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The Legend of the Wehrmacht's "Clean Hands": The Attempt to Remove Nazism from the German Military

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The Legend of the Wehrmacht's "Clean Hands": The Attempt to Remove Nazism from the German Military

Abstract

The legend of the Wehrmacht's "clean hands" was created with the Himmerdoer Memorandum of 1950 and sought to disassociate the German military with its Nazi past. The legend gained popularity in the minds of the German people and successfully led to Germany's rearmament after World War Two. Beginning in 1990, the legend was destroyed as the actions of the Wehrmacht during World War Two created a different picture than that of the legend. The Wehrmacht's hands were far from "clean" and instead were very dirty.

Keywords

Wehrmacht, "Clean hands", Post World War Two Germany, War Crimes

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Comments

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The Legend of the Wehrmacht's "Clean Hands": The Attempt to Remove Nazism from the German Military

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Abstract: The legend of the Wehrmacht's "clean hands" was created with the Himmerdoer Memorandum of 1950 and sought to disassociate the German military with its Nazi past. The legend gained popularity in the minds of the German people and successfully led to Germany's rearmament after World War Two. Beginning in 1990, the legend was destroyed as the actions of the Wehrmacht during World War Two created a different picture than that of the legend. The Wehrmacht's hands were far from "clean" and instead were very dirty.

Immediately following the conclusion of World War Two, Germany sought to rid itself of Nazism, looking towards the West for a new foundation with which to build the new German state. After the end of the war, Germany was demilitarized and divided into four occupation zones under the control of the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. In 1949, the four occupation zones were recreated into two states, a West German state made up of the American, British, and French occupation zones called the Federal Republic of Germany and an East German state made up of the Soviet Union occupation zone called the German Democratic Republic.¹ The German military, one of the key symbols of German identity since the founding of the modern German state by Bismarck in 1871, underwent a major overhaul to rid itself of the Nazi past and undergo remilitarization. The Wehrmacht, the name for the German army during the Nazi regime, was disbanded after the war, but the Germany military still retained its legacy. The Wehrmacht, being a Nazi institution, was associated with the war crimes of the Nazi regime. Seeking to distance themselves from war crimes, the creators of the new German army, the Bundeswehr, reimagined the Wehrmacht not as criminals, but as honorable soldiers doing their duty, a view that was needed if Germany was to successfully rearm itself. From the disassociation of the Wehrmacht with Nazi war crimes came the legend of the Wehrmacht's "clean hands," making the Wehrmacht innocent of all Nazi war crimes. The legend of the Wehrmacht's "clean hands" was successful in that it remilitarized the West German state and restored the honor associated with the German military, but the actions conducted by the Wehrmacht during World War Two were far from honorable and made the Wehrmacht's hands dirty.

¹ Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918-2008: The Divided Nation*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 139-140.

The driving force behind the creation of the “clean hands” legend was a document called the Himmeroder Memorandum of 1950. The opening and conclusion of this memorandum “took up the war criminal issue; along with a ‘rehabilitation of German soldiers through a declaration of governmental representatives of the Western powers.’”² Written by a group of former Wehrmacht officers, the document sought to revive the German military and “demanded that the men who had been convicted as war criminals be released ‘if they had acted only on orders and were not guilty of any offense under the old German laws.’”³ According to the memorandum, soldiers fighting in the Wehrmacht were following orders, as honorable soldiers do in the military, and not purposefully acting according to Nazi racial ideology. To further aid in distancing the military from the Nazi past, the creators of the legend persuaded General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to publicly declare the rehabilitation of the Wehrmacht soldiers. Previously, Eisenhower had spoken out against the Wehrmacht and “identified it with National Socialism.”⁴ A stop in Germany on Eisenhower’s planned trip to Europe in January, 1951 created the opportunity the writers of the Himmeroder Memorandum needed to reverse Eisenhower’s views on the Wehrmacht. Former Wehrmacht generals Hans Speidel and Adolf Heusinger, two of the writers of the Himmeroder Memorandum, met with Eisenhower and “persuaded him to sign a document they had prepared, in which he declared that his earlier assessment of the Wehrmacht had been an error.”⁵ This gave legitimacy to the legend of the Wehrmacht’s clean hands as the former Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe publicly restored the honor of the Wehrmacht. Before boarding his return flight

² Norbert Frei, *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, trans. Joel Golb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002): 148.

³ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006): 237.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

in Frankfurt, Eisenhower told reporters his opinion that the actions of a few individuals who committed war crimes did not affect the honor of all German soldiers and officers. Eisenhower also declared that he “had become convinced that a real difference existed between German soldiers and officers as such and Hitler and his criminal gang.”⁶ Like Eisenhower, the new Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Chancellor Adenauer, restored the honor of Wehrmacht soldiers. Chancellor Adenauer, in his statement, “officially restored the honor of those soldiers ‘who had not been guilty of any offense.’”⁷ Successfully distanced from the Nazi war crimes, the honor of the Wehrmacht was restored through the Himmeroder Memorandum and the following public declarations by key leaders. Through these actions, rearmament was now possible as the military was no longer a haven for war criminals, but a professional organization of honorable men.

Historians have recently called into question the legitimacy of the Wehrmacht’s “clean hands” legend. The opening of an exhibit in Karlsruhe on January 10, 1997 titled “Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944” confronted the idea of the Wehrmacht’s “clean hands” by associating the Wehrmacht with the war crimes of the Nazi regime.⁸ The legend of the Wehrmacht’s “clean hands” had already been entrenched in German society and the exhibit was met with much criticism from the German public as Hannes Herr and Jane Caplan explain in their article “The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition ‘War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944.’” After this exhibit first appeared, numerous historians began to write about the war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht during World War Two. Most

⁶ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006): 237.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Hannes Herr and Jane Caplan, “The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition ‘War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944,’” *History Workshop Journal* 46 (Autumn 1998): 187, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4289586>.

of the publications on the subject were published in the late 1990s through 2013, with the earliest being published in 1992. The writers of the Himmeroder Memorandum successfully convinced the German public and much of the Western World of the “cleanliness” of the Wehrmacht. The public believed the Wehrmacht to be honorable and disassociated it with the war crimes committed by the Nazi regime. For almost half a century, no one thought twice about the innocence of the Wehrmacht. Through this deception, Germany was able to rearm itself after World War Two and move the military away from its Nazi past. In reality, however, the Nazi past was only hidden, waiting to reappear.

The entire purpose of the “clean hands” legend was to deceive and portray the military as not an extension of Nazism, but an organization that was following orders and largely untouched by Nazi racial ideology to make rearmament possible as the military was not full of war criminals. After the war, numerous trials were held to convict members of the Nazi regime and the Wehrmacht of war crimes. During these trials, many of the Wehrmacht generals relied on catastrophe orders, orders that came from directly from Hitler, Himmler, or Keitel, as justification for their actions. The generals and military witnesses called during the trials claimed that the catastrophe orders had been legal, however, “and the reliance on these orders by generals as part of their defense, cast doubts on the claims made by the General Officer Corps that the Wehrmacht had been resistant to National Socialist ideology.”⁹ The claims to the legality of the catastrophe orders undermined the notion that the Wehrmacht was innocent of Nazi crimes. If these orders were illegal and still carried out of fear of repercussions from Hitler, Himmler, or Keitel, then the notion that the Wehrmacht was doing their duty would have been upheld.

⁹ Alaric Searle, "Revising the 'Myth' of a 'Clean Wehrmacht': Generals' Trials, Public Opinion, and The Dynamics of Vergangenheitsbewältigung in West Germany, 1948–60," *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 25, no. 2 (November 2003): 25, June 24, 2009, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://usir.salford.ac.uk/id/eprint/2140>.

Carrying out an order from a superior, even if one disagrees with it, is doing one's duty. Many of these catastrophe orders were directly or indirectly related to the mass murders carried out by the Nazi regime. With the generals defending the legality of such orders, it called into question the political affiliation of the Wehrmacht as a whole. The legend portrayed the Wehrmacht as an apolitical organization, but surveys done by the Psychological Warfare Division in the Allied High Command in Europe in 1944 showed that "more than half of all debriefed prisoners of war regularly came out in favour of Hitler."¹⁰ The Wehrmacht was far from an apolitical organization. With more than half of the POWs surveyed being in favor of Hitler, then they supported not only Hitler the man, but also his ideas and practices including in 1944 the mass exterminations of Jewish and other undesirable populations.

The Western Front, with the majority of the fighting occurring in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, did not escape the mass exterminations carried out by the Nazi regime. The Eastern Front is notorious for mass murders and the bulk of Nazi war crimes were committed in this theater of war, but the Western Front experienced instances of mass exterminations. Unlike on the Eastern Front, the "the German leadership recognized the Geneva Convention in its war against the western powers. The German Army Command had even circulated the text of this treaty to all of its units in 1939."¹¹ Despite all units of the Wehrmacht having access to the guidelines of the Geneva Convention, the Wehrmacht carried out executions of black soldiers from the French Army. When captured by the Germans, the black soldiers were often separated from the whites and were subjected to harsh treatment. "On many occasions, black prisoners

¹⁰ Felix Römer, "Milieus in the Military: Soldierly Ethos, Nationalism and Conformism Among Workers in the Wehrmacht," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 1 (January 2013): 131, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23488339>.

¹¹ Raffael Scheck, "The Killing of Black Soldiers from the French Army by the "Wehrmacht" in 1940: The Question of Authorization," *German Studies Review* 28, no. 3 (October 2005): 596, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30038233>.

were shot-sometimes up to one hundred at one time.”¹² This was a clear violation of the Geneva Convention. Not only was the Geneva Convention violated by the Wehrmacht, but the ideas of Nazi racial ideology and the inferiority of the other races were expressed in these killings of black prisoners of war. The Wehrmacht became entangled in Nazi racial ideology and with it, the Holocaust. The Netherlands’s Jewish population did not escape the evils of deportation to concentration camps. The public and Dutch Nazis actively aided in the deportation of Jews from the Netherlands and “the Wehrmacht provided behind-the-scenes assistance by apprehending those remaining Jews who had been able to evade these initial efforts.”¹³ The Wehrmacht attempted to isolate itself from Nazi ideology and remain an apolitical organization, but pressures from the regime and the local civilian support of the Nazi movement “linked the military with the persecution of the Dutch Jews”¹⁴ by aiding in the round up and deportation of the Jewish population of the Netherlands. The Wehrmacht was far from keeping their hands clean on the Western Front and put the Nazi’s racial ideology into practice on the ground.

The Wehrmacht soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front, with the majority of the fighting taking place in Poland and Russia, got their hands much dirtier than their counterparts on the Western Front, carrying out numerous and frequent mass murders. The war on the Eastern Front became a “war of systematic annihilation for Germany. Jews and Russian political partisans became the targets of German military personnel and were killed or forced into labor camps.”¹⁵ While it is true that the Schutzstaffel, or more commonly known as the SS, and special mobile

¹² Raffael Scheck, "The Killing of Black Soldiers from the French Army by the "Wehrmacht" in 1940: The Question of Authorization," *German Studies Review* 28, no. 3 (October 2005): 595, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30038233>.

¹³ Jennifer L. Foray, "The 'Clean Wehrmacht' in the German-occupied Netherlands, 1940-5," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 4 (October 2010): 781, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25764581>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 780.

¹⁵ Zackary Biro, "A New Direction of War: The Ethnic War Waged by the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe," *Lehigh Review* 18 (2010): 24, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-18>.

killing units called Einsatzgruppen carried out a lot of the killings on the Eastern Front, they were not the only ones who pulled the triggers that killed millions. As evidence from Christopher Browning's book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, no one was able to escape carrying out the mass exterminations in the east. The Wehrmacht was no exception. The killings of Jews and partisans in Russia amounted to millions of people being shot or executed in extermination camps set up in occupied territory. As the war on the Eastern Front looked more similar to World War One than to the Blitzkriegs conducted in Poland and France, soldiers on the frontlines became demoralized. To keep order and discipline within the ranks, the higher command echelon of the Wehrmacht gave the troops on the frontlines "license to vent their anger and frustration on the enemy's soldiers and civilians."¹⁶ The demodernization of the Eastern Front caused soldiers to become more brutal and "more receptive to ideological indoctrination and more willing to implement the policies it advocated."¹⁷ Members of 3rd Company, 691st Infantry Regiment were stationed on the Eastern Front in 1941 and carried out the killing of at least 150 Jewish men, women, and children in a day.¹⁸ The killings were the result of an anti-partisan conference at the headquarters for Army Group Center at Mogilev where two officers from the battalion 3rd company was a part of came back to report "where there is a Jew, there is a partisan."¹⁹ The anti-partisan war evolved into carrying out the mass extermination of the Jewish population on the Eastern Front in accordance to Nazi racial ideology. Soldiers in the Wehrmacht became fully indoctrinated with Nazi racial ideology and implemented the policies it advocated. From the conference at Mogilev, soldiers had the license

¹⁶ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992): 28.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Waitman W. Beorn, "A Calculus of Complicity: The "Wehrmacht", the Anti-Partisan War, and the Final Solution in White Russia, 1941-42," *Central European History* 44, no. 2 (June 2011): 308, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41238433>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

to kill without orders and were given direct orders to participate in the genocidal actions of the Nazi regime. The Wehrmacht transformed into a “prime player in acts of genocide.”²⁰

Despite achieving the success of rearmament, the legend of the Wehrmacht’s “clean hands” held no merit. The Himmeroder Memorandum and subsequent public declarations of the Wehrmacht’s honor by key leaders successfully moved the German military away from its Nazi past into a more favorable view, one innocent of war crimes. For almost half a century, the view of the “cleanliness” of the Wehrmacht dominated the minds of German citizens and the Western powers. Starting in the 1990s, the legend would be destroyed. Evidence from World War Two and the subsequent trials of Wehrmacht generals undermined the notion of the Wehrmacht having “clean hands.” Generals defended the legality of catastrophe orders calling into question the political allegiances of the organization as whole. On both the Western and Eastern Fronts, the Wehrmacht was linked to participating in genocidal actions in alignment with Nazi racial ideology. Soldiers executed black soldiers captured from the French Army, despite having access to a copy of the Geneva Convention treaty, and aided in the deportation of Jews from the Netherlands. In the East, soldiers were given free reign to vent their anger and frustration on the civilian populations and participated in the mass exterminations of Jewish populations in occupied territory. The Wehrmacht’s hands were far from clean. The German military had long been an important symbol to the German people. The legend of the Wehrmacht’s “clean hands” attempted to maintain the honorable view of the military, but the actions conducted by the Wehrmacht during World War Two were by no means honorable as they knowingly violated the Geneva Convention and actively participated in the mass exterminations of millions of Jews and civilians throughout Europe.

²⁰ Zackary Biro, "A New Direction of War: The Ethnic War Waged by the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe," *Lehigh Review* 18 (2010): 24, accessed November 19, 2017, <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-18>.

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