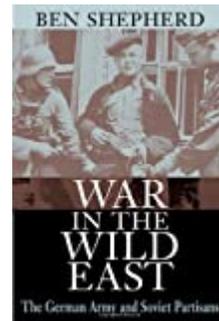




**Ben Shepherd.** *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. vi + 300 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01296-7.



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## Laws of the Jungle

Ben Shepherd's *War in the Wild East* analyzes the formation, evolution, and application of German anti-partisan doctrine behind the eastern front during the Second World War. His monograph studies the activity of German security divisions assigned to Army Group Center from 1941 to 1943 and complements the work of Omer Bartov, Hannes Heer, and Theo Schulte.[1] In this respect, Shepherd aligns himself with new military historians who view the army as a microcosm of German society. He explores the motives of men who actually carried out Hitler's orders in an attempt to determine how much support Hitler's racial plans enjoyed among the middle grades of the German officer corps.

After a survey of related literature, *War in the Wild East* examines the origins of German anti-partisan doctrine. Experiences in France, Africa, and Belgium infected the majority of the German officer corps with "guerrillaphobia" long before Hitler seized power. Partisans, guerillas, and unlawful combatants diverted resources from the *Schwerpunkt* and could only be defeated by the ruthless application of brute force. Once in direct control of Armed Forces High Command (OKW),

Hitler purged the highest echelons of the officer corps and eliminated potential supporters of chivalrous behavior. The Commissar Order and Barbarossa Decree exacerbated the officer corps' propensity for violence against irregular fighters (pp. 41-47). Abetted by Nazi ideology and criminal orders, "guerillaphobia" fostered widespread atrocities during the opening months of military operations in the Soviet Union.

Shepherd pursues two lines of analysis. First, he compares the behavior and policies of the 707th Infantry, the 201st, 221st, and 286th Security Divisions that operated behind Army Group Center. All embraced different policies with regards to the local population and Germany's fight against partisans, Jews, and guerillas. Second, Shepherd analyzes the conduct of regiments, battalions, and *Kommandanturen* assigned to the 221st Security Division and finds a similar range of behaviors. Discussion of anti-partisan policies falls into three basic periods: the summer of 1941, 1942, and 1943.

In order to secure lines of communication during what it expected to be a short campaign, Army High Command (OKH) assigned ill-trained reservists over

thirty years of age and officers ill-suited for active combat to new security divisions and spread the numerically weak formations across a vast area. By the end of July, 1941, the 221st Security Division governed approximately one million inhabitants spread across 35,000 square kilometers around Gomel (pp. 47-51, 60). It could not assume direct control over their entire zone of occupation and checked the local population by employing exemplary violence against Jews, communists, prisoners of war, and *potential* partisans (pp. 73-74, 103-106). Guerillaphobia, criminal orders, and limited resources encouraged German forces to unleash a wave of violence against real and imagined foes to prevent widespread resistance.

Soviet counterattacks launched during winter 1941-2 drove some officers to consider alternative, long-term anti-partisan strategies. Leaders of the 221st Security Division—a unit that routinely shot prisoners of war and suspected partisans during the summer of 1941—realized that they were in for a long fight and switched to a policy of constructive engagement in 1942. They treated Soviet partisans and deserters as prisoners of war to encourage surrenders and limited the requisition of livestock and grain (pp. 132-134). Leaders of the 221st Security Division may have been anti-Semitic Slavophobes, but they could be swayed by pragmatic considerations (pp. 157-162). Shepherd suggests that material weakness drove some Wehrmacht security divisions to embrace *relatively* moderate occupational policies once they realized that the war would drag on. He attributes the range of behavior to a combination of leadership and circumstance.

Defeats at Stalingrad and Kursk shattered the image of German invincibility, encouraged *attentisme* among the Russian and Ukrainian populations, and heartened resistance groups throughout Europe. Security divisions assigned to Army Group Center adapted to new circumstances and adopted new policies. To satisfy increasing manpower and material needs, they adopted a “dead zones” policy. German troops swept through partisan controlled territories, confiscated all available resources, turned the local population over to Fritz Sauckel’s labor organization or SS personnel, and burned any remaining buildings. Collective engagement gave way to ruthless, systematic despoliation in order to prevent popular collaboration with local partisan groups. Even in towns and cities under German control, occupational authorities expressed little concern for the needs of the local population after the defeat at Stalingrad.

Throughout *War in the Wild East*, Shepherd point-

edly rejects monocausal explanations for German behavior. Although some commanders displayed the “eliminationist” anti-Semitism described by Daniel Goldhagen,[2] Shepherd also cites examples of anti-Semites following a policy of constructive engagement and supporting “correct” behavior (pp. 66-71). Criminal orders, anti-Semitism, anti-Bolshevism, anti-Slavism, Nazi ideology, and “guerillaphobia” all shaped the attitude of German commanders in occupied Russia, but no single idea determined the behavior of commanding officers.

A shortage of troops, transportation, training, and other material considerations could also affect the anti-partisan policy of a particular unit. Shortages of both troops and motorized transport convinced the commanding, operations (Ia), and intelligence (Ic) officers of the 221st Security Division that they could not mount mobile anti-partisan operations and had to implement a policy of constructive engagement during summer 1942. Larger, well-equipped units could afford to pursue a rational policy of either terror or constructive engagement. While the 221st Security Division tried to cultivate popular support, the neighboring 201st Security and 707th Infantry Divisions continued to shoot all who looked askance and despoil local populations under their control. In this respect, Shepherd refines the ideas of Omer Bartov by agreeing that moderate shortages could lead to exemplary violence but adds that severe shortages could lead to a policy of restraint by default.[3]

Shepherd consistently highlights the importance of leadership in determining the behavior of a particular unit. Officers from eastern Germany often mistreated the local Slavic population, but veterans of the Imperial Army and officers from the western regions of Germany occasionally displayed some restraint. Some regimental and battalion commanders ignored divisional headquarters and followed their own anti-partisan policies (pp. 191-197). Tactful commanders stationed in distant outposts could disregard orders issued by OKH, Army Group Center, or divisional headquarters and adapt their anti-partisan strategy to suit local conditions. The chain of command did not always bind subordinates to a specific policy.

The German Army played an important role in determining the course and character of the occupation in Russia, but it did not operate alone. Both SS Einsatzgruppen and agents of Fritz Sauckel’s labor organization roamed behind the front lines and pursued their own institutional goals. According to Shepherd, security divisions established an effective working relationship with

the SS from the start. Relatively moderate army commanders often turned suspected partisans over to the black corps in order to keep their own hands clean. In contrast, the Reich Plenipotentiary for the Mobilization of Labor, Fritz Sauckel, may have had a difficult relationship with military counterparts who pursued a policy of constructive engagement. While some officers tried to cultivate popular support, Sauckel's minions rounded up native workers for service in the Reich and alienated the local population. Sauckel's actions must have upset some local commanders, but they receive very little attention in *War in the Wild East*. By focusing most of his attention on the Wehrmacht, Shepherd neglects some other institutions that operated behind the eastern front.

*War in the Wild East* portrays the transgressions of both German troops and their partisan opponents, but it does not analyze international law or define "correct" behavior in a systematic fashion (pp. 216). An extended discussion of legal issues would provide non-specialists with the means to evaluate all transgressions and provide some insight into contemporary occupations. The limitations listed above will not bother specialists who are familiar with conditions behind the eastern front, but they may make *War in the Wild East* unsuitable for an undergraduate audience.

Using evidence scattered throughout German and American archives, Shepherd assembles a detailed picture of German security divisions and expands our un-

derstanding of the units and institutions operating behind front lines. His analysis of German motives highlights the culpability of the Wehrmacht but avoids simplistic explanations for such behavior. Ideology, circumstance, and leadership all shaped the behavior of a particular unit. With few notable exceptions, German soldiers obeyed the laws of the jungle as they fought in the Wild East.

#### Notes

[1]. Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Hannes Heer and Klaus Namann, eds., *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000); Theo J. Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (New York: Berg, 1989).

[2]. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). Shepherd's discussion of Goldhagen can be found on pp. 27-30 of *War in the Wild East*. On anti-Semitic measures carried out in 1941, see pp. 84-85. On executions in 1942 being driven in some cases by anti-Semitism, see pp. 124, 148.

[3]. Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, pp. 12-28. See also Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

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