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Bastiaan Willems
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Violence in Defeat

In the final year of the Second World War, as bitter defensive fighting moved to German soil, a wave of intra-ethnic violence engulfed the country. Bastiaan Willems offers the first study into the impact and behaviour of the Wehrmacht on its own territory, focusing on the German units fighting in East Prussia and its capital Königsberg. He shows that the Wehrmacht's retreat into Germany, after three years of brutal fighting on the Eastern Front, contributed significantly to the spike of violence which occurred throughout the country immediately prior to defeat. Soldiers arriving with an ingrained barbarised mindset, developed on the Eastern Front, shaped the immediate environment of the area of operations, and of Nazi Germany as a whole. Willems establishes how the norms of the Wehrmacht as a retreating army impacted behavioural patterns on the home front, arguing that its presence increased the propensity to carry out violence in Germany.

Bastiaan Willems is a Research Fellow in Modern European History at University College London.

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The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944–1945

Bastiaan Willems

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Chronology of Events

1914–1944

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| 1 August 1914 | Start of the First World War |
| 26–30 August 1914 | Battle of Tannenberg |
| September 1914 | One-third of East Prussia's population flees in anticipation of its invasion by Russian forces |
| 7–22 February 1915 | Winter Battle of the Masurian Lakes |
| August 1916–1918 | High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff assumes control of the war effort |
| 11 November 1918 | German army signs armistice |
| 28 June 1919 | Versailles Treaty cuts off East Prussia from the rest of Germany |
| 24 February 1920 | Declaration of Party programme of the NSDAP |
| January 1924 | Klaipeda Revolt |
| 3 September 1928 | Erich Koch becomes Gauleiter of East Prussia |
| 30 January 1933 | <i>Machtergreifung</i> (Nazi seizure of power) |
| 16 March 1935 | Hitler openly breaks with the military restrictions imposed by the Versailles Treaty |
| 9 November 1938 | Königsberg's Neue Synagoge destroyed during the Kristallnacht |
| 1 September 1939 | German invasion of Poland |
| 22 June 1941 | Operation Barbarossa commences |
| 16 July 1941 | Koch becomes <i>Reichskommissar für die Ukraine</i> |
| 14 February 1943 | Führerbefehl 4 turns scorched earth practices into official military policy |
| 18 February 1943 | Goebbels proclaims Total War |
| 8 March 1944 | Führer Directive 53 orders the establishment of fortress cities |
| 22 June 1944 | Start of Operation Bagration, the Soviet summer offensive |
| 20 July 1944 | Plot to kill Hitler in his East Prussian headquarters, the Wolfsschanze |
| 18 October 1944 | Formation of the Volkssturm |

East Prussian Operations

| | |
|------------------|---|
| October 1944 | Evacuation of the border regions of East Prussia; one-quarter of province's population displaced |
| 9 October 1944 | First Baltic Front reaches the Baltic at Heydekrug, south of Memel |
| 16 October 1944 | Third Belorussian Front commences the Gumbinnen Operation |
| 21 October 1944 | Nemmersdorf captured by Red Army |
| 23 October 1944 | Nemmersdorf recaptured by Wehrmacht |
| 27 October 1944 | Start of Nemmersdorf propaganda |
| 12 January 1945 | Second Belorussian Front starts operations by breaking out of the Rozan bridgehead on the Narew, north of Warsaw |
| 13 January 1945 | Third Belorussian Front starts East Prussian offensive between Ebenrode and Schlossberg |
| 21 January 1945 | Koch orders the families of Gauleitung employees to be evacuated by a special train |
| 27 January 1945 | Memel abandoned by German troops |
| 27 January 1945 | Koch announces the general evacuation of Königsberg |
| 27 January 1945 | Lasch appointed as Fortress Commander of Königsberg |
| 30 January 1945 | Königsberg encircled |
| 15 February 1945 | Reich Justice Minister Thierack announces the establishment of summary courts in areas that were immediately threatened |
| 19 February 1945 | Operation Westwind commences, Metgethen recaptured |
| 25 February 1945 | Start of Metgethen propaganda |
| 27 February 1945 | Large scale evacuation from Königsberg starts |
| 10 March 1945 | Evacuation 'postponed until further notice' due to 'technical issues' |
| 13–29 March 1945 | Destruction of the Fourth Army in the Heiligenbeil Pocket |
| 6 April 1945 | Final storming of Königsberg |
| 9 April 1945 | Surrender talks commence |
| 10 April 1945 | Surrender signed |
| 13 April 1945 | Final offensive towards Pillau commences |
| 27 April 1945 | Pillau captured |
| 7 May 1945 | Surrender of the German Wehrmacht, remnants of Armee Ostpreußen surrender in Hela |

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|---|
| AKO | Archiv Kulturzentrum Ostpreußen |
| ARLZ | Auflockerung, Räumung, Lähmung und Zerstörung – Breaking-down, Evacuation, Paralysing, and Destruction |
| BArch | Bundesarchiv |
| BDM | Bund Deutscher Mädel – League of German Girls |
| BDO | Bund Deutscher Offiziere – League of German Officers |
| GAKO | Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Kaliningradskoi Oblasti |
| Hiwi | Hilfswillige – Auxiliary volunteer |
| HJ | Hitlerjugend – Hitler Youth |
| IfZArch | Institut für Zeitgeschichte archive |
| KPD | Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands – Communist Party of Germany |
| NKFD | Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland – National Committee for a Free Germany |
| NKVD | Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del – People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs |
| NSDAP | Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – National Socialist German Workers’ Party |
| NSF | Nationalsozialistische Frauenschaft – National Socialist Women’s League |
| NSFO | Nationalsozialistischer Führungsoffizier – National Socialist Leadership Officer |
| NSV | Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt – National Socialist People’s Welfare |
| OKH | Oberkommando des Heeres – Supreme High Command of the German Army |
| OKW | Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – Supreme Command of the Armed Forces |
| OL | Ostpreußisches Landesmuseum |
| OT | Organisation Todt |
| RAF | Royal Air Force |

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| Abbreviations | | xvii |
|---------------|--|------|
| RVK | Reichsverteidigungskommissar – Reich Defence Commissioner | |
| SA | Sturmabteilung | |
| SD | Sicherheitsdienst | |
| SS | Schutzstaffel | |
| TNA | The National Archives | |
| WPrO | Wehrmacht Propaganda Offizier – Wehrmacht propaganda officer | |

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