

{essays in history}

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Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus



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Reviewed Work(s)

Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus. By Waitman Wade Beorn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). Pp. 336. Hardcover, \$39.95.

With his groundbreaking book *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich* historian Omar Bartov was one of the first to argue for the Wehrmacht's extensive participation in the Holocaust. Bartov began a trend among professional historians who attacked the myth of an untarnished Wehrmacht and demonstrated the extensive participation of the Wehrmacht in Nazi genocide policy. Waitman Wade Beorn's new book *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* is the most recent example of this type of scholarship. Beorn focuses on army units and individual soldiers in this sharply focused micro-history. Beorn presents a straightforward argument that contains three specific claims. First, he argues, leadership and unit culture played an essential role in motivating German soldiers towards participation or nonparticipation in genocidal acts. Second, from the very beginning of the war on the Eastern front a connection was established between Jews, Bolshevism, and partisan groups that provided the Wehrmacht with a justification for the murder of Jews. Finally, Beorn argues that prolonged contact with the Nazi genocidal ideology and exposure to atrocities led to increased involvement in the Holocaust. In total, Beorn argues "that understanding how and why individuals engage in criminality on such a massive scale requires untangling the complex interplay of psychological pressures, belief systems, training, leadership, situational pressures, institutional memory and organizational standards" (20).

Beorn takes up the question of the Wehrmacht's role in Nazi genocide in a very specific time and place. He examines Wehrmacht units during the early days of the war on the Eastern front, from the autumn of 1941 to the winter of 1942 in Belarus. Beorn's periodization is critically important to his overall argument because he wants to contradict a widely held position that the Wehrmacht's participation in the Holocaust increased only after the tide of war had turned against the Germans in the East.

To do so, his narrative weaves together five chronological micro-histories of different Wehrmacht units. He begins his story in September of 1941 with the 354th Infantry Regiment. He details how this unit participated in the murder of one thousand Jews in the town of Krupki. Next, he examines an anti-partisan conference that took place in Mogilev at the end of September 1941, at which the military high command sought to create a link between Jews and partisans in the minds of ordinary German soldiers. Beorn then proceeds to investigate the murder of over a hundred Jews in the village of Krucha by the 691st Infantry Regiment. Beorn considers the towns of Slonim and Novogrudok where the 727th Infantry Regiment participated in both ghettoization and the murder of Jews. Finally, Beorn concludes with an examination of the 12th Company in Szczuczyn whose members did not participate in any large-scale massacres, but regularly organized “Jew Hunts” and murdered Jews on their own accord.

Beorn draws on a number of rich and comprehensive sources. He focuses on four types: postwar testimonies of German soldiers, German wartime military documents, survivor testimony, and fieldwork. Each of these sources brings with them their own advantages and challenges, but it is in his use of these sources that Beorn demonstrates his greatest strength as a historian. He masterfully deconstructs the evidence with a keen sense of purpose; avoiding generalization, he is able to carefully reconstruct the full spectrum of an ordinary German soldier’s experience along the Eastern Front.

The use of sources is not the only strength of Beorn’s book. One of the challenges of micro-history is that its conclusions are often dismissed as applicable only to the specific context being studied, but in Beorn’s case his theory could easily be applied to other Wehrmacht units in other areas of the Nazi occupied East or even the West. This is not to suggest that Beorn is arguing for the Wehrmacht’s universal participation in the Holocaust, but his framework and approach could be employed elsewhere. Beorn’s work makes a strong case for the value of microhistory by showing how a detailed analysis of a small geographical area can suggest insights for the broader study of the Holocaust.

Beorn’s work could also serve as a starting point for future scholars. One potential avenue of new research concerns the activities of the Wehrmacht in Italy. After the Germans occupied the country in late 1943,

the Wehrmacht, in an effort to quell perceived partisan threats, increasingly responded with extreme brutality. Often this level of violence resulted in the deaths of innocent Italian civilians. Although the Eastern front remains the focus of much scholarly attention, Beorn's work could certainly be used as a guide for historians studying the Wehrmacht in the West.

His narrative is readable, relatively free of jargon, and accessible to undergraduates, specialists and the general public alike. It is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the Wehrmacht's participation in the Holocaust. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the Holocaust, World War II, military culture, and genocide studies.

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