

Joining Hitler's Crusade

The reasons behind Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union are well known, but what about those of the other Axis and non-Axis powers that joined Operation Barbarossa? Six other European armies fought with the Wehrmacht in 1941 and six more countries sent volunteers, as well as there being countless collaborators in the east of various nationalities who were willing to work with the Germans in 1941. The political, social and military context behind why so many nations and groups of volunteers opted to join Hitler's war in the east reflects the many diverse, and largely unknown, roads that led to Operation Barbarossa. With each chapter dealing with a new country and every author being a subject matter expert on that nation, proficient in the local language and historiography, this fascinating new study offers unparalleled insight into non-German participation on the Eastern Front in 1941.

David Stahel is a Senior Lecturer in European history at the University of New South Wales in Canberra, Australia. His latest book, *The Battle for Moscow* (Cambridge, 2015), was shortlisted for the British Army's military book of the year, 2016.

Joining Hitler's Crusade

*European Nations and the Invasion of the
Soviet Union, 1941*

Edited by

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comprehensive research project on Norway and the Second World War headed by UiT, the Arctic University of Norway and funded by the Norwegian government.

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Preface

No other action impacted Germany's fate in the Second World War more directly than Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet Union. Indeed, given the enormous loss of life, the extraordinary destruction wrought and the sweeping political implications it engendered, the invasion of the Soviet Union remains one of the pivotal decisions of the twentieth century. The war in the east also led to Hitler's momentous attempt to mass murder all Soviet Jews, which paralleled the already ubiquitous criminality perpetrated by the SS and Wehrmacht against the occupied Slavic population and captured Red Army men. Thus, there can be no question that the decision to invade the Soviet Union reflected Hitler's ideological worldview about which so much has been written. By contrast, far less is known about why so many nations or individual volunteers opted to support Hitler's war in the east.

This book looks at the diverse countries, personalities and unique national circumstances that led to so many states to send men to fight against the Red Army in 1941. This is not the first book to address Germany's allies on the eastern front, but those that do are almost exclusively military histories with a focus on armies and campaigns and less the domestic politics, foreign policy pressures, prominent personalities and social conditions that led so many European nations and volunteers into war with Hitler. The 1976 study by Peter Gosztony, *Hitlers Fremde Heere: Das Schicksal der nichtdeutschen Armeen im Ostfeldzug*, and the more recent 2007 book by Rolf-Dieter Müller, *An der Seite der Wehrmacht: Hitlers ausländische Helfer beim 'Kreuzzug gegen den Bolschewismus'*,¹ are both cases in point. They also both deal with the whole period of foreign involvement in the war, which leaves very little discussion for *why* these nations took part in the first instance. A better guide is Kenneth Estes's 2015 book *A European Anabasis: Western European Volunteers in the German Army and SS, 1940–45*, which offers

¹ An English translation of this appeared in 2012. Rolf-Dieter Müller, *The Unknown Eastern Front: The Wehrmacht and Hitler's Foreign Soldiers* (London, 2012).

a good mix of social and military history that is helpful in understanding the motivations of the volunteers. However, it too covers the whole period of the war in fewer than 200 pages and therefore lacks comprehensive discussion of 1941 (as well as excluding all the non-volunteer nations). Jonathan Adelman's 2007 edited collection *Hitler and his Allies in World War II* focuses on foreign relations with Nazi Germany, but again deals with much more than just Operation Barbarossa in 1941 and, with one exception, excludes the nations from which volunteers came.

There is some excellent discussion of Germany's allies and their motivation to participate in Operation Barbarossa by Jürgen Förster in the fourth volume of *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, but, apart from having been published over thirty years ago, it suffers from the inevitable problem that all who have attempted this subject confront. Archival and secondary literature for all of these nations require linguistic skills that no single author commands, which means that the little that has been written on this subject is restricted to the small base of largely German, French and English source material. The advantage of the present volume is that each author not only has the necessary linguistic skills, but is an established authority in the local debates and literature with extensive research experience in the field. The opportunity here is to offer a fresh perspective on Operation Barbarossa, one showcasing the beginning of the war from numerous new perspectives (beyond just German), while at the same introducing a good deal of previously unavailable material into the Anglo-American world.

Given the variety of national experiences under consideration, which varies from nations that sent a few hundred volunteers to those that sent hundreds of thousands, the variety of approaches to this question is wholly consistent with the wide spectrum, and complexity, of the contrasting paths to Barbarossa. Indeed, often the only common link among all the countries is the fact that they each had nationals fighting together on Germany's eastern front. While some nations made the decision to join the war at a state level (often with little concern for popular opinion), others only sent volunteers meaning the decisions rested with the individual and are therefore much more reflective of varied social, political and personal attitudes. Some of these nations were ruled by fascist governments, which, as in the case of Croatia or Romania, proved every bit as willing as the Nazis to employ violent coercion and mass murder. Other nations lived under a form of German military occupation or were ruled by collaborationist regimes, which by no means deterred local right-wing nationalists, and sometimes other groups, from supporting Hitler. Spain was nominally a neutral country, but accounted for the highest number of volunteers sent to the eastern front in 1941. Finland

was even a constitutional democracy, while Denmark retained its pre-war democratic government under German occupation, but both sent troops to fight in the east. Clearly, there was no prescriptive formula for the states involved in Operation Barbarossa and, as the essays in this study confirm, motivations within individual countries were often likewise splintered.

Only in the broadest sense can we then divide the nations under review and categorize them into general groups on the basis of their participation. The first six chapters of this book will focus on the nations which sent elements of their national army to take part in Operation Barbarossa. The next six chapters represent the occupied and neutral countries who sent volunteers to join the war and the last two chapters have been devoted to the diverse peoples inside the Soviet Union. These final two chapters are divided between the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, which were only absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1940, and a separate chapter dealing with Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian and Cossack collaboration.

Acknowledgements

Since 2012 I have had the extraordinary good fortune of finding myself a part of the academic community at the University of New South Wales, Canberra with the best team of military historians in Australia – and none more so than Professor Jeffrey Grey. Serious students and scholars of military history will already know his unique contribution to the field; for others it is suffice to say he was a towering figure. His passing was sorely felt by all.

If there was one thing Jeff firmly advocated, even insisted upon, it was the virtue of academic exchange. In the past twenty-five years he hardly missed a meeting of the Society for Military History and he even became its first non-American president in 2015. Jeff attended countless other conferences around the world and edited or co-edited dozens of publications that brought scholars together on almost any topic related to military history. Not surprisingly, Jeff strongly encouraged me in the current project and it is therefore fitting that a collaborative work of new scholarship is dedicated to him.

Professor Jeffrey Grey (1959–2016)

Without question, my first debt of thanks for the completion of this book goes to its contributors. It was a pleasure working with a team who willingly met my every request and devoted so much of their time to its completion. I could not have asked for more.

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