

4-1-2019

Review of *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*

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Recommended Citation

Kropf, Peter (2019) "Review of *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2019.090111

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol9/iss1/11>

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War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941.

By Geoffrey P. Megargee. Total War: New Perspectives on World War II. Plymouth, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0742544826.

Civil War Union General William T. Sherman once declared, “War is hell.” This phrase aptly describes conflict on the Eastern Front during the Second World War. Adolf Hitler’s Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in mid-1941, set the stage for a wide-scale conflict the world had not yet seen. It meant death, destruction, and suffering for all involved. The campaign in Eastern Europe has been studied for decades, and an abundance of historical literature on the subject has been written and is widely available. However, in *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*, military historian Geoffrey P. Megargee asserts that there are shortcomings in this literature. He believes scholars have formed a narrative that fails to link Nazi military campaigns with crimes against humanity. This narrative is part of what Megargee calls “the dual myth of German military genius and moral correctness” (xii). Why is this “myth” commonly held as truth? He insists it is a combination of overreliance on former Nazi generals’ accounts (they placed all responsibility on Hitler or the SS), lack of access to records and documents, and post-war Cold War politics that painted the Soviets as malicious and thus the source of brutality. Another reason he cites is the habit of military historians to consider Nazi military affairs and its acts of genocide separately. By focusing on each one exclusively, they fail to connect the two. Therefore, Megargee’s goal is to show how the Wehrmacht was more intertwined with the Nazi liquidation policies and atrocities than most realize. Furthermore, he seeks to demonstrate why and how Hitler and the Germans fell short of completing their objectives in Russia. This review will pinpoint and examine the

author's major arguments, while also offering detailed analysis and evaluation of his methods and the overall work.

Before describing the cruelty and horrors inflicted by the SS, Einsatzgruppen, and the Wehrmacht, Megargee explains that the "war of annihilation" in the east had long-term racial, cultural, and national roots. He notes that feelings of German superiority emerged in the late nineteenth century and only increased after the First World War. Distrust and contempt for Slavs, Jews, and Bolsheviks grew alongside this nationalism. Hitler fed off this pent-up, post-war resentment and advocated the need for Lebensraum and preparation for an inevitable racial struggle. In terms of military strategy, the author observes that German commanders had long been promoting the ideas of total war and maximum violence to ensure the physical and emotional breakdown of the enemy (2-7). This was certainly evident during the invasion of Poland in the fall of 1939. During the occupation, the SS, Einsatzgruppen, and the German army cooperated to target and eradicate "undesirables." Even during this initial stage of the war, Hitler had stated, "The goal of the war lies not in reaching a certain line, but in the physical destruction of the enemy" (15). Nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, past war tactics, and the methods employed in Poland laid the groundwork for how future fighting was to be conducted on the Eastern Front.

Shortly after the decision to invade the Soviet Union, plans began to be formulated. Megargee points out that the message from the Nazi military brass was that the war in the east was to be one of extermination. Commander-in-Chief Walther von Brauchitsch told his senior commanders that the troops "have to realize that this struggle is being waged by one race against another, and [that they should] proceed with the necessary harshness" (33). SS functionary Herbert Backe's "Hunger Plan" (34) exemplified the indifference to human life that the Nazis

exhibited. It involved taking Russian foodstuffs and using them to feed mostly the German military and population. Essentially, it was a plan to starve millions of enemy civilians (General Quartermaster Eduard Wagner and Eighteenth Army leader Georg von Kuchler were particularly ruthless in facilitating these starvations) (120). As the war on the Eastern Front progressed, the atrocities committed by the Nazis grew. The treatment of Soviet prisoners of war was dreadful. Some were selected for Einsatzgruppen shootings (if not shot immediately upon surrender), and many lacked basic shelter, transport, medical care, and food while in captivity (on average, 6000 prisoners died every day). This negligence defied international military law and the rules of the Geneva Convention. Partisans and Jews faced the most severe circumstances, though. They were specifically targeted and often shot in cleansing operations. Since Jews had been linked with Bolshevism in Nazi rhetoric, they were especially viewed as a dangerous threat (59-62, 65-70).

Megargee emphasizes the large role that the Wehrmacht played in these displays of brutality. He notes that the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW, or Armed Forces High Command) and *Oberkommando der Heeres* (OKH, or Army High Command) often worked with the SS and the Einsatzgruppen to help them with their liquidation objectives. This was in the form of logistical aid (rail transport, etc.), the construction of ghettos, or simply through soldier-conducted and army-supervised mass shootings. The cooperation and coordination between the Wehrmacht and SS/Einsatzgruppen increased as the campaign dragged on. The author mentions that not all army generals and soldiers, though, agreed with this arrangement and these tactics. This disagreement usually was not on any moral grounds, but rather because of practical matters. Some generals were concerned that escalating violence would degrade military discipline as well as hurt any chances of acquiring the support of the local populations (58-59, 71, 116, 124).

Why did the Germans ultimately suffer defeat on the Eastern Front? Megargee claims it was the result of poor planning and internal friction. Hitler and the Nazis greatly underestimated the size, strength, and will of the Soviet army. Some may say this was due to the Germans' hubris and sense of racial superiority, but Megargee also blames a lack of reliable intelligence. The military historian adds that Nazi leaders ignored serious obstacles regarding logistics (57-58, 103, 112). They did not consider the scale of the theater in which they were fighting, nor did they concoct a backup plan for the operation. Weather was another factor not accounted for. In the early months of the campaign, rain turned roads into mud pits, making them nearly impassable. Thus, it became difficult to transport fuel and supplies. In the later months, the severe winter took a toll on the Wehrmacht, as soldiers were not prepared (they had neither enough clothing nor shelter) to take on the snow and sub-zero temperatures. The author insists that indecision among the top Nazi brass was key. Hitler, his advisors, and his army generals often could not find common ground when it came to military strategy. For example, the dictator wanted to invade the Ukraine and extract its oil and other vital economic assets, but others such as OKH Chief Franz Halder stressed the importance of toppling the Soviet capital of Moscow first. Megargee writes that these quarrels were commonplace, convincing some advisors and army leaders that they would have to manipulate Hitler, or at least attempt to work around the orders they disagreed with (78-82). Later in the campaign, after a decline in German performance, Hitler began relieving generals who defied his orders. He even took over as head of army operations (137-140). Hitler's obduracy and fanaticism created a tense atmosphere, one that detracted from the effectiveness and efficiency of the military process.

War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941 makes it clear that Megargee is an authority in his content area. In addition to being a military historian, he is

also an Applied Research Scholar at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, where he compiles and edits multivolume encyclopedias of all the camps and ghettos under Nazi control in the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, he wrote *Inside Hitler's High Command*, which has won numerous awards and makes his theses in this work even more credible and persuasive.¹ *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* is particularly well-researched. Megargee examined and analyzed both German and English texts, speeches from the era, formal SS/Einsatzgruppen reports, and even journal entries of army group commanders. These journal entries are essential, since they provide a mostly unfettered view of what these Nazis were probably thinking. The only possible criticism is that not enough sources portraying the invasion from the Soviet perspective were included; accounts from Russian soldiers, POWs, partisans, or civilians would have been informative and impactful (Megargee also should have spent more time discussing the fact that the Soviet Union was able to defend itself against the Nazis despite little economic or military assistance from Britain or the United States).² In regards to sources, the reader will be pleased to find a bibliographic essay at the book's end, one that recommends works on similar subjects and offers a sense of how the author culled his material.

One must admire the way Megargee structures his book. It is a consistent two-track/parallel commentary on military events and life behind the lines during Operation Barbarossa. By constantly alternating between the two subjects, the military historian highlights how they are interconnected. The work's bold subheadings within chapters aids the reader in breaking the campaign down into manageable, easy-to-understand phases. Maps, illustrations, and photographs enhance his arguments. The maps and illustrations allow the reader to keep track of military movements, strategies, and events. The photographs of Nazi leaders and

¹ Geoffrey Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Kansas City: University of Kansas Press, 2000).

² Gerhard L. Weinberg, *World War II: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 58-59.

generals give faces to the names; photographs of the various atrocities (shootings, graves, etc.) shock the reader and supply insight into the enormity of the situation on the Eastern Front. Megargee collected these photographs from institutions such as the National Archives Still Pictures Branch, the Imperial War Museum's Photograph Archive, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Library.

Finally, it is important to note the intended audience for *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*. The book is an outstanding synthesis for those readers who seek a critical, more detailed version of the campaign's progression and ground-level events. Those searching for a survey or comprehensive overview of the German-Soviet conflict should consult textbooks or other less-focused sources. Megargee's analyses may inspire some to learn more about the horrors in the east; those interested should read historian Omer Bartov's *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare*. The overall message Megargee conveys is that scholars and students must stop viewing history through distinct lenses and instead learn to see it as a sequence of connected events, peoples, and cultures.

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About the author

Peter Kropf majors in history and secondary education/youth services at Queens College, City University of New York. He is a Presidential Scholar who has maintained a 3.97 grade-point

average. Set to graduate in the spring of 2020, Peter is a published sportswriter and currently interns at Queens College's Athletic Communications Department.