

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.

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Violence in Defeat

The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944–1945

Bastiaan Willems

University College London



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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, Paralyzing, 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

Abbreviations

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