FOLLOWING ORDERS

Wolfram Wette: *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality.* Translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. xix, 372. $29.95.)

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Between 1995 and 1999, the Institute for Social Research in Hamburg mounted a traveling exhibit entitled "War of Extermination: The Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941–1944." The Wehrmacht is the name of the German armed forces during the Third Reich. Utilizing thousands of photographs; uncensored, personal letters; diaries; and official documents, the controversial exhibit sought to expose Germans and Austrians to the irrefutable truth that most serious historians accepted as fact decades earlier—rank-and-file German soldiers committed atrocities on the Eastern Front as part of a broader campaign of extermination. The exhibitors found that the myth of the "clean Wehrmacht" did not die easily and many Germans refused to accept that anyone other than the criminal SS and its supporting organizations were responsible for atrocities. However, the evidence in the exhibit was overwhelming, and subsequent scholarship consistently reveals more examples of the Wehrmacht's active involvement in genocide. Even the Bundeswehr accepts the weight of the historical evidence and recently declared that the Wehrmacht is an unacceptable source of military tradition.

Using the Wehrmacht exhibit as a point of departure, German military-historian Wolfram Wette gathers the various threads of scholarship proving the Wehrmacht's complicity in war crimes and presents them together in this one volume. Originally published in 2002, this excellent English translation is valuable for historians of modern Germany and anyone seeking an overview of the German military in the first half of the twentieth century. In his preface, historian Peter Fritzsche credits Wette for "making a compelling argument for the long-term military preparation for fighting a racial war to guard Germany's future" (xii). It is more accurate, however, to credit Wette for efficiently selecting and summarizing the arguments of other historians who proved that the Wehrmacht and its predecessors were complicit in conceiving and executing a racial war of extermination. This is not to minimize the value of *The Wehrmacht*, but it is not, for the most part, a work of original scholarship. Wette's contribution lies in taking disparate research and writing a simple and direct narrative accessible to both academics and the educated public.

Wette begins by arguing that the historic anti-Semitism of the Imperial German Army combined with its fear of the Russian colossus to convince the German military class that "Judeo-Bolshevism" posed an existential threat to Germany. Wette is to be commended for beginning a study of the Wehrmacht in the Second Reich because many historians fail to explain that the officer corps was historically predisposed to support a radical and aggressive ideology

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like National Socialism. Answerable only to the Emperor, the Imperial German Army considered such phenomenon as Social Democracy and a heterogeneous officer corps that included Jews and other segments of the middle class anathema to the social order. When the Empire collapsed in November 1918, a significant number of German veterans organized themselves into radically paramilitary organizations and prosecuted a systematic campaign of domestic terrorism against the hated Weimar Republic.

Wette devotes the next two chapters to detailing the Wehrmacht's alignment with Hitler and its involvement in the extermination of Soviet Jewry and related atrocities. Unfortunately, this particular section of the book is both poorly organized and redundant. Wette cites example after example of Wehrmacht officers and enlisted men committing atrocities stemming from official orders passed down through the chain of command. Wette acknowledges that most of what is known about these atrocities was discovered by historians like Omer Bartov, whose *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) is required reading for those interested in the causal link between indoctrination and genocide. Defenders of the Wehrmacht maintain that the SS carried out the executions in occupied territory. Wette correctly notes that despite a division of responsibility on paper, "In the framework of the campaign of annihilation ... members of the SS and the Wehrmacht came to view the official distinction as artificial" (p. 126). Wette carefully explains how the Wehrmacht mastered the art of using euphemisms in official documents to cover extermination activities. For example, instead of shooting Jews, German soldiers executed "bandits," "partisans," and "hostages." The Wehrmacht was as conscious of preserving a clean record as its SS counterpart.

The most interesting part of the book from the perspective of the historian of modern Germany is the final section detailing how and why the myth of the clean Wehrmacht prospered and eventually deteriorated in the postwar period. Wette describes how German generals and American and British officials and journalists perpetuated the myth that the Wehrmacht was comprised of decent German soldiers who were forced to serve a criminal regime. Both groups advocated punishing only the key perpetrators in the Third Reich, specifically Hitler's inner circle and the leadership of the SS, most of whom were conveniently dead or missing. The primary reason for this mutually beneficial arrangement between Wehrmacht generals and the British and American occupiers was the Cold War. Integrating West Germany into the North American Treaty Organization (NATO) required a German military of which everyone could take pride. The first step towards this goal was to control the historical record. The Historical Division of the United States Army employed some 328 retired German officers to write their story. By March 1948, these officers produced 34,000 pages of self-serving rubbish. The underlying theme behind the Wehrmacht myth these generals crafted with Allied help was that the Wehrmacht itself was a victim of Hitler and his criminal policies.

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The myth began to shatter when historians like Bartov dove into the archives and began to piece together a whole new perspective on the Second World War and the Holocaust, namely that the two were indistinguishable and self-reinforcing. The goal of war in the East was racial extermination, and the Wehrmacht was inextricably linked with practically every phase of the destruction process. To suggest otherwise was to ignore the evidence. Wette details how the Bundeswehr dealt with the new revelations by describing the internal battle between the "traditionalists" interested in preserving a clean image of the Wehrmacht and the "reformers" who sought a clean break with the past. Despite being outnumbered, the reformers won, in part, because of the last twenty years of scholarship on Wehrmacht atrocities and the publicity surrounding the Wehrmacht exhibition. On May 8, 2000, the Bundeswehr renamed a military base after Anton Schmid, a lowly sergeant during the Second World War who was executed by the Wehrmacht for saving over 300 Lithuanian Jews from extermination. Previously, the base was named after a Wehrmacht general with no record of resistance against National Socialism. Wette is clearly heartened by this symbolic act, but it does not erase the fact that the Wehrmacht myth is still strong in Germany and even more persistent in the United States and Britain. Hopefully, Wette's *The Wehrmacht* will change this.

–Brian E. Crim

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