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Book Review: Violence in Defeat: The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944–1945

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Bastiaan Willems’s *Violence in Defeat: The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944–1945* examines a widely overlooked event in the final year of World War II—the Wehrmacht’s perpetration of violence against *German citizens* as their Eastern Front collapsed—and joins the numerous scholars researching the Wehrmacht’s barbarization while in that theater. Although previous works have focused on Poland and the Soviet territories, Willems focuses his analysis west of the German border. He shows how each “German soldier on the Eastern Front soon learned that he was fighting a Total War,” engendering a “‘barbarised’ mindset.” This mindset remained prominent as the Red Army pushed them back into East Prussia and the city of Königsberg (today’s Kaliningrad) (8, 41). It caused Wehrmacht mid-level leadership and soldiers to view all decisions through the lens of “military necessity,” justifying their repeated “spillage” of violence onto civilians and their property (71, 288).

*Violence in Defeat* speaks with remarkable clarity to current debates in America. First, it joins the literature on military effectiveness, which examines how military formations sustain combat, especially as they face defeat. Willems aligns himself with the “primary group” theorists, who argue that internally cohesive units motivate their members to undertake remarkable feats of discipline and resilience. Second, the ongoing conflicts abroad have resurrected debates about distinction and necessity in war. The Eastern Front of World War II remains a dominant frame for this debate, and Willems adds a fresh angle by covering the treatment of German civilians by their own army. Finally, he challenges broadly held assumptions about the ability of a wartime army composed of professional and conscript soldiers to follow the guidance of political leaders once in the chaos of war. His argument frames this question from the soldiers’ viewpoint, suggesting that they principally fall back on their own experiences and biases in extreme circumstances.
Willems presents his argument in two parallel parts. He first explores how Wehrmacht soldiers and their frontline leaders acquired what he calls a “‘barbarised’ mindset” (294). Soldiers on the Eastern Front became “imprinted with the idea that the war in the Soviet Union was a Total War” through socialization within their units—their primary groups. To the Wehrmacht soldiers, the Eastern Front was a clash of “two diametrically opposed world views,” requiring them to “utterly annihilate” their opponents to safeguard their way of life (69). To this end, Wehrmacht leadership linked the Nazi Party’s genocidal intents with “military necessity,” issuing decrees that rendered the Eastern Front “lawless” and rewarded ever more radical measures to hold ground (71–73). In this process, soldiers viewed German civilians—whom they generally distrusted—as objects of war.

Once in retreat, the Wehrmacht’s win-at-all-costs mindset continued unabated, setting up the second part of Willems’s argument. A core source of tension arose over civilian contributions to the defense effort. Many Wehrmacht troops felt the army had borne the highest costs of the war, believing they had sheltered the regime’s civilians from its horrors. In retreat, they viewed German citizens as defeatists. Hence, they felt little sympathy for the non-servicemembers hurt by their radical tactics, such as scorched earth. The Wehrmacht also adopted a “fortress strategy,” declaring certain cities to be festungen (or fortresses), where they would never yield to the Red Army, no matter the cost. Königsberg became a festung in 1944, and Willems captures the ensuing tragedy in horrid detail. Wehrmacht General Otto Lasch refused to surrender his 55,000 troops and the city as four Soviet field armies surrounded them. Lasch believed—somewhat ironically—that the city awaited a barbarous fate at the hands of the Red Army. He and his commanders forced the entire city to serve in its defense and brutally executed citizens they believed to be shirking their duties.

With this book, Willems forces servicemembers to revisit some of their long-standing assumptions about unit cohesion and their relationships with the civilians they serve. Willems shows that for many in the Wehrmacht—a force long regarded as an exemplar of military effectiveness—an underlying premise of their cohesion was a shared disdain among its members for the civilians they supposedly served. He also provides a useful—albeit extreme—case study of how a military’s notion of “military necessity” can go awry. The American military has shown considerable ambivalence toward the Wehrmacht over the years, remaining impressed with Germany’s operational brilliance early in the war and its dogged persistence attitude at the war’s end. Willems provides a harrowing view into the Wehrmacht’s final days and an essential perspective on this notorious army.

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