

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

Part 2

Wolfgang Weber
20 September 2001

This is the second and concluding part of a two-part article on the debate in Germany surrounding an exhibit on the crimes of Hitler's army (the Wehrmacht). Part one was posted Wednesday, September 19.

In November 1999, under the pressure of a public campaign, Jan Philipp Reemtsma, head of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, announced the temporary shutdown of the travelling exhibit entitled *The War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-44*, which had attracted almost one million visitors.

Subsequently, in the features sections of Germany's main daily papers and within the Hamburg Institute, a vehement discussion unfolded over the following question: should the exhibit remain closed or should it be reopened, but with a new perspective in line with the arguments of its right-wing critics? Or should the basic conception of the project, with its core statements and aims, i.e., a stimulating, popular explanation of the history of the war, be preserved, and only some of the contentious photo captions and exhibit texts be corrected, as Hannes Heer, the initiator and director of the exhibit, had suggested?

Even before the Historians' Commission appointed by Reemtsma had concluded its work and submitted a report, Reemtsma suddenly decided the question, not on the strength of scientific arguments, but simply on the basis of his position as financial backer and leader of the institute. In the summer of 2000 he announced that the Hamburg Institute was immediately parting company with Hannes Heer.

It was quite evident that this measure was not based on scientific criteria. This was underlined a few months later when the report of the Historians' Commission completely acquitted those around Heer of the accusation of falsifying pictures. Moreover, the Commission expressly confirmed the central historical contentions and theses of the project.

The historians did find disturbing, however, the fact that these theses, expressed in categorical judgements, were very much aimed at polarising and emotionally engaging the visitor, instead of seeking the sort of calm, academic-scientific "discourse" they were used to.

However, in view of the historic crimes dealt with, the authors of the project quite legitimately sought to enlighten, polarise and emotionally affect the audience.

As for the specific pretext for closing down the exhibit—a few incorrect photo captions—this was attributed to a lack of attention in linking photographs with specific historical events. The pictures in question were found in Eastern European archives after the fall of the Stalinist regimes in 1989-90. Under the Stalinists, they had been catalogued as "documents of Nazi crimes".

It is not known whether this had occurred as a result of express instructions, in order to cover the tracks of the real culprits, or simply because the archivists preferred to avoid certain difficulties. In any case, those responsible for organising the exhibit included this material without

any closer inspection.

Even on the question of mislabelled photographs, the Historians' Commission absolved the exhibit organisers to a certain degree, pointing out that such superficial treatment of pictorial material from the archives was quite common in historical and scientific publications, and that critics of the exhibit such as Bogdan Musial could also be reproached on the same account.

The weaknesses in the historical conception underlying the exhibit are far more serious than any errors involving the presentation of pictorial material. But this was not an issue of criticism by the Historians' Commission, since they have no differences with Heer on this score.

The extent and consequences of the barbarism depicted in the exhibit must raise the question for any thoughtful spectator: how could such a thing come to pass? Neither the exhibit nor the accompanying book provides an answer, nor could they, since they present the events as disconnected from the class struggles in Germany and Europe, and as if there had been no resistance to the Nazis' conquest of power and their war plans.[1]

Heer and his co-workers come close to the theses advanced by Daniel Goldhagen, who completely ignores the traditions of the socialist workers movement and its struggle against anti-Semitism and nationalism, instead explaining the Holocaust as a product of the "German national character".[2]

Like most historians, Heer does not agree with the unscientific methods and crude historical falsifications of Daniel Goldhagen. Contrary to Goldhagen, he also stresses that a prerequisite of the Holocaust was the war of extermination. (See the article "Die große Tautologie" by Hannes Heer in *Taz*, number 5018, p.15, September 4, 1996). It was only through such orgies of violence that it was possible to stifle all restraint in relation to the mass murder of the Jews. The command structures of the *Wehrmacht* and the apparatus of repression of the Gestapo and SS smothered all resistance, and as moral scruples were abandoned, a blood lust was unleashed in many battalions.

But how was it that the Nazis could conquer power and unleash the war? Even before the campaign to secure *Lebensraum* in the East, destroy the Soviet Union and annihilate the Jews, had not the Nazis openly proclaimed these goals in their program in 1933? On this issue the Hamburg Research Institute is as sketchy as Goldhagen.

The unparalleled betrayal of the German Communist Party (KPD), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the trade unions in 1933, their passive capitulation to Hitler, are not discussed in the exhibit. Nor is the subsequent smashing of the organised workers movement by the Nazi dictatorship, which made the war possible.

There is no mention of the fact that the nationalist policy of the KPD and the Comintern leadership under Stalin had for years mislead the

workers movement and sapped its resistance to the poison of anti-Semitism. No reference is made to the mass murder of the old Bolsheviks and innumerable Marxists in the course of the Moscow Trials, or the decimation of the leadership of the Red Army, the murder by Stalin of all its most able generals and officers from the time of the revolution. The Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 is only touched upon in relation to its consequences for the direct process of German conquest; its tremendous political implications for the workers movement are not documented.

The devastatingly disorienting and demoralising effect of these events on the proletarian resistance to Hitler, and also on ordinary German soldiers, was, however, the main political factor that smoothed the way for the Nazis' initial victories against the Soviet Union and the Holocaust that followed.

To the extent that Heer and his co-workers keep quiet about these class and political questions, they present the war of extermination and the Holocaust essentially as inevitable events, to which there was no realistic alternative. Thus, apart from some methodological and factual reservations, they have nothing substantial with which to oppose the reactionary and racist theses of Daniel Goldhagen.

Despite all this, as the Historians' Commission complained, the exhibit did have a politically polarising effect and unleashed fierce debates, because its exposure of the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* in and of itself laid bare the nerves of a sick society. Even if the exhibit did not explicitly approach the role of the *Wehrmacht* from a class standpoint, it nevertheless touched on the roots of fascism and war in class society—roots that were not eliminated after 1945, but merely covered over in cosmetic fashion.

This was the main reason Reemtsma eventually fell out with the director of the project and insisted on Heer's dismissal, despite the Commission's rather positive report. He announced that the old exhibit would remain closed, and a completely different team of young historians would devise a new exhibit.

Everything that has come to light in interviews with Reemtsma and press conferences held by the Hamburg Institute suggests that the political weaknesses of the old exhibit are now being made the guiding principles of the new exhibit.

The exhibit project is to shift away from the sphere of "coming to terms with the past" and the "unfortunate back and forth of current historical/political debate", and instead keep strictly to the "historical anthropology" advocated by Reemtsma. It is no coincidence that Reemtsma (in contrast to Heer) agreed unreservedly with the theses of Daniel Goldhagen and delivered the celebratory speech in 1997 in Berlin when the American author was awarded the Democracy Prize.

Reemtsma wants the documentation to make even fewer references to contemporary social developments and institutions. The crimes of the Nazis and the Holocaust are to be presented as general historical phenomena, as examples of the fact that "under concrete conditions human beings at all times and everywhere can behave inhumanely towards others".

Reemtsma explained this in a friendly discussion with Bogdan Musial in the daily *Die Welt* (September 16, 2000), in which he not only reconciled himself with the Polish critic regarding the controversy over the picture captions, but also showed a large degree of understanding and even agreement on questions of historical viewpoint and historical method.[3]

From this it flows almost automatically that in contrast to the old exhibit, the future one will avoid everything that might oppose Germany's militarist traditions and upset today's militarists.

The more the new exhibit tries to present itself as "apolitical", the clearer becomes the actual political significance of the actions of Reemtsma and his Institute. The closure of the old exhibit in 1999 could not be understood other than as a capitulation to the ruling political and military caste. It occurred in the very year that the German army

(*Bundeswehr*) participated in the war against Yugoslavia. This marked the first time since 1945 that a German government and army had conducted a war of aggression—and it was carried out in the Balkans, the scene of the cruellest crimes documented in the exhibit on Hitler's *Wehrmacht*.

All those who have an interest in preserving the myth of the *Wehrmacht*, from the nationalist German historians and magazine columnists, to the parties in the SPD-Green government coalition and the "tradition-conscious" *Bundeswehr* generals, to the right-wing extremist skinheads on the streets—all felt encouraged by the dismissal of Heer.

The gloating within these circles on the news from Hamburg was expressed most openly in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, formerly known as a liberal newspaper, in a detailed comment by editor Thomas Medicus (August 15, 2000). The editor wrote that in the person of Heer "an anachronistic 1968-activist" was leaving, someone "whose borrowed anti-fascism had become a hindrance to the development of the [Hamburg] Institute".

The article went on to describe all the defenders of the exhibit against its right-wing critics as "having outmoded ways of perceiving and thinking", which led to "the helpless attempt ... to cling to obsolete ideological divisions". Thus the closure of the exhibit and Heer's dismissal cleared the way "for a change of view that will throw overboard the culture of recollection and shock that dominated the old Federal Republic..."

What Medicus means by "outmoded ways of perceiving and thinking" and "borrowed anti-fascism" is the conception that Nazism and war do not belong simply to the past, and that important representatives and beneficiaries of Hitler's "National Socialism" remained active in the post-war German state and society, and therefore must be exposed and fought today.

This view was common among young people and critical intellectuals in the 1960s and 1970s, a time of political crisis in Europe. Most of the ideological leaders of the 1968 protest movement soon abandoned such views as an obstacle to their own ascent in politics and society; others did so on the occasion of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany.

According to Medicus, the dismissal of Heer, a prominent member of the SDS radical student organisation in the 1960s, should be the signal to finally put paid to the so-called "culture of recollection and shock" regarding the crimes of fascism. This injunction coincides with the official policy of post-unification Germany, which is to reject all constraints arising from the recollection of the crimes of the recent German past. Historians are called on to direct their gaze to the future. According to Reemtsma's "historical anthropology," the barbarities of fascism and world war can be regarded as general social phenomena, linked to a completed historical epoch, which have nothing to do with the present social order.

The grounds for extreme right-wing, anticommunist and racist forces to regard the dismissal of Heer and the transformation of the exhibit as their victory have been further clarified by the emergence of details about the so-called "historian" Bogdan Musial.

What were the historical conceptions of the Third Reich and the Holocaust that led Musial to expand his criticism of incorrect photo captions into a belligerent and generalised attack on the *Wehrmacht* exhibit and its originators? The answer to this question, based on the statements made by Musial in 1999, remained speculative until the publication in 2000 of his book *Counter-Revolutionaries are to be Shot* [4], in which he combines resolute and primitive anticommunism with barely concealed anti-Semitism. These two fundamental convictions form the ideological blinkers through which Musial turns everything in history on its head; culprits are turned into victims and victims become culprits.

With his nationalist and pathological hatred of Russia and the former Soviet Union, combined with his racist prejudices, Musial is an indicative product of Poland's tragic history and the decline of its workers

movement.

Musial was born into a Galician peasant family and as a young miner was active in the Polish trade union Solidarity. Although Solidarity arose in opposition to the Stalinist bureaucracy, backward and nationalist sentiments were expressed in the perspectives of Solidarity leaders such as Lech Walesa, Jacek Kuron and Bronislaw Geremek. After more than 50 years of Stalinism, barely a trace remained of the international socialist ideas associated with such Polish revolutionists as Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches. Following the implementation of martial law, Musial's opposition turned into blind anticommunism. In 1985 he emigrated to West Germany, and with a scholarship from the Social Democratic Friedrich Ebert Foundation, took up a study of politics and history.

Musial's conception of historical research is revealed in his book, when he quotes a "witness" of the war-time "Polish resistance" (by which he means the bourgeois-nationalist underground that sympathised with the government-in-exile in London) as a factual account: "The Jews harass the Poles terribly and persecute everything to do with Polishness.... People simply hate the Jews." Musial then summarises: "Similar sentiments are expressed in other cities."

At a further point in his book, Musial writes: "The behaviour of many Jews, their comparatively strong representation in the Soviet state apparatus and the Soviet terror, burdened the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in Soviet-occupied Poland" (p. 71). He continues: "Anti-Soviet sentiments were the result of the Soviet terror. Anti-Jewish emotions, on the other hand, resulted from the behaviour expressed towards non-Jews by not a few Jews, and the fact that many non-Jews identified the Jews with Soviet rule" (p. 73). In this way, according to Musial, the pogroms that took place in many areas after the invasion of the *Wehrmacht* are to be explained.

The "behaviour of not a few Jews", which, according to Musial, was responsible for the pogroms, mainly consisted in the following: contrary to their status in the Polish state, which was riddled with clericalism and anti-Semitism, Jews under Soviet law were for the first time in Polish history guaranteed equal rights with other nationalities. This led to a certain social advance for many, especially younger, Jews, who were able to take up positions in state and local administrations working as teachers, etc. This social and political emancipation was a direct result of the progressive laws passed after the October Revolution of 1917 and the situation that prevailed in the early years of the new Soviet state.

The further advance of this emancipation into Soviet-occupied Poland in 1939 took place in the teeth of opposition from Stalin himself, who attempted to reverse the progressive laws of 1917 and is credited with deporting between 50,000 and 100,000 Polish Jews to Siberia on the charge of being "counterrevolutionary elements." This, however, did not prevent racist contemporaries from denouncing the advance and participation of Jews in the Polish state as "collaboration".

This is the point of view that has been taken over in its entirety by Musial and presented as historical fact. He writes, for example: "A relatively large number of NKVD informants and denounciators, who actively and mostly voluntarily took part in Soviet crimes, were of Jewish origin."

On the basis of these and similar "eyewitness testimonies" and "proofs", Musial advances two main theses:[5] First, the brutalisation of the German-Soviet war, and even the Holocaust, had its origins in the crimes of the Soviet occupation of Poland and, following the German invasion of Soviet-occupied Poland and the USSR, the "perfidious struggle" of the partisans and snipers, i.e., of resistance groups within the Polish and Soviet civilian population.

According to this thesis, German soldiers—confronted with mountains of victims murdered by the Soviet NKVD, as in Katyn and Słoczków, and embittered by the "attacks of damned snipers"—regarded Hitler's notorious order—"All Soviet political commissars are to be shot

immediately!"—as justified, and they consequently showed no mercy.

Musial's second thesis can be summed up as follows: the thousands upon thousands of Jews who fell victim to the pogroms that followed the *Wehrmacht* invasion were at least partially responsible for their own destruction.

In the book, Musial repeats these two theses like a religious incantation and "proves" them through an accumulation of statements by so-called "contemporary witnesses". He treats the utterances of such "witnesses" in a completely uncritical manner as "historical fact", without the least analysis or examination—even when such utterances express nothing more than anti-Semitic and anticommunist prejudices.

From time to time Musial qualifies his core theses, first in the preface and then in the course of the text, by rejecting any "alleged Jewish responsibility for the Soviet terror" and opposing "general accusations" against the Jews. But these caveats are of a purely tactical character, intended to more effectively package his apologia for racist policies and the *Wehrmacht*. Musial does not make the slightest effort to explain or resolve the contradictions arising from such a presentation.

He proceeds in the same manner with respect to the role of the *Wehrmacht*. He himself reports (on page 245 of his book) that from army headquarters AOK17 the suggestion came "to use anti-Jewish and anticommunist Poles resident in newly occupied areas to carry out self-cleansing actions", and that this suggestion for organising pogroms was enthusiastically taken up by Richard Heydrich, the state police chief, who passed it on to his task force as the order of the day. This acknowledgement, however, does not prevent Musial from claiming three pages further on that the *Wehrmacht* leadership had nothing to do with the slaughter of Jews committed by Latvian or Ukrainian nationalists: "The *Wehrmacht* leadership strove to prevent pogroms in the areas under its control. But this was not always easy, as the examples of Lemberg ... and Słoczków show."

Here as well, Musial leaves untouched the glaring contradictions in his own statements, or simply obscures them with new "eyewitness testimonies" and "proofs". Even from the standpoint of purely academic criteria, the book never attains the level of an historical investigation. Instead, entire sections resemble a right-wing pamphlet with an academic gloss. Historical facts are intermixed with stitched-together "testimonies" and "proofs", in order to make a complex historical development adhere to the author's crude way of thinking. The innumerable sources cited, which actually say nothing at all about the content and value of the aforementioned statements, are intended to lend the whole project the appearance of factual impartiality and scrupulous accuracy.

Based merely on his 1999 article in *Contemporary Historical Quarterly* (*Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*) on the discrepancies in the *Wehrmacht* exhibit pictures, with its deliberately factual tone, one could assume that Musial possessed the qualities (factual impartiality and accuracy) that are generally regarded as basic requirements for a professional historian. But after reading his book, one naturally asks oneself: how could scientists with a more intimate knowledge of Musial place him on such a pedestal?

From the point of view of the work of a genuine historian—uncovering new facts or convincingly presenting historical truth—Musial does not deserve the slightest attention. And indeed, he obviously did not gain his celebrity on that basis. It was rather his scientifically cloaked apologia for Nazism and the *Wehrmacht* from the standpoint of a Polish nationalist that induced the German historians Horst Möller and Hans Peter Schwarz to place their *Contemporary Historical Quarterly* at his disposal. Since his article made some factually correct points concerning the photo captions, they rightly sensed that they could utilise Musial in their own efforts to force the closure of the *Wehrmacht* exhibit.

The political blindness of the exhibit organisers regarding the Stalinist bureaucracy also proved convenient for their purposes. When Musial drew

attention to the mass murders committed by Stalin's secret police, Heer did not want to concede these historical facts solely because he regarded Musial—with justification—as an anticommunist and Polish nationalist. But in this way, he gave Musial and Möller the opportunity to link the pursuit of their own political aims with the claim that they were defending historical truth.

The fact that Horst Möller, the chairman of the respected Institute for Contemporary History, played the main role in this manoeuvre casts a significant light on the course of ideological and political debates in Germany about the Nazi past.

The Institute for Contemporary History was founded in the 1950s in order to research and document the history and crimes of Nazism. Initially, however, the institute chronically found itself in financial straits, since the leading politicians of the day had no interest in a thoroughgoing exposure of their own past.

The reputation of the Institute only began to grow with the change in the intellectual climate at the end of the 1960s, when younger generations turned against the elites in science, society and politics, which had their roots in the Nazi period. Between 1972 and 1989, under the social liberal historian Martin Broszat, the institute was able to make a series of important advances in scientific research.

The death of Broszat in 1989 coincided with a new intellectual sea change, which was already signalled in the so-called “*Historikerstreit*” (“Historians’ controversy”) of the 1980s, but gained momentum with the collapse of the Stalinist regime in the East and the reunification of Germany. In 1992, Horst Möller was appointed director of the Institute. In 1986-87, Moeller had stood on the side of Ernst Nolte and Andreas Hillgruber in the *Historikerstreit*.

At that time, Nolte argued along the following lines: although it was not permissible to approve the excesses of Nazism, such as the mass annihilation of the Jews, it was nevertheless necessary to understand the rational core of such excesses—that is, the legitimate “defence reflex of bourgeois civilisation in Europe” against Bolshevism and its “Asiatic crimes”.

Some prominent philosophers and historians at the time, such as Jürgen Habermas, spoke out against this apologia for fascism. Horst Möller, however, sprang to Nolte's side, insisting it was necessary to keep in mind that the Eastern Front in the Second World War had served to defend the German population against the atrocities of the Soviet army. Five years later, Möller, at the urging of then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl and other sponsors, was rewarded with the directorship of the now internationally renowned Institute.

The *Historikerstreit* dragged on for three years, until the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, and not a few commentators indulged in the illusion that it had been ended with a “clear victory for reason” and “scientific enlightenment” over Nolte and his rewriting of history. The fate of the *Wehrmacht* exhibit should dispel such illusions.

Fifteen years ago, in the *Historikerstreit*, numerous historians, writers and critical journalists took a stand against Nolte. Today, from the world of science and journalism, only professor Peter Steinbach, director of the *Deutscher Widerstand* (German Resistance) memorial, and Johannes Willms of the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper have spoken out clearly against the dismissal of Heer and the closure of his *Wehrmacht* exhibit.

This turn in the debate over the German past bodes ominously for the future. The atrocities of the *Wehrmacht* and the Holocaust were not accidents, nor merely the consequences of the actions of one or two madmen. These crimes were the product of powerful militaristic and anti-democratic forces and traditions with deep roots in German society—tendencies which are stirring once again in a threatening manner.

Politically the German bourgeoisie—in contrast to the American—never based its domestic rule on the achievements of a democratic revolution, but instead on the military-dominated, authoritarian state of Prussia. The

German bourgeoisie suppressed the revolution of 1848 and, following its victory over France in the war of 1870-71, united the German Reich under the spiked helmet of Prussian militarism.

In order to secure their *economic* interests abroad, the German industrial and financial concerns habitually resorted to violent military means. Because of the delayed historical development of German industrial capitalism, the German ruling classes employed militarism to acquire their share of raw materials, markets and strategic advantages in a world already divided up among their main imperialist rivals.

After losing the First World War, and haunted by the spectre of proletarian revolution—especially after the onset of the Depression—the bourgeoisie threw its lot in with Hitler. Due to the betrayal of the social democratic and Stalinist parties, the working class was unable to prevent the impending disaster, take power and open the way for a progressive reorganisation of society. Instead, the way was free for fascism and militarism to plunge the world into the most hideous barbarism in the history of mankind.

Today the advocates of militarism in Germany sense that their time has come again. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and German reunification, German capital once again confronts the same challenge upon which Hitler foundered—to conquer *Lebensraum im Osten* (living space in the east), i.e., control over eastern European and Russian markets and raw materials in order to ensure Germany's equal (or dominant) status in world politics against its Western rivals, in particular, the US.

To achieve these ends the German ruling class must, in the long run, base itself on police state measures domestically and militarism abroad. The closure of the *Wehrmacht* exhibit makes clear the increasingly aggressive posture of these reactionary forces, as well as the wretched nature of their liberal opponents within the German academic intelligentsia.

The only force that can defeat these reactionary plans is the working class. Should it fail to measure up to this task, then the populations of Germany, Europe and, indeed, the entire world face enormous dangers. The dimensions of these dangers are indicated by the shocking pictures and documents that were presented in the *Wehrmacht* exhibit—a testimony that cannot be annulled by the closure of the exhibit and the sacking of its director.

Notes:

1. See: The report on the panel discussion on the *Wehrmacht* exhibit between Hannes Heer, Professor Hans Mommsen and Professor Bernd Bonwetsch, held April 17, 1996 in Essen [<http://www.wsws.org/de/1996/mai1996/wehr-m10.shtml>]
2. See: David North, *Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust. A Critical Review of Daniel Goldhagen's Hitler's Willing Executioners*, [<http://www.wsws.org/history/1997/apr1997/fascism.shtml>].
3. See the report in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, “The Outlines of the New *Wehrmacht* Exhibit,” May 22, 2001.
4. *Konterrevolutionäre Elemente sind zu erschießen. Die Brutalisierung des deutsch-sowjetischen Krieges im Sommer 1941*; Berlin/Munich, 2000.
5. Musial does not hesitate to include Franz Josef Strauss amongst his “witnesses”. Strauss was an extremely right-wing Bavarian politician in post-war West Germany, minister of defence (1956-1962) under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and minister of finance (1966-1969) under Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former Nazi. During the war, Strauss participated personally in the occupation of Poland as a staunch member of the Nazi Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

--