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

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Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front

The German Infantry’s War, 1941–1944

Jeff Rutherford

Wheeling Jesuit University
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Acknowledgments

The completion of this manuscript would have been impossible without the support of numerous institutions and individuals. Funding granted by the German American Exchange Service (DAAD) in 2004–5 allowed my family and myself to spend ten months in Freiburg and Berlin, where I completed the bulk of my research. Several Foreign Language and Area Study (FLAS) grants gave me the opportunity to learn Russian during my graduate study at the University of Texas, while a West Virginia Humanities Council fellowship supported my writing.

I wish to thank the archivists and staffs at the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg im Breisgau; the Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfeld; the Feldpostarchiv in the Berlin Museum für Kommunikation; the Deutsche Dienstelle, Berlin; the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin; the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte, Stuttgart; the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland; and the United States Holocaust Museum and Memorial Archive, Washington, DC. Everyone I worked with was extremely helpful in answering questions and facilitating my research.

I have been fortunate to study under numerous talented historians during my undergraduate and graduate career. These include Kenneth Straus and the late George H. Stein at Binghamton University; H. Peter Krosby and Dan White at SUNY Albany; and Charters Wynn, W. Roger Louis, Tracy Matysik, and Jim Boyden at the University of Texas. The most important person in guiding me through the labyrinth of graduate school and academia has been David Crew. His advice and encouragement were indispensable to completing the project. He was everything a dissertation adviser should be and I am privileged to now call him a friend.

At Wheeling Jesuit University, Leslie Liedel, Donna Simpson, and Dan Weimer have provided a welcoming professional home and Dan in particular has encouraged my research. The Wheeling Jesuit librarians, particularly Barb Julian, have done yeoman’s work in locating books I requested through interlibrary loan.

At Cambridge University Press, I thank my editor Michael Watson for his assistance in completing this project; his early encouragement as well as his patience in answering my numerous queries has not been overlooked. The two reader reports and that of the Cambridge Editorial Board were extremely useful in forcing me to sharpen my argument and their criticisms and suggestions have hopefully made this a much stronger work.

Four other individuals have been instrumental in completing this study. I had the privilege of working with two outstanding scholars in Alex J. Kay and David Stahel on another project and each of them provided trenchant commentary on the sections of my manuscript that they read. Both are model historians and discussions over the years with each of them have helped me formulate my ideas. Ben Shepherd gave me my first opportunity to present my research and has been enormously supportive of this project. His valuable criticisms and suggestions have greatly improved the final version in innumerable ways and I am extremely grateful for his assistance. Adrian Wettstein has been my closest professional collaborator over the past decade; his encyclopedic knowledge of German military history and his intellectual rigor have challenged my assumptions and forced me to rethink numerous issues. Of course, all errors remain my responsibility.

A special debt of gratitude is owed to my family. My father first piqued my interest in the Second World War and both he and my mother have always encouraged me in my career. Pursuing a career in the humanities in this era is neither financially profitable nor socially valued; their shared belief in the importance of education and knowledge, however, sustained me during my studies. I cannot thank them enough. My son Ryan was
Acknowledgments

six months old when we moved to Germany for my initial research and my daughter Rachel was born as I was completing the dissertation. Both have grown up with this project and their laughter and joy have provided cheerful distractions from its grim topic. Finally, my wife Bridget has listened to more discussions about the German infantry than any person should have to endure. Her patience and support cannot be measured; I dedicate this book to her in love and gratitude.