



2014-043

Christian Hartmann, *Operation Barbarossa: Nazi Germany's War in the East, 1941-1945*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 184. ISBN 978-0-19-966078-0.

Review by Jesse Kauffman, Eastern Michigan University (profkauffman@gmail.com).

“Everything about [the German-Soviet war],” writes historian Christian Hartmann (Inst. for Contemporary History, Munich), “was gargantuan—the numbers deployed, the theatre over which it was fought and, not least, the numbers of victims that it claimed” (1). The same might be said of the weighty volumes written on the subject.¹ The concision alone of Hartmann’s book makes it a welcome addition to the literature. Its clear, almost conversational prose, devoid of jargon and overly specialized terminology, makes it especially suitable for undergraduates as well as the general public. The widely published Hartmann is eminently qualified to write such a work. He has both impeccable scholarly credentials and much experience making history accessible to a mass audience as an advisor for German films and television programs.

The book’s remarkable brevity comes at the expense of fuller background information. *Operation Barbarossa* opens with a whirlwind tour of German and Soviet foreign policy from the end of the First World War to the early years of the Second. Although the author warns against simplifying the causes of these highly complex events, the ideologies and psychopathic personalities of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin figure conspicuously throughout as the motors driving Europe toward catastrophe.

Structurally, Hartmann mixes thematic and chronological chapters. Following a chapter on “The War, 1941-1942,” for example, are others on “The German Occupation,” “German War Crimes and Atrocities,” and “Politics, 1941-1945.” This disjointedness extends to the chapter subsections as well. The one on politics, for example, treats German and Soviet foreign policy, the brutality of the Soviet government toward its own soldiers and civilians, and the response of the Soviet state and society to the threat of annihilation—a bit much for twenty-one pages. Still, for Anglophone readers unfamiliar with the conflict, the book offers a good, terse outline of the war’s operational, social, cultural, and political aspects.

Hartmann is at his best when writing operational history; as he fluidly conveys the movements and clashes of enormous armies spread over a vast and shifting front,² the reader gains a good sense of how the fighting progressed without bogging down in excessive details of specific orders given, divisions moved, and flanks turned. This is not to say that Hartmann oversimplifies; on the contrary, he enlivens his broad overview with well-chosen quotations that humanize his story and bring the war’s participants to life in ways that operational maps with their arrows and lines simply cannot. To give a feel for what it was like as the Wehrmacht ran out of steam and winter began to approach in 1941, for example, Hartmann quotes a soldier describing the troops’ daily routine:

The men wake up at around three or four in the morning and get ready to move out, usually without washing, because the water is too far away and there’s no time and no light. The marching then goes on all day until late on [sic], again in the dark, often at nine or ten o’clock, when the men reach their quarters and have to care for the horses and set up the stalls before they have their mess at the field kitchen and then lie down to sleep. (53)

Describing the Wehrmacht’s retreat west in December 1941, a German chaplain wrote that “for days on end, the wind whipped up the fine, powdery snow and drove it into our eyes and faces, so that one had the feeling of having stumbled into a rain of needles” (53).

The quotations come mostly from Wehrmacht soldiers, in part because they are in fact the book’s subject, even though its title suggests otherwise. Hartmann mentions the other party and state institutions in-

1. E.g., Stephen Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2011)—664 pages, and David Glantz and Jonathan House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1999)—485 pages.

2. Hartman lectures at the German Army Staff College, which may explain his talent in this area.

volved in the eastern war, but does not say a great deal about what they did. This is a problem, since readers without prior knowledge will learn precious little about the critical role of the SS, for instance. Again brevity entails painful choices. The author stresses throughout that the Wehrmacht was a vast institution and that generalizations about the lives and actions of average soldiers in the East often miss important nuances and exceptions. He constantly assures us that not every German soldier was a fanatical, or even lukewarm, Nazi who shared Hitler's vision of an unrestrained war of annihilation. Thus, resistance from below brought about the suspension of the Commissar Order (91); German troops had to be reprimanded for giving their food to civilians (104); commanders outside starving Leningrad fretted that their men might not fire on innocent civilians trying to flee (99); other commanders tried to mitigate the hardships of occupation (97); and so on.

Hartmann is no apologist for the Wehrmacht, as his chapter on "German War Crimes and Atrocities" makes clear, and there were certainly exceptions to the generally barbarous conduct of the army, but to give instances of decent behavior so much prominence in a concise summary of Operation Barbarossa risks making the anomalous appear to be the norm. More space should have been devoted as well to the other institutions of German destruction in the East and to the Wehrmacht's anti-Partisan war, which, apart from one brief mention, the author fails to link to the Holocaust.

Hartman's insistence on the relative decency of the Wehrmacht transforms one of the book's strengths into a potential liability. He carefully points out that the Third Reich's war in the East was not an exclusively German affair—volunteers from all over Europe participated in the military campaigns and were, he writes, willing executioners of Jews. These facts are essential for understanding the brutal dynamics of the war, but when combined with an insistence on the generally humane nature of the typical German soldier, they leave the distinct impression that eastern Europeans were far more zealous killers—especially of Jews: "If direct *individual* responsibility for the Holocaust was slight in the *Wehrmacht*, its *institutional* responsibility was immense" (88). Whatever one thinks of this paradox, how are we to reconcile the observation that "a not-inconsiderable number of anti-Semitic collaborators ... appeared on the scene in the Baltic states, the former East Poland, and the Ukraine, [and] the Romanian occupiers took on a particularly active role in the genocide" (88–89) with Hartmann's assurance that the Germans were the true architects of the horror? The juxtaposition of the reluctantly and "institutionally" culpable Wehrmacht with the eager eastern murderers is troubling and reinforces the subtle contrast between the fundamentally decent but misled Wehrmacht and the more authentic hatreds and brutality of the East.³

This reservation aside, *Operation Barbarossa* is a useful, succinct review of what was arguably the decisive campaign of the Second World War.⁴

3. Interestingly, Hartmann was a consultant for the compelling and exceptionally well made 2013 German miniseries *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* (Our Mothers, Our Fathers; *Generation War* in the United States), which followed the fortunes of a group of young German friends under the Nazi regime. Enormously popular in Germany, the program caused outrage in Poland. The Polish resistance cell members show a vicious hatred for Jews, while the series's German protagonists, even the convinced Nazis, do not.

4. It also has a good bibliography of classic and recent English and German works on the war in the East, though the omission of Robert Citino's books is puzzling, and the absence of Omer Bartov's flawed but important *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1991) feels a bit pointed. One last liability: the forgoing of citations in the text makes it impossible to trace the source of a particular quotation or argument.