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Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. 314. ISBN 978-0-674-72550-8.

Review by Jeff Rutherford, Wheeling Jesuit University (jrutherford@wju.edu).

The German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 encompassed far more than simple military operations; Adolf Hitler declared it a “war of annihilation,” designed to destroy the USSR and decimate its population, in particular Soviet Jewry. In the immediate postwar period, the German Army distanced itself from Nazi genocidal practices, particularly the Holocaust. Beginning in the late 1970s, however, historians began chipping away at the notion of a “clean Wehrmacht.” With his new monograph, *Marching into Darkness*, Waitman Wade Beorn (Univ. of Nebraska–Omaha) contributes to this recent scholarship by detailing the German army’s active involvement in murdering Soviet Jews, with the intent “to reconstruct the daily lives and decisions of Wehrmacht units complicit in mass killing” (9).

By “complicit,” Beorn means the Wehrmacht was guilty of “the knowing furtherance of the Nazi genocidal project and/or ... [the] attempt to personally benefit from it” (4). To explore the attitudes and motivations of German soldiers, he uses both official Wehrmacht archival records and, more importantly, the testimonies given by former soldiers during postwar trials. Based on the analysis of this evidence, he offers three principal arguments:

First, unit cultures and leadership played a vital role in influencing both participation and nonparticipation of German soldiers and units. Units led by particularly brutal men became particularly brutal.... Second, almost from the beginning, a Jew-Bolshevik-partisan calculus was used to justify participation within the Wehrmacht in the murder of the Jews.... Lastly, ... extended contact with the Nazi genocidal project led to increased and deeper participation in the Holocaust. (7)

While the author provides persuasive evidence to support all three contentions, each has already appeared in previous literature on the subject.

Beorn presents five case studies from Army Group Center’s occupation of Belarus in 1941. The first examines the behavior of the 354th Infantry Regiment (IR), initially mobilized as part of the 213th Infantry Division (ID), a rear-area occupation unit, and then transferred to the 286th Security Division during its deployment to Krupki in late September. When elements of Einsatzkommando 8 arrived in Krupki, its commander ordered the 354th to assist SS men in murdering Jews. On 18 September, men from the regiment’s 10th and 12th companies participated in the *Aktion* against the village’s Jews. Not only did Wehrmacht soldiers secure the execution site, but a group of some twenty volunteers led by a junior officer dragged Jews from their homes prior to the shooting. Beorn states that soldiers killed Jews during the massacre, both as guards firing on escapees and as executioners at the edge of mass burial pits: “determining the nature of this participation in the actual killing is difficult, as very few former soldiers are willing to discuss such behavior. What is clear from the documents is that some men *did* shoot” (76). Beorn notes that the detachment’s small complement of men could not have murdered the some nine hundred Jews in Krupki without the army’s support, making it clear that members of the 354th IR joined in the killing.

The second case study concerns a conference on dealing with partisans held in Mogilev. Here Beorn clarifies the link between anti-partisan actions and the Holocaust. Summoned by the commander in chief of Army Group Center’s rear area, the meeting’s participants were overwhelmingly army men, mostly from the three security divisions operating in Belarus. Beorn argues that this “conference led directly to participation by the Wehrmacht in the murder of Jews” and that “the nature of the partisan threat was, in fact, intentionally mobilized to provide useful ideological, psychological, and tactical expedients with which to bring the substantial manpower of the Wehrmacht to bear against the Jews” (103). In this respect, the meeting “is evidence of an intentional effort to include the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust at its most basic level” (93). Cit-

ing the subsequent dramatic increases in the numbers of those killed by the 286th and 354th Security Divisions, Beorn deduces that the meeting directly led to more murderous policies by units in Army Group Center's rear area. By framing the murder of Jews within the context of partisan activities, the Wehrmacht legitimized the murder of "ideological enemies" in the occupied territories.

Beorn's third case study relates to the participation the 691st IR in the murder of Jews in the village of Krucha. The actions of the various companies within the regiment also illustrate the importance of leadership at the local level. The 3rd Company's first sergeant "took over the organization and execution of killings in Krucha and exercised considerable initiative" (122). In contrast, the 1st Company's commander refused to allow his troops to participate in the massacre. Beorn asks why other officers—those who were neither violent anti-Semites nor adamantly opposed to the *Aktion*—took part in killing some 150 Soviet Jews. His analysis links the attendance of regimental officers at the Mogilev conference with the Krucha shootings. According to the postwar testimony of one company commander, "the Regimental commander and an officer from each battalion took part.... [T]he subject of the training was primarily: Jews and partisans" (127). When these officers returned to their regiments, they encouraged their men to equate Jews with partisans: "Jews were the enemy or, at the very least, supported the enemy, and their removal made things easier and safer for the Wehrmacht.... [The] mass killing conclusively illustrates dissemination of the Jewish-Bolshevik-partisan calculus as formulated in Mogilev, from the highest level to the lowest. It is a rare example of a *direct causal link* between such exhortations to increased violence against Jews as partisans and actual killing actions" (133–34).

Beorn's last case study involves the notorious 707th ID, especially the actions of its 6th Company in Zyrowice, 7th Company in Novgrudok, and 12th Company in Szczuczyn. Commanded by Maj. Gen. Gustav Freiherr von Muchenheim genannt Bechtolsheim, a "fervent racist and Nazi," this "second-line occupation unit" provides an excellent example of a Wehrmacht unit's expanding participation in the Holocaust, as it moved from digging trenches and securing murder sites to voluntarily joining in mass shootings and, more disturbingly, "Jew hunts" in which small groups of German soldiers "independently and actively targeted Jews for murder" (136–37, 192). All three of Beorn's argumentative strands come together in his analysis of the unit. While Bechtolsheim set the tone for the division's behavior, other leaders, like 6th Company's commander, Lt. Fritz Glück, 7th Company's 1st Platoon leader, Lieutenant Martin, and 11th Company's commander, Lt. Josef Kiefer, catalyzed the murders committed by their men. Glück, for example, carried out a mass shooting "on his own authority, using mostly his own soldiers" (142). For Beorn, this action differed sharply from the earlier shootings at Krupki and Krucha; here "Wehrmacht participation in mass murder [w]as a highly coordinated, more complex, comprehensive, and organized operation in conjunction with local civilian authorities" (142).

The experiences of the 707th also reveal the Wehrmacht's increasing cooperation with other Nazi agencies, such as the SS and the local civilian administration. As various divisional units occupied areas for months at a time, they formed closer ties with members of the Reichskommissariat Ostland government: Lieutenant Martin, for example, "was both ideologically and practically aligned with the Gebietskommissariat and as a result often acted in the furtherance of its goals" (160). Consequently, Beorn asserts, "most soldiers and units ... internalized the necessity of their role in assisting in the murder of Jews in the Soviet Union" (183).

The "Jew hunts" by the 707th's 12th Company in late 1941 attest to "the ultimate fulfillment of the Jewish-Bolshevik-partisan calculus.... [The] sadistic 'Jew games' its soldiers played on Saturdays were the end result of prolonged exposure to genocidal killing and the internalization of the necessity to kill Jews" (186). Volunteers from 12th Company conducted small patrols, ostensibly to combat partisans, but in actuality "to independently and actively target ... Jews for murder" (192). The unit's continual "Jew hunts," Beorn writes, prove that "participation in killing had become normalized and was no longer an extraordinary event but a daily element of duty in the East" (198).

Though Beorn's primary themes are generally convincing, several of his claims are open to debate. First, to say that "the Holocaust and the anti-partisan war have long remained separated in the historiography,

with anti-Jewish actions inhabiting the history of the Nazi genocide and the anti-partisan war the military history of the war on the eastern front” (118) is to ignore all serious scholarship on anti-partisan warfare on the Eastern Front at least since Jürgen Förster’s path-breaking essay¹ on the subject. Beorn should have located his own work more accurately within the current historiography of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front in 1941.

More substantively problematic is Beorn’s claim that the Wehrmacht as a whole “internalized” the need to carry out the genocide of Jews, based on the deeds of several units from either security divisions or infantry divisions specifically established for occupation duties. While he conclusively shows that these divisions carried out genocidal policies, such rear-area units were a distinct minority in the Eastern Army and their experiences do not typify those of the remainder of the army, particularly true combat units. Of course, both front-line and rear-area units were part of the same institution and indisputably committed war crimes, but more precise investigations of each type of unit in the context of the Holocaust are needed.²

Waitman Wade Beorn’s microanalysis of German rear-area units convincingly identifies the sorts of army formations that committed mass murder and why. His scrutiny of trial transcripts reveals the mentalities of soldiers involved in the Holocaust in a way that recalls his dissertation director’s study of police detachments.³ Finally, his emphasis on individual actors will give readers of *Marching into Darkness* a chilling look at the part played by German soldiers in the Final Solution and their motives for enacting the vilest of the Third Reich’s genocidal policies.

1. “Die Sicherung des ‘Lebensraumes,’” in Horst Boog, et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4: *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983) 1227–87. See further (cited by Beorn) Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Ed., 1999), and Ben H. Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2004).

2. On a more pedantic note, Gen. Johannes Blaskowitz’s opposition to Einsatzgruppen activities in Poland in 1939 did not end his military career; while his advancement was slowed, he did return to command the German Army Group tasked with defending southern France in 1944.

3. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (NY: Harper-Collins, 1992).