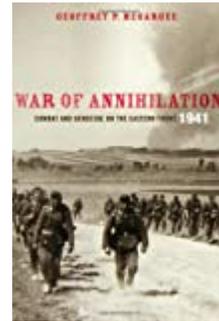




**Geoffrey P. Megargee.** *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. xvi + 177 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7425-4481-9.



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## **Total War Becomes Gruesome Reality**

In the preface to his book, Geoffrey Megargee notes a curious disconnect in the historical literature on the Nazi-Soviet war between the campaign's military and criminal aspects, and indicates as well his intention to write a synthesis to reconnect these two facets. He might also have pointed to a similar curious gap in recent English-language scholarship on the military aspects of Barbarossa, especially given the American fascination with World War II and Nazi Germany. In any case, on the first point he was certainly correct, and on the second, he clearly fulfilled his goal by producing an excellent synthesis of the first six months of the Nazi-Soviet war that manages to be both concise and yet surprisingly substantive.

Megargee begins his analysis with a succinct summary of background forces that helped shape the broader German national perception of eastern Europe and Russia, putting emphasis on key factors such as the harsh experience of World War I; German soldiers' perceptions of the East, the population of which seemed to them alien and primitive; the shock of defeat and social collapse, which left most Germans dazed and disoriented;

the postwar rise in political violence; the emergent myth of the "new man" who saw in war a model for life and embraced the notions of camaraderie, courage, ruthlessness, and the rejuvenation of Germany through force; the search for culprits to explain Germany's sorry plight; and the curious mix of National Socialist ideas, which seemed both to be grounded in a larger European context yet also make sense of specific German circumstances. Of key importance, of course, were notions such as Social Darwinism, with its emphasis on the inevitability of struggle and conflict, and *Lebensraum*, which in the broad Nazi context transcended its original geographical meaning and came to incorporate notions of economics, racial purity, racial conflict, and war. As Megargee emphasizes, to Adolf Hitler, *Lebensraum* meant war, an understanding that marked the first point of contact between National Socialism and the military leadership of Germany. As the Nazis set out to create a *Volksgemeinschaft*, a racial community strong and cohesive enough to withstand the rigors of the next war, the military thought in terms of transforming Germany into a *Wehrgemeinschaft*, a fully militarized society in which all resources would be directed at the war effort, a failing that, in their minds, had

contributed to the Germans defeat in World War I. One of the strengths of the first part of the book, then, is that Megargee quickly establishes the broad commonalities of thought and aims between Hitler and the army leadership. The fullest implications of Hitler's notions of radical racial war might have left a few generals squeamish, but by and large a broad agreement existed between the two sides on the nature and purpose of the future war, as indicated by events in Poland in the autumn of 1939.

In planning for the action that became Operation Barbarossa, Megargee notes a recurring characteristic of the German war effort: considerable operational aptitude combined with strategic confusion. One could also add that German leaders seemed constantly unprepared for the eventuality that enemy nations and leaders might fail to react the way they were supposed to, that is, to surrender. In the event, the failure of Great Britain to leave the war in the summer of 1940 left Hitler with many choices, but few that would guarantee a quick victory. Half-hearted efforts to subdue Britain either directly, through aerial combat and then invasion, or indirectly, by coordinating a strategy with Germany's nominal Mediterranean allies, failed to produce satisfactory results, and in any case Hitler's gaze kept returning to the East and the lure of *Lebensraum*. With little immediate risk of a two-front war, Hitler believed an attack on the Soviet Union, and with it the ultimate showdown with the "Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy," promised great rewards with little downside. After all, the German military had just defeated France in five weeks (something it had not been able to do in over fifty months in World War I), evicted British forces from the continent in a humiliation that Winston Churchill's fiery speeches could not disguise, and faced a Red Army presumably beheaded by Joseph Stalin's purges (a conclusion that appeared justified by its woeful performance in the Finnish war), which meant that it was certainly not as formidable as the tsarist forces defeated by the Germans between 1914 and 1917. To be sure, the Germans had weaknesses of their own, most notably woeful intelligence on all aspects of the Soviet Union and a shift in war production ordered by Hitler that was to leave the army short of vital equipment. Arguably the worst failing, though, was that Hitler and the German military planners could never decide on specific, attainable goals for the operation that, once achieved, would ensure the defeat of the USSR. Indeed, as planning progressed, operational objectives became more diffuse. Early versions of Barbarossa took some notice of limited German resources and sought to limit both targets as well as coordinate the use of German forces so as

to achieve maximum effect. By the final plan, the Germans had three army groups moving in three different directions, with little coordination, too few resources to accomplish all the objectives, and finally, no agreement as to which of the thrusts was the key one. As Megargee points out, faced with this dilemma of too few resources chasing too many goals, German leaders responded with a mixture of hope and denial: hope for the best and denial that Stalin's regime could survive the initial blow.

More importantly, as Megargee demonstrates, from the inception of planning, political and military decisions interacted and affected each other in a thoroughly complementary manner. If military planners had to face the prospect of too few food resources coming from Germany over an strained supply chain, for example, then improvisations would have to be made: the army could live off the land. This decision fit well with the larger economic, political, and racial aims of the war, since the goal of *Lebensraum* required the ruthless exploitation of land and resources in the Soviet Union. Indeed, a hierarchy of needs would be established in the food chain: German combat troops, rear-area troops, German civilians, foreign laborers, and then, if anything was left, Soviet civilians. If this doomed millions of Slavs to death, so be it. In the Nazi racial categorization, they were deemed less worthy of life than Germans. Similarly, military concerns over security in such a vast conquered area meshed neatly with the "special tasks" assigned by Hitler to Heinrich Himmler and the SS. Even the fear, and then reality, of partisan war could be utilized as justification for eradicating the bearers of the "Jewish-Bolshevik contagion." As Hitler understood from the beginning, and communicated on numerous occasions to his generals, this was truly to be a war of annihilation, and the great majority of the generals willingly, many even enthusiastically, transmitted criminal orders to their subordinate commanders, who in turned ensured their implementation.

In a book aimed at students or the general reader, Megargee demonstrates in a clear, concise, systematic manner, through each phase of Operation Barbarossa, just how the ideological and military aspects of the campaign intersected, from the shared values to the way in which military victories or defeats affected ideological decisions. The murderous activities of the *Einsatzgruppen*, for example, would not have been possible in the first place without the victories on the ground produced by the military leadership, nor could they have sustained the relentless pace they achieved without significant aid from the army, which most frequently took the form of logistical assistance, information, and separation of spe-

cial categories of prisoners for execution, but occasionally extended even to the soldiers' participation in the killings themselves. Along the same lines, the lack of strategic clarity meant that despite the great operational successes of the campaign, the Germans found their momentum waning by the fall of 1941, with prospects for a quick end to the war fading rapidly. In a cruel irony, however, this turn of affairs meant that the Germans could exploit the territories under their control even more ruthlessly, as well as more thoroughly implementing the now-operational "Final Solution." In a further paradox, even the December reverses suffered before Moscow and the declaration of war on the United States, which helped turn an essentially regional war into a world war that Germany had little hope of winning, had scant effect on immediate Nazi policy, since German leaders understood that the United States and its new allies could do little to affect the German position significantly until at least the second half of 1943. As 1941 closed, then, Hitler and Nazi officialdom sought not ways

out of their dilemma, but occupied themselves with how to make their exploitation of *Lebensraum* more effective and the "Final Solution" less onerous for the perpetrators yet more comprehensive for the victims. A process of cumulative radicalization had now set in, one that Nazi leaders had no wish to restrain.

Geoffrey Megargee has written a very fine, readable survey of the first six months of the Nazi-Soviet war, one that effectively demonstrates the relationships, on any number of levels, between the military sphere of strategy and operations and the political imperative, which encompassed ideology, economics, culture, and racial policy. This interconnectedness combined to produce a pervasively criminal war and occupation, which in turn had a decisive influence on the evolution and implementation of the murderous action that became known as the "Final Solution." He has also produced a thoughtful work of synthesis and analysis that effectively fills a gap in the historical literature, quite an accomplishment for a book of less than two hundred pages.

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