

**Gottlob Herbert Bidermann.** *In Deadly Combat: A German Soldier's Memoir of the Eastern Front.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001. xiv + 330 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-1122-5.



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The recent sixtieth-anniversary commemorations in France of the D-Day landings generated substantial media coverage in the United States. The presence of various heads of state in Normandy underscored the salience of Operation Overlord in the liberation of western Europe from the scourge of National Socialist wartime occupation. Ironically, the attendance of Russian president Vladimir Putin reminded historically conversant observers of the crucial, and incomparably costlier, role played by the former Soviet Union in defeating the Third Reich. While West Europeans and North Americans properly commemorated the valor and sacrifice of the armed forces of the United States, British Commonwealth, the Free French government, and Poland, the public, especially in Anglophone countries, would do well to remember the colossal struggle that unfolded on the Eastern Front in June 1941 and lasted for four years. Noting the simple fact that, since the end of the Cold War, historians have revised the death toll sustained by the USSR upward from 20 to 25-26 million, and that the Red Army inflicted the majority of casualties sustained by its German counterpart during World War II in no way impugns the important contributions of the Western Allies to the ultimate defeat of the Third Reich.

Historians both within and outside of Germany have considered the Soviet-German conflict, a full-scale war

within its own right, critically since at least the late 1970s. Books like Christian Streit's *Keine Kameraden* (1978) and the scholarship generated by the Military History Research Office in Freiburg, Germany, have addressed the role of the regular German armed forces in atrocities perpetrated against non-Jewish civilians and prisoners of war in both the former USSR and occupied southeastern Europe. The Research Office has also thoroughly analyzed and documented the significant role played by the regular German armed forces in the Holocaust, thereby disproving postwar contentions by German veterans which ascribed culpability for the implementation of the Final Solution solely or at least largely to the SS and related organizations like the SD and Gestapo.

Bidermann's memoir first appeared in the original German as *Krim-Kurland: Mit der 132. Infanterie-Division, 1941-1945* in 1964. The English translation contains a preface by Derek S. Zumbro, who obtained the manuscript from the author, and an introduction by Dennis Showalter. Organized into eleven chronological chapters, the book describes Bidermann's experiences as an infantry reservist in the East. Combat, the loss of friends and commanding officers, encounters with Soviet civilians and troops, promotion from the rank of private first class to lieutenant, and the experiences of a 1,000-day Soviet captivity (included in the epilogue) before his

return to his native Wuerttemberg in 1948, all find mention in simple, linear narration.

In his introduction, Dennis Showalter notes the absence in the memoir of discussion of the role of National Socialism in sustaining morale among German combatants in the East. Showalter describes this absence as normal for an “ordinary” German reflecting on experiences that transpired decades earlier. However, various scholarly works have addressed precisely that phenomenon. The most influential of such commentators, Omer Bartov, attributes the incredible ferocity that characterized conflict on the Eastern Front to the interconnectedness of three factors: demodernization of the German army, destruction of the primary group, and the resulting demonization and destruction of the enemy. Scholars of the war know full well that the German army that invaded the USSR consisted very largely of infantrymen relying heavily on draught animals, and that armored, mechanized and motorized units comprised a small fraction of the total German force. Clearly, the blitzkrieg tactic so successful in defeating first Poland and subsequently the Benelux countries and France failed in the Soviet Union.

This “demodernization,” then, combined with the tenacity of the Soviets and their ability both to sustain and inflict enormous casualties, resulted in the destruction of the “primary group,” the small number of fellow combatants with whom an individual frontline soldier maintains his most immediate relationship. Scholars have often attributed the willingness of soldiers of any nationality to fight to the desire to protect, and, reciprocally, expect protection from, their fellow soldiers. However, Bartov argues that the heavy casualties sustained by the Germans in the East and the resultant high rate of personnel turnover leading to the destruction of the primary group do not explain the motive for fighting. Consequently, he notes the extent to which National Socialist ideology imbued German soldiers and thereby provided them with a motive to destroy the Soviet enemy, who was denigrated to something less than human. The high degree to which National Socialist *Weltanschauung* accorded with the predispositions of the officer corps itself explains why the Germans could demonize, and therefore, destroy, their Soviet enemy.[1]

Bidermann’s memoir distinguishes itself through a conspicuous absence of any discussion of the above, and consequently Showalter’s mention of this fact can warn the reader to treat the work, like any other memoir, with a healthy degree of skepticism. Bidermann mentions that, after witnessing the debilitating effects of Stalin-

ism firsthand upon crossing the Soviet border, he felt fortunate to be a German. He rather laconically notes that both sides perpetrated atrocities but professes ignorance of specific examples committed by the Germans: “Through the excesses that took place against the Russian people the German soldier became, to the simple Russian, a fighter and supporter for a despised, murderous political institution. Because of this doctrine, established and mandated in far-away Berlin, countless atrocities were in turn committed on soldiers in the front lines, even though we front soldiers were unaware of the murder of thousands of innocent people” (p. 43). On the same page he notes that, as veterans of World War I, many divisional, regimental and battalion commanders comported themselves properly and that he never witnessed any mistreatment of Soviet prisoners. While one should not expect every individual of the perhaps ten million or so Germans who served in the East to have known about atrocities, a substantial corpus of scholarship proves the very active role of the regular German army, as opposed to the SS, in the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war and civilians alike, and in the Holocaust. The notorious “commissar order” issued before the invasion of the USSR, according to which German personnel were to execute captured commissars, found ready compliance. In like manner, German troops interpreted the decree suspending orthodox military justice in the East as a license to commit atrocities on a truly massive scale with impunity.

A source that amply documents the collusion of the Wehrmacht in war crimes and crimes against humanity is *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*, the catalog of the controversial exhibit that has toured Germany and Austria since the late 1990s and is currently accessible in Hamburg. Its numerous essays analyze the culpability of ordinary soldiers in mass shootings of commissars, Soviet prisoners of war, civilians, and Jews. Scholars have noted the ideological propinquity of the German military leadership to the belief in the putative threat posed to western civilization and the world at large by “Judeo-Bolshevism,” a tenet of National Socialist ideology.[2] In other words, the very commanders lauded by Bidermann for their allegedly “gentlemanly” comportment largely shared Hitler’s perception of the Soviet Union as a bastion of “Jewish-Communism”, within which the extant political system and tens of millions of inhabitants were slated for destruction or conversion into the eastern component of a large German empire.

Bidermann’s discussion of the Soviet combatant per se distinguishes itself through absence of any explicit

presumption of innate German “racial” superiority. The author ascribes to his former enemy physical toughness and notes a reversal of the situation in the East as Soviet combat capability registers marked improvement and merit determines rank in the Red Army. Previously, according to the author, political factors had determined which position one would occupy. Interestingly, Bidermann described that very same circumstance as obtaining in the German army by early 1942, after the Germans had begun to experience their first severe setbacks in the East. Now, he argued, political connections, and not professional qualification, determined rank in the Wehrmacht (pp. 116-117).

The author’s discussion of combat motivation and ideology contradicts Bartov’s argument discussed above. Bidermann contends that, by 1942, a willingness to die for the fatherland replaced a willingness to sacrifice oneself for members of the National Socialist Party. The attempted assassination of Hitler on July 20, 1944 proves illuminating for the author, for he claims it was then that he realized the futility of Germany’s military endeavor. However, he and his comrades continued to fight and indeed fought harder, fearing retribution from the Soviets if the latter should invade Germany. In this regard, the author’s contention accords readily with Bartov’s argument that German soldiers, fully cognizant of the mass murder of Soviet civilians and prisoners that they had perpetrated, expected no less from the Red Army on German soil.

In order to understand the remarks in Bidermann’s memoir, and others like it, in context, readers should consult not only Bartov, but also Gerhard Weinberg’s sem-

inal *A World at Arms* in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the Soviet-German war. Additionally, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, by David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, warrants consideration for anyone interested in a detailed operational study of the Red Army in 1941-1945. While Bidermann’s memoir provides some interesting vignettes, such as the tale of the replacement of a stolen cow for a Ukrainian family, the war in the East certainly merits additional research. Only scholarly and rigorous works can provide readers with an accurate, nuanced and multifaceted analysis of the largest single armed conflict in the history of the world.

#### Notes

[1]. Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and the War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[2]. Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Editions, 1995), esp. pp. 63-64, 70-71, and 74 on the role of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust. Regarding the treatment of non-Jewish Soviet civilians, the following remark proves singularly illuminating: “in der Praxis hatten viele Soldaten der Ostfront das Recht auf Leben nur denjenigen zuerkannt, die brauchbare Sklaven abgaben. Der Rest mochte verkommen, war Ballast auf dem Schlachtfeld. Nichts bezeugt besser den Zustand der Verrohung einer Millionenarmee als diese Haltung” (p. 101). H-German discussion of the debates over the Wehrmacht exhibit and book review are accessible at [\\$\\$.](http://www.h-net.org/~{}german/discuss/other/wehrmacht.htm)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

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