



2013-039

Stephen G. Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2011. Pp. xxiv, 640. 978-0-8131-3416-1.

Review by Adam R. Seipp, Texas A&M University (aseipp@tamu.edu).

In a scene in Heinrich Böll's postwar novel *A Soldier's Legacy*,¹ a company of German soldiers arrives at a nameless train station in Russia, fresh from years of fighting nothing more than boredom on the Normandy coast. "The farther we were hauled into this dark land," the narrator recalls, "the clearer it became that nothing we encountered here would be comparable to the kind of war we had been experiencing in France. Here anything wearing a grey uniform was filled with a frightening urge to get as far to the rear as possible." Böll, himself a wounded veteran of World War II, reminds us that it was here, in the East, that the army of the Third Reich suffered a staggering strategic, logistical, and moral collapse. This is the story that Stephen Fritz (East Tennessee State Univ.) tells, with great success, in his new book *Ostkrieg*.²

For specialists and an increasing percentage of the historically-informed public, there has for some time been a consensus that World War II in Europe was largely won, lost, and endured in the East. Thanks to the work of a generation of post-1989 German and Soviet historians, we have a much more sophisticated understanding of the forces that opposed each other across the vast Eastern Front and of the relationship between the war, German and Soviet population policy, and the horror of the Holocaust.

By its author's own admission, the book is a synthesis of the best contemporary scholarship; it features no new archival findings or bold interpretations of the war. Fritz is not particularly interested in the Soviet side of the conflict, though he certainly engages with a great deal of scholarship on the subject. Instead, this is a careful, elegantly argued study of Hitler's war in its operational, strategic, political, and social settings. It is weighted toward the history of military operations—German forces cross the Soviet border by page 80 of the 500-page main text—but without disregarding the larger, often horrific context of the *Ostkrieg*.

Fritz skillfully lays out the conditions under which the German military made strategic decisions, a topic too often bypassed in favor of more polemical efforts to explain these murderous and ultimately self-destructive choices. Victory in Western Europe and the early successes of the Barbarossa offensive masked profound material weaknesses, exacerbated by the need to fight on several fronts at once and an initial failure to take seriously the growing strength of Soviet forces. If the Germans ever had a chance of success, it was fleeting, since they were so poorly prepared to achieve victory before their limitations began to tell.

Fritz analyzes the narrowing range of options available to German war planners at each step along their way to defeat in 1945. His discussion of Operation Blau (1942), for example, highlights the utter failure of the high command to devise a plan that could resolve worsening manpower and logistical predicaments without recourse to the fantastical thinking that characterized the Nazi regime and its leader.

Adolf Hitler naturally looms large in any attempt to understand Germany's war. Fritz is exceptionally judicious in his assessment of the Nazi leader, stressing his virulent racism and anti-Semitism without turning him into a raving irrational fanatic. For him, Hitler's thinking was "a curious mixture of clear-sighted realism and gross self-delusion, of a cogent understanding of Germany's predicament and little sense of its limitations" (401). This mirrors the broader argument of the book. For instance, Fritz writes of the planning for a new offensive in 1942 that "even as Nazi planners worked furiously to realize the original economic

1. Written in 1948, but not published till 1982.

2. Born of frustration "with trying to find acceptable books for my World War II classes to read" (xxi). Fortunate students! Fritz has also published two other highly regarded works: *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1995), and, on the fierce seesaw struggle for Franconia during the Allied invasion of Germany, *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2004).

and racial goals associated with *Lebensraum*, ... the operational war plans for 1942 revolved around the necessity of securing oil resources, without which the grand Nazi schemes would be mere chimeras” (236).

Hitler’s generals, in turn, were not just cowardly snivelers or venal careerists, though there were plenty of both. They strove to adapt to their mercurial commander’s strategic insights (and blunders). Many shared Hitler’s fixation on First World War experiences and his fear of the collapse of home front morale, which they blamed for Germany’s defeat in 1918. This mindset, combined with visceral anti-communism and anti-Semitism, helps us account for the vicious nature of the Wehrmacht leadership’s conduct of the war in the East.

Fritz also very effectively tells the parallel story of German racial policy in Eastern Europe. As he repeatedly and appropriately reminds readers, the war against the Soviet Union and the war for racial empire were intimately linked parts of Nazi policy making. The murder of Europe’s Jews and the projected extermination of every Jew on earth were just one aspect of a vast dystopian vision of demographic revolution. The planning and execution of this racial re-ordering depended on the military situation. Fritz carefully demonstrates the convergence of events at the front and the radicalization of racial policy. In summer 1942, for example, the success of the Reich’s new offensive, its increasing ability to stabilize agricultural and industrial production through forced labor, and its fear of domestic food shortages fostered a shift in the regime’s Jewish policy: “If the Nazis were intent on a New Order in the East, the first step in creating it would be the Final Solution to the Jewish Problem” (257).

Fritz has enviable gifts as a writer. Even for those impatient with the conventions of operational history, he makes the military history of the conflict understandable yet not overwhelming. His description of Gen. Erich von Manstein’s 1942 Crimean campaign (241–47) is a model of clarity and sprightly prose, weaving the story of that terrible battle into the broader narrative of the war. (The maps here and throughout are exceptionally useful and well-matched with the text.)

As in any book of this size and scope, some topics get short shrift. Fritz, in too great a hurry to get to June 1941, neglects the critical and delicate diplomacy that brought Germany’s East-Central European allies into the war against the Soviets. As a result, he replicates one of the great blind spots in the literature, as the Romanians and Hungarians appear only long enough to be steamrolled by the Red Army and then vanish. We still need a book that treats the war in the East as the work of a coalition whose members sometimes had remarkably divergent expectations and ambitions.

For all the importance that Fritz rightly places on Hitler’s understanding of the German defeat in World War I, that conflict also shaped the mistaken views of many others, even three decades later. The relatively mild German occupation of Russian Poland during the First World War made some East European Jews less likely to flee in 1941. On the other side of the border, German residents of East Prussia, remembering that the brief Russian invasion of 1914 had been rapidly thrown back, assumed that history would repeat itself when Soviet troops arrived in early 1945.

A more serious shortcoming is the less complete interweaving of the operational and demographic histories of the war in the second half of the book. There is virtually nothing about collaboration among civilians or the complex and problematic relationship between the German occupiers and members of nationalist movements in the Soviet Union, who functioned sometimes as allies and sometimes as bitter enemies of Hitler’s empire.

Nonetheless, *Ostkrieg* is an engagingly written, broadly useful overview of the war. I recommend it not only to those teaching and studying World War II, but to anyone interested in the conflict and the long shadow it has cast over the past seven decades.