

The debate in Germany over the crimes of Hitler's Wehrmacht

Part 1

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This is the first part of a two-part article on the debate in Germany surrounding an exhibit on the crimes of the German army (Wehrmacht) under the Nazis. The second part will be posted Thursday, September 20.

Nearly sixty years after Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, an intense public debate has broken out in Germany over the role played by the German army (*Wehrmacht*) during the Second World War.

This debate was sparked in 1995 by a touring exhibit entitled *The War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-44*. The exhibit was authored and organised by the historian and publicist Hannes Heer, a member of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. Over a period of four years it attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors in many different cities.

At the same time the exhibit was subjected to a heavy barrage of right-wing attacks, until the financier and head of the Hamburg Institute, Jan Phillip Reemtsma, finally closed it, sacked Hannes Heer and announced the opening of a new exhibit on the same theme, but with a completely different perspective, to take place later this year.

What is the controversy about?

The exhibit was preceded by a research project that examined the role played by the *Wehrmacht* in the war of extermination carried out during the Second World War against the Jews and entire populations within the Soviet Union, the Balkans and Eastern Europe. Of the participating historians, some were affiliated with the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, some with the Research Office for Military History in Freiburg and Potsdam, and some with British, American and other foreign universities.

Extensive and meticulous research was carried out in many private and state-owned archives in Germany, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and countless letters and photo albums of former members of the *Wehrmacht* were evaluated. The results, published in 1995 in the book *The War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-44* [Hannes Heer/Klaus Naumann (editors): *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1994*, Verlag Hamburger Edition, Hamburg, 1995], can be summarised as follows:

1. The *Wehrmacht* led a war of extermination in Poland, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, aimed at creating “living space (*Lebensraum*) in the East” by “liquidating the Jewish-Bolshevik intelligentsia” and murdering the Slavic population, all Jews and other “inferior races”.

2. The *Wehrmacht* was not a “misused tool”, but an integral part of the fascist regime. Not only the SS and the Gestapo, but also the *Wehrmacht*, its generals and thousands of officers and soldiers were active accomplices of the Holocaust.

3. In total, about 10 million people were killed by the *Wehrmacht* —not in the course of combat at the front, but in mass shootings, executions, and

the burning of villages, towns and entire regions.

4. The myth of the “resistance led by the Men of July 20th” is based on lies. The opposition by a group of German army officers, who half-heartedly and unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Adolf Hitler on July 20, 1944, only to be later executed themselves, was based on differences with Hitler on how to win the war, or how to end it with as little loss and social disruption as possible. So-called “resistance fighters” like Arthur Nebe or General von Trescow were, in fact, notorious mass murderers and organisers of the Holocaust themselves or, like General Graf von der Schulenberg, men who provided justifications and orders for the mass execution of civilians by the *Wehrmacht*.

Backed by a wealth of material, the book revealed in detail the historical facts concerning these events. It laid bare the mechanism of command for this butchery, as well as the different groups of perpetrators and various operational regions, e.g., Serbia, White Russia, Latvia, Greece.

In so doing, the book and the original exhibit it fostered destroyed one of the ideological cornerstones of post-war German politics: the legend of the “clean *Wehrmacht*”. This thesis, circulated by historians as well as generals, politicians and publicists, maintains that the *Wehrmacht* had nothing to do with the genocide against the Jews or other Nazi crimes. Instead, it is claimed, the *Wehrmacht* was merely suffused with a military sense of duty, “in itself, an honourable attitude” which was abused by the Nazis.

The defenders of the *Wehrmacht* go even further and maintain that if there was any effective resistance to Hitler, it came from the leadership of the *Wehrmacht* itself and such men as the group of July 20. In the 1950s this legend helped overcome popular protests and resistance to the rearming of the post-war German army (*Bundeswehr*). It also made it easier for the *Bundeswehr* to seamlessly take up *Wehrmacht* traditions and reactivate its old officer corps.

Following publication of *Crimes of the Wehrmacht*, the results of the research were overwhelmingly approved by experts, but mostly ignored by the media. It was only after the results were made accessible to a wider public in the touring exhibit (including 1,400 photographs) that they provoked a sensation, and much indignation.

This was not so surprising in light of the fact that the real role played by the *Wehrmacht* was being exposed and made a major issue at the very time the federal government and the *Bundeswehr* were preparing for military action in the Balkans for the first time since World War Two. Thus, there were pressing contemporary reasons to attach great importance to the defence of the *Wehrmacht* legend. The overt shift from national defence to the defence of geo-strategic interests in faraway countries, the restructuring of the *Bundeswehr* along the lines of a well-equipped army ready for combat anywhere in the world—all this was already being discussed and partly implemented in the 1990s.

The reaction from the highest political and military circles in Germany was unmistakable, although at first these forces preferred to work behind the scenes. At the instigation of the government of Christian Democratic (CDU) Chancellor Helmut Kohl, an invitation by the Historical Institute in Warsaw to show the exhibit in Poland was withdrawn; the same kind of pressure was unsuccessfully exerted on the Goethe institute in New York.

The minister of defence at the time, Volker Rühle (CDU), banned members of the armed forces from participating in “events taking place within the framework of the exhibit”, for example, panel discussions, and ordered that “members of the Office for the Research of Military History are not to take part in discussions on the exhibit.” This measure was aimed at historians like Manfred Messerschmidt and Wolfram Wette, who had participated in the research project and the organisation of the exhibit.

Rühle’s successor, Social Democrat (SPD) Rudolf Scharping, expressly confirmed both directives. He also stressed that regardless of the revelations in the exhibit, “The men of the circle of the July 20th resistance were an essential element of Bundeswehr tradition.”

Soon, however, attacks on the exhibit appeared in numerous TV programmes and newspaper commentaries. War veterans such as the right-wing CDU politician Alfred Dregger and the former vice-chairman of the Free Democratic Party (FPD) and ex- *Wehrmacht* officer Erich Mende began making appearances on TV talk shows, alongside ex-chancellor Helmut Schmidt (SPD), to defend the “besmirched honour of the *Wehrmacht*”.

In unison they declared that the exhibition was “not serious”, that it defamed the *Wehrmacht* with “sweeping judgements” and therefore also besmirched the traditions of the Bundeswehr. They claimed that the exhibit showed only “half of the truth”. They insisted that they themselves as former officers, and their units, had nothing to do with the crimes of the Nazis.

Although Hannes Heer and his collaborators could prove in detail that, in fact, the units in question had participated in war crimes, this did not prevent the media from repeatedly providing a platform for these propagators of a lie.

The propaganda included claims by officers of Hitler’s regime that the exhibit constituted a wholesale condemnation of all soldiers of the *Wehrmacht*. This charge was not aimed at defending ordinary soldiers who were forced into the army and reluctantly went to war—soldiers who morally distanced themselves from the crimes of their officers and fellow soldiers under conditions where any sort of physical resistance was practically impossible.

This is proven by the politics of these *Wehrmacht* defenders in the years following 1945. As long as they and their parties held the levers of power—whether it was the conservative CDU, the liberal FDP or the social-democratic SPD—they blocked the reversal of numerous wartime *Wehrmacht* court martial judgements against resistance fighters, deserters and those who refused to follow orders. On the contrary, they mobilised those social forces that even today regard the war against the Soviet Union as fully justified, and uphold it as an outstanding example of devotion to military duty.

This became especially clear at the beginning of 1997, when these reactionary elements were supported by Peter Gauweiler, a right-wing figure in the conservative Christian Social Union (CSU), who attacked Hannes Heer and Jan Phillip Reemtsma in his characteristically filthy manner. Together with the daily papers *Die Welt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Gauweiler claimed that the exhibit and its defenders were part of a conspiracy of extreme left “red cells” within the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, the Office for the Research of Military History and various newspaper editorial boards.

When the exhibit opened in Munich, Gauweiler organised a public wreath-laying at the grave of the unknown soldier, not far from where the exhibit was being held. The aim, he said, was to “defend the honour of the

Wehrmacht”. With this action Gauweiler gave the go-ahead for a number of propaganda coups and provocations by the neo-fascist German National Party (NPD) and other right-wing organisations. These culminated in a bomb attack on the exhibit in Saarbrücken.

The initial result of this debate was to encourage even more people to visit the exhibit. Until its closure in autumn 1999, nearly one million people visited the exhibit in various German and European cities, showing their interest in a documentation of the most extensive war of extermination in human history. Most visitors were visibly shocked and upset by what they had seen.

When the attacks began Jan Phillip Reemtsma vehemently defended the aims and basic content of the exhibit, which he had financed in opposition to the right-wing rabble and their like-minded friends in established political parties and the press. When in 1997 the magazine *Focus* claimed that some of the photographs in the exhibit were faked, he successfully opposed this accusation in court.

The tables turned when, in 1999, similar accusations were made by the magazine *Der Spiegel*—this time backed by the authority of several historians, research institutes and specialist journals.

In the October 1999 issue of *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, published by the Institute for Contemporary History, the Polish historian Bogdan Musial declared that the exhibit had wrongly classified nine photographs. The photos did show victims of mass executions, but those executed, he maintained, were victims of the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, not the *Wehrmacht*.

Following the treaty between Stalin and Hitler in 1939, the eastern parts of Poland were occupied by the Soviet army and, on orders from the Kremlin, were politically purged by the NKVD. Following the *Wehrmacht* surprise offensive against the Soviet Union in early June 1941, the NKVD did not have enough time to deport all of its victims further east, and killed thousands before the arrival of the rapidly advancing German army.

Musial was able to prove that the above-mentioned photographs showed such victims in the prisons yards of Zloczow, Tarnopol and Lemberg. After the arrival of the *Wehrmacht*, mainly Polish Jews were forced to dig up the corpses before they themselves were shot in the same mass graves. One of the photos shows Jews murdered in a pogrom following the arrival of the German army. However, Musial stressed, Ukrainian nationalists rather than German soldiers were the culprits. He also claimed that other photos had been wrongly classified, but failed to present any sound arguments or proof.

At the same time, the Hungarian Krisztian Ungvary published a “quantitative and qualitative analysis” of the photographic material in the exhibit in the magazine *History in Science and Teaching*. In contrast to Musial, this “historian” did not waste time examining the historical events or presenting any kind of proof. Rather, he simply claimed that 90 percent of the exhibit’s photos did not show crimes of the *Wehrmacht*.

He justified this charge with the fact that the executions were often carried out by the police, SS and SD (Nazi Security Service), as well as by Latvian and Ukrainian “helpers” and paramilitaries. His conclusion that the *Wehrmacht* could not be held responsible flies in the face of the fact that these executions could only have taken place in the presence and with the protection of the *Wehrmacht*, which in the main gave direct orders for the killings.

Ungvary also claimed that “normal combat” against partisans and other civil resistance groups did not constitute a crime on the part of the *Wehrmacht*. This kind of argumentation is, of course, identical to the line adopted by Nazi and *Wehrmacht* propaganda. Nonetheless, Ungvary was cited in the media as a “historian” and principal witness, whose credibility was enhanced by the fact that he came from Eastern Europe where the killings took place.

The handful of photos proven by Musial to have been wrongly classified—nine out of a total of 1,400—could not materially alter the

weight of the research project's results, which were backed by a large number of undisputed documents. In any event, the photos were merely used to illustrate the historic facts presented in the exhibit.

Nevertheless, following the publication of these two specialist journals, Musial and the head of the Institute for Contemporary History, Horst Möller, not only demanded that the classification of some of the photographs be examined and altered, but they began a malicious campaign in the media against the entire exhibit and its main theses.

Musial claimed that Hannes Heer and the Hamburg Institute for Social Research had "exploited" the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* and declared: "This is how exhibits were done in communist Poland." Möller accused the organisers of the exhibit of "agitating" and "hammering things home" in a manner "familiar to Hitler". It would be "irresponsible" to show the exhibit in America, he said.

In the face of such polemical attacks, Heer and his collaborators at first refused to acknowledge or examine the factual background to Musial's accusations—the massacres carried out by the Stalinist secret police. This made it all the easier for their enemies to mobilise a posse of journalists and commentators, who rushed from one press conference to the next and waited for the exhibit to be finally closed down and Heer sacked.

The statements of Musial and Möller disqualified them from being regarded as conscientious historians and revealed an affinity with right-wing and fascist apologetics. Nevertheless, Reemtsma finally gave in to the pressure.

In November 1999 he announced the temporary closure of the exhibit until a commission of historians could examine the classification of the photographs and make a recommendation on its continuation. He invited the Polish critic Musial to be an adviser to the commission. He also cancelled the long-planned tour of the exhibit to the US, a censorship measure that drew protests from many renowned American historians, including Omer Bartov and Christopher Browning.



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