

Stephen G. Fritz. *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*. Lexington: University Press Of Kentucky, Illustrations, tables. 2011. 688 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3416-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8131-6119-8.



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Highly Readable Analysis of the Eastern Front

Reviews of Stephen G. Fritz's *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* demonstrate that the eastern front in World War II means so many different things to so many different people. Certainly the Ostkrieg campaign, the Germans' land assault of the Soviet Union, was the most important campaign to the Nazi war machine and instrumental in the development and implementation of the Holocaust. The book under review, an updated revision of a 2011 edition, examines this campaign in detail. In this revised and improved edition, Fritz offers a thorough analysis of recent German sources on the eastern front. Fritz's comprehensive understanding of the conflict is clearly brought out in the text. He writes in an approachable style that enables the reader to be drawn into the drama. Beginning with the start of World War II, the book outlines the strategic mistake with which the Germans began the war in the East: being allied to their mortal enemy (Russia) and being at war with those they wished were their ally (Great Britain). This makes clear the fundamental strategic errors with which the Germans started Barbarossa in June 1941.

Fritz goes on to outline the heady early successes of the Germans. I especially enjoyed his description of the Germans' final attempt to capture Moscow toward the end of 1941. Here the Nazi war machine began to spin out of control as the reality finally caught up to their lofty ambitions. Fritz weaves a fascinating narrative and shows the complex relationship (or breakdown of relationship) between Adolf Hitler, his commanders in the field, and the Wehrmacht High Command (OKW), as their different objectives were still apparent when the Germans drove on with their final reserves into the oblivion of the Russian winter. Similarly, Fritz details the German errors at Stalingrad and the outcome of that terrible campaign. He discusses its importance to the turning point of the war and also to the push by Joseph Goebbels toward Total War. He contextualizes the achievements of the German population as well as the proliferation of the slave labor industry as Germany's method of increasing production. This makes clear that despite remarkable improvements in the armament industry by early 1943, the Germans were never going to surpass the combined

output of their enemies. Fritz maintains that the interest attached to Kursk, its “enduring fascination” (p. 338), is unwarranted; compared to operations like Barbarossa and Blue in previous years, it was really a glorified local attack. What is most striking in Fritz’s description is German indecision and material shortages compared to their opponents. Of the total German armored strength of 2,465 tanks, a little over 300 were either Tiger or Panther tanks that were superior to their Soviet adversaries. The Ninth Army, which was to spearhead one of the pincers, had only 26 Tiger tanks compared to 85,000 horses (p. 343). Despite the staggering Soviet losses that Fritz records at Kursk, such as at Prokhorovka, the Germans still lost the battle.

Fritz sometimes gets off track in his discussions. In his description of major battles, for example, he goes to great lengths to reinforce the point that even when they were supposedly winning and had numerous advantages in terms of materials, the Soviets still seemed to lose an excess of men and equipment. Not only does he quote casualty figures, but he also amplifies the point by explaining this in terms of ratios of losses (for example, p. 355). The conclusions, which the reader is left to construct, are that, firstly, the Soviet system was callous and did not care about these excessive losses of men; secondly, that the Soviet military leadership—despite their material advantages—remained largely inept throughout the entire war; and lastly, that the Soviet soldier was never as good as a German Landser (as Fritz refers to them with some affection throughout the book). These assumptions, based on politically charged causality figures, should be used with caution. I did find some of this detailed and unsubstantiated analysis distracting on a number of occasions. For example, in describing the Soviet losses at Kursk in July 1943 and Operation Bagration in June 1944, he quotes the “latest Soviet figures” but does not give a reference. He partly blames the Soviet disaster at Prokhorovka during Kursk on the “liberal doses of vodka” drunk by the Russian tank crews (p. 349). As Fritz notes in his introduction, he relies on German sources as he feels that the Soviet ones are too ideologically skewed. However, there are elements of this from any perspective. With such an outlook, one needs to be wary of making the opposition, in this case the Russians, appear like cardboard cut-outs. Fritz asserts that these losses show not just Joseph Stalin’s but “the entire Soviet system’s utter disregard for its own people” (p. 357). I think a similar statement about the Nazi system could have been inserted, especially considering that for the Germans, after 1943, the war was unwinnable.

Fritz’s discussion of the Holocaust in the East is a particularly worthwhile aspect of this book. It looks at the development of the murderous policies of the Einsatzgruppen and contextualizes them into the eastern front. However, Fritz makes a few risky statements when debating the complicity of the Wehrmacht in war crimes on the eastern front. He contends that although institutional complicity is apparent, it “seems clear that relatively few soldiers took an active part in the shootings of Jews.” Fritz goes on to assert that “not more than twenty to thirty thousand Wehrmacht personnel” were active in mass murder and that German soldiers only account for 1 percent of the victims (p. 481). I am not sure where he gets these figures from, and does it also account for treatment of Soviet prisoners of war? Fritz suggests that in many of the crimes perpetrated that did involve Wehrmacht personnel, many of the victims were rear-echelon soldiers rather than frontline troops. But is this a moot point? How many knew about the crimes that were happening? Fritz asserts that it is erroneous to revert to a description of a “clean” Wehrmacht, but equally, the argument that they were all criminals is also incorrect. I would argue that on balance, he does not present enough evidence to redress this point of view.

To better discuss the wider debate of the complicity of the Wehrmacht soldier, Fritz could have examined the terror apparatus that kept them in the field. He could have tried to determine the motivation the Germans had to keep fighting, especially when all appeared lost after the Russian offensive of June 1944. Fritz touches on this subject but does not identify the role the regime’s harsh punishment played in keeping German soldiers in the field. Certainly the other factors he identifies were important, for example, defending the homeland, but the fact that brutal individual commanders, such as Field-Marshal Ferdinand Schörner or Colonel-General Lothar Rendulic, rose to prominence in this last stage of the war was in part due to their excessive and blood-thirsty discipline. This is only mentioned in passing, with a reference to Schörner’s “energetic” leadership and Rendulic’s “pride” in having officers and men court-martialed and shot for retreating (pp. 434, 447). The extent to which these commanders began to mimic the Soviets with their terrorizing policies against their own troops would have been worthy of further discussion.

Fritz’s book has many strengths; it covers the German invasion of Russia very well and offers solid analysis as well as a compelling narrative of the events. The book includes a number of worthwhile images, while the tables are useful for drawing an overall picture of the economic,

industrial, material, and human sides of the conflict. For study of this complex and multifaceted conflict. these reasons, this book is an important addition to the

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