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978-1-107-05571-1 - Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front: The German Infantry's War, 1941–1944

Jeff Rutherford

Excerpt

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## Introduction

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### I. The infantry's war

“This campaign is the infantryman’s war. He wins and holds territory. He combs through the forests, he secures the supply lines, he wins the war.” So wrote Lt. Schmidt, a member of the East Prussian 121st Infantry Division (ID) in early August 1941.<sup>1</sup> His appraisal of Operation Barbarossa as an infantry campaign was certainly correct: while the overall success of the operation primarily hinged on the performance of the elite motorized and mechanized tip of the Wehrmacht,<sup>2</sup> 107 of the 139 divisions that invaded the Soviet Union marched towards their objectives overwhelmingly dependent on horse-drawn transport for their supply needs.<sup>3</sup> The declaration highlights the importance of the individual *Landser* to the German war effort: despite contemporaries’

<sup>1</sup> Tagebuchartige Aufzeichnungen des Lt. Schmidt-Btl. Adjutant, 2.8.41, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau (hereafter BA-MA), RH 37/3905; emphasis in original. German data protection laws prevent the naming of the following types of individual: those still alive, those who died within the previous thirty years, those of whom no proof regarding death exists and who were born within the past 110 years. For this reason, each soldier in this study who falls into one of these categories has been given a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, the Wehrmacht (Armed Forces Command) included the Heer (Army), Kriegsmarine (Navy) and the Luftwaffe (Air Force). Within the context of the German military and the war of extermination waged in the east, however, the term Wehrmacht is generally used to describe the army and it is in this sense that the term will be deployed in this study.

<sup>3</sup> For a breakdown of the German order of battle on 22 June 1941, see Burkhard Müller-Hillebrand, *Das Heer, 1933–1945: Entwicklung des organisatorischen Aufbaues*, vol. II, *Die Blitzfeldzüge 1939–1941: Das Heer im Kriege bis zum Beginn des Feldzuges gegen die Sowjetunion im Juni 1941* (Frankfurt am Main, 1956), pp. 188–91. On the armored units’ importance to the invasion’s success, see David Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany’s Defeat in the East* (Cambridge, 2009). On the preponderance of infantry divisions in the German order of battle, see R.L. DiNardo, *Mechanized Juggernaut or Military Anachronism? Horses and the German Army of World War II* (Westport, CT, 1991), p. 38; and Rolf-Dieter Müller, “Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg,” in Horst Boog et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. IV, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Frankfurt, 1996), pp. 141–245, here pp. 209–27.

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fixation on the armored units that were racing across the steppes of the Soviet state – a fixation that has indeed persisted until the present day – it was the German infantryman who shouldered the bulk of the fighting, especially with the constant attrition suffered by armored divisions that left them severely weakened by the conclusion of the year.<sup>4</sup> Lt. Schmidt did not, however, merely focus on the traditional military aims of destroying enemy forces and seizing territory. Due to the German High Command's massive gamble that the Soviet state would crumble after only several weeks of fighting, he and other foot soldiers found themselves carrying out tasks normally set aside for rear-area formations: the securing of communication and supply lines between the front line and their logistical tails as well as apprehending thousands of scattered Red Army soldiers dislocated by the advancing German armor.<sup>5</sup>

Such irregular warfare plagued the invaders from the very beginning of the campaign, as Lt. Schmidt's diary makes clear. On the second day of the operation, he raged against guerilla forces who "seemingly shot out of every house" in the village of Vilkoviszki. Members of his 405th Infantry Regiment responded in the heavy-handed, yet traditional, manner called for by the German High Command: "as every house from which the devious guerillas shot was set on fire, nearly the entire town was burning by evening."<sup>6</sup>

When examined in the overall context of the invasion, these two diary entries illustrate the dual nature of the invasion of the Soviet Union for the German infantryman: on the one hand, the particular circumstances of this campaign forced him to assume numerous other roles in addition to his primary, and extremely arduous, task of fighting the Red Army, while on the other hand, his own political and military leadership considered him "a bearer of an inexorable racial value" in its ideological

<sup>4</sup> Nearly every major study of Operation Barbarossa written in the first forty-five years after the war, particularly in English, places heavy emphasis on armor operations; see, for example, Albert Seaton, *The Russo-German War, 1941–1945* (Novato, 1993); Alan Clark, *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict 1941–1945* (New York, 1985); and Matthew Cooper, *The German Army, 1933–1945* (Chelsea, 1990). One of the primary causes of this preoccupation with armor divisions lay in the postwar popularity of memoirs written by German armor commanders; see, among others, Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York, 1996); Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Novato, 1994); Hans von Luck, *Panzer Commander* (New York, 1989). For a detailed examination of these types of historical and popular writing, as well as the memoirs themselves, see Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 73–156.

<sup>5</sup> Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der letzte deutsche Krieg 1939–1945* (Stuttgart, 2005), pp. 81–90; Christian Hartmann, "Verbrecherischer Krieg – verbrecherische Wehrmacht?" in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (52) 2004, pp. 5–10.

<sup>6</sup> Tagebuchartige Aufzeichnungen des Lt. Schmidt, 23.6.41, BA-MA, RH 37/3905.

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war that demanded any and all means to destroy the “Jewish–Bolshevik system.”<sup>7</sup> In many ways, these two entries penned by the lieutenant encompass the German infantry's war in the Soviet Union.

Historians have provided excellent coverage and analysis of the Wehrmacht during the period stretching from the opening of hostilities to the conclusion of the 1941–2 winter crisis, examining the various operational, ideological, and economic facets of the war.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, the remainder of the war in the Soviet Union has not received the same type of dedicated investigation and the twists and turns of army policy and behavior from 1942 through 1944 are much more difficult to bring into focus.<sup>9</sup> The tasks faced by the German infantry only multiplied as the war dragged on. Certainly combat remained its first and most important responsibility, but as the conflict transformed from one of movement to one of grinding defensive battles, frontline combat units found themselves burdened with occupying cities, towns, and villages for extended periods of time – and these were tasks that no one within the army had even remotely planned for before the invasion due to the general belief that the campaign would be over in mere months. Now questions such as “improving . . . the hopeless food situation for evacuated Russian civilians” became ones wrestled with by combat divisions as they surveyed the misery – that they themselves had caused – in their midst.<sup>10</sup> This more complicated relationship with civilians that emerged after the conclusion of the winter crisis in early 1942 and which evolved up until the scorched-earth retreats of late 1943–early

<sup>7</sup> The cited phrases are drawn from Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau's infamous order issued to his Sixth Army on 10 October 1941; as the order corresponded to Hitler's own conception of the campaign, it was later circulated to other units of the *Ostheer*. The order is printed in Gerd Ueberschär and Wolfram Wette (eds.), *Der Deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion 1941: “Unternehmen Barbarossa”* (Frankfurt am Main, 1997), pp. 285–6.

<sup>8</sup> Several recent and important studies that approach Operation Barbarossa from various perspectives include Christian Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg: Front und militärisches Hinterland 1941/42* (Munich, 2009); Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer: Die Deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion, 1941/42* (Munich, 2006); Felix Römer, *Der Kommissarbefehl: Wehrmacht und NS-Verbrechen an der Ostfront 1941/42* (Munich, 2008); Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel, *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide and Radicalization* (Rochester, NY, 2012); and David Stahel's three volumes on German operations during the summer and fall of 1941: *Operation Barbarossa; Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East* (Cambridge, 2011); and *Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941* (Cambridge, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> The most recent and comprehensive study of the entire war from the German perspective is Stephen Fritz's excellent work *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Annihilation in the East* (Lexington, 2011), though Fritz is more concerned with the activities of the upper levels of command than with the war on the sharp end.

<sup>10</sup> Gruppe Rauch, Abt. Ib, Nr. 194/42 geh., Betr.: Ernährung der Zivilbevölkerung, 2. Mai 1942, BA-MA RH 26–123/205.

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1944 underlined the fundamental contradiction facing the *Ostheer* (Eastern Army) during the second half of the war: while Nazi propaganda portrayed the Soviet population as an inchoate mass of subhumanity that needed to be scrubbed from the pages of history, the German Army's only chance to achieve victory lay in mobilizing this same population behind the German war effort.

Both forced-labor roundups and anti-partisan operations highlighted this contradiction within the Wehrmacht's occupation policy and the interplay between these two issues set into motion an accelerating violent spiral in which the Germans responded with increased brutality and ruthlessness against Soviet civilians, indiscriminately devastating large swaths of Soviet territory, which in turn led to more people fleeing their homes and joining the resistance. Working under slogans such as "where the partisan is, the Jew is, and where the Jew is, there is the partisan," German anti-partisan policies were frequently indistinguishable from other genocidal policies and smoothly elided into their later scorched-earth retreats.<sup>11</sup> Thus, by 1944, the overwhelming majority of the German Army had participated in some way or another in the German war of annihilation in the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

The primary question confronting all historians of not only the Wehrmacht but also the Third Reich is *why* did German soldiers engage in such behavior? How important a role in motivating individuals did an identification with Nazi racial ideology play?<sup>13</sup> Did other concerns, be they economic or a desire to conform, lead Germans not only to support the Nazi regime but to actively work for it both at home and abroad?<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Jürgen Förster, "Die Sicherung des 'Lebensraumes,'" in Boog et al., *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, pp. 1227–1287, here p. 1240.

<sup>12</sup> Christian Hartmann concludes his analysis of five German formations on the Eastern Front in 1941–2 by stating that all "were guilty of war and often even of NS-crimes during the first year of the German–Soviet war." Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg*, p. 792. Christoph Rass writes in his examination of the 253rd Infantry Division that "the soldiers of the 253rd Infantry Division had taken part in a large number of crimes connected" to the war of annihilation; see his "Menschenmaterial": *Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront. Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision 1939–1945* (Paderborn, 2003), p. 410.

<sup>13</sup> For our purposes, Nazi racial ideology will be defined as a belief system that held that the Aryan, German *Herrenmensch* not only were justified in reorganizing the racial structure of eastern and central Europe due to the alleged inferiority of Slavs and other "racial" groups but also righteously demanded the elimination of the mortal Jewish enemy. For more detailed discussions of Nazi ideology and its application, see Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's World View: A Blueprint for Power* (Cambridge, 1981); Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, 2005); and Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Ippenmann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> For a controversial examination of materialism as an important bond between Nazi state and society, see Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (London, 2009). On the function of conformity in stabilizing the state, see Peter

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For soldiers in the Wehrmacht, such issues are complicated not only by situational factors during their violent existence on the Eastern Front but also by the institutional practices of the organization that dominated their lives: the army itself.<sup>15</sup>

This study will look at three frontline infantry divisions – the 121st, 123rd, and 126th Infantry Divisions – and their combat and occupation practices in an attempt to understand not only what policies and practices the army and its soldiers carried out in the Soviet Union but also why they did so. These units were chosen for several reasons. First, all three divisions were mobilized in the eleventh wave in October 1940 and saw their first action during Operation Barbarossa.<sup>16</sup> Each formation was constructed around cadres drawn from pre-existing units originating from the same military districts and was then filled out by new recruits. None of these divisions could be considered elite, with the majority of the enlisted men consisting of civilian recruits – or “ordinary men” – who seem representative of the communities that they called home.<sup>17</sup>

Second, each division attempted to recruit men from specific regions within the German Reich. East Prussia, Berlin-Brandenburg, and Rhineland-Westphalia were home to the 121st, 123rd, and 126th IDs respectively. These areas significantly differed from one another in economic development, confessional allegiance, and political orientation, and recruiting territorially from such varied regions had two possible consequences. First, these divisions became microcosms of their geographically and culturally distinct areas, with the rank and file carrying a distinct cultural baggage with them into the service; such different backgrounds could help explain differences in the behavior of the units. Second, the various experiences of the home front during the war affected the soldiers and their conduct at the front

Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 2009); on its role in the carrying out of mass executions, see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> For an outstanding examination of this issue, see Rass, “*Menschenmaterial*”, pp. 205–330.

<sup>16</sup> On mobilization, see Mueller-Hillebrand, *Die Blitzfeldzüge 1939–1941*, pp. 76–81; and Bernhard Kroener, “The Manpower Resources of the Third Reich in the Area of Conflict between Wehrmacht, Bureaucracy, and War Economy, 1939–1942,” in Bernhard Kroener et al., *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. VI/I, *Organization and Mobilization of the German Sphere of Power* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 966–1000.

<sup>17</sup> The phrase was first coined by Christopher Browning in his groundbreaking study *Ordinary Men*. This is a major drawback of Omer Bartov’s highly influential work. In his two monographs, *The Eastern Front 1941–1945: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* (London, 1985) and *Hitler’s Army* (Oxford, 1992), Bartov focuses on two first-wave divisions and one which rapidly attained the level of an elite division, and this emphasis limits the applicability to the rest of the army.

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in diverse ways and this also helps explain the range of behaviors displayed by the three divisions.<sup>18</sup>

Third, each unit fought for the majority of the war in Army Group North, with the 121st ID and the 126th ID capitulating in Latvia as part of Army Group Kurland in May 1945 while the 123rd ID was sent to Ukraine in fall 1943, where it disintegrated during the fighting of early 1944. Of the three army groups that invaded the Soviet Union, Army Group North has been the least well served by historians. Both Army Groups Center and South won more spectacular successes and suffered more devastating defeats than their northern counterparts and have consequently received the lion's share of scholarly and popular attention. With the exception of the siege of Leningrad, the operational and occupational practices of the northernmost army group have received very little attention in comparison with the two army groups engaged to its south.<sup>19</sup> While Army Group North's campaigns contained no decisive battles, such as Moscow, Stalingrad, or Kursk, and nor did the military occupation authorities find themselves responsible for a large Jewish population, the nature of Army Group North's war sheds light on an important and relatively neglected topic: the occupation practices and policies of frontline troops and their interactions with Soviet civilians.

The experiences of Army Group North offer the most important examples of long-term occupation by combat soldiers in the Soviet Union due to the nature of war in this theater. With the exception of the six-week advance through the Baltic states in the summer of 1941,

<sup>18</sup> This theme will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>19</sup> Studies of the siege include Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad*, 2nd edn (New York, 1985); Leon de Gourev, *The Siege of Leningrad* (Stanford, 1962); Antje Leetz and Barbara Wenner (eds.), *Blockade: Leningrad 1941–1944. Dokumente und Essays von Russen und Deutschen* (Reinbek, 1992); Peter Jahn (ed.), *Blockade Leningrads – Blockada Leningrada* (Berlin, 2004); Jörg Ganzenmüller, *Das belagerte Leningrad, 1941–1944: Die Stadt in den Strategien von Angreifern und Verteidigern* (Paderborn, 2005); and, most recently, Anna Reid, *Leningrad: The Epic Siege of World War II, 1941–1944* (New York, 2011). The only full-length operational treatment of the campaign, albeit based primarily on Russian-language sources, is David Glantz, *The Battle for Leningrad 1941–1944* (Lawrence, KS, 2002). Johannes Hürter examines Eighteenth Army and the encirclement of Leningrad; see Hürter, "Die Wehrmacht vor Leningrad: Krieg und Besatzungspolitik der 18. Armee im Herbst und Winter 1941/42," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 49 (2001), pp. 377–440; for a brief overview of German occupation practices in northern Russia, see Gerhart Hass, "Deutsche Besatzungspolitik im Leningrader Gebiet 1941–1944," in Babette Quinkert (ed.), "Wir sind die Herren dieses Landes": Ursachen, Verlauf und Folgen des deutschen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion (Hamburg, 2002), pp. 66–81. Jürgen Kilian has recently produced a comprehensive examination of German rear-area practices; see his *Wehrmacht und Besatzungsherrschaft im russischen Nordwesten 1941–1944: Praxis und Alltag im Militärverwaltungsgebiet der Heeresgruppe Nord* (Paderborn, 2012).

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positional warfare (which often closely mirrored the style, if not the intensity, of combat on the Western Front during the First World War) became the norm in Army Group North's area of operations for some two and a half years. From the fall of 1941 to January 1944, the army group administered an area that essentially remained the same throughout the duration of the occupation.<sup>20</sup> German troops controlled the same industrial suburbs of Leningrad, the same communities along the Volkhov river, and the same villages and towns in the Demiansk region for two to three years, and this provides a prism through which to examine the development of Wehrmacht occupation practices on the local level in an amount of detail hitherto missing in the historiography. An examination of these three divisions and their combat and occupation practices will allow for a more precise reconstruction of how frontline German infantry divisions behaved during their years of occupation and, just as importantly, why.

This study will argue that while Nazi racial ideology provided a legitimizing context in which violence was not only accepted but encouraged and that it frequently complemented the army's own attitudes, it was the Wehrmacht's adherence to a doctrine of military necessity which proves most useful in explaining how and why the German Army and its soldiers fought the war in the Soviet Union. Various described as "military utilitarianism" or "pragmatism," the concept of military necessity provides the necessary flexibility in understanding the development of policies on the ground in the Soviet Union.<sup>21</sup> Military necessity should not be understood as a rigid concept, however. At its essence, it meant that the German Army would do whatever was necessary to preserve its combat efficiency and emerge victorious on the battlefield, though how to achieve victory could be understood by various units in different ways. While previous analyses have emphasized an increasing brutalization of German behavior due to the inculcation of Nazi ideological values within the ranks, or have focused on the continual radicalization and application of German violence during the war, these approaches are unable to completely explain the contradictory turns of the army's policy, specifically with regard to occupation as periods of brutality were intermixed with periods of conciliation.

<sup>20</sup> Hass, "Deutsche Besatzungspolitik im Leningrader Gebiet 1941–1944," p. 66.

<sup>21</sup> Timm C. Richter uses the former term in his introduction to his edited volume; see Richter (ed.), *Krieg und Verbrechen. Situation und Intention: Fallbeispiele* (Munich, 2006), p. 15; Mark Edele and Michael Geyer deploy the latter term in "States of Exception: The Nazi–Soviet War as a System of Violence, 1939–1945," in Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 345–95, here p. 377.

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In contrast to historiographical approaches that emphasize the ideas of ideology or situation in explaining the attitudes and actions of the Wehrmacht, the notion of military necessity has been rather sparsely utilized. Two exceptions to this trend are studies that examine the activities of army-level formations in the Soviet Union. Johannes Hürter's examination of German policy towards the city of Leningrad in 1941 and the subsequent occupation of the surrounding area emphasized the idea of military necessity, or a "vague military utilitarianism," in explaining both Army Group North and Eighteenth Army's practices.<sup>22</sup> While ideology served as a necessary ingredient in the "merciless occupation policies of Eighteenth Army," the "most important motivating force was a military utilitarianism that wanted success in this particular theater of war at any price and by all means."<sup>23</sup> The army viewed the intentional starvation of Leningrad's occupants and the forced deportations of the hungry, poverty-stricken population in the area ringing the city as necessities to ensure "sufficient food and permanent shelters" for German troops and thereby to "save their combat strength."<sup>24</sup>

Manfred Oldenburg's comprehensive examination of Eleventh Army's occupation policies in the Crimea and those of Seventeenth Army in the Donets basin and the Caucasus in 1942 similarly illustrates the centrality of military necessity to the command structures of these armies and their participation in war crimes.<sup>25</sup> Oldenburg persuasively argues that the Wehrmacht fundamentally transformed its behavior towards the surrounding civilian population due to the army's need for both security and supplies; in other words, due to the worsening strategic situation, the Germans enacted more conciliatory policies towards the sections of the civilian population that neither resisted nor fell into categories deemed ideologically dangerous. Such reasoning led to Eleventh Army's active complicity in the murder by the SD (Sicherheitsdienst, or Security Service) of 14,500 Jews in Simferopol in December 1941; here, military necessity – providing food for civilians in order to lessen any resistance and consequent threats to the army's security – smoothly functioned alongside the regime's desire to exterminate Soviet Jewry.<sup>26</sup>

The approaches of both Hürter and Oldenburg allow for a more nuanced examination of the Wehrmacht's behavior and actions not by

<sup>22</sup> Hürter, "Die Wehrmacht vor Leningrad," p. 440.      <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 418, 423.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439.

<sup>25</sup> Manfred Oldenburg, *Ideologie und Militärisches Kalkül: Die Besatzungspolitik der Wehrmacht in der Sowjetunion 1942* (Cologne, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–87.

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exploring just one approach, but instead by analyzing the interplay between ideology, situation, and the concept of military necessity. Despite their immense importance to the general historical debate, both of these works focus on the headquarters of the respective armies and offer little to no discussion of how frontline troops interacted with Soviet civilians.<sup>27</sup> This study intends to fill this gap not only by looking at how German soldiers experienced the sharp end of war, but, by integrating their roles as warrior and occupier into one narrative, it also looks to examine the totality of the German infantry's war in northwest Russia.

An examination of the 121st, 123rd, and 126th IDs clearly illustrates that their policies towards civilians underwent dramatic changes during the course of the war. Operation Barbarossa – the initial invasion of the Soviet Union – was marked by a callous neglect of the overwhelming majority of civilians, who, when thought of at all, were viewed as potential partisans. German behavior towards these very same individuals underwent a dramatic radicalization during the 1941–2 winter crisis when not only victory, but even survival, seemed in doubt; now the divisions ruthlessly exploited civilians for food, clothes, and labor. Following the stabilization of the situation, each of the three divisions began to rethink its occupation policy. The realization that military victory could only be achieved against a larger, increasingly better-armed force through a mobilization of all resources, including civilians, led to the implementation of more conciliatory policies by the Germans.<sup>28</sup>

While such a revision of occupation practices is only comprehensible through the framework of military necessity, the same focus on military victory led the Wehrmacht to carry out policies that not only contradicted its more agreeable new course, but frequently completely negated their intended effects; here the toxic effect of Nazi racial ideology reinforced more violent interpretations of military necessity, ensuring that hard-line policies remained very much in the mix. The final stage in the evolution of German policy occurred in different phases across the front of Army Group North between 1943 and 1944. As the German Army began its long, arduous, and bloody retreat back to the Reich,

<sup>27</sup> For example, Oldenburg devotes a mere three pages to the activities of frontline troops; *ibid.*, pp. 116–19.

<sup>28</sup> The contention made by Edele and Geyer that “this more pragmatic approach also turned out to be a far more radical one” is true in one sense as the final development of this policy turned exceedingly violent. During the second half of 1942 and stretching well into 1943, however, the measures enacted by these three divisions under examination proved to be far less violent and arbitrary than previous German practices. See Edele and Geyer, “States of Exception: The Nazi–Soviet War as a System of Violence, 1939–1945,” p. 375.

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scorched earth and the creation of “dead zones” became the order of the day in an attempt to limit the military potential of the Red Army. As this brief overview shows, the German war in the east, while certainly influenced by both Nazi ideological beliefs and situational factors, is best explained through the idea of military necessity. But how has the war been understood in the historiography? A brief review of the primary themes and controversies follows.

## II. Explaining the German *Vernichtungskrieg*

The Wehrmacht's criminal activities across occupied Europe have been public record since the various postwar Nuremberg trials.<sup>29</sup> Recent work has examined the German armed forces and their behavior across the continent, including France,<sup>30</sup> Greece,<sup>31</sup> Italy,<sup>32</sup> and Yugoslavia.<sup>33</sup> Events on the Eastern Front, however, have correctly received the bulk of the attention concerning this issue during the past thirty-five years. Despite this focus, several questions remain open.

Three of the thornier issues include the scale of the Wehrmacht's participation in the war of annihilation, what types of unit carried out what types of crime, and the motivations behind such atrocities. The explosive 1995 Hamburg Institute for Social Research's *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944* (War of Extermination:

<sup>29</sup> *Trials of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg, Germany*, 42 vols. (Nuremberg, 1947); *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10: Nuernberg Oct. 1946–April 1949*, vol. XI, *The High Command Case* (Washington, DC, 1950).

<sup>30</sup> Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (Cambridge, 2008); Thomas Laub, *After the Fall: German Policy in Occupied France, 1940–1944* (Oxford, 2008); Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg? Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44* (Munich, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Mark Mazower, “Military Violence and the National Socialist Consensus: The Wehrmacht in Greece, 1941–1944,” in Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann (eds.), *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944* (New York, 2000), pp. 146–74; more generally, see his outstanding study of the German occupation of Greece, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–1944* (New Haven, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> Gerhard Schreiber, *Deutsche Kriegsverbrechen in Italien: Täter, Opfer, Strafverfolgung* (Munich, 1996); Michael Geyer, “Civitella Della Chiana on 29 June 1944: The Reconstruction of a German ‘Measure’,” in Heer and Naumann, *War of Extermination*, pp. 175–216; and Carlo Gentile, *Wehrmacht, Waffen-SS und Polizei im Kampf gegen Partisanen und Zivilbevölkerung in Italien 1943–1945* (Paderborn, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> For different approaches to occupied Yugoslavia, see Walter Manoschek, “Serbien ist judenfrei”: *Militärische Besatzungspolitik und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42* (Munich, 1995); Klaus Schmider, *Partisanenkrieg in Jugoslawien 1941–1944* (Berlin, 2002); and Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare* (Cambridge, 2012).