrmacht were serving their country and not the Nazi regime served the purpose of dissociation from the atrocities of the Second World War.

After the conclusion of the war, the Allies set up a Historical Division to document the history of the Second World War. Ex-German officers, working from July 1945 to November 1961, produced roughly two hundred thousand written pages for the United States government describing the actions of the Wehrmacht which are now held in the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.\(^\text{265}\) However, crimes of the Wehrmacht were covered up with aid by Allies and ex-Wehrmacht leaders. During this time, communism threatened the United States and the rest of the democratic world. Thus, former Wehrmacht leaders were able to capitalize on the Cold War and express their original dislike for the Soviet Union. By explaining to their American captors, the ex-Wehrmacht generals were able to create a more self-serving view of themselves during the Second World War.

Former high-ranking officers of the Wehrmacht were thus presented with the opportunity to produce a legend with disregard to the facts of the war. Field Marshal von Küchler instructed his colleagues to follow a strict set of guidelines when writing their accounts of the war. Von Küchler stated: "It is German deeds, seen from the German standpoint, that are to be recorded; this will constitute a memorial to our troops.... [N]o criticism of measures ordered by the leadership was permitted; no one could be 'incriminated in any way,' and the achievements of the Wehrmacht were to be

appropriately highlighted. The convenient amnesia that many veterans suffered was thus born out of lies created by the Wehrmacht commanders. Former General Geyr von Schweppenburg boldly stated that it was even possible “to allow one or the other piece of incriminating evidence that could have been used at the Nuremberg trial to disappear. The Americans even helped out.” In a twist of fate, the authors of the Wehrmacht’s actions were presented freedom from censorship when scripting the actions of the German army during the war.

Other than the obvious reason of omission of guilt, why did the ex-Wehrmacht generals and officers feel the need to blur the historical record? As Wette explains, “the desire to cling to perceptions of a ‘clean’ Wehrmacht that had fought bravely and effectively was connected directly with German career soldiers’ self-image, since the military…tends to derive its legitimacy…from history.” Manfred Messerschmidt, chief historian at the Military History Research Institute, exposed the myth of the Wehrmacht, receiving much criticism from veterans’ organizations throughout Germany. The veterans claimed Messerschmidt damaged the German military’s honor as well as the reputation of the millions of German soldiers. General Secretary Körber of the Federation of German Veterans’ Organizations publicly stated that no such extermination campaign existed. He also stated that this behavior was extremely rare and not as widespread as Messerschmidt claimed. Körber explained further, “No one disputes that during the Second World War soldiers of the Wehrmacht committed crimes…. When such acts became known they usually led to sentencing of the offender by a court. If such regrettable instances are generalized and ascribed to the Wehrmacht as a whole…it amounts to discrimination….

266 Wette, 232-233.
267 Ibid., 232-233.
268 Ibid., 258.
Defaming German soldiers in general means the defamation of more than 11 million German men, many of whom sacrificed their lives or their health for our fatherland.269

The national amnesia of the Second World War was difficult to break through for Germans. It appears that veterans tended to dismiss claims such as Messerschmidt by claiming a general defamation to the honor of the dead. Yet, it appears that many of these same veterans display intense emotions concerning their actions of more than sixty years ago. Why would these men wish to have the truth of the Wehrmacht silenced? The answer lies in the fact that their pasts are a dark chapter in German history and the twentieth century to which none wish to revisit.

The German collective memory of the Third Reich became warped after the war. As Omer Bartov explains,

The distorted features of the tortured and butchered served as evidence of their own, rather than of their murderers’ inhumanity; the sense of moral outrage and physical disgust they aroused produced a powerful desire for revenge, which by a process of inversion was directed at the victims rather than the perpetrators, that is, the ‘other’ rather than oneself, for it was their presence which had made such atrocities necessary, their evident inhumanity which had revealed one’s own barbarity. Hence, only by physically annihilating the victims and erasing their memory could one salvage one’s won humanity.270

Much of this distortion came from years of propaganda that aimed at dehumanizing the enemy to create a necessity for their destruction. It was only after Germany’s defeat that many veterans finally realized the criminal actions of the Nazi regime. One individual who served as a junior officer in Poland and Russia stated forty years after the war:

“Well, of course, what they [the Nazis, rather than “us,” the Wehrmacht] did to the Jews was revolting. But we were told over and over again that it was a necessary evil...No, I

269 ibids., 266-267.
270 Bartov, Hitler’s Army, 107-108.
must admit, at the time I had no idea we had fallen into the hands of criminals. I didn’t realize that until much later, after it was all over.\textsuperscript{271} Even in the years after the war, this particular individual still associates the criminal actions specifically with the Nazis, conveniently deleting himself from the situation.

Without the help of the Wehrmacht, Hitler could never have unleashed the hellish treatment of civilians and POWs. The myth propagated by ex-Wehrmacht generals popularized the claim that it was the SS and the hardcore Nazis who committed the criminal directives during the war. This falsehood withstood almost five decades of the twentieth century until historians began analyzing letters and correspondence from ex-Wehrmacht soldiers. The fact that Nazi propaganda had completely infiltrated the Wehrmacht emphasizes the reality that more soldiers knew what was occurring on the front lines. Megargee stresses the essential information that Hitler could never have wreaked so much death and destruction if it was not for the aid of the Wehrmacht.

When the papers were submitted to the United States Army, the Wehrmacht generals and officers had successfully omitted any reference to war crimes committed by their military. In this way, they had the final word on the Wehrmacht’s performance during the war, creating a far different perception of reality. With no mention of criminal activities, the popular myth of “clean hands” became an accepted truth of history. Pride and defiance proved too great for these men to admit the instances of their military’s illegal conduct during the war. As Wood explains:

They [high-ranking German POWs] decried the ‘defamation’ of the Wehrmacht in postwar Germany and pointed to their 1934 oath of obedience to the Führer in explaining their powerlessness to counteract Hitler’s foolish decisions. It is also possible to find evidence in these reports that the impending war crimes tribunals weighed heavily upon

\textsuperscript{271} Ibids., 165.
what was written in these manuscripts.... The inescapable conclusion indicated by these reports is that even after 1945, when the magnitude of Germany's crimes should have been dawning on the authors, they steadfastly refused to examine their own roles in supporting the state that perpetrated these crimes.\textsuperscript{272}

Whether it was for fear of imprisonment or incrimination upon the millions of Germans killed in action, the authors were able to convolute the truth and save themselves any further embarrassment after a military defeat.

\textsuperscript{272} Wood, 136.
Conclusion

The Wehrmacht was in fact an invaluable asset to Hitler during the course of the Second World War. Without the unquestioning loyalty and dedication from the soldiers, the Nazis could never have waged war throughout Europe. The German Army was the backbone of the German war machine, yet for the most part they were equally as indoctrinated in Nazi ideology as members of the elite SS divisions. This conclusion may indeed be shocking, but there is ample evidence via letters and memoirs that suggest this result. The primary reason this is difficult to accept is due to the rewriting of history by the Wehrmacht generals and leaders at the conclusion of the war. They chose to place emphasis upon the fanatical Nazis, the SS, and the Einsatzgruppen so that their military record would appear clean. Therefore, the myth of innocence emerged which remained for decades until the 1990s.

Much of the reason Hitler was able to gain so much support throughout Germany dealt with his ability to blame the Allied powers for the turbulent times during the 1920s. When Hitler obtained power in 1933 an entire generation of Germans entered into the Hitler Youth programs which indoctrinated them for service to Nazi Germany. These individuals admired Hitler as a father figure and willingly accepted his views on Bolsheviks, Jews, and the Allies. The final product was individuals who believed in the annihilation of Jews, Slavs, and anyone else who was not of pure Aryan race. After years of indoctrination and propaganda directed toward an entire generation, it is not surprising that so many Germans would later commit horrible atrocities against the Polish, Russian and other European populations.
A primary argument of Omer Bartov, John Mosier, and Niall Ferguson explains that the men of the Wehrmacht were not innocent at all. *Landsers* actively embraced and believed in Nazi ideals and goals. As Bartov concludes, the soldiers "fought for Nazism and everything that it stood for."\(^{273}\) When understanding German history during the twentieth century, it becomes clear that it would have been almost impossible for an average German not to participate in Nazi activities. Due to the idealistic and noble causes Hitler placed before all of Germany, it was normal for many average soldiers not to doubt their role in extinguishing the threat of Bolshevism from the Soviet Union. In destroying the evil hordes from the East, German soldiers were encouraged by their commanders to deal swiftly and ruthlessly with those classified as *Untermenschen*. Presently, historians and researchers are able to obtain orders from Hitler and Wehrmacht leaders that state the necessity to approach Operation Barbarossa with extreme prejudice and without mercy toward the Jewish-Bolshevik threat.\(^{274}\) Due to this incriminating evidence, it becomes much more difficult to view the Wehrmacht in a more positive perspective.

It is difficult to argue on the side of innocence for the majority of German soldiers. The difficult truth is that many of these individuals either witnessed or actively participated in executions of civilians, Jews, and POWs. From the available historical sources, many eyewitnesses claim to have viewed such heinous acts but refused to act in defense of those suffering at the hands of their comrades. Yet, even after stating this, it is vital to understand that these men were indeed human beings instead of soulless murderers. These men had families and faced death on a daily basis on the Eastern Front.

\(^{273}\) Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 182.
\(^{274}\) Wette, 94.
This is not to excuse them but rather to form a more complete understanding for the circumstances surrounding German soldiers during the war. However, this analysis allows researchers and historians to gain more insight into the situation for soldiers of the Wehrmacht.

The Wehrmacht was indeed guilty of crimes against civilians, prisoners of war, partisans, Jews, and anyone else considered as Untermenschen. Letters from the front demonstrate the immensity of hatred directed at those individuals not accepted by Nazi Germany. These sources present direct evidence of opinions and actions directed at the time which are invaluable to historians. Memoirs, on the other hand, present the soldiers’ opinions long after the conclusion after the war and the criminal trials at Nuremberg. The authors of these works rarely incriminate the German military on the grounds of a complex social amnesia that appeared to inflict many veterans after the war. Memoirs also allow the men to change facts to create a more positive perspective of events they experienced, creating a myth all their own.

Through his painstaking evaluation of the German soldiers in Russia, Stephen Fritz concludes that these men were indoctrinated within their ranks. He admits that they fought courageously in the face of brutal conditions, yet the fact does remain that the average soldier in the Wehrmacht was Nazified.275 Fritz’s research is interesting in that he attempts to empathize with the average German combatant by examining several men at a grass-roots level. However, he ultimately comes to the similar conclusion of Bartov, Mosier, Wette, and other authors that the average Wehrmacht soldier was more indoctrinated than was originally accepted by the historical community.

275 Fritz, 242.
Most families throughout Germany sent at least one soldier to the front. These soldiers returned with brutal images of war as well as a distorted image of military discipline. As Bartov and Wolfram Wette discuss, these attributes ultimately added to the general German national amnesia when discussing the Second World War. The murdered and mistreated victims of brutality during the Russian campaign were widely forgotten, replaced by a victim complex developed by German veterans who later cried foul from the Nazi government. When former Wehrmacht generals were permitted to write their accounts of the German military during the Second World War, they chose to blame the SS and Einsatzgruppen forces. Thus, these ex-generals effectively altered the historical record for decades until the early 1990s. The realities of events from the war were finally revealed in the controversial exhibit from the Hamburg Institute for Social Research entitled *The German Army and Genocide* released in March 1995. With photographic and written evidence, there was much guilt associated with the average German soldier. This display deeply upset veterans as well as Germans as a whole, who had not accepted the bitter truth of the Second World War.

During the initial stages of this research, I was unknowingly well-associated with the myth of the clean hands of the Wehrmacht. However, the more research I conducted, the more disturbing and incriminating evidence was uncovered. It is impossible to disagree with the true historical record as understood at this juncture in time. The Wehrmacht were indeed guilty of horrendous crimes against Russian POWs, civilians, Jews, and anyone else described as *Untermenschen*. Yet, the immensity of this topic allows for the work to never end, especially with the reluctance of many to accept the fact that Germany did in fact commit crimes against humanity. The letters involved in this
analysis represent a minute amount of the total material written during the course of the Second World War. Debates present an interesting forum in which historians and members of the public can discuss this difficult issue. Through these conversations hopefully more individuals will understand the necessity of learning about this difficult time period in Germany’s recent history.
Appendix 1

War Crimes Definition According to OSS: Problems Concerning the Treatment of War Criminals, September 28, 1944

Definition of “War Crime”
...A war criminal would...be a person who had violated the rules of warfare. Such a definition would present operational difficulties, because practice among nations has not crystallized sufficiently to remove the possibility for disputes as to the contents of the definition. Further, if positive international law alone were to serve as the substantive law for the purposes of punishment of war criminals, it would be impossible to punish the superior officers and, in many cases, even those who have committed the crimes. It would seem, therefore, that such a definition would not efficiently serve the purposes of the United Nations as expressed in the Statement.

Need for a Policy Directive. In order to secure more adequate definitions of the persons to be treated as war criminals, it may therefore be desirable to have a policy directive fixing the offenses which are to be treated as war crimes...It is therefore suggested that this basis would make possible a policy directive clearly establishing the following acts as war crimes:

a. shooting hostages;
b. forcible deportation of civilian population;
c. spoliation of civilian population, as by expropriations, pillage, etc.;
d. maltreatment of prisoners of war or civilian internees;
e. collective reprisals, such as the killing of the inhabitants of a town or other groups, who have been made collectively responsible for an individual hostile act or the burning of villages for similar reasons (Lidice may be termed an example for such action);
f. atrocities against whole groups in pursuance of a general program of annihilation, such as the massacre of Jews, the maltreatment of special categories of persons because of their political or religious convictions (Communists, Socialists, pacifists, Jehovah’s Witnesses) or because of their standing in the community (intellectuals, for example).

Such a directive, if issued by the United Nations, would make plain the scope which the United Nations intend to assign to war crimes and would afford an efficient basis for uniform tripartite action.

B. Definition of War Criminal

A large number of persons have been directly or indirectly involved in such crimes. Declarations hitherto issued by the United Nations do not sufficiently indicate the principles according to which responsibility of such individuals shall be established.

1. Establishment of Responsibility. Under traditional legal procedure, punishment for crime is predicated upon the establishment of individual responsibility for the criminal act. By referring to persons who ‘have been responsible for or have taken a consenting part in’ war crimes, the Moscow Statement suggests a broader interpretation of the concept of responsibility than it has traditionally received.
The issue would thus seem to have become whether, in case of a massacre of Jews in a concentration camp, all the hierarchical superiors of the executing Gestapo squad, from the district Gestapo chief up to Himmler himself, as Reich Leader SS and Chief of the German Police, may be held responsible, even when no specific order for the commission of the act can be found. Or again, whether, in case of the shooting of hostages, the superior officers up to the Army High Command may be held responsible, even though no specific confirmation of the order is found.

The answer, if any, would seem to lie, not in the traditional channels through which criminal responsibility is established but rather in the nature of the Nazi state. According to the peculiar structure of Nazi organization and to the ‘leadership principle’ which controls all relationship between members of official organizations, the hierarchical superior is responsible for whatever happens within the functional and territorial sphere of his jurisdiction. Hitler or his associates lay down fundamental policies but delegate full discretion in their execution to their subordinates in various fields. Since each subordinate has his own share in the elaboration and execution of a given policy, the plea that he had no knowledge of a specific act or the details of its execution or that he did not order it should not be available to him.

In other countries such a defense would usually be valid, because acts of officials are lawful only if authorized by the law of the land, which establishes clear-cut standards for action. Consequently, any excess is attributable to the individual officer and not to his superiors. Under the Nazi system, however, in addition to the wide freedom of action left to subordinates as just stated, various agencies and organizations (for example, the SS) are exempt from legal limitations. No curbs are placed upon their activities. Under this combination of circumstances, the only admissible defense would seem to consist in the proof that the person against whom the charge is preferred did all in his power to prevent the act or its repetition or, in the case of administrative officers, that, having been unable to prevent the act, he resigned immediately after its commission.

2. Superior Orders. It may be desirable to bring to justice not only the instigators of a crime but also those who took part in its immediate execution. The latter may, however, be expected to raise the defense that they acted under binding orders from their superiors.

The plea of superior orders has been widely discussed in connection with military orders but little agreement has been achieved. While many army manuals, - among them, the American, - admit the plea without exception; others favor its admission only under narrowly defined conditions, if at all.

Since the authoritarian structure of the Nazi regime makes individual resistance against orders more dangerous and consequently less to be expected than elsewhere, a general prohibition of the plea does not seem warranted. Such a plea should not be considered in the case of those who have a certain amount of discretion in the execution of a policy. It might, however, be pressed by persons who acted under specific orders which left no individual choice. The individual member of an army firing squad detailed to shoot hostages might well risk his life if he refused to obey. While the same justification might apply to members of Party formations, any policy statement issued by the United States or the United Nations might well require as a preliminary test whether or not the person in question enlisted voluntarily. In the case of the SS, it might be borne in mind that enlistment was voluntary until 1943. In case of voluntary enlistment, the
person might be presumed to have had full knowledge of the functions and practices of
the organization and should not be allowed to avoid his share of responsibility.

It may well be argued that crimes, such as the persecution of Jews or political
opponents, committed in the execution of the general Nazi programs, should be
considered as war crimes, even when committed against Axis nationals or stateless
persons in Axis territory. It may not, however, be feasible for Allied municipal or
military courts to try such cases. It is probably that such cases would most
advantageously be brought before the reconstituted German courts. Punishment of Nazi
crimes by German courts would, it is submitted, go far to prove to the German people and
the whole world that Germany repudiates the crimes of its former leaders."

Statement on Atrocities
Signed by President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and Premier Stalin

The United Kingdom, the United States and the Soviet Union have received from
many quarters evidence of atrocities, massacres and cold-blooded mass executions which
are being perpetrated by Hitlerite forces in many of the countries they have overrun and
from which they are now being steadily expelled. The brutalities of Nazi domination are
no new thing, and all peoples or territories in their grip have suffered from the worst form
of government by terror. What is new is that many of these territories are now being
redeemed by the advancing armies of the liberating powers and that in their desperation
the recoiling Hitlerites and Huns are redoubling their ruthless cruelties. This is now
evidenced with particular clearness by monstrous crimes on the territory of the Soviet
Union which is being liberated from Hitlerites and on French and Italian territory.

Accordingly, the aforesaid three Allied powers, speaking in the interests of the
thirty-two United Nations, hereby solemnly declare and give full warning of their
declaration as follows:

At the time of granting of any armistice to any government which may be set up
in Germany, those German officers and men and members of the Nazi party who have
been responsible for or have taken a consenting part in the above atrocities, massacres
and executions will be sent back to the countries in which their abominable deeds were
done in order that they may be judged and punished according to the laws of these
liberated countries and of the free governments which will be therein. Lists will be
compiled in all possible detail from all these countries, having regard especially to
invaded parts of the Soviet Union, to Poland and Czechoslovakia, to Yugoslavia and
Greece, including Crete and other islands; to Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands,
Belgium, Luxembourg, France and Italy.

Thus, Germans who take part in wholesale shooting of Italian officers or in the
execution of French, Dutch, Belgian or Norwegian hostages or of Cretan peasants, or
who have shared in slaughters inflicted on the people of Poland or in territories of the
Soviet Union which are no being swept clear of the enemy, will know they will be
brought back to the scene of their crimes and judged on the spot by the peoples whom
they have outraged. Let those who have hitherto not imbued their hands with innocent
blood beware lest they join the ranks of the guilty, for most assuredly the three Allied
powers will pursue them to the uttermost ends of the earth and will deliver them to their
accusers in order that justice may be done.
The above declaration is without prejudice to the case of the major criminals whose offenses have no particular geographical localization and who will be punished by joint decision of the governments of the Allies.
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