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Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to the Department of Government and Justice Studies and the Honors College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

May, 2016

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Abstract

This work examines the way the German armed forces treated the Soviet peoples. particularly the Slavs, versus the way other opponents of Nazi Germany were treated. The guiding question of my research has been, "Why did the Germans treat the Russians with a much greater level of brutality than what was seen elsewhere?" Since the end of the war, scholars have attempted to explain Germany's behavior. Given the debate over this topic, in addition to the existence of anti-Slavic and Neo-Nazi groups today, it is important to examine this phenomenon in detail. Using qualitative analysis, specifically the examination of scholarship from multiple countries, the accounts and testimonies of German and Russian troops, and documents from war crimes tribunals, I argue that the motivations for such cruelty were based on ethnic and political differences. Quantitative data also serves to emphasize the vast differences in treatment of POWs between German fronts. Nazi propaganda very effectively cast Slavs as "subhuman" and "Asiatic," likening them to Mongols. Similarly, Hitler saw the domination of the USSR as a battle between National Socialism and Jewish Bolshevism, an entity he blamed for Germany's loss in World War I and suffering thereafter. Another curious area in this study is the attitude of the individual German combat troops—how did they view their enemy? I find that the combination of Nazi anti-Bolshevism and racism, combined with propaganda, encouraged many troops to execute Slavs remorselessly, while the minority of soldiers and officers who disagreed with Hitler were unwilling or unable to protest. The subjugation of the Slavs, and often the obliteration, was encouraged from the highest levels.

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Chapter 1—Introduction

This work will examine the brutality of the Eastern Front during the Second World War. More specifically, I ask why the German forces treated Russians and other Eastern Europeans, both soldiers and civilians, far more harshly than Western nations. As I will outline in this paper, there is rarely room for just comparison: Wehrmacht and SS units slaughtered Soviet peoples in untold numbers, and subjected prisoners and those under their occupation to horrid conditions and punishments. While the Western Allies (the United States, Great Britain, France, Canada, and escaped Polish forces fighting alongside their Western peers) were occasionally the victims of war crimes or other acts of savagery, the differences in treatment were greatly pronounced. Several exceptions exist, as there are cases of German troops executing Western POWs and civilians (the desperate massacre of American GIs at Malmedy during the Battle of the Bulge serves as a chilling example), but these incidents do not come close to equaling the scale of the atrocities committed in the East.

The German occupation of France, for instance, was decidedly pleasant, at least as far as occupations by foreign armies go. German officers expected their men to conduct themselves with respect and discipline, and any offenses committed by Wehrmacht troops towards the local populace could be reported to a commanding officer. German troops saw a deployment to France as a vacation, with opportunities to drink wine, relax in a café, visit one of Paris's many bordellos, or chat with French women on the street (see Figures 7 and 8 in the appendix). While many French citizens were uncomfortable with Nazi occupation, they also readily admitted that things were bearable. Indeed, Henriette Dodd, a Frenchwoman who grew up during the war, stated that the American troops who liberated France were rowdier and less disciplined than the Germans, with heavy drinking, fistfights, and military police officers that often failed to rally themselves to keep the peace. Madame Dodd also recounted a story of great heroism on the part

of a Wehrmacht soldier. Dodd, a girl at the time, was walking home from school when a Royal Air Force plane flew over and began strafing the road, attacking the German soldiers walking near her. One of the soldiers pushed Dodd into a doorway to shelter her, and then collapsed from a wound inflicted by the airplane's machineguns (Dodd 2014).

The civilian experience on the Eastern Front, by comparison, was hell on earth. There were no restrictions limiting what atrocities German troops could commit against the populace. Theft, rape, and murder would go unpunished—these actions were at times encouraged by commanding officers. And, while French civilians were given mediocre rations, the Slavs were left to fend for themselves. All available food was requisitioned by the Germans to feed their own troops, leaving millions of Russians to starve. Many more froze to death after German troops took their clothing for protection against the bitter cold, and captured Russian soldiers suffered similar fates (Bellamy 2007; Merridale 2006; Beevor 1998). Even anti-partisan operations differed greatly: Frenchmen suspected of involvement or collaboration with the resistance were subject to execution or incarceration. SS or Gestapo officers would apprehend a suspect and question him, with torture deemed an acceptable means to an end. Taking hostages also became commonplace as the partisan effort intensified, as did more violent reprisals. While somewhat obvious to the locals, the Germans nevertheless tried to keep these anti-partisan efforts clandestine, while simultaneously sending a message. In contrast, a Russian village believed to be harboring partisans was often burned down and its inhabitants shot. There were a handful of similar, extreme responses in the occupied Western countries, but these incidents were sparse when compared to the Ostfront (Eastern Front). Civilian massacres were abnormal in France, whereas in Russia they were entirely commonplace.

Two different schools of thought attempt to explain this behavior—the first argues that German racial and political motivations allowed German troops to callously kill so many Slavs. Nazi propaganda only bolstered this prejudice, casting the Slavs as "subhuman," or *Untermenschen*. Additionally, Hitler's concept of Germania's eastward expansion for "living space"—*Lebensraum*—called for the annihilation of millions of Russians. Once cleared out, Germanic peoples would occupy the vast steppes of Russia, farming the land and building a "superior" Aryan infrastructure. A very large majority of historians accept this reasoning as the explanation for the German conduct, including Antony Beevor, Ian Kershaw, Catherine Merridale, and Chris Bellamy (though Bellamy has pointed towards inconclusive evidence of an offensive Soviet buildup towards Germany). A great many other serious scholars, too many to name here, also fill these ranks.

The second explanation for the brutality of the war places greater responsibility on the Soviet Union, arguing that the Red Army and Soviet partisans fought without rules and were not worthy of the same respect as Western troops. Indeed, many German soldiers were told that because the Soviet Union never signed the Hague Convention of 1907, they could abuse and slaughter their enemy without remorse. There is one historian, David Irving, who supports this second theory. His 1977 book, *Hitler's War*, claims that Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union was a preventative, defensive measure.

Between these two arguments, I find that the first is more accurate; while the Russians fought with stubbornness unseen anywhere else, it was the German forces who cast the first stone. They razed villages to the ground, shot POWs, and kicked off the war against Russia with carnage and brutality. Hitler saw the war against the USSR as a great racial conflict, pitting the Aryan, Germanic peoples against the "Asiatics," likening the Slavs to Mongol hordes. The

Führer also attacked with political motivations—his deep hatred of Bolshevism, stemming from his outrage at Germany's loss in World War I, encouraged a brutal policy of annihilation. National Socialism was destined to triumph over the "Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy," as Hitler saw it. In his words, the war on the Ostfront was about destroying "Bolshevik commissars and the communist intelligentsia" (Beevor 1998; Kershaw 2000). The Führer planned on "annihilating...Russia as the home of Bolshevism" (Kershaw 1998). Finally, Hitler sought to expand the Third Reich eastward, capturing the vast living space of Russia for the German people. The threat of the United States entering the war added haste to this plan, as Germany would need the resources of Russia to turn its war machine to the west. Therefore, the oilfields of the Soviet Union were a large target, an objective that the Nazis pursued with vigor after Operation Barbarossa began. To make room for Germanic peoples to inhabit the Russian steppes, however, approximately thirty million Slavs needed to disappear from the face of the earth (a figure stated by Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the SS and senior NSDAP official) (Avalon Project 2016). Lebensraum depended on this, and so it is not surprising that the deaths of millions of Russians was inconsequential, indeed, even desirable, to the *Reichstag*.

Table 1: World War II Deaths by Nationality*

Country	Civilian	Military	Total
France	267,000	245,000	550,000
Germany	2,035,000	3,250,000-5,533,000	8,000,000
Great Britain	60,595	403,195	463,900
Poland	5,700,000	240,000	6,000,000
United States	1,700	416,800	418,500
USSR	13,204,000	9,750,000-11,444,100	25-27,000,000

(Clodfelter 2002; Bellamy 2007; National WWII Museum 2016) *Figures are approximations; total numbers vary by source. In some cases there are great discrepancies between different sources.

Perhaps the only credit I will give to the second theory is that once the fighting began and Russians became aware of German atrocities, they undeniably began combating the invaders savagely and without mercy. One could rightly argue that both sides escalated their callous actions against one another as the war grinded on and a hatred of each other deepened. Again, however, the Germans launched the invasion and wasted little time in proving how ruthless they could be. While this certainly does not justify the shocking atrocities committed by the Red Army as they "liberated" Nazi-occupied countries and later Germany itself, it is not fair or correct to blame them for the way German troops treated the Slavs. Clearly, there was something else at play.

To accurately examine this phenomenon, I turn to both qualitative and quantitative data. The previous works of other scholars provide much information, and without them this could never have been written. Drawing on their studies into war crimes, Nazi propaganda, and combat on the frontlines of World War II, a picture begins to come together. To bolster this research, I survey personal accounts, testimonies, and statements from German and Russian troops—testimonies from war crimes tribunals were also studied, all in an effort to gain a perspective on the attitudes of men on the frontlines. Finally, quantitative data is used to demonstrate the differences in violence between the Eastern and Western Fronts.

This work is broken into four chapters: The first is this introduction, while the second chapter provides many examples and figures establishing the scale of the brutality in Russia compared against Western Europe. The treatment (and frequent execution) of Soviet POWs and

partisans will be examined, as this was not practiced nearly as frequently by the Germans in Western Europe. It could be reasoned, and correctly so, that the Germans were not the only forces in the war to treat captured troops abysmally: the U.S. Marine Corps was known to machine-gun captured Japanese troops, and Japanese treatments of captured Allied soldiers, sailors, and airmen were often horrendous. These arguments, however, are better suited to a different study, as this one solely focuses on comparing German military actions between different fronts. Through accounts of death and destruction, along with quantitative data showing the massive differences in treatment the Slavs suffered compared with their Western peers, it becomes quite clear that the Soviet peoples were some of the most unfortunate of the war.

Once the degree of harshness has been established, the third chapter asks the important questions, and then attempts to answer them: Why were the German troops so callous on the Eastern Front? What motivated them to act so harshly, and what allowed the individual soldiers to behave in this way? Nazi propaganda and anti-Bolshevik sentiments are analyzed here, as well as *Lebensraum*. Expect to delve into the very psyche of the Eastern Front itself. Ultimately, I conclude that while the Soviet failure to sign the Hague Convention of 1907 and fight with the same rules of war practiced by Britain and France may have contributed to the German approach to warfare, this argument decidedly lacks merit in explaining Wehrmacht and SS behavior. German troops were often told by their government leaders, by propaganda, and by their commanding officers that the Slavs were lesser beings, unworthy of humane treatment or mercy.

Of course, this attitude was not held by all members of the Wehrmacht; it is wrong to demonize every last *Landser* who fought in World War II. Men have lost a great deal of innocence in every battle since the dawn of armed conflict, and troops fighting under every flag have sometimes compromised their values—such is the nature of war. The actions of the German

military on the *Ostfront*, on the other hand, cannot be easily forgiven. They were not isolated incidents of unwarranted violence that are wont to occur when young men are given weapons and sent off to war, but the product of a calculated policy to destroy the Russian state and enslave or exterminate its people.

A theme ignored all too often is the similarity between the Final Solution and the Nazi attitude toward the Slavs—Hitler referred to his conflict against the Soviet Union as a "war of annihilation" many times, both privately and in public. The Führer, along with his political leadership and commanding military officers, told the German armed forces that this was a war about survival, without room for compassion or humanity. The Nazis also masterfully used propaganda to harden preexisting German sentiments against the Slavs and Communism in the same way it was used against Jews. Ordinary German troops were desensitized by this racial and political campaign, and many believed the leadership's rhetoric about destroying, enslaving, or resettling the "subhuman" Slavs. Daniel Goldhagen (1997) writes in Hitler's Willing Executioners that the Germans were anti-Semites from the very beginning, and many willingly participated in the Holocaust; he also argues that the troops had room to protest orders with their officers. I dispute this, as it took effort from Nazi leaders to convince German troops of their duty to remorselessly kill so many; once corrupted, however, blood flowed freely. Furthermore, individual enlisted men often had little choice in their options. Troops with any misgivings were rarely able to speak out, particularly as members of the highly-disciplined German military. Structure and obedience ruled the day, and to speak out as an individual against his officers and national government would have been tantamount to suicide, certainly in terms of career and possibly concerning his life as well.

Chapter 2—A Nation Torn Apart

Prior to Operation Barbarossa, the German war machine crushed everything in its path—the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, kicked off the war with a predictable start. The illequipped Polish forces quickly collapsed under the onslaught of the Blitzkrieg. Germany's preparations for war, as well as its cutting-edge advancements in coordinated, mechanized warfare, all came to fruition in Poland. Panzer divisions rapidly overwhelmed the defenders, with help from coordinated artillery and airstrikes. Indeed, the ability to coordinate attacks between tanks, Stuka dive bombers, and infantry was one of the greatest strengths of the Blitzkrieg.

If the Poles' situation was not desperate enough, their predicament was worsened considerably when the Soviet Union invaded from the east; only days after the Germans launched their offensive, Poland found itself pinched between two superior military forces. The fighting lasted little over a month. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact ensured cooperation between Berlin and Moscow, though Stalin would soon be double-crossed. For the time being, however, Stalin was oblivious to Hitler's deception—the USSR would continue to send supplies into Germany up to the moment the Reich's panzer divisions attacked into Russia.

France was the next victim of the Blitzkrieg. The overwhelming tactics that shocked the world in Poland proved just as lethal in France, and Germany outfoxed the French from the very beginning. The invasion began on May 10, 1940, after the Wehrmacht had taken several months to repair and rearm its combat units after the Polish campaign. German troops moved into Belgium in the same way they had done in World War I. The French anticipated this maneuver and moved troops to block the attack, with additional support from British forces. What they failed to realize, however, was that this thrust was only a feint. The prevalent belief among French generals was one of false security—the famed Maginot Line would surely halt an attack

farther south, and the Ardennes were too dense to move an army through. The Germans did not share this opinion, and proved the French to be disastrously incorrect. Panzer formations and other mechanized units simply went around the Maginot Line and moved through the "impenetrable" Ardennes. Needless to say, the French military was quite alarmed when large numbers of German tanks started appearing far south of where they were expected. The feint worked, and the French and British troops were quickly outflanked.

Despite the unfortunate reputation the French military has acquired, in no small part due to this very conflict, they fought admirably at times, offering the Germans fierce resistance and bogging down attacks. French tanks, in spite of their many shortcomings, typically had very thick armor for early-war tank designs. The small, short-barreled cannons on early German tanks could not reliably penetrate their armor—it was at this point that the Germans realized the ferocious tank-killing ability of their 88mm flak guns, as they were often forced to haul up a flak gun or call a Stuka down from the heavens to defeat the French armor. This was a lesson the Reich would remember, and the adaptability of the Wehrmacht proved too much for France and England to contain. The German victory was complete when the remaining Allied soldiers were pushed back into the English Channel. A daring rescue at Dunkirk managed to save several hundred thousand British troops, but France was lost. The Wehrmacht paraded down the Champs-Élysées, and France succumbed to the Blitzkrieg just as Poland had before it. By late June, the Nazi eagle soared over France.

Immediately after this stunning victory, the *Luftwaffe* launched its air campaign against England. After destroying the Royal Air Force (RAF) and crippling Great Britain's ability to fend off an invasion, the Germans planned to launch Operation Sea Lion—the cross-channel invasion of the British Isles. The superhuman resistance of the RAF, however, eliminated this

possibility, with help from the near-unlimited stream of supplies and munitions from the United States. The *Luftwaffe* suffered huge losses and would never fully recover, while the corpulent commander of the *Luftwaffe*, *Reichsmarschall* Hermann Göring, seemed more preoccupied with looting museums of their paintings and sculptures than leading his air force to victory.

With Operation Sea Lion halted before it began, Hitler became impatient and turned his attention to the east: the Soviet Union, a bastion of "Jewish-Bolshevism" and possessor of great natural resources, industry, and land, became the Führer's next obsession (Hitler 1971). Senior Nazi political and military officials shared this interest in the Soviet lands—Field Marshal Keitel himself commented on the vast "granary" that was the Ukraine, and its potential to prosper under "German skill and German sweat" (Keitel 1966, 160). Despite the reservations of some of his military commanders, Hitler proceeded with the invasion. Initially intended to begin on May 15, 1941, the invasion was delayed until June 22 of the same year. The more cautious members of the German general staff were uneasy with the loss of a month, anticipating the harsh Russian winter. Hitler, however, was optimistic, as were the majority of soldiers and intelligence officers (Beevor 1998).

Germany prepared for the invasion months in advance, massing millions of troops and thousands of tanks, field guns, and aircraft near the Soviet border. This was done with great secrecy, but Soviet intelligence still managed to discover that there were astonishing numbers of German troops building on their border. On the eve of the invasion, Soviet border guard troops noticed signs of impending doom. Tank engines could be heard warming up through the trees, and increased *Luftwaffe* activity along the border did not go unnoticed. Stalin, however, refused to believe that Germany was about to invade. Though the evidence was abundant and outwardly

obvious, he simply brushed the invasion force off as a diversion from the imminent Nazi conquest of England (Beevor 1998; Bellamy 2007).

When Operation Barbarossa launched, it initially appeared that the prevailing attitude was correct—Germany would surely take Russia with the ease it had captured every country before it. The Blitzkrieg stormed across the Russian steppes, annihilating everything in its path. In the first three weeks of fighting, the Red Army lost approximately 2 million men, 3,500 tanks, and 6,000 aircraft (most were destroyed by the *Luftwaffe* while still on the ground) (Beevor 1998). In an ironic twist, the Russian officers familiar with German armored warfare tactics had been eliminated in the Red Army purges years earlier.

Even after the invasion, Stalin remained in a form of denial. Furthermore, he was utterly terrified of Hitler. The fierce sense of vengeance that colors history's memory of Stalin had not yet arrived; the Soviet leader watched in horror as the Wehrmacht steamrolled towards Moscow. SS and Secret Field Police units moved in behind the invading force, quickly implementing the Final Solution and killing suspected partisans in droves (see Figures 2,3, and 9). Soviet responses were equally brutal, but could not halt the attack (Beevor 1998; Bellamy 2007). By October, 1941, ninety million Russians found themselves on the wrong side of the frontline, living in Nazi-occupied territory (Merridale 2006).

While Operation Barbarossa initially returned massive victories for the Germans, conditions began to deteriorate several months into the conflict. The vast space of Russia began to negatively impact the Wehrmacht, as keeping supply lines up to speed with the panzer divisions' rapid advance proved difficult. Russian resistance also strengthened, in no small part due to the introduction of the T-34 medium tank, a robust and versatile machine capable of going head-to-head with German Panzer III and Panzer IV tanks. Russian tank crews, however, were

often poorly trained and underequipped; incredible numbers of T-34s were destroyed in action by the Germans.

The German assault started to slow in the autumn with the arrival of heavy rains. Roads were turned into nigh impassable mud pits, and Russian resistance became fiercer the closer the Germans got to Moscow. The Wehrmacht came dangerously close to the Soviet capital (vanguard units reported being close enough to see searchlights and antiaircraft fire from the city), but was slowed by fanatical Russian troops. Then, the Russian winter arrived. The combination of unanticipated resistance and unusually harsh weather halted the lead elements of the assault approximately 26 kilometers from the Kremlin, with an SS motorcycle battalion coming within 17 kilometers of the outskirts of Moscow (Bellamy 2007). Any hope of forward progress was lost until the following spring, so the German generals pulled their men back from the outskirts of Moscow and dug in for the winter, with the main German assault force halted roughly 41 kilometers from the center of Moscow (Beevor 1998; Bellamy 2007).

Like Napoleon's army over a century before them, the Wehrmacht was damaged by the brutal winter. Men succumbed to frostbite, illness, and the cold itself. Hitler's overconfidence in a quick victory meant that the troops had not been equipped with appropriate clothing. Vehicles and weapons stopped working in the intense cold. The Wehrmacht, however, would not be defeated so easily. Though they were pushed back by a strong Russian counterattack, losing 100-250 kilometers despite Hitler's orders not to relinquish an inch of ground to the Russians, the Soviet counteroffensive ran out of steam in the spring and the Germans were able to gain the upper hand once again (Bellamy 2007). The oil fields of the Caucasus became Hitler's next target, and by extension the city of Stalingrad—an industrial city on the Volga that bore Stalin's namesake. Capturing it would allow the Germans to pivot south into the oil-rich Caucasus and

protect the eastern flank of the attack. Hitler's megalomania also influenced his decision, as the city named after Stalin later became a personal obsession. This decision to abandon Moscow and drive south infuriated some German generals. Heinz Guderian opted to renew the attack on the capital city, but Hitler dismissed this argument and fired him for his failure to capture Moscow and his decision to pull his men back from the winter defensive line. The Führer fancied himself to be a military genius, despite no strategic training or experience, and began micromanaging the war effort (Beevor 1998; Bellamy 2007). This hubris cost Germany many victories. After the defeat at Stalingrad, and then Kursk, the Reich gained no more ground in Russia. The slow demise of the German war machine began, as the Red Army battled their mortal enemy across the motherland and finally into Germany itself. In the midst of this epic struggle, western Russia was nothing short of ravaged.

The scale of destruction on the Eastern Front cannot be overstated—millions of Russians died, regardless of whether they were wearing Red Army uniforms or the attire of a peasant.

Entire villages were burned to the ground by the invading forces. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the SS played a significant part in the destruction, but this violence was not executed solely by

Einsatzgruppen and other specialized units tasked with carrying out the Final Solution. The SS was not only responsible for the Holocaust and Hitler's personal protection; the paramilitary wing of the SS, the Waffen-SS or "armed SS," fielded dozens of combat divisions. These
Waffen-SS combat units, including panzer divisions, sometimes took part in crimes on the
Ostfront as well. The infamous and brilliant SS panzer commander, Joachim "Jochen" Peiper of the 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, twice ordered his tanks to surround
Russian villages. Once encircled, panzer grenadiers set fire to the village buildings, with women and children trapped inside. These actions earned his unit the nickname "Blowtorch Battalion."

Unfortunately, events of this nature were not few and far between, particularly as reprisals. Indeed, Peiper ordered the villages razed after some of his men were killed by partisans there (Parker 2014). That is not to say, however, that there were not completely unwarranted cases of murder. Anti-partisan operations made up a significant portion of civilian deaths, but many others were killed without a shred of justification.

Contrary to a long-held belief, the SS alone was not responsible for the atrocities on the Eastern Front. In fact, the Wehrmacht often took part in questionable anti-partisan operations and other acts of violence. The main reason for this was that Waffen-SS combat units and the Field Police were grossly outnumbered by their Wehrmacht peers; according to Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, Waffen-SS *Obergruppenführer* in command of anti-partisan operations in the Nazioccupied central sector of Russia, Wehrmacht units were commonly used to fight partisans and attack villages suspected of harboring them. In his own words, recorded at the Nuremburg Trials, Bach-Zelewski testified that "anti-partisan operations were undertaken mainly by Wehrmacht formations." Typically, whatever troops that were nearby and available for tasking were assigned to these operations, with local officers given command of the maneuvers. Practically, this could mean SS units, Wehrmacht troops, or a combination, with command given to the senior-most officer present. According to Bach-Zelewski the majority of operations were commanded by a Wehrmacht officer (Avalon Project 2016). This testimony, combined with other evidence recently brought to light, challenges the widely-accepted understanding that Wehrmacht war crimes seldom occurred. The SS can no longer be given all of the blame for German brutality against the Slavs.

Soviet partisan fighters remained a thorn in the Germans' side throughout the war, and caused continuous problems for the invaders (it was not uncommon for over one hundred

stretches of railway line to be blown up by partisans each night (Keitel 1966)). By November, 1942, there were an estimated 94,000 partisans operating behind German lines, ambushing patrols, destroying supplies, and otherwise resisting the occupation (Merridale 2006). Therefore, the German response to guerrilla attacks was often swift and savage. One SS trooper, Eberhard Kehrle, was secretly recorded in an Allied POW camp telling a fellow SS man, "In the Caucasus, when one of us got killed [by a partisan] there was no need for any lieutenant to tell us what to do. We just pulled out our pistols and shot everything in sight, women, children, everything..." (Spiegel Online 2011). It should be noted that the German military fought partisans in other occupied countries with similar methods; partisans and their civilian countrymen in France and Italy were put down with callous ferocity as well, but not on as large a scale or with such total disregard for life. French villages were seldom wiped off the face of the earth like some Russian settlements were (see Figure 6).

One Red Army soldier, Misha Volkov, wrote to his wife in February, 1942, telling her of the unthinkable atrocities he had witnessed at the hands of the Germans: entire towns and villages burned down, littered with the corpses of women and children. Refugees who had managed to escape the German advance told similar stories, recalling mass shootings and the torture of partisans. More than one escapee talked of the joy some German troops got from murder; they would drink and laugh around gasoline-soaked bonfires built with the bodies of their victims (see Figure 1 for a similar bonfire of corpses). A survivor from Smolensk told that on December 13, 1941, German soldiers rounded up a great many captured Red Army troops, locked them in a building surrounded by barbed wire, and set fire to the structure. Any man who climbed out of the inferno was shot. Some Wehrmacht and SS troops even took mementos with

them—captured German troops were found with photographs of mass graves, executed Russian soldiers and civilians, and hanged men (Merridale 2006).

Another large killer of Russians was starvation—German units moving through villages took as much food as they could carry, stripping entire towns of milk, honey, poultry, ham, potatoes, and bread. Additionally, grain fields were burned to prevent surprise attacks and deny cover to the enemy (Russian troops also burned these fields in retreat with the intention of denying the Germans food. The wellbeing of the peasants relying on these crops for survival was not considered, or consciously sacrificed for the greater survival of Russia. Stalin also ordered the peasants themselves to burn their villages and crops and then flee east.) (Beevor 1998). Given that the Nazis planned to eradicate approximately thirty million Slavs to make way for German expansion, it is not a stretch to say that these mass starvations were intended.

The Germans did not always take prisoners, even when they were able to. Surrendering Russian soldiers were sometimes shot; particularly prone to execution were Soviet commissars, Communist Party political officers tasked with supporting and enforcing loyalty to Stalin's regime within the Red Army. Likewise, NKVD troops suffered a similar fate. And unlike the wholesale destruction of villages spontaneously organized by troops on the ground, this treatment of Soviet political officers was ordered from the highest level. Upon Hitler's command, the OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) issued the infamous "Commissar Order" on the eve of Operation Barbarossa—the Reich's invasion of the Soviet Union. The order decreed that commissars were to be immediately shot upon capture, or handed over to the SS or the Secret Field Police (Beevor 1998; Römer 2012). Partisans, alleged communist sympathizers, Jews, those with "Bolshevik sentiments," and others deemed undesirable to the Reich were treated similarly.

Standard Russian combat infantry fared no better. One German veteran of the Eastern Front, Wolfgang Horn, served with a panzer regiment in 1941. He recalls that many Red Army troops would simply curl up into balls, crouching on the ground when fired upon, or play dead. German troops would order them to raise their hands in the basic Russian they were taught, but often the Soviet soldiers would remain motionless. At that point they were shot by the Germans. In the words of Horn: "When they don't surrender, we shoot them. It was natural for us to do...we naturally shot them all crouching. They are cowards—they didn't deserve any better, anyhow. That was our feeling. We would never have done that. You're crouching and doing nothing, not raising your hands and doing anything...just passively waiting. You couldn't see their faces. Just the shaking when the bullets had an impact on them. So that way lots were killed." (Frontline Soldier 2014). It should be noted, however, that Russian infantry were known to play dead, then open fire when German troops approached (Beevor 1998). Understanding this, it is hard to demonize this particular German tactic entirely, though many Russians were no doubt shot trembling on the ground, truly terrified of their swiftly-approaching deaths.

Captured Russian troops were often no more fortunate than their executed comrades. Out of the 5.7 million Red Army troops captured, around 3.5 million died in German captivity, a mortality rate of well over fifty percent. The largest influx of Soviet POWs came during the first successful months of the invasion, as the Germans steamrolled across Russia. By February 1942, 2 million out of 3.3 million Russian prisoners had already died (USHMM 2016). Comparatively, the mortality rate of Western troops in German POW camps was under five percent (Holderness et al. 2012).

Table 2: Mortality Rate of POWs in German Custody by Nationality

Country	Number Captured	Number Died	Mortality Rate
United States	95,532	1,124	1%
Great Britain	135,000	4,725	3.5%
Soviet Union	5,700,000	3,500,000	57.5-61%

(Beevor 1998; Clodfelter 2002; USHMM 2016)

Clearly, Russian POWs were not seen as equal to their Western peers. Even the quality of the camps themselves was very different. In Western Europe, established prisoner camps were quite common, with barracks, kitchens, watchtowers, latrines, and other amenities. For many captured Russians, their "camp" was an open field surrounded by barbed-wire and armed guards. Precedent was given to the speed of the German advance, and slowing to build adequate facilities for *Untermenschen* would have seemed ludicrous to Hitler. And so, quite callously, the wellbeing of Soviet POWs was almost an afterthought, if it entered the mind at all. No shelter was given, only open steppe, forcing prisoners to carve out shallow trenches in the earth to sleep in. Food was extremely scarce; most prisoners were fed a thin gruel or an appalling bread made from sugar beet husks and straw flour. Officially, Soviet prisoners used for labor were to be fed 2,200 calories a day—in reality they were fed closer to 700 calories, a diet that killed many within weeks. Scores resorted to eating grass and leaves, while at Gross-Rosen concentration camp the SS intentionally starved 65,000 Russian prisoners by only feeding them a soup of grass, salt, and water (USHMM 2016). Some prisoners resorted to cannibalism to stay alive (Merridale 2006). One lucky Soviet POW later told that in a makeshift camp on the steppe they were fed once a day, from large cauldrons where the Germans boiled horsemeat; any prisoner who ran when dinner was announced was shot down and left for 3 days as a warning to the

others (Beevor 1998). At another crude POW camp, this one in Rzhev, prisoners were held in huts that did little to fight off the cold. They were fed one or two frozen potatoes a day, with rotten meat and bones supplementing this diet. 20-30 prisoners died each day at the Rzhev camp, and those too weak to work were executed by the guards (Merridale 2006; see Figure 10). Disease ran rampantly through all of the makeshift prisons (mainly typhoid and dysentery), and lice and fleas only compounded the misery. Finally, the sun scorched and blistered those unable to seek shelter.

A grueling march awaited prisoners not detained close to where they surrendered (though before Stalingrad, most POWs were held close to the front). The German military refused to ride Soviet POWs in their trucks because of the lice and flea epidemic, and when prisoners were transported by train they rode in open-topped freight cars (Beevor 1998). This was especially lethal during the winter months—when the trains reached their destinations, between 25 to 70 percent of their occupants were often dead (USHMM 2016). Most prisoners were not transported via any type of vehicle, so captured Russians were forced to walk long distances to camps behind the lines. Those who were wounded, starving, or otherwise weak and unable to keep pace met death where they fell, via Mauser rifle bullet or bayonet. Those who survived the death marches were used as manual labor for German companies and factories, but were often too weak to be effective workers. Failure to meet expectations resulted in execution, at least for the prisoners who had not already succumbed to starvation or disease (USHMM 2016).

Soviet prisoners sometimes found themselves used as guinea pigs for twisted experiments. Zyklon B, the cyanide-based poison gas used in the Holocaust, was first tested on a group of Soviet POWs. In fact, many similarities can be drawn between the Final Solution and the treatment of the Slavs. Both Jews and Slavs were seen as racially inferior and deserving of

extermination, so Nazi ideology seamlessly intertwined the treatment of both groups. The nightmare camp known as Auschwitz-Birkenau was originally built not for the Jews, but for Soviet prisoners. Once most of the original POWs taken into German-controlled territory had perished and no more were expected, the camp was reassigned to the Final Solution (USHMM 2016). It is very likely that high-ranking Nazi officials intentionally blurred the lines between the extermination of the Jews and anti-Soviet operations. Hitler's consistent use of the phrase "war of annihilation" sounds eerily similar to his genocide against Jewry.

Chapter 3-Why?

There were several reasons why the Germans behaved the way they did towards the Slavs. Hitler's genocidal fantasies towards those he deemed subhuman quickly manifested themselves during Operation Barbarossa. The precursor invasion of Poland offered a glimpse of what the Nazis had in store for Eastern Europe, but the conquest of Soviet Russia multiplied the carnage immeasurably. Approximately 27 million Russians died over the course of the war, with noncombatants and civilians comprising over half of these casualties (Römer 2012). As previously noted, 3.5 million of the at least 11 million Red Army troops killed died after capture. Allied troops and POWs on the Western Front were treated with much greater respect. As an example, at the same time the German war machine was slaughtering villages and shooting Red Army POWs, the *Afrika Korps* under Rommel's command was entertaining captured British officers to dinner.

Nazi leadership issued several directives aimed at destroying the communist infrastructure in the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most infamous is the aforementioned "Commissar Order," issued by Hitler through Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel. The immediate execution of commissars, as well as others deemed necessary to the communist movement, was intended to eradicate every trace of Stalin's regime.

Hitler's *Rassenkampf* ("race war") and anti-Communism turned German soldiers into executioners. The *Untermenschen* belief was pervasive throughout the ranks of the Wehrmacht and reinforced by high command and the Führer himself. Hitler was quoted at an address he gave to over 200 senior Wehrmacht officers, espousing that the invasion of Soviet Russia was to be "a battle between two opposing world views" and "a battle of annihilation." Indeed, German troops were encouraged by some officers to pillage, rape, and kill with abandon. They were protected

from repercussions by a "Jurisdiction Order" that exonerated all troops from crimes they committed against the local populace. The only punishment a German soldier *might* receive for raping a Slavic woman was not in defense of her human rights; rather, he would be chastised for relations with someone of racial impurity. Field Marshal Keitel signed the "Jurisdiction Order" into effect with the explanation "that the downfall of 1918, the German people's period of suffering which followed and the struggle against National Socialism—with the many blood sacrifices endured by the movement—can be traced to Bolshevik influence. No German should forget this." (Beevor 1998, 14).

With the "Commissar" and "Jurisdiction" orders came others with similarly brutal implications. Regimental officers were informed of the necessity to take "collective measures of force against villages" when fighting partisans. The very idea of crushing Soviet partisans seems to have been deliberately joined with the Final Solution and destroying Bolshevism. General Hermann Hoth, commander of the 4th Panzer Army during the drive to Stalingrad, stated that "the annihilation of those same Jews who support Bolshevism and its organization for murder, the partisans, is a measure of self-preservation" (Beevor 1998, 16).

On the 10th of October, 1941, Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau issued the infamous "Severity Order," calling for the annihilation of "false Bolshevik doctrine of the Soviet state," as well as the extermination of all resistance and "foreign treachery and cruelty." This was framed as a means of protecting the German troops on the Eastern Front, but its true implications towards genocide and murder are thinly veiled at best (*WWII Today* 2011). It should be noted that Field Marshal von Reichenau was not an SS officer, but the commander of the Sixth Army until his death in early 1942.

A key aspect of the Nazi plan to eradicate the population in Russia was mass starvation, though it is unclear how knowledgeable most frontline troops and officers were of this. As the decorated historian Antony Beevor (1998) points out, few officers saw the orders stating that German forces fighting in the east should take whatever food and supplies they needed from the land to survive (though many units did it anyway), as well as the orders to ship several tons of grain back to Germany annually. As Beevor also points out, however, it should not have been difficult to surmise what was really going on. The innocence of the troops and their commanding officers on this issue is questionable, yet still plausible. The guilt of Nazi leaders on this matter, on the other hand, is beyond question. Martin Bormann is documented saying that "many tens of millions [of Russians] will starve"; Hermann Göring is reported to have bragged that the Soviet Slavs would be forced to eat leather saddles (Beevor 1998, 16).

Similarly, the brutal methods used to fight partisans were not challenged by Nazi commanders. At the Nuremburg Trials, SS *Obergruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, chief of anti-partisan combat units in occupied Russia, gave testimony indicating that Nazi high command was well aware of the cruel and vicious nature of anti-partisan operations and allowed them to continue. According to Bach-Zelewski, there were no specific directives given by the OKW or the OKH (*Oberkommando des Heeres*) for fighting partisans. The officer in immediate command of an anti-partisan operation had great discretion, which greatly contributed to the chaos and "a wild state of anarchy in all anti-partisan operations." He stated further that he believed the operations to have largely failed in their purpose and only resulted in a large number of civilian deaths. When he and his peers submitted complaints to their superiors about these issues, they were ignored—Bach-Zelewski stated that he believed this to be intentional, citing a speech made by Heinrich Himmler in 1941 prior the launch of Operation Barbarossa. Himmler

reportedly told those in attendance that the purpose of the invasion was to reduce the Slavic population by 30 million people (Avalon Project 2016). If murder on this scale was a key objective, it should not be surprising that no steps were taken to restrain the violent operations that killed so many innocents. Additionally, it is extremely noteworthy that of the POWs who survived their time in German custody, a disproportionate number were members of non-Slavic ethnicity. Many hailed from Georgia, the Baltics, Ukraine, Turkestan, or were Cossack (Merridale 2006).

Hitler gave several reasons to his general staff for their invasion of Russia—chiefly, he believed the Soviet Union was preparing an attack on Germany. Operation Barbarossa was deemed a preemptive strike. While unsure in the beginning, many German officers came to accept this explanation once the fighting began, including Field Marshal Keitel, who stated in his memoirs that the Russian preparations for an attack on Germany were revealed once the Wehrmacht crossed into Soviet territory (Keitel 1966). This perspective, however, has been rebuked countless times; virtually all credible scholars in the field agree that Operation Barbarossa was an unprovoked attack on Russia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was also instrumental to the Nazi conquest of Britain—Hitler believed that the English would continue to hold out as long as Russia held back a German attack. During a meeting at the Berghof in early January 1941, Hitler told his generals that "The possibility of a Russian intervention in the war was sustaining the English. They would only give up the contest if this last continental hope [the Soviet Union] were demolished" (Kershaw 2000, 336).

By the time Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*, his stance on Russia was solidly established. Indeed, he telegraphed his actions two decades into the future. The idea of *Lebensraum* is

discussed in detail. His feelings towards the "Red agitators" that would crash NSDAP meetings are equally transparent: Hitler believed the only way to stop them was with brutal force. The *Sturmabteilung*, the "monitor service" that provided security at party meetings and rallies, was guided by Hitler's principle that "terror can only be broken by terror" (Hitler 1971, 490). Years later, he would tell his generals the same thing in regard to fighting partisans.

Hitler saw no difference between Judaism and Bolshevism; in his eyes the lines between them were so heavily blurred that they merged into one movement, a movement that would attempt to subject the German people under the Jewish intelligentsia. He calls the rulers of Bolshevik Russia "common blood-stained criminals" and "the scum of humanity," leaders controlled by Jewish puppet-masters (Hitler 1971, 660-661; Kershaw 1998). In a speech Hitler gave at the *Reichstag* on January 30, 1939, he informed its members that "if international finance Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will be not the Bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!" (Kershaw 2000, 127).

Once studied, it becomes clear how *Mein Kampf* ties many of Hitler's views together. In the chapter of his work titled *Eastern Orientation or Eastern Policy*, he begins by stating that the relationship between Germany and Russia requires "special examination," and is "the most decisive concern for all German foreign affairs" (641). Hitler then goes on to discuss the importance of soil and land for the German people, providing statements such as "The National Socialist movement must strive to eliminate the disproportion between our population and our area—viewing this latter as a source of food as well as a basis for power politics—between our historical past and the hopelessness of our present impotence" (646). Reworded in another quote, Hitler explains that one of the two main objectives of Germany should be "Land and soil as the

goal of our foreign policy" (649). He justified this proposed expansion with the opinion that "The right to possess soil can become a duty if without extension of its soil a great nation seems doomed to destruction" (654). And, if he could not have been any more blatant, he explicitly specified what land his sights were set on, pausing to clarify that "If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states" (654). After this specification, Hitler explains that as soon as the Bolsheviks gained power, Russia forfeited her right to sovereign statehood. According to the Führer, the great accomplishments of Russia in years past were not due to the virtues of the Slavs, as they are racially impure, but because of the "German elements in an inferior race" (654). Essentially, the Slavs benefitted from small amounts of Germanic genes in their blood and were unfit and incapable of leading themselves. Upon the Bolshevik takeover, writes Hitler, the upper echelon of Russian government officials with German traits were replaced by Jews, a fate that infuriated him to no end (Hitler 1971; Kershaw 2000). So, all of the pieces fall together—an inferior nation of racially impure, Jewish-Bolshevik-controlled masses have lost any right to self-determination, and are in possession of great swaths of land that would better the future of the Germanic peoples. Russia was doomed to oblivion the moment Hitler's pen met paper.

Field Marshal Keitel reiterated Hitler's position, explaining in his memoirs that the Führer fundamentally believed that his Germany was "diametrically opposed" to Stalin's USSR (1966). Hitler was certain that the two ideologies could not exist in harmony, and that Bolshevism was destined to eventually strangle all of Europe. He saw it as his duty to prevent this, rather than leave it to a successor; he was to destroy Bolshevism before it destroyed Germany. In a speech given in March, 1941 to senior Wehrmacht officers across all branches preparing to invade Russia, he outlined this duty to save Europe from Bolshevism; he went on to

explain that all preconceived notions about the rules of war and chivalry should be thrown out. This war was about survival, and the enemy would not entertain any code of honor. Hitler cited the Soviet campaigns in the Baltics, Finland, and Bessarabia as proof, and reminded his officers that the USSR had refused to validate the Hague Convention respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land protocols for POW treatment. The first hint at the "Commissar Order" was also delivered here, when Hitler bluntly told those in attendance that commissars were not to be treated as soldiers or prisoners of war—rather, they were to be shot in combat or immediately upon capture, or handed over to the SS or Secret Field Police for execution. The Führer justified this with the explanation that the commissars were the backbone of Stalin's regime and would be responsible for organizing resistance and rallying Red Army troops. To kill them would be to kill Stalin's rule and his ideology, and would save countless German lives. Last, Hitler told his men that the court martial of German troops suspected of carrying out individual atrocities towards the civilian population was to be suspended, at least until a commander believed his territory to be cleansed of partisan activity (Keitel 1966).

Keitel (1966) stated in his memoirs that many of those officers in attendance at the meeting were quietly uncomfortable with many of Hitler's directives, particularly the severity of anti-partisan actions and the treatment of Russian prisoners and commissars. Keitel also related that both he and General Jodl protested Hitler's decision to give Heinrich Himmler ultimate authority over police operations in the rearward areas of occupied Russia, but Hitler would not hear it. Official, written orders for the "Commissar" and "Jurisdiction" orders were drafted a month later, at the beginning of May 1941.

Despite Keitel's defense of his fellow officers, as well as his misgivings about Hitler's strategy, there exist numerous direct quotes from high-ranking German officers about the

necessity of carrying out these orders and destroying Bolshevism in one form or another. Some of these quotations are listed in this work, and virtually all of them are filled with the typical NSDAP rhetoric about eradicating Bolshevism for the good of Germany and the greater world. Given this evidence, it is difficult to surmise how much of this ideology the generals and field marshals believed, though many ultimately relayed the messages to their troops, regardless of personal beliefs. A minority, however, refused to pass these orders on, as their honor in the Prussian military tradition stood in stark contrast with Hitler's orders for murder.

Just days before Operation Barbarossa launched, Hitler again assembled his senior commanders, this time to specifically address the importance of ruthlessly crushing any partisan who dared raise arms against the invaders. After again mentioning that this was a "war of ideologies," Hitler used Germany's recent experiences fighting partisans in the Balkans to explain the need for brute force. In the months leading up to the invasion of the Soviet Union, Germany had indeed had its fair share of trouble with partisan fighting in the occupied Balkan states, and the Führer used this to elaborate on the necessity of slaughtering every last partisan fighter the invading troops would engage. According to him, the Soviet partisans would fight harder than any guerillas yet encountered, and that killing them was ultimately the "kindest way" (Keitel's words again). After all, Hitler had destroyed the German Communist Party not with trials and laws, but the violence of his Brownshirts (Keitel 1966).

The anti-Bolshevik theme was a pillar of Nazi ideology, and was used extensively to justify the war. In one of many references, Keitel used it to sway the Hungarian Prime Minister, Dr. László Bárdossy, to send more troops to fight for Germany. In early 1942, Field Marshal Keitel visited him in Budapest, where they discussed critical aspects of the nations' cooperation. The prime minister was more focused on the Hungarian peoples' animosity towards Romania;

Keitel took the opportunity to stress the importance of setting aside old grievances and committing to aiding in the fight against Bolshevism, as it was the greater threat to them all (Keitel 1966). This tactic was often effective in gaining multinational support—if it was capable of swaying foreign ambassadors and heads of state, it is not difficult to imagine its potent application in convincing German foot soldiers and officers alike.

In a similar fashion, Joseph Goebbels painted the Red Army as a "red horde," consisting of savages of a half-Asiatic breed who were poised to pillage and enslave Europe. This propaganda took root in many German troops, some of whom were already afflicted with a racially-charged attitude towards the Soviet peoples. One German officer mused on his personal thoughts about the ethnic make-up of the Slavs, writing "Of special importance, however, I consider the infusion of Mongol blood." (Merridale 2006, 12).

Existing German sentiments towards the Slavs undoubtedly helped German soldiers mercilessly kill and mistreat Russians, and Nazi propaganda catalyzed this (Waddington 2007; see Figures 11 and 12). The Reich increased its racial and political propaganda during the prewar years, and by 1939 every aspect of living was peppered with the ideology of Aryan superiority. The SS is an obvious example of an ideologically-charged institution, but the Wehrmacht did not escape this propaganda. The degree of party loyalty, however, varied more greatly than in the SS. Some career officers in the Army were outraged when Hitler ordered the eagle and swastika, the symbol of the NSDAP, sewn on all military uniforms. They believed that the Wehrmacht should remain separate from any political affiliation and saw the addition of the *Hakenkreuz* (swastika) as an affront on the integrity of the military (Beevor 1998). Furthermore, Nazi Party membership should not be taken as a stark indicator of loyalty, as many Germans joined without

subscribing to the mentality of Nazi leadership. Joining was simply something one did to avoid suspicion and to make life easier.

Despite this tepid defense of the Wehrmacht, many troops did commit atrocities, and many officers told their troops that their Russian enemy was not deserving of compassion. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, then still a general, infamously told his troops that "the Jewish-Bolshevik system must be rooted out once and for all" (Beevor 1998, 16-17). Again, however, this mentality was far more inconsistent across German forces outside of the SS. Hitler's infamous "Commissar Order" was not well received by all Wehrmacht officers—Heinz Guderian, the father of armored warfare and one of the best Wehrmacht commanders on the Ostfront whom Hitler sacked after the German defeat at Moscow, plainly refused to carry it out, and many others also did not pass the order on to their men. Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, the commander of Army Group Center at the launch of Operation Barbarossa, gave a half-hearted attempt at protest, though he made no other official attempts after his initial objection was shot down. Bock did, however, verbally agree with several other commanding officers to disregard the "Commissar" and "Jurisdiction" orders, including Weichs, Kluge, and Guderian (Kane 2002). Historian David Stahel (2015) argues to the contrary, citing that Guderian's Panzer Group 2 shot 183 commissars between June and October 1941. It is also true that some commanders falsified reports, showing that they had carried out the "Commissar Order" when in fact they had been imprisoning Soviet political officers with the rest of the captured Red Army troops. This tactic worked for a time, but Hitler eventually learned of this deception and sent the SD (Sicherheitsdienst) to Wehrmacht POW camps to execute commissars, Communists, and Jews (Kane 2002).

Given this knowledge of false reports, it is difficult to surmise how complicit these high-ranking officers were. In several individual cases, the obedience and innocence of the commanders is blurry at best. Some actively tried to ignore Hitler's illegal orders altogether. Unfortunately this morally-grounded group was a minority, and even fewer actively voiced their condemnation. Most of the officers who quietly disapproved said nothing—Manstein was critical of Hitler's leadership, but adamantly refused to resist him with the explanation that "Prussian field marshals do not mutiny" (Kershaw 2000, 460). Historians also disagree on the guilt of Manstein—Stahel (2015) asserts that at his postwar trial, Manstein was found guilty on several counts of complying with the "Commissar Order" while in command of the 11th Army, while Kane (2002, 175) espouses that Manstein was "acquitted of any direct breaches of the Geneva Convention and other laws of war," and that he was only found guilty of several "minor offenses." According to Manstein himself, the commissars his men executed were only shot after lawful military tribunals that found them guilty as partisans (Kane 2002).

Opposition to the "Commissar" and "Jurisdiction" orders eventually swayed Hitler to temporarily repeal them in May 1942, after General Wolfgang von Kluge objected. Kluge's concerns, like most officers, were not for the wellbeing of the Russians, but the morale and discipline of his men. He was also concerned that the brutality of the German troops would strengthen the Russians' resolve (Beevor 1998; Kane 2002). By this point, however, it was far too late, as much damage was already done and millions of Russians were dead.

While it is true, and redeeming, that many Wehrmacht officers refused to pass on the unlawful orders or carry them out, many others did. The men most ideally placed to object to Hitler often fell silent, taking half-measures to stop the slaughter rather than full ones. History can gratefully acknowledge the men who falsified documents and resisted Hitler's murderous

instructions in an effort to conduct war with honor, but by the same token history can condemn the men who said nothing and allowed these horrors to transpire. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil."

Chapter 4—Wrapping Up

I have demonstrated that the invasion of Russia was framed by Hitler and other leading Nazis, as well as several senior military commanders, as a war of annihilation. The occupation of Russia was intended to wipe out the local populace and allow Germans to move onto the land and exploit its natural resources.

Hitler was also motivated by his hatred of the Jews, Slavs, and the Bolsheviks. He wanted to eradicate the Jews, destroy the Bolshevik intelligentsia, and exterminate part of the Slavic population and enslave the rest. In short, the incredible amount of brutality was encouraged, even required, by the Nazi leaders.

So how, then, did individual German troops come to accept this? Some did not—there are examples of German soldiers demonstrating sympathy and even kindness to the Russians, soldier and civilian alike (see Figures 4 and 5). Unfortunately, there seem to be many more cases of cold, calculated murder, and others where hot-headed responses combined with the "Jurisdiction Order" resulted in dead civilians. While some troops, particularly veteran officers, upheld their honor as soldiers, others killed with abandon. A common theme pulsing through the minds of many German combat troops was that their enemy on the *Ostfront* truly was subhuman and undeserving of mercy. Nazi racial propaganda and anti-Bolshevik political propaganda quickly dehumanized the Slavs, and preexisting German anti-Slavic sentiments were supercharged by Nazi rhetoric. Germans were constantly reminded by their government that they were the "master race," and the troops that exploded into Russia in 1941 were given a double dose of this. Killing Slavs was made out to be like squashing insects, and a large quantity of Wehrmacht and SS men readily adopted this sentiment. When the enemy is portrayed as more monster than man, the pages of history run red with blood.

The German excuses to treat the Russians abysmally (a lack of fighting honorably or by the rules of war) do not explain the actions of millions of Wehrmacht and SS men, from frontline troops to high-ranking officers. Rather, Nazi racism, anti-Communism, and a "need" for territory are much more satisfying answers. From the top down, Hitler and his servants instigated the destruction of the Soviet Union and the Slavic peoples, insisting to Germany's soldiers that there was no place for chivalry or mercy in a war against *Untermenschen*. From the bottom up, German troops were desensitized by the picture Nazi propaganda painted of their enemies, and at the same time rigorously instructed that honor and discipline to the command structure of the Wehrmacht and the Reich defined them. The result that occurred when these two forces met was the utter destruction of millions of Russian lives and possessions. The Second World War very nearly had not one genocide, but two.

While the Third Reich has long since been buried by the sands of time, Neo-Nazi elements still exist, and have seen a resurgence in Germany, the Baltic states, and Ukraine, a trend that points to a sobering realization: the ideals of the NSDAP are not yet eradicated. The banners are waved by younger generations, fewer in number but equal in vitriol. Svoboda, a Ukrainian far-right party routinely accused of anti-Semitic, anti-Russian, racist, and fascist tendencies, holds several seats in Ukraine's parliament; it is concerning that many Ukrainians seem to have no problem with this—they have actively voted for Svoboda members who are openly Neo-Nazi (Ishchenko 2014). Former East German areas have also seen a rise in Neo-Nazi groups, as have the Baltic states: large numbers of protestors, marches, and demonstrations have attracted the ire of Vladimir Putin, as have Waffen-SS veteran reunions. Many of these new Baltic groups strongly dislike Russia, the Slavs, and the years they suffered behind the Iron Curtain—many believe that life under Nazi rule would have been far superior (JTA 2015;

Sharkov 2014). This is a disturbing trend, and one that points to a lack of education about the atrocities committed in World War II and a willingness to glorify the Third Reich with fantasies of peace and prosperity. Nazi sentiments are not gone, and a disdain for Slavic peoples accompanies this dark presence. We must recognize the threat and respond—history need not repeat itself.

Appendix

Figure 1



Slain prisoners from a camp in Klooga, Estonia, stacked with wood on a bonfire. (*State Archive of the Russian Federation*)

Figure 2



Suspected partisans hanged by the Germans.

(http://historyimages.blogspot.com/2009/11/some-rivetting-pictures-from-ww2.html)

Figure 3



Suspected partisans are hanged in Russia by a German officer.

(http://incredibleimages4u.blogspot.com/2014/12/germans-hanged-soviet-partisans-1941.html)

Figure 4



A German soldier shares his rations with a Russian mother; one of the few redeeming photos of the Eastern Front.

https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/c6/c0/15/c6c015f75c6c9958d4b1a1e19fef27a1.jpg

Figure 5



A German soldier gives bread to an orphaned Russian boy, Volkhov area, 1942. This is one of the only other photos this author found that shows compassion, not brutality, on the *Ostfront*.

 $\underline{http://rarehistorical photos.com/german-soldier-giving-bread-orphaned-russian-boy-volkhov-area-1942/$

Figure 6



German troops walk away from a burning Russian village.

 $\underline{https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/af/dd/f7/afddf7659b03fdbc48d2cd1bc9d2f6cd.jpg}$

Figure 7



French women chat with German soldiers in Paris.

 $\frac{http://40.media.tumblr.com/e91d63e06d6e0142bf7acdfe8274d5d8/tumblr_mxvw4m2hHr1spwf5}{201_1280.jpg}$

Figure 8



German officers relax at a café in Paris as enlisted troops walk past and salute.

http://media.tumblr.com/tumblr_lfncakFpkn1qav0ix.jpg

Figure 9



German troops execute Jews in the Babi Yar ravine near Kiev, Ukraine 1941.

 $\underline{http://www.vosizneias.com/38786/2009/09/22/kiev-ukraine-city-plans-hotel-at-babi-yar-site-of-ww2-massacre-of-33000-jews/}$

Figure 10



German troops watch as captured Red Army soldiers dig their own grave.

http://russiapedia.rt.com/files/galleries/anti-fascists-museum/anti-fascists-museum 33.jpg

Figure 11



A Nazi propaganda poster warning Germans about dangerous *Untermenschen*. Note the Jewish features on the Soviet face.

https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10005202&MediaId=1063





Nazi poster with the message "Bolshevism Unmasked"; the Star of David is explicitly paired with the hammer and sickle.

http://i.imgur.com/gpqLA.jpg

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