

NEGOTIATING MURDER: *WEHRMACHT* SOLDIERS AND PARTICIPATION IN
ATROCITIES, 1941-1942

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ABSTRACT

WAITMAN W. BEORN: NEGOTIATING MURDER: *WEHRMACHT* SOLDIERS
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(Under the direction of Christopher Browning)

How did ordinary German soldiers confront atrocities and their complicity in them? This study investigates the complexities of participation and non-participation in spontaneous acts of violence in one unit on the eastern Front. It begins by examining what kinds of propaganda soldiers were exposed to and what kinds of beliefs and worldviews they expressed in letters home. In September 1942, the 4th Panzer Signal company murdered thirty to forty Jews in the tiny Soviet town of Peregruznoje, apparently on the initiative of the unit commander. A case study of this unit illuminates a twisted terrain of choices, pressures, norms, and organizational culture that helps explain why some men (and units) killed and others did not. This work argues that the kinds of “perpetrators” among *Wehrmacht* soldiers fall along a continuum of response: an activist core led by the commander, followers who went along, and others who evaded participation.

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I. Introduction: One Day in September

I believed it would be better for the victims as well as the participants, not to see the others lying at that place, that a mass shooting was taking place. Those were thoughts at the time, to my recollection.

- Statement of Sergeant Fritz Puls¹

The war in the East was carried out with reckless cruelty by the Russian side. My endeavor was always with the leadership of the company, to spare the blood of my men. For this reason, I had to treat the members of the Russian civil population harshly. I had to presume of them, that they could become dangerous to the unit and especially my men.

- Statement of First Lieutenant Fritz Fischer²

Sometime in September, 1942, a small formation took place just outside the tiny town of Peregruznoje, in the Soviet Union. In the pre-dawn hours, a group of German soldiers congregated in the dusty unit motor pool. Sergeant Puls, an officer candidate and leader of this group, nodded to the roving sentries who had been guarding the unit's vehicles overnight and they moved back to their quarters. Puls looked at one truck in particular, a cargo truck, with its tarp tightly closed. The thirty to forty inhabitants were quieter now after almost half a day crammed together in the truck, but soft cries and moans still emanated from the stifling interior. After checking their weapons, the twelve to fifteen soldiers, led by Puls, climbed

¹ "Statement of Fritz Puls, 11-27-62," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 356. [*Ich glaubte, es wäre für die zu Erschießenden besser und auch für die Ausführenden, dass an der Stelle nicht sehen andere lägen, dass also eine Massenerschießung stattfindet. Das waren meiner Erinnerung nach damals so meine Gedanken.*]

² "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 12-6-62," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl.341. [*Der Krieg im Osten von Seiten des Russen mit rücksichtslosen Grausamkeit geführt. Mein Bestreben ist es immer bei der Führung der Kompanie gewesen, das Blut meiner Männer zu schonen. Aus dieser Grunde musste ich die Angehörigen der russischen Zivilbevölkerung hart anfassen, von denen ich annehmen musste, sie könnten der Truppe und insbesondere meinem Männern gefährlich werden*]

into a few vehicles and slowly pulled out of town, as the steppe landscape of Russia was illuminated by the rising sun.

The small convoy drove only a kilometer or so outside of the town and then pulled off the dirt path into the steppe. Puls and his men opened the flaps and the tailgate and forced a group of approximately ten women, children, and elderly out of the back of the truck. These people were forced to stumble away from the vehicles while the German soldiers walked behind them, shooting with a combination of rifles and submachine guns. When no one was left standing, another soldier walked among the victims, shooting any still alive. As the men walked back to the trucks, the remaining Jews screamed in fright and pleaded, knowing what fate awaited them. The soldiers mounted up, drove several hundred meters farther and repeated the process. When all were dead, the small convoy returned to the motor pool. It was likely finished before breakfast. As the men cleaned out the back of the truck and started weapons maintenance, Sergeant Puls walked off to report the successful completion of his mission to the company commander, First Lieutenant Fritz Fischer. In this manner, the entire Jewish population of Peregruznoje was exterminated by a small group of signal soldiers whose military mission was laying and maintaining communication wires between headquarters.

Yet, out of almost two hundred men, only a small minority of the 4th Panzer Signal Company actively participated in this execution and the other atrocities for which it was responsible. Some men actively refused, others made themselves scarce, others followed orders when given, and some volunteered. Why did some men choose to participate or avoid participation in atrocities in the ways they did? To what extent did earlier and contemporary

efforts at indoctrination influence the mindsets of these soldiers? These are the principal questions that this study seeks to answer.

What follows is an examination of the forces at play within German Army units as they experienced combat on the Eastern Front and engaged in a variety of atrocities. This case study will illustrate the complex interaction between leadership and unit dynamics on the one hand, and indoctrination, propaganda, and training on the other. Judicial interrogations of the 4th Panzer Signal Company will illustrate the complicated pressures at work inside one such unit such as peer pressure, dysfunctional leadership, and role-playing. An examination of soldier letters, wartime propaganda directed at the troops, and internal military documents will help us understand some of the preexisting mindsets and lenses through which these soldiers viewed the situations in which they found themselves.

Destroying a Myth: The “Clean” Wehrmacht

Investigating the complicity of German soldiers in atrocities during World War II requires a descent into the murky realm of obscuration, memory, myth, and guilt. Fortunately, many historians have done exhaustive research in debunking the *Mythos der Sauberen Wehrmacht*³ (The Myth of the Clean Wehrmacht). Immediately following the war, the Nuremberg Tribunal promoted the “clean hands” myth by specifically terming the SS, and not the *Wehrmacht*, a criminal organization and, by implication, blaming senior leadership, not ordinary soldiers both legally and morally for atrocities and the Holocaust.

³ The term *Wehrmacht* technically refers to all fighting arms of the German military during World War II. When discussing the general complicity of the military, especially from a historiographical standpoint, in atrocities committed during the war, I will use the term “*Wehrmacht*” though the discussion of such atrocities generally centers on land forces, specifically the Army. While other formations such as *Luftwaffe* Field Divisions, *Waffen-SS*, *Einsatzgruppen*, Reserve Police, and a host of others were often attached to the Army in varying forms, they are special enough in their organization and characteristics that they should not be included as “representative” units.

Contributing to this myth that the *Wehrmacht* was a purely military organization that fought bravely for the Reich were the flurry of clearly self-serving memoirs written by German generals and senior military officials, portraying themselves as unwilling participants and as ignorant of the crimes committed by “others” within the regime.⁴ In addition, the specter of Communism and the Cold War made rearmament (and the participation of former *Wehrmacht* members in facing the new threat) a vital component of post-war German life.

Historical treatment of the *Wehrmacht* began with “pure” military histories, concentrating on tactical prowess and operational history, but generally eschewing any discussion of political involvement or complicity. Indeed, these works generally claimed a “vast distance” between the officer corps and the Nazi political organs, implying the *Wehrmacht* did not condone, let alone participate in atrocity and genocide. Examples of this genre include a number of works, especially those by British historians such as Liddell-Hart which often legitimized the alibis of the German generals.⁵ Donald Bloxham states that he played “Cold War politics while [he] was purportedly working in support of the apolitical figures, who happened to be the standard-bearers of the Vernichtungskrieg.”⁶ Indeed, evidence of Liddell-Hart’s disturbing myopia can be seen in his own conclusion that “60 percent [of the generals] are apolitical vacuum-men who have hitherto concentrated upon

⁴ See Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (Washington: Zenger Pub. Co., 1979), Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1958)., and F. W. von Mellenthin, *German Generals of World War II : As I Saw Them*, 1st ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977)..

⁵ Omer Bartov, "German Soldiers and the Holocaust: Historiography, Research, and Implications," *History & Memory* 9, no. 1-2 (1997): 165. Also, see Liddell-Hart’s myopic work. Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk*, Apollo Editions ; a-41. (New York: W. Morrow, 1948).

⁶ Donald Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial : The War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 177-78.

their professional work and have never thought about wider questions'.”⁷ He made this conclusion after beginning his intimate relationship with the German generals during their imprisonment in England in 1945. In short, the historical material produced after the war and into the 1960s did little to recognize or investigate the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* at any level.

Also, complicating any investigation of *Wehrmacht* complicity in this period were the political exigencies of the immediate post-war era, which tended to favor a rapid re-integration of former *Wehrmacht* soldiers into the *Bundeswehr* to face the new Soviet threat. Liddell-Hart appears in this context as well, aiding people like imprisoned Waffen-SS General Wilhelm Bittrich. These same German generals used Liddell-Hart to connect “rehabilitation” for Nazi crimes with the need for rearmament against the Soviet threat.⁸ Strategies such as these both reflected and impacted German public opinion; Germans sought honor and heroism in the *Wehrmacht* and were more than willing to ignore the possibility that their husbands, fathers, and sons had committed the basest of Nazi crimes. As Donald Bloxham notes in his work on the subject, the “trials were conceptually flawed as didactic tools and...their shortcomings were magnified by the political discourses of the post-war years.” Between 1945 and 1953, Allied policy shifted rapidly from enforcing the idea of collective German guilt to differentiation between Germans, then, somewhat more gradually, to appeasement of German indignation at the earlier punishment of war criminals.”⁹ Indeed, in 1953, when asked if they thought “German soldiers could be reproached for their actions

⁷ Alaric Searle, "A Very Special Relationship: Basil Liddell Hart, Wehrmacht Generals and the Debate on West German Rearmament, 1945-1953," 1998, 332.

⁸ For more on Liddell-Hart's involvement with rearmament, see Alaric Searle, "A Very Special Relationship: Basil Liddell Hart, Wehrmacht Generals and the Debate on West German Rearmament, 1945-1953," 1998

⁹ Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial : The War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory*, 11-12.

in the occupied countries”, 55% of Germans said “no”, 21% said “in some cases,” and only 6% answered with an unequivocal “yes.”¹⁰ As Bloxham concludes, “the reputation of the Wehrmacht was preserved in Germany by the perpetuation of one myth of its ‘unpoliticized’ nature and of another of the German ‘bulwark’ against the Communist east.”¹¹

Gradually, however, scholars began revising this interpretation. They unearthed the ubiquitous implementation of the *Kommissarbefehl*, collaboration with the *Einsatzgruppen*, and the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war.¹² Indeed, while the Army had no jurisdiction in the operational employment of the *Einsatzgruppen*, it did have operational control of them for movement and logistics and had liaison officers attached to its headquarters at all levels. In Belorussia, Army units established and ran ghettos for two months before handing them over to civil administration.¹³ Nor were these actions limited to

¹⁰ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Erich Peter Neumann, and author joint, *The Germans: Public Opinion Polls 1947-1966* (Allensbach: Bonn, Verlag für Demoskopie, 1967), 202.

¹¹ Bloxham, *Genocide on Trial : The War Crimes Trials and the Formation of Holocaust History and Memory*, 178.

¹² Bartov, "German Soldiers and the Holocaust: Historiography, Research, and Implications," 166. The *Kommissarbefehl* or Commissar Order dictated that Army units summarily execute any Communist political apparatchiks captured during combat operations. The *Einsatzgruppen* were tactical units specially formed for the purpose of carrying out the mass executions of “potential enemies behind the lines on the Eastern front. By the summer of 1941, this had evolved into essentially the mass murder of Jews. Finally, as Streit shows, a precedent for neglect toward Soviet POWs existed in the Army command and resulted in large numbers of deaths. Some controversial literature suggests that the extermination of POWs was an intentional design. For analysis of the Commissar Order (and other directives from both OKW and OKH) see *Hans Buchheim and Institut für Zeitgeschichte (Munich Germany), Anatomie Des Ss-Staates*, 2 vols., *Dtv Dokumente. (München: Deutschen Taschenbuch Verlag, 1967)*.. For Wehrmacht collaboration with the *Einsatzgruppen*, see Helmut Krausnick, Helmut Krausnick, and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges : die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, 1938-1942*, Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte ; Bd. 22. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981). For Wehrmacht genocidal policies toward Soviet POWs, see *Christian Streit, Keine Kameraden : die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941-1945*, Neuausg. ed. (Bonn: Verlag J.H.W. Dietz Nachf., 1991).

¹³ Hannes Heer, "Killing Fields: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belorussia, 1941-1942," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, no. 1 (1997): 81.

the Eastern Front or to a period of increasing violence after 1941, as some have argued.¹⁴ Soldiers carried out atrocities and abetted the precursor to the Final Solution in Poland and France.¹⁵ In partisan wars in both Greece and Serbia, *Wehrmacht* soldiers committed atrocities that in many ways prefigured those committed during *Barbarossa*.¹⁶ Thus, the German Army had demonstrated a proclivity for complicity and atrocity before stepping foot into the Soviet Union. The final result of this research has been to show that the *Wehrmacht* in general and the German Army in particular, were far from “clean” in their roles in war crimes during the period. Indeed, members of the military participated willingly at all levels. Soldiers rounded up Jews and handed them over to *Einsatzgruppen*. Soldiers shot Soviet POWs who could not work and guarded POW cages where they died from starvation and exposure by the hundreds of thousands. Soldiers conducted reprisals both spontaneously and systematically. Soldiers guarded execution sites. The illumination of the actual participation of all levels of the *Wehrmacht* in the crimes of the Nazi state can be said to constitute the first “generation” of work in this area.

¹⁴ Omer Bartov claims that the barbarization of the war in the east led to more and more violence against civilians and more complicity by the Army. While this is not an unrealistic argument, recent scholarship suggests that such proclivities existed and were executed much earlier, before the influence of the Russian campaign. See Omer Bartov, "Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich," *The Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 1 (1991).

¹⁵ For Poland, see Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity*, Modern War Studies. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003). For France, see Raffael. Scheck, "'They Are Just Savages': German Massacres of Black Soldiers from the French Army in 1940," *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 77 (2005), Christopher Neumaier, "The Escalation of German Reprisal Policy in Occupied France, 1941-42," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 1 (2006).

¹⁶ For Greece, see Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece : The Experience of Occupation, 1941-1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), Mark Mazower, "Military Violence and National Socialist Values: The Wehrmacht in Greece, 1941-1944," *Past and Present*, no. 134 (1992). For Serbia, see Walter Manoschek, "*Serbien Ist Judenfrei*" : *Militärische Besatzungspolitik Und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42*, Beiträge Zur Militärgeschichte ; Bd. 38. (München: R. Oldenbourg, 1993), Christopher R. Browning, "Wehrmacht Reprisal Policy and the Murder of the Male Jews in Serbia," in *Fateful Months : Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991).

The Kaleidoscope of Perpetrator Motivation

Even as the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* were being uncovered and documented, historians and other researchers began asking why and how these men, especially at the lowest levels, participated in these crimes. While one could perhaps ascribe the horrific actions of particular individuals to a sadistic or abnormal mental pathology on the one hand or intense ideological commitment to Nazism on the other, such a charge became untenable for the majority of those involved, in light of the fact that over 20 million Germans served in the *Wehrmacht* during the course of the war.¹⁷ A more complex explanation was needed. This “new” group of perpetrators was not a collection of sadists, ideologues, and psychopaths; it was made up of ordinary men from all walks of life.

The investigation of the “mentality” of the *Wehrmacht* began, in some sense, as an attempt to explain the remarkable battle cohesion of the German army, especially when it was clear that the war was a losing endeavor against extraordinary odds. How and why did these men, outnumbered, outgunned, and undersupplied, continue to fight so effectively? American sociologist and political scientist Morris Janowitz conducted a study of captured German soldiers in 1944-45 in an attempt to understand their mindset. He found that “the ideology of the ‘average’ German soldier remained singularly steadfast.”¹⁸ Indeed, even in January 1945, 62% of captured German soldiers on the Western Front reported that they “trusted the Führer.”¹⁹ Yet, even given these seemingly powerful results, Janowitz added the disclaimer that “these polls must be viewed in conjunction with the more important mass of

¹⁷ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht : History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 202.

¹⁸ Morris Janowitz and M. I. Gurfein, "Trends in Wehrmacht Morale," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (1946): 78.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 81.

documents collected and prepared on the *Wehrmacht* as an integral fighting organization and as a social and psychological entity.”²⁰ Indeed, two years later, Janowitz and his fellow researcher Edward Shils, focused on the “primary group” as the essential factor behind soldier motivation and combat effectiveness. Retreating from earlier assertions, the two sociologists argued that

it appears that a soldier’s ability to resist [to fight] is a function of the capacity of his immediate primary group...to avoid social disintegration...The capacity of the primary group to resist disintegration was dependent on the acceptance of political, ideological, and cultural symbols (all secondary symbols) only to the extent that these secondary symbols became directly associated with primary gratifications.²¹

In other words, social-psychological and peer influences were responsible for what was seen as a remarkable degree of unit cohesion.

The work of Omer Bartov challenges this explanation.²² He claims that the original primary groups were quickly destroyed in the first two years of the war and that, as a source of cohesion, primary group loyalty was replaced by an almost blind reliance on belief in Hitler and the propaganda of the Third Reich. In a later work, Bartov explains his position, saying

It is quite possible, of course, to stake out a third position, one which stresses a crucial factor neglected both by Browning’s circumstantial interpretation and by Goldhagen’s essentialist view, namely the powerful impact of ideology and indoctrination on the perpetrators.²³

²⁰ Ibid.: 79.

²¹ Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948): 281.

²² While I disagree with some of Bartov’s conclusions, his research is exceptional and useful. Most notably: Omer Bartov, *Hitler’s Army : Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45 : German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 2nd ed., St. Antony’s Series. (New York: Palgrave in association with St. Antony’s College Oxford, 2001).

²³ Omer Bartov, *Germany’s War and the Holocaust : Disputed Histories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 130.

Indeed, Bartov argues that the “widely accepted sociological theory of Shils and Janowitz...is thus shown to be largely irrelevant to conditions particularly on the Eastern Front.”²⁴ He also discusses the “extent to which years of premilitary and army indoctrination distorted the soldiers’ perception of reality.”²⁵

For the most extreme explanation, one must look to the work of political scientist Daniel Goldhagen. He argued that the German people possessed an especially virulent strain of anti-Semitism that “marked their departure from civilized peoples.”²⁶ Essentially, for Goldhagen, Hitler merely provided the opportunity for the German people to carry out an extermination they had been yearning to realize for centuries. When applied to *Wehrmacht* perpetrators, such a doctrine would explain their participation as a logical step for an entire people who wanted to kill the Jews anyway. No other factors were especially important given this powerful drive to kill. Goldhagen argues that the Reserve Policemen he studied “wanted to be genocidal executioners.”²⁷

In his book, *Ordinary Men*, Christopher Browning arrived at a much different conclusion than Bartov or Goldhagen as to why soldiers participated in atrocities. He argues convincingly that social psychological factors within the context of group dynamics played a pivotal role in motivating middle-aged reserve policemen to commit atrocities and that, at

²⁴ Bartov, *Hitler's Army : Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*, 5.

²⁵ Ibid., 8.

²⁶ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners : Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 279.

least in these cases, ideology was not the primary motivating factor.²⁸ The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were neither specially indoctrinated troops nor men young enough to have been targeted by Nazi propaganda. They were middle-aged men, with families, who killed more often due to peer pressure and obligation to duty than out of malice.

Such an interpretation has substantial support from the realm of social psychology. Stanley Milgram's groundbreaking experiment on obedience demonstrated how strong a factor deference to authority is in shaping human behavior.

Philip Zimbardo's disturbing "Stanford Prison Experiment" demonstrated that 1) peer pressure can form quickly and have a decisive impact on behavior and the decision to stand up to perceived wrongdoing, and 2) that individuals quickly adapt to assigned roles, and seek to demonstrate the skills and characteristics they believe define these roles. His experiment was so "successful" that it had to be stopped after six days as it became too violent and degrading for the participants. Zimbardo argues that the social groups in which we find ourselves "define what is right, socially appropriate, or 'in,' and produce adherence to these ideas through such techniques as social rewards, threats of punishment or ostracism, and various other pressures toward conformity."²⁹ In addition, the theory of cognitive dissonance holds that most individuals are distressed by discrepancies between their beliefs and action , and often alleviate this distress by altering their beliefs. In the end, all this social psychological research indicates that human beings are profoundly influenced by the social

²⁸ See Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men : Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 1st Harper Perennial , Reissued [with a new afterword by the author]. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

²⁹ Philip G. Zimbardo, Ebbe B. Ebbesen, and Christina Maslach, *Influencing Attitudes and Changing Behavior : An Introduction to Method, Theory, and Applications of Social Control and Personal Power*, 2nd ed., Topics in Social Psychology. (New York: Random House, 1977), 42.

pressures within groups. Such recognition is a valuable starting point for the investigation of *Wehrmacht* atrocities committed in the context of deeply social military units.

Harald Welzer, in his book on perpetrators, draws heavily on this methodology. He writes “even when we examine ourselves, substantial discrepancies appear between our moral demands and actions; depending on the situation, we are capable of extremely different ways of thinking, acting and speaking.”³⁰ In his study of *Einsatzgruppen* and concentration camp personnel, Welzer identifies a Nazi morality that guided the actions of these men. He leaves us with an insightful thought that, in some ways, underlies much of this present study:

A social-psychology of mass-murder must also come analytically from three questions, namely, how the perpetrators perceived and interpreted the situation in which they killed, which internal rationality (which can be irrational when regarded from the outside) allowed their actions to appear meaningful, and how the social and psychological processes and situational dynamics were, that preceded their decision to kill.³¹

In Search of the “Ordinary” Soldier

Complicity in crimes by the *Wehrmacht* can be likened, metaphorically, to a field prior to planting, where the field represents the army and the crops atrocities. Some portions of the field have been plowed and prepared for planting, by propaganda and internal beliefs of a myriad of origins; others have not. The seeds of violence are spread evenly over the area. Some fall in areas less fertile and do not bloom. Some even bloom in inhospitable locations. Some seeds, however, fall in prepared ground. They are carefully tended and

³⁰ Harald Welzer and Michaela Christ, *Täter : wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden*, 2. Auflage. ed. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2005), 22.[*Auch wenn wir uns selbst betrachten, zeigen sich gelegentlich erhebliche Diskrepanzen zwischen unseren moralischen Ansprüchen und Handlungen; wir sind je nach Situation zu höchst unterschiedlichen Deutungs-, Handlungs- und Redeweisen in der Lage*]

³¹ *Ibid.*, 43. [Eine Sozialpsychologie des Massenmords muss also analytisch von drei Fragen ausgehen, nämlich wie die Täter die Situation wahrgenommen und interpretiert haben, in denen sie töteten, welche Binnenrationalität (die von außen betrachtet ganz und gar irrational sein kann) ihnen ihr Handeln als sinnvoll erscheinen ließ, und wie die sozialen und psychischen Prozesse und situativen Dynamiken waren, die ihrer Entscheidung zum Töten vorausgegangen sind.]

fertilized by such things as battle experience, conditions at the front, peer pressure, and directed propaganda. These seeds may bloom in much larger numbers as a result of both prior preparation of the ground and continued cultivation.

The brief historiography of *Wehrmacht* complicity in the crimes of the Third Reich reveals that important work has been done in explaining the behavior of German soldiers and their relation to atrocity. However, much work remains to be done. While the crimes of the German Army have in many ways been laid bare, the experience and mindset of the German soldier in relation to these crimes remains in shadow.

While Browning's work on reserve police battalions and Shepherd's work on security regiments have told us much about the internal workings of such types of units, we still lack an understanding of what participation in atrocities meant for members of more conventional units, who experienced killing in an ad hoc rather than organized manner.³² Hannes Heer, creator of the controversial "*Wehrmacht* Exhibition," writes that "one seeks in vain a history of the mentality of the *Wehrmacht*."³³ Truman Anderson notes that "it is clear that German soldiers followed the ideological orders given to them..., even when these orders demanded the killing of women and children, but questions remain about their motivation and about the extent of their own initiative."³⁴

³² For Security Regiments and their participation in atrocities and the Holocaust see, Ben Shepherd, *War in the Wild East : The German Army and Soviet Partisans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), Ben Shepherd, "Wehrmacht Security Regiments in the Soviet Partisan War, 1943," *European History Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2003).

³³ The *Wehrmacht Ausstellung* (exhibition) was a pivotal cultural event for Germans and the historical community. For perhaps the first time, the public at large was confronted with incontrovertible evidence of the crimes of the *Wehrmacht*. Heer, "Killing Fields: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belorussia, 1941-1942," 97.

³⁴ Truman Anderson, "Incident at Baranivka: German Reprisals and the Soviet Partisan Movement in Ukraine, October-December 1941," *The Journal of Modern History* 71, no. 3 (1999): 590.

This study seeks to illuminate some of these questions. As James Waller warns in his work on genocide, “ultimately, a contest between dispositional and situational explanations is not productive...Instead, what we should be concerned with is the *relative* importance of dispositional *and* situational factors in explaining extraordinary human evil.”³⁵ I begin with an examination of the propaganda vehicles and messages transmitted to the soldiers. This discussion is limited primarily to materials that likely were read by the soldiers. Next, a survey of themes present in German *Feldpostbriefe* indicates some agreement and parroting of these propaganda messages. One cannot, perhaps, tie this concurrence directly to propaganda, but it may well indicate that these messages did not fall on unapproving ears. Finally, I investigate one specific unit, the 4th Armored Signal Company. This unit committed increasingly violent atrocities from 1941 to 1942. In this case study, one can perhaps see the confluence of situation and disposition, of ideology, organization, and environment and its effect on the participation in atrocities by a unit which was conventional in most senses. This investigation forcefully argues that ideological beliefs could create a fertile ground for a predisposition to atrocity, but that leadership and peer forces at the lowest level were essential for the actual commission of violence.

³⁵ James Waller, *Becoming Evil : How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 175.

II. Fertile Fields and the Seeds of Killing

During the shooting of the inhabitants, bad things happened.

- Letter from Karl Bühler to his parents, 2 December 1941, Kraljevo, Yugoslavia³⁶

In mid-October 1941, significant partisan forces in western Serbia engaged the German 717th Infantry Division, which was stationed in the town of Kraljevo.³⁷ After these attacks were repelled, the 717th IN DIV rounded up all the male inhabitants of the town of Kraljevo in the yard of the local railway car factory and shot them. Killed in this reprisal were 1736 men and 19 “communist women.”³⁸

On November 14th, Karl Bühler’s division, the 113th IN, arrived from service on the Eastern Front to assist in anti-partisan warfare in the region.³⁹ Clearly, Bühler is referring, above, to the mass execution of civilians that had occurred a little over a month prior. However, barely two weeks after his unit arrived, Bühler’s division took part in another “anti-partisan” action that resulted in 1,415 “enemy” casualties at a cost of 11 German

³⁶ Karl Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat* (Spaichingen: M. Hohner, 1982), 46. [*Bei der Erschießung der Einwohner sind schlimme Dinge passiert*]

³⁷ Along with the Ukraine, Serbia witnessed perhaps the most egregious examples of *Wehrmacht* participation in atrocities.

³⁸ Christopher R. Browning, *Fateful Months : Essays on the Emergence of the Final Solution*, Rev. ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991), 52.

³⁹ Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat*, 44.

soldiers dead and 35 wounded.⁴⁰ The sheer disparity in casualty figures suggests the nature of this “action.” Also interesting, and revealing of his reaction to the Kraljevo atrocity perhaps, is Bühler’s complaint in the sentence preceding his euphemistic revelation of “bad things” having happened: he complains of the local availability of only poor Schnapps and no beer.

Soldier letters provide a glimpse into the minds of German soldiers, and, as such, are a valuable resource in attempting to identify the motivations and beliefs of these men. In their innermost moments, these writers portray a different kind of “honesty” than that of other sources. While much work has been done documenting the crimes of the *Wehrmacht*, comparatively little has been done in analyzing how the “ordinary” soldier conceived of himself in relation to these crimes, especially through an analysis of letters.⁴¹ Messages transmitted from soldiers on the Eastern Front home are important as windows into their mindset and their identity. As Stephen Fritz points out, “no one forced a soldier to make positive comments about the Nazi regime.”⁴² While censorship could play a role in repressing negative statements (at which it was often ineffective), no one forced these soldiers to relate ideological concepts. Thus, the choice, conscious or not, to include these

⁴⁰ Manoschek, “Serbien Ist Judenfrei” : *Militärische Besatzungspolitik Und Judenvernichtung in Serbien 1941/42*, 150.

⁴¹ Some work has been done in this area. Almost exclusively, it is in German. In addition, these works tend to focus on smaller case studies of individual collections of letters rather than a more global approach to soldier identity. See Alexandre Proskouriakov, *Das soziale Bewusstsein und die Wahrnehmung des Krieges der deutschen und russischen Soldaten im Zweiten Weltkrieg im Vergleich: Am Beispiel der Schlacht um Stalingrad* (Konstanz: Universität Konstanz, 2003), Alf Lüdtke, “The Appeal of Exterminating “Others”: German Workers and the Limits of Resistance,” *The Journal of Modern History* 64, no. Supplement: Resistance Against the Third Reich (1992), Thilo Stenzel, *Das Russlandbild des “kleinen Mannes” : Gesellschaftliche Prägung und Fremdwahrnehmung in Feldpostbriefen aus dem Ostfeldzug, 1941-1944/45* (München: Osteuropa-Institut, 1998).

⁴² Stephen G. Fritz, “We Are Trying..To Change the Face of the World”-- Ideology and Motivation in the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front: The View from Below,” *The Journal of Military History* 60, no. 4 (1996): 687.

statements and descriptions in the valuable free time taken to write a letter is significant. The Nazis themselves certainly recognized that letters were powerful indications of soldiers' feelings, for they attempted to harness these letters for propaganda purposes. A brochure issued in 1943 to officers in charge of training new army recruits emphasized the importance of letters, asking "how do we make each one [soldier] an active propagandist for the German people's struggle for freedom in their letters to home and their conversations while on leave?"⁴³

Indeed, propaganda directed at the troops was clearly designed to reinforce the belief systems that made murder and atrocity possible. An investigation of some of the propaganda documents aimed directly at the troops reveals themes that are often echoed in *Feldpostbriefe*, indicating that some important commonalities existed between attitudes and views expressed by letter writers and the publications they were exposed to on the Eastern front.

Wofür Kämpfen Wir? Propaganda Messages Directed at the German Soldier

Our fight has saved our *Heimat*⁴⁴, our wives and children and our way of life from Bolshevism. We soldiers know best, what it would mean if their hordes and commissars were to fall upon our land, our blooming towns and cities.

- Article in *Unser Heer*, 3 March 1942⁴⁵

Good night, if the Russians were to win this war.

⁴³ Ellenbeck, *Der Offizier als Führer im Kampf gegen die feindliche Propaganda*, trans. Randall Bytwerk (OKW, 1943).

⁴⁴ The German word *Heimat* is difficult to translate. It means one's country and homeland, but is far more emotionally charged than the same words in English. It implies a loved locality and a tie to the land. Therefore, I will use the original word *Heimat* where it appears.

⁴⁵ Wilhelm Ritter von Schramm, "Wofür Kämpfen Wir? Der Deutsche Soldat Im Kampf Für Reich Und Heimat," *Unser Heer* 1, no. 5 (1942): 7. [*Unser Kampf hat die Heimat, unsere Frauen und Kinder und Lebenskreise vor dem Bolschewismus bewahrt. Wir Soldaten wissen am besten, was es bedeutet hätte, wenn seine Horden und Kommissare über unser Land, unsere blühenden Dörfer und Städte gekommen wären.*]

- Letter from Karl Bühler, 28 March 1942⁴⁶

There was a broad agreement among military officials that “the failure of German propaganda in World War I had had a decisive impact on the collapse of the German rear and had led to the German defeat.”⁴⁷ German soldiers were, therefore, exposed to all kinds of propaganda messages before and during their service in the army. Indeed, the myriad of influences that a soldier could have been exposed to is mind-boggling. Experiences in the Hitler Youth, Reich Labor Service, school, and at home all likely had an impact on future soldiers. As Omer Bartov notes, German soldiers were “increasingly molded in accordance with the new National Socialist ideal of the political warrior...because they came to the army not tabula rasa but from a system of schooling and paramilitary youth training that had made this new type of soldiering seem quite natural to them.”⁴⁸ This section, however, will focus on propaganda that was directed at the troops and read by them. The Military High Command (OKW) published a series of “knapsack books” which were short pamphlets designed to be read and passed on to other soldiers by men at the front. In addition, two magazines directed at the troops were published and disseminated: *Unser Heer*, published by the Army High Command (OKH), and *Die Wehrmacht*, published by the Military High Command, (OKW). These magazines were accessible to the average soldier, full of illustrations as well as articles replete with propaganda messages. The 694th Propaganda Company, working for the 4th Panzer Army, reported in March 1942 that it had sent the following forward to the troops:

⁴⁶ Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat*, 58. [*Gute Nacht, wenn Russland den Krieg gewinnen würde*]

⁴⁷ Daniel Uziel, "Wehrmacht Propaganda Troops and the Jews," *Shoah Resource Center, The International School for Holocaust Studies*: 2.

⁴⁸ Bartov, "Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich," 54.

110 Cases of books
71 Cases of NSV materials⁴⁹
20,530 Pamphlets
20, 470 Soldier pamphlets for leisure activities (Soldatenblätter für Freizeitgestaltung)
4000 Calendars
5 Bundles of Magazines⁵⁰

Thus, this would be a war in which the soldier would be actively targeted by propaganda to a greater extent than ever before. Previous scholarship has shown that German soldiers were “exposed to a massive indoctrination effort by the military authorities.”⁵¹ The need for a concerted propaganda organ led to the development of the Wehrmacht propaganda branch.

The *Wehrmacht* propaganda branch, established in 1935-36, was created to orchestrate the propaganda efforts of the military (in this case all branches). Initially, this organization had 11 companies (5 in the *Heer*, 4 in the *Luftwaffe* and two in the *Kriegsmarine*). By mid-1942, the *Wehrmacht* propaganda branch had grown to division strength, approximately 15,000 troops.⁵² The army *Propaganda Kompanien*(PKs) came under the control of the OKW, but received their directions from the Ministry of Propaganda.⁵³ The tasks of these units were: 1) collection of news material from military sectors, 2) dissemination of propaganda to the enemy military and population, and most

⁴⁹ *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt*. (NSV) National Socialist Peoples' Welfare. This charitable organization reflected Nazi racial doctrine, discriminating against so-called asocials, inferior races, genetic defectives, and Jews. It aided German mothers and children by fighting serious diseases, by promoting school health and welfare, and by sending to Germans the valuables of people murdered by the Third Reich. (Definition from Robert Michael and Karin Doerr, *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi German : An English Lexicon of the Language of the Third Reich* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), 289.

⁵⁰ "Photo #47619," Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives, 862033-34.

⁵¹ Bartov, "German Soldiers and the Holocaust: Historiography, Research, and Implications," 169.

⁵² Uziel, "Wehrmacht Propaganda Troops and the Jews," 2-3.

⁵³ OKW [*Oberkommando des Wehrmacht*] functioned as the military high command, controlling all branches of the German military.

importantly for this study, 3) organization of educational and recreational activities for the German troops.⁵⁴ While this last mission may seem innocuous, it was essential (and effective) at providing German soldiers with an ideological framework in which to view the war.

The propaganda effort directed at the German soldiers fell into two major categories: 1) mass media, and 2) instruction by military leadership. In many ways, the Second World War was the first in which mass media was mobilized (on both sides) for the purposes of propaganda. Because of their isolation on fighting fronts, especially in the East, German soldiers were completely reliant on the Nazi apparatus to supply them with information. Printed material was the first medium employed. Soldiers during all wars crave information from the outside world. In the case of German soldiers on the Eastern Front, this news was supplied solely through Nazi-managed newspapers and magazines, circulated among the troops. This “softer” approach of propaganda-laden newspaper was probably much more effective than more direct and overt measures that soldiers could more quickly recognize as propagandistic.

The *Wehrmacht* Propaganda Branch recognized that propaganda needed to be uncomplicated for the troops and, for example, ensured that material given to field commanders “was so organized that it could be passed on by them to the troops without requiring any special skill.” It also acknowledged that “too much propaganda could be deadening.”⁵⁵ In addition, special publications like the *Mitteilungen für die Truppe* were

⁵⁴ Uziel, “Wehrmacht Propaganda Troops and the Jews,” 3.

⁵⁵ Jeffrey Robert Willis, *The Wehrmacht Propaganda Branch. German Military Propaganda And Censorship During World War II* ([Charlottesville: Va.], 1964), 82.

distributed down to the company level.⁵⁶ For the first time, film and radio were also mobilized to impart ideology to the troops. Throughout the Eastern Front, film vans brought “recreational” films containing propaganda messages to the soldiers, often screening them in local movie theaters or creating theaters where they did not already exist. Often these films contained anti-Semitic and anti-Bolshevik material.⁵⁷ A monthly for Nazi party propagandists stated with pride that in 1941 about 30,000,000 soldiers had attended films arranged by the district film offices for the military.⁵⁸ In its activity report, Section Ic (Security) of the 4th Panzer Army listed how these movies were provided to its troops:

For movie screens, 12 projectors were available. These were supplied to the divisions with 2 in the Army rear areas. Screening rooms were built out of farmhouses or barns, in which approximately 3 showings took place a day. Thus, for example, such a Front cinema that was placed in a farmhouse with about 80 seats was visited by 9,000 soldiers in a month.

29 feature films were available, which were exchanged weekly. In addition, newsreels and documentaries were shown. Unfortunately, it was not possible to organize showings for all combat troops, owing to a lack of power.. All was done however, so that those troops at Division or Corps headquarters could participate in such showings from time to time.⁵⁹

Radio became an even more important method of communicating propaganda to the troops.

Indeed, the same party monthly reported more than 60,000 radios supplied to the troops

⁵⁶ Ibid., 85. These *Mitteilungen* contained news pieces as well as propaganda messages and ideology.

⁵⁷ Uziel, "Wehrmacht Propaganda Troops and the Jews," 20.

⁵⁸ This number is most likely an exaggeration of the actual numbers of soldiers and must include the same soldier seeing multiple films. "Die Arbeit der Partei-Propaganda im Kriege," *Unser Wille und Weg* 1941.

⁵⁹ "Photo #47619," 8632034. [Für Filmvorführungen standen 12 Apparaturen zur Verfügung. Davon waren Ic bei den Divisionen und 2 im rückwärtigen Armeegebiet eingesetzt. Aus Bauernhöfen oder Scheunen wurden Vorführungsräume gebaut, in denen täglich rund 3 Vorstellungen stattfanden. So wurde z.B. ein solches Frontkino, das in einem Bauernhaus untergebracht war und 80 Sitzplätze aufwies, in einem Monat von 9.000 Soldaten besucht. 29 Spielfilme waren vorhanden, die wöchentlich ausgetauscht wurden. Dazu wurden Wochenschauen und Kulturfilme gezeigt. Leider war es nicht möglich, bei allen kämpfenden Truppenteilen Filmvorführungen zu veranstalten, da es an Aggregaten fehlte. Es wurde aber alles getan, dass diese Truppenteile ab und zu bei den Div.- oder Korps-Gefechtsständen an einer solchen Veranstaltung teilnehmen konnten]

(10,000 of these radios came from Poland, confiscated from Jews.)⁶⁰ The importance of these radios to the troops appears in their letters home. For example, letter writer Karl Bühler wrote on Christmas Eve, 1942, “we enjoyed first of all the program from 7-8 pm up to the beginning of Goebbels’ speech. Then, we listened with deeply moved hearts to the speech of Dr. Goebbels.”⁶¹ Another soldier noted that he listened daily to the *Wehrmachtbericht*, a propaganda radio program managed by the *Wehrmacht* Propaganda Branch.⁶²

Finally, and perhaps most effective, were the impromptu discussions by small unit leaders, promulgated by the Propaganda Branch. A special *Mitteilungen für das Offizierkorps* was published, directed specifically at supplying officers with propaganda messages to give to their troops and stressing the importance of this indoctrination.⁶³ The importance of these meetings with the company commander cannot be underestimated. For example, already in 1940, the 12th Infantry Division stated in an order to its officers: “the company commander is the central personality still retaining a direct influence upon the education, instruction and leading of the individual man...thereby the ideological education of the troops is also his task.”⁶⁴ The OKW, in fact, intended that the pamphlets and “knapsack books” that it published be also used as material for this ideological indoctrination. A pamphlet entitled “Organization of Free Time for the Troops: Suggestions and Proposals” indicated how these discussion periods could be used to propagate ideological messages. It stated

⁶⁰ "Die Arbeit der Partei-Propaganda im Kriege."

⁶¹ Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat*, 106. [Am Radio erfreuten wir uns zunächst der Ringsendung von 19 Uhr 20 bis zum Beginn der Goebbelsrede...Ergriffenen Herzens lauschten wir dann der Ansprache von Dr. Goebbels.]

⁶² Franz Schober, Leopold Schober, and Michael Hans Salvesberger, *Briefe von der Front : Feldpostbriefe, 1939-1945*, 1. Aufl. ed., Reihe Lokalgeschichte. (Göding am Wagram: Weinviertel, 1997), 201.

⁶³ Bartov, *Hitler's Army : Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*, 123-24.

⁶⁴ Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45 : German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 74.

Also, free time must be given a meaning and an importance that has its roots in a soldierly view of life and lifestyle, perpetuates comradeship, has been proven in war, and is perfected during the monotony of day to day life.⁶⁵

The pamphlet went on to suggest that “the literature published by OKW can serve as stimulus and material for lecture hours far more than it has been.”⁶⁶

Indeed, *Feldpostbriefe* show a high level of respect for officers, making this task even more important. In conclusion, in his case study of several German units, Omer Bartov concludes that “the troops at the front actually asked for and were glad to receive, radio, film, written, and verbal propaganda.”⁶⁷

What were the messages transmitted to the troops through this media? First and foremost, the Russians (and all things Soviet) were dehumanized and vilified at every turn. Secondly, subtle and not-so-subtle racial messages entered in. The most important of these was the conflation of Jew and Bolshevik. Finally, soldiers were told that they were engaged in self-defense, protecting the fatherland from certain destruction, that their enemy did not fight fairly and, thus, his destruction deserved no remorse. Taken together with the brutalizing environment of the Eastern Front, these messages certainly helped to pave the way for the commission of atrocities. Indeed, some of these messages can even be seen echoing in the letters that follow.

⁶⁵ Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, *Freizeitgestaltung der Truppe. Vorschläge und Anregungen*, vol. Heft 63, Tornisterschrift des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Berlin: W. Limpert, Druck- und Verlagshaus, 1942), 1. [Auch der Freizeit muss ein Sinn und eine Bedeutung gegeben werden, die ihre Wurzeln in soldatischer Lebensauffassung und Lebensführung hat und die im Krieg erprobte und bewährte Kameradschaft fortsetzt und in der Eintönigkeit der Alltäglichen vollendet.]

⁶⁶ Ibid., 3. [Das vom Oberkommando der Wehrmacht herausgegebene Schrifttum...kann als Anregung und Material für Vortragsstunden vielmehr ausgewertet werden, als es bisher geschehen ist.]

⁶⁷ Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45 : German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 89.

Anti-Bolshevik Messages and the Judeo-Bolshevik connection

The work that the German people performed as farmers, merchants, engineers and officials in service for the order and prosperity of the Russian state seemed to have given way to destruction under Bolshevism.

- *Die Völker des Ostraumes*, 1942⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, one of the most important messages that propaganda transmitted to the troops was that the Soviet Union was cruel, ineffective, and controlled by the Jews. These messages first ridiculed the Bolshevik system as a complete failure. As one article in *Unser Heer* notes, “[Russia] was on the margins of Europe, sick and insane in mind and body.”⁶⁹ A “knapsack book” on the Baltic and Ukraine lamented,

One year of Bolshevism! What a change the country has gone through in this short time, how much misery and destruction must it have suffered! Terror, shootings, and depression prevail again. The result of Bolshevization is economic decline, impoverishment, and hunger.⁷⁰

The anti-religious nature of the Soviet system was also used to arouse outrage in the German soldier.

A small book published in 1934 entitled, “The Red Army Brings This,” stated that “the terrible frustration that Soviet rulers feel is understandable, as Adolf Hitler built the

⁶⁸ *Die Völker des Ostraumes*, Die Bücherei des Ostraumes (Berlin: O. Stollberg, 1942), 17. [*Die Arbeit, die der deutsche Mensch als Bauer, Köther, Ingenieur, Beamter im Dienst für die Ordnung und den Wohlstand des russischen Staates in langer Zeit geleistet hatte, schien unter dem Bolschewismus der Vernichtung preisgegeben*]

⁶⁹ Kurt Ziesel, “Maske Und Gesicht Des Ostens—Gedanken Um Den Härtesten Kampf,” *Unser Heer* 1, no. 2 (1942): 4. [*Er war der Rand Europas, krank und irr an Seele und Körper*]

⁷⁰ Robert Stupperich, *Die Ukraine und das Baltenland*, vol. Heft 49, Tornisterschrift Des Oberkommando (1941), 14-15. [*Ein Jahr Bolschewismus! Welchen Wandel hat das Land in dieser kurzen Zeit durchgemacht, wie viel Elend und Zerstörung hat es erdulden müssen!...Es herrschen wieder Terror, Erschießung, und Bedrückung. Die Folge der Bolschewisierung ist wirtschaftlicher Niedergang, Verarmung, und Hunger.*]

national state in Germany, thus the inextinguishable hate with which they persecute National Socialism.”⁷¹

Geopolitical racial terminology then turns to one of the more dangerous themes of propaganda directed at the troops: the conflation of Jews and Bolsheviks. For example, consider the following discussion of historical development in Lithuania, from the guidebook on the Ukraine and the Baltic: “here, Polish not German influence was foremost since the Middle Ages. So, apart from a few remnants in previously German cities such as Kovno, Lithuanian towns have the appearance of a Polish provincial town: haphazardly built, dirty, inhabited by a completely proletarianized Jewish majority.”⁷² Indeed, there was little direct anti-Semitism in the propaganda, but much that was combined with anti-Bolshevik propaganda. *Das bringt Der Rote Armee* was typical, stating that, “there, however, the people are the exploited slave of the Jewish caste, who set up the Soviet program and organized the state accordingly.”⁷³ A more direct formulation came from a soldier pamphlet on the conditions in the Soviet Union. It told readers that, “out of this racial conglomeration came a type of people, whose essence aimed at the control and exploitation of other peoples. The strongest of these adopted the unnatural idea of Judaism, and became its special carriers in the course of European history.”⁷⁴ Finally, a pamphlet on the people of the Eastern territory

⁷¹ Neils Närk, *Das bringt die Rote Armee* (Berlin: Nibelungen-Verlag, 1936), 16-19. [So ist die furchtbare Enttäuschung zu verstehen die die Sowjetmachthaber fühlten, als Adolf Hitler in Deutschland den völkischen Staat errichtete, so der unauslöschliche Haß, mit dem sie den Nationalsozialismus verfolgen]

⁷² Stupperich, *Die Ukraine und das Baltenland*, 11. [Hier war nicht der deutsche, sondern der polnische Einfluss seit dem Mittelalter führend... So hatte, abgesehen von geringen Resten in den ehemals deutschen Städten wie Kauen (=Kaunas), die litauische Stadt das Aussehen der polnischen Provinzstädte: planlos gebaut, schmutzig, von einer völlig proletarisierten jüdischen Mehrheit bewohnt.]

⁷³ Närk, *Das bringt die Rote Armee*, 15. [Dort aber ist das Volk ausgebeuteter Sklave der jüdischen Kaste, welche das Sowjetprogramm aufgestellt und den Staat dementsprechend organisiert hat]

⁷⁴ Abteilung Inland Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, *Die Sowjetunion Gegebenheiten und Möglichkeiten des Ostraumes*, vol. Heft 72, Tornisterschrift des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Berlin: O. Stollberg, 1943), 29.

stated that “the extraordinary position of the Jews in the USSR led to the opposition of all peoples against them.”⁷⁵

Racial Awareness and German superiority

Its name and design is owed to the Marxist doctrine of the Jew Maier-Merdochai, whose list of ancestors features a number of rabbis. Disguised as a new social order, it is neither that nor a new economic theory but a clever attempt at the control and exploitation of humanity.

- *Die Sowjetunion: Gegebenheiten and Möglichkeiten des Ostraumes, 1943*⁷⁶

Racial and purely anti-Semitic messages were much more subtle and muted, especially in the magazines. But they were there. The end result of all these messages was the creation in many German soldiers of an awareness of the importance of race both as a method of evaluating individual worth and as the basis of their own superiority. An article on the people of the Soviet Union begins by saying, “anyone, who has intently observed a platoon of Bolshevik POWs will have recognized that there are men of many different races in it.”⁷⁷ The piece goes on to discuss in detail the many different “races” of the Soviet Union. Racial prejudice and stereotyping are rampant throughout, though, as these races are essentialized. For example, one ethnic group is “through their Mongolian influence devious

[Aus jenem Völkertkonglomerat ist ein Menschtyp hervorgegangen, dessen wesentliche Charaktereigenschaft auf die Beherrschung und Ausnutzung der Andersstämmigen abzielte. Am stärksten eignete sich diese naturwidrige Idee das Judentum an, das zu ihrem besondern Träger im Laufe der europäischen Geschichte wurde]

⁷⁵ *Die Völker des Ostraumes*, 91. [Die außerordentliche Stellung des Judentums in der UdSSR hat zu einer Gegnerschaft aller Völker gegen dieses geführt.]

⁷⁶ Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, *Die Sowjetunion Gegebenheiten und Möglichkeiten des Ostraumes*, 31. [Ihren Namen und ihre Ausgestaltung verdankt die marxistische Doktrin dem Juden Maier-Merdochai, dessen Vöfahrenliste eine Reihe von Rabbinern aufweist. Als seine neue Gesellschaftsordnung getarnt ist sie in Wirklichkeit weder dies noch eine neue Wirtschaftstheorie, sondern ein raffiniertes Werk zur Beherrschung und Ausnutzung der Menschheit]

⁷⁷ Kurt Gloger, "Völker Der Sowjetunion," *Unser Heer* 1, no. 13 (1942): 8. [Jeder, der einem Zug bolschewistischer Gefangener aufmerksam beobachtet hat, wird festgestellt haben, dass in ihm Menschen der verschiedensten Rassen waren.]

, unfeeling, and can be very cruel” but “with good leadership, they are useable soldiers.”⁷⁸ A pamphlet instructing soldiers how to behave in foreign lands told German soldiers that their membership “in a racial community must be apparent.”⁷⁹

This conception of German superiority to the peoples of occupied territories was a major theme throughout. The same instructional pamphlet on soldierly behavior began by stating that, “the most important thing that you must know in foreign lands is that the people and the land arose under different laws and were shaped by a different past than your people and your Fatherland.”⁸⁰ Another article in *Unser Heer* referred to the higher requirements arising from the “increase in people of our blood.”⁸¹

Other propaganda messages portray the Russian himself as a backward, inhuman fighter. A discussion of the close-quarters combat techniques of the Soviet soldier noted that “their leadership was certain, that these combat techniques were especially suitable for the primitive thinking and totally uneducated Russian soldier and corresponded with the instinct for self-preservation as a part of their nature and in part as a measure of the soulless individuals produced by the scourge of Bolshevism.”⁸² The Russian soldier was a primitive,

⁷⁸ Ibid. [Sie [Indogermanen] kommt vor allem in ihren Liedern und in ihrer Stellung zur Familie zum Ausdruck, aber andererseits sind sie durch ihren mongolischen Einschlag verschlagen und gefühlsroh und können sehr grausam sein. Bei guter Führung sind sie brauchbare Soldaten.]

⁷⁹ Bruno Brehm, *Deutsche Haltung vor Fremden: Ein Kameradenwort an Unsere Soldaten*, vol. Heft 16, Tornisterschrift des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Berlin: W. Limpert, 1941), 27. [die Zugehörigkeit zu einer Volksgemeinschaft...muss man euch Soldaten in der Fremde auch ansehen.]

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1. [Das Wichtigste, was du in der Fremde wissen muss, ist, daß das Volk und und das fremde Land nach anderen Gesetzen gewachsen und von einer anderen Vergangenheit geformt sind als dein Volk und dein Vaterland.]

⁸¹ Franz Hayler, "Was Wird Aus Mir? Berufsfragen Der Kriegsteilnehmer: 3. Der Einzelhandelskaufmann," *Unser Heer* 1, no. 12 (1942): 11. [Mit dem Zuwachsen der Menschen unseres Blutes werden höhere Bedürfnisse entstehen]

⁸² "Nahkampf Der Sowjets—Aus Sowjetrussischen Beutefilmen Und Instruktionsbüchern," *Unser Heer* 1, no. 3 (1942): 8-9. [Seine [Red Army] Führung war sich im klaren darüber, dass diese Kampfweise dem primitiv denkenden, jeglicher Bildung baren russischen Soldaten besonders gut liegt und auch dem Selbsterhaltungstrieb der zu einem Teile aus

undeveloped creature, without sophistication. *Die Wehrmacht* reported that, “wherever the eye reaches, a gruesome picture of devastation and senseless destruction presents itself, typical for the Soviet way of war.”⁸³

However, these messages also contained dehumanizing, almost racial depictions of the people of the Soviet Union. The land was portrayed as strange and backward. A caption to a sketch of the landscape, related that, “for hours, one can ride through the vast Russian plains, through the unendingly bleak land, without a change in the landscape. From time to time, one encounters a couple of abandoned and decaying wooden huts, a dead horse along the way.”⁸⁴ The Russian land, according to one article, “does not offer the slightest possibility for the provision of the simplest necessities of a civilized people.”⁸⁵ German war correspondent, Kurt Ziesel, wrote derisively, that, “we threw hardly a glance at these ragged forms near the ruins of their houses, who called themselves human.”⁸⁶ Another article stated that the Soviet soldier is “on average, nothing more than a piece of Russian earth come to life.”⁸⁷ Further, “the Russian, in contrast, is as a creature, simply a function of its earth and

Naturmenschen, zum anderen Teile aus einer unter der Knute des Bolschewismus zum seelenlosen Individuum gewordenen Masse am besten entspricht]

⁸³ "Brandfackel Im Osten," *Die Wehrmacht* 4, no. 15 (1941): 2. [*Wohin das Auge reichte, bot sich ein grauenvolles Bild der Verwüstung und sinnlosen Vernichtung, typisch für die sowjetische Kriegführung*]

⁸⁴ "Mit Dem Skizzenbuch an Der Ostfront," *Die Wehrmacht* 4, no. 19 (1941). [*Stundenlang kann man durch die weite russische Ebene reiten, durch das unendliche trostlose Land, ohne dass sich die Landschaft ändert. Hin und wieder trifft man auf ein paar verlassene und zerfallene Holzhütten, ein totes Pferd am Wege.*]

⁸⁵ George Soldan, "Kämpfer Im Osten—Die Leistungen Des Deutschen Soldaten- Ein Beitrag Zu Ihrer Würdigung," *Unser Heer* 1, no. 1 (1942): 5. [*...das auch nicht die geringste Möglichkeit zur Ergänzung einfachsten Lebensdarfes eines Kulturmenschen bietet...*]

⁸⁶ Ziesel, "Maske Und Gesicht Des Ostens—Gedanken Um Den Härtesten Kampf," 4. [*Wir warfen kaum noch einen Blick auf diese zerlumpte Gestalten neben den Ruinen ihrer Häuser, die sich Menschen nannten*]

⁸⁷ V.F.W. von Oertzen, "Warüm Kämpfen Viele Sowjets So Stur? Ein Beitrag Zur Wertung Des Kampfes Gegen Die Sowjetarmee," *Unser Heer* 1, no. 6 (1942): 5. [*Viele Sowjetsoldaten sind im Durchschnitt nichts anderes als ein Stückchen lebendig gewordener russischer Erde*]

space, whose vastness has often something absolutely depressing.”⁸⁸ Such depictions of the enemy could not help but inspire a disdain for and devaluation of the enemy that could easily lead to atrocity.

Defensive War and Dirty Fighting

We are lined up in earnest to protect our *Heimat* and for the protection of our *Heimat* our comrades have built a wall in the icy East, which has again and again held back the soviet masses.

- “Wofür Kämpfen Wir?,” *Unser Heer*, 3 March 1942⁸⁹

National Socialist Germany created no so-called Women Battalions, did not place its women in uniform, which stands in such glaring opposition to a woman’s nature as such.

- *Neue Wirtschaftsfragen*, 1941⁹⁰

The final major message that these propaganda materials transmitted to the troops was two-fold. First, the Germans were participating in a defensive war, to protect the homeland from the ravages of the Soviet invader. Secondly, the Soviet enemy was an animalistic, dirty fighter to whom the laws of war and decency did not apply.

The view of the war on the Eastern front as a defensive one for the Germans was certainly ahistorical but seems to have been a powerful motivator throughout the propaganda examined. One “knapsack book” claimed that “the battle in the East arose from the harshest necessity, it was the counterattack, which in the last hours prevented Moscow’s premeditated

⁸⁸ Ibid. [*Der Russe dagegen ist als Lebewesen einfach eine Funktion seiner Erde und seines Raumes, dessen Weite für uns ja oftmals etwas absolut Bedrückendes hat*]

⁸⁹ Schramm, “Wofür Kämpfen Wir? Der Deutsche Soldat Im Kampf Für Reich Und Heimat,” 7. [*Zum Schutz der Heimat sind wir ernst angetreten, und für den Schutz unserer Heimat haben die Kameraden im eisigen Osten den Wall gebildet, der immer und immer wieder die sowjetischen Massen aufgehalten hat.*]

⁹⁰ Karlheinz Backhaus, *Neue Wirtschaftsfragen : die dich angehen!*, vol. Heft 36, Tornisterschrift des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Berlin: Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, Abt. Inland, 1941), 23. [*Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland schuf keine sogenannten Frauenbattallone, steckte seine Frauen nicht in Uniformen, die in einem krassen Gegensatz zum fraulichen Wesen als solchem stehen*]

and truly monstrous blow of annihilation against National Socialist Germany.”⁹¹ *Unser Heer* proclaimed, “there is no social justice if we are not masters of our own lands and cannot lead our life according to our own ways and our own laws. We need space, bread for our family, freedom of development for our children.”⁹² In other words, the war itself was a struggle for the future of the German people; the message for the German soldier was that the very lives of his family and children were threatened by the war in the East.

The final component of this dangerous cocktail of inflammatory messages was the recurring discussion of the “dirty” and “unlawful” combat methods of the Soviets. Such characterizations of the enemy as beyond the pale of accepted warfare implicitly justified methods of dealing with him that were also beyond the pale. On 6 January 1942, the following appeared in *Unser Heer*: “the Bolshevik is an uncommonly hard and devious enemy and his often seemingly animal instinct not only gives the struggle a repugnant character, but at the same time poses a task, whose solution often requires the highest overcoming of self.”⁹³ Such a phrase as “overcoming of self” has ominous connotations when one thinks of the atrocities committed on the Eastern front against civilians as well as POWs. Germans were especially outraged by the Soviet use of female soldiers. Women combatants were clearly outside the traditional bounds of warfare. A caption in *Die*

⁹¹ Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht, *Die Sowjetunion Gegebenheiten und Möglichkeiten des Ostraumes*, 4. [Der Kampf in Osten entsprang dem hartesten Muss, es war der Gegenangriff, der in letzter Stunde einem wahrhaft ungeheuerlichen von Moskau geplanten Vernichtungsschlag gegen das nationalsozialistischen Deutschland zuvorkam.]

⁹² Schramm, "Wofür Kämpfen Wir? Der Deutsche Soldat Im Kampf Für Reich Und Heimat," 7. [Es gibt keine soziale Gerechtigkeit, wenn wir nicht Herren im eigenen Lande sind und unser Leben nach unserer eigenen Art und nach unseren eigenen Gesetzen führen können. Wir brauchen Raum, Brot für unsere Familie, Entwicklungsfreiheit für unsere Kinder.]

⁹³ Soldan, "Kämpfer Im Osten—Die Leistungen Des Deutschen Soldaten- Ein Beitrag Zu Ihrer Würdigung," 5. [...der Bolschewik ein ungemein harter und verschlagener Gegner ist, und dass sein oft geradezu tierisch anmutender Instinkt dem Ringen nicht nur ein widerliches Gepräge gibt, sondern zugleich vor Aufgaben stellt, deren Lösung oft höchste Selbstüberwindung verlangt.]

Wehrmacht read: “these degenerate gunwomen participated with particular stubbornness in the enemy sniper war against our soldiers. They were, however, soon discovered and disarmed.”⁹⁴ The real German fear of and anger toward the partisan war can be seen in the propaganda treatment of snipers, particularly those in the forest (*Baumschützen*). An entire article in *Die Wehrmacht* was devoted to this topic. It told readers,

Our soldiers got to know the fight against tree snipers in the campaign against Poland and France. In the West it was usually negroes who acted as tree snipers. The Soviets have now developed this way of fighting into a regular battle tactic. In baskets and bags specially designed for this purpose, with camouflaged helmets, they squat in the branches, mostly near roads to treacherously ambush supply columns and isolated vehicles. As a result, the woods flanking our advance must always be cleaned of tree snipers.⁹⁵

The message here was that snipers hanging in trees and ambushing supply columns constituted a cowardly, degenerate form of combat. Particularly interesting here is the conflation of this type of fighting with racial and gender inferiority. Lastly, the treatment that captured partisans or suspected partisans could hope to receive was clearly laid out in a 1942 article in *Die Wehrmacht*. The message from this caption is clear.

What were the fruits of the German propaganda effort? One can clearly identify the intent of these publications. The ideal outcome of this propaganda offensive was a soldier, who hated and feared the Soviet Union, who thought in racial terms where he saw himself superior to his enemy, and who was angry and afraid enough of the partisans that he was prepared to “overcome himself” to deal with them in the most brutal manner. Like any attempt at measuring reception, identifying the actual effect on the ground of these materials is not an exact science. However, in both letters and the behavior of the soldiers of 4th

⁹⁴ "Kampf Um Die Zitadelle," *Die Wehrmacht* 4, no. 15 (1941): 8. [*Diese verkommenen Flintenweiber beteiligten sich mit besonderer Verbissenheit an dem von den Feinden geübten Heckenschützenkrieg gegen unsere Soldaten, wurden aber bald entdeckt und unschädlich gemacht.*]

⁹⁵ "Achtung Baumschützen! Die Kampfmethoden Der Sowjetsoldaten," *Die Wehrmacht* 4, no. 15 (1941): 6.

Company, one can see clear commonalities of belief and action that may be associated with these propaganda themes. This may indicate influence by propaganda, existing agreement with the themes presented, or a combination of the two. Because they are such an internal, personal medium, German letters from the Eastern Front offer us a useful window into the beliefs and concerns of soldiers in the German Army.

“We all want to set fire to this nest:” Ideology, the East, and *Feldpostbriefe*, 1939-1943

Letters home from the Eastern front demonstrate several congruencies with themes prevalent in the propaganda. Soldiers writing home from Russia encountered a frighteningly large and foreign land, that many interpreted as barbaric and backward. They also held quite negative views of Bolshevism, and though the racial context was muted, it was present. Like the propaganda to which they were exposed, many German soldiers reacted indignantly to the battle tactics of their enemy and viewed them as outside the accepted norms of combat. Finally, as time continued, these letters indicated an increasingly stark realization of the real life or death struggle on the Eastern front. This fatalistic realization led to an increased dehumanization of enemy soldiers and civilians and a recognition of the need to be hard. Surprisingly, these letters do not indicate a shift to an increased reliance on overt Nazi propaganda as a motivating factor.

This study examined 157 letters from the Eastern Front written between 1939 and 1943, with the overwhelming majority written in 1941-42. The sample contains 65 different letter writers. Of the 31 authors whose ages are known, the average age in 1939 was 22. The sample used here cannot be said to be representative in the traditional sense of representing all possible variations in the subject proportionally. Published between 1941 and 2003,

these collections come from a very wide array of backgrounds. Some, such as *Deutsche Soldaten sehen die Sowjet-Union* were published by the Nazis themselves to demonstrate the “truth” of the situation on the front as seen through soldier letters. Indeed, this collection was a companion-piece to a traveling exhibition of the crimes of the Soviet Union. Others are family collections, such as the collection of letters from Ernst Guicking to his wife. Some are topical based on commonalities of writer or location, such as a collection of letters from German students (*Kriegsbriefe des Gefallener Studenten*) and letters from Stalingrad (*Feldpostbriefe aus Stalingrad.*) Some, such as the letters of Karl Fuchs, are collections published by historians with no emotional or familial ties to the writer. The variety of publication and sources of documents imposes a sort of representativeness. It is the motivations behind publishing that matter here. For example, Nazi collections would seek to find those letters most reflective of Nazi beliefs, family collections would likely include more innocuous letters, while collections published by historians would include all letters of various types. Thus, while not a random sample, these sources do provide an idea of the spectrum of responses. Finally, and most importantly, choosing to investigate soldiers’ views of the East rather than direct participation in atrocities greatly increases the pool of data to be gleaned from these letters, as anti-Communist comments were much more acceptable throughout the period during which these were published. Moreover, one of the elements of the “clean” Wehrmacht myth was the Army’s contribution in saving Europe from Communism, making it much more likely that those publishing these letters would see little problem in pejorative views of the East.

Methodologically, these letters were closely read and elements falling into any one of 72 different thematic categories were counted as well as annotated. The result is both a

quantitative catalog that allows us to look at changes over time and general trends in themes as well as a qualitative record that shows the actual words and images used by the letter writers in context. This study relies most heavily upon the latter, using the former only to place themes in a comparative environment, most often chronological.

Russia As A Desolate, Primitive Land

And it is not only German soldiers to whom art is to give something. A second mission of culture [*Kulturmission*] must yet be fulfilled here....Here we finally have the opportunity to show by deed that we are capable of bringing salvation to other peoples, to be leaders for them out of the darkness of un-culture [*Unkultur*] and un-education [*Unbildung*] to the light of an ideal existence truly worthy of humans.

- *Das Land Ober Ost. Deutsche Arbeit in den Verwaltungsbezirken Kurland, Litauen und Bialystok-Grodno*, 1917⁹⁶

We are not bringing these people civilization. I can only repeat to you word for word what the Führer wishes. It will be enough if (1) the children learn to read the traffic signs so that they do not run under vehicles (2) if they learn their 2 x 2 so they can count up to 25, and (3) if they can write their own names; no more is necessary.

- Heinrich Himmler to a group of senior SS leaders, Zhitomir, USSR, September 1941⁹⁷

As Vejas Liulevicius notes in his study of the German encounter with the East during World War I, “the eastern-front experience of the First World War was an indispensable cultural and psychological background for what came later in the violent twentieth century, a preexisting mentality.”⁹⁸ In this sense, for the Wehrmacht soldier, the Eastern front represented both a continuity and a break from previous German experiences in the East.

⁹⁶ Vejas G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front : Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*, *Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare* 9 (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 140.

⁹⁷ Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards : A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 6.

⁹⁸ Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front : Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*, 1.

Feldpostbriefe carried similar depictions. Descriptions of the physical landscape tended to blend with descriptions of the people in a bleak, frightening environment.

Karl Fuchs wrote, “the land here is bleak and desolate.”⁹⁹ Another soldier lamented the “foot deep dust in a bleak landscape.”¹⁰⁰ At times the sheer size of the East becomes monotonous, as one soldier related, “not much to write about, you can drive 100km and only see forests and swamp.”¹⁰¹ A former philosophy student felt that he had been “thrown into this violently chaotic endless gray expanse of the East, that men have hardly touched.”¹⁰² The oppressive heat, biting cold, and endless mud also occupy prominent and frequent positions in these World War II letters. There was an unspoken feeling of emptiness, isolation, and fear throughout these depictions. Such feelings were vital in binding a soldier to his peer group and in creating the conditions for the overwhelming fear of partisans and inhabitants that one sees later in the actions of units such as 4th Company.

Soldiers writing from the Eastern Front found the native population equally strange and, perhaps, forbidding. One soldier described the “strange, captivating harmony of a Russian folksong in all its cruelty and ferocity.”¹⁰³ Another mentioned in a long discussion the customs of the “Mohammedan” population and that the women were veiled.¹⁰⁴ Simon

⁹⁹ Karl Fuchs, Horst Fuchs Richardson, and Dennis E. Showalter, *Sieg Heil! : War Letters of Tank Gunner Karl Fuchs, 1937-1941* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1987), 145.

¹⁰⁰ Walter Bähr and Hans Walter Bähr, *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten, 1939-1945* (Tübingen: R. Wunderlich, 1952), 135.

¹⁰¹ Schober, Schober, and Salvesberger, *Briefe von der Front : Feldpostbriefe, 1939-1945*, 127.

¹⁰² Bähr and Bähr, *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten, 1939-1945*, 241.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 134.[*doch in einer fremden fesselnden Harmonie zusammen zu einem russischen Volkslied in all seiner Schwere und Wildheit*]

¹⁰⁴ Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat*, 47.

Krings told his mother, “our men can’t eat any Russian bread. It is made also with a primitive way of baking.”¹⁰⁵ Descriptions of poverty and dirt were common reactions to both war experiences. A *Wehrmacht* soldier wrote, “the villages are horrible (*grauenhaft*), houses like pigsties (*Schweineställe*).”¹⁰⁶

Unlike their forefathers in the First World War, these descriptions take a racial turn as well. While during the First World War, the occupiers were interested in bringing culture and civilization to the land, admittedly in a paternalistic sense, such an impulse had been eliminated by the Second World War. Instead of viewing the natives of the East as “simple-minded, good-hearted primitives,” they are viewed as swine, dogs, vermin, and pests.¹⁰⁷ One soldier proclaimed, “alright, let’s take this exertion upon ourselves, so that these pests of the world will be exterminated.”¹⁰⁸ Another soldier compared the “mice, lice, and flies” favorably to the Russians.¹⁰⁹ In their letters, German soldiers in Poland saw the Poles as “a herd of living things,” “decrepit and degenerate,” “with vengeful, brutal features.”¹¹⁰ Echoing Nazi propaganda, these letter writers were no longer interested in bringing culture and civilization to the East in the role of paternal ruler. They now came as a cleansing fire to rid the East of its subhuman inhabitants.

¹⁰⁵ Jens Ebert, *Feldpostbriefe aus Stalingrad* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003), 19.

¹⁰⁶ Schober, Schober, and Salvesberger, *Briefe von der Front : Feldpostbriefe, 1939-1945*, 127.

¹⁰⁷ Dennis Showalter, ““The East Gives Nothing Back”: The Great War and the German Army in Russia,” *The Journal of the Historical Society* 2, no. 1 (2002): 10.

¹⁰⁸ Wolfgang Diewerge, *Deutsche Soldaten Sehen Die Sowjet-Union* (Berlin: W. Limpert 1941), 15. [Na, so wollen wir alle Anstrengungen auf uns nehmen, damit diese Weltpest ausgerottet wird.]

¹⁰⁹ Hans-Albert Giese, Herbert Giese, Konrad Elmshäuser, and Jan Lokers, *Man muss hier nur hart sein : Kriegsbriefe und Bilder einer Familie (1934-1945)* (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 1999), 196.

¹¹⁰ Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity*, 204.

That the people of the East were seen in fundamentally different terms from those in the West is evident in a propaganda leaflet disseminated to the Waffen-SS in 1944 saying that “the American soldier is racially related to us, but he does not carry the same spirit.”¹¹¹ This lukewarm criticism is a far cry from the steady diet of racist and anti-Bolshevik propaganda fed to German troops. What these letters show is that “the German soldier on the Eastern Front of the Second World War was, however, much better prepared for...myths, superstitions, and legends,” and that he embraced them to a large extent.¹¹²

Bolshevism and Racial Awareness

Apart from offering the above descriptions of a backward, primitive people which was naturally associated with Bolshevism, the letters also demonstrate a more than passing animosity to “Bolshevism” as a pathological concept. This was a concept given much attention in the homeland as well. An exhibition of what life was “really” like in the East, appearing in 1941, included the dire warning that “either the German people will win and ensure the survival of the world and its culture or it will perish and all the peoples of the world will fall into the barbarism of the Soviet State.”¹¹³

This was not a message lost on soldiers writing home from the front. For example, an Army captain wrote, “if some perhaps assumed ‘propaganda’... then truth becomes clear to him here. There is no clever propaganda able to portray what horrifying things happened

¹¹¹ James Weingartner, “War against Subhumans: Comparisons between the German War against the Soviet Union and the American War against Japan, 1941-1945,” *Historian* 58, no. 3 (1996).

¹¹² Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45 : German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 103.

¹¹³ “Nahkampf Der Sowjets—Aus Sowjetrussischen Beutefilmen Und Instruktionsbüchern.”

here.”¹¹⁴ Another said, “our propaganda still says too little about the true face of Bolshevism.”¹¹⁵ Finally, many of these soldiers offered sarcastic comments as to the reality of the “Soviet Paradise” that Nazi propaganda so often referred to. As Bartov rightly remarks, “one measure of the extent to which Nazi images permeated the soldiers was their manner to resolve the contradiction between abstract image and actual appearance.”¹¹⁶ Referring to the assumed threat that Bolshevism posed to Germany, Karl Bühler wrote, “good night, if the Russians were to win this war.”¹¹⁷

Depictions of the enemy took on a racist tint as well. Most prevalent are the images of the Eastern peoples as distinct, racially different, and devalued. One soldier remarked that “obedience becomes them, like their naked feet and fur coats.”¹¹⁸ Karl Bühler spoke of the “final victory over the Russian beast.”¹¹⁹ Terms like “beast,” “swine,” “pigs,” “bandits,” were used in such a way as to equate meanings with “Bolshevik” and “Communist.” Widespread dehumanization is the precursor to the mistreatment and mass killing of others.¹²⁰ When anti-Semitism was apparent in these letters, most often it was in the form of

¹¹⁴ Diewerge, *Deutsche Soldaten Sehen Die Sowjet-Union*, 41. [Wenn dieser oder jener vielleicht in Schilderungen und Romanen (Dwinger etwa) etwas Propaganda vermutet hat, so wurde imstande ist, das zu schildern, was hier en Entsetzlichem geschah]

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁶ Bartov, *Hitler's Army : Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*, 127.

¹¹⁷ Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat*, 58.[Gute Nacht, wenn Russland den Krieg gewinnen würde]

¹¹⁸ Harald Bleker and Wido Spratte, *Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe des Oberleutnants Harald Bleker* (Osnabrück: Wenner, 2000), 54.

¹¹⁹ Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat*.

¹²⁰ For more on this See LTC Grossman's book, below. He describes the importance of “cultural distance” in conditioning soldiers to kill. This concept works just as well for killing non-combatants. Dave Grossman, *On Killing : The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1995).

the Judeo-Bolshevik conflation. Karl Fuchs referred to “these subhumans, who’ve been whipped into a frenzy by the Jews.”¹²¹ Another remarked that “if there are any decent dwellings, they hold functionaries [Communist] or Jews, who hold a prominent position.”¹²² This image of Jews and Communists holding power and privileged positions recurs not infrequently in these letters. Such stereotyping evident in these observations likely would help to further reinforce existing racial biases and Nazi propaganda that would enable commission of atrocities.

Bandits and Swine: On the Underhanded Tactics of the Enemy

Here and there are the partisans, who we have beaten off, but who wait until we are engaged to the front and then attack us from behind.”

- Robert Hocke, 26 August 1944¹²³

Many German soldiers expressed anger and revulsion at what they considered to be the unfair or unmilitary methods of the enemy. This likely first came about through widely reported allegations of atrocities committed by the Soviets; most of these reports were not first hand. One soldier claimed that in Lemberg (Lvov) the “Bolsheviks and Jews had killed 12,000 Germans and Ukrainians in bestial ways.”¹²⁴ Many of the atrocities, however, were closer to home, as soldiers expressed in their letters. Karl Bühler wrote his parents in March, 1942,

Recently we found 4 corpses of our comrades, whose eyes the Russians had stabbed out, wearing only their pants, and dowsed with water. They must have

¹²¹ Fuchs, Richardson, and Showalter, *Sieg Heil! : War Letters of Tank Gunner Karl Fuchs, 1937-1941*, 124.

¹²² Diewerge, *Deutsche Soldaten Sehen Die Sowjet-Union*, 17.

¹²³ Bähr and Bähr, *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten, 1939-1945*, 278.

¹²⁴ Diewerge, *Deutsche Soldaten Sehen Die Sowjet-Union*, 45.

frozen miserably. How one becomes accustomed to such sights, you can imagine.¹²⁵

Karl Fuchs echoed the *Die Wehrmacht* article discussed earlier, saying, “yesterday, for instance, we saw our first women soldiers—Russian women, their hair shorn, in uniform! And these pigs fired on our decent German soldiers from ambush positions.”¹²⁶ Ernst Guicking angrily wrote, “this time no quarter will be given.”¹²⁷ Speaking of an encounter with Soviet POWs, Guicking stated, “one forgets too quickly the crimes they have committed against our comrades.”¹²⁸ Euphemism supported this as well. Partisans and the enemy became “bandits” or “gangs” instead of soldiers, and, thus, not worthy of being protected by the customs of war. The implication, clearly, was that if these elements refused to “play by the rules,” then they could be dealt with in whatever harsh manner the fearful, isolated German soldier felt appropriate...as we shall see later.

Dehumanization and “Hardening”

I have known, up to now, no unspoilt men, but only such who have forgotten their natures and those who have won their natures back, or are in the process of winning them back.

- Friedrich von Koch, 15 March 1943¹²⁹

¹²⁵ Bühler, *Spaichingen, Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe, 9.2. 1941-6.1. 1943, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte unserer Heimat*, 58.

¹²⁶ Fuchs, Richardson, and Showalter, *Sieg Heil! : War Letters of Tank Gunner Karl Fuchs, 1937-1941*, 119.

¹²⁷ Irene Guicking, Ernst Guicking, and Jürgen Kleindienst, *Sei tausendmal gegrüsst : Briefwechsel Irene und Ernst Guicking 1937-1945*, Reihe Zeitgut. Spezial ; 1. (Berlin: JKL Publikationen, 2001), CD.

¹²⁸ Ibid. [*Die Grausamkeiten, die vergisst man gar zu schnell, die sie unseren Kameraden angetan haben.*]

¹²⁹ Bähr and Bähr, *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten, 1939-1945*, 244. [*Ich kante bisher noch keine ursprünglichen Menschen, sondern nur solche, auf der Seite des Bewusstseins wieder gewonnen hatten oder im Begriff sind, ihn wieder zu gewinnen.*]

The combination of brutal combat, ideological indoctrination, and the realization of the very life-and-death nature of day to day life on the Eastern Front appear in many soldiers to have led to a dangerous numbing of conscience and feeling. Many letter writers make this surprisingly clear. They speak of the necessity of becoming “hard,” unfeeling, and steeled to the task at hand. Wolfgang Döring, a college student, wrote from Poland that “it is hard to extract the correct attitude: not to become too soft and succumb to everything and not to become too hard and crude and unfeeling over everything you see. One sees both, above all the latter.”¹³⁰ Döring eerily foreshadowed the evolution of this hardness. Adelbert Rühle demonstrated this process of desensitization in May of 1942, writing that “our minds must not harden, they must only become decently callused, to bear each blow without becoming wounded.”¹³¹

This hardening must be seen in connection with the increasing difficult and costly nature of combat on the Eastern Front. Certainly, moralistic concerns must have weakened when faced with death on a daily basis, and with the “no surrender” nature of the conflict in the Soviet Union.¹³² Harald Bleker describes this warfare as a battle “for life and death.”¹³³ A soldier describing the ever brutal anti-partisan war said that “with these swine (*Sauvolk*) it

¹³⁰ Ibid., 16. [*nicht weich zu werden und allem zu erliegen und nicht verhärten und roh und gefühllos über alles hinwegzusehen.*]

¹³¹ Adelbert-Ottheinrich Rühle and Brunhild Rühle, *Die Feldpostbriefe des Adelbert-Ottheinrich Rühle, 1939-1942 ; Briefe und Gedichte eines Frühvollendeten* (Heusenstamm: Orion-Heimreiter, 1979), 66. [*Unsere Seele darf nicht verhärten, sie muß nur eine anständige Hornhaut bilden, die manchen Schlag verträgt, ohne wund zu werden*]

¹³² It must be noted that the Germans were mostly to blame for the violent nature of warfare in the East. Their reluctance to take prisoners, incredibly harsh treatment of those POWs they took, and brutality toward the civilian population went a long way both toward steeling enemy resolve against them and toward inspiring partisan activity.

¹³³ Bleker and Spratte, *Stalingrad : Feldpostbriefe des Oberleutnants Harald Bleker*, 180.

is too much to proceed humanely.”¹³⁴ Simon Krings stated coldly, “if you could only see the Russian prisoners of war from Stalingrad. They fall starving on top of each other, because for a long time they have been given only water and some grain. They look at us Germans as little Fritz looks at his big, strong brother.”¹³⁵ Ernst Guicking, neither a career officer nor by any indication a die hard Nazi, wrote his wife that the Jews “must be exterminated, root and branch, or we do not achieve our goal.”¹³⁶ Disturbingly, after only a year of war in the East, many German soldiers appeared highly hardened and willing to ignore suffering around them. Combined with personal loss, this desensitization created a volatile environment.

The reactions, feelings, and thoughts expressed by the men in this sample of letters to their loved ones back home present a disturbing picture of a group of men being changed by their surroundings into “hard” killers. However, in contravention of Bartov’s explanation, it is important to remember that the majority of these letters were written in 1941 and 1942, before the Eastern Front became the truly deadly horror that it would become at its height.

In addition, the level of ideological content appears to decline with time, indicating an acceptance of the Nazi explanations for conditions in Russia and perhaps for the atrocities committed there. By 1942, the letters of these soldiers included more and more focus on casualties or death. Sometimes it is a simple mention of a comrade killed or wounded. At others, the writer acknowledged the mounting casualties and increasing urgency of the war in the East. This phenomenon reflects the reality of an increasingly stagnant and brutal tactical situation. Its effect on the mindsets of the soldiers can be seen as well. Some adopted what

¹³⁴ Anatoly Golovchansky, *“Ich Will Raus Aus Diesem Wahnsinn” : Deutsche Briefe Von Der Ostfront 1941-1945 : Aus Sowjetischen Archiven* (Wuppertal : P. Hammer: [Moskau], 1991), 109.

¹³⁵ Ebert, *Feldpostbriefe aus Stalingrad*, 19.

¹³⁶ Guicking, Guicking, and Kleindienst, *Sei tausendmal begrüsst : Briefwechsel Irene und Ernst Guicking 1937-1945*, CD.

could be a dangerously fatalistic attitude; as one soldier wrote: “How does one feel strong when he thinks that God has decided his fate and not this stupid world.”¹³⁷ Another had a similar response, writing in early 1942, “God will not let this bitter cup of death pass from me.”¹³⁸ These letters begin to give evidence of the mounting casualties that would characterize the Eastern Front, though this increase is gradual. One would surmise that as the war goes on, letters would contain more and more mention of the human cost of the war. It is enough for this study to note that already in 1942, soldiers are becoming increasingly preoccupied with death.

Through the examination of letters and propaganda materials, an archetypal “ordinary soldier” perhaps emerges. This German soldier entered the Soviet Union with idealized negative images of Bolsheviks, perhaps even a latent anti-Semitism or at least a racial “consciousness.” Upon entering the East, he is shocked by the poverty and real primitive conditions he experiences. Perhaps he associates this with the negative images of Bolshevism he reads in soldier literature or received in his pre-military experiences. The land itself assaults him. Our German soldier may find himself crossing plains and grasslands that seem endless and isolating. He may be lost in deep, dark, and overgrown forests and swamps, far different from the well-kept lands of Germany. He swelters and chokes along dusty roads in the burning sun and he slogs through icy mud and freezing temperatures. As the war progresses, he is shocked by the ferocious Soviet attacks and the brutal, no quarter form of warfare that occurs, even in conventional arenas. He loses friends, often many.

¹³⁷ Hans Dollinger, *Kain, wo ist dein Bruder? : Was der Mensch im Zweiten Weltkrieg erleiden musste, dokumentiert in Tagebüchern und Briefen* (München: List, 1983), 151. [*Gott...entscheidet letzten Endes über mich und nicht die blöde Welt*].

¹³⁸ Golovchansky, *"Ich Will Raus Aus Diesem Wahnsinn" : Deutsche Briefe Von Der Ostfront 1941-1945 : Aus Sowjetischen Archiven*, 57. [*läßte den bitterest Kelch nicht an mir vorübergehen*]

Perhaps he is wounded and returns to his unit. He is frustrated by the elusive partisan, with his hit-and-run tactics, apparently supported by the local population (who may actually be just as victimized by partisan groups as he is). He perhaps reads the front newspapers and magazines in his spare time, such as in winter quarters. These materials reinforce his hatred of the enemy, the land, and its people. They also reinforce that obedience, loyalty, and comradeship are the highest ideals of the soldier and that his homeland will be destroyed and defiled unless he fights. However, contrary to some previous scholarship, this transformation could have occurred even before war turned against Germany. Such a characterization is not meant to exculpate soldiers who committed atrocities, but instead to briefly summarize a process of transformation that certainly contributed greatly to an increased readiness to participate in all kinds of killing on the Eastern Front.

The preceding section has shed some light on the anatomy of German soldier identity. We can see that there is a startling similarity in propaganda messages and ideas expressed by letter writers. Of course, it would be presumptuous to claim a definitive link between propaganda and these expressions. In the end, finding such a link may be unnecessary. That such commonalities exist certainly indicates that the ideas behind them held traction in the worldview of the German soldier. Perhaps such an archetypal transformation applies to some members of 4th Company as they moved deeper into the Soviet Union. Next, we will move from the realm of thoughts to the realm of deeds and explore how and why one unit killed on the Eastern Front.

III. East Towards Murder: 4th Company's Descent into Violence

In November of 1960, former First Sergeant Heinrich *Bollmann* received an anonymous letter, demanding a bank check and the addresses of the former unit commander, then- First Lieutenant Fritz Fischer, and a former platoon leader, First Lieutenant Fritz Puls.

¹³⁹ "Many years have gone by," wrote the blackmailer, "but all is not forgotten. You took part in this thing also...It happened in October 1942 near Aksay, Obgarnarow near Stalingrad, in the steppe. You know better than I what happened in your unit."¹⁴⁰ The writer then threatened to turn to other authorities. Three weeks later, Bollmann received a second letter from this anonymous company member. "Think about the place in Russia where Technical Sergeant Dischlan [sic] died. You hanged a Russian in the barn in Glamandino [sic] and subsequently shot him with your pistol."¹⁴¹ Demanding Bollmann's state pension money, the writer claimed that "since 1945 you have heavily aggrieved our state."¹⁴² Bollmann neither responded to nor reported this attempted blackmail.

¹³⁹ Note: All last names which have been replaced by pseudonyms are signified by italics in their first usage.

¹⁴⁰ "Court Judgment in Trial of Fischer Et. Al," in *B 162/4314 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 466. The full text of both letters was included in this judgment. [*Es sind schon viele Jahre vergangen, aber doch ist nicht alles vergessen. Sie sind an dieser Sache auch beteiligt...Es handelt sich um Oktober 1942 bei Amsay, Obgarnarow bei Stalingrad in der Steppe. Was da in Ihrer Einheit geschehen ist, wissen Sie ja noch besser als ich.*]

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 467. [*Denken Sie an den Ort in Russland wo Wm Dischlan umgekommen ist. Da haben Sie im Schuppen von Glamandino einen Russen erhängt, und anschließend haben Sie noch auf ihn mit der Pistole geschossen.*]

¹⁴² Ibid. [*Seit 1945 haben Sie unseren Staat schon schwer geschädigt.*]

Six months later, investigators with the Central Office for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes received two letters from a Helmut *Ortlepp*. The first asked that someone help “guarantee the conviction of those responsible for the mass murder of Jews in the Soviet Union.”¹⁴³ In the second letter, Ortlepp claimed to be “in a position to help solve the mass murder of Jews.”¹⁴⁴ Thus began the investigation into the activities of the 4th Kompanie, 4th Panzernachrichtenregiment during Operation Barbarossa in the Soviet Union.

The 4th Company was born 3rd Company, 62nd Signal Battalion (Nachrichtenabteilung—NaAbt). Mobilized on 25 August 1929, the 62nd Corps Signal Battalion (KorpsNachrichtenAbteilung—KnaAbt) was assigned to support the XVI Army Corps (Motorized), with an authorized strength of 850 men.¹⁴⁵ This unit fought in both the Polish and French campaigns. On 15 February, 1941, the 4th Panzer Group Signal Regiment (Panzergruppen-Nachrichtenregiment—PzGrNaAbt) was created, in preparation for the German invasion of Russia.¹⁴⁶ The 62nd Signal Battalion joined two other signal battalions as part of this new unit, and 3rd Company, 62nd Signal Battalion became 4th Company, 2nd Battalion, 4th Panzer Group Signal Regiment.

The Panzer Signal Regiments supported Panzer Groups with communications. They followed combat units, laying wire and connecting various headquarters. The 4th Company

¹⁴³ "Letter from Helmut Ortlepp to the Special Commission on the Persecution and Destruction of the Jews, 5-7-61," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 1. [*Wird jemand der mithilft, die Verantwortlichen zur Massenvernichtung von Juden um der Sowjetunion zu überführen in irgendeiner Form sichergestellt.*]

¹⁴⁴ "Letter from Helmut Ortlepp to the Central Office for Nazi Crimes, 5-22-61," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 3. [*...bin ich in der Lage bei der Aufklärung von Massenvernichtung von Juden zu helfen.*]

¹⁴⁵ Hans-Georg Kampe, *Die Heeres-Nachrichtentruppe der Wehrmacht, 1935-1945* (Wölfersheim-Berstadt: Podzun-Pallas, 1994), 98. and Hans-Georg Kampe, *Nachrichtentruppe des Heeres und deutsche Reichspost : militärisches und staatliches Nachrichtenwesen in Deutschland 1830 bis 1945* (Waldesruh bei Berlin: PV, 1999), 409.

¹⁴⁶ Kampe, *Die Heeres-Nachrichtentruppe der Wehrmacht, 1935-1945*, 200.

was a *Feldfernkabelkompanie* (FFK), a wire-laying unit whose responsibility was to lay communication wires for combat units. With approximately 200 soldiers, the company had three wire laying platoons with around 40 men each and a headquarters section.¹⁴⁷ The unit traveled mainly in Opel Blitz 3-ton trucks and staff cars in order to keep up with the units it supported. During the advance into the Soviet Union, these wire companies followed immediately behind combat units laying wire, until the distance became too great. At this point, another company would move to the front, leapfrogging the previous unit.¹⁴⁸ Once these “trunk” lines were laid, lateral lines were laid connecting other headquarters.

As the advance slowed, these communication lines became more static and were handed over to the responsible Army Signal Regiments. This, Hans-Georg Kampe writes in his study of German signal units, resulted in the “regular detachment of Panzer Group Signal Regiments for new missions in forward areas.”¹⁴⁹ 4th Company was likely employed in these new tasks. Throughout the period in question, the unit appears to have been busy repairing and maintaining communication lines from the rear to forward units.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, in the month of November 1943, 2,000 telegraph poles were cut down or destroyed and 200 underground lines cut between Army Group Center and its four armies, indicating that there was indeed much work to be done.¹⁵¹ While these acts of sabotage occurred outside of the time frame investigated, they do give an idea of the vulnerability of these lines. After the attack on Moscow in late 1941, 4th Company was removed from frontline duty and tasked with

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 53.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 138.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 139.

¹⁵⁰ 4th Company’s crimes occurred between June 1941 and November 1942.

¹⁵¹ Kampe, *Die Heeres-Nachrichtentruppe der Wehrmacht, 1935-1945*, 162.

securing major supply routes between Smolensk and Moscow.¹⁵² These security missions likely entailed patrolling major roadways and also repairing lines damaged by normal wear and tear or by partisan action. In short, 4th Company was not intended to be a killing unit of any kind.

What follows is a description of the crimes of 4th Company, perpetrated between September 1941 and November of 1942. The sources for this narrative were pre-trial interviews conducted in preparation of the case against a Captain Fischer and First Lieutenant Puls, tried in Düsseldorf between 27 April and 13 May 1964.¹⁵³ As a source, the pre-trial investigation records of this court case offer both insight and challenges to the researcher. At first, the challenges can seem daunting. By their nature of being conducted in an investigatory environment, these interviews automatically place the participants in an adversarial relationship: interrogators questioning and witnesses answering (with some clearly weighing each answer). These men clearly worried about self-incrimination and so were often careful to remain ambiguous or non-communicative about events that they believed might get them into trouble.¹⁵⁴ Secondly, though not of lesser importance, these men were quite reticent to implicate former comrades and may have neglected to mention crimes that were not explicitly investigated.

A careful reading of the texts and accepting their limitations can, in fact, yield a large amount of valuable information about both the events and the mindsets of those involved.

¹⁵² "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 264.

¹⁵³ Note: At the time that he commanded 4th Company, Captain Fischer held the rank of First Lieutenant (*Oberleutnant*). For clarity, he will be referred to as First Lieutenant Fischer throughout this study. Lieutenant Puls was an officer candidate holding the rank of Technical Sergeant (*Wachtmeister*) and will be referred to as such as well.

¹⁵⁴ For a more detailed explanation of the criminal elements as they appeared in the law, please see section V.

Christopher Browning provides the following useful set of tests to assess the validity of perpetrator testimony, which he elaborates upon in his discussion of Adolf Eichmann.

1. The Self Interest Test: When a witness makes statements against his self-interest or where telling the truth is in his self interest.
2. The Vividness Test: When the witness describes events with “an unusual attention to details of visual memory.”
3. The Possibility Test: When a witness' claims “are not contradicted or proven impossible.”
4. The Probability Test: When the accounts “coincide with or fit a pattern of events suggested or established by other documentation.”¹⁵⁵

According to these metrics, former 4th Company soldiers often do volunteer what are likely true statements. Also, the methods and words used to describe a situation are important, whether true or not. If one continues to refer to the women and children killed as “partisans,” twenty years after the fact, such a word choice is significant. Even those who give the most self-serving statements (such as the accused or those who feel threatened by others' statements) give us great insight into their thought process simply by the ways in which they obfuscate. Finally, in some instances, what is *not* said can be a useful tool in understanding responses to atrocities. While such statements can be contradictory, self-exculpatory, and simply false at times, the following narrative of 4th Company's violence in the Soviet Union is confirmed by multiple testimonies and consists of the most corroborated version of events.

On the 22nd of June, 1941, the 4th Company of the 4th Panzer Group Signal Regiment crossed the border between Poland and Lithuania as part of Panzer Group 4, Army Group North.¹⁵⁶ Having already participated in both the French and Polish campaigns, 4th

¹⁵⁵ Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories : Holocaust History and Postwar Testimony*, George L. Mosse Series in Modern European Cultural and Intellectual History. (Madison, Wis.: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 11-12.

¹⁵⁶ 4th Company member Johannes Wechsler provided his *Wehrpaß* as part of his testimony. Using this document, it is possible to track the movements of 4th Company throughout the period in question. "Statement of Johannes Wechsler, 4-13-62," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 250. the XVI Corps had also by this time been redesignated as the Panzer Group 4. Georg Tessin and Brün Meyer, *Verbände und Truppen*

Company's march east into the Soviet Union would be marked by increasing acts of violence against the civilian population, culminating in the murder of approximately 40 Jewish men, women, children, and elderly in September of 1942.

Two months after entering the Soviet Union, in September 1941, 4th Company was stationed in the vicinity of Roslavl (in modern day Byelorussia). A German sentry caught a Russian civilian among the company's trucks in the motor pool. According to Lieutenant Fischer, this action violated a standing curfew during hours of darkness that forbade the citizens of the town from leaving their houses.¹⁵⁷ After questioning the Russian through an interpreter, Fischer determined the Russian was guilty of attempted sabotage. In his testimony, he stated that he "saw in [the Russian's] demeanor a clear violation of the given order and made him understand that he was going to be shot."¹⁵⁸ Fischer claimed, without any details, that "I saw the Russian as having been caught in the act and felt myself entitled by my instructions to have him shot, whereas I had first given him the opportunity to remove suspicion, to tell his side of the story, through the questioning by the interpreter."¹⁵⁹ The evidence of sabotage here (simply being in the vicinity of the unit's vehicles) is certainly weak and would not have warranted such drastic action. Indeed, it seems that the only "act" this civilian was caught in was being near the trucks after curfew, which in no case is punishable by death under any law of war.

der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939-1945, 2. verb. Aufl. ed., vol. 1 (Osnabrück: Biblio, 1979), 15.

¹⁵⁷ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 265.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* [Auf jeden Fall sah ich in dem Verhalten des Russen einen klaren Verstoß gegen die erlassenen Befehle und habe ihm zu verstehen gegeben, dass er nunmehr erschossen werde.]

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Bl. 266. [Ich sah den Russen als auf frischer Tat betroffen und hielt mich nach den allgemeinen Anweisungen für berechtigt, ihn erschießen zu lassen, wobei ich ihm zunächst durch die Frage des Dolmetschers Gelegenheit gab, sich zu dem Verdacht zu äußern]

However, without further deliberation, Fischer sent for Sergeant Heinrich Pehle, whose group had captured the Russian. Fischer then ordered Pehle to shoot the captive. According to Pehle, he at first refused, at which point First Lieutenant Fischer drew his pistol and threatened him with it. After this, Pehle stated that he “felt threatened and shot as ordered.”¹⁶⁰ The threat of being executed for failing to obey orders is a common trope in perpetrator testimony. In this instance, however, it is possible, based on Fischer’s past actions, that he did indeed brandish his weapon as a means of intimidation. In any case, it is *highly* unlikely that Fischer would have actually shot Pehle for refusing such an order. Fischer denied forcing Pehle to shoot but freely admitted ordering him to shoot the civilian.¹⁶¹

By the winter of 1941-42, 4th Company was billeted in the town of Klemjatino, tasked with securing a portion of the main supply route between Smolensk and Vyasma.¹⁶² Sometime in January or February 1942, Fischer ordered the execution of another civilian. This time the civilian was suspected of being a partisan, in part because he had been wearing a Russian military uniform coat.¹⁶³ Fischer ordered Sergeant Justus *Huber* to carry out this execution. According to Huber, he was told that this Russian had been involved in the disappearance of three members of a neighboring unit.¹⁶⁴ Again, Fischer’s penchant for

¹⁶⁰ "Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 1-28-63," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 371. [*Ich kann nur sagen, dass ich mich bedroht fühlte und dann befehlsgemäß geschossen*]

¹⁶¹ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 265.

¹⁶² A note on place names. Whenever possible, the modern place name spelling will be used.

¹⁶³ "Antrag Auf Voruntersuchung Gegen Die Beschuldigten, 9-28-62," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 304.

¹⁶⁴ "Statement of Justus Huber, 3-12-63," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 419. [*Es wurde mir vor der Erschießung gesagt es bestände eine Zusammenhang mit dem Verschwinden der 3 Angehörigen der Nachbareinheit und dem Partisan.*]

executions calls into question the validity of this charge. Unlike the previous instance, Fischer cannot even claim that this individual was caught in the act. Sergeant Huber first approached enlisted man Wilhelm *Orlmann* who refused to shoot (or claimed to have done so in his testimony). According to Orlmann, Huber then ordered Bernard *Grackel* to carry out the execution.¹⁶⁵ Sergeant Huber then gave his service pistol to Grackel and the group (Grackel, Orlmann, Huber, and the Russian) began walking into the countryside outside the village. After approximately 50-100 meters, Grackel shot the Russian in the back of the head, killing him. The soldiers then returned to their quarters.¹⁶⁶

Klemjatino bore the burdens of an increasingly violent 4th Company. February and March of 1942 saw two separate hangings of Russian civilians.¹⁶⁷ In February, according to Fischer, the village elder gave him information regarding a Russian who was supposed to have been involved in attacks on the main supply route. The elder continued, further alleging that this Russian secretly left the village at night.¹⁶⁸ First Sergeant Bollmann, who was present at the execution, appears to have concurred with Fischer's judgment, arguing that the Russian who was hanged was "known to us as the chief liaison officer for the local partisan group."¹⁶⁹ Fischer himself admitted to having ordered that this Russian be hanged "to warn the Russian population, to serve as a deterrent."¹⁷⁰ Though Fischer did not remember whom

¹⁶⁵ "Statement of Wilhelm Orlmann, 2-14-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 130-31.

¹⁶⁶ "Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 4-16-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 256.

¹⁶⁷ "Antrag Auf Voruntersuchung Gegen Die Beschuldigten, 9-28-62," Bl. 304.

¹⁶⁸ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 267. [*Der Kolchoseenvorsitzender hatte im übrigen von anderen Dorfbewohnern bestätigt erhalten, dass dieser Russe sich nachts heimlich aus der Ortschaft entfernte.*]

¹⁶⁹ "Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 8-29-61," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 47. [*Dieser war uns als Hauptverbindungsman der dortigen Partisangruppen bekannt.*]

¹⁷⁰ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 267. [*Diese Erhängung war von mir befohlen worden, um die russische Bevölkerung zu warnen, wobei von mir behängen als Abschreckung dienen sollte.*]

he ordered to hang this Russian, it is clear that this man was taken to an open barn in the town. Soldier Clemens *Hahn* was on guard duty 200m from the barn and witnessed the hanging, albeit from a distance. He described how a crowd of the town's inhabitants followed the 4th Company men with the condemned Russian to the barn. A German soldier read something from a document. A noose was put around the Russian's neck and he was placed on a stool or something similar. The stool was removed and the Russian hung there for approximately ten minutes. When the victim was motionless, another Company member shot him in the heart.¹⁷¹ Sergeant *Pehle*, Tech Sergeant *Fuchs*, and MSG *Bürger* were named as possible participants.¹⁷² One can confirm at least the identity of the shooter. First Sergeant *Bollmann* admitted shooting the man in the heart "when he could no longer see his death throes."¹⁷³ *Hahn* further stated that this body hung in the open barn for several weeks as a deterrent, and *Karl Ostermann* confirmed that he had to pass this corpse every day on the way to guard duty.¹⁷⁴ *Karl Roth* also recalled seeing this Russian hanging "from a beam" when he was on guard duty later.¹⁷⁵

A month later, a second Russian was hanged in the vicinity of Klemjatino. Soldier *Wilhelm Kappel* reported that in the vicinity of the village "we repeatedly observed blinking

¹⁷¹ "Statement of Clemens Hahn, 1-9-62," in *B 162/4313* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 104.

¹⁷² Both Heinrich *Bollmann* (*Bürger*, *Pehle*, *Fuchs*) and *Helmut Ortlepp's* (*Bürger*, *Bollmann*) testimony confirm that it is likely that at least *Bürger* and *Bollmann* participated. "Statement of *Karl Roth*, 9-6-61," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 65.

¹⁷³ "Statement of Heinrich *Bollmann*, 8-29-61," Bl. 47. [*Ich habe diese Aufgehängten dann noch mit meiner Dienstpistole ins Herz geschossen, da ich den Anblick des Todeskampfes nicht mehr mit ansehen konnte.*]

¹⁷⁴ "Statement of Clemens *Hahn*, 1-9-62," Bl. 104. [*Der Tote wurde zur Abschreckung noch mehrere Wochen hängen gelassen.* "Statement of *Karl Wilhelm Ostermann*, 4-9-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 238. [*Dieser Russe hing in einer Scheune, an der ich immer vorbei musste, wenn ich zum Wachestehen zum Schneebunker ging. Meiner Erinnerung nach hat dieser Russe dort mehrere Tage gehangen.*]

¹⁷⁵ "Statement of *Karl Roth*, 9-6-61," Bl. 65. [*an deren Querbalken ein russischer Zivilist aufgehangen war*]

light signals.”¹⁷⁶ These suspicious lights were reported up the chain of command. Johann Halter explained the interpretation of these lights, saying that “it was suspected that these signals would have been seen by partisans.”¹⁷⁷ Fischer explained during his interrogation that these lights were understood to be “release points for Russian planes dropping supplies to the partisans.”¹⁷⁸ First Lieutenant Fischer then ordered his 3rd platoon leader, First Lieutenant Sauer, to conduct a raid on this town, which was approximately 8km from Klemjatino. During this raid, all the inhabitants of the town were rounded up and assembled in the center of the village.¹⁷⁹ A house to house search was conducted. After the search was completed, Fischer arrived in the town. A flashlight (*TaschenLohner*) had been found in the home of one of the inhabitants. Fischer then ordered that its Russian owner be hanged. Once again, 4th Company used excessive, almost psychotic force. A flashlight could not be mistaken for the type of lights allegedly seen, and, in any case, ownership of a flashlight does not in any way indicate partisan activity. Bernhard Olker remembered Fischer as having said, presumably as a justification for the hanging, “one must believe.”¹⁸⁰ He also remembered hearing that the Russian was supposed to have been a soldier in civilian clothing.¹⁸¹ The 3rd Platoon left the town after the hanging. Olker reports ironically that some days later, it was discovered that the so-called “blinking signals” were really the headlights of passing trucks on the main

¹⁷⁶ "Statement of Wilhelm Kappel, 2-6-62 " in *B 162/4313* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 82.[*In diesem Ort wurde von uns des nachts wiederholt beobachtet, das Blinkenzeichen gegeben wurden.*]

¹⁷⁷ "Statement of Johann Halter, 2-15-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 133.[*dass diese von Partisanen gesehen wurden*]

¹⁷⁸ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 12-6-62," Bl. 345.[*Es war damals üblich, dass durch Blinkzeichen den russischen Fliegern die Abwurfplätze für den für die Partisanen bestimmten Nachschub angezeigt wurde.*]

¹⁷⁹ "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 10-3-61," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 83.

¹⁸⁰ "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 1-29-63," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 384.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

supply route as they went behind a small hill, which caused them to briefly appear and disappear, thus, blinking.¹⁸²

While these two Klemjatino hangings were the only ones with which Fischer was officially charged, testimony of company members indicates the likelihood of other such incidents of which there was insufficient evidence to charge. One such incident involved an apparent ambush that occurred in the town. According to widespread testimony among witnesses, two Russian paratroopers (or partisans) jumped from a plane in the vicinity of Klemjatino and occupied a house on the edge of town. From this location, they ambushed members of 4th Company before they were killed (or committed suicide). The two dead paratroopers were placed on a sled by the village children and hastily buried in the snow.¹⁸³ During this operation, a Technical Sergeant Diehle was killed by an explosive device left behind by the partisans, most likely by accident.¹⁸⁴ While many company members did not recall a hanging associated with this ambush, Wilhelm Maier stated that, in connection with this attack, a woman was hanged. This woman supposedly lived in Fischer's house and had been the school teacher of the village.¹⁸⁵ Helmut Ortlepp remembered that the victims had been two Russians who were inhabitants of the house used for the ambush and who were suspected of having aided the partisans.¹⁸⁶ They were hanged on the order of First Lieutenant Fischer. While the facts concerning these alleged hangings are difficult to

¹⁸² "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 10-3-61," Bl. 83-84.

¹⁸³ "Statement of Karl Wilhelm Ostermann, 4-9-62," Bl. 239.

¹⁸⁴ "Statement of Hans Eduard Hartmann, 2-15-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 136.

¹⁸⁵ "Statement of Wilhelm Maier, 4-11-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 242. [*In diesem Zusammenhang sie eine Frau aufgehängt worden, die im Hause des Fischer gewohnt habe und Einsicht in Unterlagen der Komp gehabt hatte.*]

¹⁸⁶ "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 7-12-61," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 6-7.

determine, some elements of the story are supported by much of the testimony. First, Technical Sergeant Diehle's accidental death is established by at least six of those company members interviewed.¹⁸⁷ In a unit that apparently had few casualties, this was a significant event. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the "paratrooper" incident is corroborated in some form by thirteen former soldiers.¹⁸⁸ With these two events established as likely and given 4th Company's past record of executing civilians for far less, it seems exceedingly probable that civilians were executed in reprisal for Diehle's death, the partisan attack, or both.

Having progressed from individual shootings to hangings to mass roundups, 4th Company crossed over into the realm of mass murder while stationed in the small town of Peregruznoje, approximately 80km southwest of Stalingrad. According to Fischer and Puls, the unit was engaged in anti-partisan operations. One late afternoon in September, Fischer ordered that all the Jews in the town be rounded up. He claimed that the Starost (village elder) of the town had pointed out to him a group of people who moved back and forth between the German and Russian lines during the night, bringing the Russians reports on German positions.¹⁸⁹ Therefore, Fischer argued, he had these "unsafe people" rounded up in order to be removed from the town and taken to Russian lines.¹⁹⁰ This argumentation must be taken as patently ridiculous and purely self-serving. The idea that these people,

¹⁸⁷ Hartmann, Grackel, Halter, Lohner, Ostermann, Orlmann

¹⁸⁸ Epprick, Dörmann, Grackel, Hartmann, Hessler, Halter, Lohner, Lange, Maier, Möller, Ostermann, Ortlepp, Wielert

¹⁸⁹ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 269. [*Ich weiß außerdem, dass ich von dem örtlichen Ortsvorsteher darauf hingewiesen worden war, dass während der Nacht ein Teil der Bevölkerung zwischen der deutschen und russischen Front hin und herwanderte und den Russen Meldungen über unsere Stellungen brachten.*]

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. [*unsicheren Personen*]

established to be women, children, and the elderly, were bringing intelligence to the Russians is wildly imaginative and implausible. Why would Jews, having made it to Russian lines, return to German occupation?

This military necessity rationale is brought into question by other testimony. In addition to the fact that clearly the majority of soldiers knew that these were Jews, not just Russian civilians, August Möller offers a more damning reason for the roundup. He testified that he had “heard later through hearsay that the reason for this round-up was supposed to have been that a Jewish woman refused to accept German soldiers [to be lodged in her home].”¹⁹¹ Günther *Lehmann*, the company clerk, had heard that, “due to many telephone lines being cut in the town, Fischer had ordered all the Jews in the town, from infant to the elderly, be rounded up in order to be shot.”¹⁹² Company cook, Sergeant Kurt *Lange*, heard rumors that the Russians were accusing the Jews of having “squatted” in the town.¹⁹³ Karl Rothe supported this claim; he stated that Russian refugees had approached Lieutenant Fischer “with the request that the people who had settled down in their homes— during their absence—be removed. Thereupon, Fischer ordered, in my presence, that the Jews of the village be rounded up.”¹⁹⁴ The investigating judge wrote in a letter to a World Jewish Congress representative in 1962 that the Jews of Peregruznoje were likely refugees from

¹⁹¹ "Statement of August Georg Mahler, 8-28-61," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 51. [*Wie mir weiterhin vom Hörensagen bekannt ist, dürfte der Grund dieses Zusammentreibens darin zu sehen gewesen sein, dass eine jüdische Frau die Aufnahme deutscher Soldaten verweigert hatte.*]

¹⁹² "Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 8-29-61," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 55. [*Ich hörte, dass der öfteren Telefonleitungen in unserem Ort zerschnitten waren, sodass Hptm Fischer eines Tages als Repressalie anordnete, sämtliche Juden vom Säugling bis zum Greise zusammentreiben, um sie erschießen zu lassen.*]

¹⁹³ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 231. [*die Juden hätten sich im Dorf „breit gemacht.“*]

¹⁹⁴ "Statement of Karl Roth, 9-6-61," Bl. 65-66. [*russische Flüchtlinge mit der Bitte an Fischer herangetreten sind, die Leute, die sich in ihre Wohnungen eingenistet hatten—während der Abwesenheit—aus diese zu entfernen.*]

larger towns west of Stalingrad.¹⁹⁵ The witnesses above present a damning set of alternate motivations for murdering the Jews of Peregruznoje. Regardless, the decision to round up the Jewish citizens of the town likely had little to do with any threat they may have posed to 4th Company.

Regardless of the reason, the Jews of the town were gathered together under guard in the vicinity of Lange's field kitchen. They were guarded by 3-4 men and stood tightly packed in the hot sun in the town square.¹⁹⁶ These Jews consisted mainly of women, children, and the elderly. At some point on this afternoon, First Lieutenant Fischer ordered Technical Sergeant Puls to arrange an execution detail and kill them. As Puls stated during questioning, Fischer told him "you will lead an execution detail in the morning."¹⁹⁷ Perhaps owing to the late hour, these 30-40 Jews were loaded onto a company vehicle, with the tarp down, and left in the motor pool overnight. Members of 4th company guarded the truck. Throughout the night, the men heard the cries and moans of those packed into the truck. Sergeant Lange best described the situation that night, saying, "the cries and wails, above all those of the children which could not be ignored, generally lasted the entire night. One could not think of sleep in the immediate vicinity."¹⁹⁸

In collections of testimony such as these, silences often are as important as utterances. An important silence exists concerning the Jews of Peregruznoje. Not a single member of 4th

¹⁹⁵ "Photo #13337," Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives. [*Es sind Anhaltspunkte dafür vorhanden, daß es sich bei den ermordeten Juden nicht um Bewohner des Ortes P. gehandelt hat, sondern um Menschen, die wohl auf der Flucht nach P. gekommen waren, möglicherweise also aus größeren Orten westlich des Gebietes von Stalingrad stammten.*]

¹⁹⁶ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 231.

¹⁹⁷ "Statement of Fritz Puls, 11-27-62," Bl. 354.

¹⁹⁸ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 232. [*Es war aber so, dass das Schreien und Jammern, vor allem der Kinder nicht zu überhören war, was im übrigen die ganze Nacht angedauert hat. An ein Schlafen in der unmittelbare Nähe war nicht zu denken.*]

Company interviewed mentioned attempting to help the Jews or alleviate their suffering, even though such a statement would be clearly in their best interests. That none of the soldiers mentions giving the captives water or food, allowing them access to latrines, or even opening the flaps on the truck to give them air, gives us great insight into how this action was viewed by the members of 4th Company.

Early the next morning, Sergeant Puls organized a firing squad of approximately 12-15 men and drove the Jews of Peregruznoje into the steppe a few kilometers outside of town.¹⁹⁹ Here, the truck pulled off the road and a small group of Jews were forced out and made to run into the steppe. Members of the firing squad walked behind them, shooting. Some witnesses stated that an NCO then went among the bodies to ensure that the Jews were dead. Then the soldiers drove the truck a short distance and repeated the operation. During the shooting, according to numerous accounts from veterans of 4th Company, a Jewish woman refused to surrender her infant child and insisted that they both be shot together. A German soldier shot her in the head, killing her but not the child who was left to crawl about in the blood and brains of its mother until it, too, was killed. Alleged perpetrator Technical Sergeant Fuchs was described as being appalled that this child had moved its hands through the mother's shattered head; he told Helmut Ortlepp that he supposed he would never forget this for the rest of his life.²⁰⁰ According to some testimony, a Russian woman cried out, "I no Jew!" and was put back into the truck and returned to the town. The firing squad returned to Peregruznoje, where Sergeant Puls reported the completion of the mission to First Lieutenant Fischer. Later, rumors were heard that a woman had survived and made it back to

¹⁹⁹ "Antrag Auf Voruntersuchung Gegen Die Beschuldigten, 9-28-62," Bl. 302.

²⁰⁰ "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 7-12-61," Bl. 8. [*Fuchs war entsetzt darüber, dass nun das Kind mit sei en Händen in dem zerschossenen Kopf der Mutter herumgewühlt habe. Er meinte noch, er würde dies in seinem Leben nicht vergessen.*]

the town. Puls himself testified that the Starost had approached him saying that a woman was still alive at the execution site. He stated, “the next day a Russian (I believe it was the Starost of the village) came to me and told me that they weren’t all dead, that one was found in the town, I remember that I made it clear to him that he should not tell the commander. I gave him cigarettes so that he would stay quiet.”²⁰¹ The moral value of this action is dubious. Based on Puls’ demonstrated loyalty to Fischer, it is more likely that he wished more to hide his failure to complete the mission than to save the wounded woman from any further action. Sadly, the Jews of Peregruznoje had a decent chance of surviving the war. Were it not for the murderous initiative of Lieutenant Fischer, they would have been liberated by the Red Army by mid-December.

Throughout the violence committed by 4th Company during its advance ever deeper into Russia, members of the unit participated in a variety of ways. Some guarded. Some hanged. Some shot. Some drove. Some were simply present. And some refused or evaded participation. The case of 4th Company demonstrates that soldiers responded to atrocities in different ways and for different reasons.

Parts in a Machine: The Men of 4th Company

I wouldn’t have been court-martialed but I would have been blacklisted, put on KP back at base camp, and labeled a coward. That I couldn’t take.
- Vietnam veteran on why he would never disobey an unlawful order.²⁰²

²⁰¹ "Statement of Fritz Puls, 11-27-62," Bl. 357. [*Am nächsten Tage ist ein Russe—ich denke, es war der Starost des Orts—zu mir gekommen und hat mir gesagt, es wären nicht alle tot, einige befänden sich dort im Ort. Ich erinnere mich noch, dass ich ihm klargemacht habe, er sollte ja nichts dem Chef sagen. Ich habe ihm noch Zigaretten gegeben gesagt, es sollte so bleiben.*]

²⁰² Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing : Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* ([New York, NY]: Basic Books, 1999), 199.

The threat of social death, exclusion from the mutual welfare and communication network, was the cement of military group culture.²⁰³

What role does the group play in the explanation of the crimes of the Third Reich, specifically those of the *Wehrmacht*? This question is central to any understanding of the commission of atrocities by the German Army, especially to understanding *who* participated and *why*. Indeed, theories of socialization and social psychology occupy prominent positions in Holocaust historiography, specifically works attempting to explain perpetrator behavior. Are individuals more likely to participate in atrocities due to pre-existing notions and experience (education, training, propaganda) or because of social pressures and group dynamics (peer pressure, authority relationships, social psychological influences)? This false dichotomy is not particularly useful to the historian, as Leonard Newman, professor of psychology, observes.²⁰⁴ One might better argue that pressures to commit atrocities are situational, but that the situation itself is read by the perpetrators through a certain lens and within the context of group norms that are influenced by indoctrination, education, and prior life experiences. That being said, historians and social psychologists have attributed variant levels of agency to the individual or the group, respectively.

Omer Bartov perhaps best represents a school of thinkers prioritizing individual conditioning, specifically propaganda. He writes,

the average combat soldier and junior officer, in his profound sense of a complete lack of choice, drilled into him through years of ideological indoctrination and social-organizational pressures, in his ability to conceive of any other alternative to the values propagated by the regime, and in his dependence on the polarized images of a

²⁰³ Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft : die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert*, Kritische Studien Zur Geschichtswissenschaft ; Bd. 173. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 273.

²⁰⁴ See Leonard S. Newman, "What Is A "Social-Psychological" Account of Perpetrator Behavior? The Person Versus the Situation in Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*," in *Understanding Genocide : The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

deified Führer and a demonized enemy as his motivating engine, was probably closer to the National Socialist model of the fanatic, politically committed *Kämpfer* than the generals.²⁰⁵

In his estimation, the most important factor in the behavior of *Wehrmacht* soldiers was the intensive indoctrination effort to which they were subjected.

In contrast to this interpretation stand the findings of many social psychologists and historians. Christopher Browning, in his study of Police Battalion 101, demonstrates that propaganda and indoctrination were not a decisive influence on the murderous behavior of the unit. Indeed, he ends his text with the words, “within virtually every social collective, the peer group exerts tremendous pressures on behavior and sets moral norms. If the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 could become killers under such circumstances, what group of men cannot?”²⁰⁶ In their discussion of group dynamics and the Holocaust, social psychologists seem to agree. They argue that “individual cognitions, identities, and so forth depend to a larger degree on the groups within which people affiliate and are determined by which group memberships are currently salient. In other words, individual attitudes, beliefs, and so on are social phenomena; they exist in and are produced by social groups.”²⁰⁷

Yet, not all soldiers killed, and not all soldiers killed in the same ways. How does one account for these variances within what is sometimes thought to be a cohesive group? A 1951 sociological study found that a Canadian infantry company appeared “not as a succession of individuals, but as a set of more or less related clusters of men bound together

²⁰⁵ Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust : Disputed Histories*, 29.

²⁰⁶ Browning, *Ordinary Men : Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 189.

²⁰⁷ R. Scott Tindale, Catherine Munier, Michelle Wassermann, and Christine M. Smith, "Group Processes and the Holocaust," in *Understanding Genocide : The Social Psychology of the Holocaust*, ed. Leonard S. Newman and Ralph Erber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 144.

by bonds which have little to do with army organization in the formal sense.”²⁰⁸ This description of military units can be as easily applied to most Western armies. Thomas Kühne has identified a similar group of clusters in his study of comradeship among *Wehrmacht* soldiers. He categorizes German soldiers into three groups: 1) the “Unsoldaten”—the outsider of military culture, 2) the “Born” soldier—the genuine insider, and 3) the “Draftee” soldier—recruited compulsorily but who knew how to adapt.²⁰⁹ However, these categories seem far too broad and caricatured to be truly useful as analytic tools. They do not tell us much at all about the responses of men in these groups to atrocities. For example, 4th Company shows that “draftees” could volunteer, participate, and decline to participate in atrocities.

A new theoretical framework is required. Previous studies of this spectrum of “characters” fail to display a sufficiently nuanced approach. In reality, there seem to be many different archetypal personalities within groups of perpetrators. Any critical study of groups responsible for committing atrocities shows that most responses of individuals are attempts to negotiate various group pressures, risks, and psychological stressors. Apart from those who are intrinsically motivated, individuals must choose a path between administrative penalty (or the threat thereof), peer isolation, and cognitive dissonance. In other words, when confronting the choice to participate in atrocities, one must weigh the risk of punishment from his superiors, the risk of ridicule or isolation from his fellow group members, the rewards to be gained, and the internal pain caused by following or ignoring one’s moral inclinations. The interplay of these forces often results in a wide range of responses, from

²⁰⁸ Anthony Kellett, “Combat Motivation,” in *Contemporary Studies in Combat Psychiatry*, ed. Gregory Belenky, *Contributions in Military Studies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 207.

²⁰⁹ Kühne, *Kameradschaft : die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert*, 23.

complete compliance to outright refusal. Categorizing these responses or archetypal characters tells us much about complicity in atrocity and the forces at play behind it.

Motivated actors are those who willingly or eagerly participated in atrocities. They may have volunteered. These individuals could be motivated by any number of reasons (ideology, careerism, or self-interest); what is important is that they acted almost entirely of their own free will. These motivated actors must be divided further into the *true believers* and the *role players*, as the reasons for such strong motivation can be markedly different. As the name suggests, true believers possess an ideologically driven motivation for participation. They truly believe in the goals and doctrine of the regime and, thus, see themselves as following the same path. These individuals need not subscribe entirely to the dominating ideology, but need only find enough commonality that they can devote their full allegiance to it. Role players on the other hand appear equally motivated in their actions, yet the underlying reasons may be more professional than ideological. Role players are intrinsically motivated to fulfill their role to the best of their ability. There is an element of pride here. Role players need not hold any deep-seated agreement with ideological aims (though they may exhibit more than a tacit acceptance). They are committed to executing whatever tasks fall to their position and to displaying the characteristics expected of such a position. It is here that organizational culture and individual training can also influence responses to social pressures.

A large percentage of soldiers and perpetrators likely fall into categories of following and obedience. However, not all following can be categorized the same way. There seem to be at least two distinct types of following. *Dutiful followers* exhibit a willingness to fully participate when asked or ordered, but do not necessarily possess any intrinsic motivation to

do so or act on their own initiative. These men function within a hierarchical and military structure, doing what they “must” do. These men can be counted on to execute orders when given; not all individuals can. *Nominal compliers* will execute orders they are given, but require supervision or group social pressures to achieve complete compliance and cease to comply when not under supervision.

Finally, some individuals choose to not comply. It must be stressed that reasons behind this non-compliance are many. Some individuals may fail to comply because of moral disagreement: they simply believe the acts to be wrong. Others may fail to comply because the violent, bloody nature of these acts is something they are not capable of handling. While one cannot always determine the reasoning behind non-compliance, the forcefulness of the act can allow the historian to infer the depth of belief behind it. *Evaders* attempt to avoid participation. They may decline orders, but may also participate against their will if pressed. Often they will simply attempt to withdraw from the situation. These individuals may be but an order away from nominal compliance, but they will seek to avoid situations where their hand would be forced.

Finally, *active refusal* requires a greater commitment. Such actions do not often remain in the shadows; they are not unnoticed measures and they entail the assumption of increased risk, of social alienations and military punishment. But not all active resistance is the same either. These individuals can be divided into two groups as well: *individual refusers* and *group resisters*. *Active refusers* will refuse to comply. These refusals can be both verbal and non-verbal, but in either case they are final. Individual refusal is characterized by a commitment. These individuals cannot be further coerced. There are those who refuse but then comply. These are nominal compliers, not failed resisters. Yet

refusal can also be selective. Men will refuse certain order or certain types of activities and, often, accept others. The final category is that of *active group resisters*. These are individuals who not only refuse to participate personally but also attempt to either intervene by preventing others from participating or by convincing others they should not comply. This is the rarest form of resistance and carries with it the greatest risk of penalty, for inciting others to disobey was a much more punishable offense than refusing to participate in what were still viewed legally as acts of questionable or ambiguous legal standing.

Employing archetypes such as these is useful in understanding the various forces at work behind killing. However, one can be tempted to view them as static or intrinsic to the individual. These groups are neither fixed nor impermeable. Even within these categories, continuums exist. Moreover, individuals can move between these groups based on the nature of the situation. These groups are defined by behaviors and actions. Personality plays a role inasmuch as it, along with other forces, affects this behavior. Thus, the same individual can fall into different categories at different times based on his attitudes at the time and his reaction to the specific situation. This distribution of behavior in social groups is not a new concept. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the landmark Milgram and Zimbardo experiments demonstrated that human behavior relative to authority tends to fall along a spectrum ranging from initiative-taking to refusal, with the majority of individuals participating to a large extent.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Stanley Milgram conducted a series of experiments in 1961 attempting to examine human reactions to authority by having them administer what they thought to be painful shocks to another person. (For an informative short documentary on this important series of experiments, see Stanley Milgram, *Obedience* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1969), videocassette.) Philip Zimbardo conducted his now-famous “Stanford prison experiment” in 1971, creating a mock prison in the basement of the psychology building in order to evaluate how socially imposed roles, peer pressure, and environment affected human behavior. (For more, see Philip G. Zimbardo, Ken Musen, and John Polito, *Quiet Rage: The Stanford Prison Study* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Instructional Television Network, Stanford University, 1992), videorecording.)

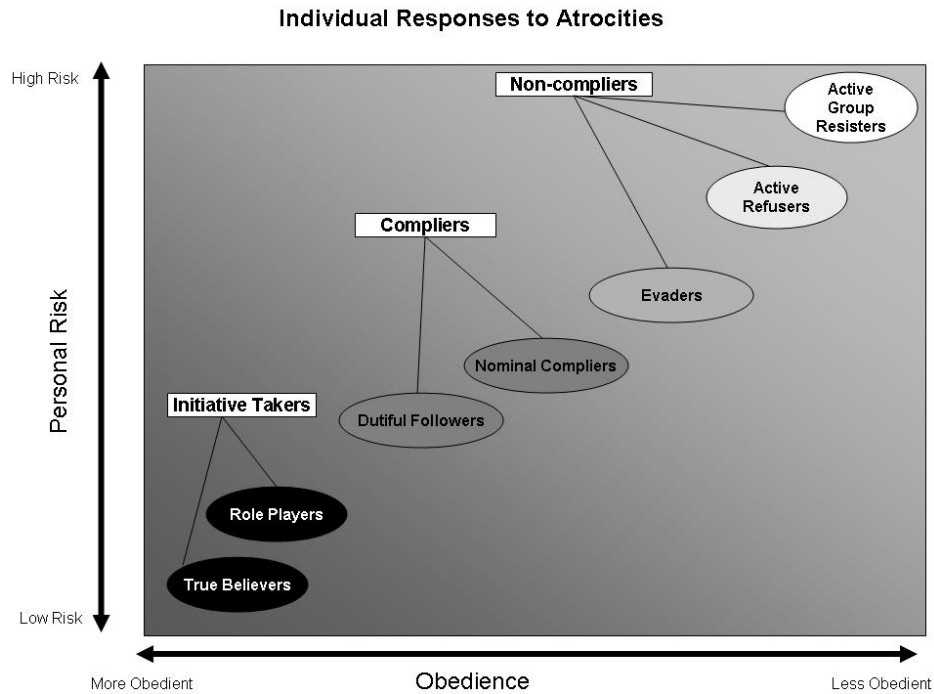


Figure 1. Conceptual View of Responses to Participation in Atrocities

“One must believe” 4th Company’s Motivated Actors

What allowed a communications company to become such a brutal and violent organization may well be tied to a group of like-minded believers within the unit. First among these must be the commander, First Lieutenant Fischer. He began his service in the *Wehrmacht* in April of 1935 as an officer cadet, eventually attaining the rank of First Lieutenant in 1939.²¹¹ He took command of 3rd Company (4th Company’s original designation) shortly before the French campaign in 1940 and continued to command the unit until 1943.²¹²

²¹¹ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," B1. 263.

²¹² Ibid.

By all accounts, Fischer was a dedicated National Socialist. One company member described him as a “staunch Nazi.”²¹³ His company clerk, Günther Lehmann, was in a position to know him well, working as he did in the company headquarters. He testified that “based on our working relationship over several years, I can say that he was an absolute adherent to Nazi ideas.”²¹⁴ One of Fischer’s platoon leaders, Franz Scherer, called him an “über-Nazi” and a “radical Jew hater.”²¹⁵ Scherer continued, saying that he was familiar with “statements by Fischer which made it clear that he wanted most to eliminate all Jews.”²¹⁶ The cook, Lange, termed Fischer “the type of Jew-hater who once made the remark that he would love to drive out all the Jews and hunt them with bullets.”²¹⁷

Fischer’s anti-Semitism and Nazi ideological attitudes were not simply abstractly held beliefs, but were guiding influences on his own decision-making. Sergeant Lange claimed that Fischer had punished him with three days confinement for spending the night in a Jewish household and for giving the family food during the advance in Latvia.²¹⁸ The commander had clearly gone from an anti-Semite in theory to an anti-Semite in practice. Lieutenant

²¹³ "Statement of Paul Krüger, 11-15-61," in B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 119. [*dieser ein überzeugter Nationalsozialist war*]

²¹⁴ "Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 5-28-63," in B 162/4313 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 29. [*Allgemein kann ich über Fischer aufgrund der jahrelangen Zusammenarbeit sagen, dass er ein unbedingter Anhänger der nationalsozialistischen Ideen war.*]

²¹⁵ "Statement of Franz Scherer, 3-23-62," in B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 235. [*Fischer muss ich als einen Übernationalsozialisten bezeichnen, der ein radikaler Judenhasser war.*]

²¹⁶ Ibid. [*Außer dem eben beschriebenen Vorfall sind mir Äußerungen von Fischer geläufig, aus denen klar zu entnehmen war, dass er am liebsten alle Juden beseitigen wollte*]

²¹⁷ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 230. [*Überhaupt war Hauptmann Fischer der Typ des Judenhassers, der einmal sogar die Bemerkung gemacht hat, am liebsten würden er alle Juden wegjagen und ihnen noch Kugeln jagen*]

²¹⁸ Ibid., Bl. 229. [*Dieser war ein sehr gestrenger Offizier, der unter Umständen schon bei kleinen Verstößen mit harten Strafen vorging. Persönlich habe ich von ihm einmal drei Tage strengen Arrest erhalten, weil ich auf dem Vormarsch 1941 in Lettland während einer Nacht in einem Hause übernachtet habe, das von Juden bewohnt wurde. Das hatte er erfahren, auch, dass ich den Juden etwas zu essen gegeben hatte.*]

Scherer offered another, more chilling, example of Fischer's ideology in practice. In describing the execution of a civilian which Sergeant Pehle was ordered to carry out in Roslavl in 1941, *Scherer* described the victim not as a Russian partisan, but as a Jew.²¹⁹ Other testimony did not describe the victim as a Jew, but given Fischer's predilections, it is not unreasonable to lend some credence to *Scherer's* statements. Moreover, Fischer never once in his multiple statements claimed to have received any order from a higher headquarters for the mass murder in Peregruznoje. Thus, his "military necessity" justifications notwithstanding, Fischer's order to round up and murder the Jews likely derived solely from his earnest desire to kill Jews.

Even a commander as fanatical as Fischer would have had difficulty enacting his plans without a group of other motivated actors to support him. First among these was Technical Sergeant Fritz Puls. Puls was described by one 4th Company member as a "zealous soldier."²²⁰ Another remembered that he was an anti-Semite, "which was clear from his words."²²¹ It is perhaps not coincidental that Puls was later named a *Nationalsozialistischen Föhrungs Offizier* (NSFO) when he was the legal officer for the Regiment.²²² He claimed that this was a position "on paper only" and that he was so tasked only because he was the youngest officer on staff.²²³ Given witness characterizations of Puls,

²¹⁹ "Statement of Franz Scherer, 3-23-62," Bl. 235. [*Ich habe mir Pehle sofort vorgenommen und dabei folgendes erfahren: Oblt Fischer soll Pehle den Befehl erteilt haben, den Mann, einen Juden, zu erschießen.*]

²²⁰ "Statement of Heinrich Gasscher, 3-11-63," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 405. [*Er war ein eifriger Soldat*]

²²¹ "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 11-14-61," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 116. [*Außerdem ist mir bekannt, dass er judenfeindlich eingestellt war, was aus seinen Redewendungen eindeutig zu erkennen war*]

²²² "Statement of Fritz Puls, 5-29-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 189.

²²³ *Ibid.*

it seems very likely that he possessed a high level of ideological dedication and that his appointment as an NSFO was no random administrative decision. Moreover, as a long distance runner in Berlin in 1939, Puls was, by his own admission, a member of the SS Sports Club (*SS-Sportsgemeinschaft*).²²⁴ He could not explain how his application to join the *Allgemeine-SS* came to be filled out in his own hand in August 1939 or how he came to be listed in 1939 SS membership statistics.²²⁵ Despite his feeble objections, Puls' membership in the SS and service as an NSFO, in addition to characterizations by his former comrades, indicate a high degree of ideological belief or, at the very least, commitment to the regime.

Because the post-war investigation was focused primarily on Fischer and Puls, identifying other motivated actors becomes more difficult, but not impossible. One soldier remembered that certain individuals were repeatedly chosen to take part in "individual actions" and that a Private Heinrich *König* always "volunteered."²²⁶ After the Peregruznoje shooting, one NCO remembered that a nineteen year old Private *Keller* had "taken a particularly active role" in the shooting.²²⁷ Others remember Keller as possibly having participated.²²⁸

²²⁴ Ibid., Bl. 187.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ "Statement of Wilhelm Orlmann, 2-14-62," Bl. 131. [*Zu den einzelnen Aktionen wurden dann jeweils von Unteroffizieren geeignete Leute aufgesucht, die für solche Taten fähig waren. Ich erinnere mich noch an den damaligen Putzer des Oblt Sauer, den jungen Gefr. Heinrich König, der sich immer freiwillig meldete*] Private Klobozinski was not interviewed in the course of the investigation.

²²⁷ "Statement of Heinrich Gasscher," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 87. [*dass der jüngere Kopm-Angeh Keller, seinerzeit etwa 19 Jahre alt und von Beruf Bäcker, sich bei dieser Erschießung besonders aktiv verhalten hätte*]

²²⁸ "Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 10-3-61," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 80. Keller is mentioned in several court documents. His testimony is even referenced. Unfortunately, his testimony is missing from the archival files.

While names and specifics have faded, it is clear that there existed a group of motivated actors in 4th Company who were repeatedly called upon to participate in atrocities. One soldier, Herbert *Bärmann*, clearly identified this group. He said, regarding the shooting of the Jews in Peregruznoje, that “these people [shooters] belonged to the circle in the company which was always on the spot for special tasks.”²²⁹ He is not alone in this observation. Cook Lange remembered that the members of the NCO corps that took part in the shooting “all had the same attitude as Fischer.”²³⁰ In addition, he believed that Puls was “always together with the commander and, as a would-be officer, would be given special missions as a leader.”²³¹ Puls “carried out all of Fischer’s orders without contradiction” and was characterized as a “good helper” of Fischer”²³² Speaking of the murder of the Jews, Alfred *Hoffmann* remembered that “only volunteers were to be taken.”²³³ Thus, testimonies from the 4th Company case clearly indicate the presence of a group of individuals bound together by common ideological belief or motivation to actively participate. While for some it may be difficult to further define this motivation, what is clear is that these individuals took

²²⁹ "Statement of Herbert Bärmann, 2-20-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 154. [*dass diese Personen zu dem Kreis in der Kompanie gehörten, die zu einer solchen Aktion bereit waren. Damit will ich zum Ausdruck bringen, dass es diejenigen waren, die für Sonderaufgaben freiwillig zur Stelle waren.*]

²³⁰ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 234. [*Diese von Hptm Fischer gezeigte Einstellung hatte vor allem Unteroffizierkorps, das an der Erschießung teilnehme.*]

²³¹ *Ibid.*, Bl. 233. [*Ich meine auf Grund meiner Erinnerungsbilder, dass es Wachtmeister Puls gewesen ist. Ich komme zu dem Schluss, weil Puls stets mit dem Chef zusammen war und als angehender Offizier bei besonderen Einsätzen als Führer eingeteilt wurde*]

²³² "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 3-8-63," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 401-02. [*Fischer hatte einen guten Helfer und zwar war diese der damalige Leutnant Puls.*] and "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 11-14-61," Bl. 116. [*weil ich von Puls weiß, dass er sämtliche Befehle Fischers widerspruchslos ausgeführt hat.*]

²³³ "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 12-5-62," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 336. [*dass nur Freiwillige genommen werden sollten*]

the initiative and to a great extent were self-selected. That many of these individuals were in leadership positions only enhances the violent potential of such groupings.

“I did not interest myself in this matter” Dutiful Following and Participation in Atrocities

I cannot say today which members of the company rode out when the Jews were shot. I did not investigate this afterwards. I wasn't interested in this matter. As long as they leave me alone.

- Statement of Erwin *Garner*²³⁴

While the existence of a group of motivated participants was important to the propensity to kill, the existence of a larger group of soldiers willing to follow orders when given, even if distasteful, is perhaps more vital. Such a lack of concern as that voiced by Garner is prevalent throughout the testimonies of 4th Company members. The number of soldiers who appear by these testimonies to have willingly carried out orders dwarfs those who gave them or volunteered to carry them out.

Perhaps we are limited by our sources. Many of those who appear to be dutiful followers do not testify, due to death or absence. Moreover, we do not often hear about these individuals' motivations or attempted non-compliance (if it occurred). However, there are enough examples, both first- and second-hand, that one can reasonably draw the conclusion that such a group of dutiful followers existed.

Maintenance Sergeant Paul Fuchs figures prominently as a member of the firing squad which killed the Jews of Peregruznoje. Four of those interviewed stated that Fuchs had participated in the shooting. Helmut Ortlepp, who claimed to have been a friend of

²³⁴ "Statement of Erwin Garner, 6-19-63," in *B 162/4313* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 9. [Ich kann auch heute nicht mehr sagen, welche Komp-Angeh mit herausgefahren sind, als die Juden erschossen worden sind. Ich habe mich hinterher nicht viel nach der Sache erkundigt. Mich interessierte die Sache nicht. Was andere machen, interessierte mich nicht, Hauptsache, mich lassen sie in Ruhe.]

Fuchs, encountered him the morning after the execution. "I saw him sitting on a stump with a very downcast expression on his face," Ortlepp stated. Fuchs went on to admit that he had participated in the shooting and had witnessed a mother shot with her baby in her arms; the baby had then crawled around in its mother's blood and brains. Fuchs confessed that he would "never forget this image for the rest of his life."²³⁵ What is notable about this story is not so much the description of the violent act or of Fuchs's remorse afterward. Indeed, his remorse is in many ways normal and heartening. What is interesting is that he failed to relate to Ortlepp any attempt to avoid or refuse to shoot. His story was one of dedication to fulfilling one's duty, regardless of how difficult that duty may be. This is at the heart of the dutiful follower archetype and represents perhaps the clearest example. The depth of commitment to duty, orders, or authority is shown precisely *because* of Fuchs's apparently troubled conscience rather than in spite of it.

More mundane examples of this dutiful obedience, neither volunteering nor refusing, abound in the testimonies concerning 4th Company. Sergeant Pehle, who shot 4th Company's first recorded victim in Roslavl, is typical. He stated that when he was summoned before First Lieutenant Fischer (and possibly First Sergeant Bollmann), he felt threatened by Fischer's brandished pistol and complied with the order to shoot. He never mentioned any attempt to evade or refuse this order. For him, perhaps, the combination of his commander's and first sergeant's presence, the order, and the brandished pistol were enough to convince him to comply. Fischer claimed never to have used any force on Pehle.²³⁶ While this is perhaps a dubious claim, Pehle had no real cause to feel physically threatened anyway; the

²³⁵ "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 3-8-63," Bl. 401-02. [*Diesen Anblick vergesse ich in meinem Leben nie.*]

²³⁶ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 265.

likelihood of Fischer executing one of his soldiers, in the presence of his first sergeant (who clearly disliked him), was low indeed. We will return to Pehle later.

Bernhard Grackel is another example of this willingness to follow orders when given. One may recall that, after Oldermanns refused Sergeant Huber's order to kill a Russian civilian, Grackel received the same order and complied. Grackel made no claim to have questioned or attempted to refuse this order, even though it would have been in his best interests to do so. Indeed, he expressed a kind of tragic surprise when told by investigators that Orlmann had refused the same order without any negative repercussions. He said at first that had he known about Orlmann's refusal, he, too, would have refused the order and blames his military training which taught him not to disobey orders.²³⁷ Yet when pressed, he reversed this position, saying that "if I had seen an opportunity to avoid [Sergeant] Huber's order, I would have not done so. Huber told me that the order to shoot the partisan came from the commander. I could certainly not disobey an order from the commander in the field."²³⁸ Such rationalization is typical of the dutiful follower. Either way, what separates Grackel from Orlmann is precisely the fact that they were placed in the same situation, at the same time, by the same superior, and chose two separate responses. Both men were within three years of one another (Grackel 27, Orlmann 30) so youth or experience does not seem to be a factor. The simple fact is that one soldier, for whatever reason, saw a choice and exercised his ability to make decisions. Grackel may not have felt he had a choice or he may have had no problem with the order; in any case, the result was the same: compliance and execution.

²³⁷ "Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 4-16-62," Bl. 256. [*Hätte ich dies gewusst, hätte ich mich ebenfalls geweigert, den Russen zu erschießen*]

²³⁸ "Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 3-12-63," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 414-15.

Other types of participation indicate this willingness to follow orders. Heinrich *Klein* represents another kind of dutiful follower. On the night before the murders, while the Jews were imprisoned in the LKW in the motor pool, Klein had two hours of motor pool guard along with another soldier. Though he claimed to have had “roving guard” (*Pendelposten*), it is highly likely that Klein had received instructions to guard the truck as well. In any case, Klein recalled in his first testimony hearing the moans and cries coming from the vehicle, though he claimed that he did not know what kind of people were in the truck. In his second testimony, however, he admitted that he “took the noises from the LKW to be the cries of women and children.”²³⁹ Klein fulfilled his two hour guard shift and was duly relieved. He made no mention of investigating the source of the noises or of making any attempt whatsoever to aid them in even the smallest way. His chilling explanation is probably indicative of the attitude of the dutiful follower: “I was not interested in [the cries from the truck]. One was indifferent. I didn’t do anymore during the war than what was absolutely necessary.”²⁴⁰ This episode is even more interesting given that in an average night, from 7pm to 4am, approximately ten soldiers would have had this guard shift, if no one received two shifts. Yet only two of those interviewed admitted guarding the truck.²⁴¹ In fact, very few of the soldiers mentioned the guarding of the truck at all. This would indicate that many of them may have also been ordered to guard the truck. Either way, the watchful guarding of

²³⁹ "Statement of Heinrich Klein, 5-30-63," in *B 162/4313* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 18. [*Ich habe die Geräusche, die ich von dem LKW gehört habe, für das Weinen von Frauen und Kindern gehalten.*]

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.* [*Ich habe nicht dafür interessiert. Man war eben gleichgültig. Ich habe im Kriege nicht mehr getan, als was unbedingt nötig war*]

²⁴¹ The other was Wilhelm Danner, who was ordered specifically by Puls to guard the truck. "Statement of Wilhelm Danner, 11-16-62," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 329. [*bekam ich von Puls den Befehl, einen LKW zu bewachen, der auf dem Parkplatz der Komp stand.*]

this LKW, packed with the elderly, women, and children overnight certainly demonstrates a willingness to comply with orders. No witness mentions any refusal to participate, personally or from hearsay.

Dutiful following was not limited to enlisted men. Junior officers, too, fell into this category. The most obvious dutiful follower among them appears to be First Lieutenant *Sauer*, who led the First platoon in 4th Company. It was Sauer's platoon that carried out the search of the village near Klemjatino, where the suspicious lights had been seen. It was also his men who rounded up the inhabitants of the village and forced them into the town square. Finally, it was Sauer's platoon which hanged the owner of a flashlight in conjunction with this raid. Fischer himself confirms that a Russian was hanged.²⁴² From this point, the details seem to be contested. Fischer claims, not unreasonably, that Lieutenant Sauer was the military commander (*Ortskommandant*) of this town 8km from Klemjatino. He further claims that he did not order this hanging but that Sauer had carried it out of his own accord. Yet Bernhard Olker distinctly remembers that Lieutenant Fischer was present in the town square.²⁴³ Moreover, according to him, Fischer questioned civilians regarding the incident. This suggests that Fischer may have taken a more active role in this operation, and even possibly have ordered the hanging. Such behavior would certainly not be out of character for him. Either way, Sauer can be placed clearly in the category of dutiful follower or perhaps that of motivated actor. As an officer, he would have been able to object to orders and potential atrocities in a way that an enlisted soldier would not. Indeed, as we will see, there were officers in 4th Company who did confront the commander directly. Thus, the lack of

²⁴² "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 12-6-62," Bl. 345.

²⁴³ "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 1-29-63," Bl. 383. [*Hptm Fischer war bei diesem Einsatz zugegen, dass weiss ich*]

any testimony indicating hesitation to comply shows that Sauer likely followed orders and possibly was of a like mind as Fischer. It was a former first platoon member, Wilhelm Orlmann, who mentioned that the NCOs would seek out a group of “suitable” people for individual “actions,” implying that such actions took place more than once.²⁴⁴

Only two former soldiers admit to having taken part in the mass shootings at Peregruznoje: Fritz Puls and Hans-Jürgen Köther. Puls’ reasons for participation are fairly clear; by all accounts, he was a Nazi believer, compatriot of Fischer, and possibly careerist. Thus, Köther appears the only link to the worst killers of 4th Company. Unfortunately, he tells us almost nothing about how he became involved. He claimed even not to remember who told him to participate. He merely stated, “I belonged to the detail that had to drive out with the Jews.”²⁴⁵ His motives remain a mystery, yet his failure at least to claim to have been ordered or to have refused clearly marks him as a dutiful follower if not more. Köther testified that the detail consisted of approximately 12-15 men. We are left, in the end, with seventeen names: men accused by one witness or another of having taken part in the mass shooting.²⁴⁶ Eliminating Köther and Puls, fifteen other individuals are named, some among those interviewed, some who died during the war or were otherwise unavailable. None of those among the interviewed admitted to having participated in this shooting, likely for self-serving reasons. It is impossible to definitively prove their complicity, though based on multiple testimonies it is more than likely that Fuchs, Gasscher, Walter, and Keller were

²⁴⁴ “Statement of Wilhelm Orlmann, 2-14-62,” Bl. 131.

²⁴⁵ “Statement of Hans-Jürgen Köther, 11-15-62,” in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 321. [*Ich gehörte zu dem Kommando, das mit den Juden herausgefahren musste.*]

²⁴⁶ Fuchs, Puls, Gasscher, Keller, Walter, Sichtig, Erich, Huber, Kircheis, Janot, Bürger, Dörmann, Unger, Erhardt, Köther, and Grackel.

shooters as well. In any case, these others, whose voices are lost, probably number among dutiful followers *and* motivated actors.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Evasion in 4th Company

It is often difficult to identify acts of evasion among groups of potential perpetrators. This is due, in part, to the nature of the act itself. Evasion enables individuals to avoid participation without drawing attention to themselves or risking punishment. These men often remain unnoticed by history as a result. Indeed, it is neither apologetic nor unrealistic to assume that many of those categorized as dutiful followers could have perhaps remained evaders had they been able to avoid being ordered to participate. Their agreement to participate, however, clearly removes them from the group of evaders.

Even with these limitations, at least two examples of evasion appear in the testimonies concerning 4th Company. Of these, Bernhard Olker's experience was perhaps the most telling. During the search for the "partisan signaler" in the town near Klemjatino, Olker was a member of the platoon charged with searching the village and forcing the inhabitants into the square. He stated that he and a comrade entered a house with an elderly couple and an infant during this search. "My comrade and I did not want to force these two old people into the town square," he said.²⁴⁷ The two soldiers stayed in this house for a while and then moved to another house, which they found already empty. They ran into some other members of the company here who were drying their socks in front of the stove. Olker then stated that he stayed with this group and then adds that "we couldn't see what else happened

²⁴⁷ "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 1-29-63," BI. 383. [*Mein Kamerad und ich wollten die beiden alten Leute nicht auf den Dorfplatz treiben*]

in the village.”²⁴⁸ As he elaborated further, “up to this point, I had taken part in the action as ordered, finally I and 3-4 comrades went inside an empty house, because I did not want to have anything to do with it because of my attitude (Catholic) as I mention in subsequent interrogations.”²⁴⁹

Olker’s actions do not strike one as particularly altruistic, but they do indicate intent on his part (and those of his unnamed comrades) to avoid participating in whatever the rest of the unit was up to in the village. This form of evasion, simply disappearing during potentially criminal activities, was an option that others likely took as well. It allowed them to avoid participating in acts they found objectionable without risking the alienation from the group that Kühne terms “social death.”

Alfred Hoffmann related another form of evasion: the refusal to volunteer. Before the shooting of the Jews, Hoffmann’s superior, Technical Sergeant Walter, asked him if he wanted to “take a drive,” meaning drive a vehicle in the convoy taking the Jews to their execution site.²⁵⁰ Though Walter didn’t explicitly state it, Hoffmann immediately understood the implications of this request. “It was clear as a light,” he said.²⁵¹ Walter stressed his participation was fully voluntary and Hoffmann apparently declined. When Hoffmann asked him later what had happened, Walter replied shortly that he had found

²⁴⁸ Ibid. [*Was sonst in dem Dorf geschah, konnten wir nicht sehen*]

²⁴⁹ "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 10-3-61," Bl. 83. [*Bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt habe ich befehlsgemäß an der Aktion teilgenommen, anschließend bin ich dann mit mehreren (etwa 3 bis 4 Kameraden) Kameraden in ein leerstehendes Haus hineingegangen, weil ich aufgrund meiner Einstellung (kath.) mit den nach folgenden Vernehmungen usw. nichts zu tun haben wollte.*]

²⁵⁰ "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 12-5-62," Bl. 335. [*Walter ist eines Tages zu mir gekommen und hat mich gefragt, ob ich noch eine Fahrt machen wollte*]

²⁵¹ Ibid. [*Da ist mir erst ein Licht aufgegangen*]

another driver.²⁵² Here, given a non-confrontational opportunity to avoid participation, Hoffmann evaded simply by declining to volunteer. He had been overtly given a choice. It is unclear perhaps what he would have done had he actually been ordered to participate. It is possible that others took similar approaches, and their voices simply are not heard through the source material. Due to the partly adversarial nature of the interrogations, incidences of more active resistance are more visible.

The Courage to Refuse: Active Refusal in 4th Company

It is unfortunate that the purest act of resistance, that of actively intervening and stopping an atrocity from happening, does not appear in the testimonies concerning 4th Company. It is more unfortunate, perhaps, that this form of resistance is exceptionally rare in most case studies of perpetrator activity. However, the 4th Company case does include several examples of direct refusal to participate. These individual refusers were faced with an order or suggestion from a superior and refused, often in the face of threats or insults. Taking self-exculpatory motivations into account, these acts of resistance are still important and seem actually to have taken place.

We have already encountered Orlmann's refusal to shoot the Russian partisan. When ordered by Sergeant Huber, he simply refused, at which point Huber ordered Grackel to carry it out. Yet, Orlmann's refusal did not extend to all forms of participation. Orlmann still accompanied Huber, Grackel, and the condemned man to the execution site and witnessed

²⁵² "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 7-3-62," in B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 285. [Er hat lediglich auf meine Frage, ob er einen anderen Fahrer gefunden habe, kurz erwidert: Es habe sich einen Fahrer gefunden.]

the murder of the civilian.²⁵³ Regardless, he did refuse an order by his immediate superior, with all the risks, real or imagined, it entailed.

As mentioned earlier, these categories are neither fixed nor impermeable. Sergeant Pehle is an example, albeit perhaps a problematic one. Earlier, in 1941, he had complied with an order by First Lieutenant Fischer to shoot a Russian civilian. He claimed that Fischer told him about the plan to kill the Jews of Peregruznoje and ordered him to participate. Pehle stated that he immediately refused this order, saying that he “could not and would not do this.”²⁵⁴ Given his previous guilt in killing, this statement could be seen as an attempt to redeem himself in front of the authorities. Yet his further statements indicate that he may have been telling the truth. He stated that Fischer’s response was to call him a coward and to dismiss him. Further, he said that Fischer did *not* exert any obvious pressure on him to comply after he refused.²⁵⁵ Given his description of Fischer’s threatening mannerisms earlier, why not claim now to have refused in the face of similar threats? It certainly would make him appear more resistant. In truth, it is likely that Fischer realized that this behavior was more difficult to compel than the execution of a partisan and thus, was reluctant to press his subordinate on it.

Pehle was not the only soldier to defy the commander. Company clerk Günther Lehmann related the following episode. As he was working in his office, First Lieutenant Fischer told him that as a result of the cut telephone lines in the town, he had ordered all the Jews of Peregruznoje to be rounded up and shot in reprisal. Fischer then told Lehmann

²⁵³ "Statement of Wilhelm Orlmann, 2-14-62," Bl. 130-31.

²⁵⁴ "Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 10-3-61," Bl. 79-80. [*Befehl widersetzte ich mich sofort mit etwa folgenden Worten, dass ich diese nicht könne und auch nicht tun würde*]

²⁵⁵ Ibid. [*Einen offensichtlichen Druck hat Fischer nach meiner Befehlsverweigerung auf mich nicht ausgeübt*]

personally that he could participate.²⁵⁶ According to Lehmann, he told Fischer such things were not for him and he should be left alone.²⁵⁷ This is an interesting episode for several reasons. First, it falls in a gray area between evasion and more active direct refusal. Lehmann was not ordered to participate, but such a suggestion from his commanding officer carried implicit force that Walter's did not. Secondly, this exchange seemed to Lehmann to be an intentional challenge on Fischer's part, rather than an off-hand remark. According to Lehmann, Fischer should have known that he would not willingly participate in the shooting. "I did not understand this to be an explicit, official order," he testified, "I knew Captain Fischer somewhat better as a result of our association of several years. He would not have seriously expected that I would take part in such a shooting. Besides, he also knew me too well."²⁵⁸ Why would Fischer invite Lehmann to participate if he already knew that he lacked the inclination to do so? Indeed, after working so closely, he should have known better. Perhaps, Fischer was testing his own power and his lukewarm response to Lehmann's refusal represents his acceptance of what he had already correctly guessed to be Lehmann's attitudes.

Killing and its Aftermath: Rationalization and Motivation

I certainly had no concerns then over whether Fischer had been right to shoot such people without a legal trial with a death sentence.

²⁵⁶ "Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 8-29-61," Bl. 55. [*Hptm Fischer sagte zu mir selbst „ich könne mich auch daran beteiligen.“*]

²⁵⁷ Ibid. [*Ich entgegnete ihm, dass sei nichts für mich, er solle mich damit in Ruhe lassen.*]

²⁵⁸ "Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 5-28-63," Bl. 24. [*Ich habe das nicht als einen ausdrücklichen, dienstlichen Befehl aufgefasst...Ich kannte Hptm Fischer durch die jahrlange Zusammenarbeit etwas besser. Ernsthaft hätte er nie von mir erwartet, dass ich mich an einer solchen Erschießung beteiligen würde. Dazu kannte er auch mich zu gut.*]

- Fritz Puls²⁵⁹

In particular, a small child was spoken of, who had also belonged to one of the groups...

- Sergeant Heinrich Pehle²⁶⁰

So far, we have seen what the men of 4th Company did and the ways in which they negotiated the various pressures (personal, social, and organizational) to participate in atrocity. However, we are still left with the nagging question faced by all those who study the Holocaust—namely, why. The “real” motivations of the perpetrators and the reactions of the bystanders and other members of the unit remain the most difficult historical meanings to discover. Yet, for many of us, discovering this meaning is most important. This case study, thus far, has been able to identify and categorize the pressures and forces acting upon these men that may have significantly contributed to their participation. But what did such participation mean to *them*, in their own words? Why did *they* believe they were following orders? How did *they* characterize their actions?

Here the sources are both help and hindrance. On the one hand, we have perpetrators, bystanders, and resisters making personal statements attempting to explain their actions. Yet on the other hand, many of these men make these statements in an environment of personal legal risk and thus probably at least attempted to formulate explanations which were self-exculpatory, evasive, or flatly false. Yet as we have seen, there are ways around such self-serving testimonies [this is an allusion to the as yet unwritten section on source criticism and

²⁵⁹ "Statement of Fritz Puls, 11-27-62," Bl. 359. [*Ich habe mir damals sicher keine Gedanken darüber gemacht, ob Fischer berechtigt gewesen ist, solche Leute von sich aus Erschießen zu lassen, ohne dass ein gerichtliches Verfahren mit einem Todesurteil vorlag*]

²⁶⁰ "Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 1-28-63," Bl. 375. [*Insbesondere erinnere mich, dass von einem kleinen Jungen gesprochen worden ist, der auch zu einer Gruppe gehört...*]

how we can identify truths from perpetrator testimony]. Even in obfuscation, a careful reading of these statements reveals much.

There are two sides to this coin: *motivation* and *rationalization*. Motivation here refers to the actual reasons driving one's decision-making process. Rationalization is the explanation of one's actions to oneself or others. This process can occur simultaneously with the act or after the act as a self-serving device. For example, a man may kill a snake because he is deathly afraid of them (motivation) but he may say before or after the act that he is concerned the snake may bite his children (rationalization). Thus, rationalization may be useful in a decision-making role *or* in a psychological one, to ease what may be cognitively dissonant reactions. One sees in the motivations and rationalizations of these men a deliberate operationalization of partisan paranoia and general fear of the civilian population. Indeed, higher headquarters encouraged these fears in no small part. However, the historian has a much more difficult time attempting to identify anti-Semitic justifications through the statements of the witnesses. Yet given the prevailing organizational climate and behavior of some of these men, such views likely were present, if only on a more muted level than in other more highly indoctrinated organizations (such as SS, SD, or party organs.)

Next to these rationalizations for murder also stand glimpses of conscience. 4th Company was neither a specially trained and indoctrinated execution unit like the *Einsatzgruppen* nor a seasoned killing formation like many of the police battalions. It was a unit whose crimes were still fresh, whose mental and emotional wounds perhaps had not yet healed. Evidence of this is apparent in the documents. At some level, most recognized something fundamentally wrong had gone on in Peregruznoje (if not Klemjatino.) What exactly disturbed the men of 4th Company may remain obscured, but that such a sense of

unease existed indicates some level of conscience, guilt, shame, or sentimentality remained in the unit at that time.

Jews, Partisans, and the Ritterkreuz: Motivation and Rationalization

The first (and most logical place) to begin discussing the motivations and rationalizations of these individuals is within the military organization itself. While the “obedience to orders” defense was clearly and, perhaps, eternally discredited at Nuremberg, it is not fair retroactively to transfer this understanding on the soldiers of 4th Company. In order to understand why some decided to obey and others did not, one must examine the concept of orders from *their* perspective, with an eye to explaining what *they* believed *their* options were.

Clearly, for the enlisted soldier, the first and last explanation for their actions was that of obedience to orders. This was voiced by more than a few members of 4th Company. Yet, there were also clearly “orders” which *could* be refused without serious repercussions. Thus, understanding the viability of orders as a motivation to kill requires careful examination of the facts and personalities involved. Bernhard Grackel, who shot the Russian civilian in Klemjatino (after another soldier had refused) epitomizes this dilemma. Consider two of his statements regarding his actions:

If it was told to me that I did not need to carry out Uffz. Huber’s order to shoot someone, which Orlmann declined to do in that way, I must say that it was not known to me that the same order had been given to Orlmann. If I would have known that, I would have refused to shoot the Russian.

-Second Statement, 16 April 1962²⁶¹

²⁶¹ "Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 4-16-62," Bl. 256.[*Wenn mir hier vorgehalten wird, dass ich den Befehl des Uffz. H. nicht auszuführen brauchst, einen Menschen zu erschießen, da Orlmann dies gleichfalls abgelehnt hatte, muss ich dazu bemerken, dass mir nicht bekannt war, dass der gleiche Befehl woher an Orlmann gerichtet gewesen war. Hätte ich dies gewusst, hätte ich mich ebenfalls geweigert, den Russen zu erschießen. Aufgrund meiner militärischen Ausbildung habe ich nicht gesagt, einen von meinem Uffz. Erteilten dienstlichen Befehl zu verweigern*]

If I had seen an opportunity to avoid Uffz. Huber's order, I would have not done so. Huber told me that the order to shoot the partisan came from the commander. I could certainly not disobey an order from the commander in the field.

-Third Statement, 12 March 1963²⁶²

How do we account for the contradictory nature of Grackel' statements? One detects almost a sense of regret in the first statement followed by an angry rationalization in the second. Puls, too, makes a similar orders-justified statement. He declared, "in Russia, it was not possible to refuse an order. That was clear to me as a soldier and was a matter of course."²⁶³ For younger, less experienced soldiers whose basic training experience was more recent, Grackel' second explanation of the power of orders was perhaps more influential (and more plausible). Others may, however, have realized at the time that the draconian discipline of the *Wehrmacht* did not apply to all orders, especially those concerning acts such as the killing of civilians. Clearly, those giving the orders knew this. Lieutenant Fischer told his company clerk that he "could participate" in the shootings, and Sergeant Walter gave Hoffmann the opportunity to volunteer to drive the Jews out to the execution site. Yet, Fischer ordered the shootings of Russian civilians while brandishing a pistol and threatening court-martials. Shootings of suspected partisans obviously lay much closer to military action against the enemy and were justified much more easily. What of the value of threats of court-martial or summary execution? The statement of Rudolf *Dörmann*, a man who said he "could not rule

²⁶² "Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 3-12-63," Bl. 414-15. [*Wenn ich eine Möglichkeit gesehen hätte, mich dem Befehl des Uffz. Huber zu entziehen, hätte ich es auch nicht gemacht. Huber hatte mir gesagt, der Befehl zur Erschießung des Partisanen käme vom Kompaniechef. Ich konnte ja nicht im Felde einen Befehl des Kompaniechefs verweigern.*]

²⁶³ "Statement of Fritz Puls, 11-27-62," Bl. 359. [*In Russland war es nicht möglich, sich einem Befehl zu widersetzen. Das war mir als Soldat damals klar und eine Selbstverständlichkeit.*]

out” that he had been a member of the execution detail is insightful regarding the plausibility of threats from Fischer. He said:

Because Captain Fischer was a very forceful officer, he was strongly against the refusal of orders. I would definitely not have disobeyed an order. I cannot today, as a result of the long elapsed time give any example in which Captain Fischer took severe, drastic measures against the refusal of orders or similar.²⁶⁴

This is especially telling given that Fischer was a man prone to harsh punishment of his soldiers for the smallest infractions.²⁶⁵ Thus, while some younger soldiers may truly have believed that they could not disobey these orders or that they could be punished or executed, it is highly probable that most soldiers knew which orders could be disobeyed and which could not. Sergeant Pehle is an excellent example. Though he attempted to refuse, he acquiesced in obeying Fischer’s order to shoot a suspected partisan, but steadfastly refused to participate in the execution of the Jews.

Yet Fischer (and others) did give orders or make “suggestions” that could be considered at least extra-judicial. The lack of higher orders for Fischer himself is one of the most interesting and damning elements of the 4th Company case. At no time does Fischer claim to have received orders from above requiring him to execute (or even deport) the Jews of Peregruznoje, even though this was a common and often successful response under questioning.²⁶⁶ Thus, for the leadership, the question was not one of obedience to orders but

²⁶⁴ "Statement of Rudolf Dörmann, 1-24-62 " in *B 162/4313* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 98.

²⁶⁵ Recall Sergeant Lange’s punishment for lodging with Jews and giving them food. In addition, Harald Eck received three weeks arrest for losing the tarp for his truck ("Statement of Harald Eck, 2-21-62," in *B 162/4312* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 157.) Erich Franken received 5 days punishment because his replacement arrived at guard duty late ("Statement of Erich Franken, 2-14-63," in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 398.)

²⁶⁶ None of the men from 4th Company admitting shooting civilians or participating in the execution of the Jews were charged with any crimes.

of the authority to issue them. What made Fischer think that he had the “space” ultimately to order the deaths of over forty innocent civilians on his own initiative?

The command climate of higher headquarters was without a doubt the first indicator of what was to be considered acceptable behavior. Indeed, previous research has shown that most of the German generals agreed with some, if not all, Nazi genocidal war aims. What Manfred Messerschmidt termed a “‘partial identity of objectives’ provided a sufficient basis for collaboration between the army and National Socialism in the ideological war against the Soviet Union.”²⁶⁷ This common vision was further operationalized by a series of orders governing the conduct of soldiers in the East, beginning with the infamous “Barbarossa” order which freed German soldiers from conventional legal penalties for their actions against civilians. An OKW order prior to the invasion clearly stated the manner in which the population of the occupied territories should be treated.

*OKW Order for the Exercise of Military Jurisdiction and Procedure in area
‘Barbarossa’, and Special Military Measures, 13 May 1941*

[Pacification] is possible only if the troops take ruthless action themselves against any threat from the enemy population.

1. Until further notice the military courts and the courts martial will not be competent for crimes committed by enemy civilians.
2. Guerillas will be relentlessly liquidated by the troops, whilst fighting or escaping.
3. Likewise all other attacks by enemy civilians on the Armed Forces, its members and employees, are to be suppressed at once by the military, using the most extreme methods, until the assailants are destroyed.
4. Where such measures have been neglected or were not at first possible, persons suspected of criminal action will be brought at once before an officer. This officer will decide whether they are to be shot.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Jürgen Förster, "Operation Barbarossa as a War of Conquest and Annihilation," in *The Attack on the Soviet Union, Germany and the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 519.

²⁶⁸ Matthew Cooper, *The Nazi War against Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 167.

Further, the Reichenau order on the “Conduct of Troops in the Eastern Territories,” on 10 October 1941 calls for the application of the above policies to Jews as well, conflating Jew and partisan.

Therefore the soldier must have full understanding for the necessity of a severe but just revenge on subhuman Jewry. The Army has to aim at another purpose; i.e. the annihilation of revolts in hinterland which, as experience proves, have always been caused by Jews.²⁶⁹

These orders originated from the highest level. How far down the chain of command did these directives reach? In his important study of the Barbarossa campaign, Jürgen Förster shows that at least some of these directives had been distributed to platoon level; in fact, Hitler himself was angered because one of these memos regarding the “particular nature of Russian warfare” had not included the element of “treachery.”²⁷⁰ In the case of 4th Company, elements of these themes were clearly present in its higher headquarters, the 4th Panzer Army. Indeed, as a special unit assigned to Army headquarters, the 4th Panzer Signal Regiment was closer than other line units to these directives from headquarters. The security reports of Section Ic on Army staff demonstrate this same fear of partisans and instructions for severe treatment of civilians. In a report dated 8 December 1941, the section stated that “*Geheim Feldpolizei* and *Feldgendarmarie* have established in almost all towns searched that they hold hidden Russian soldiers in civilian clothing. The troops must eliminate village outsiders in their quarters and keep the streets free of unauthorized traffic, even of women, girls, and children.”²⁷¹ A further report in March of 1942 (six months before

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Förster, “Operation Barbarossa as a War of Conquest and Annihilation,” 516.

²⁷¹ “Abwehr Nachrichten Nr. 1 (Abt Ic, Kdo Der 4 Pzgruppe),” Roll 348,8 December 1941. National Archives and Records Administration, 8632042. [*Die Truppe muß in ihren Unterkünften die Ortsfremden ausschalten und die Straße vom unbefugten Verkehr, auch der Frauen, Mädchen, und Jugendlichen freihalten*]

the Peregruznoje massacre) warned: “every civilian person met in the area of the front is suspicious and is to be arrested on principle” and “living in close quarters with the civilian population requires caution and extreme restraint. In those occupied houses with offices, the inhabitants are to be removed on principle.”²⁷² Thus, Fischer likely had access to official communications and orders in some form from the 4th Armored Signal Regiment, orders that clearly advocated brutal measures against the local population.

A second indicator was the tacit permission of immediate superiors. First Lieutenant Fischer claims that the Battalion staff of 2nd Battalion was also garrisoned in Klemjatino during the winter of 1941-2.²⁷³ Moreover, he claims the Battalion Commander, Major Lieber could not have failed to see the body of the civilian Fischer executed because it was hanging in the vicinity of the commander’s quarters. Hoffmann also remembered the Battalion staff (as well as possibly a greater part of the battalion) as having been quartered in Klemjatino.²⁷⁴ Thus, Fischer’s superiors at least tacitly, if not actively, approved of his actions. At the very least, his executions of civilians in Klemjatino did not go unnoticed by his superiors. It is also tantalizing to note that at the time of 4th Company’s Jewish massacre, the headquarters of the 48th Panzer Corps was located in the town of Aksaj, barely 5 miles from Peregruznoje.²⁷⁵ It is unlikely that Fischer’s execution could have taken place without notice. While there is no direct evidence of permission from Major Lieber, obviously he did

²⁷² "Photo #47619." [*Jede Zivilperson die im Frontgebiet angetroffen wird, ist verdächtig und grundsätzlich festzunehmen...Das enge Zusammenwohnen mit der Zivilbevölkerung erfordert Vorsicht und äußerste Zurückhaltung. Aus mit Geschäftszimmern belegten Häusern, sind die Einwohner grundsätzlich zu entfernen*]

²⁷³ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 266.

²⁷⁴ "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 12-5-62," Bl. 338.

²⁷⁵ "Statement of Hermann Hoth, 1-23-62," in *B 162/4313* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 90.

not disapprove of the actions of First Lieutenant Fischer in securing the area in which his headquarters was located.

The above evidence demonstrates that there existed a command climate from higher headquarters that certainly permitted or even approved of Fischer's actions. This command climate would not have been unknown to the soldiers as well. The fear of the civilian population and exhortations to ruthless behavior could not have failed to permeate the ranks. In fact, this partisan paranoia is evident in the members of 4th Company, beginning at the top with Fischer. He made his position clear, even during his interrogation, saying, "one must also consider that for us as soldiers, the entire population appeared to be suspicious, where the partisans stood amongst them."²⁷⁶ He continued, "the war in the East was carried out with reckless cruelty by the Russian side. My endeavor was always in leading the company, to spare their blood. For this reason, I had to treat the members of the Russian civil population harshly. I must presume of them, that they could be dangerous to the unit and especially my men."²⁷⁷

This partisan fear was clearly used to convince the soldiers of 4th Company to participate or to provide them with rationalizations. Sergeant Huber explained his participation in the Klemjatino shooting by claiming that "there existed a connection between the disappearance of three members of a neighboring unit and the partisan."²⁷⁸ Grackel, the shooter, claimed Huber had told him that this civilian had "laid mines and ambushed 'leave

²⁷⁶ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 266.

²⁷⁷ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 12-6-62," Bl. 341. [*Der Krieg im Osten von Seiten des Russen mit rücksichtslosen Grausamkeit geführt. Mein Bestreben ist es immer bei der Führung der Kompanie gewesen, das Blut meiner Männer zu schonen. Aus dieser Grunde musste ich die Angehörigen der russischen Zivilbevölkerung hart anfassen, von denen ich annehmen musste, sie könnten der Truppe und insbesondere meinem Männern gefährlich werden*]

²⁷⁸ "Statement of Justus Huber, 3-12-63," Bl. 419. [*Es wurde mir vor der Erschießung gesagt es bestände eine Zusammenhang mit dem Verschwinden der 3 Angehörigen der Nachbareinheit und dem Partisan*]

convoys' ...It was always said back then that anyone who was a partisan should be shot. The entire region was under attack by partisans at that time."²⁷⁹ What could be a more treacherous, underhanded crime than attacking convoys of soldiers headed home to their families? It is worth noting as well that throughout these testimonies, the victims were almost always still referred to as partisans, even twenty years after the fact.

What evidence do we have that these crimes against civilians resulted from paranoia rather than from the brutalizing effects of real partisan warfare? First, subsequent research does not seem to support the level of fear seen in 4th Company. Partisan warfare was hardly as widespread or deadly during the period in which the unit committed its atrocities (1941-1942) as it would be later in the war. Matthew Cooper notes in his study of the partisan war that "by the end of 1941, then, of the seventy million people in the occupied regions of the Soviet Union, probably no more than 30,000 were in the partisan movement, scattered, uncoordinated and unevenly, over 850,000 square miles; most were poorly equipped and many undernourished."²⁸⁰ Joachim Hoffmann concurs, writing that "largely because of past omissions, the development of the partisan movement ran into great difficulties from the start....The authorities charged with the conduct of the partisan war had no precise ideas either on the tactics to be applied or on the most suitable forms of organization."²⁸¹

But what of 4th Company? Consider the timeline of their crimes. A Russian civilian was executed in Roslavl in September of 1941. Yet Lieutenant Hillermann testified that "I

²⁷⁹ "Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 3-12-63," Bl. 414.[*der Partisan hätte Minen gelegt und Fronturlaubzüge und Brücken gesprengt. Es ist uns damals immer wieder gesagt worden, alles was Partisane sei, würde erschossen. Die ganze Gegend war damals von Partisanen angegriffen*]

²⁸⁰ Cooper, *The Nazi War against Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944*, 17.

²⁸¹ Joachim Hoffman, "The Conduct of the War through Soviet Eyes," in *The Attack on the Soviet Union, Germany and the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 878.

can with good conscience say we generally had nothing to do with partisans in Roslavl.”²⁸²

In the town of Klemjatino, in the vicinity of Vyazma, 4th Company executed at least four civilians, suspected of partisan activity from January to April 1942. However, the rear area commander (1/593) at Vjazma reported on 1 December 1941 that “There is still no indication of the formation of partisan groups or of partisan activity.”²⁸³ Even more damning, Section Ic of the 4th Panzer Group (4th Panzer Signal Regiment’s higher headquarters) reported that “after the shifting of the front, the partisans have recently behaved relatively calmly in the area of the support troops. Large actions and assaults by partisans were not reported.”²⁸⁴ Finally, Puls and his execution detail likely murdered the Jews of Peregruznoje in September 1942. Only this crime falls into the period of increased partisan activity and effectiveness. We cannot say for certain that 4th Company did not experience partisan warfare in 1941 and 1942. Yet it does seem unlikely that the level of fear expressed by its members or the brutality of its “reactions” to the civilian population were in any way commensurate with the threat of partisan warfare.

Finally, what role did anti-Semitism play in 4th Company’s actions, specifically its mass murder of Jews in Peregruznoje? The proven Nazi and racist credentials of Fischer and Puls demonstrate their motivations for ordering and carrying out orders, respectively. Yet, even this action was couched in terms of the partisan threat. Though Fischer never admitted to ordering the Jews killed (or even that they *were* Jews), he did claim that the group of

²⁸² "Statement of Heinz Hillermann, 3-21-62," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 276. [*Ich kann mit gutem Gewissen sagen, dass wir in Roslawl mit Partisanen überhaupt nichts zu tun gehabt haben*]

²⁸³ Cooper, *The Nazi War against Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944*, 23.

²⁸⁴ "Photo #13356," Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives, 8623052. [*Nach Verlegung der Front verhielten die Partisanen sich in der letzten Zeit im Gebiet der fechtenden Truppe verhältnismäßig ruhig. Größere Aktionen und Überfälle durch Partisanen sind nicht gemeldet worden*]

people he ordered taken into the steppe were suspected of moving back and forth between the Russian and German lines with information about German troops and positions.²⁸⁵ Fischer had some very powerful legal reasons to hold to this story.²⁸⁶ Under German law, he could not be convicted of first degree murder simply for killing civilians, especially those suspected of being partisans, and lesser offenses were beyond the statute of limitations. He could, however, be charged with murder for the wanton execution of Jews *because* they were Jews. Yet many of the soldiers in the company clearly knew these civilians were Jews. August Möller presented an interesting reason for the murder, while clearly recognizing the victims as Jews. “A Jewish woman,” he said, “had allegedly refused to take in the soldiers [for quartering]. Thereupon, Captain Fischer met together with the Starost and the Jews were then rounded up.”²⁸⁷ Hans-Jürgen Köther, one of the shooters, remembered the morning of the execution that “we found out that the Jews were to be in the truck. It was said that these Jews must be shot, they had betrayed us.”²⁸⁸ Here, we also see the dangerous conflation between Jew and enemy. This is certainly how the round-up was portrayed to the soldiers of 4th Company.

As has been stated, none of those who took part in the shooting of Jews in Peregruznoje discussed their motivations for so doing. In addition, none of the men directly

²⁸⁵ "Statement of Fritz Fischer, 5-10-62," Bl. 269.

²⁸⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the legal considerations of prosecuting suspected Nazi war criminals see section V. Also, the following works provide an excellent summary of the relevant issues: Devin O. Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963-1965 : Genocide, History, and the Limits of the Law* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice : The Auschwitz Trial* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005).

²⁸⁷ "Statement of August Georg Mahler, 3-13-63," in B 162/4314 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 424. [*eine Judenfrau hätte sich geweigert die Soldaten auf zunehmen. Daraufhin hätte sich Hptm Fischer mit dem Starosten in Verbindung gesetzt und die Juden seien dann zusammengetrieben worden*]

²⁸⁸ "Statement of Hans-Jürgen Köther, 11-15-62," Bl. 321. [*Am nächsten Morgen erfuhren wir, dass Juden auf dem Wagen wären. Es wurde gesagt, diese Juden müssten erschossen werden, sie hätten uns verraten*]

associated Jews and partisans or expressed anti-Semitic or Nazi ideology. This, again, is not surprising given the situation in which these statements were given. Yet evidence of anti-Semitism or Nazi ideology is not entirely absent from these testimonies. Erwin Garner described the day the Jews were rounded up. He knew who the Jews were because, as he said, “the Jews were externally recognizable. The Russian has a differently shaped head than the Jew. Also the skin and hair color are different. The Jews spoke Russian with a different accent, I think that there were Russians and Kalmucks together in the town. The Kalmucks were of Mongol ancestry and appeared again different from the Jews.”²⁸⁹ This description cannot be accidental and provides telling glimpse of the Nazi indoctrination and habit of racial categorization that thrived in 1942.

Unfortunately, the interrogations of 4th Company cannot demonstrate conclusively much about the anti-Semitic beliefs of its members, with the obvious exceptions of Fischer and Puls. There are very few open discussions of the issue due, in part, to the legal setting in which the testimony took place. What is clear is that everyone knew that it was the Jews who had been rounded up. It is also clear that these Jews had been equated with the hated and feared partisan enemy as justification for their murder. Finally, this “action” required the largest number of participants of all the atrocities 4th Company had committed to date...and apparently there was little or no difficulty in assembling 12-15 men willing to carry out this task. Therefore, while a charge of virulent anti-Semitism cannot be supported, the presence of what Thomas Kühne calls an “anti-Semitism of indifference” seems highly

²⁸⁹ "Statement of Erwin Garner, 6-19-63," Bl. 7-8. [*Die Juden waren äußerlich erkennbar. Der Russe hat eine andere Kopfform als der Jude. Auch die Haut und Haarfarbe ist anders. Die Juden sprechen auch das Russische mit anderem Akzent. Ich meine, in dem Dorf waren Russen und Kalmücken zusammen. Die Kalmücken sind mongolischer Abstammung und sehen daher auch wieder anders als die Juden aus*]

probable.²⁹⁰ In the end, it is likely that the majority of soldiers were willing, at the very least, to tolerate the murder of Jews and were willing to believe the charge of Jewish-partisan alliance.

“I can’t get what I saw out of my head:” Conscience, Guilt, and Shame

Frank sat on a tree stump and had his head in his hands. I approached him and asked him what was wrong. I was close with him. He told me something to the effect of: “This morning I was out where the Jews were executed. I can’t get what I saw out of my head

-Witness Helmut Ortlepp describing the reaction of SGT Fuchs²⁹¹

It is misleading to characterize all the perpetrators in 4th Company as cold killers or all the bystanders as merely indifferent. Indeed, what makes this an interesting case is that the company was not particularly hardened or brutalized by their experiences thus far in the war. Therefore, we are able to observe the responses of a group of soldiers to their first mass killings. These responses demonstrate a certain understanding of the negative implications of their acts. Some of these soldiers exhibited an understanding of conscience and guilt, and the psychological trauma which accompanies them. Such feelings of trauma and guilt do not necessarily mean that these men were not anti-Semitic or that they were morally opposed to these acts of atrocity. It does demonstrate that such acts were not accepted without reservation or without psychological reaction. Later discussions of these events among the men also show that the experience of atrocities did not end with the event itself, but continued in the memory of the unit.

²⁹⁰ Thomas Kühne, "Male Bonding and Genocidal War: Germany, 1918-1945," in *Triangle Seminar in the History of the Military, War, and Society* National Humanities Center, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina: 2006, 18.

²⁹¹ "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 3-8-63," Bl. 401. [*Fuchs saß auf einem Baumstumpf und hatte den Kopf in die Hände gestützt. Ich habe ihn angesprochen und gefragt, was er denn hätte. Ich war „per Du“ mit ihm. Er sagte mir, etwas folgendes: „Ich bin heute morgen mit draußen gewesen wo sie die Juden umgelegt haben. Was ich da gesehen habe, geht mir nicht mehr aus dem Kopf heraus*]

“A disgusting mess:” Reactions to Mass Murder

The word *schweinerei* is often used in the testimonies of 4th Company. It does not translate directly into English but its meaning is something like a “disgusting mess” with a recognition of impropriety, inappropriateness, and revulsion. What is important is that the word connotes an event that should not have taken place (at least in the way that it did) and has an element of revulsion attached to it. Thus, while the use of *Schweinerei* by these men does not necessarily indicate a moral judgment (though it certainly could), it does signify recognition by some in the company that this action was out of bounds. The use of this term in connection with the murder of the Jews of Peregruznoje indicates that such an action had broken a taboo for them. It was not a subtle, incremental escalation of violence for them, but a quantum leap most were not prepared for.

For example, Bernhard Grackel said that he considered the shooting of women and children to be a “große *Schweinerei*” or huge mess.²⁹² Alfred Hoffmann stated during questioning that he “regarded the shooting of Jews at the time to be a *Schweinerei*.”²⁹³ Heinrich Seiler, too, used this term. He remembered that, upon returning from a wire laying mission, he was told by his comrades that “a *Schweinerei* happened at the company.”²⁹⁴ It is also worth noting that Lieutenant Puls, too, claims that the execution was a *Schweinerei*, but

²⁹² "Statement of Bernhard Grackel, 3-12-63," Bl. 414.

²⁹³ "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 12-5-62," Bl. 336. [*Ich habe die Erschießung von Juden schon damals für eine „Schweinerei“ gehalten.*]

²⁹⁴ "Statement of Heinrich Seiler, 12-21-62 " in *B 162/4314* Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl.348. [...*dass eine Schweinerei bei der Kompanie passiert wäre*]

his testimony in this regard is clearly suspect. Bernhard Olker remembered that he and his comrades had thought that “it would be a mean thing to simply shoot these people.”²⁹⁵

How did the men of 4th Company react to the atrocities it committed? This case study offers an instructive glimpse inside a unit relatively unaccustomed to atrocity, after its first initiation into mass killing. The company was neither a highly racially indoctrinated nor seasoned killing unit. The responses of its men, therefore, tell us much about how German soldiers initially responded to the commission of atrocity, beyond the decision of whether or not to participate. In other words, what role did atrocity play in the group culture of the soldiers involved (directly, indirectly, or by association)?

Our best example of individual reaction to the killing of the Jews of Peregruznoje comes from the testimony of Helmut Ortlepp, who initiated the investigation. He described the reactions of his friend, Sergeant Fuchs.²⁹⁶ Ortlepp stated that Fuchs had participated in the execution (as do at least three other witnesses.) As indicated above, Ortlepp approached Fuchs and asked him why he appeared so downfallen. Fuchs told him that he had been a part of the execution squad and was clearly upset over his participation. Specifically, the memory that haunted him was the killing of a mother and her infant. According to Ortlepp’s testimony, the mother wished to die with her infant; apparently, the children and mothers had been separated in earlier iterations.²⁹⁷ Fuchs went on to say that, for some reason, this woman was allowed to die with her infant. She was shot in the head and killed, but the infant did not die. Fuchs told Ortlepp that he was “appalled over this, that now the child moved his

²⁹⁵ "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 1-29-63," Bl. 381. [*es wäre eine Gemeinheit diese Leute einfach zu erschießen*]

²⁹⁶ Ortlepp states that he was “per Du” with Fuchs, indicating that they were familiar and likely friends.

²⁹⁷ "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 11-14-61," Bl. 116. [*Bemerken möchte ich hier, dass die Kinder vor der Erschießungsaktion von ihren Müttern getrennt wurden.*]

hands through the mother's shattered head. He supposed that he would never in his life forget this."²⁹⁸

Fuchs's reaction is instructive. What most disturbed him, according to Ortlepp, was the killing of a mother and infant, and the gruesome nature of the killing, not the killing of the other Jews. One must also recognize that Ortlepp clearly wanted Fischer and Puls to be punished and would likely choose the most damning anecdotes to relate. It is possible that Frank elaborated on his feelings about the killing in general and that Ortlepp omitted this from his testimony. Fuchs was not a hardened killer, even after having been in a unit that had killed civilians before, though in a much different manner. Yet his lack of condemnation of the event in general and his preoccupation with the mother-child incident may also indicate the presence of a latent acceptance of the anti-Semitic policy in general.

Regardless, it is clear that this mass murder and its aftermath had occupied a place in the collective memory of the unit because it was an emotional and disturbing event. One indicator of this impact is in the oral "afterlife" of the event. More than a few soldiers remark that this incident was talked about in the company long after it had occurred.

Company Cook Lange remarked insightfully,

In my memory, the narratives of the shooting were sorrowful. It is also not that this execution had no lasting impact on the company members. At that time and during meetings after the war, the conversation always came back to the execution. My comrade Reise with whom I repeatedly spoke about this after the war had the same memories of this event as I.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ "Statement of Helmut Ortlepp, 7-12-61," Bl. 8. [*Fuchs war entsetzt darüber, dass nun das Kind mit sei en Händen in dem zerschossenen Kopf der Mutter herumgewühlt habe. Er meinte noch, er würde dies in seinem Leben nicht vergessen.*]

²⁹⁹ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 233. [*In meinem Erinnerungsbild aber ist es so, dass die Erzählungen über die Erschießungen traurig waren. Es ist auch nicht so, dass diese Exekution an den Komp-Angeh spurlos vorbeigegangen ist. Damals und bei Zusammen treffen nach dem Kriege ist das Gespräch immer wieder auf die Exekution kommen. Mein Kamerad Reise, mit dem ich wiederholt nach dem Krieg darüber gesprochen habe, hatte dasselbe Erinnerungsbild von dem Vorfall wie ich.*]

He is not alone. Heinrich Klein, too, remembered that “it is correct that these events were talked about in the company for a long time.”³⁰⁰ Sergeant Pehle remembered that “it was long talked about in the company, that Puls was supposed to have led this execution squad.”³⁰¹ He went on to say that, “in particular, a small child was spoken of, who had also belonged to one of the groups [that were shot].”³⁰² Hoffmann said that “one also spoke of this in soldier circles, that women and children had been shot.”³⁰³ Interestingly, he mentions this continuing discussion and also says that he “was generally of the impression that it was forbidden to speak about the shooting.”³⁰⁴

What do these discussions about the killing tell us about the reactions of German soldiers to atrocities? First, it shows that there WAS a reaction. We do not know the contents of these discussions, but it is implied in the testimony of 4th Company veterans that they revolved around the appropriateness of the action. It appears that groups of enlisted soldiers especially discussed the killings long after the event. Moreover, Hoffmann’s impression of such discussions as having been forbidden indicates that these discussions may have taken place privately among groups of trusted comrades. Secondly, these discussions appear to indicate at least an uneasy relationship of the men to the killing of women and children (if not Jewish women and children.) Clearly, this action was beyond the pale of

³⁰⁰ "Statement of Heinrich Klein, 2-16-62," in *B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg*, Bl. 146. [*Es trifft zu, das über dieses Ereignis noch längere Zeit in der Komp gesprochen wurde*]

³⁰¹ "Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 10-3-61," Bl. 79-80. [*Mit Bestimmtheit wurde lange in der Komp gesprochen, dass diese Exekutionskommando unter der Führung des Komp-Angeh Puls gestanden haben soll*]

³⁰² "Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 1-28-63," Bl. 375. [*Insbesondere erinnere ich mich, dass von einem kleinen Jungen gesprochen ist, der auch zu einer Gruppe gehört*]

³⁰³ "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 12-5-62," Bl. 336. [*Man hat im Kameradenkreise auch davon gesprochen, dass Frauen und Kinder mit erschossen worden seien*]

³⁰⁴ "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 7-3-62," Bl. 285. [*Ich hatte überhaupt den Eindruck, dass ein Verbot ergangen war, über die Erschießung zu sprechen.*]

previously accepted behavior. Soldiers did not have such discussions or even make mild condemnations of the killings of “suspected partisans” earlier on in the war. The continued discourse over the incident at Peregruznoje and the important, if shadowy, place it occupied in the unit’s collective memory strongly suggests that there were indeed moral boundaries. Killings such as Peregruznoje certainly tested these boundaries, at least in units such as 4th Company, and were not easily explained away by the conditions of the war or the ideological indoctrination to which the men were exposed.

Moreover, at least two soldiers mentioned contemplating the events of September 1942 even after the war. Hoffmann, who clearly thought on the event a great deal, describes an interesting encounter with his father after the war.

In 1945, when I came home to my parents...I had reported the shooting of the Jews. I had spoken with my father, about what one should do about this thing, that is, whether one should somehow report it. My father was of the opinion that one shouldn’t do anything. One could not make the thing “un-happen” and the person who was responsible would have to live with his own conscience.³⁰⁵

While this vignette may say more about German post-war memory than soldier experience, it does imply, if true, that this murder had a long “afterlife” among those who experienced it. Such a revelation also indicates an attempt to deal with the aftereffects of the event, whatever they may have been. Wilhelm *Danner* apparently also continued to think on the events of that afternoon. He told investigators,

After the war, I spoke about the shooting of the...Jews by Puls with my in-laws, who were persecuted by the Third Reich. My mother in law was 1/8th Jewish. When the Eichmann trial began, I thought often of this matter. When the *Kripo* came to me, I even said to myself, it must have to do with

³⁰⁵ "Statement of Alfred Hoffmann, 12-5-62," Bl. 337. [*Ich habe 1945, als ich zu meinen Eltern zurückkam...über diese Judenerschießung berichtet. Ich habe noch mit meinem Vater gesprochen, ob man aus der Sache was machen sollte, d.h. ob man die Sache irgendwie anzeigen sollte. Mein Vater war damals der Ansicht, man sollte nichts unternehmen. Man könne die Sache nicht ungeschehen machen und der Mann, der verantwortlich dafür sei, müsse das mit seinem Gewisse selbst abmachen*]

what went on with Wm Puls. The officer was thus surprised when I immediately began with this.³⁰⁶

That the Eichmann trial would have evoked memories of the event is also perhaps indicative of the extent to which it affected the men of the unit.

Whether the emotional reaction of the men to the shooting, especially at the time, had anything to do with the ethnicity of the victims (as Jews) remains unclear. Until that point, 4th Company's victims had been primarily military-aged men suspected of hostile acts against the *Wehrmacht*, certainly not the elderly or children. It seems apparent that the different nature of this atrocity resonated within the group in a different way. There seems to have been much debate and discussion of it, perhaps in an attempt to determine its legality, or perhaps just as a form of "group therapy." In either case, it seems that "ordinary" German units, even under the conditions of the Eastern Front, maintained some moral awareness. Moreover, testimony indicates that moral spheres were not universal and that some atrocities were regarded as normal and justified activities while others were still seen as beyond the realm of acceptable behavior. In his discussion of *Wehrmacht* crimes in Greece, Mark Mazower found similar reactions. Soldiers who may have been willing to accept the killing of unarmed male civilians still found killing women and children emotionally difficult, if not morally wrong. One soldier referred to the shooting of women and children as "a *Schweinerei* which had nothing to do with fighting a war."³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ "Statement of Wilhelm Danner, 11-16-62," Bl. 333. [*Über die Erschießung der...Juden durch Puls habe ich nach dem Kriege mit meinen früheren Schwiegereltern gesprochen, die zu den Verfolgten des 3 Reiches gehörten. Meine Schwiegermutter war, wir sie sagte, Achteljüdin. Als das Eichmann Verfahren lief, habe ich oft an diese Sache denken müssen. Als die Kripo zu mir kam, habe ich mir gleich gesagt, es müsste um die Sache mit Wachtmeister Puls gehen. Der Beamte wart noch erstaunt, als ich gleich davon anfang*]

³⁰⁷ Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece : The Experience of Occupation, 1941-1944*, 130.

Shards of a Mirror: Fault Lines across 4th Company

In Russia, my relationship with Captain Fischer was ultimately strained. I had good relations with then Lieutenant Franz Scherer, with whom I had gone to Gymnasium in Neheim and had known well from this time. I think, that it was a result of strained relationships that prevailed between Scherer and Fischer.

- Sergeant Pehle³⁰⁸

To summarize, I must say as a result of that experience, that we as company members knew that Captain Fischer had done something illegal whereby a portion of the company took part without orders because they were of the same attitude as Fischer.

- Company Cook Lange³⁰⁹

I assumed, however, that this shooting was carried out by troops from the company trains.

- Soldier Bernhard Olker³¹⁰

Regarding Captain Fischer I would like to say that I always respected him as a man and took him for 100% a soldier and officer.

- Soldier Wilhelm Ritter³¹¹

One of the interesting findings in the investigation of 4th Company's participation in atrocities is that the unit itself was riven with cliques, feuds, and other social divisions. The comradeship of the "group" appears much more problematic in this context. It seems that some historians hold a view of German army units as idealized, homogeneous groups of "brothers in arms." Such an interpretation becomes questionable when it is mobilized to

³⁰⁸ "Statement of Heinrich Pehle, 10-3-61," Bl. 79-80.[*In Russland war mein Verhältnis zu Hptm Fischer zuletzt gespannt...Ich hatte einen guten Kontakt mit dem damaligen LT Franz Scherer, mit dem ich zusammen das Gymnasium in Neheim besucht hatte und den ich seit dieser Zeit gut kannte...Ich möchte meinen, dass das eine Folge des gespannten Verhältnisses war, das zwischen Fischer und Scherer geherrscht hatte*]

³⁰⁹ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 234.[*Zusammenfassend muss ich auf Grund der damaligen Erlebnisse sagen, dass uns als Komp-Angeh bewusst war, dass Hptm Fischer hier etwas Unrechtes tat, wobei ein Teil des Kommandos nicht befohlen an der Aktion teilnahm, weil sie dieselbe Einstellung wie Fischer hatten*]

³¹⁰ "Statement of Bernhard Josef Olker, 10-3-61," Bl. 84.[*Ich nehme allerdings an, dass diese Erschießung von Angeh des Komp-Trofes durchgeführt worden ist.*]

³¹¹ "Statement of Wilhelm Ritter, 5-11-62," in B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 261. [*Bezügl. des Hptm Fischer möchte ich noch sagen, dass ich ihn immer als Menschen geachtet habe und ihn für einen 100%igen Soldaten und Offizier gehalten habe.*]

explain participation in atrocities. Historian Thomas Kühne has done much work on the role of comradeship in the German army. However, he also appears to have fallen victim to just such an overly general interpretation of comradeship. He writes, for example, “immediately becoming ‘the best of friends’ with men one had never known before proved to be a daily experience in the German army.”³¹² In attempting to explain motivations for participation in atrocities, Kühne argues “it was not only about group *pressure* (or any other pressure) but about—group *pleasure*, about togetherness, about belonging.”³¹³ Clearly, comradeship was important in creating social pressures. However, the idea of a single “group pressure” can be misleading. In fact, there is no one group but rather a shifting conglomeration of peer groups, interest groups, and cliques. It is not presumptuous to assume that many conventional army units on the Eastern Front possessed a similar structure. Therefore, an investigation of this structure allows us to define the space in which soldiers negotiated participation in atrocities.

Why is defining this space so important? First, it suggests that the somewhat monolithic concept of German “comradeship” is not as useful as it may seem. Soldiers may develop cliques within a unit that will sustain them emotionally and physically, even when these cliques may be counter to the approved or desired ethos of the unit. That is to say, for example, substandard soldiers can continue to be poor performers without succumbing to group pressures if there are other substandard soldiers with whom they can socialize. This concept has important implications for the commission of atrocities. It suggests that the existence of competing cliques within a unit may allow additional space for various forms of non-participation or evasion than in units that are more cohesive.

³¹² Kühne, “Male Bonding and Genocidal War: Germany, 1918-1945,” 2.

³¹³ Ibid., 5.

Secondly, a detailed look at these subgroups reveals that non-participation in different forms of atrocities did not coincide cleanly with these fault lines, nor did each group influence behavior with equal strength. For example, dissent regarding Nazi policy against Catholics may not equate to opposition toward atrocities directed against Jews. Indeed, as we have already seen, at least one soldier was easily coerced into killing a suspected “partisan” but steadfastly refused to participate in the killing of Jewish women and children. This revelation indicates that the spectrum of responses discussed earlier must also be filtered through a variety of social groupings and influences. Thus, in units with more divisions, negotiating participation in atrocities may have been even more chaotic.

Finally, how does the presence of such cliques affect a top-down pressure to participate in atrocities? The existence of multiple lines of conflict and the fact that responses to atrocity do not break out clearly along them leads to an important conclusion: the *true believers* and *role players* can, and often did, drive genocidal actions, even when in the minority in a group. Without a fairly homogeneous group culture, perhaps execution of unpopular acts is more likely. Moreover, it seems that the existence of multiple subgroups within the unit allows individuals space to evade or resist, knowing that they are still secure in that subgroup, if not in the eyes of the leadership or unit at large.

Catholics

Testimony from several members of the unit, including two officers, indicates that Catholics in 4th Company felt alienated and formed an informal clique based on this. First Lieutenant Fischer as a clear adherent to Nazi ideology had a particular distaste for Catholics. A great deal of testimony from the legal investigation confirms this. Company clerk

Lehmann remembered that Fischer “impressed me with his anti-religious views. He had, in a general sense, told me that I, too, could leave the church. I inferred then from the conversation that he no longer belonged to the church.”³¹⁴ Fischer’s anti-Catholic views reached the breaking point when he expressed them to two of his Catholic officers, Franz Scherer and Heinz *Hillermann*. Hillermann recalled that, at an evening meeting between Fischer and the two officers, “Fischer presumed to condemn Catholics as being the enemies of Germany. I demanded that he take back this comment by the next morning or I would report him. Fischer apologized the following morning.”³¹⁵ Scherer remembers a similar event. He stated,

Here I must unfortunately say that he would sometimes underscore his demands or desires with a drawn pistol. He occasionally threatened Lieutenant Hillermann and me with his pistol during arguments when we were not of the same opinion. Hillermann and I discussed the topic of Catholicism, condemning the dominant view in Nazi circles. Fischer, who had secretly eavesdropped on us, reproached us forcefully and called Catholics “traitors.” When we, as Catholics, protested these obscenities, the aforementioned threat occurred.³¹⁶

Such behavior clearly united the Catholic members of the company in opposition to Fischer’s leadership. Indeed, it seems that such a firm response, as that of Hillermann, had an impact on Fischer. Apologizing for his remarks to his own platoon leaders seems out of character and demonstrates that Fischer was willing to swallow his pride at least superficially to

³¹⁴ "Statement of Günther Adolf Wilhelm Lehmann, 5-28-63," Bl. 29. [*Speziell kann ich noch angeben, dass er seine Kirchenfeindlichkeit mir gegenüber zum Ausdruck gebracht hat. Er hat mir sinngemäß gesagt, ich könnte doch auch aus der Kirche austreten. Ich habe damals aus dem Gespräch entnommen, dass er der Kirche nicht mehr angehörte*]

³¹⁵ "Statement of Heinz Hillermann, 3-21-62," Bl. 278. [*Dabei verstieg sich Fischer zu dem Vorwurf, die Katholiken seien die Feinde Deutschlands. Ich habe ihn darauf aufgefordert, bis zum nächsten Morgen diese Äußerung zurückzunehmen andernfalls ich Meldung machen würde. Fischer hat sich am folgenden Morgen entschuldigt*]

³¹⁶ "Statement of Franz Scherer, 3-23-62," Bl. 235. [*Hierzu muss ich bezüglich Fischer leider sagen, dass er seine Forderungen oder sein Verlangen manchmal mit der gezogenen Pistole unterstützte. Selbst mir und Leutnant Holtheide hat er mit der Pistole gelegentlich eine Auseinandersetzung gedroht, als wir nicht seiner Meinung waren. Holtheide und ich hatten uns über Fragen des Katholismus unterhalten, wobei wir die damals herrschende Ansicht in NZ Kreisen verdammt. Fischer, der uns heimlich belauscht hatte, machte uns schwere Vorwürfe und bezeichnete die Katholiken als Verräter. Als wir uns als Katholiken diese Beschimpfungen verbat, kam es zu der vorbeschriebenen Bedrohung.*]

resolve this particular dispute. Perhaps more importantly, it seems that the reaction of these officers to Fischer's anti-Catholic rhetoric attracted enlisted men to this group as well. For example, Sergeant Pehle had known Scherer from his hometown and from school and he indicates that he and Lieutenant Scherer were close. While Pehle does not mention religion, it is likely that he, too, was Catholic. That Fischer attempted to convince Lehmann to leave the church also suggests that Lehmann was Catholic. Thus, it appears evident that Catholic soldiers within the company knew each other and bonded, at the least as fellow sufferers under Fischer's ideological attacks. What make this group interesting are its varied responses to participation in atrocities. Both Pehle and Lehmann refused at some point to participate in the killing of the Jews of Peregruznoje. Yet the two officers, who were incensed enough to demand an apology from their commander regarding a religious insult, failed to voice any real opposition to the killing of civilians or Jews. A statement made by Lieutenant Hillermann is instructive; regarding one of the "partisan" executions, he remarked, "I was horrified over this event, and afterward however didn't speak of it anymore with Fischer, particularly because my relationship with him was extremely strained."³¹⁷ He elaborated later, "I myself was extremely incensed over Fischer's 'speedy trial' and exchanged thoughts with Lieutenant Scherer on Fischer's extreme handling of the situation. As I have said, my relationship with Fischer was extremely strained, one could even say antagonistic. In spite of this, however, after consultation with Scherer, I did not take it further."³¹⁸

³¹⁷ "Statement of Heinz Hillermann, 3-21-62," Bl. 276. [*Ich war über diesen Vorfall entsetzt, habe aber wohl bei dem Gespräch mit Fischer zunächst nichts weiter gesagt, zumal mein Verhältnis zu ihm äußerst gespannt war*]

³¹⁸ Ibid., Bl. 277. [*Zudem war ich ja selbst über dieses von Fischer geübte „Schnellverfahren“ äußerst erregt und habe mit LT Scherer meine Gedanken über diese unremässige Handlung von Fischer ausgetauscht. Wie gesagt, war mein Verhältnis zu Fischer äußerst gespannt, man kann sogar sagen verfeindet. Trotzdem habe ich aber nach Rücksprachen mit Scherer nichts weiter veranlasst*]

Thus, it seems that Hillermann felt comfortable standing up to the commander over his religious views, but not over atrocities. Neither he nor Scherer expressed opposition or condemnation to either the killings of “suspected partisans” or the Jews of Peregruznoje, even twenty years after the fact. This is an interesting observation, given that prior discussion indicates opposition to the killing of women and children to be more acceptable, as it was farther out of the bounds of normalcy. It seems that, given their success in confronting the commander on his anti-Catholic attitudes, Scherer and Hillermann did not want to jeopardize these gains by speaking out against any other atrocities. As well, it is instructive that Lieutenant Fischer felt threatened enough by the reaction of his officers that he was willing to apologize. Perhaps he feared a justified charge that he was undermining morale by attacking his soldiers’ religious beliefs. Fischer clearly felt these expressions of displeasure to be far more important than those of men refusing to participate in the killing of Jews, likely because he felt far more support and justification from his higher headquarters and superiors in anti-partisan and anti-Jewish measures.

In any case, the Catholic group indicates that subgroups could provide comradeship and serve as loci for opposition of varying kinds and severity. Yet it also shows that such opposition was neither uniform nor did it necessarily cross the bounds of interest which created the group in the first place. Catholics in 4th Company seemed content to advocate for their beliefs selectively and remain quiet on other fronts once their anger was assuaged.

Sergeants vs. Officers

Conflict between NCOs (non-commissioned officers) and officers exists in every unit, up to the present. In most forms, this conflict/competition is a healthy and natural one,

owing to the separation of power and spheres of influence and responsibility between officers and NCOs. Thus, it is perhaps no surprise to see some indication of such conflict in 4th Company. It does appear, however, that such conflict was less than healthy. Coming mainly from the testimony of ex- First Sergeant Heinrich Bollmann, a description emerges of a commander disliked intensely by the highest-ranking enlisted soldier in the unit and perhaps by other NCOs. We also see an officer, already described as impetuous and quick to make decisions, who refused to listen to the advice of his presumably more experienced NCOs.

First Lieutenant Fischer also apparently had a Russian “wife” whom he kept in his room in the headquarters building. In Bollmann’s words, “I was especially disgusted that Fischer lived together with a Russian woman in his room the whole winter in Clemjatino [sic]. This woman was even pregnant by Fischer, which I merely suspected by her condition.”³¹⁹ This relationship was not a secret either. According to Heinrich Seiler, “regarding the ‘womanizing story,’ that Fischer had womanized in the company rear, that I knew and this generally was known. In connection with this, I told the police that the First Sergeant did not agree with the behavior of the commander.” He added, “in so far as this, the First Sergeant was completely correct.”³²⁰ First Sergeant Bollmann could have had multiple reasons for disapproving of Fischer’s illicit relationship. First, it clearly violated existing rules about fraternizing with the “enemy” and could have compromised the security of the unit by having its commander so intimately involved with a native. Secondly, for a

³¹⁹ "Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 8-29-61," Bl. 48. [*Mich hat dann noch ganz besonders abgestoßen, dass Fischer den ganzen Winter über in Climatjino mit einer russischen Frau in seiner Stube zusammengelebt hat. Diese Frau erwartete sogar von Fischer ein Kind, welches ich aber nur auf Grund des Zustandes der Frau vermutete*]

³²⁰ "Statement of Heinrich Seiler, 12-21-62 ", Bl. 349. [*...über die Weibergeschichten Dass Hptm Fischer beim Kompanietross Frauengeschichten gehabt hat, das wusste ich und das war auch allgemein bekannt. In diesem Zusammenhang habe ich dann dem Kriminalisten gesagt, dass der Spieß mit der Handlungsweise des Chefs nicht einverstanden gewesen sei. Insoweit war der Spieß unbedingt korrekt.*]

commander as strict as Fischer, to blatantly disobey policy could have introduced a poisonous element of hypocrisy into the company's morale. Finally, Fischer was setting an undisciplined example for the rest of the unit, whom Bollmann was likely also trying to keep in line with regards to relationships with the civilian population of occupied towns. It is unclear from his testimony which reasons were most compelling for his condemnation, but, as the First Sergeant, it is unlikely that Bollmann was alone among the NCOs in his feelings regarding the commander.

Fischer was described by more than a few veterans as a man who made hasty decisions, without much regard for the advice of others. Lieutenant Hillermann perhaps best described this, saying, "as a characterization of Fischer I would like to say that he was an extremely 'bold' man, who seemed to me insensitive and unscrupulous. If it concerned ideas and their implementation, he proceeded recklessly and would have stopped at nothing to accomplish his goals."³²¹ First Sergeant Bollmann claimed that Fischer was "explosive in his decision-making...[he was] quick to make a decision."³²² Herbert Bärmann concurred, describing Fischer as "a very bold officer, quick to take aggressive actions that were sometimes not appropriate."³²³ Company cook Kurt Lange noted that Fischer "was a very

³²¹ "Statement of Heinz Hillermann, 3-21-62," Bl. 277. [*Zur Charakterisierung von Fischer möchte ich sagen, dass er ein äußerst forschter Herr war, der mir gefühl- und skrupellos erschien. Wenn es sich um Ideen und deren Verwirklichung handelte, ging er rücksichtslos vor, wobei er auch über Leichen gegangen wäre.*]

³²² "Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 4-22-62," in B 162/4312 Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, Bl. 281. [*er in seinen Entschlüssen explosiv war... dass er schell mit einer Entscheidung zur Hand war*]

³²³ "Statement of Herbert Bärmann, 2-20-62," Bl. 153. [*ein forschter Offizier, der schnell mit energischen Maßnahmen zu Hand war, die zuweilen nicht angebracht waren*]

severe officer, who would often punish the slightest offenses with the hardest punishments.”³²⁴

One of the best examples of this rash, unilateral behavior was Fischer’s action against his own first sergeant, Heinrich Bollmann. Bollmann claimed in his statement that Fischer attempted to punish him for stealing a cow. Bollmann contended that he had “organized” a total of 6 cows from the “partisan area” in order to improve the rations of the company and so they could have something to eat.³²⁵ Apparently, a hearing of some kind took place. Bollmann claimed that these charges were levied against him because he had opposed Fischer’s living with Russian women.”³²⁶ As a result of these disputes, Bollmann was transferred to 3rd Company in April 1942.³²⁷ Bollmann testified that his later company commander “who was probably already at Regimental staff, worked it so that I was transferred to his company...[and] he must have known why I came to his unit.”³²⁸

This internal conflict between the commander and his highest ranking NCO is important. Officers come and go but NCOs frequently stayed for long periods of time in the unit. It is then likely that the loyalty of the other NCOs and soldiers in the company would have been stronger toward Bollmann, even without a martinet of a commander like Fischer. Moreover, it seems that Bollmann did have the interests of the company in mind, given his

³²⁴ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 229. [*Dieser war ein sehr gestrenger Offizier, der unter Umständen schon bei kleinen Verstoßen mit harten Strafen vorging.*]

³²⁵ "Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 4-22-62," Bl. 281.

³²⁶ Ibid. [*Meine Vernehmung Setzung erfolgte ausschließlich deswegen, weil ich dagegen opponiert hatte, dass Fischer mit russischen Frauen in seinem Quartier zeitweilig zusammenlebte.*]

³²⁷ "Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 8-29-61," Bl. 47.

³²⁸ "Statement of Heinrich Bollmann, 4-22-62," Bl. 282. [*Daraufhin hat mein späterer Kompaniechef, der wohl auch zufällig beim Stab war, daraufhin gewirkt, dass ich zu seiner Kompanie versetzt wurde... er müsste ja wissen, warum ich zu seiner Einheit gekommen bin.*]

attempt to supply better meals to the men. Fischer's actions against Bollmann would surely have created a rift between the NCOs and himself, minus the cadre of sergeants who were of a like mind with him. Indeed, this dispute was serious enough that Bollmann was transferred out of the unit, apparently without ill effects. What is interesting as well is that this dispute did not seem to impact the actions of the men in the unit regarding atrocity. Bollmann had left the unit by the time of the Peregruznoje shooting; his response to that event must remain conjecture. But he apparently had no problems with the shootings of civilians that had occurred prior. Indeed, by his own admission, he administered a coup de grace to the hanging victim in Klemjatino. The lasting effects of Bollmann's feud do not appear to have had any effect in opposition to the shootings at Peregruznoje.

Fischer Loyalists

What is clearly evident from the testimonies of 4th Company veterans is that a group of soldiers and NCOs existed who were of a like mind with the commander, Lieutenant Fischer. These individuals likely belonged to the *motivated actor* group, and their loyalty to Fischer could have several origins. Regardless, these men allied themselves with Fischer and were willing and eager to carry out his orders. Though cited earlier, the following descriptions of this group of "loyalists" bear repeating here:

I can generally say that these people [shooters] belonged to the circle in the company which was always on the spot for special tasks.³²⁹

The NCO corps that took part in the shooting above all had the same attitude as Fischer.³³⁰

³²⁹ "Statement of Herbert Bärmann, 2-20-62," Bl. 154.[*dass diese Personen zu dem Kreis in der Kompanie gehörten, die zu einer solchen Aktion bereit waren. Damit will ich zum Ausdruck bringen, dass es diejenigen waren, die für Sonderaufgaben freiwillig zur Stelle waren*]

³³⁰ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 234.[*Diese von Hptm Fischer gezeigte Einstellung hatte vor allem Unteroffizierkorps, das an der Erschießung teilnehme*]

It was related to me later that the young company member, Keller, 19 at the time and a baker, had taken a particularly active role in the shooting.³³¹

For each individual Action, suitable people were sought out by the NCOs who would be capable of such acts. I remember the batman of First Lieutenant Sauer, the young lance corporal Heinrich König, who always freely volunteered.³³²

I took him [Puls] as a man who assisted the commander and reported to him on the morale of the unit. Sometimes he had even "told" on people. However, it was not that he told on everybody to the commander.³³³

This clique of soldiers, NCOS, and officers was vital for the perpetration of atrocities.

Moreover, the existence of this group was clearly apparent to members of the unit at the time.

Whether this unit gravitated toward Fischer out of ideological agreement, desire for power or acceptance, or simple proclivity for violence is not obvious in all cases. Also unclear are the interactions between this group and the other cliques within the company. How did these men interact with other members of the company? Here, the sources are of little use, as clearly no one would include himself in this group voluntarily; thus, all we get are second-hand descriptions and identifications of this group. It is, therefore, hard to say if members of this clique were looked down upon by other members of the unit for their participation.

However, it does seem likely, based on the testimony available, that they were disliked, if only because they were allied with the unpopular Lieutenant Fischer. Above all, here is a

³³¹ "Statement of Heinrich Gasscher," Bl. 87. [Weiterhin wurde mir erzählt, dass der jüngere Kopm-Angeh Keller, seinerzeit etwa 19 Jahre alt und von Beruf Bäcker, sich bei dieser Erschießung besonders aktiv verhalten hätte.]

³³² "Statement of Wilhelm Orlmann, 2-14-62," Bl. 131. [Zu den einzelnen Aktionen wurden dann jeweils von Unteroffizieren geeignete Leute aufgesucht, die für solche Taten fähig waren. Ich erinnere mich noch an den damaligen Putzer des Oblt Sauer, den jungen Gefr. Heinrich König, der sich immer freiwillig meldete]

³³³ "Statement of Kurt Siegfried Lange, 3-23-62," Bl. 233. [Ich bezeichne ihn als einen Mann, der dem Chef sehr zur hand ging und ihm über die Stimmung in der Einheit berichtete. Es kam sogar vor, dass er „gepetzt“ hat. Aber es war das nicht so, dass er jedermann beim Chef „anschierte“]

group formation most directly linked to participation in atrocities. The members of this sub-group were defined in many ways precisely *because* they were willing to kill.

Picking up the pieces: Making sense of Cliques and Sub-groups

What this case study clearly indicates is that there was no such thing as “the group,” even in the mythic brotherhood of conventional *Wehrmacht* units. Indeed, it is likely that most units possessed similar fissures and dividing lines as 4th Company. Moreover, these divisions are complex and do not often allow one to predict their impact upon the predisposition to commit atrocities. For example, though the NCOs of 4th Company may have disliked Lieutenant Fischer as a military leader, no evidence suggests that this critique led anyone to refuse to participate in killing. The most central clique to explaining such participation is the ideological one, the group of men who believed what Fischer believed or who saw it beneficial to ally themselves with him. More research must be done to test the wider applicability of these findings within German army units. Understanding the patchwork of groups overlaid upon the military unit will greatly help in understanding why men chose to participate in killings and why they refused. Perhaps more importantly, it will perhaps illuminate what issues resisters and killers alike held as important.

IV. Conclusion

When your icon of the enemy is complete
you will be able to kill without guilt,
slaughter without shame.

The thing you destroy will have become
merely an enemy of God, an impediment
to the sacred dialectic of history.

- Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*

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The jury, as a result of the trial, was not convinced that the foreign civilian persons were killed by the members of 4th Company in a malicious manner under the law. "Malicious" in this sense is an act which would have been committed under the circumstances of great evil and in which the victims were defenseless. This trial did not show that the killing of these non-resident villagers took place under such circumstances. All circumstances point to the fact that the victims were not innocent at the time of their roundup and also as they met their fate. In particular, there is an absence of any evidence for the assertion that there was anything before or during their evacuation to the execution site, that would have aroused or allowed any belief but that they should simply be deported, and that they therefore would not have reckoned on their execution as the worst possible eventuality... Therefore, Fischer's acts exhibit neither in their motives nor in their execution the reprehensible characteristics which distinguish a deliberate and illegal killing as murder (in accordance with 211 para. 3 of the Penal Code).

- Judgment in the Trial of Fischer et. Al., 13 May 1964³³⁵

After an eight day trial in April and May 1964, the district court in Düsseldorf

dropped all charges against Fritz Fischer due to the above findings, which brought into play

³³⁴ Sam Keen, *Faces of the Enemy : Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

³³⁵ "Court Judgment in Trial of Fischer Et. Al," Bl. 504-05. [Es fehlt insbesondere jeglicher Anhaltspunkt für die Annahme dass in ihnen irgendwann vor oder bei ihrem Abtransport zur Erschießungstätte, die Meinung hervorgerufen oder gewährt worden wäre, sie sollten lediglich aus dem Ort abgeschoben werden, und dass sie deshalb nicht mit ihrer Erschießung zumindest als dem schlimmsten der als möglich erachteten Eventualfälle gerechnet hätten... Mithin weist die Tat des Angeklagten **Fischer** weder nach ihren Beweggründen noch nach ihrer Ausführung die besonderes verwerflichen Merkmale auf, die nach 211 Abs.3.StGB eine vorsätzlich und rechtswidrige Tötung als Mord kennzeichnen.]

the fifteen-year statute of limitations on any “non-heinous” crimes committed under the Nazis. The court found that because Fritz Puls acted “as a subordinate in the execution of orders and did not exceed his instructions, he could only be punished if he could have been expected to know that the order of his superior Fischer directed a civilian or military crime or offense.”³³⁶ He was acquitted. Despite extensive testimony to the contrary, the jury failed to accept that the victims were Jews, that they had been killed *because* they were Jews, or that they had been killed in a particularly gruesome manner.

In order to understand the “logic” behind the Fischer ruling, a discussion of West German law at the time is a useful digression.³³⁷ As the former director of the Central Office for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes, Adelbert Rückerl observed, “there was a general political climate in the 1950s that viewed the “war criminals” problem as a thing of the past, an unfortunate legacy of the occupation period best left behind.”³³⁸ Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was certainly part of the problem in this regard. His “continued focus on the future and more immediate concerns...made him a unifying force in an extremely fractured state with a “fragile popular psyche.””³³⁹ In essence, he sought to put the crimes of the past behind Germany, by punishing a small but highly visible few. The legal authorities sought to do likewise. When the Allies relinquished control of the West German courts, the German

³³⁶ Ibid., Bl. 509. [*Da der Angeklagte Puls somit als gehorchender Untergebener in Ausführung eines Befehls in Dienstsachen gehandelt, und den ihm erteilten Befehl nicht überschritten hat, wäre er nach 47 Abs.II des Militärstrafgesetzbuches nur zu bestrafen, wenn ihm bekannt gewesen wäre, dass der Befehl seines Vorgesetzten Fischer eine Handlung betraf, welche eine bürgerliches oder militärisches Verbrechen oder Vergehen bezweckte.*]

³³⁷ For three excellent discussions on the problems and limitations of German judicial attempts at accountability for the crimes of the Third Reich, see Wittmann, *Beyond Justice : The Auschwitz Trial*, 47-48, Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963-1965 : Genocide, History, and the Limits of the Law*, Adalbert Rückerl, *The Investigation of Nazi Crimes, 1945-1978 : A Documentation* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1980).

³³⁸ Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963-1965 : Genocide, History, and the Limits of the Law*, 15.

³³⁹ Wittmann, *Beyond Justice : The Auschwitz Trial*, 27.

judiciary banned any retroactive prosecution of crimes that fell under the new category of genocide, making only future crimes punishable under this statute. In addition, while extending the statute of limitations on murder, the German legislature kept in place the fifteen year statute of limitations on manslaughter, meaning that no crimes of this category could be prosecuted after 1960. Finally, two of the elements required to convict someone of murder drastically reduced chances for conviction while providing ample pretexts for acquittal.

First, an actual crime must have been committed. Central to this idea is the subjective category of intent, defined as the “knowledge that the behavior will have a particular result and the desire or will that this result should come about.”³⁴⁰ One of three key concepts regarding this element must be present to meet its burden of proof: base motives, treacherous action, or cruelty. Such categories did more to provide defenses with loopholes for exoneration than they provided arguments for prosecutors. Secondly, the act must be unlawful and the perpetrator must *know* that it was unlawful. An act that would have been legal at the time would be much more difficult to punish. Individual initiative was the deciding factor between a charge of murder and that of aiding and abetting. For example, as Rebecca Wittmann succinctly shows,

...although the “order defense” could not be used on its own, as the Nazi state had been ruled illegal, its organizations criminal, and its orders therefore invalid, this defense could still be used to demonstrate that the defendant had not carried out individual acts of cruelty (to make the cruelty clause of paragraph 211 inapplicable), had not demonstrated personal anti-Semitism (to make the base motives clause inapplicable), and had not acted on individual will (to make perpetration inapplicable, although aiding and abetting might be.)³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 37.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 47-48.

Thus, the legal code itself, as well as a German desire to forget the past, especially the smaller crimes that were perpetrated by a much larger group of soldiers, provided Fischer and Puls an alibi and an almost ready-made defense. If those killed at Peregruznoje were not civilians, let alone Jews, Fischer and Puls could not have had base motives. Because they did not “know” they were going to be killed, they were killed neither treacherously nor cruelly. And because Sergeant Puls could not have known it was illegal to kill suspected partisans, he was not guilty of a crime.

As the World War II generation slowly fades, it may become easier to expose this last “uncomfortable” truth, that of the “normal” soldier who, for a variety of reasons, participated in atrocities. Indeed, these actions may provide us the greatest insight into the Nazi perpetrator who participated in “crimes of opportunity,” that is, atrocities that were somewhat spontaneous or not within the scope of his wartime mission.

An analysis of military propaganda materials and letters indicates that, in many soldiers, mental ground had been prepared that would ease the transition into criminal acts. First and foremost, fear, disdain, and even hatred of all things Russian *and* Soviet were cultivated amongst the rank and file. It is this prejudice that created the primary foundation for atrocities, even anti-Semitic ones. The German soldier was taught that his enemy was bestial, conniving, subhuman, and bent on wreaking terrible violence against the German homeland. These propaganda messages were echoed and reinforced by the common experience of soldiers on the Eastern Front. German soldiers battled the harsh environment, observed what they saw as the backward and subhuman inhabitants and way of life in the East, and participated in the bloody, difficult anti-partisan war.

Admittedly, much of this work is based upon a case study of one unit's experience. In their discussion of the value of the case study, several social scientists write that "the qualitative research exemplified in the case study usually brings us closer to real human beings and everyday life. Rather than assuming a world of simplicity and uniformity, those who adopt the qualitative approach generally picture a world of complexity and plurality."³⁴² It is this complex world that we see in the experience of 4th Company in 1941-42. This environment bears further investigation. It reveals that units involved in atrocities likely are not as homogeneous as many historians have assumed. Indeed, it appears that soldiers navigated a complicated maze of personal connections, cliques, orders, and senior-subordinate relationships. Yet we also see that even within this web, some soldiers *were* able to chart a course toward various forms of non-participation if they so chose.

On the other hand, the example of 4th Company demonstrates (as others have) that only a few dedicated men or volunteers are necessary to carry out significant atrocities. A relatively small number of the soldiers in the unit ever actively engaged in killing, though more were likely involved in any number of supporting actions. 4th Company also demonstrates conclusively the power and importance of leadership in the commission of atrocities. A signal company would probably have never killed 30-40 men, women, and children without direction from above. Fischer's anti-Semitism and rash behavior was certainly a driving force behind 4th Company's crimes. Without Fischer's leadership, the unit's killing would have been limited to executing suspected partisans, if that.

Further research is required to understand the response to atrocities at the unit level. One of the challenges to this is first finding as many conventional units as possible with

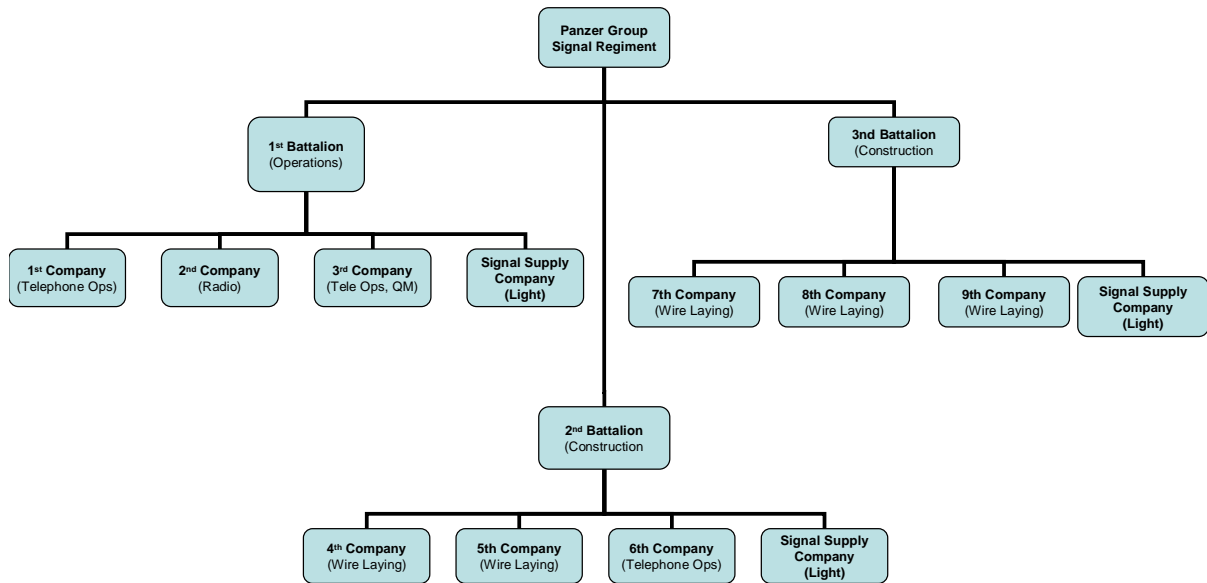
³⁴² Joe R. Feagin, Anthony M. Orum, and Gideon Sjoborg, *A Case for the Case Study* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 23.

documentation of their crimes. Thousands of crimes, such as the partisan executions described here, likely passed without notice or record by the more “conventional” units on the Eastern Front. Secondly, reliance on interrogation transcripts limits the researcher’s ability to plum the depths of the German soldier psyche. The ideal situation would be a collection of letters from a unit investigated for war crimes. However, in the absence of this, further investigation of conventional units that conducted atrocities as well as of letters will expand, illuminate, or even challenge some of the conclusions reached in this study.

What the case of 4th Company shows us is that ideology and social pressures are symbiotic. True believers and fanatics such as Fischer can drive atrocities, even when in the minority. However, it is the presence of a majority of indifferent followers that truly makes atrocities possible. 4th Company also demonstrates that in the National Socialist military universe neither a specific killing mission nor intensive indoctrination was required for the commission of mass murder. One sees the how the pressures and fears of the partisan war was used as a justification for racial killing. It is likely that the different categories of response to atrocities exist in many German military units. Further research is required to confirm such a hypothesis, but in this case, at least, examining the inter-workings of one such unit at the lowest level has revealed how *Wehrmacht* soldiers responded to participation in atrocities against both civilians and Jews.

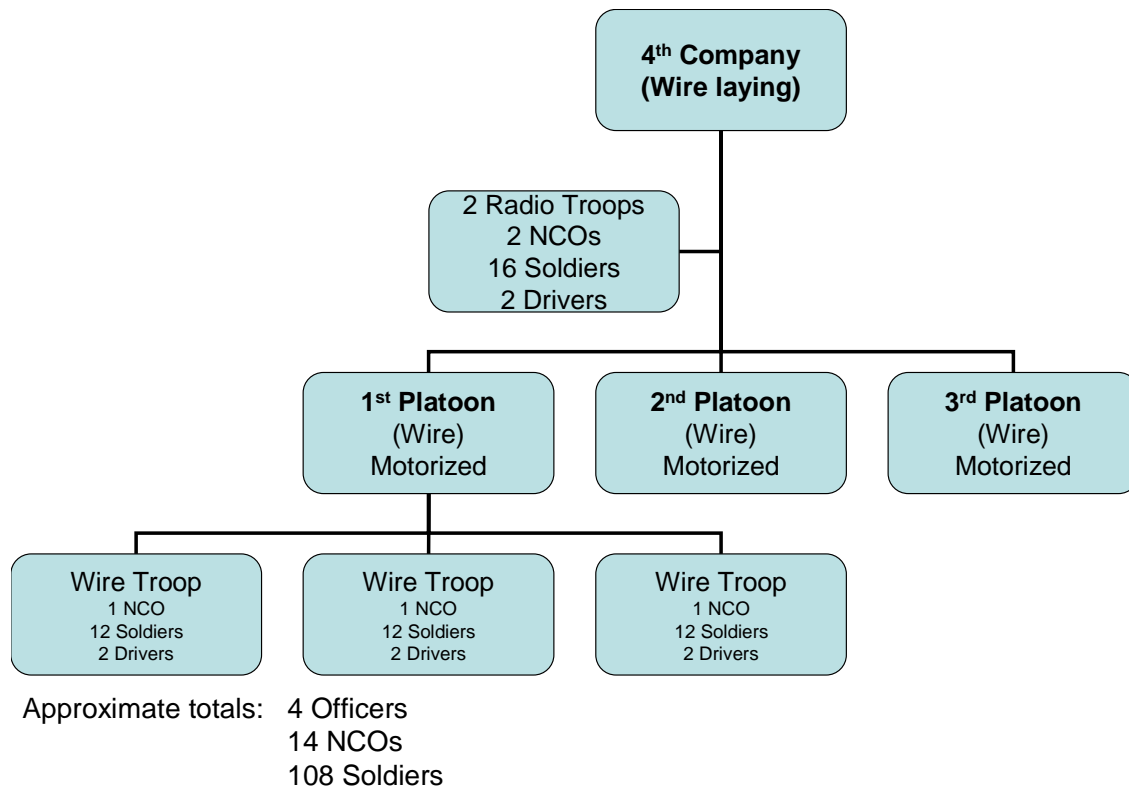
Appendix 1: Organization of a Panzer Signal Regiment³⁴³

As of 6-22-1941



³⁴³ Kampe, *Die Heeres-Nachrichtentruppe der Wehrmacht, 1935-1945*, 114.

Appendix 2: Organization of a Wire-laying Company (FFK- Feld Fern Kabelkompanie)³⁴⁴



³⁴⁴ Ibid., 56, 114.

Appendix 3: 4th Company Biographical Information

Avg Age
(1942)

26.5
Avg Age
Interr.

46.5

Last	First	DOB	Position	Rank	Age at time	Interview Date	Age at Int
Baumann	Wolfgang	9/28/1920			22	2/1/1962	42
Bärmann	Herbert	9/20/1910	Soldier		32	2/1/1962	52
Bossmann	Heinrich	5/12/1911	First Sergeant	1SG	31	8/29/1961	50
Danner	Wilhelm	1/1/1922	Soldier	Obgefr	20	11/16/1962	40
Dirkes	Heinrich	1/10/1914	Soldier		28	9/27/1961	47
Epprick	Walter	4/14/1914	Command Driver Maint. Tech SGT	Tech SGT	28	8/15/1961	47
Eck	Harald	3/5/1920	Driver		22	2/21/1962	42
Franken	Erich	1/1/1921	Medic	Obgefr	21	2/14/1963	42
Fischer	Fritz	7/3/1915	Company CDR	Oblt CPT	27	5/10/1962	47
Grackel	Bernhard	8/22/1915	Soldier		27	7/21/1961	46
Gasscher	Heinrich	8/21/1914			28		
Garner	Erwin	1/1/1916			26	6/9/1963	47
Hartmann	Hans	12/16/1915	Platoon Leader	LT	27	2/15/1962	47
Hahn	Clemens	7/19/1918			24	1/9/1962	44
Hessler	Max	12/17/1911	Soldier		31	4/12/1963	52
Halter	Johann	1/30/1911			31	2/15/1962	51
Huber	Justus	2/23/1915	Gruppenfuhrer	Sgt	27	9/11/1961	46
Hillermann	Heinz	1/1/1916	Platoon Leader	LT	26	3/21/1962	46
Köther	Hans-Jürgen					7/20/1962	62
Klein	Heinrich	1/28/1912	Fernsprecher		30	2/16/1962	50
Kürten	Wilhelm	8/12/1915	Driver		27	2/6/1962	47
Kürten	Paul	10/29/1915	Soldier		27	11/15/1961	46
Lohner	Heinrich	4/14/1915	Driver		27	8/16/1961	46
Lange	Kurt	9/15/1917		NCO	25	3/23/1962	45
Lehmann	Gunther	4/22/1916	Admin SGT	SGT	26	8/29/1961	45
Maier	Wilhelm	11/25/1920	Driver		22	4/11/1962	42
Moller	Georg	11/28/1915	Driver		27	8/28/1961	46
Nadolny	Gottlieb	1/1/1921		Obgefr	21	2/6/1963	42
Neubauer	Ludwig	10/18/1920	Fernsprecher		22	4/13/1962	42
Ostermann	Karl	2/8/1920	Fernsprecher		22	4/9/1962	42
Oberreuter	Gottfried	6/9/1915	Gruppenfuhrer	NCO	27	10/5/1961	46
Olker	Bernhard	3/8/1914	Soldier		28	10/3/1961	47
Obrikat	Helmut	3/31/1911	Soldier		31	2/20/1962	51
Orlmann	Wilhem	5/10/1912	Soldier		30	2/14/1962	50
Ortlepp	Helmut	1/17/1913	Soldier		29	7/12/1961	48
Pehle	Heinrich	2/24/1916		NCO	26	10/3/1961	45
Puls	Fritz	4/30/1907	Gruppenfuhrer Platoon Leader	Uffz LT	35	5/29/1962	55
Ritter	Wilhelm	7/28/1911	Mess Vehicle Dvr		31	5/11/1962	51

Last	First	DOB	Position	Rank	Age at time	Interview Date	Age at Int
Rothe	Karl	5/1/1913	Soldier		29	9/6/1961	48
Scherer	Franz	1/1/1916	Platoon Leader	LT	26	3/23/1962	46
Seiler	Heinrich	1/1/1919			23	12/21/1962	43
Schwalm	Johannes	3/31/1916	Tele. Const. Soldier		26	8/17/1961	45
Trubel	Rudolf	9/27/1916	Tele SGT Mess officer	Tech SGT	26	8/16/1961	45
Unger	Walter	8/3/1915	Kradmelder		27	4/13/1962	47
van Lindt	Heinz	7/14/1920	Driver		22	2/5/1962	42
Wiegand	Karl	5/4/1916	Soldier		26	9/7/1961	45
Wielert	Wilhelm	6/12/1916	Soldier		26	9/7/1961	45
Wechsler	Johannes	11/23/1917	Soldier	Obgefr	25	4/13/1962	45

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