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Daniel Uziel, *The Propaganda Warriors: The Wehrmacht and the Consolidation of the German Home Front*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. Pp. 463. ISBN 978-3-03911-532-7.

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Propaganda Warriors argues that the Wehrmacht entered World War II with a sophisticated theoretical understanding of the role of propaganda in sustaining a national war effort. It prepared for war by creating Propaganda Companies (PKs) which, though under military command through the Wehrmachtpropaganda (WPr), worked hand in glove with Josef Goebbels' civilian Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda (RMVP). The propaganda produced by the armed forces played a vital role throughout the war. Moreover, whatever the claims of Wehrmacht apologists, the material disseminated by Propaganda Companies took the same racist tone as that produced by civilian agencies; no surprise, given their intimate relationship with the RMVP. PK propaganda continued after the war, when veteran propaganda warriors managed to conceal their close identification with the National Socialist vision. Indeed, such was the PKs' success in shaping the image of the Wehrmacht after 1945 that, whatever the military outcome of the conflict, German propaganda warriors can be said to have won their war.

If successful, such a book would reaffirm the Wehrmacht's complicity in every noxious aspect of Adolf Hitler's state, a point that cannot be made too often. If the claims of the subtitle were fulfilled, *Propaganda Warriors* would also contribute to our understanding of the political structure of wartime Germany. However, while Uziel is surely correct to insist that the PKs participated in the political as well as the military side of the German war effort, he does not present enough material to provide a true study of civil-military relations, let alone an examination of the home front.

Despite its promising argument, the book is far less interesting than advertised. Its overall tedium is exacerbated by jarringly poor writing¹ and even more jarring praise for the skill of Wehrmacht propagandists. A clinical, detached description of exemplary German propaganda coups would be unexceptionable, but the author answers the question "Was it effective?" with a grammatically awkward but enthusiastic "and how" (10).

Of course, Uziel, a historian at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Israel is no apologist for National Socialism. His apparent enthusiasm for German wartime propaganda and the men who produced it presumably reflects a tone-deaf effort to warn readers of the enemy's pernicious skills.

¹ Uziel, who is not writing in his native language, has not been well-served by his proofreaders. The text is disfigured by misspellings (including "Ludendorf" throughout), colloquialisms ("better intro"), bizarre word choices ("the ground became rife"), and grammatical errors (examples from 195-96).

The problematically positive language is rendered stranger by the dearth of evidence for Germany's alleged sophistication in the area of propaganda. Uziel dubs a "theoretician" the author of any book extolling the value of propaganda in warfare. In his view, a man capable of conceiving of the years 1914–18 as fifteen distinct "psychological-historical" periods is intelligent rather than mad (39–40). It is naïve to see Erich Ludendorff's claims about the role of British propaganda in Germany's collapse in 1918 as a shrewd analysis of the nature of modern war rather than a self-promoting effort to feed the *Dolchstoß* legend (36–37). Most of the so-called "theories" are platitudes about the importance of rallying popular will or lists of desirable media; their probable purpose was to create party and government jobs for aspiring propagandists. That a five-sentence PK document of 1939 offered "a summary of all of the theoretical writing done between the wars about the lessons to be learned from WWI regarding propaganda" suggests the poverty of the whole theoretical project (109).²

The author's admiration for his subject would be less surprising if he offered adequate support for his claims that German propaganda actually worked. Few will accept as uncritically as Uziel does that mass desertion would have dissolved the Red Army had a Soviet artillery shell not destroyed "a large supply of giant wooden spoons" before they could be erected in view of Soviet lines to tout the superiority of German logistics (375).

In fact, most of the book details organization rather than methods or product. Where such information could be useful, as in demonstrating that the close relationship between the propaganda troops and the RMVP provided "a major opening into the Wehrmacht for a civilian ministry and for the Nazi party," the key argument is buried under minutiae about structural changes and personnel reassignments. Uziel rarely puts details in context. Why, for example, say that the problem of clothing the civilian members of the propaganda companies "remained seemingly insoluble" even while noting that it was solved by issuing unadorned infantry uniforms? More curiously, what lay behind the official criticism of military reporters during occupation of the Sudetenland for "a tendency to nag" (94)? Whole pages of meaningless details, obscured by constantly changing abbreviations, show Uziel's inability to select and manage his considerable archival material.

Uziel's ill-advised decision to tell two parallel stories in sequence, first the rise and fall of the propaganda companies and then the history of the propaganda they produced, means that one learns that the PKs failed before learning what they actually produced. This makes it difficult to evaluate his explanation that the propaganda troops were disbanded near the end of the war because the German people stopped believing what they were told (174–76). The implication that propaganda works only when the product involves good news makes one wonder exactly how much propaganda actually contributed to the war effort. Goebbels, at any rate, found control of propaganda troops worth fighting over in the winter of 1944/5, and his snippy comments about the head of WPr provide an interesting taste of the bureaucratic language of National Socialism (178–79).

A chapter ostensibly devoted to the relationship between the propaganda companies and the RMVP turns out to feature yet another review of the repeated reorganizations of the propaganda troops. One is then annoyed to be told that the real question "is not what caused the power struggles between WPr and the RMVP, but how they affected the conduct

² As the assertion that "the first official public announcement in the history of Germany was the announcement made by the Governor of Berlin on October 17th 1806" (26) hints at a suspect understanding of German history.

of Wehrmacht propaganda.” The answer—“as the wartime functionality of this system proved, their effect was minimal, and, as concerns the daily work in the local and lower levels, no effect at all can be traced” (206).

To demonstrate the irrelevance of intra-agency conflicts to the propaganda effort at the local level, Uziel branches out at the end of this chapter to descriptions of lecture tours and displays, material one would expect to find in the subsequent chapter on “War Propaganda.” We are told, for example, that in the winter of 1942/3 “thirteen highly decorated ... soldiers” were diverted from the front to deliver lectures to civilians, of which there were a great many and those well received. Instead of explaining what was said and why it worked, Uziel only quotes an official document’s instruction that “the aim of the lecture activity is to grasp the wide masses and to inspire them.” There is no indication of how pep talks by thirteen men, even men sporting the Ritterkreuze, counterbalanced the depressing news from Stalingrad (233–34, and n. 177).

Also oddly placed in this chapter on institutional collaboration is a brief description of the “whispering campaign,” the use of Wehrmacht soldiers to spread useful rumors among the civilian population (221–25). Though it was tried on a large scale only in February and March 1945, Uziel confidently claims that “it was only the speedy conquest of Germany by the Allies that prevented the rumor-spreading system from becoming a primary tool of German propaganda” (225). On the other hand, without the conquest of Germany, the whispering would have been unnecessary. Once again, Uziel’s enthusiasm for his subject carries him away. If, as he notes later, the *Flüsterpropaganda* campaign really was the high point of Germany interagency cooperation, that in itself is a damning indicator of German organizational effectiveness (241).

It is irritating to leave the discussion of the *Flüsterpropaganda* without learning what rumors were supposed to be passed along, but hope is aroused in the beginning of the next chapter, on the contents of the Wehrmacht propaganda. The intent here is to demonstrate that the armed forces were yet another vehicle for delivering the regime’s message. Before exploring content, however, Uziel surveys the means by which propaganda was distributed; here, for example, we learn that the weekly newsreels produced by the RMVP contained live combat footage absent from comparable U.S. presentations. Lacking, however, are specific examples of content and any discussion of why live footage presented in German cinemas elicited a positive response on the home front.

Finally, Uziel is ready to tell us what kind of propaganda was dispatched from Poland. The brief answer is military reporting—“setting everything else aside” and offering no undue optimism (254). By the end of the page, Uziel has returned to counting the number of Army PKs in Poland and describing how their reports were transmitted back to Germany. That the PKs were instructed to provide “proof of Polish atrocities against ethnic Germans” receives two sentences without any elaboration as to how this fraud was accomplished (257), though one also learns that the PKs provided some footage for the Reich’s anti-Semitic films (260). It would be interesting to see an example of the requested reports of “the barbarity of the French” (265). And what exactly do the “extraordinary PK reports” (358) in the RMVP archives contain?

Wehrmacht propaganda units witnessed a wide range of atrocities, though Uziel describes their films as intended for “pure documentary purposes” rather than propaganda

(288). Regrettably, we know neither who sent the PKs to the execution sites nor with what intent, but Uziel does provide chilling descriptions of the home front's response to films of Russian Jews (289). Ironically, an event he identifies as exemplifying "mainstream" official news coverage—the climbing of Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus by German Alpine troops—in fact aroused Hitler to fury at the wasteful effort (292).³

The discussion of official treatment of the Stalingrad disaster is enlightening and makes one wonder whether enough evidence exists for a thorough case study of this challenge to the regime's propagandists. Stalingrad led to Goebbels' proclamation of "total war," which Uziel sees as a Pyrrhic victory for the army's propaganda theorists. Their interwar vision of "total war" came true, but only when the civilians of the RMVP took over the show (303–4). Whether or not "total war" is a useful concept for explaining German military strategy, the major outcome of Goebbels' proclamation seems to have been yet another round of re-organization.

To judge the effectiveness of propaganda requires access to information about public opinion. Uziel uses "public mood reports" where available, but he does not offer enough information to prove we know what the German people actually thought. Absent such proof, one cannot assess Uziel's description of certain bits of propaganda as "popular" (313). Whose morale, for example, was raised by the failure of the July 20 plot (323)?

Uziel's arguments for the effectiveness of the demobilized propaganda warriors in shaping Germany's post-war collective memory are vitiated by unclear language. He admits that the propaganda troops had no post-war organization, that "there was no official or semi-official propaganda regarding the Wehrmacht," and that "clear-cut evidence of a well organized conspiracy" is lacking (341). Nonetheless, the activities of the veterans constituted an "image-building mechanism, ... a cultural and mental phenomenon" (341). But just what does this mean?

The story of the PKs veterans' post-war efforts to rehabilitate the Wehrmacht is interesting, but how much credence should be given to men who were, after all, both professional propagandists and determined self-promoters?

Uziel concludes with minatory observations about the continuing influence of the propaganda troops, whose films, he warns, continue to provide the German people with their main visual record of World War II. The implications of that thought-provoking observation demand examination based on far more information than that provided here. In *The Propaganda Warriors*, Uziel hoped to improve on a first-hand account of the propaganda troops that was "basically a non-critical technical and organizational history" which offered "almost no mention of the content or character of the Wehrmacht propaganda" (391). The result is disappointing.

³ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–45: Nemesis* (NY: Norton, 2000) 530.