

Representations of War in the East, 1941-1945

The German case

Tobias Jersak

The war in the East was to last ten weeks. Then, more than 100 of the 154 German divisions were to be discharged and sent home, German men united with their families and casualties embraced in the celebration of complete German domination over Europe. Yet, the war in the East did not last ten weeks, it was not over after ten months. It lasted as long as the people of the Soviet Union were able to defend their lives against the men from the Axis' states who had joined in a 'crusade against Bolshevism' once the ten week threshold had passed.

This paper sets out to shed light on the many facet of representations of war in the East between 1941 and 1945 in a number of ways. In order to approach the many layers of representations it will first undertake the attempt to structure the war in the East. It is important to note that the representations of war changed with the character of war itself. A second part will examine the fundamental difference between 'just' or 'rightful warfare' in the Western theatre of war and the preconceived idea of an ideological *Weltanschauungskrieg* in the East - and how the individual soldier experienced this difference. This includes the question how the German soldiers turned into a crusader who brought bloodshed to Eastern Europe. A third and final part will attempt to put the war in the East in the broader context of the 'landscape of death'. It will try to link the various total aspects of this total war - total mourning, total destruction, total victory or total defeat - with a memory that could not cope with this totality.

1. Three stages of war in the East, 1941-45

Originally, Hitler had envisaged a war against the Soviet Union as the final stage of his conquest. The war against France was believed to last until the end of 1941, if not 1942. Moreover, already in 1937 Hitler had named the year 1943 as the right year for the war he wanted to fight against 'Russia'. This was to be his final *Weltanschauungskrieg* against Judeo-Bolshevism, the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the East.

Hitler's strategy changed after the surprisingly quick victory over France. Not only did his ambitions acquire a global dimension that envisaged offensive warfare against the United States in his lifetime, but his confidence into the German *Wehrmacht* also approached hubris after the crushing defeat of France. Now, the war against the Soviet Union united means and ends in a campaign that was no longer limited to the final struggle of two opposing world views. In fact, the defeat of the Soviet Union became the cornerstone of Hitler's new global strategy that would enable him to join forces with Japan in an offensive war against the United States; in effect he no longer cared about Britain. On the globe in his study Hitler had already marked the new German-Japanese border at the Urals with a pencil line. In order to win the war in the East quickly it was modelled after the campaign against France, a *Blitzkrieg* from the beginning.

(I) *Blitzkrieg*

The campaign against the Soviet Union was planned to last not much more than ten weeks. From August 1941 onwards, the mass of German soldiers would be at home again or engaged in crushing the British Empire from its 'outer positions', as Hitler termed them, while planning to attack British positions in the Middle East. Eleven days before German forces invaded the Soviet Union, a Führer directive

already set out the next aims for warfare after victory in the East. Furthermore, less than four weeks into the campaign, in mid July-1941, Hitler offered the Japanese ambassador an alliance that aimed at offensive warfare against the United States.

The simple German soldier, as quietly as possible transferred to new deployment sectors near the new German-Soviet border in former Poland, was kept uninformed about the events to come. To be sure, national-socialist education within the forces theoretically had made every German soldier a 'carrier of the NS-*Weltanschauung*'. Yet, with the Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty still in force German privates were told that deployment at the Soviet border was yet another ingenious trick of the Führer's to deceive the British. As late as the night before the invasion they learned, to their surprise, that their real enemy was right across the border in the East and to be attacked the following night. They were told what they might have believed before: that the Russian soldiers were subhuman, the Soviet commissars wild animals and the Jews the driving force behind them. Further, they believed that the Red Army would be crushed with the first blow. All in all, no-one would want to spend longer in Russia than absolutely necessary – until it was governed by the Greater German Reich. They would get in, defeat the 'stumbling colossus' -- the Red Army -- and get out again. Warfare would be different in the East, the propaganda told them. We will see later how the first encounters with Russian forces unwittingly enforced Nazi propaganda and changed warfare on the ground already in this first period.

The complete chaos and surprise that hit the Russian soldier with the German onslaught almost defies description. The German soldiers showed no mercy with the Slavic 'subhumans', although the tactic was to outflank and encircle complete armies. Helpless Red Army soldiers, forced by their political commissars to attack

the Germans again and again, ran arm in arm, one row after the other, into the machine gun fire of laughing soldiers as they did in the First World War. Only this time the Germans were laughing.

(II) Crusade

The notion of the war in the East as a 'crusade against Bolshevism' was not invented when the German strategic goals had not been reached after the first ten weeks. Hitler had used this theme before to mobilize his Allies, especially Italy, Romania and Hungary, to contribute to the war in the East by sending forces. (The Japanese ally was invited on strategic rather than ideological grounds to attack the Soviet Union from Vladivostok). Yet, the crusading idea was not very popular with either Hitler or the generals at the beginning. It was there merely help explain the German u-turn against its former ally and to unite Europe under German leadership even before victory over the Soviet Union. When it came to fighting, Hitler and the generals preferred to 'finish the job' alone. Oil transport enjoyed a higher priority than the transport of Italian troops to the front, who were indeed held back in the first weeks of the campaign. Furthermore, offers from Hungary and Romania to send forces were negotiated very slowly. The original idea of a crusade was to 'unite' Europe - for Hitler and the German leadership this obviously meant to subjugate them all even before victory.

Unexpectedly, though, the crusading notion proved very helpful when the campaign do not go according to plan. Three stages of ever increasing and ever more important calls to join the crusade were sent out from Germany to its allies. The first in the autumn of 1941, when the ten week threshold had been passed and victory in 1941 had become a matter of conjecture. The second, more urgent call, was sent out after the Russian counter-offensive in front of Moscow at the beginning

of December 1941 and during the growing winter crisis of the German forces. Finally a third call was made to join what military historians have called Hitler's 'second campaign' against the Soviet Union in the summer of 1942. Italian, Romanian and Hungarian troops were incorporated in the front that advanced against Stalingrad. They were not allowed to join the attack and thus assigned only defensive tasks against possible Soviet counter attacks. When German forces had been encircled in Stalingrad, Soviet forces broke through the defence line held by Germany's allies at the turn of 1942/43. From that moment on, the 'fatherland' was in danger.

(III) Bulwark

The notion of the war in the East as a 'crusade against Bolshevism' did not vanish when the attacking German armies were forced into defence first after the defeat at Stalingrad in January 1943 and finally after the defeat at Kursk in July 1943. On the contrary, now the crusading idea developed images ever more cruel, such as those of 'Bolshevik hordes' about to overrun the heart of civilisation, a tide that had to be stopped. The German Reich was now declared the last bulwark against barbarism. A change in imagery and propaganda accompanied this last stage of the struggle in the East. No longer were the Soviet forces and government portrayed as a 'Judeo-Bolshevik' spearhead, no longer was Moscow named the centre of evil and capital of the 'International Jewish Conspiracy'. In fact, Hitler voiced his respect for Stalin as a leader who had managed to cleanse his government of the Jews.

Two factors contributed to this change in imagery. First, the Red Army was pushing ever closer to Reich territory and the image of German women and girls being raped by Soviet soldiers had entered the propaganda long before it became reality -- a fact that intensified the horror of this reality later. The second factor was

even more cruel. The mid-1943 change in imagery and propaganda reflected the (secret) fact that not only the Jews of the Soviet Union, but all Jews in German occupied territory had been annihilated. Indeed, the three extermination camps at Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka had already stopped their terrible work and were torn down. Special commands dug up the victims, piled them on pyres and set them on fire. The term 'Holocaust' -- in its sense of sacrificial burning -- might have stemmed from this imagery. With the Jews murdered and the Red Army on the offensive, the crusade against Bolshevism now became the fanatic defence of Europe and its culture from the 'Asiatic hordes'. Like the Austrian Empire against the Turks, the German Reich was declared Europe's bulwark, the last line of defence against Barbarism - and Hitler the defender of European tradition, culture and values.

2. 'In the East, hardness is gentle for the future'

While on the Western front and in the African desert thresholds of legitimate violence were restored and warfare 'standardized' in an 'ethical' form, warfare in the East drew on two completely different sets of images. First, the imagery of the First World War -- or at least what was left of it -- as a set of images of a war against a backward civilization and a non-culture was mixed with the anti-Semitic doctrine of a ruling class of Jewish revolutionaries, in Hitler's words a 'ferment of decomposition'. As such they equalled the backward *Ostjüden* encountered by German soldiers in the last war like a relic from the Middle Ages. Thus, it is not surprising that the second set of images related to Medieval imagery. Nazi propaganda reinvented images of religious warfare, of crusader-like violence, combined with the image of redemption. Not only the East itself would be redeemed by the Germans, 'redeemed' from its culture, its language, its religion, redeemed from the Soviet system, from Bolshevism and last but not least from its own inhabitants, but

Germany would also redeem Europe, in fact the whole world, from the danger of Bolshevism. Whereas German and British soldiers jointly celebrated their 'gentlemenly war' in the African desert again this year in London, there existed nothing similar in the East let alone anything to celebrate.

The German attitude in the East was different from the beginning. Yet, there existed considerable disagreement even between Nazi ministries as how to treat the population in the Soviet Union. The *Wehrmacht* tended to join Rosenberg's - the designated Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories - position to treat them rather well than badly and to create separate states. But this was not the policy Hitler, Himmler and the SS had in mind. Before the campaign started, Himmler explained his 'dilemma' in a letter to Hitler's confidante Martin Bormann:

Already the following question appears me to be very difficult: the instructions, which the Führer has given me as well as the *Wehrmacht* with regard to carrying out executive measures are profoundly different from the views Rosenberg has expressed. I do not want to find myself in the fatal situation - on the basis of detailing orders which Rosenberg will issue - as to either go against the Führer's opinion or to be branded by the people of his staff or himself; branded as the one who has acted politically unreasonable, merely as police henchman or similar.

Himmler described his role in history here remarkably sharply. Yet, in the end Rosenberg's authority was diminished by Hitler and Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, the Chief of the *Wehrmacht*, who lent his authority to any Hitler order. After all, he was conveniently nicknamed *La-Keitel*, a German play on words for 'lackey'.

Thus, the policy of destruction did not develop as the war in the East changed its character. It was there from the beginning, ordered and authorized from above

and further instigated from below. Mass murder was planned before the first shot had been fired. Thirty million Russian civilians were earmarked for starvation. So were all POW's. Political commissars were to be shot on the spot. All male Jews in state or government functions awaited the same fate. This was Hitler's war of destruction in the East; long before the campaign he had instructed the Army's leading generals that 'in the East hardness is gentle for the future'. The *Lebensraum* was to be cleansed for German colonization.

Still, German soldiers and officers preserved the illusion of keeping their 'honour' in yet another *Blitzkrieg*. If the campaign was only conducted swiftly and professionally and finished within ten weeks, they might be out in ten additional weeks. Yet, their reputation was ahead of them. As you sow so shall you reap. As the Army did not bring 'just warfare', they could not expect to be greeted with 'just warfare'. When Stalin offered to sign the Geneva convention Hitler refused. Rumours that the Germans shot their POW's had already led to many suicides of Red Army officers before they were captured. And Soviet soldiers certainly knew the tricks outside the Geneva convention as well and infuriated those German privates and officers who might have fought by the book until then.

Many Red Army soldiers pretended to be dead on the ground only to shoot in the back the Germans soldiers who had passed them by. There are reports that whole groups of Soviet soldiers emerged from a trench waving a white flag. When the Germans came slowly and fearfully near to take them prisoners - they also had heard rumours of unconventional warfare - they were mowed down by Russian machine gun fire. This group of Soviet soldiers, once subdued, was not the only one executed on the spot on the orders of a German officer. Reports of unarmed Red Army soldiers found dead with their hands above their heads and wounds in the

heads piled up on the German Army's desks. Even the commander of Army Group Center reports about the atrocities in his war diary:

The troop commanders report the craftiness of the Russian, who pretend to surrender in order to shoot anew; [this] has infuriated our men so much that they kill everything that crosses their path. We have also reports about the mutilation of our wounded German men.

When it came to atrocities and the treatment of political enemies, the two sides were not very selective in their methods, which were relentlessly executed. Hitler had 'cleansed' his occupied part of Poland of the intelligentsia, the nobility and the clergy. Stalin had pretty much done the same. Yet, whereas the Army's protest against the atrocities executed by the SS in Poland was silenced through a Hitler order, the encounter with victims of the NKVD in the Eastern part of Poland after crossing the border on 22 June 1941 very conveniently redirected the anger and fury against the new, 'real' enemy.¹

One of the strange human dimensions of warfare is the understanding that it requires trust -- the belief that signs have the meaning that is ascribed to them and that warfare could follow conventions; that war was a contest to determine which was the better army, which had the better fighting power, supplies, tactics and strategy. The war in the East had none of these. It was neither a contest nor did it follow conventions. *Hinterlist* (craftiness) was not only expected from the Russians, but pre-empted by the Germans. The aim of the war was not victory, but destruction. Victory, was assumed in the most fatal way, even before the first shot had been fired.

¹ It is unfortunate that the original *Wehrmacht* exhibition, now revised, has taken so little care to put these events into context.

As far as the people in the western Soviet Union are concerned, they had mostly greeted the Germans as liberators. Contemporary reports and diary entries tell us that the first question asked by peasants was when would they get their land back; older women hoped for the churches to be reopened.

The fundamental difference between the 'gentlemen war' in the West and the *Weltanschauungskrieg* in the East was also reflected in Hitler's different handling of complaints, depending on the front. Let us look closer at the examples of Colonel Speidel (West) and Colonel-General Höppner (East) as far as Hitler's orders were concerned. Let us also have a look at Cracow railway station in January 1942 where German soldiers, up to then working for the German military administration in France and now in transition to the East, had to leave behind their previous lives in the snow of the railway station.

One striking difference between warfare in the East and warfare in the West is that there existed no systematic policy of deterrence through shooting hostages in the East. The reason for this is at hand. According to Nazi ideology and Hitler's conviction, a 'subhuman' would not be impressed if his brother, mother, father or sister was shot. On the contrary, resistance might stiffen. The governing principle of the administration in the East was different. As Hitler put it on 16 July 1941: 'The giant area must be pacified as quickly as possible; this will happen at best by shooting anyone who pulls a wry face'.

In the West, Hitler insisted on a harsh policy of retaliation in cases of attacks on German administrative personnel. When in October 1941 several German officers were shot by the underground resistance in France, Hitler intervened personally and demanded draconian measures from General Stülpnagel, the commander of his military administration in France. Stülpnagel, however, feared a

radicalisation and tried his best to get round Hitler's order. At the beginning of November 1941, in a last attempt to mediate, he sent his deputy, Colonel Speidel, to Hitler's headquarter in East Prussia. Speidel reported during the daily situation conference on the hostage situation in France. Hitler lost his temper and shouted at him about the 'weakness' of the military administration. The French themselves had killed many hundreds of thousands of people during the commune in 1871 and nobody cared anymore. Speidel used a pause to mention that, according to historical research, these numbers were wrong: a maximum of 20,000 people had died and this had nothing to do with the shooting of hostages. Hitler was interested: how did he know? Would he please come to lunch with him? After lunch, Hitler gave in to some of Speidel's pleas and he left for Paris with a partial success. The striking feature of this episode is not so much Speidel's courage as Hitler's willingness to reconsider his orders in the case of France.

When it came to the East, Hitler's orders had to be obeyed no matter what. Colonel-General Hoepner was not the first to experience this, but certainly the harshest case. Hoepner was one of the most experienced tank commanders on the Eastern front and had been put in command of tank group 3, one of four tank groups in the East, at the beginning of the campaign. During the winter crisis of 1941/42, on 8 January 1942, one of the smaller corps under his command was no longer able to hold its front line and was about to be destroyed by the Soviet counter attack. Yet, according to Hitler's 'hold order', moving back was impossible. Hoepner's superior, Field Marshal von Kluge, did not dare to take the necessary decision, but phoned the Army High Command's Chief of General Staff at noon. From headquarters came no reply. After waiting two hours and watching his men die, Hoepner allowed the corps to retreat. He duly reported this at 7pm. Less than five hours later Hitler had

interfered; Hoepner was informed that he had not only lost his command, but his life as an officer: Hitler had kicked him out of the *Wehrmacht*. Whereas Colonel Speidel from the Western theatre had been able to challenge Hitler and won the argument, Colonel-General Hoepner paid for being a responsible commander on the Eastern front by forfeiting his career. It was as if 'right' and 'wrong' were different in the East and in the West. The same evening that he kicked Hoepner out of the *Wehrmacht*, Hitler allowed the whole front to retreat.

The winter crisis 1941/42 brings about another point of comparison between the war in the West and the war in the East. With the ghost of defeat looming on the horizon, the German war effort had been pushed into another phase. The *Blitzkrieg* had been lost, but the war was not over. A total of 45 field, town and district commands were now deemed unnecessary for the administration of occupied France and thus transferred to the East where every man was needed in order to stop the Red Army's counter offensive. Transport capacity was sparse, especially on the railway lines in the East, so the train journey from France ended in Cracow. The commanders, their men and all their equipment were loaded onto trucks to be driven to their destinations at temperatures approaching minus 30 degree Celsius. Yet, the trucks had not the same transport capacity as the trains in which they had arrived from France. The difference in attitude became apparent when the German officers previously relaxing in France found themselves in the snow at Cracow railway station. Here they had to leave behind several thousand bottles of Bordeaux and Burgundy wine, their own bedding and other luxurious goods they had brought all the way from France. The wine froze in the snow at the railway station. Most of the commanders, not used to the hard work and harsh conditions in the East, reported ill within weeks.

3. Landscapes of death

In the big picture, the image of landscape does not change regardless of how much the villages are bombarded and thus quite a number of the miserable shacks are destroyed, regardless of how many cows, chicken, goose and pigs are eaten up. Only if one deals with the particulars or the human suffering does one experience the destructive violence of war. Books will later be written about this.

The German General who reported this in his diary might have captured a deeper truth. The *image* of the landscape might not have changed, but the landscape itself bore scars that would not heal for a long time and are mostly still visible today. 'Landscape' had become something entirely different after the Germans, first during the advance and then during the retreat, had destroyed whatever had been landscape before. Mourning had acquired a completely new dimension as the Germans turned from welcomed liberators into brutal murderers. For a long time, trust was a lost word. The comparison with the 'total war' of 1917 seems almost out of place, so much more total was the war in the East. While in the Great War every family, every bond of kinship was affected *somehow*, in the East almost every person was affected *directly*.

In contrast to the Great War warfare was never stationary in the East. There were no trenches, no demarcation line. The German advance brought terror and destruction to almost the entire European part of the Soviet Union – and did so more than once. For us today, 'Grosny' seems a very remote, nearly Asian town far away; one that pops up in the media; not so for the German soldiers, nor for the Soviet defenders. As the front went back and forth, as partisan warfare and German counter measures became ever more violent, as the big rivers froze and melted

again, destruction became a part of everyday life. Many towns changed hands more than four times. Every new liberation brought new hope -- and every new occupation, new suffering. The landscape was engraved, as in other wars, in the memory of the combatants. Yet, the mass of memories of the *same* landscape at different times and at different stages in the war blurred memory itself.

Let us briefly consider the case of Byelorussia. Byelorussia saw the most terrible destruction of all former Soviet republics in World War II. Located next to the Polish border, it was the first land to be overrun and the first land where heavy fighting led to great destruction. Then it saw an increasingly brutal and desperate civil administration, followed by the retreat of the German troops being forced back into Reich territory again. In Byelorussia, the Red Army lost its first great battle and hundred of thousands of soldiers their lives at the beginning of the war, and in Byelorussia the German army lost its last great battle and also hundred of thousands of soldiers their lives at the end of the war.

In between, the German occupiers murdered 2.2 million of a total of 10.6 million civilians and POW's. By 1944, by and large, every town was destroyed - if not during the initial attack in 1941, then during the German retreat in 1944, following Hitler's 'Nero' or 'burnt soil' order. Most of the villages had seen fighting and destruction; the longer the war lasted the more villages were burnt down during the so-called anti-partisan warfare - in many cases together with the women, children and old people who had remained there. Some population groups had been almost completely wiped out: the Jews, the prisoners of war and the male peasants. Three million Byelorussians no longer had a place to live, because their houses had been destroyed. Industrial capacity was reduced by 95%, the area of arable land by

almost 50%. Only about 20% of millions of sheep, cows, chicken and dogs were left. The landscape was not much different from Flanders at the end of 1918.

Worse, still, the civilian population was not only exposed to the German terror, but also the terror from the NKVD, the partisans and the Red Army. The NKVD continued the purges under wartime conditions. The partisans took the last bits of food the Germans had not already taken and drafted every boy and girl of age into their ranks. And Red Army soldiers raped there too; not just when they came to the German border. Trust was a lost word indeed.

If we return to the overall picture, mass death appears not so much as a set of single events, but rather as a shocking total. During the first three months of the war in the East, 2.1 million Soviet soldiers lost their lives. By the end of the year 4.3 million were either wounded or dead. The year 1942 saw 3 million killed soldiers of the Red Army; in 1943 2 million and in 1943 yetl 1.4 million more, yieldingl a total of more than 10 million Soviet soldiers killed by the end of the war. A further 18 million had been wounded.

Of all German soldiers who died in the war Hitler had brought about, more than 50% died in the East. 'Only' 6% were killed on the Western front. Furthermore, the contrast between the German and the Soviet losses could not have been greater. A total of 2.7 million German men lost their lives on the Eastern front. It might help to categorize German and Soviet war losses on the Eastern front if we consider relative casualties from the beginning of the campaign (Table 1)

Table 1. German and Soviet war losses on the Eastern Front, 1941-45

period	German soldiers killed	Soviet soldiers killed
<i>Blitzkrieg</i>	302,000	2,994,000
<i>Crusade</i>	849,000	3,775,000

<i>Bulwark</i>	1,549,000	3,242,000
----------------	-----------	-----------

Historiography on the Second World War in the East is still trying to come to terms with these terrifying dimensions. The first period, *Blitzkrieg*, is well researched from the German onslaught to the Russian counter-offensive. The second period has only been covered as far as the great battles Stalingrad and Kursk are concerned. Also, the various aspects of the ‘*crusade*’ period have been analyzed in a number of contexts. Yet, for the third period, *the ‘Bulwark’ phase*, studies are still lacking. Not a single German investigation covers the period from 1943-45. Only very few aspects have been examined. The questions still seem too big and the answers unsettling and uncertain.

It seems particularly difficult to cope with the human dimension and the various ‘if’s’ of this history. Had, for example, the attempt on Hitler’s life succeeded in July 1944 and fighting been stopped then, 1.3 million Soviet soldiers would not have been killed, a further 4.8 million not wounded. On the German side these figures are even more dramatic, not in absolute numbers, but as ratio of overall casualties. Roughly 50% of the German war losses occurred after July 1944. 1.97 million German men were killed during the last nine months of fighting. And this does not take into account the casualties among the civilian population on both sides.

All this is so deeply disturbing, that the narrative of these events has still to be told. Maybe most disturbing of all is the fact that not even the narrative has been told. After all, everyone has somehow heard of Stalingrad, yet no one of the defeat of Army Group Centre in 1944. Worse still, to this day German military historians refer to it as a collapse rather than as a defeat. The truth is too harsh to be faced even in military history.

How does memory, how does mourning work in the absence of narratives? Maybe this is the big question left by the many representations of the changing war in the East, as far as the German case is concerned. So far memory seems to have been buried not only with the dead but also with the political system that destroyed their lives.