

Strategic Visions: Volume 22, Number I

Harrisville, David A. *The Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2021.

Following the collapse of the Nazi regime in 1945, a troubling narrative became entrenched in German public perception: the myth of the clean Wehrmacht. In comparison to the Hitler Youth and SS, soldiers of the Wehrmacht, so the myth went, were decent fellows and faithful Christians who made enormous sacrifices on the battlefield against an unworthy foe, only to be duped by a nefarious state that turned its own unwitting troops into victims. This whitewashed image of the Wehrmacht remained entrenched in the public imagination for decades as postwar Germans sought to reconcile their wartime pasts in the wake of Cold War tensions. In *The Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944*, David Harrisville explores the roles that the Wehrmacht's own soldiers played in constructing that myth during their time in uniform, which shifts both the time in which this myth emerged and the agents that created it.

Harrisville argues that Wehrmacht soldiers operated in a moral landscape with “a broad array of more traditional value systems” that informed their self-perceptions (9). Traditional nationalism, Christian principles, middle-class norms, and military virtues such as comradeship, duty, sacrifice, and military necessity all interacted with Nazi morality in complex and occasionally contradictory ways. Soldiers encountered traditional value systems in wartime rhetoric and orders that sometimes deviated from broader Nazi values but nevertheless demonstrated Wehrmacht soldiers' supposed moral superiority over their Soviet enemy. Harrisville divides the book into five thematic chapters that investigate the Wehrmacht's value systems and their use in rationalizing the force's actions and its soldiers' culpability. The Wehrmacht's moral

value systems leveraged martial values, bourgeois ethics, and military necessity, all infused with Nazi racial hierarchies, to allow soldiers to reinforce notions of decency and moral superiority over their enemy. For soldiers, orders calling for leniency and restraint, even though they clashed with Nazi rhetoric, offered supposed proof of their force's upholding of morality and rules of engagement. Soldiers wrote about German atrocities as morally justified necessities against flagrant Red Army breaches of international law. At the same time, Wehrmacht soldiers leveraged religion and humanity to paint their invasion of the Soviet Union as a welcomed crusade and a righteous liberation, with propaganda citing dramatic gestures to convey the Wehrmacht's position as good Christians fighting godless opponents and freeing a subjugated population from the burden of communism. The Wehrmacht's proper burial of its fallen initially offered proof of the force's moral worthiness, yet as retreat rendered these practices impossible, soldiers instead painted themselves as victims, a sentiment that would ultimately become a quintessential pillar of the postwar Wehrmacht myth. Taken together, Harrisville shows how Wehrmacht soldiers in the east used blended systems of morality to choose whatever rationalizations or narratives they personally found most compelling, which allowed them to convince themselves of the righteousness of their cause and justify the horrific means by which they sought to achieve it. By showing how soldiers reconciled their own morality, Harrisville convincingly argues that the “clean Wehrmacht” was not just a postwar reassessment of the Nazi past but instead a wartime narrative crafted by the ordinary soldiers themselves still fighting a losing war and seeking to reconcile their own positions and responsibility for the violent front around them. In this way, Harrisville's work reveals that the myth was the “sum of countless individual decisions to present audiences in the homeland with a positive

image of ‘their’ men and the organization to which they belonged” (13).

Harrisville’s decision to search for the roots of the Wehrmacht myth among its soldiers on the battlefield is perhaps his work’s most significant contribution, and this evaluation is made possible by his masterful use of a diverse pool of sources from several levels of the Wehrmacht. The core of his source base consists of 2,018 letters written by thirty Wehrmacht soldiers from different social, religious, geographic, and educational backgrounds who saw service in the east and faced many different wartime fates. For some, this sample size may appear limited, particularly due to its prioritization of the lower ranks of frontline units who predominantly served in the early phases of eastern operations. Nevertheless, with these sources, Harrisville convincingly reveals the ways in which soldiers portrayed their front experiences, while at the same time demonstrating how soldiers presented themselves and their tales to friends and family. These letters behave both as a source of self-exploration and a tool of self-defense for the soldiers writing them, and his attention to the responses and views offered by civilians reading them only adds to his work’s utility. Harrisville takes careful note of potential censorship, both self-imposed and officially enforced, in his sources and succeeds in navigating these potential pitfalls to offer a sound analysis. By drawing attention to the dialogue between soldiers on the eastern front and their families on the home front through their correspondence, Harrisville’s work also reveals how the negotiation of the Wehrmacht’s value system and popular image within these letters offered a site of greater integration of the warfront with the home front. To contextualize these letters within broader conceptions of service and violence, Harrisville also employs institutional documents at various levels of the Wehrmacht’s structure, including orders and regulations, propaganda materials, and reports

from the rear echelons, as well as home front documents. In so doing, his work treats Wehrmacht soldiers as moral agents that retained their own space to make choices within the constraints of an institution that demanded obedience and conformity. This effort blends top-down and bottom-up historiography to draw broader conclusions about the Wehrmacht’s nature in its own terms and the terms of its lowest ranks.

In sum, Harrisville’s work offers a significant contribution to a dynamic field by revealing the role of the Wehrmacht soldier in postwar memory and morality. Indeed, Harrisville’s book should prove a must-read for those looking to better understand Hitler’s war in the east as well as the long-term views of the men that fought it.

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