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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

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THE MYTH OF THE EASTERN FRONT

From the 1950s onward, Americans were quite receptive to a view of World War Two propagated by many Germans on how the war was fought on the Eastern Front in Russia. Through a network of former high-ranking Wehrmacht and current Bundeswehr officers who had served in Russia, Germans were able to convince Americans that the German army had fought a “clean” war in the East and that atrocities there were committed solely by Nazi organizations. This view fit well with the prevailing anti-Communism of the Cold War and continues to this day in a broad subculture of general readers, German military enthusiasts, wargame aficionados, military paraphernalia collectors, and reenactors who tend to romanticize the German military.

Professor Ronald Smelser is the author of *The Sudeten Problem, 1933–1938: Volkstumspolitik and the Formulation of Nazi Foreign Policy* and *Robert Ley: Hitler’s Labor Front Leader*. Both books have been translated into German. In addition, he has published seven edited or co-edited books and numerous articles on modern German history. He is also editor-in-chief of the four-volume *Learning about the Holocaust: A Student Guide* and has worked closely with the Holocaust Education Foundation. Smelser is former president of the German Studies Association and the Conference Group for Central European History as well as a former member of the American Advisory Board of the German Historical Institute in Washington.

Professor Edward J. Davies II is the author of the *Anthracite Aristocracy* and *The United States in World History* and has also served on the advisory board for National Geographic’s *Concise History of the World*. He has published articles in professional journals such as the *Journal of Social History* and *Journal of Urban History* and reviewed manuscripts for the *Journal of Military History* and university presses.

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Dedicated to
Edward J. Davies, 1925–2003
Ruth Smelser

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Preface

We would like to express our gratitude to those who have helped us along the way in researching and writing this book. We are grateful to the staff members in the archives where we have worked and to colleagues who have helped us with materials and advice. The Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv in Freiburg, the Institute für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, and the Staatsarchiv in Nuremberg provided us with invaluable documentation. Similarly, library and staff members in archives and libraries in this country have been helpful: the National Archives of the United States at College Park as well as, at long distance, the staffs of the Cornell Law Library (William Donovan Papers), the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library (Truman Smith Papers), the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library at Princeton University (Allen Dulles Papers), and the University of Notre Dame Archives (George Shuster Papers). We have profited enormously from discussions with colleagues, including Peter Black, Jürgen Förster, Joseph Bendersky, Robert Gellately, Johannes Hürter, MacGregor Knox, Geoff Megargee, Dieter Pohl, Bruce Siemon, and Charles Sydnor.

We would like to thank Antonio Munoz for his generous permission to use photographs from his many publications. In the spirit of true scholarship, he also sent us additional materials that we incorporated into the book.

Our indexers, Robin Hill and Tressa Friend, completed an essential task with skill and grace; we are grateful for their help.

We are also grateful to our home institution, the University of Utah, for its support. The University Research Committee provided us with vital computer equipment; the College of Humanities was generous with release time, and the Tanner Humanities Center hastened the appearance of this book by making one of the authors, Ronald Smelser, a Center Fellow.

The writing of this book was in many ways a personal journey. Many decades ago, I came across a title, *Hitler Moves East*, by Paul Carell, in a local bookstore

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in my hometown. Having little knowledge of the war in Russia, I purchased the book and quickly became enthralled with the scope of the war and its centrality in defeating the Germans. Carell's dramatic prose and his gift for storytelling soon created immense sympathy on my part for the Germans and their plight in the vast landscapes of Russia. My interest aroused, I continued to buy as many books as possible on the Eastern Front and by the late 1990s owned several hundred. My desire to learn as much as possible about the titanic struggle in the East also led me into the world of war games, and over the years I also came to own dozens of games. Well versed on the war, or so I believed, I began to discover the Russian side of that vast conflict and realized that my understanding was at best incomplete and at worst terribly exaggerated. Soon I turned to my colleague, Professor Ronald Smelser, an expert on Nazi Germany, for more effective explanations of the war and thus started our collaboration that led to the present book.

My one regret as I now finish the last stages of the book is the absence of my father, Edward J. Davies, whose death in 2003 took him from me. He and my mother, Mary V. Davies, have been constant sources of support and inspiration over the long years of my career and I now dedicate this book to his memory. I also want to extend my thanks to my wife, Liliana, who has stood by me throughout the completion of this book, and to my daughters, Erin and Mary Anne, who have been with me in good and bad times. Dad, I finally did finish the book!

— Edward J. Davies II

The book began with reminiscences of growing up in Pennsylvania in the 1950s, when the first documentaries began to appear on television. We remembered how boys came to school every morning after these showings full of enthusiasm about German dive-bombers and armored formations. These memories led us to find and investigate the phenomenon of “romancing” the German military in American popular culture from that day to this.

I would like to dedicate this book to my wife Ruth, who has been a source of support, encouragement and love.

—Ronald Smelser

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