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BOOK REVIEW: *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, by Wolfram Wette

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Author

Choe, Steve

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Wolfram Wette. *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*. Trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006. Pp. 372. Paper, \$17.95.

Wolfram Wette's *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* is a translation of the original German text published by S. Fischer Verlag in 2002. It aims to debunk the legend of the Wehrmacht's "clean hands," a legend that exculpates the Germany army from any misdeed during World War Two, and in some versions, celebrates their ostensible valor and professionalism. As we know, only a handful of the 20 million soldiers who served throughout the war were tried and found guilty.¹ Immediately following the Zero Hour and throughout the Adenauer era, a number of myths emerged based on accounts presented by Wehrmacht generals and other military leaders who would be tried in Nuremberg. At the dawn of the Cold War, these myths were circulated among more than a few military historians in Great Britain and the United States. They have claimed:

that the Wehrmacht kept its distance from the regime; that officers served their country, not the Fuehrer, with devotion; that the generals were horrified by the crimes of the SS and offered resistance to them; that they strictly adhered to moral standards and the code of professional soldiers. (235)

Wette delivers a devastating blow to this set of myths through careful research and astute interpretation. Consisting of six chapters and a conclusion, *The Wehrmacht* attends to micro-level details in order to construct a broad picture, not only of the history of the Wehrmacht, but also of its historiography.

Significantly, his account does not begin with the conclusion of the war crimes trials.

Chapter One, "Perceptions of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Bolshevism as Enemies,"

¹ For instance in trial twelve of the War Crimes Trials, conducted by the American authorities, fourteen men were accused who were to stand as representative of the Wehrmacht leadership. "Most of the defendants belonged instead to the second tier of the hierarchy and could thus be seen, in a manner of speaking, as representative of the entire military elite – or at least that was the reasoning of the authority issuing the indictments." (213)

reconstructs German perceptions of Russia throughout the twentieth century in order to demonstrate the discursive power of images of foreignness, myths that can have greater political consequence than reality. Wette quotes towards this an encyclopedia entry in the *Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexikon* from 1907 that characterizes the Asiatic “Russian soul”: “On its dark side the Russian character displays a love of material pleasures and an inclination to guile, thievery, and graft” (6). Such characterizations informed the nationalistic and imperialistic view of Russia as a geopolitical threat, while reinforcing the perception in 1914 that, “in the East the land is soaked with the blood of women and children butchered by the Russian hordes.”² These discursive constructions of identity and ethnic difference would in turn stoke fears of German encirclement (Einkreisung) in Europe and instigate the call for German militarism. During the Weimar period Wette notes that the German Communist Party (KPD) lent full support to the revolution and its role in world politics. He then connects these constructions of racial difference to the ideology of National Socialism, giving particular attention to Hitler’s Russian campaign in 1941. Hitler would exploit these racial discourses to promote his anti-Semitic, anti-Slavic program, concomitant to his aim of annihilating the Jews of Europe. And these perceptions would come to inform the official Nazi ideology to regard not only “Jewish Bolsheviks” as racially inferior, but all Slavs as well.

Wette then traces the trajectory of these public perceptions, identifying how they informed the ideology of the Prussian officer corps, and linking them to dominant myths of Jews circulating among the Reichswehr and the Wehrmacht. He notes that at the turn of the century pseudoscientific beliefs were deployed to rationalize emerging notions of racial hierarchies, while anti-Semitism became increasingly organized through political associations such as the

² From the infamous appeal written in 1914 and signed by fifty-six university professors, and which presented the war as a struggle for survival. Quoted from pg. 13 of Wette’s text.

Deutscher Handlungsgehilfenverband and the Band der Landwirte. Whereas officer corps under the Kaiser generally held a “rather moderate, conventional anti-Semitism,” (33) there also existed a much more radical strain which would evolve into an overt, hypostasized form of racism. During the 1920s, for example, German-Jewish soldiers who fought for the “fatherland” were barred from joining veterans’ organizations, while their characterization as “cowards, deserters, and traitors” only intensified as concomitant to the loser trope of the Dolchstoßlegende. For the Nazis these perceptions, ideologies, and pseudoscientific beliefs constituted the baseline for their conception of their Jewish others and became manifest as their official, xenophobic policy.

Wette shows that there existed a widespread racism throughout the Wehrmacht both “from above” and “below.” At the start of the Russian campaign, the propaganda issuing from the regime spoke of the Jews as “the global enemy.” At the same time, Hitler was perversely arguing that the Jews had begun the war against the German Reich. When the military order came from above on June 22, 1941 to annihilate “Stalin’s Bolshevist-Jewish system,” it was framed as a duty of the “Herrenmensch” to engage and conquer the inferior enemy on the eastern front. “The intent of the military order cited is clear, however,” Wette writes:

the soldiers were to be persuaded at least to tolerate the systematic killings by the SS, and to show no mercy in fighting their own battles. At the same time, the language was intended to blunt their scruples and the feelings of guilt likely to surface in conjunction with such brutality. Thus the main function of the racist propaganda consisted in creating a psychological distance between German soldiers and enemies through continual denigration and dehumanization of the latter in order to make killing them easier. (99-100)

How was this institutionalized cool conduct understood by the Wehrmacht soldiers from below? Wette describes a number of theaters of war – in Serbia, the massacres in Belaya Tserkov in August 1942, and in Babi Yar in September 1941 – to show how Wehrmacht and SS soldiers took to their duties, murdering tens of thousands of Jews seemingly without remorse. In Babi Yar, evidence of mass murder was systemically destroyed, including any records indicating the Wehrmacht’s involvement in intelligence officers’ reports. More horrifically, between 40,000 and 45,000 bodies were burned on pyres made of railroad ties soaked in gasoline, while those who knew how the evidence was destroyed, namely the members of the special commando sent to perform these grim duties, were “removed” as well. Wette relies on careful research of primary sources, those familiar and overlooked, eyewitness accounts, and other key resources up to the time of his own writing, telling this history at every moment with careful yet passionate sagacity. Sondercommando Paul Blobel, who carried out the Babi Yar “operation” was eventually found to be guilty on all three counts of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and membership in a criminal organization, and hanged on June 8, 1951.

The Wehrmacht keeps the reader apprised of the evolving historiography of the German army, evaluating at key moments scholarship that has decisively shaped its history. In ascertaining the extent to which the average Wehrmacht soldier may or may not have actually held racist beliefs, Wette contextualizes his findings with those of a 1995 history, *Frontsoldaten*, written by Stephen G. Fritz. This text is the result of close evaluation of thousands of letters, diaries, memoirs, and oral accounts by German soldiers on the front in order to access the reality of the soldiers in the bunkers and foxholes. “How could such a book be written? On what sources could the author draw?” While Wette acknowledges the difficulty in ascertaining the inner thoughts and beliefs of the average soldier, he credits Fritz for letting the former Wehrmacht

soldiers “speak for themselves,” and for achieving a high degree of authenticity, patently aware at the same time of the potential limitations of his methodology. In turn Wette lets Fritz’s text speak for itself and self-consciously presents its aims as parallel to his own project.

This historiographic transparency is particularly crucial when evaluating the postwar history of the Wehrmacht and its “clean hands” after 1945. Curiously, it was the Historical Division of the United States Army that commissioned former Wehrmacht General Franz Halder to begin research on the history of the German army. Wette notes that for almost two decades after the Second World War, most of this writing was carried out by the defeated, and to a far greater extent than most people realize. In June of 1946, 328 former German officers were writing for the history program, and by March 1948 they had collectively produced about 34,000 pages. Despite Halder’s disagreement with the Führer’s leadership in the war, he offered as the reason for his participation in the program: “to continue the battle against Bolshevism.” Wette is attendant to such histories, not only for their factual meaning, but also for their political ramifications, their myth-making potential, and their epistemological implications for knowing the past.

Chapter Six, “A Taboo Shatters,” is the most fascinating in this regard. Throughout *The Wehrmacht* Wette presents the facts as accurately as possible, maintaining throughout a clear and concise style. However, in this chapter he turns to a less empirical object, but nonetheless equally as concrete and “factual”: the taboo of the Wehrmacht’s guilt. And here he is attendant to the histories that have tried to exculpate the Germany army while placing sole blame for the disaster of the war on Hitler and his high command. Wette points to the tensions initially produced by the historiography of the July 20, 1944 plot to assassinate Hitler, and how it indirectly forced historians in the Adenauer era to address the “clean” Wehrmacht. The public discontent in the

early 1980s over the unresolved relationship of the Bundeswehr to the Wehrmacht, culminating in the Historikerstreit, raised the historical and political consciousness of the younger generation born after the war. It was subsequently the Wehrmacht Exhibition, mounted by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research between 1995 and 1999, that decisively shattered the taboo. For “hundreds of thousands if not millions of citizens,” (270) both young and old, the question of the Wehrmacht’s guilt was raised and interrogated within the public sphere. “Roughly 20 million men had passed through this gigantic military force of the National Socialist system,” Wette writes,

making it truly an army of the people. To a far greater degree than the Bundeswehr of today, it represented and reflected the general population of the country. Thus it cannot be understood solely as an institution of the state, but must be seen as part of society, closely bound up with the lives of the average German family. (270-1)

The Wehrmacht Exhibition was crucial for shattering the legend of the “clean hands,” for the taboo was presented, not merely as an object for academic historians, but as part and parcel of everyday life in postwar German society.

The Wehrmacht has been beautifully translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider. The prose reads quickly, yet every word carries weight and communicates clearly. Wolfram Wette’s text is undoubtedly an important contribution to the field of German military history. It deftly attends to historical details, yet is also attentive to the ideological problems that inform this historiography. In this two aims are kept in careful balance: *The Wehrmacht* rigorously critiques the discursive effects that constitute knowledge about the past and vigorously interrogates how such discursive

formations also inform ethnic and racial difference. *The Wehrmacht* is highly recommended for all who may have even a slight interest in the topic, academic and otherwise.

STEVE CHOE, University of Iowa