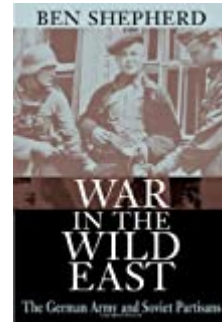


Ben Shepherd. *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. vi + 300 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01296-7.



Reviewed by Lee Baker (Department of History, University of Cincinnati, Raymond Walters College)

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German Security Divisions and Soviet “Partisans”

For the last several years the most interesting debates about the brutality of the Second World War on the Russian front have revolved around trying to explain the process by which seemingly ordinary men became embroiled in routinely murdering innocent civilians. Ever since the publication of Omer Bartov’s seminal book, *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare*, it has been impossible to maintain that the Wehrmacht stood aloof from the mass murders which occurred after the invasion of the U.S.S.R.[1] This book adds a highly nuanced layer of understanding to the discussion by examining the anti-partisan operations of several security divisions operating in Army Group Center’s rear.

The Wehrmacht faced an intractable partisan problem during its invasion of the U.S.S.R. during World War II. Historians’ interpretations as to how the Germans dealt with it, beginning with Bartov, have spawned a rather large literature explaining the spiral into mass murder. The central question of this literature is generally the same: how and why does the repression of active and armed opposition shade into atrocity? This question is

made more difficult when asked of German anti-partisan operations because it is difficult to separate what could be perceived as military necessity from those actions that flowed from the racist anti-Slavic and anti-Semitic philosophy that permeated parts of German society during the first few decades of the twentieth century. This book is a superb attempt to clarify how each of the pieces of the puzzle fit together and explain how the Germans fought their anti-partisan operations behind the eastern front, and why they ultimately failed.

The book begins, logically, by examining the evolution of German anti-partisan theory beginning with the Franco-Prussian War through the radical changes made after the invasion of Poland in 1939. It continues with an analysis of anti-partisan operations after the invasion of the U.S.S.R. through the end of the first year when partisan operations were embryonic and unorganized. The bulk of the book is spent on the field campaign of 1942-1943, when Army Group Center faced increasingly organized partisan operations in its rear. This, the core of the book, focuses on the ad hoc evolution of Wehrmacht policy, ultimately culminating with a confused, con-

tradictory, and self-defeating mishmash of initiatives by mid-level officers.

The book focuses on the security divisions whose responsibilities included protecting the vital rear areas behind main operations at the front. It examines, in particular, the activities of the 221st Security Division. This unit served in the general area between Mogilev and Gomel, which today marks the approximate border between Belarus and Russia, and was one of the areas most plagued by partisan operations. Using the reports its officers wrote to document its activities, Shepherd follows the unit's activities from 1941 through the summer of 1943, after which records no longer exist.

Perhaps his most important conclusion is that the descent into murder began with the "systematic consideration of circumstances, more than ... preexisting personal inclinations" by the officers who led the various units of the 221st (p. 232). The key, according to Shepherd, is that the men who staffed the security divisions were too old, under-equipped, poorly trained, rarely reinforced, and in general provided with inadequate resources for their demanding tasks. The lack of any real ability to effectively combat the partisans led the units to adopt various expedients that, it was hoped, would counterbalance their material inadequacies. Thus extreme violence resulted from frustration, fear, and both perceptions of and actual material inferiority. Scared and angry soldiers killed because it was one of the few ways they could exercise control over their environment. Shepherd identifies further factors within the division that encouraged unbridled violence. Preexisting prejudice among the rank and file may have been only a secondary cause of unit violence, but the ideological and genuine anti-Semitism and anti-Slavism of the unit's leading officers, especially its commander and operations officer, were important factors. Shepherd adds to this underlying base several additional factors that depended upon particular circumstances, including the "criminal orders" issued by the supreme command just before Operation Barbarossa began. This created a permissive atmosphere in which an increasingly frustrated and fearful unit expressed itself in brutal behavior towards civilians.

These factors, which operated relatively separately during the first months of the war, combined and intensified during the fall of 1941 (especially during September) to radicalize the anti-partisan effort. The body count exploded during this period as the failure to defeat the U.S.S.R placed enormous pressures upon the 221st. This exacerbated its already less than ideal situation. It suf-

fered from a lack of mobility due to fuel shortages and a lack of vehicles, the detachment of its best, and usually most mobile, units for action at the front, and the expansion of its territory as the front advanced eastwards. It was during this period that the unit began to equate Jews with Bolsheviks, Bolsheviks with partisans, and began the mass shootings of Jews whom it labeled partisans in its reports. But Shepherd shows that what intensified repression at this particular moment was not solely the ideological factors but cold pragmatism as well, as the increasing pressures felt by the division led it to lash out at not only actual enemies, of whom there were as yet few, but potential ones as well.

The rest of 1941 and 1942 witnessed a surge in partisan activity, as men sent specifically to organize a partisan movement joined Red Army stragglers and as the local population became disillusioned with German policy. Shepherd points to the failure of German agricultural reforms and the expansion of forced labor as key factors in this growth. In addition, both the division and Hitler issued directives which permitted the troops to cast restraint aside whenever they felt threatened. As the tasks assigned to the 221st increased in proportion to the territory it was assigned, the increasing intransigence of the population, combined with an increasingly permissive attitude towards repression, created a scenario wherein the 221st was bound to fail. These problems also led the 221st to attempt a less violent approach during 1942, when a concerted "hearts and minds" campaign was launched. This effort originated not with a desire by the Wehrmacht to be more civil in its treatment of civilians, but rather in the complete inability of the unit to maintain a high level of effective violence; a more benevolent policy was thus an expedient designed to overcome the unit's limitations. Shepherd shows that both violence and the lack of violence had the same essential root causes: German inadequacy.

Rather than trying to provide an overall, and therefore generally correct but specifically over-simplified view of anti-partisan operations, Shepherd provides us with a piece of the mosaic; the bigger picture could perhaps be filled in by other studies which focus on Army Group South (particularly its operations around Kiev) and Army Group North (especially in the Baltic countries). This book makes very important contributions to the debate about the nature of violence on the eastern front and should be read by all those who study that sector of the war.

Note

[1]. Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001). Several of his subsequent works have followed this trail.

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