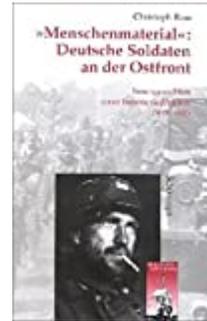


Christoph Rass. *„Menschenmaterial“: Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront: Innensichten einer Infanteriedivision 1939 - 1945.* Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2003. 486 S. EUR 39.00 (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-506-74486-9.



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Ganz normale Soldaten

Over the past ten or fifteen years research on World War II has increasingly focused not only on the destructive aspect of the German war in the Soviet Union, but also on the reality of war at its most basic level, that of the average soldier. Because of the nature and limitations of the sources, however, much of this latter research has of necessity been based on personal documents such as diaries, letters, and memoirs. Although these materials allowed a subjective, qualitative glimpse of the nature of war from below, until now a comprehensive quantitative examination of war at the level of its most basic actors was lacking. It is precisely this gap that Christoph Rass's book, a reworking of his doctoral dissertation at the RWTH Aachen, seeks to fill. In conducting a detailed examination of the 253rd Infantry Division, which participated in the French campaign and then fought without interruption from 1941-1945 in the war against the Soviet Union, Rass aims to answer a number of questions: Who were these men in a typical infantry division? How were they integrated into the structure of their unit? How did they maintain their cohesion and fighting ability? Why did they fight? What impact did the daily fighting and brutalization of war have on the men? In what ways were

average soldiers of a combat unit involved in the crimes of the Wehrmacht?

Even though this is a detailed and statistics-laden social-historical analysis, with well over fifty very valuable and useful charts, graphs, and tables, Rass takes pains to ensure that the ordinary Landser remains at the center of his investigation. Using information gleaned from *Wehrstammbücher* and other personnel files, from records from the *Suchdienst* and *Heimkehrerkartei* of the German Red Cross, and from personal documents such as *Feldpostbriefe*, Rass has assembled an impressive and daunting mass of evidence to analyze and from which to draw his conclusions. His goal is nothing less than a collective profile or biography, both qualitative and quantitative, of a German infantry division. For the most part, he succeeds in this endeavor, providing clear analysis, valuable insights, and well-reasoned conclusions.

Although the key arguments of the book are contained in three long sections ("Die Soldaten," "Das militärische System," and "Der Krieg"), Rass begins, after an overview of the research problem and nature of the sources, with a short discussion of the military opera-

tions and history of the 253rd Infantry Division from 1939 to 1945. In this, Rass is not merely reciting a litany of operations in order to provide a historical chronology. Rather, he means to establish and emphasize two main points: that this division saw significantly more combat than the norm, and that despite its steady erosion in strength, it was able until very late in the fighting to maintain a high level of cohesion and inner stability. It is this last point, especially, that Rass seeks to explore and explain in the following sections.

Beginning with an intensive investigation of the basic “human material” of the division, the ordinary soldiers of a combat unit, Rass first establishes, through both his discussion and a series of very helpful charts and graphs, the long-term erosion in the strength of the division. The key here, I think, is that Rass demonstrates convincingly that this was not a continual process as such, but rather took place in a series of stages, so that catastrophic losses in the winter of 1941-1942, for example, would be followed by a relative period of stability that might last six months to a year. As a result, the immediate consequence of these various personnel crises was not the destruction of the basic social profile of the division, for it normally, until the very end of the war at least, had time to re-stabilize itself. Despite the attention paid by historians to the severe setback in the winter of 1941-1942, for example, Rass’s detailed analysis of casualties shows that the worst single month of the war for the 253rd Infantry Division was July 1944. Although losses in December 1941 and January-February 1942 were high, they were followed by a period of some fifteen months in which casualties were relatively low. Another period of high casualties in the summer of 1943 was then followed by a period of relative stability, until the final disaster of the summer of 1944. More importantly, Rass shows that of every ten casualties in the 253rd, seven were wounded, and of these, the great majority returned to the division after their convalescence. In fact, Rass further demonstrates that the Wehrmacht’s replacement system worked precisely as intended, as some 75 percent of replacements were either convalescents or came from the division’s recruitment area, thus ensuring a steady stream of personnel that would maintain the essential social profile of the division. Not only did this contribute to maintaining the cohesion and fighting ability of the 253rd, but since Rass emphasizes that his findings are in line with those for other units, it goes a long way toward explaining the persistence and efficiency of German resistance.

Having demonstrated that the social profile of the division was effectively maintained through much of the

war, Rass then turns to establishing the nature of this social profile. Relying on an analysis of a representative sample of the members of the 253rd, Rass arrives at conclusions that, in part, confirm previous assumptions and, in part, offer new insights. There is little surprise, for example, in his findings that those born between 1911 and 1920 made up over two-thirds of the division’s personnel, or that they were overwhelmingly concentrated in the combat units of the division. Nor is it especially surprising that in a division whose recruiting area lay along the Rhine and in Westphalia that a majority of its soldiers were Catholic and from the working class. Perhaps more surprising, although certainly in line with more recent research on Nazi Germany, Rass’s occupational analysis shows evidence of upward social mobility for some sons of working-class fathers. Unfortunately, Rass’s further attempt to demonstrate a loss of occupational status for middle-class sons is less convincing, since a close reading of his figures shows a slight increase in middle-class social mobility.

More significantly, Rass demonstrates the impact of National Socialist indoctrination and socialization, but in ways and on groups that are, at first glance, perhaps a bit surprising. Nazi educational and school policy, for example, had little impact on determining the social profile of the 253rd, for the simple reason that the core group of soldiers had already completed most or all of its schooling before the Nazis came to power. The key socialization processes for this core group seemed to be the loss of World War I and its attendant front experience and stab-in-the-back myths, the series of economic crises and consequent economic instability of the Weimar years, and the sense of social dislocation and loss of community that made Nazi promises of a *Volksgemeinschaft* particularly attractive. Echoing recent research on the working class in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, Rass finds the elimination of unemployment, the improvement in their socioeconomic situation, and the stress on building an encompassing national community of key importance in determining working-class attitudes toward the Nazi regime. Additionally, the creation of organizations aimed at the young was fundamental in the transmission and acceptance of Nazi ideology among the core group of soldiers in the division. A relatively small percentage had completed the entire National Socialist “youth cycle” (Hitlerjugend-Reichsarbeitsdienst-SA-Wehrmacht), but in some social segments 50-90 percent had belonged to at least one of the organizations, while fully 75 percent of the core group (born between 1910-1920) had proceeded through the RAD, Wehrmacht, and at least some other

Nazi organizations. At bottom, this meant that the core group of the division, the combat infantry units, were overwhelmingly comprised of single young men influenced by the myths of the *Fronterlebnis* and *Dolchstoss*, inclined to give credit to the National Socialists for the restoration of economic security and social mobility, and most of whom had been exposed in various party organizations to a significant degree of Nazi ideological indoctrination.

As could be expected, this pattern, along with the Wehrmacht's mechanisms for promoting unit cohesion and stability, resulted in a surprisingly stable social profile and group outlook. The increasing hardship and brutality of the war in Russia, for instance, seemed not to result in an increase in desertion, self-mutilation, or suicide, all of which remained marginal and insignificant, but in a hardening of the attitude of the ordinary German soldiers. It is here, in his discussion of the maintenance of group cohesion, of the importance of camaraderie and the primary group to fighting effectiveness, that Rass undermines somewhat the position of Omer Bartov, who had argued that the destruction of these primary groups led to the substitution of ideologically sanctioned brutality in order to maintain fighting efficiency. To Rass, it is precisely the astounding homogeneity and stubborn persistence of the primary groups throughout the course of the war that is reflected in his data. Not only did the combat soldiers come overwhelmingly from the same age groups and backgrounds, have similar formative experiences, and progress in like fashion through various Nazi organizations, but even when heavy casualties threatened to sunder the ties of primary group loyalty, the combat units of the 253rd normally were given a months-long respite. This commonality allowed them to regain stability and absorb replacements, the great majority of whom were new recruits from the same area as the veteran troops or convalescents who were rejoining their old units, thus reinforcing group cohesion and primary group loyalty. Even when certain units became too small to function, their members were normally dispersed throughout other units in the division, so that a core group of veteran soldiers was constantly in place. From Rass's evidence, it would appear that the crucial element in maintaining group cohesion was a sufficient amount of time to integrate replacement elements and stabilize the primary groups. After the disasters of the winter of 1941-1942 and the summer of 1943, the 253rd Division had time to accomplish this integrative function; after the catastrophe of the summer of 1944 no such time was available, which led to its disintegration as a fighting

unit by February 1945. Social networks among the combat troops, as Rass shows, were altered and transformed, but only rarely (and belatedly) destroyed.

At the end of this long first section, Rass poses an intriguing question which, unfortunately, is not addressed until the third section: In view of Bartov's assumption of a connection between the destruction of primary groups and the brutalization of war, and in light of the fact that primary groups were more resilient than thought, and since it was the rearward units even of a combat division that perpetrated the most brutalities against civilians and prisoners of war, was it this very stability, and not ideology, that led to such atrocities? After a second section that easily could have been shortened (or eliminated), Rass provides a detailed look at the occupation practices from ground level. In explaining the savagery of the German occupation of the Soviet Union, the key factors, in addition to the brutalizing process of the war itself, seem to be the interaction between demands from above and the decreasing availability of German manpower with which to fulfill these orders. The injunction to feed the *Ostheer* entirely from local sources in itself would have been sufficient to ensure harsh treatment of the occupied areas. As the war turned against Germany and became one of attrition, however, further requisitions of resources, and especially labor, for the war economy became necessary. Additionally, the demands of positional warfare required extensive utilization of labor, which could only be supplied by Soviet citizens and POWs. The competing demands of industry and army for increasingly scarce supplies of Soviet labor meant that those forced into labor would not merely be "used up," as had occurred in the first months of the occupation, but also that German control of the occupied areas would be tightened so as to exploit fully all available resources. As Rass demonstrates, in all of this the German army, or at least its rear area divisions and support units of combat divisions, was deeply involved.

In general, Rass's evidence seems to show that it was this incessant need for labor, and not ideology as such, that drove the escalating spiral of terror, violence, and repression on the local level. Even as the German army was forced out of the Soviet Union, the brutal process continued, for the Germans needed labor to build new positions, but at the same time could barely feed the "useful" elements of the civilian population. As a way out of this dilemma, then, army units, when ordered or forced to retreat, began to expel vital labor to the rear while simultaneously driving "superfluous" elements of the population (the old, the sick, women with small children) into the no

man's land between the opposing forces. As the steady Soviet advances of Fall 1943, continued into 1944, German troops, ever more fearful and anxious, turned to a scorched earth policy designed to slow the Soviet juggernaut, with the result that the cycle of brutality and savagery increased apace. The implementation of these vicious measures, Rass emphasizes, was done by members of the rear services; that is, not by those men of the combat units presumably most hardened by war and most affected by Nazi indoctrination, but by older men living in a relatively stable and safe social structure. Rass offers few explanations for this intriguing paradox, suggesting merely that the unleashing of both the institutional and individual potential for violence was responsible for an

ever-increasing spiral of brutality and criminal actions.

Despite this unsatisfying explanation, this is a careful, thorough, comprehensive study, one that makes a major contribution to our understanding of the human dimension of war, and how a multitude of factors within war, both personal and institutional, interact to drive actions in an ever more radical direction. It has also raised a number of questions which need to be explored further, not least the evident dichotomy between combat as a brutalizing experience, yet the commission of atrocities by troops in more stable rear areas. In even raising such questions, though, Rass again demonstrates that his is an important, path-breaking book.

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