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Alexander B. Rossino. *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. xv + 343 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1234-5.

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Dress Rehearsal for Operation Barbarossa

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Operation Tannenberg, the code-name for the German assault on Poland, has usually received attention only as the initial example of the Wehrmacht's use of the new concept of blitzkrieg, or as a brief interlude before the real war in the west began. On closer inspection, what set the Polish campaign apart, according to Alexander B. Rossino, was neither of these, but rather the stunning level of violence and brutality directed at civilians and prisoners of war, as well as the ideologically motivated murder of specific groups of the population. If this bears a striking similarity to the later German invasion of the Soviet Union, that is as it should be, for "the invasion of Poland heralded a fundamental shift in the way that Germany waged war in Eastern Europe ... [as] mass murder was employed ... as an instrument of German state policy" (p. 2). Over the last few years a general acknowledgment has been made that the German Army from 1941 committed atrocities in the Balkans and the Soviet Union, but Rossino situates the onset of such brutality earlier, in the Polish campaign of 1939. In doing so, he also reminds us that it was not German actions in the east, but rather the conduct of the war in the west, that proved atypical.

To Rossino, the Polish campaign represented a transitional conflict. It was a *Volkstumkampf* (ethnic conflict) that combined Nazi ideological goals with the traditional military-political objective of the establishment of a German empire in Eastern Europe. The invasion of Poland thus ushered in the first of several large-scale killing programs, with virtually all elements of the later ideological campaign in the USSR present: the deliberate intention to eradicate political and ideological enemies, as defined in both racial-biological and military-political terms; the extensive use of mobile death squads (the notorious *Einsatzgruppen*); the generally cooperative stance of the Army toward the SS; and the use of a harsh reprisal policy by the Army. In all of this, one key point stands out: the brutalities of German soldiers and SS/police personnel did not result from the barbarization of war, as Omer Bartov has suggested; instead, "leading figures in the SS and police apparatus intentionally took steps before the outbreak of hostilities with Poland to sharpen the regime's racial-political policies" (p. 228). For Rossino,

then, cause and effect have been inverted up to now: it was not so much the stresses of combat but the morally corrosive influence of Nazism that led to unprecedented atrocities. The Polish campaign was simply the testing ground for brutalities to come.

In discussing the ideological dimension of the Polish operation, Rossino illustrates anew the temporary overlap between the radical/revolutionary Nazi goals and the more traditional aims of the German officer corps, and how the latter tended to obscure the former. For Hitler, war against the Poles was necessary as a first step toward achieving the *Lebensraum* (living space) deemed vital for the future well-being of the German people. Linked with the notion of *Lebensraum*, of course, was the essential and unavoidable next step: the land had to be ethnically and racially cleansed of what the Nazis regarded as inferior peoples in order to make it habitable for Germans. The territorial goalÂ-at a minimum the recovery of formerly German land taken from the Reich by the Treaty of Versailles, at a maximum the eradication of Poland as a state-Âfound broad support among German officers, even as they failed or neglected to note the second, racial aim. Even when Hitler, just before the invasion, exhorted his officers to eliminate Polish forces mercilessly and to avoid viewing this as a traditional war, some could still regard this as mere rhetorical excess in an effort to emphasize the essential qualities of this new style of war. After all, blitzkrieg aimed at the destruction of armies, not the securing of a particular line.

To those officers paying close attention, and there were some, it soon became uncomfortably clear that Hitler had more in mind than simply a quick military victory. Evidence of this was there for those who wished to see: the decision, months before the attack, to use *Einsatzgruppen* for special (murderous) tasks; the preparation of long lists of Poles to be arrested and executed; and the detailed discussions of the jurisdictional and administrative arrangements between the Army and the SS. This was also emphasized by the care with which the commanders of the *Einsatzgruppen* and their smaller subsections, the *Einsatzkommandos*, were chosen. They constituted an elite group, most with law (or advanced) degrees, picked for their ruthlessness, dedication to National Socialism, and previous military experience. Based on extensive research into personnel records, Rossino provides a chilling look at men willing to kill not because they were sociopaths, but out of ideological commitment; men, moreover, who were educated, competent professionals applying all of their considerable skills to the task at hand.

Wehrmacht officers, as well as most of the common soldiers, displayed a more complex set of attitudes toward Poles, an inflammatory mixture of contempt and fear. Although generally regarded as primitive, uncultured, backward, and inferior, Poles (and Jews) were also seen as devious, tricky, cruel, and treacherous people likely to use terrorist methods to resist German occupation. Given their extensive fearsÂ-and the reality of bitter civilian resistance as well as some atrocities against *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) living in PolandÂ-German military leaders saw this "guerrilla war" as justification for the authorization of killings and brutality as reprisal measures designed to quell resistance. The German Army thus sought to employ *Schrecklichkeit* (terror) as a means to pacify the Polish civilian population, using as a precedent actions taken in France and Belgium in both the Franco-Prussian War and World War I. In essence, the combination of a derogatory *Feinbild* (concept of the enemy) plus a legacy of institutional brutality equaled a savage reprisal policy, from which it was a short step to deliberate atrocity.

These negative attitudes, of course, extended to Polish Jews, against whom some actions were directed, but Rossino clearly shows that it was Polish gentiles-Âintellectuals, nationalists, Catholic clergy, military leaders, anyone, in short who might lead resistance to German rule-Âwho were the principal targets of Nazi wrath. From the autumn until the end of December 1939, for example, the SS murder campaign claimed some 50,000 victims, of whom approximately 7,000 were Polish Jews. "The roughly 4 to 1 [sic] ratio of Polish Christian deaths to Polish Jewish deaths suggests the decidedly anti-Polish, and not anti-Jewish, animus of the killing program of the SS in those early months of the war" (p. 234). In reality, this six to one ratio emphasizes a key point: at this stage Nazi anti-Jewish policy was still evolving, part, but not yet the most vital aspect, of a larger plan for the racial reordering of this first piece of newly acquired *Lebensraum*. Clearly fluid in nature and as yet with no definitive formulation or aim, the "final goal" of Nazi anti-Jewish policy during this period seemed to be expulsion and resettlement of Polish Jews across the demarcation line with the Soviet Union, or the creation of Jewish reservations in the southeastern part of occupied Poland.

While making use of extensive archival research to detail top-level decision-making, Rossino has also mined the relevant archives for answers to another significant question: why did average German soldiers (and police) demonstrate such a willingness to act brutally? Here

Rossino makes good use of *Erlebnisberichte* (experience reports) written shortly after the campaign by many military personnel, as well as diaries and letters, to arrive at some conclusions. Alongside considerations such as fear and nervousness in combat, bitterness toward civilian assailants, and the Army's legitimation of violence, Rossino notes other factors: ethnic and racial contempt for Poles and Jews; anti-Semitism; nationalistic hatreds stemming from the Treaty of Versailles; a perceived need to help *Volksdeutsche* allegedly endangered by the Poles; and the impact of Nazi ideology, in the sense of defining people by their supposed racial value and the necessity of a vigorous defense of the *Volk*. In this, Rossino's findings reinforce the emerging consensus among historians that German behavior reflected a complex mix of traditional and ideological emotions.

In emphasizing the extent to which Nazi ideology drove the German military machine even in its first action of the war, Rossino has demonstrated not only the ruthlessness and brutality of the Polish campaign, but more significantly that it was pivotal in initiating Hitler's new type of war. Although individual army officers objected on a number of occasions to SS brutalities in Poland, and the majority of average soldiers did not participate in committing atrocities, the trend was nonetheless clear: the policy of using mass murder both to pacify conquered territory and prepare this eventual *Lebensraum* racially for German settlement began in 1939, not in 1941. In a very real sense, then, German violence against Poles served as a dress rehearsal for Operation Barbarossa.

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