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Die Wehrmachtausstellung. Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung.

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What's All the Fuss About?

The most curious aspect of the debate over the Wehrmachtsausstellung in Germany is that it has all happened before. And yet, whenever some new (or old) evidence is made public regarding the involvement of the Wehrmacht in Hitler's policies of conquest, subjugation, and genocide, everyone seems surprised, shocked, and angry, whether because they "finally" have the "definitive" proof of the German army's criminality, or because they see this as "another" conspiracy against the Wehrmacht's shield of honor. <p> In April 1981 the weekly <cite>Der Spiegel</cite> carried a review of the recently published volume, <cite>Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges</cite>: <p> "Ein deutscher Historiker widerlegt die gaengige These, die Wehrmacht habe mit den Mordaktionen der Eisatzgruppen in Russland nichts zu tun gehabt. Das Heer war tief darin verstickt [...]. Ueber die 'in ihrem Ausmass erschreckende Integration des Heeres in das Vernichtungsprogramm und die Vernichtungspolitik Hitlers' hat jetzt der Historiker Helmut Krausnick in Zusammenarbeit mit seinem Kollegen Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm neue Materialien vorgelegt. In einem Buch ueber die Geschichte der Eisatzgruppen korrigieren sie liebgewordene Vorstellungen von der 'Reinheit' der Wehrmacht." <p> Nor did this begin with Krausnick and Wilhelm. In 1965 Hans-Adolf Jacobsen published an important chapter on the implementation of the infamous Kommissarbefehl. In 1969 Manfred Messerschmidt examined in great detail the National Socialist indoctrination of the Wehrmacht's troops. In 1978 Christian Streit demonstrated the role of the army in the murder of over three million Soviet POWs. Following Krausnick's book, my own two studies, <cite>The Eastern Front, 1941-1945</cite> (1985) and <cite>Hitler's Army</cite> (1991), documented the involvement of the rank-and-file in the murderous policies of the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union. <p> Each time such a study is published, everyone seems terribly exercised. After touring Germany for two years and arriving finally in the "capital of the movement," the exhibit organized by the Hamburger Institut fuer Sozialforschung elicited the following comments from Theo Sommer of Die Zeit: "Die Bilder einer Ausstellung erregen Deutschland. Sie raeumen ein fuer allemal auf mit dem Mythos, dass die Wehrmacht in Hitlers Reich des Boesen ein unanfechtbarer Hort des Anstands, der Ritterlichkeit und der Ehrenhaftigkeit geblieben sei." <p> I doubt that even the recent exhibition will put an end to the debate, despite its wealth of photographic evidence. There will always be those who will say that they (or their parents, or their grandparents) had never had anything to do with all that, had not even seen it, that one should not generalize, that there were good soldiers and bad in an institution through whose ranks close to twenty million men served at one time or another. <p> What is interesting in this debate is something else. One wonders why the public reception of Daniel Goldhagen's book in Germany was so positive (excluding early journalistic criticism which soon adjusted to the public mood, and scholarly criticism which only demonstrated the gulf between the historians and the public), while the Wehrmachtsausstellung has created such a political debate. Let me offer a partial explanation. <p> Even if Goldhagen insists on speaking about "the Germans" rather than the Nazis when describing the murder of the Jews, the perpe-

trators he is concerned with are members of reserve police battalions or other units connected with the SS. Not only does he offer all Germans a way out of the dilemma by saying that after 1949 they became "like us," namely, ceased being the subjects of an anthropological inquiry and could be recognized as "normal" human being; he also writes on people who cannot by any stretch of the imagination be described as objects of admiration and respect. No one has ever said in Germany that he or she was proud of his or her father's heroic service in a reserve police battalion. I don't think that Gerald Feldman would have written that a few of his best friends are former members of the police and that "we understand one another perfectly." Policemen, even in Germany, are rarely cult figures. <p> The Wehrmacht is a wholly different matter. It has remained in people's minds the last bastion of honor and respect in the Third Reich not because evidence to the contrary was in short supply, but because it encompassed a vast portion of the German male population and provided in the postwar years the young generation that rebuilt both Germanys. To say that the Wehrmacht was involved in the Holocaust on every level is equivalent to saying that all Germans were; to admit that the millions of young men who created the Federal Republic were involved in genocide is to cast doubt on the very essence of postwar German society. It is, indeed, to say that the Germans did not become "like us," because so many (though perhaps fewer and fewer) of them still refuse to accept that between 1939 (or 1941) "we" fought a just war, and "they" fought an evil one; not that all wars are evil, but rather that some regimes are so evil that one must annihilate them even at the cost of terrible destruction to all sides; not that all soldiers are victims, but rather that some soldiers fight on the side of evil and become complicit in it, and some fight against evil and are therefore morally superior, despite the many exceptions on both sides. It is this recognition that is so difficult to accept in Germany, and one can hardly expect the current exhibition to make much of a dint on the public's mind for any sustained period of time. One only wonders when will we read again that "finally" the myth of the Wehrmacht's "purity of arms" has been shattered. <p>

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