

# The Myths of the Wehrmacht

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Ever since its establishment as a conscript army in 1935 and long after its destruction ten years later, the Wehrmacht has been the source of an array of myths concerning its military capacities, its political role within the Third Reich, its involvement in the criminal policies of the Nazi regime and, not least, its ideological make-up. But how many of these stand up on examination? And what motivated the ordinary soldier in Hitler's armies in the Second World War?

Exaggerations regarding the military strength of the Wehrmacht were common as early as the Rhineland crisis of 1936, when the French generals claimed that only by fully mobilising their reserves could they expel what amounted to merely a few German battalions, representing an army still in its initial stages of reorganisation and far inferior to their own. The debacle of May-June 1940 greatly increased the tendency to exaggerate the technological and numerical might of the Wehrmacht as an excuse for a defeat caused mainly by the incompetence of the French commanders and their stubborn insistence on preparing for the kind of war they had won in 1914-18 rather than for the Blitzkrieg tactics already demonstrated in Poland. But while long after the war the generals tried to save their reputation by quoting highly inflated figures of German war machines and greatly underplaying the strength of their own forces, the fact is that on May 10th, 1940, the Wehrmacht sent into action 2,445 of its 3,505 available tanks, whereas France and its allies had a total of no less than 3,383 tanks. Moreover, only 725 German tanks were of the advanced Panzer III and IV models, and even they found it difficult to confront the excellent heavy French tanks. However, while German armour was grouped together in Panzer divisions, which at the crucial stage of the campaign were almost all concentrated on the same front, French armour was scattered among infantry units and never managed to launch more than a few weak, hesitant, and badly organised raids. Even in the case of aircraft, though the Luftwaffe had 4,020 operational machines (of which 1,559 were bombers), as opposed to 3,099 Allied airplanes (with only 708 bombers), it is clear that much better use could have been made of the available machines had they too not been scattered along the whole front, badly commanded, and extremely hesitantly used. The fact that the French air force had more planes on the ground at the end of the fighting than on the day of the attack testifies to its potential of inflicting much greater damage on the enemy than it had.

The Red Army too, though better supplied with modern armaments than the Wehrmacht, explained its early catastrophic setbacks by reference to the Germans' alleged technological superiority rather than to its own inability to learn from others' errors. It should be noted that on June 22nd, 1941, the Wehrmacht deployed 3,648 tanks out of a total stock of 5,694, and of those used only 444 were of the advanced Panzer IV model. The Red Army, on the other hand, had concentrated no less than 15,000 tanks in the West out of a total of 24,000, and if much of this vast arsenal was obsolete, 1,861 were T-34 and heavy KV tanks, significantly superior to anything the Germans had at the time.

Similarly, while the Luftwaffe sent to the East only 2,510 aircraft, the Soviets had up to 9,000, although again most of them were obsolete. But even though the Germans deployed their forces much more effectively than the Russians, it must be stressed that what actually saved the Soviet Union during the first phases of 'Barbarossa' was precisely the fact that with its relatively limited materiel the Wehrmacht could not carry out a successful Blitzkrieg campaign over the huge spaces of Western Russia as it had done on the far more restricted battlefields of Flanders. And when the Russians, British, and Americans finally adapted to modern warfare, while at the same time bringing to bear their vastly superior material and manpower resources, the fate of Germany was sealed. By the latter stages of the war, what allowed the Wehrmacht to hold on for so long was neither the quality and quantity of its armaments, nor the clever tactics of its commanders, but rather the tenacity and determination of its troops.

Another myth that gained much popularity during the Third Reich and acquired new adherents both in Germany and abroad following the defeat, concerned the domestic political role of the Wehrmacht. Encouraged after the War by former German generals, and allegedly given concrete proof by the putsch attempt of July 1944, the argument ran

that the German officer corps had opposed the Nazi regime and that the army had served as a 'haven' from the more criminal aspects of Hitler's rule. Indeed, although in the last two decades a number of major scholarly studies have convincingly demonstrated that the Wehrmacht's leadership had actively and willingly participated in the process of Gleichschaltung, that is, in the coordination of the army into the Nazi state, this myth has not yet evaporated, and each new revelation of the Nazification of the Wehrmacht is greeted with either anger or puzzlement. To be sure, there were some officers in the army who came to oppose Hitler; but even in their case, and they constituted a tiny minority within the officer corps, resistance came only with the realisation that Hitler was leading Germany towards catastrophe. Thus, for instance, a major figure among the conspirators of 1944, General Ludwig Beck, had in fact, forged the instrument which made Hitler's conquests possible in his capacity as the army's Chief-of-Staff during the crucial period of its establishment. Moreover, Beck was very much in favour of German expansionism; it was on the choice of the most opportune political and military circumstances that he differed from Hitler, not on the essence of regaining German supremacy.

As some scholars have shown, particularly after the Wehrmacht's initial victories, the vast majority of senior German officers supported Hitler's goal of conquest and subjugation, and were driven by political concepts and racial prejudices not essentially different from those propagated by the Nazis. This was of course especially evident during the campaign against the Soviet Union, which was seen both by the regime and by its soldiers as a struggle for 'living space' conducted against a racially inferior people led by a diabolical clique of 'Judeo-Bolsheviks'.

This myth of the Wehrmacht as a 'haven' from the regime was extended to include not merely the attitudes of the generals, but also the actions of the troops, that is the reality of the army's conduct in war and occupation. Thus the army was portrayed both as immune to Nazi ideological influences, and as a professional organisation preoccupied with fulfilling its military duties and wholly innocent of the crimes committed by other Nazi agencies 'behind its back'. The longevity of this image can be seen even in the recent debates surrounding former US President Reagan's speech in the German military cemetery in Bitburg, where he presented the fallen soldiers of the army and the Waffen-SS as victims of the regime rather than as its instruments. Similarly, in the German historians' controversy, the so-called revisionists repeated the old claim that the Wehrmacht had in fact saved the West from the onslaught of the 'Asiatic hordes' and from Bolshevik domination.

The survival, indeed the growing popularity of such distortions is all the more striking in view of the meticulous work done by German (and foreign) scholars which demonstrated that especially with the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22nd, 1941, the Wehrmacht had not only paved the way for the regime's murder organisations, but had issued its own troops with a complex of what has been called 'criminal orders' which turned the Russian campaign into a war of murder and destruction on an unprecedented scale. The 'Barbarossa' decree, as the order for the attack on Soviet Russia was called, demanded the execution on the spot of all political commissars in the Red Army; curtailed martial law as regards the rights reserved for occupied populations; called for the elimination of all partisans, political activists, and Jews; and ordered the close collaboration of army units with the Einsatzgruppen, the extermination squads of the SS and SD. Moreover, the army was ordered both to 'live off the land', which meant that it supplied its needs by extensive plunder of the impoverished Russian population, and to assist in the ruthless exploitation of the occupied lands in favour of the German population in the rear.

Thus one cannot avoid the conclusion that the Wehrmacht played a crucial role in making possible the occupation, exploitation, and devastation by Nazi Germany of vast tracts of territory in the East, as well as in the implementation of the 'Final Solution'. This in turn was the direct result of the army's willingness wholly to embrace Hitler's view of the war in the East not as one to be fought according to the traditional rules of warfare, but as a Weltanschauungs and Vernichtungskrieg, an ideological war of total destruction in which there would be 'no comrades in arms' and where none of the enemy must be spared. Consequently, to quote one important example, it has been shown that of about 5,700,000 Soviet prisoners of war taken by the Wehrmacht, no less than 3,300,000 died in captivity, of whom some 600,000 were shot out of hand and the rest treated in a manner which brought about their death by starvation, exposure, disease and fatigue. The myth of the 'purely professional' soldiers had nothing to do with reality. As far as their actions were concerned, the men of the Wehrmacht were the willing and efficient instruments of the Nazi

regime. Indeed, even during the last two years of the war, when under growing Soviet pressure the army retreated from the East, the soldiers took care to carry out a ruthless 'scorched earth' policy which ensured that the liberated areas would suffer for many years after the war from extreme hardship.

If in Germany, and in some circles in the West, the myth of the 'professional' Wehrmacht was sustained long after the war, those most viciously persecuted by the Nazis as the Reich's political and 'biological' enemies by and large identified the German soldier with Hitler's regime. From their point of view, after all, with the army came the occupation and all its horrors. The question which still needs to be answered, however, is how did the German soldier conceive of himself, what were the ideals and concepts that motivated him, and what sort of memory have the surviving veterans retained from the war and disseminated in post-war German society?

The soldiers and junior officers who formed the bulk of the Wehrmacht's combat troops came to the army after years of extensive ideological preparation in a Nazified school system and particularly in the Hitler Youth, whose impact on the mentality of German youngsters in the 1930s cannot be overestimated. As Gustav Kopcke, a former soldier who had grown up in a working-class area said during an interview in the early 1980s:

*Our workers' suburb and the HJ [Hitler Youth] were in no way contradictory... you shouldn't see it as if we young lads had to decide for something or against something; there was nothing else... and whoever wanted to become something belonged to it... The HJ uniform was something positive in our childhood.*

Not surprisingly, when explaining why he had later on volunteered to a Waffen-SS division, he added: 'I was raised then, in the National Socialist time, and had seen the world just as they had shown it to us'.

Once in the army, these young men were exposed to a massive propaganda and indoctrination campaign ranging from theoretical ideological sessions, to more subtle forms of persuasion by means of newspapers and army information sheets widely distributed among combat units, radio programmes directed at the soldiers who were given large numbers of receivers, orders of the day read out to the troops by their commanders, numerous 'educational' brochures on such subjects as history and geography, books collected in unit libraries, talks by visiting lecturers, and so forth.

Naturally, this indoctrination was most effective when it exploited already existing prejudices and anxieties, particularly in the case of the Jews, the Russians, and Bolshevism. What can hardly be doubted is that by the time the Wehrmacht marched into the Soviet Union, its troops were prepared to wage a campaign of the utmost ruthlessness and brutality against what they perceived to be a demonic enemy even before their first encounter with the Russians. Indeed, it is a measure of the efficacy of their indoctrination that when they did meet the enemy in the East, whether it was a Red Army soldier, a commissar, a Russian woman, or a Jew, they invariably perceived them as a living confirmation of their prejudices, that is as the embodiment of those diabolical qualities they had been taught respect. Thus rather than accepting the myth of the Wehrmacht as an army which had remained aloof from ideological contamination, we should actually speak of the myth of the enemy which permeated the troops and powerfully motivated them on the battlefield. Here was indeed an explosive combination of hatred and fear, a sense that the Germans were fighting on the side of God, humanity, and justice, against an enemy representing Satan, subhumanity, and evil. Note, for instance, the following letter written by a soldier from the Eastern Front in July 1941:

*The German people owes a great debt to our Fuhrer, for had these beasts, who are our enemies here, come to Germany, such murders would have taken place that the world has never seen before... What we have seen, no newspaper can describe. It borders on the unbelievable, even the Middle Ages do not compare with what has occurred here. And when one reads the 'Sturmer' and*

*looks at the pictures, that is only a weak illustration of what we see here and the crimes committed here by the Jews. Believe me, even the most sensational newspaper reports are only a fraction of what is happening here...*

The myth of the Wehrmacht as a 'purely' professional army, accepted by so many military historians and soldiers in the West, had to do not only with ignorance, but also with the fact that in the West the Wehrmacht did behave differently, especially in the fighting of 1940. To be sure, in the latter stages of the war, and not least due to the fact that many soldiers fighting in France in 1944 had already served in Russia, its conduct became increasingly criminal. Nevertheless, the Eastern Front, where the lion's share of the Wehrmacht fought for most of the war, and where the back of the German army was broken, remained an essentially different experience.

This was so first and foremost due to Hitler's concept of the war in the East as a struggle for Lebensraum (living space) with a diabolical enemy, a notion transmitted to the troops by means of both orders and indoctrination, and widely accepted since it reflected both popular prejudices against Jews and Russians, and the deep and highly prevalent anxiety about Communism. The primitive conditions in which much of the Russian population was living, the cultural and linguistic gap, perceived as much greater than that separating Germany from the nations of Western Europe, all combined to create a perception of the enemy in the East as an Untermensch (subhuman). Add to this the ferocity of Russian resistance and the tremendous hardships of fighting in the East, and one comes closer to an understanding of the barbarous war conducted by Germany in the Soviet Union.

The consequent distorted perception of reality by the individual soldier against all available evidence is nevertheless quite striking. The extent to which the Wehrmacht's troops perceived the atrocities they themselves or their comrades had perpetrated as evidence of the enemy's inhumanity is a painful reminder of the manner in which people's minds can be moulded so as not only to make them carry out criminal actions, but also to glorify them as noble deeds aimed at eliminating evil. Thus, for instance, Private Fred Fallnbigl wrote from the front in mid July 1941:

*Now I know what war really means. But I also know that we had been forced into the war against the Soviet Union. For God have mercy on us, had we waited, or had these beasts come to us. For them even the most horrible death is still too good. I am glad that I can be here to put an end to this genocidal system.*

A lance-corporal writing in early August maintained that 'to those in the homeland we soldiers can only say that he [Hitler] has saved Germany and thereby the whole of Europe from the Red Army by his decision. The battle is hard', he admitted, 'but we know what we are fighting for, and with confidence in the Fuhrer we will achieve victory'. And later that month another soldier wrote from Russia:

*Precisely now one recognises perfectly what would have happened to our wives and children had these Russian hordes... succeeded in penetrating into our Fatherland. I have had the opportunity here to... observe these uncultivated, multi-raced men. Thank God they have been thwarted from plundering and pillaging our homeland.*

These sentiments were reiterated by numerous other soldiers. Private Kurt Christmann exclaimed at the time:

*What would have happened to cultural Europe, had these sons of the Steppe, poisoned and drunk*

*with a destructive poison, these incited subhumans, invaded our beautiful Germany.' Endlessly we thank our Fuhrer, with love and loyalty, the saviour and historical figure.*

And in September Lance Corporal O. Rentzch similarly asserted:

*It is good to know that this confrontation has already come. If otherwise those hordes had invaded our land, that would have... made for great bloodshed. No, now we want to shoulder ourselves all endeavours, in order to eradicate this universal plague.*

Interestingly, while during the initial phase of the campaign in the East the dehumanised image of the enemy legitimised the barbarous policies of the Wehrmacht for the individual soldiers, by the time the Germany army was retreating and the Reich faced possible occupation by the Red Army, the same diabolical picture of the enemy was used to justify opposition to him at all cost. Indeed, vivid memories of atrocities committed by the Wehrmacht were now employed to threaten the troops with what they could expect of the Russians if they ever managed to conquer the German homeland. Fear of vengeance and knowledge of the pain and suffering of being occupied by a foreign army now combined to intensify German resistance. Note the following letter by a Wehrmacht captain written in mid-February 1943:

*May God allow the German people to find now the peace of mind and strength which would make it into the instrument needed by the Fuhrer to protect the West from ruin, for what the Asiatic hordes will not destroy, will be annihilated by Jewish hatred and revenge. The belief at the front is unshakable, and we all hope that, as Goring has said, with the rising sun the fortunes of war will again return to our side.*

And in September 1944 one lieutenant wrote:

*Nothing may exist which could make us weak. Any German defeat would spell a total... destruction of all Germans... We are the last bastion, with us stands and falls everything which has been created by German blood over the centuries.*

Myths do not disappear quickly, at least not as long as the cause of their growth is still present. The French still find it difficult to concede that the Wehrmacht was in fact not particularly superior technologically, that the training of its men was not significantly better, that the German command had committed some serious errors, and that the main military cause of the debacle was the blunders, not to say the stupidity, of their own generals. The Russians have similarly clung to the myth of a technologically superior Wehrmacht halted only by the courage and self-sacrifice of determined Soviet patriots (or Communists), and have refused for long to admit that in point of fact they had made exceptionally bad use of their own excellent equipment.

The Germans too prefer to remember what they perceive as their self-sacrificial, hopeless attempts to halt the Red Army from entering the homeland during the last months of the war, rather than linger on the memory of their years of conquest and subjugation of others. What the popular collective memory of Germans is reluctant to concede is both that they ended up defending themselves against a 'world of enemies' only because they had first tried to take over the world, and, even more importantly, that to the very end they were not fighting merely for the survival of Germany, but very much also for the continued existence of the Third Reich and all that it stood for, including the

death camps that kept functioning at full steam as long as the troops hung on to their positions.

Indeed, what has often been forgotten in post-war Germany is that the stated purpose of the Reich's enemies was not the destruction of Germany, as Nazi propaganda had convinced much of the population and the majority of the soldiers, but the eradication of the Hitler regime. The fact that Germany was allowed to survive, and that merely five years after the invasion of the Soviet Union it has been reunified and is already emerging as the most powerful nation in Europe, demonstrates that contrary to the claims of recent revisionist historians in the Federal Republic, the aims of the Allies were inherently different from those of the Third Reich.

Nevertheless, the myth of the Wehrmacht as the protector of German existence, as the embodiment of higher German values against Nazi distortion., and, very much so, as the bulwark of Western civilisation against the 'Mongol flood' and Communism, is still alive, even to the point of portraying its soldiers as victims of the regime along with the millions persecuted and murdered by the Nazis with the active assistance of the army. The persistence of this myth is a clear sign of the continuing need in contemporary Germany to find positive elements in a dark, recent past. As such it is part and parcel of the German search for a new national identity. Whether its ultimate demise will signify a true 'coming to terms' with the past, or merely growing indifference to it, remains to be seen.

### **Further Reading:**

A. Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-45*, 2nd ed. (Macmillan, 1981); W. Deist. *The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament* (Macmillan, 1981); J. Forster, 'New Wine in Old Skins? The Wehrmacht and the War of "Weltanschauungen", 1941', in W. Deist (ed.), *the German Military in the Age of Total War* (Berg Books, 1985); G. Hirschfeld (ed.), *The Policies of Genocide. Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (London/Boston/Sydney, 1986); K.-J. Muller, *The Army, Politics and Society in Germany, 1933-45* (St. Martin's Press, 1987); R.J. O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933-39* (Macmillan, 1966).