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978-0-521-71231-6 - The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture

Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II

Excerpt

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Introduction

For most Americans, the Western Front – defined as North Africa, Italy and France, and western Germany – was decisive in defeating Nazi Germany during World War Two. After all, this was the arena in which our military dominated in terms of manpower, material, and planning. It was the front that received the most exhaustive coverage in the media, despite thorough wartime reporting from Russia. It was from this front that the names, which would highlight our struggle, echo down through several generations – Kasserine Pass, Anzio, Normandy, Huertgen Forest, the Bulge. And it was this long series of military engagements that would figure most dramatically in postwar presentations – right down to today. Television series such as *Combat* during the 1960s featured American soldiers defeating Germans on a weekly basis. Movies, most notably *The Longest Day*, *Patton*, and *The Battle of the Bulge*, reminded Americans dramatically of the triumphs of U.S. arms. A stream of books from *Company Commander* to *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* gave the general public detailed accounts of our wartime exploits. Media fascination with World War Two gained renewed impetus in the 1990s, as we commemorated various fiftieth anniversary events. Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* celebrated and romanticized in print and on television those rapidly disappearing men and women who saved the world from Hitler. *Saving Private Ryan* brought the same message to movie audiences and *Band of Brothers* continues to do so on television as we enter the twenty-first century. A controversial monument in Washington, DC, enshrines our wartime triumphs in stone. But one looked in vain during those celebrations for any mention of the Soviet contribution to victory in Europe. Even the D-Day fiftieth commemorations in 1994, appropriate in their extensiveness, largely failed to mention that a gigantic Soviet offensive unleashed on June 22, 1944, took enormous pressure off Americans, who still had not broken out of the Normandy Pocket. This omission is all the more unfortunate in light of the fact that it was Soviet arms that really broke

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the German army, no less than 80 percent of which was fighting on the Eastern Front. Even those Americans with a passing familiarity with the war in Russia have insisted that the Red Army only triumphed because of enormous supplies sent to them by America through the Lend Lease program.

Only recently have the widespread awareness of the Holocaust and revelations about the barbaric depredations of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) and its *Einsatzgruppen* altered this fundamental misunderstanding. Still, the legacy of the Cold War and all it entailed – fighting the evil empire with the Germans as our friends and allies – continues to cast its spell on American perceptions of World War Two in the East. Those who have taken the trouble to learn about that titanic struggle, ironically enough, tend to view it, not as the agony and eventual triumph of an important ally, but rather through the lenses of our common enemy.

The thesis of this book is that from the early 1950s on, Americans were uncommonly receptive to a view of World War Two as it was fought in Russia that was remarkably similar to that of many Germans, particularly leading circles of former German military and even National Socialists. In fact, this view of the war in the East in many respects contained elements of the Nazi worldview as applied to this theater of the war.

That it was possible for Americans to adopt the outlook of their late enemies on a crucial theater of World War Two to the detriment of their former allies derives in part from the imperatives of the Cold War. After all, if the Germans were not only to be our friends, but also our armed allies, it was important to erase at least some aspects of the recent war from the public memory and to revise the terms of discussion of other aspects, particularly with regard to our new enemy – and former ally – the Soviet Union.

Many Germans stood ready to help us in this regard, and they had certain advantages in doing so. For one, we had a long record of anti-Communism, which pre-dated World War Two, and therefore an established antipathy toward the Russians, which was easily revived after that conflict was over. Toward the Germans, Americans had always had a deeply ambivalent attitude. During wartime, negative sentiments readily emerged. In more normal times, the wellspring of positive attitudes was just as easily recalled and used to shape the public outlook (with the surviving negative ones attaching themselves exclusively to Hitler and the Nazis). Large segments of the American public also harbored certain attitudes, among them cultural, economic, racial, and aesthetic, which bore a disturbing similarity to those of fascism in general and Nazism in particular, which could be tapped in shaping a new view of the war in the East. Finally, by the 1950s, Americans, who, during the war, had followed events in Russia on a day-to-day basis, remembered little about the

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Eastern Front and were thus open to new interpretations, which faced little competition in becoming established.

These factors permitted opinion-making members of the former German military, busy creating their own mythologies about World War Two, to take advantage of the Cold War climate to work on their receptive American “friends” and colleagues. This book is the story of how the Germans, through a network of former high Wehrmacht officers and Bundeswehr officers who had served in World War Two, created in the minds of the American military, then journalists and popular writers, an interpretation of World War Two in the East disturbingly similar to that projected by Hitler’s regime during the war itself and that left the Wehrmacht with a largely “clean” reputation as to its conduct of that war. This view, which the Americans gradually absorbed during the 1950s, continues in the popular literature and part of the media to this day, and indeed delineates a broad subculture of general readers, German military enthusiasts, war game aficionados, military paraphernalia collectors, and reenactors.

Clearly, academic scholarship in America has always studied the war in Russia. During the past thirty years, scholars have gradually exposed the role of all the agencies of Nazi Germany, including the military, in Hitler’s war of racial enslavement and extermination in the East. Still, mainstream academic scholarship has focused on a narrow spectrum of professorial readers and has ignored the general public, whose views were shaped by German writers and their sympathizers.

To be sure, awareness of the Holocaust is quite widespread today. Yet this awareness seems to be compartmentalized in the minds of many Americans, who continue to admire the German performance in Russia during World War Two despite the obvious involvement of the German military in the crimes of the regime.

As our research reveals, a more specific American subculture composed of military officers, historians employed by the military, and popular historians has really succeeded in shaping the broad popular view of the German military. This view makes the German army appear as if it had operated independently of the genocidal policies and practices of the Nazi regime in the East and only played the traditional role of a military force fighting honorably for its country. Indeed, given our view of the Russians, which quickly emerged early in the Cold War, the Wehrmacht is often viewed on a heroic scale, as if its role in Russia were only a prelude to our own struggle against Soviet Communism. In this context, the defeat of the German army in 1945 *on the Eastern Front* shapes up to have been something approaching a tragedy. Indeed, one can observe in this popular literature something very close to a “lost cause” romanticism that, in

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many respects, parallels that which appeared in the United States decades after the Civil War with respect to the Confederate cause. The South lost the Civil War on the battlefield, but, in many ways, won it in the history books and in the popular imagination. With regard to a sizable number of Americans, this also appears to be the case with the Nazi war against the Soviet Union.

Given the dramatic change in historical memory initiated during the Cold War, it is necessary to look at how familiar Americans were with the war on the Eastern Front during World War Two itself. In Chapter 1, we review the very extensive, indeed ubiquitous, coverage aimed at Americans of the war in Russia. This coverage ranged from newspapers, magazines, books, and movie newsreels to popular radio programs and mass rallies and collections. Americans were quite familiar with the campaigns in the East from the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, to the capture of Berlin in May 1945. Russian leaders, including Stalin and a number of top Soviet generals, were household names for Americans. By the end of the war, Americans were nearly as familiar with the German-Russian war as that of our own.

Chapter 2 deals with the changing historical perspectives wrought by the Cold War. Within a short time, as the Cold War broke out, the memory of the Eastern Front in World War Two began to fade. As we made the psychological shift from viewing the Russians as allies to seeing them as (potential) enemies and the Germans from enemies to clients and, eventually, allies, a conscious attempt was undertaken to change the historical memory of the American public; to create a “lost cause” myth with regard to the Eastern Front, one that cast the German army in the role of a heroic adversary to the Communist monolith. Former German generals were more than happy to help create the myth – especially Franz Halder, whom we discuss in some detail.

Chapter 3 continues this story by examining the so-called Halder group, which, commissioned by the U.S. army, provided us with hundreds of studies, especially of the war in Russia, as seen from the German perspective. We, who were facing a possible land war with the Soviet Union, were an eager audience. Later, ties were cemented with former German officers through a complex network of relationships throughout the 1950s and 1960s, particularly among the Bundeswehr, the West German army, and U.S. forces in Germany, and the myth achieved wider popularity. The chapter concludes with parallels between the myth creation during the Cold War and that undertaken, also for political reasons, in the United States after the Civil War, in order to reintegrate the white American South back into the Union on the grounds of a heroic “lost cause” fought by the Confederacy.

Chapter 4 examines how the myth of the “clean” Wehrmacht in the East during the Second World War was brought to the general public in the United

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States by a series of widely selling memoirs, written by former German generals such as Erich von Manstein, Heinz Guderian, Hans Rudel, Hans von Luck, and others, as well as novels, such as those by Swen Hassel, and popular histories like those written by Paul Carell. The chapter also debunks many of the myths, especially those propagated by Manstein and Carell. It concludes by examining the revival of Wehrmacht popularity, especially in the U.S. military after the debacle in Vietnam. We felt, once again, that the Germans had valuable things to tell us, both regarding how to maintain the integrity of an army in wartime and how to defend against a possible Russian attack in the revived Cold War of the 1980s. This new popularity of and respect for the Wehrmacht seeped out into the broader culture and created the foundation for popular activities that fascinate several American subcultures to the current day – such as wargaming, reenacting, Internet websites, and chatrooms.

If Chapter 4 examines and debunks the myths developed by the German generals, Chapter 5 explores more specifically just what messages the German generals in their earlier publications, as well as lower-ranking officers and ordinary German soldiers in more recent memoirs, were trying to communicate to a broader American audience.

Chapter 6 examines the gurus. These authors, mostly but not exclusively American, have picked up and disseminated the myths of the Wehrmacht in a wide variety of popular publications that romanticize the German struggle in Russia. The gurus, men like Mark Yerger, Richard Landwehr, Marc Rijkmanspoel, and Franz Kurowski, who insist on authenticity in their writings, combine a painfully accurate knowledge of the details of the Wehrmacht, ranging from vehicles to uniforms to medals, with a romantic heroicization of the German army fighting to save Europe from a rapacious Communism. There is little in the way of historical context in the writings of these men. They honor particularly the soldiers of the Waffen-SS, without bothering to tell us of the war of racial enslavement and annihilation these men pursued in the East.

In Chapter 7, we examine the popular culture of what we have termed the “romancers,” that is, a wide subculture of Americans who have embraced the message of the gurus and indulge in wargaming and Internet chatting to a degree that reveals an identification with the values of courage, honor, and self-sacrifice they see in the German soldier of World War Two. The romancers also show an alienation from what is viewed as the crass materialism, selfish egotism, and moral ambiguities of the current world.

The book concludes with Chapter 8, which investigates similar people who choose to more actively carry out their fantasies of the “clean” Wehrmacht by donning the uniforms of their heroes and spending weekends and vacations in reenactments. They, like the gurus and other “romancers,” also insist on

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authenticity in uniforms, equipment, and organization. One authenticity they lack is that of historical accuracy; they also dream of a different outcome of World War Two, if only the mistakes made by Hitler, but never the generals, could have been avoided. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of “what-if-history,” like that written by R. H. S. Stolfi, which envisions the possibility of a German victory in the East under different circumstances. The “what-if” histories fuel the imaginations of the romancers in all the subcultures.

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1 Americans Experience the War in Russia, 1941–1945

Opening: The Story of the First Russian–American Encounter

On April 25, 1945, an American patrol in the small town of Leckwitz, Germany, learned from freed Allied prisoners of war (POWs) that the Russian army was in the immediate neighborhood. Shortly, the GIs came upon a young Russian cavalryman who told them Soviet troops were on the eastern bank of the Elbe. The Americans crossed the Elbe near Streha and soon met the Russian soldiers. This meeting marked the first encounter between American and Russian troops (Figure 1). The GIs, part of an advanced patrol, fraternized with their Russian counterparts for ten days. Both sides managed to communicate with each other and the U.S. soldiers received superb treatment.¹

Here were American soldiers sharing bread, stories, and comradeship with their fellow Russian allies, about whom the Americans had been curious for years. Both reveled in their celebration of the impending victory over their bitter enemy, Nazi Germany.

Within a few years, soldiers from the Soviet Union and the United States would again face each other – not in friendship but in anticipation of war. The tensions of the Cold War might be understood in light of our past histories. The friendship of 1945 demands thought and reflection. Hostile opponents in 1939, tentative partners in 1941, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States of America (USA) had become staunch allies by 1945, to the surprise of many and the disappointment of some Americans.

The Russian–American Relationship, 1917–1941

The tortured relationship with the Soviet Union began with the birth of the Soviet state in 1917, when the Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Vladimir

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Figure 1. American troops (left) reach out to grasp hands with Soviet soldiers after the historic junction at Torgau, Germany. (Reprinted by permission, United Press International Photo.)

Lenin, seized power. The capitalist and democratic United States immediately identified the Bolsheviks and their Marxist ideology and authoritarian style of rule as inimical to our system. This hostility only intensified during the interwar years as the U.S. media mounted a sustained attack on the Soviet experiment. For most Americans, the Soviet Union remained a distant and menacing power. Soviet policies during the 1930s – Stalin’s brutal collectivization and ruthless purges – heightened the already strong distrust.

The 1930s also witnessed the rise of another hostile regime – the Nazi Germany, one that would join the USSR as an enemy of America’s democratic principles. By the late 1930s, this new threat, in fact, overshadowed the danger posed by the USSR. Accordingly, Hitler temporarily replaced Stalin as the major international villain in American minds.²

The unexpected Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 and the subsequent conquest of Poland by these two powers revealed Hitler’s aggressive plans, and, again, reminded Americans of Stalin’s duplicity. This deed also opened the final flurry of anti-Soviet and anti-Communist activity before our own involvement in the war. The 1940 Soviet invasion of Finland only added fuel to the fire. Americans were outraged over this attack on a small, defenseless country by a neighboring giant.

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Americans Experience the War in Russia, 1941–1945

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June 22, 1941 dramatically transformed the landscape. The Nazi surprise invasion of the USSR suddenly made the Soviet Union appear as a victim rather than as a victimizer. Moreover, any potential Soviet threat to the United States and the West gave way to the larger awareness that if Hitler conquered Russia, he might be unstoppable.

U.S. policy makers reacted to the new situation by moving rapidly to support the Soviet Union in its fight for survival. Isolationists in America were unconvinced of the need to aid Russia, so recently our foe. Most Americans were ambivalent. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and his advisors proposed applying the policy of Lend Lease to the Russians, much as we were doing with the British. Isolationists bitterly opposed this move.³

Pearl Harbor and Hitler's subsequent declaration of war undercut this opposition. Now, the Americans and the Russians faced the same enemy in Nazi Germany. Americans could no longer safely observe the struggles in Europe from across the Atlantic Ocean, for the war had become their fight as well. The new allied relationship with the USSR was reflected in the changed attitudes of the American press toward the Soviet Union; increasingly the media would portray the Russians in positive and, often, heroic terms.

The newspaper of record, the *New York Times*, brought from the outset highly detailed reporting of the conflict, including daily maps noting the locations of the battles and the advances or retreats of the Germans and Russians. *New York Times* reporters also provided incisive analysis of the battles and key decisions by both armies. The paper even printed the often-conflicting communiqués from Berlin and Moscow in its stories. The paper carried numerous photographs of action in Russia, even of Soviet training exercises before the outbreak of the war. Clearly, the *New York Times* brought sophisticated, in-depth analyses of the war, along with often, in retrospect, surprisingly accurate prognoses of its future course, to which stories by journalists such as Hansen Baldwin attest.⁴

For the more general public, there were *Look*, *Life*, *Time*, *Liberty*, and the *Reader's Digest* – and above all, the radio. These accounts often characterized the Russians in terms that made their plight compelling to an increasingly compassionate American public, itself now deeply embroiled in the conflict. The media humanized Russians for Americans. Russians facing the departure of family members for battle or the real possibility of the deaths of sons, fathers, and even daughters struck a chord with Americans who shared the same experiences as their loved ones went to war.⁵

Correspondents, authors, and radio announcers described the modern character of Soviet society and its daily struggles for survival. The media wrote extensively of the proficiency of Russian armies and their heroic soldiers who steadfastly faced a brutal enemy capable of cruel deeds. Readers and viewers

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in the United States came to learn how vicious and inhumane the Germans behaved toward the Russian people. The American media shocked American audiences with accounts of German atrocities against even the most innocent of Russians. Pictures in magazines as well as newsreels in theaters highlighted the written descriptions.⁶

As time went on, Americans became quite familiar with the course of the conflict, with the nature of the belligerents involved, and with the top leadership in both Germany and the Soviet Union, as well as with the devastation being wrought. Above all, from the beginning, Americans had little doubt as to the enormous scale of the conflict and the implications of a Nazi victory.

Radio programs listened to by millions of Americans, especially favorites like *The Great Gildersleeve*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and *The Jack Benny Show*, frequently made reference to the valiant fighting of the Russians.

Initial coverage focused almost exclusively on battlefield operations as the momentous struggle between Nazi invaders and Soviet defenders unfolded. Gradually, however, coverage broadened to include a wealth of stories on wider subjects, including social, economic, political, and human-interest themes, all vital for an American public whose knowledge of the Soviet Union was sketchy and cliché ridden at best.

Americans also tried from the outset to contextualize the war, attempting to find a sense of the war's direction and eventual outcome by comparing it to earlier conflicts. Stories abounded about the classic invaders of Russia and their fate, ranging from the Swedes under Charles XII to Napoleon to Hindenburg. Nor did analysts miss the parallels between the Nazis and the Teutonic Knights. These attempts to furnish context provided Americans a way to deal with a conflict in which an early awe of German military prowess combined with a fundamental lack of respect for Soviet war potential could be molded into some hopeful expectations about how the war would conclude. As the Russian fortunes of battle went first one way, then another; as the Germans advanced and the Soviets retreated, but did not collapse; as the Germans renewed their offenses, again driving the Soviets back, but not to the point of defeat; as the Soviets gradually stopped the Germans, then began their own painfully slow advances; as the momentum of war passed from German to Soviet hands, American attitudes toward the Soviet Union shifted and a growing respect for the Russians and their capabilities emerged. These changing fortunes of war, in turn, combined with our own participation in the conflict to prepare Americans to accept and even admire a country that, until recently, they had regarded with extreme skepticism and suspicion – and with good reason.⁷

After our entry into the war, the newfound alliance with the USSR encouraged a growing respect for the Soviet Union and even a lionizing of the Russians