

Wendy Lower. *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xviii + 307 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2960-8.



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Published on H-German (April, 2006)

Radicalized European Imperialism as Practiced in Europe Itself

Despite a general understanding of the Nazi drive for *Lebensraum*, detailed analyses of its actual application to the occupied Soviet Union are few and far between, especially in English. Wendy Lower's excellent study fills this gap for the Zhytomyr region in Ukraine. Lower examines the totality of the German occupation, from the initial arrival of Wehrmacht troops in July 1941 to the collapse of German colonization plans in late 1943. Her discussion of both extermination and settlement policies highlights the tension and fluidity of relations between the center and periphery in the short-lived Nazi empire as well as the impact of imperial practices on a subject population. Lower's analysis of German policymaking provides an excellent complement to Karel Berkhoff's recent study of the Ukrainian population during the occupation.[1]

According to Lower, Nazi imperialism cannot be understood without examining the broader context of general European imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as Germany-specific phenomena such as German migration to Eastern Europe during the same time period and the development of *völkisch*-

racist thought since the turn of the twentieth century. Lower states that the administrators of occupied Ukraine "perceived their actions as legitimately linked to Europe's history of conquest and rule" (p. 3). British dominion over India functioned as a blueprint for German rule in Ukraine. The Nazis deemed the "civilizing mission" of the British, however, as inappropriate for the Ukrainians and other Slavic *Untermenschen*, whose only value lay in their labor. Lower attributes this radicalization of traditional (or at least British) imperialism to the influence of *völkisch* thought that "meld[ed] race and space in a new movement for utopian settlements" (p. 21). She carefully avoids framing this attribution in the context of the *Sonderweg* context, arguing that it was merely an "extreme form" of European colonial practices that included "exploration, conquest, migration, and mass destruction of peoples" (p. 19).

The first agent of German rule was the Wehrmacht, which established a military occupation administration in July 1941. Lower argues that the German Army's over-riding emphasis on security dovetailed with the murderous policies of Himmler's SS-police forces. An "admin-

istrative division of labor" (p. 43) developed between the Wehrmacht and the SS-police apparatus in which the two closely worked together in cleansing the Zhytomyr region of Communists, Jews and others viewed as undesirable by the occupiers. The army viewed the cooperation between these two agencies as necessary to police the expanding rear-areas. As Lower correctly points out, however, the occupiers simply lacked the necessary manpower to rule such a large area effectively and they relied upon numerous native Ukrainians, Russians and ethnic Germans to staff the lower levels of the governing system. Many Wehrmacht officers in the field viewed the use of ethnic Germans as counterproductive, as they were generally much less educated and experienced in administration than their Ukrainian counterparts. Despite official directives from Berlin calling for the use of ethnic Germans in positions of authority, the army continued to employ Ukrainians. Policies emanating from the center that emphasized the importance of ethnic Germans in establishing Nazi rule in Ukraine, therefore, were contested at the periphery. Policies concerning the murder of racial and political enemies, however, were enthusiastically taken up by various agencies at the local level, including the Wehrmacht. According to Lower, army leaders as well as SS-police authorities all "coalesced around the policy of murdering Jews" (p. 54).

Lower emphasizes the personal role in radicalizing the occupation played by the commanders of the two infantry armies operating in Ukraine (Field Marshal Walther von Reichenau and General Karl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel of the Sixth and Seventeenth Armies, respectively) and claims that Reichenau in particular "shaped the army's involvement in the mass murder that occurred in the rear-areas" (p. 55-56). The Wehrmacht's Security Divisions played the predominant role in fighting the ideological war in the rear areas and coordinated their tasks to such an extent with the SS-police formations, that Lower rightly argues that "in many respects, their [Security Divisions'] activities overlapped with the secret police tasks of Himmler's forces" (p. 56). This cooperation between the army and SS was also manifested in the "cleansing" of prisoner-of-war camps, as police units executed over 16,000 prisoners under Army supervision. For Lower, the "brutalization of war" does not adequately explain the involvement of Wehrmacht units in war crimes; "rather, it was an assertion of Nazi power in its heyday" (p. 68).[2]

While the Wehrmacht played an extremely important role in radicalizing occupation practices in Ukraine and, more specifically, Zhytomyr, Lower leaves no doubt that

the SS-police apparatus was the driving force behind the Holocaust. Between summer 1941 and fall 1943, the Germans and their collaborators murdered 180,000 Jews in the Zhytomyr region, with the majority of women, children and infirm killed in August and September 1941. Lower agrees with historian Dieter Pohl's formulation that "events in Zhytomyr show most clearly the transition from a selective policy of destruction to one of total eradication" (p. 70). The "drive to annihilate the Jews was so intense" that the standard Nazi practice of concentrating Jews in ghettos was deemed unnecessary in the region (p. 70). According to Lower, the local officials on the spot drove the radicalization of anti-Jewish policy—these were the Higher SS and Police Leader Friederich Jeckeln, Head of Einsatzgruppe C Otto Rasch and the Commander of Sonderkommando 4a Paul Bobel. By the end of August, these three men, assisted by Reichenau, had transformed the task of police and security forces in the Zhytomyr region from destroying the Bolshevik political apparatus to murdering the entire Jewish population, irrespective of sex or age. Lower convincingly argues that the experiences in eastern Ukraine provide further evidence of how the periphery radicalized the general policies emanating from the center. Lower places the burden of guilt for the switch to genocide on the shoulders of Jeckeln, who personally supervised the mass shooting of over 23,500 Jewish women and children in the first week of September 1941. In Zhytomyr, the Holocaust was not merely the result of a technocratic bureaucracy's machinations; rather, individuals set the pace.

Following the replacement of the military administration by the civilian General Commissariat administration, the practice of genocide was forced to evolve. The mobile units responsible for the mass murders of the summer and fall 1941 had moved towards the East, behind the advancing Wehrmacht. In order to complete the "cleansing" of the region, the General Commissariat was forced to utilize a motley group of organizations. Lower's examination of this period of the Holocaust uncovers the complicity of individuals (from forest rangers to agricultural leaders) and institutions (such as Organization Todt and economic planning groups), leading her to argue persuasively that "the most remarkable administrative pattern was one of ad hoc collaboration" (p. 159). The General Commissar was the key coordinator of this process and the involvement of this civilian agency in what was primarily a SS-Police affair only highlights how important the Holocaust was to all German authorities in the East.

The final distinguishing characteristic of the Holo-

caust in the Zhytomyr region was the importance of the top Nazi leadership in accelerating the killing process. Both Hitler and Himmler had headquarters installations built in the surrounding area and it became a matter of pride to the local commanders to present their superiors with a *judenfreie Lokale*. For Himmler, the destruction of Zhytomyr's Jews was also a necessary prerequisite for the construction of his planned model colony, Hegewald. Believing the mass murder far enough along by September 1942, Himmler ordered the establishment of an ethnic German settlement that would function both as a defensive belt against partisan attacks as well as an ideal racial community in the newly acquired *Lebensraum*. As Lower points out, in contrast to the unanimity of goals shared by the center and periphery concerning the murder of the Jews, local officials viewed the center's pronouncements on the value of ethnic Germans as out of touch with reality. Many Germans posted in the East viewed the ethnic Germans as "fit[ting] the pejorative European notion of an 'Easterner' rather than the Nazi image of a cultured Aryan" (p. 165). Despite Himmler's determined attempts to create the German reservation, the project failed with just over 10,000 inhabitants living in Hegewald (instead of the planned 40,000) before the approaching Red Army forced the disbanding of the colony. Lower convincingly argues that this project was unsuccessful because it "created more conflict than consensus within the German administration," proving that "the destructive aspects of the FÄ¼hrer's Lebensraum policies proved easier to promote and carry out than the constructive ones" (p. 178).

Lower should be commended for linking German and, more generally, European imperialism to the Third Reich's war of extermination in the former Soviet Union. When placed into this context of European conquest and exploitation, the brutality of the German occupation becomes somewhat more comprehensible. Despite this focus on Nazi imperialism, Lower provides only a brief three-page analysis of the economic exploitation of the

region. This is rather puzzling, as the quest for economic benefits served as the backdrop for European imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as figuring prominently in the Third Reich's predatory policies. Reich authorities viewed Ukraine as the breadbasket of Europe and believed its agricultural production would satisfy Germany's foodstuffs needs both during and after the war. The links between economic and population policies in Ukraine require some further analysis, especially in a work analyzing Nazi imperialism. A further minor quibble concerns a caption for a photograph in which a Waffen-SS Infantry Division is identified as an armored division approximately two years before this transformation occurred. Apart from these two criticisms, Lower has produced a very important study on Nazi occupation goals and practices that not only highlights the centrality of the Holocaust to all German institutions in the occupied Eastern territories, but also stresses the collapse of unanimity between these same institutions concerning the construction of the German East.

Notes

[1]. Karel Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[2]. The phrase comes from Omer Bartov's pioneering work on German soldiers and the ideological campaign in the former Soviet Union: *The Eastern Front 1941-1945: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* (London: Macmillan Press, 1985).

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Citation: Jeff Rutherford. Review of Lower, Wendy, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

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