



The Finnish SS-Volunteers and Atrocities, 1941–1943 by Lars Westerlund.

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Review by Jonathan Beard, New York City (jb752@caa.columbia.edu).

It is difficult to fit Finland into the conventional narrative of World War II. Between 1939 and 1945, Finland fought two wars, both against the Soviet Union. The first—the Winter War (Nov. 1939–Mar. 1940)—came when the USSR attacked Finland. Although the Finns initially humiliated the Red Army, the war ended with Finland ceding 11 percent of its territory to the Soviets. The second—the Continuation War (1941–44)—was a joint Finnish-German campaign against the USSR that ended in defeat. Both were, by World War II standards, “clean wars,” with only a few civilian casualties, caused by air raids. At the end of 1945, as Europe was trying to recover from terrible destruction, massive civilian death, and genocide, no one thought about Finland or Finns.

But that is not the whole story. In 1941–43, when Finland was allied with Nazi Germany, a total of 1408 Finnish men volunteered to serve in the Waffen SS, the military arm of Heinrich Himmler’s Schutzstaffel. Most served in the Wiking Division, comprised of German troops, but also Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, Estonians, Dutch, and Belgians. These “Vikings” were meant to exemplify the commitment of Nordic soldiers to the goals of the Third Reich. In 1941–42, the division took part in Operation Barbarossa, the ill-fated German invasion of the USSR, and marched across much of Ukraine and the Soviet Union toward Stalingrad, along their way killing thousands of Jews, Soviet civilians, and POWs.

The book under review is an attempt to determine how much responsibility the fairly small number of Finns bore for these crimes. In January 2018, Israel’s Simon Wiesenthal Center asked the Finnish government to make a thorough investigation of this question. The Finnish National Archives, along with Lars Westerlund, completed the text of their study in November 2018. It was published—online¹ (gratis) and on paper—in February 2019.

The book begins with an overview explaining why Finns fought the USSR in the Winter War and, in some cases, later joined the SS to fight the Soviet Union. It also describes the source material for the study—the seventy-six diaries kept by Finnish SS men, and other records and books about the Waffen SS and the massacres it committed.

The bulk of the book details the killings themselves, proceeding both chronologically and by category of victims. The survey is not confined to the actions of Finnish volunteers, but instead describes all of the places, beginning with Lemberg (Lviv) in Ukraine, where the Wiking Division was present and the SS murdered Jews, POWs, and other noncombatants. The division marched from central Poland over nine hundred miles to Rostov-on-Don in southern Russia. This section of the book is confusing, for several reasons. First, the killings themselves had many authors. The regular German army (Wehrmacht) often killed civilians, Russian prisoners, and Jews. Local people, particularly Ukrainian nationalists, took revenge on Soviet officials and killed their Jewish and Polish neighbors. And the notorious SS Einsatzgruppen—units established specifically to carry

1. At: www.miwsr.com/rd/1902.htm.

out war crimes—operated alongside and behind Waffen SS and Wehrmacht units, killing hundreds or thousands of Soviet citizens, mostly Jews, every week.

In terms of history, no new ground is broken here. Hundreds of studies have been devoted to this phase of the war on the Eastern Front and to the “Holocaust by bullets.” Indeed, the authors of *The Finnish SS Volunteers* rely on the vast literature compiled by Jewish survivors, German historians, and others to establish who killed whom and where. The book concludes with this summary of its findings:

The investigation of the large archival documentation and the literature has confirmed several cases in which the Finnish SS-volunteers engaged in violent acts against civilians and Jews. However, the documentation in diaries, recollections, notes, and documents is certainly vague and cannot really be confirmed in an entirely reliable way. Nevertheless, at least some of the cases show that Finnish volunteers did participate in carrying out atrocities against Jews and civilians.... As the documentation on these events only occasionally mentions the number of civilians killed by Finnish volunteers, the real numbers are likely to be higher, perhaps at least a few dozens. The readiness of the Finnish volunteers to shoot Soviet POWs was likely to have been much greater than that for killing civilians. There is a whole set of vague documentation that indicates that it was not particularly uncommon to kill surrendered Soviet POWs in clear conflict with the norms of the Hague Convention of Land Warfare of 1907 and the Geneva Convention on the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 1929. One of the few clear cases documented by the volunteer Taisto Kuuri happened in a village near Donskoye on 18.1.1942. Although the documentation is poor, the Finnish volunteers are nevertheless likely to have participated in the deliberate killing of several hundred Soviet POWs in Ukraine and the Caucasus. This investigation has been carried out using a considerable body of archival documents and literature. Although the SS-Investigation of the National Archives has not been able to access some ... documents, new materials most likely will concern individual cases. This additional information will probably not change the picture presented in this report. After more than 75 years since the march of the SS-Division Wiking through Galicia and beyond, there are no longer any volunteers left to investigate as none of those individuals mentioned above are still living. (202–4)

Both victims and perpetrators are now dead. The Finnish government is to be congratulated for having the courage to commission and publish this report. It is a invaluable addition to the scant English-language literature² on the non-German volunteers of the Wiking Division.

2. Including Claus Bundgård Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Peter Scharf Smith, “Germanic Volunteers from Northern Europe,” in *The Waffen-SS: A European History*, ed. Jochen Böhrer and Robert Gerwarth (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2017) 42–75, which covers the Scandinavian situation, Denmark and Norway in particular, as well as the more numerous Dutch and Flemish volunteers. The few memoirs by veterans, mostly in their native languages, include Hendrik C. Verton’s *In the Fire of the Eastern Front: The Story of a Dutch Waffen-SS Volunteer, 1941–45* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2010). A Norwegian woman, Ida Jackson, published *Morfar, Hitler og jeg* [Grandpa, Hitler, and I] (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2014), after learning about her maternal grandfather Per Pedersen Tjøstland’s service with the Nazis, both on the Eastern Front and at home in Norway.