



Spring 2021

Clash of Totalitarian Titans: Nazi Germany, The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Racial and Ideological War of Annihilation on the Eastern Front

John M. Zak
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship



Part of the [European History Commons](#), [Military History Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Recommended Citation

Zak, John M., "Clash of Totalitarian Titans: Nazi Germany, The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Racial and Ideological War of Annihilation on the Eastern Front" (2021). *Student Publications*. 918. https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/918

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/918

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Clash of Totalitarian Titans: Nazi Germany, The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the Racial and Ideological War of Annihilation on the Eastern Front

Abstract

The eastern front in the Second World War was one of unparalleled ferocity and brutality unseen on any other front during civilization's largest and most destructive war. This work contends that in order to understand how the eastern front was such can only be understood through the lens of Nazi ideology and its long-term goals for Lebensraum and the Greater Germany it sought to secure. The role of Nazi racial ideology and its belief in the inherent racial inferiority of the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, along with totalitarian ideology viewing Soviet Communism as Nazism's chief totalitarian rival are crucial factors that explain the distinctly brutal characteristics of the eastern front. How these factors translated into Nazi policies and conduct on the eastern front must also be analyzed with the contextualization of understanding Nazi racial and totalitarian ideology. Specific themes such as the treatment of civilians, Soviet and Polish POWs, the Holocaust, indoctrination of individual soldiers in Nazi ideology, and sexual violence as a weapon of war will be analyzed to offer a better understanding of the eastern front in the Second World War. Its distinct brutality can only be explained by Nazi ideology and attitudes toward the Eastern European and Soviet regions.

Keywords

Eastern Front, Nazi Germany, Lebensraum, Holocaust, Totalitarianism, Wehrmacht, Soviet POWs

Disciplines

European History | Military History | Race and Ethnicity

Comments

Written for HIST 418: Senior Research Seminar on Nazism

Clash of Totalitarian Titans: Nazi Germany, The Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the
Racial and Ideological War of Annihilation on the Eastern Front

John Zak

The eastern front in the Second World War was one of unparalleled ferocity and brutality unseen on any other front during civilization's largest and most destructive war. This work contends that in order to understand how the eastern front was such can only be understood through the lens of Nazi ideology and its long-term goals for Lebensraum and the Greater Germany it sought to secure. The role of Nazi racial ideology and its belief in the inherent racial inferiority of the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, along with totalitarian ideology viewing Soviet Communism as Nazism's chief totalitarian rival are crucial factors that explain the distinctly brutal characteristics of the eastern front. How these factors translated into Nazi policies and conduct on the eastern front must also be analyzed with the contextualization of understanding Nazi racial and totalitarian ideology. Specific themes such as the treatment of civilians, Soviet and Polish POWs, the Holocaust, indoctrination of individual soldiers in Nazi ideology, and sexual violence as a weapon of war will be analyzed to offer a better understanding of the eastern front in the Second World War. Its distinct brutality can only be explained by Nazi ideology and attitudes toward the Eastern European and Soviet regions.

Professor Bowman

History 418

May 14, 2021

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the honor code.

1

The eastern front in the Second World War in Europe was unparalleled in its immense destruction and mutual detestation between both sides. Not only did a majority of the German military, the Wehrmacht, serve on the eastern front at some point during the war but the vast majority of German casualties occurred on that front. The eastern front neglected to distinguish enemy combatants from civilians, as this was meant to be a war of peoples and civilizations rather than armies. These factors contributed to the eastern front's distinct destruction and ferocity. Extensive scholarship has been published on the issue of the eastern front, seeking to explain its brutality. Examination of scholarship offers an opportunity to gain a more complete understanding not only about the eastern front but explanations for its distinct nature. Scholarship on the issue of the eastern front attests to the notion it was a different conflict than other fronts in Europe.

John Connelly has written extensively about Nazi racial ideology and the significant role it played in the unfolding of events on the eastern front. Connelly argues that the eastern front was distinct because it was a racial conflict. The Slavic peoples of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were viewed as racially inferior and thus expendable by the Nazi regime. The Soviets and Poles were placed at the bottom of the Nazis racial hierarchy and regarded as better than Jews only in the sense that they were worth keeping alive to work as slave laborers for the Third Reich.¹ Understanding the racial nature of the conflict on the eastern front Connelly argues is critical to contextualizing the atrocities and intensity of the conflict. Racial ideology was a central tenet of Nazism and the Slavs were viewed as racial enemies of the Reich, both

¹ John Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racist Practice," *Central European History* 32, no. 1 (1999): 1–33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4546842>

civilian and military alike. Connelly's argument is important because it explains the immense devastation and suffering of East European and Soviet citizens under German occupation. This is because Nazi racial ideology discouraged soldiers in the Wehrmacht from making such a distinction between civilians and enemy combatants, as the Slavs were regarded as an enemy race.

The Nazis also sought to enslave the Slavic peoples over time, once the Greater Germany Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were meant to offer the Third Reich once secured. The Nazis hoped over time to colonize the region through German settlements, where the local population would be utilized as slave laborers to ensure the prosperity of Nazi Germany.² Such a ghastly vision attests to the brutality of the Nazis, but as Connelly makes clear marks a distinct characteristic of the eastern front. This was a racial war where the Wehrmacht and the Nazi regime it served thought of their enemy as sub-human and explains the widespread atrocities that occurred on the eastern front as a matter of policy for the Nazi regime. These policies reflected their racial ideology and attitudes towards the Slavs of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Connelly's analysis of this ideology supports the notion that the eastern front was distinct in its brutality and explains the draconian nature of German conduct in the east that was not seen on other European fronts.

Gesine Gerhard emphasizes the importance of Nazi ideology and how it influenced the prosecution of the German war effort in the east. The belief in Lebensraum or living space was a central component of Nazi ideology. (Appendix 4) This is significant to understanding the nature of German conduct on the eastern front as Lebensraum in Nazi ideology was meant to consist of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union west of the Ural Mountains. Once the Nazis conquered these regions, the slave labor of the Slavic inhabitants would be utilized in order to

² Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs," 21.

ruthlessly exploit the agrarian and economic resources of what would become a Greater Germany. This in Nazi ideology was believed imperative to the survival of the German race, its self-sufficiency, and hegemony in Europe.³ Gerhard contends that economic considerations coincided with Nazi foreign policy as the regime believed the conquest, colonization, and ruthless exploitation of agrarian, economic, and human resources of the East European and Soviet regions were necessary to ensure the national and economic security of the Third Reich.

This desire for ruthlessly efficient exploitation of the East European and Soviet regions' resources was reflected in Nazi plans for the region once German control was consolidated. The exploitation of food resources by the Nazi regime was deliberately meant to cause mass starvation on an astonishing scale amongst the civilian populations of these regions. This exploitation of food resources consistent with the logic of Lebensraum became more intensified as the German military situation deteriorated and soldiers were encouraged to live off the land with impunity.⁴ Widespread theft of livestock, food, winter clothing, and anything of military or human value for the Wehrmacht on the eastern front were systematically confiscated from the civilian population. This caused widespread starvation for civilians living under German occupation in the process, whom the Nazis coldly labeled as their racial inferiors "useless eaters."⁵ Gerhard argues the eastern front was distinct in Europe because it was an integral economic component of the Nazi regime that relied on the murderous exploitation of economic, agrarian, and human resources of the East European and Soviet regions to gain economic autarky. Through such autarky the Nazis believed they could achieve an impenetrable European empire with infinite riches.⁶

Gerhard's argument also underscores the distinct nature of the eastern front as no such

³ Gesine Gerhard, "Food and Genocide: Nazi Agrarian Politics in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union," *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 1 (2009): 45–65. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40542587>

⁴ *Ibid.*, 58-60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 64-65.

comprehensive plan for deliberate starvation nor the mass enslavement of an entire race in the Slavs was ever envisioned nor implemented in other areas of Europe occupied by Nazi Germany. The reason for this Gerhard asserts is that the eastern front was an ideological struggle and for the Nazis an attempt to ensure the survival and prosperity of the German race through the incorporation of Lebensraum into a Greater Germany. Lebensraum meant subjugating a people the Nazis deemed racially inferior in the Slavs of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Omer Bartov focuses on the ideological indoctrination of the Wehrmacht on the eastern front and how it translated into its viscous conduct. Bartov argues that the Wehrmacht was not a passive observer to the crimes of the Nazi regime in the East, but was a direct perpetrator of them in service to the Nazis. The indoctrination of Nazi ideology within the Wehrmacht on the eastern front was critical to motivating German troops on the ground to sustain their morale and sense of purpose on the battlefield. German soldiers were taught to believe they were fighting an ideological struggle against Communism and the protection of German civilization from it.⁷ Bartov also argues that conditions distinct to the eastern front also led to the vulnerability of regular soldiers to embrace Nazi ideology to fight the regime's racial and ideological conflict.

The Nazis relied on Blitzkrieg tactics, the coordination of tanks and aircraft in mechanized warfare designed to utilize speed, in order to win quick victories by rapidly overrunning opponents and avoiding a protracted conflict. Bartov argues that Operation Barbarossa and the invasion of the Soviet Union it launched was the first major failure of Blitzkrieg, as the Germans proved unable to capture the Soviet capital of Moscow by the end of 1941.⁸ This led to a de-modernization of the eastern front where the Wehrmacht over time found themselves

⁷ Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-20.

engaged in a largely defensive, immobile, and protracted conflict. As a result, the Germans soon found themselves overwhelmed by the superior military and economic resources of the Soviet Union.⁹ (Appendix 6) This led to horrid conditions unique to the experience of German soldiers serving in the east that made them more susceptible to indoctrination in Nazi ideology to believe in the war the regime was forcing them to fight. The de-modernized front Bartov asserts also led to devastating losses for the Wehrmacht. In Operation Bagration for example, the Germans suffered two-hundred thousand casualties monthly from July to December of 1944 as the Soviet onslaught swept to the border of Germany.¹⁰ Such astounding losses Bartov argues led to the erosion of common camaraderie that typically existed amongst combat units in warfare. This is because the casualty and replacement rate denied Wehrmacht troops the opportunity to truly form bonds with fellow soldiers that through common experience in war could cement a form of camaraderie between one another. Bartov argues this is significant because it supports the notion that Nazi ideology was the major source of unit cohesion amongst the Wehrmacht on the eastern front. Additionally, it motivated German soldiers in the east to fight to the bitter end as they believed Nazi propaganda that promised German defeat to be synonymous with the destruction of German civilization.¹¹

Bartov's focus on the indoctrination of the Wehrmacht in the east is crucial to understanding the Wehrmacht's conduct in the east. Bartov argues it is clear the Wehrmacht was not divorced from nor unaware of Einsatzgruppen and other SS atrocities, but actively participated in them alongside those elements. This is because the Wehrmacht and its soldiers were deliberately indoctrinated to prosecute the Nazi war of annihilation against its racial and ideological foe in the Soviet Union and broader region of Eastern Europe. Therefore, Bartov's argument is critical to understanding the nature of the conflict that represents another distinct element of the eastern front. The Wehrmacht was made into a vehicle for the Nazi

⁹ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

regime and as a result was actively engaged in the regime's war of annihilation on the eastern front.

In conclusion, scholarship representing core themes of the Eastern Front in the Second World War attests to the distinct nature of its aims and the manner in which it was fought. Although different factors that influenced the conduct and motivation for the war are emphasized in the scholarship, it provides stark evidence of its distinct nature. The inherent racial and ideological nature of the conflict on the eastern front attests to its unique brutality and carnage, which can only be understood through Nazi ideology as this work seeks to argue.

The eastern front in the Second World War was one of the most destructive and bitter conflicts in human history. The clash between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union not only defined the fate of the Second World War in Europe, but defined that of Eastern Europe and Germany for four and a half decades after by its end in 1945. By the time the clash was over, four out of five German war deaths occurred on the eastern front while five point seven million Poles and thirteen point two million Soviet civilians had been killed.¹² Such astounding death rates, especially amongst the civilian population, distinguishes the eastern front as a uniquely heinous conflict. The death rates and destruction of the eastern front however were not a coincidence but a deliberate act that resulted from Nazi policies in the east. Nazi Germany viewed the struggle both as a racial and ideological clash, one meant to ensure the survival of the German race and destroy a totalitarian rival in the Communist Soviet Union. Therefore, the eastern front was distinct in its brutality because it was viewed as both a racial and ideological struggle that reflected Nazi attitudes towards the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. It was a war that Nazi ideology taught was crucial to securing a Greater Germany. One that would ensure the survival of the Third Reich through Lebensraum, subjugation of the

¹² Ian B. Smith, "Savagery on the Eastern Front: Hitler's Policy of Annihilation in Russia," thesis, Department of Government and Justice Studies, Appalachian State University, 2016.
<https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/Smith,%20Ian%20B.%202016.pdf>

Slavic peoples, and extermination of racial groups deemed enemies of the German race by the Nazi regime.

The motivations behind the launch of Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941 that initiated the German invasion of the Soviet Union itself distinguishes the eastern front from other theaters of Europe in the Second World War. Nazi ideology taught that in order for the German race to survive and secure hegemony in Europe, it must incorporate Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union west of the Ural Mountains into a Greater Germany. The agrarian, economic, and human resources of the region the Nazis believed would ensure the self-sufficiency and supremacy of Germany in Europe.¹³ In the process of incorporating this Lebensraum, the Nazis would also have an opportunity to destroy Soviet Communism, Nazism's chief totalitarian rival in Europe. German plans for consolidating this Lebensraum included mass murder and enslavement on an unprecedented scale that underscores the unparalleled nature of the eastern front in the Second World War that reflected Nazi ideology.

The Nazis expected to defeat the Soviets in a matter of months. This reflected Nazi racial ideology that viewed the Slavs of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as inferior and sub-human.¹⁴ As a result of this, the Nazis had distinct plans in the east for their racial enemy. Once German control of the region was established, the General Plan for the East would be implemented. This murderous scheme involved the deliberate starvation of between thirty and forty-five million Slavic inhabitants of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The use of biological warfare in the intentional spread of disease throughout the region was also part of the General Plan of the East.¹⁵ Once this occurred, the Nazis believed that the racial makeup of

¹³ Gerhard, "Food and Genocide," 55-57.

¹⁴ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 23-26.

¹⁵ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: 1939-1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010), 171-172.

the region would be sufficiently diminished to be “Germanized” and in their view “racially purified.” The Nazis also sought to weaponize hunger to pacify resistance to their rule and command the subservience of the civilian population. Following this hunger plan, the region would be colonized by German settlers who would establish their own communities and ruthlessly exploit the economic, agrarian, and human resources of the region to ensure the hegemony and prosperity of the Third Reich.¹⁶ Such murderous long-term goals for the region attests to the distinct nature of the eastern front and how it was an ideological and racial struggle to ensure the survival of the German race in the view of Nazi ideology through acquiring Lebensraum.

The exploitation of the civilian population as slave laborers on behalf of Nazi Germany reflected their racial attitudes towards the Slavs as their inferiors. SS Chief Heinrich Himmler described German plans for the mass enslavement of the Slavic peoples that underscores their ghastly vision for the region and what it would entail for its inhabitants:

The population of the Government General will after a consistent application of these measures in the course of the next 10 years of necessity comprise a permanently inferior population.... This population will be available as a leaderless people of laborers and provide Germany every year with itinerant laborers, and workers for special projects (roads, quarries, building construction). At the same time they will get more to eat and have a better life than they did under Slav rule, and, lacking a culture themselves, it will be their calling under the strict, consistent and just leadership of the German people to contribute to the accomplishment of the latter’s eternal cultural deeds and construction projects; indeed, in terms of the amount of heavy labor this latter will require, it may be they who will make them possible in the first place.¹⁷

Such a statement from Himmler, one of the most powerful Nazi officials and a member of Adolf Hitler’s inner circle attests to the ideological nature of the conflict. Also, how the Slavic peoples were viewed as inferior and thus expendable in consolidating what the Nazis hoped

¹⁶ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 170-175.

¹⁷ Heinrich Himmler, “Himmler’s Memorandum on the Treatment of Alien Peoples in the East,” May 25, 1940. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/giles/barbaros.html>

would become a racial utopia. Such a statement made before the launch of Operation Barbarossa further attests to the ideological nature of the conflict. An upcoming clash with the Soviet Union was inevitable because it was believed necessary in Nazi ideology to ensure the survival and prosperity of the Third Reich in Europe.

The horrors the Nazis envisioned for the East European and Soviet regions following their expected swift victory over the Soviet Union did not end with mass starvation and enslavement of an entire racial group. Following the initial hunger plan, the Nazis planned on exterminating eighty-five percent of Poles, seventy-five percent of Belarusians, sixty-five percent of Ukrainians, and fifty percent of Czechs over time.¹⁸ The conducting of systematic murder on such an incomprehensible scale was another phase in Nazi schemes to consolidate Lebensraum and subjugate the Slavic peoples as their racial enemy. The Nazis also sought to completely disempower the societies of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to ensure no organized leadership for resistance emerged by exterminating the intelligentsia of the region.

Politicians, lawyers, physicians, scientists, military officers, clergy, businessmen, and intellectuals would be systematically exterminated overtime. The Nazis came disturbingly close to achieving this in the case of Poland, where during the occupation from 1939-1944 fifty-seven percent of lawyers, thirty-nine percent of physicians, thirty percent of university professors, and in total thirty-eight percent of Poles with higher education degrees were murdered.¹⁹ Systematic attempts at decapitating East European and Soviet societies through the extermination of these countries' elites is distinct to the eastern front. Such an act also reflected Nazi ideology as they deemed the Slavic peoples unworthy of the vast resources their homelands offered and proved unhesitant in conducting mass murder and enslavement against them to enjoy those regions'

¹⁸ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 160.

¹⁹ Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs," 31.

resources.

The apocalyptic vision the Nazis had for Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is further evidenced in minutes of a meeting of Hitler's inner circle taken by Martin Bormann, Hitler's private secretary and covertly one of the most powerful officials in the Third Reich. Bormann's minutes capture the Nazis long-term goals for the region that included the permanent disempowerment of those regions' societies:

In principle we have now to face the task of cutting up the giant cake according to our needs, in order to be able: first, to dominate it; second, to administer it; and third, to exploit it. The Russians have now given an order for partisan warfare behind our front. This partisan war again has some advantage for us; it enables us to exterminate everyone who opposes us. Never again must it be possible to create a military power west of the Urals, even if we have to wage war for a hundred years in order to attain this goal. All successors of the Führer must know: Security for the Reich exists only if there are no foreign military forces west of the Urals; it is Germany who undertakes the protection of this area against all possible dangers. Our iron principle must be and must remain; *We must never permit anyone but the Germans to carry arms!*²⁰

Notes from such a meeting underscores how the Germans viewed the war in the East both as necessary to the survival of Nazi Germany, but also attests to the ideological nature of the conflict on the eastern front. The ideological component of Lebensraum coupled with racial hatred towards the Slavs encouraged the Nazis to conduct themselves with unmatched brutality that distinguished the eastern front from other theaters in the European war. Ideology trumped rational considerations, as the conduct of the Nazi regime demonstrated in the east.

Such a struggle where no distinction between civilians and enemy combatants would be made, as the resources of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union along with the violent subjugation of its Slavic inhabitants were deemed critical to the survival of Nazi Germany as Nazi ideology taught its followers.

²⁰ Martin Bormann, "Minutes of a Meeting at Adolf Hitler's Headquarters," July 16, 1941. https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1549.

The indoctrination of the Wehrmacht on the eastern front in the Second World War was a major theme of the conflict. In order for regular soldiers to prosecute the Nazi regime's murderous racial and ideological struggle, Nazi ideology was intentionally instilled into the ranks of the Wehrmacht. The Wehrmacht had been gradually Nazified overtime during the 1930s, where soldiers had to swear personal oaths of loyalty to Hitler and through such an act married themselves to the Nazi regime and its policies.²¹ Most German enlisted men had come of age during the 1930s in Germany. The generation of German youth who would play a primary role in the war became socialized in Nazified education curriculums that valued indoctrination over the promotion of intellectual and personal development.²² Soldiers in the Wehrmacht were taught to believe the eastern front was a crusade to protect Germany from the threat of Communism. The war was communicated through Nazi propaganda as a defensive war to protect German civilization from an imminent Soviet attack that represented a broader "Judeo-Bolshevik Conspiracy" to destroy Germany.²³ Such language underscores the ideological nature of the conflict but more importantly how it influenced regular soldiers on the ground in the Soviet Union. This factor of indoctrination was a unique characteristic of the eastern front because it contextualizes the conduct of the Wehrmacht in it and demonstrates how it was so heavily influenced by Nazi ideology.

The generals within the Wehrmacht itself promoted Nazi ideology to motivate its soldiers and remind them of the unique characteristics of the war in the east. Field Marshall Walter Von Reichenau made this statement to the Wehrmacht in his "General Orders for Conduct in the

²¹ 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): 683–710. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944661>

²² Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 108-110.

²³ Fritz, "We Are Trying... to Change the Face of the World," 690-693.

East” to remind the Wehrmacht of their ideological mission in service of the Nazi regime:

Regarding the conduct of troops towards the Bolshevistic system, vague ideas are still prevalent in many cases. The most essential aim of the war against the Jewish-Bolshevistic system is a complete destruction of their means of power and the elimination of Asiatic influence in the European culture. In this connection the troops are facing tasks that exceed the one-sided routine of soldiering. The soldier in the Eastern territories is not merely a soldier according to the laws and art of war but also a bearer of ruthless national ideology and the avenger of bestialities which have been inflicted upon German and racially related nations.²⁴

In this statement, Von Reichenau makes clear to the Wehrmacht serving in the east the ideological nature of their mission. This was a war of annihilation where the Communist system and European Jewry Nazi ideology associated it with must be destroyed to protect the Third Reich. The instillation of Nazi ideology by the regime and its encouragement by Wehrmacht generals translated into the criminal conduct of regular German troops on the eastern front. German generals such as Reichenau actively encouraged atrocities against civilians or deliberately looked the other way. This is because Wehrmacht leaders viewed such atrocities as an outlet for soldiers to relieve stress from the intense combat of the eastern front.²⁵ These atrocities also reflected how Nazi ideology had perverted a once proud and honorable institution in Prussian and German history, turning the Wehrmacht into a criminal organization in the case of the eastern front. Atrocities against civilians as a matter of policy on the eastern front was distinct and not as acute as in the western European region. This is precisely because the Slavs of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were viewed as racially inferior sub-humans where western Europeans were viewed as more civilized in Nazi

²⁴ Walter Von Reichenau, “Field Marshall Walter Von Reichenau Orders for Conduct in the East: Crushing the Jewish-Bolshevist System,” October 10, 1941, in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, edited by Anson Rabinbach, Sander L. Gilman, and Lillian M. Friedberg (University of California Press, 2013), 1,011.

²⁵ Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 61-62.

ideology.²⁶ The indoctrination of the Wehrmacht in Nazi ideology is critical to understanding its transformation into a criminal organization on the eastern front, and that it was done so to prosecute the Nazi regime's racial and ideological struggle.

The ideological nature of the eastern front and its desire to destroy Communism was also reflected in the infamous Commissar Order. This was an order to systematically execute Red Army Commissars, political officers tasked with instilling Communist ideology in the Soviet Red Army. The order itself states:

In the battle against Bolshevism, the adherence of the enemy to the principles of humanity or international law is not to be counted on. In particular the treatment of those of us who are taken prisoner in a manner full of hatred, cruelty and inhumanity can be expected from the *political commissars of every kind* as the real pillars of opposition. The originators of barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare are the political commissars. So *immediate* and unhesitatingly severe measures must be undertaken against them. They are therefore, when captured either in battle or offering resistance, as a matter of routine to be dispatched by firearms.²⁷

Such an order, along with Field Marshall Von Reichenau's order, underscore the distinct nature of the conflict on the eastern front. This was to be a clash of totalitarian ideologies where the Wehrmacht was expected to destroy Nazism's totalitarian rival in Communism. In the process, the systematic murder of political Commissars along with the targeting of civilians were believed by the Nazis integral components to achieve victory and with it Lebensraum and the destruction of Communism. Such policies further attest to the distinct brutality of the eastern front in the Second World War and its ideological nature.

The indoctrination of the Wehrmacht on the eastern front was reflected by the experience of individual soldiers. German soldiers who encountered the primitive social conditions in the form of extreme poverty confirmed for many in the Wehrmacht prejudices against Slavs and

²⁶ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 67.

²⁷ German High Command (OKW), "Commissar Order: Guidelines for the Treatment of Political Commissars," June 6, 1941. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/ggiles/barbaros.html>

reinforced their belief in a just war against Communism.²⁸ Lieutenant Otto Deissenroth, fighting in the Soviet Ukraine in the Summer of 1941 with Army Group South wrote a letter to family that highlights the disturbing success of Nazi ideology corrupting the integrity of the Wehrmacht:

What Bolshevism has done to humanity is a sin against God, a crime one cannot begin to understand. Every German who formerly thought Bolshevism was a worthy idea and who threatened we National Socialists with death and bloodshed only because we didn't believe in this nonsense should be ashamed!"When one sees this dismal poverty, one is reminded that these Bolshevist animals wanted to bring culture to us industrious, clean and creative Germans. How God has blessed us! How justified is the Führer's claim to European leadership! The last and deepest reason for this war is to restore the natural and godly order. It is a battle against slavery, against Bolshevist insanity. I am proud, deeply proud, that I may fight against this Bolshevist monster, fighting once again the enemy I fought to destroy during the hard years of struggle in Germany.²⁹

Deissenroth's letter attests to the instillation of Nazi ideology in the Wehrmacht and how he like countless other Wehrmacht soldiers on the eastern front became manipulated by Nazi ideology to believe in the regime's murderous enterprise in the east. Nazi ideology on the eastern front proved not just a major motivator for Wehrmacht troops in conducting a racial and ideological struggle but also proved a major source of unit cohesion on the eastern front. This sense of cohesion stemmed from Nazi ideology that had taught a generation of youth socialized in Nazified education to believe in the concept of a Volksgemeinschaft or national community. This proved a strong source of unit cohesion on the eastern front as this idea promoted a national community of German citizens that transcended class, regional, and religious cleavages. This national community working together to defeat the racial and ideological enemies of the German nation present on the eastern front. In the process, securing the Lebensraum deemed critical in Nazi ideology for this national community to continue to

²⁸ Fritz, "We are Trying... To Change the Face of the World," 697-698.

²⁹ Otto Deissenroth, "The Workers Paradise," letter, July 30, 1941, in *German Soldiers in the Soviet Union: Letters from the East*, edited by Joseph Goebbels (Berlin: January, 1942). <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/feldpost.htm>.

prosper and survive.³⁰ This sense of a national community, consistent with Nazi ideology, sustained the morale of Wehrmacht units on the eastern front and encouraged them to participate in atrocities on behalf of the Nazi regime.

Nazi ideology also encouraged the Wehrmacht to fight on the eastern front long after realistic hopes for victory had passed. Wehrmacht soldiers believed Nazi ideology that defeat would be synonymous with the destruction of German civilization and subsequent spread of Communism and Slavic barbarity throughout Europe.³¹ An unidentified soldier, in a letter to his wife, captures this sense of fighting for national survival in August of 1943, when the German military situation continued to deteriorate on the eastern front. The soldier in writing to his wife states:

Their attack was in vain, their sacrifice forgotten, broken against our death-spewing weapons, against our strength, against our will, against our faith, which is stronger than any challenge. For in our hearts is Germany, the Germany that must live. Germany, that is you and the children. You are the homeland for us, and we carry you in our hearts. We fight and sacrifice and bleed for you. We never weaken for a second, for you must be protected. And do you know how happy I will be to know that you are safe? We can lose everything we have, everything except our honor, our homeland, and the lives of our children. That we must defend, and win victory. Now it is time to prove that we are Germans, that we believe in the Führer and are loyal to him. You must think the same way all of us do. Now more than ever we must stand together, help each other, obey every order. Your heart must tell you: I believe in victory, I believe in the Führer. That is our most holy confession. We carry it through the hell of these unimaginably difficult days of August, and it will shine in us when we rebuild our ruined cities and our children are happy around you. My dear wife, I greet our children. Stay brave, loyal, and proud, and learn what the soldier has long known: to believe in victory even in the most difficult and hopeless situation, for only victory can unite us once again in the homeland.³²

This letter demonstrates the degree that Nazi ideology penetrated the Wehrmacht over time. It is significant to analyze because it is crucial to understanding how fighting on the eastern front was conducted in such a brutal manner. In order to fight an ideological and racial struggle,

³⁰ Fritz, "We are Trying... to Change the Face of the World," 700-704.

³¹ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 134-135.

³² Unidentified Soldier, "Brief Eines Soldaten," letter, *Der Schulungsbrief*, August 30, 1943.
<https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/schul03.htm>.

regular German soldiers were indoctrinated in the ideological motivations for the war. This caused the Wehrmacht to engage in ghastly atrocities throughout the conflict and motivated them to fight to the bitter end, believing in this war of annihilation for national survival against a racial and ideological enemy.

The Holocaust was the greatest humanitarian tragedy in modern history. Six million European Jews along with Roma, homosexuals, the mentally handicapped, and other groups deemed “asocial” by the Nazi regime perished. Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union had been the traditional homeland for European Jews and consisted of the majority of Europe’s Jewish population. It is because of this the Holocaust and horrors it entailed were inextricably linked to the eastern front. The execution of the Final Solution as the Nazi regime referred to the Holocaust was made possible by Nazi Germany’s early conquest of Eastern Europe and large swathes of Soviet territory. With the exception of Imperial Russia, no regime had ruled over such a large Jewish population than the Nazis at the apogee of their military success in 1942.³³ As the failure of Nazi Germany to defeat the Soviet Union created logistical problems for implementing the General Plan for the East, the Nazi regime decided an opportunity existed to exterminate European Jewry as their racial enemy. Genocidal anti-Semitism was the central motivator for the Holocaust but also reflected the ideological nature of the genocide and its relation to the eastern front.³⁴

Hitler viewed Communism as a Jewish conspiracy for world domination and frequently equated Communism with European Jewry.³⁵ As a result, Hitler and the Nazis viewed the

³³ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 185.

³⁴ Catherine Epstein, “Nazi Occupation Strategies,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 1 (2009): 107–20. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/259996>

³⁵ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), 20.

Soviet Union as a Jewish state and an imminent racial and ideological threat to the Third Reich. Such factors made the eastern front the epicenter of the Holocaust that serves as another horrific distinction of the conflict on the eastern front. Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as the traditional homelands of Europe's Jews were reflected in Nazi opinion towards the region. Einsatzgruppen, elite SS commando units tasked with killing the racial and ideological enemies of the Third Reich behind the frontlines, described in a situational report attesting to the belief of the East being the epicenter of European Jewry and execution of the Final Solution as an integral component of the eastern front:

More than half of World Jewry lives in a relatively narrow strip of East-Central Europe along the Riga-Bucharest line, the so called Jewish segment of Europe. Here, one can find the human reservoir of Western Jewry which cannot renew itself on its own, depending on a steady transfusion from the East. It is simply impossible to trace the family lines of any leading personality of World Jewry without going back to the ghetto of some town in East-Central Europe.³⁶

This report indicated Nazi attitudes toward the east and as a result the eastern front would become ground zero for the execution of the Final Solution. Systematic mass shootings, labor camps, and death camps solely for the purpose of murdering millions on an industrial scale would be employed throughout the eastern front to eradicate a primary racial enemy of the Third Reich in Europe's Jews.³⁷

The Holocaust was not a singular event but a process that occurred in stages. Hitler in consistency with Nazi ideology always planned on the ultimate extermination of European Jewry. In a speech to the German Reichstag in 1939 before the outbreak of the Second World War, Hitler foreshadowed what would become the Final Solution that offers guidance to understanding his chilling vision for the East:

Today I will again be a prophet and say, if international Jewry in and outside of Europe succeeds in plunging nations into another world war, then the end result will not be the Bolshevization of the planet and

³⁶ "Operational Situation Report USSR No.33," July 27, 1941, in *The Einsatzgruppen Reports: Selections from the Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads' Campaign Against the Jews, July 1941 - January 1943*, edited by Yitzhak Arad, Shmuel Krakowski, and Shmuel Spector (New York: Holocaust Library, 1989), 47.

³⁷ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 218-222.

thus the victory of the Jews- it will be the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe. People are tired of dying on battlefields just so that international race can profit from the business of war and satisfy its Old Testament thirst for revenge. The Jewish slogan 'Proletarians of the World Unite!' will be trumped by a higher calling, Productive Nations of the World-Know Your Common Enemy!³⁸

Hitler's striking and odiously self-righteous statement predicting the destruction of European Jewry offers insight into Nazi ideology and what it would mean for the east. The concept of Lebensraum made a clash with the Soviet Union inevitable as it was deemed critical to the survival of the German people and nation. Within this Lebensraum, racially inferior groups such as the Slavs, Jews, and Roma would either be enslaved or outright exterminated to create the racial utopia desired by the Nazi regime and confirmed in its ideology. As a result, the eastern front became the scene of the worst atrocities committed during the Holocaust that marks another distinction in the nature of the conflict.

The use of systematic mass shootings on the Eastern Front targeting Jews was an integral component of the Final Solution and was the method of choice for the Nazis before the construction of death camps later in the war. An estimated two million Jews murdered in the Holocaust were from mass shootings perpetrated by Einsatzgruppen commandos, other SS elements, and Wehrmacht troops.³⁹ The German advance through the East led to an orgy of violence where individual units murdered Jews by the tens of thousands. Units engaged in sadistic competition for who could accumulate the highest body counts of Jews on the eastern front. One SS Calvary Brigade boasted murdering an estimated forty-eight thousand Soviet Jews in July and August of 1941.⁴⁰ The practice of mass shootings on the eastern front led to

³⁸ Adolf Hitler, "Adolf Hitler Speech to the German Reichstag," speech, January 30, 1939, in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, edited by Anson Rabinbach, Sander L. Gilman, and Lillian M. Friedberg (University of California Press, 2013), 1,086.

³⁹ Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, 128.

⁴⁰ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 226.

the emergence of infamous sardine pits where by the tens of thousands Jews would be shot into a ravine one atop the other after being forced to dig their own mass graves. Jewish women would often be forced to strip nude and in the process were forced to perform humiliating sexual acts in front of German troops and would often be assaulted or groped.⁴¹ Sardine pits and mass executions soon became a matter of policy on the eastern front that sought to exterminate the Nazi regime's racial enemy in European Jews. The most infamous mass shooting on the eastern Front was that of Babi Yar in the Soviet Ukraine. Between September 29-30, 1941 thirty-three thousand seven-hundred and seventy-one Jews were murdered in a mass grave, the largest single incident of the systematic shooting campaign.⁴² The employment of mass shootings on such an incomprehensible scale was unique to the eastern front. Such an event further underscores the heinous nature of the conflict and how it distinguished itself from other fronts in the European theatre. The eastern front became ground zero for the Final Solution precisely because it was the historical homeland of European Jewry.

The utter neglect of humanity afforded to the Jews by the perpetrators of these massacres is striking. As racial enemies of the German nation, Jews were viewed as vermin rather than fellow human beings that merited extermination. Felix Landau, an Einsatzgruppen commando operating in Lemberg, Poland, now Lviv, Ukraine, documented his experiences as a perpetrator of these massacres. Landau's diary entry offers an insight into how the perpetrators of these crimes viewed their helpless victims:

One hour later, at 5 in the morning, a further thirty-two Poles, members of the intelligentsia and Resistance, were shot about two hundred metres from our quarters after they had dug their own grave. One of them simply would not die. The first layer of sand had already been thrown on the first group when a hand

⁴¹ Regina Mulhauser, "Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War: The Case of the German Wehrmacht during the War and Genocide in the Soviet Union, 1941-1944," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 3 (2017): 366-401. <https://doi.org/10.7560/JHS26302>

⁴² Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 227.

emerged from out of the sand, waved and pointed to a place, presumably his heart. A couple more shots rang out, then someone shouted – in fact the Pole himself – “Shoot faster!” What is a human being? The Jews were pouring out of the entrance. There were rows of Jews lying one on top of the other like pigs whimpering horribly. The Jews kept streaming out of the citadel completely covered in blood. We stopped and tried to see who was in charge of the *Kommando*. Someone had let the Jews go. They were just being hit out of rage and hatred. Nothing against that – only they should not let the Jews walk about in such a state. Our work is over for today. Camaraderie is still good for the time being.⁴³

Landau’s first-hand account of the atrocities inherent to the Holocaust demonstrates the humanity denied to the supposed racial enemies of the German nation. It is also relevant to the core themes of the eastern front as it underscores how the conflict’s racial and ideological nature caused German soldiers to view both enemy combatants and civilians as racial and ideological enemies not worthy of mercy or common humanity.

Although the majority of mass shootings occurred in the Soviet Union behind the frontlines of the eastern front, labor and death camps that led to the deaths of millions of Jews were largely located in Poland. A Slavic country and home to a large Jewish population, Poland would become the epicenter of forced labor and extermination policies that marked the final stage of the Holocaust. Infamous factories of death such as Chelmno, Belzec, Sobidor, Treblinka, Birkenau, and Majdanek were all located in Poland and collectively murdered five point seven million people, both Jews and other groups deemed “asocial” by the Nazi regime.⁴⁴ (Appendix 2) Such an industrial slaughter is another factor unique to the eastern front. The extermination of European Jews was considered by the Nazis critical in order to consolidate Lebensraum and achieve their racial utopia and all the horrors it would entail for its inhabitants. The Holocaust was meant to become the first stage in achieving Lebensraum, where the mass starvation and enslavement of Slavs would precede a mass migration of German colonists to populate the East and dominate what would become a neo-feudal society.⁴⁵ The attempted

⁴³ Felix Landau, *Diary of Felix Landau, July 3-July 14, 1941*, July 5, 1941.
<http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/einsatz/landau.html>.

⁴⁴ Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, 149.

⁴⁵ Epstein, “Nazi Occupation Strategies,” 109.

extermination of European Jewry occurred in the East, and marks another disturbing distinction of the eastern front.

Preceding outright extermination, the Nazi regime sought to ghettoize Jews in communities isolated from the outside world. The mass deportations to these ghettos were concentrated in Poland. Mass ghettoization was also a strategic step in the direction of extermination as the Nazis sought to concentrate Europe's Jews in one general area where logistical difficulties of mass transport to labor and death camps would be alleviated.⁴⁶ Once Jews were forcibly taken to these ghettos, they faced wretched conditions that unfortunately only represented a mere preview to the horrid conditions of the camps. Overcrowding, food shortages, lack of sanitation, and lack of winter clothing created an environment where starvation and disease flourished, killing residents by the tens of thousands.⁴⁷ By 1942, the Final Solution had officially been adopted as the long-term goal of the Nazi regime. Throughout 1942-1943, mass deportations of Jews from ghettos to labor and death camps would be conducted.⁴⁸ This created another opportunity for violence by German troops tasked with carrying out this mission throughout the Polish ghettos. Sporadic acts of violence included random beatings, murder, and public humiliation of Jews as they were being deported to the camps. The employment of sexual violence as a weapon of war was also evident. Reports of mass rape and sadistic mutilation of Jewish women perpetrated by German troops conducting the liquidation of the ghettos were disturbingly common features of ghetto liquidation. This also defied Nazi laws that banned sexual relations between Germans and Jews in the Third Reich and its territories as "race defilement." German generals, however, chose to look the other way, neglecting to punish soldiers who did this as they viewed it as an outlet for soldiers to release tension from the stress

⁴⁶ Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, 210-213.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 214-219.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 290-294.

of combat. Nazi racial laws and how they governed sexual relations between Germans and Jews were not enforced in the east and largely were a factor only on the home front.⁴⁹ The forced deportation of Jews in the east to death and labor camps marked the final stage in the Nazi effort to destroy European Jewry. The conduct of German soldiers in liquidating these ghettos is consistent with the ideological and racial themes of the eastern front. German troops, bewitched by Nazi ideology behaved with the utmost brutality towards their perceived racial enemy, neglecting to demonstrate any sense of mercy or common humanity for these defenseless civilians.

Ruthless efficiency in the exploitation of resources was also a consistent theme of the Nazi enterprise in the east. The exploitation of Jewish labor was a major example of this that further attests to the genocidal nature of the Holocaust and brutality of the eastern front. Jews deemed too old, young, or sickly to work would be executed immediately. Those capable of labor however would face “extermination through labor” in order to maximize their efficiency for the German wartime economy.⁵⁰ Such a nefarious policy led to the construction of labor camps, mostly in Poland but a number in Germany itself, where Jews would be deliberately worked to death. For those that would be killed immediately in the death camps solely in Poland, the use of poison gas enabled mass murder on an industrial scale as an estimated two-thousand people daily would be murdered in the gas chambers.⁵¹ By the time the Second World War had concluded, the camps primarily located throughout Poland, had nearly wiped out European Jewry. Other groups such as the Roma, homosexuals, the mentally handicapped, and political prisoners also died at astonishing rates.⁵² When examining the millions exterminated

⁴⁹ Mulhauser, “Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War,” 396-397.

⁵⁰ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 265.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 252-254.

in this humanitarian tragedy, it cannot be discounted this event occurred in the east. Even the vast majority of Jews from Western, Central, and Southern Europe would be transported over time to meet certain deaths in the camps throughout Poland. This is because Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were the traditional homelands for European Jewry, thus the Nazis sought to conduct their genocide of them there. When analyzing the Holocaust, it is important not to denigrate the lives lost to mere statistics. Rich and vibrant communities that had prospered in Europe for centuries were systematically wiped out in a matter of years, all too commonly through immense coercion and destruction. The Holocaust represented one of the gravest humanitarian tragedies in history, and is the most catastrophic event that occurred on the eastern front.⁵³

The failure to distinguish between enemy combatant and civilian on the eastern front was a central theme of the conflict. The racial and ideological nature of the conflict encouraged German authorities to target the civilian population with impunity, as they were viewed as sub-human and thus expendable. Brutal German policies toward the Slavs of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union created a vicious cycle where German policies would inspire resistance translating in partisan activity. In response to partisan activity, the Wehrmacht would conduct heinous mass reprisals against the civilian population, encouraging more partisan activity in the process. (Appendix 1) In the Russian region of the Soviet Union alone, a relatively small portion of the occupied regions of the eastern front, ninety-four thousand partisans operated behind German lines.⁵⁴ Such extensive partisan activity caused by German policies toward the east created the opportunity for mass atrocities against the civilian population under the pretext

⁵³ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 410-414.

⁵⁴ Smith, "Savagery on the Eastern Front," 15.

of anti-partisan activity.⁵⁵ The systematic employment of atrocities against the civilian population was unique to the eastern front, and reflected Nazi racial and ideological attitudes towards the peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The Wehrmacht high command made it clear to their soldiers before the launch of Operation Barbarossa that the racial and ideological nature of the war they were about to fight merited criminal measures against the civilian population. Field Marshall Walther Von Brauchitsch in his infamous Barbarossa Decree dated before the launch of Operation Barbarossa highlights this:

The wide extent of operational space in the East, the form of combat that this offers, and the peculiarity of the enemy, present tasks to the courts martial...that, with their limited personnel, they can only solve, if military law restricts itself for the time being to its central task. That is only possible if *the troops themselves* defend themselves against every threat from the enemy civilian population without mercy... Criminal acts of enemy civilians are withdrawn until further notice from the jurisdiction of courts-martial and summary courts. *Guerrillas* are to be dispatched without mercy by the troops either in combat or while trying to escape. Furthermore, *all other attacks by enemy civilians against the Wehrmacht*, its members and retinue are to be repelled on the spot by the most extreme measures up to the destruction of the attacker. Where measures of this kind were missed or were initially not possible, *the suspicious elements are to be immediately brought before an officer. He will decide whether they are to be shot. Collective drastic action* will be taken immediately against *communities* from which treacherous or insidious attacks against the Wehrmacht are launched, on the orders of an officer with at least the rank of battalion commander upwards, if the circumstances do not permit a speedy apprehension of individual culprits." For *acts which members of the Wehrmacht* or its retinue commit against enemy civilians, there is *no compulsion to prosecute*, even when the act represents at the same time a military crime or offense.⁵⁶

The encouragement of systematic atrocities against the civilian population on the eastern front led to the Wehrmacht waging war on the civilian population under the pretext of anti-partisan activity. The contempt the Nazis held for the peoples of the East and how it translated into policy created numerous opportunities to conduct indiscriminate mass killings of civilians under the guise of anti-partisan operations. On September 16, 1941 Wehrmacht general Wilhelm Keitel ordered that fifty to one-hundred civilians be executed for the death of one

⁵⁵ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 190-193.

⁵⁶ Walther Von Brauchitsch, "Decree on the Jurisdiction of Martial Law and on Special Measures of Troops," May 13, 1941. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/ggiles/barbaros.html>

German soldier for partisan activity.⁵⁷ Such a criminal order was distinct to the eastern front as it was meant to explicitly apply to this region. The order would be used as a pretext for conducting horrid atrocities against the civilian population in the east.

The use of mass shootings in the east were not unique to the Holocaust. Under the vague pretext of anti-partisan activity, German units murdered innocent civilians in the east on a colossal scale. As a direct result of Keitel's order, in December 1941 thirty-thousand innocent Serbian civilians in Yugoslavia were shot in response to Yugoslav partisan activity that resulted in the death of one-hundred and sixty German soldiers.⁵⁸ Such disproportionate numbers underscore how German military strategy relied on brute force to pacify the civilian population. This ill-thought strategy however only bred more partisan activity in the long run, creating more opportunity for the mass slaughter of civilians by German units. Just as in the Holocaust, German units both SS and Wehrmacht sadistically competed with one another for the highest body counts to win praise from their commanders. One SS Battle Group alone conducting anti-partisan activities in Soviet Belarus from November 1942-April 1943 reported having executed thirty-three thousand five hundred civilians "suspected" of assisting partisan activity, eleven thousand of them Jews.⁵⁹ Soviet Belarus was considered a hot bed of partisan activity on the eastern front. Possessing vast swamps and marshes, the geography of the region favored the guerrilla tactics utilized by partisans. As a result, Soviet Belarus in particular suffered devastating losses in proportion to its population. Reprisals for partisan activity over the course of the German occupation led to the deaths of two point two million Belarusians, the vast

⁵⁷ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 237.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵⁹ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 241.

majority of them civilians, out of a population of ten point six million.⁶⁰ This sadistic competition tolerated by German commanders and encouraged by the Nazi regime contextualizes the mass loss of civilians in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The racial nature of the conflict taught German units to view both enemy combatant and civilian alike as hostile. Also, as the Slavic racial group was inferior and thus unworthy of humane treatment afforded to civilians on other fronts in the European theatre. Such a policy resulted in devastation for the east and mass murder of millions of innocent civilians on the eastern front.

The atrocities waged against the civilian population on the eastern front extended beyond mass murder. The systematic destruction of entire villages throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in response to partisan activity was common. In the Soviet Union alone, seventy-thousand villages were destroyed over the course of the war.⁶¹ The systematic destruction of entire communities as reprisals for partisan activity caused widespread dispossession, socio-economic deprivation, and starvation for the civilian population throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In May 1943, for example, the eighteenth Panzer Division operating in Briansk, located in the Russian region of the Soviet Union bordering Soviet Belarus, forcibly deported fifteen-thousand eight-hundred and twelve civilians from the area and destroyed all surrounding villages in response to partisan activity in the region.⁶² The Germans also deliberately burned grain fields and confiscated livestock to deny cover to partisans and the utilizing of agricultural capital. This policy caused widespread starvation both in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.⁶³ The weaponization of hunger employed by the Nazi regime

⁶⁰ Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-45* (London: Vintage Books, 2016), 275.

⁶¹ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 195-196.

⁶² Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 92.

⁶³ Smith, "Savagery on the Eastern Front," 16.

was meant to compel the compliance of the civilian population, but also offered a grim preview of Nazi long-term goals when considering the General Plan for the East. Due to the racial and ideological nature of the conflict, mass starvation caused by German policies in the East was not only ignored but deliberately encouraged. During the German capture of Kiev, the capital of Soviet Ukraine, in September 1941, the Germans deliberately besieged and cut off all food supplies to the city. This caused the deaths of seventy-thousand civilians by the end of 1941.⁶⁴ The use of mass starvation and destruction of entire communities was most starkly seen in the Siege of Leningrad from 1941-1944. The Nazi regime planned initially to destroy the entire city, killing its entire population of three and a half million residents in the process. Although the Germans never captured the city, mass starvation was weaponized as supply lines to the city were deliberately cut off, leading to the death of one million residents over the course of the siege.⁶⁵

The willingness to destroy entire cities and committing mass murder of civilians in the process was a consistent theme of the eastern front. This was a racial and ideological conflict in which the Nazis sought to destroy any semblance of infrastructure and culture for the Slavic people, consolidating the Nazi goal of *Lebensraum*.⁶⁶ Also, the destruction of Communism and extermination of the Third Reich's racial enemies populated throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

One of the most notorious atrocities on the eastern front occurred in Lidice, a village in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia, although geographically located in Central Europe, is relevant to this work because of its Slavic status and shared experience of enduring a distinctly brutal occupation common throughout the east. Reinhard Heydrich was head of the SS intelligence branch known as the SD and deputy to Heinrich Himmler. He was wounded in an assassination attempt by Czech resistance fighters on May 27, 1942 and died a few days later as

⁶⁴ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 170-172.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 173-175.

⁶⁶ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 194.

a result of his wounds.⁶⁷ (Appendix 3) Heydrich was the highest-ranking official to have been assassinated during the war and undoubtedly the most powerful in the Nazi regime. Heydrich was the number two official in the SS who was credited as the architect of the Final Solution. Notorious even in Nazi circles for his ruthless brutality, Heydrich turned ruthlessly efficient mass murder into a disturbing art form.

In response to Heydrich's assassination, Hitler initially wanted the entire Czech intelligentsia along with ten-thousand Czech civilians executed in retaliation. Practical complexities however made the Nazis settle on wiping out the village of Lidice, killing all of the town's residents in the process. On June 10, 1942 the village was destroyed and its one thousand three-hundred and fifty-seven residents murdered, effectively wiping the community off the map. The few women and children who survived were then deported to concentration camps. This mass reprisal in response to Heydrich's assassination was accompanied with the shooting of one-thousand Czech Jews in the capital of Prague.⁶⁸ The story of Lidice is the most notorious but unfortunately not the only example of entire villages being destroyed on the eastern front. Just as in the Holocaust, entire communities that had resided and prospered for centuries were systematically destroyed in a matter of days. This reflected the distinct nature of the conflict on the eastern front as systematic atrocities in the form of indiscriminate mass reprisals against the civilian population were common. Although often rare and isolated events on other European fronts, waging war against the civilian population was an integral component of the eastern front that reflected the racial and ideological nature of the conflict.

The use of sexual violence as a weapon of war was employed throughout the eastern front. In the case of the eastern front, it is important to stress the term sexual violence rather than

⁶⁷ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 275.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 277-278.

rape. This is because the term better characterizes the conduct of German units toward female civilians in the east but further underscores the malicious and sadistic intent of German policies throughout the eastern front. Sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war throughout history, but in the case of the eastern front it represented another major distinction in this conflict from other European theaters in the Second World War. Once again, a major German policy on the eastern front was motivated by Nazi ideology. Sexual violence has typically been employed as a heinous measure to disempower and humiliate women within an enemy country and strip fighting men of their dignity by demonstrating they cannot protect them. On the eastern front, this willingness to use sexual violence as a weapon of war took a racial component along with the heinous intent of the tactic. Consistent with the racial nature of the conflict in the east, German soldiers conducted widespread acts of sexual violence against women throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to demonstrate that Nazi ideology had taught them their racial superiority.⁶⁹ Reports of sexual violence against female civilians extended beyond mass rape and even included sadistic acts such as coerced undressing, sexual torture, and sexual mutilation.⁷⁰ Such horrendous acts were a coordinated strategy to inflict pain and trauma upon defenseless communities and underscored the racial and ideological contempt the Nazi regime had for the inhabitants of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

The German high command in the case of systematic sexual violence perpetrated by its troops once again implicated itself and with it the Wehrmacht into criminal conduct. Field Marshall Von Brauchitsch made troops immune from court martial for sexually based offenses against female civilians. This order was significant because it explicitly applied to the eastern front. German soldiers accused of such crimes on other European fronts would still

⁶⁹ Mulhauser, "Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War," 373-375.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 382.

be subject to court martial and punishment for sexually based offenses.⁷¹ Such an order gave the green-light for German units to conduct systematic sexual atrocities against female civilians with impunity throughout the eastern front. Without the fear of draconian punishment, a method the Wehrmacht clearly demonstrated it was capable of for perceived lack of fervor in fighting the war in the East, the Wehrmacht high command became more than complicit in widespread sexual crimes throughout the eastern front. The Wehrmacht also added human trafficking to their list of criminal activities throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Throughout Poland and the Soviet Union, brothels were established for the pleasure of German troops. Women in nearby communities would be forced into prostitution. These women were unable to leave these establishments, generating an environment of coercion coupled with the fear of violence.⁷² Such a nefarious policy on the eastern front underscores the brutal nature of the conflict. The fact that German units became immune to court martial for such heinous crimes attests to the cruel nature of German conduct in the east. The policy also further underscores the racial and ideological nature of the conflict. The Nazi regime viewed the people of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as racially inferior and best utilized as their slaves. The systematic perpetration of sexual violence against civilians is one of the most heinous examples of this and represents another important distinction of the eastern front as it took a racial and ideological component unseen on other European fronts.

The treatment of Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs) on the Eastern Front by the Nazi regime was horrendous. Soviet POWs were thought of as vermin because of their Slavic racial status and thus unworthy of humane treatment afforded to other Allied prisoners during the Second World War. (Appendix 5) In the case of the eastern front, the Nazi regime even encouraged mistreatment of Soviet POWs as a means to discourage their own troops from surrendering out of fear of similar treatment.⁷³ The horrid treatment of Soviet troops captured on the battlefield

⁷¹ Mulhauser, "Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War," 389-390.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 391-392.

⁷³ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 175.

remains one of the many humanitarian tragedies that occurred on the eastern front. Soviet soldiers who surrendered and were found to be Jews, part of the intelligentsia, and Commissar officers were ordered to be shot on sight as a matter of policy.⁷⁴ The average Soviet POW fared little better over the course of the war. Soviet soldiers would be forced to march hundreds of miles from their field of capture into overcrowded camps without food, water, rest, and following the confiscation of their winter clothing. Those who collapsed from exhaustion were beaten to death or shot in these forced marches. An estimated two-hundred thousand Soviet POWs died from this ordeal.⁷⁵ The plight of Soviet POWs only continued to deteriorate once they arrived at these drastically overcrowded and ill-constructed camps.

Once Soviet POWs were marched into holding camps, unimaginable misery was to await them. These camps were overcrowded, often so much so that soldiers could only stand shoulder to shoulder against barbed wire. In addition to this Soviet POWs were only fed enough to keep them barely alive so they could be exploited as slave laborers for the Third Reich. The average caloric intake of Soviet POWs ranged from seven hundred to one-thousand calories daily.⁷⁶ Such wretched conditions created an environment ripe for the spread of disease and starvation that killed Soviet POWs by the millions by the end of the Second World War.⁷⁷ Such controlled starvation policies made it common for prisoners to fight over licking utensils, engage in cannibalism, and eat dogs as the only source of meat to provide calories for the hard labor they were forced to perform. Such stories were used as propaganda by the Nazi regime as confirmation of Communist and Slavic “sub-humanity.”⁷⁸ Treatment of Soviet POWs turned sadistic on a number of occasions. Camp guards were known to use Soviet POWs for target

⁷⁴ Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 83-86.

⁷⁵ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 176-177.

⁷⁶ Gerhard, “Food and Genocide,” 61.

⁷⁷ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 181-184.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

practice and set loose dogs on them trained to kill. Soviet POWs were also used as human shields in German frontal assaults against Soviet positions, and also forced to clear minefields.⁷⁹ Such treatment indicated the lack of humanity the Nazi regime afforded to Soviet POWs. It is also another aspect of the eastern front that is distinct in its viscous nature. Unlike Allied POWs captured from other fronts, Soviet POWs were the racial and ideological enemies of the Third Reich. As a result, they were viewed as expendable and consistent with the long-term goal of Lebensraum used as slaves for the sole benefit of the Third Reich.

The murderous treatment of Soviet POWs took a drastic toll. In POW camps throughout Soviet Belarus, Soviet POWs died at a rate of two percent daily. In the case of the camp known as Dulag 342 in Soviet Belarus, prisoners sent a petition to their German captors asking to be executed, an indication of the horrid conditions experienced by Soviet POWs.⁸⁰ Such careless disregard of human life underscored the contempt the Nazi regime had for Soviet POWs, and how such contempt was driven by Nazi ideology. The death rates of Soviet POWs throughout the war most starkly highlights the difference in attitudes taken by the Nazi regime towards their enemies in the east and those on other fronts in the European theatre. Over the course of the war the Nazi regime captured five point seven million Soviet prisoners, most of them in the opening months of the war as the Wehrmacht made its murderous advance towards Moscow. Over time, three point three million of these Soviet POWs died in captivity, totaling a death rate of fifty-eight percent. This is sharply contrasted with the death rate of Anglo-American prisoners, whose death rate totaled two percent, the vast majority of which occurred in the final months of the war.⁸¹ The fact most Anglo-American POWs died in the final months of the war,

⁷⁹ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 182-184.

⁸⁰ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 179.

⁸¹ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 185.

where the Nazi regime could barely afford to feed its own people much less POWs, offers an astonishing finding. Soviet POWs over the course of their captivity were systematically starved, sickened, and worked to death for the sole benefit of the Third Reich. As many Soviet POWs died on a single day in German captivity than American and British POWs throughout the war.⁸² Such a policy reflected Nazi racial and ideological beliefs about the eastern front because Soviet POWs were Slavs and associated with the Communist system. Thus they were considered unworthy of the same treatment given to POWs from enemy nations not viewed as racial or ideological enemies.

Unsurprisingly, at the Nuremberg War Trials, mistreatment of POWs was high on Soviet priorities. Y.V. Pokrovsky, a lead Soviet prosecutor at the trials, made sure the world was aware of the crimes afflicted upon his fellow citizens in Soviet POWs throughout the war. Pokrovsky describes the criminal treatment of Soviet POWs during the trial and why it merited justice by stating:

In the light of the facts which I shall submit to you, on the basis of irrefutable documents, Germany's solemn undertakings in regard to prisoners of war will appear to be nothing but unparalleled and cynical mockery of the very conception of treaties, laws, culture, and humanity. The Soviet Military Command is aware of numerous cases of the subjection of captured Red Army men, the majority of them wounded, to savage torture, ill-usage, and murder at the hands of the German Military Command and German military units. Captured Red Army men are tortured with bars of red-hot iron; their eyes are gouged out, their feet, hands, fingers, ears, and noses are hacked off, their stomachs ripped open, and they are tied to tanks and torn asunder. Enormities and shameful crimes of this sort are committed by German fascist officers and men along the whole front, wherever they may be and wherever men and commanders of the Red Army fall into their hands. There are a number of cases on record where the German Command has driven captured Red Army men in front of their advancing columns, during an attack, on pain of shooting. Such cases in particular have been registered in the vicinity of the Vybor State Farm, in the Leningrad region; in the vicinity of Yelna, in the Smolensk region, in the Gomel region of the Bielorussian S.S.R.; in the Poltava region of the Ukrainian S.S.R., and in a number of other places. Wounded and sick Red Army men in hospitals which fell into the hands of the German invaders were also systematically subjected to outrageous

⁸² Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 182.

indignities, torture, and savage illusage. On innumerable occasions defenseless sick and wounded Red Army men in hospitals have been bayoneted or shot by the fascist fiends on the spot.⁸³

Pokrovsky's exposure of Nazi crimes committed toward Soviet POWs is important and further underscores the distinct nature of the eastern front. Soviet POWs were subjected to especially tortuous and cruel treatment not experienced by the other major Allied powers. Polish POWs also were treated with equal cruelty and disregard for humanity, with similar murderous results to that of Soviet POWs.⁸⁴ The consistent theme is their shared Slavic racial heritage and because of this they were treated with the utmost contempt by the Nazi regime. The treatment of these POWs is one of the gravest but unfortunately one of the many humanitarian tragedies that occurred throughout the eastern front during the Second World War.

In conclusion, the eastern front in the Second World War was a conflict that caused immense destruction and human suffering for those unfortunate enough to have experienced it. The conclusion of the eastern front in Europe following the Soviet capture of the German capital of Berlin by the end of April 1945 did not lead to liberation as it did for much of the rest of the Europe. On the contrary, the conclusion of the Second War World War in the east merely marked the replacement of one murderous occupation regime in Nazi Germany with several others in the Soviet satellite governments that emerged throughout Eastern Europe. Much like the Nazi regime, these Soviet satellite regimes proved equally willing to employ state terror and murder to compel the subservience of their respective populations. The conflict and destruction that led to these developments are forever connected with the eastern front and the devastation it brought upon the citizens of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. This distinctly racial and ideological struggle led to the deaths of millions in these regions, and in

⁸³ Y.V. Pokrovsky, "Nuremberg War Crimes Trials," February 13, 1946, in the *Avalon Project, Documents in History, Law, and Diplomacy*, 346. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/02-13-46.asp>

⁸⁴ Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs," 10.

a matter of years destroyed centuries old communities integral to the rich nature of European history, society, and culture.

The systematic atrocities that defined the eastern front make it unique both as a European front in the Second World War but also in the lessons it can offer in contemporary times. It offers evidence of what heinous actions can culminate from racial hatred and totalitarian utopianism. Identity group-based conflict is an uncomfortably relevant lesson in the contemporary global context. All too often contemporary conflicts have become centered around issues of identity-based grievances, where contending identity groups clash for dominance with devastating effects for the civilian population as seen on the eastern front in the Second World War. The eastern front above all else underscores the need to recognize a common humanity between one another, and how the racial dehumanization inherent in the Nazi enterprise toward the East led to such carnage and bloodshed. The dangers of totalitarianism are evident in the eastern front, as in the process of achieving their own perception of a utopian society, the Nazi regime proved more than willing to commit mass murder on an unprecedented scale. Such acts attest to the distinct brutality of the Nazi regime and justifies its classification as a criminal regime unparalleled in its brutality. These racial and ideological factors that defined the eastern front provide the motivations for the conflict as well as an explanation for the conduct of the Nazi regime in the east that distinguishes the conflict as uniquely heinous. It also offers a historical case study to learn from and plan accordingly so such a humanitarian tragedy can never again occur on the European continent nor globally.

Bibliography:

A. Primary Sources:

Bormann, Martin. "Minutes of a Meeting at Adolf Hitler's Headquarters." July 16, 1941. https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1549.

Deissenroth, Otto. "The Workers Paradise." Letter, July 30, 1941. In *German Soldiers in the Soviet Union: Letters from the East.*, edited by Joseph Goebbels. Berlin, January, 1942. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/feldpost.htm>.

German High Command (OKW). "Commissar Order: Guidelines for the Treatment of Political Commissars." June 6, 1941. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/ggiles/barbaros.html>

Himmler, Heinrich. "Himmler's Memorandum on the Treatment of Alien Peoples in the East." May 25, 1940. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/ggiles/barbaros.html>

Hitler, Adolf. "Adolf Hitler Speech to the German Reichstag." Speech. January 30, 1939. In *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, edited by Anson Rabinbach, Sander L. Gilman, and Lillian M. Friedberg, 1,086. California University Press, 2013.

Landau, Felix. *Diary of Felix Landau, July 3-July 14, 1941.* July 5, 1941. <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/einsatz/landau.html>.

"Operational Situation Report USSR No.33." July 27,1941. In *The Einsatzgruppen Reports: Selections from the Dispatches of the Nazi Death Squads' Campaign Against the Jews, July 1941 - January 1943*, edited by Yitzhak Arad, Shmuel Krakowski, and Shmuel Spector, 47. New York: Holocaust Library, 1989.

Pokrovsky, Y.V.. "Nuremberg War Crimes Trials." February 13, 1946. In the *Avalon Project, Documents in History, Law, and Diplomacy*, 346. <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/02-13-46.asp>

Soldier, Unidentified. Letter. "Brief Eines Soldaten." *Der Schulungsbrief*, August 30, 1943. <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/schul03.htm>.

Von Brauchitsch, Walther. "Decree on the Jurisdiction of Martial Law and of Special Measures of Troops." May 13, 1941. <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/ggiles/barbaros.html>

Von Reichenau, Walter. "Field Marshall Walter Von Reichenau Orders for Conduct in the East: Crushing the Jewish-Bolshevist System." October 10, 1941. In *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, edited by Anson Rabinbach, Sander L. Gilman, and Lillian M. Friedberg, 1,011. California University Press, 2013.

B. Secondary Sources:

Bartov, Omer. *Hitlers Army: Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Connelly, John. "Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racist Practice." *Central European History* 32, no. 1 (1999): 1–33. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4546842>

Dawidowicz, Lucy. *The War Against the Jews*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975.

Epstein, Catherine. "Nazi Occupation Strategies." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 1 (2009): 107–20. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/259996>

Evans, Richard J. *The Third Reich at War: 1939-1945*. New York: Penguin Press, 2010.

Fritz , Stephen G. ““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): 683–710. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944661>

Gerhard, Gesine. “Food and Genocide: Nazi Agrarian Politics in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union.” *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 1 (2009): 45–65. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40542587>

Mulhauser, Regina. “Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War: The Case of the German Wehrmacht during the War and Genocide in the Soviet Union, 1941-1944.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 3 (2017): 366–401. <https://doi.org/10.7560/JHS26302>

Smith, Ian B. “Savagery on the Eastern Front: Hitler’s Policy of Annihilation in Russia.” Thesis, Department of Government and Justice Studies, Appalachian State University, 2016. <https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/Smith,%20Ian%20B.%202016.pdf>

Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

Stargardt, Nicholas. *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-45*. London: Vintage Books, 2016.

Appendix:

1



Massacre of civilians in the East. Although rare and often isolated events on other European fronts, massacres of civilians such as this was an integral component of the Third Reich's war against its racial and ideological enemies. [The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust on the battlefield | Germany | News and in-depth reporting from Berlin and beyond | DW | 07.05.2020](#)

2.



Factories of death in Poland. As the historical homeland of European Jewry, the eastern front became the epicenter of the Holocaust and the worst humanitarian tragedy in modern history. [German camps in occupied Poland during World War II - Wikipedia](#)

3.



Reinhard Heydrich, SD chief, architect of the Holocaust, and SS deputy to Heinrich Himmler. His assassination by Czech resistance fighters led to the destruction of the entire village of Lidice. Such policies of destroying entire communities on the eastern front in retaliation for partisan activities were common. <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dw.com%2Fen%2Fdid->

[reinhard-heydrich-aspire-to-replace-hitler%2Fa-39108720&psig=AOvVaw1716iLYyhy3gMPtKULUXrq&ust=1619296169603000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAkQjhxqFwoTCPCqirqalfACFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD](https://www.google.com/search?q=reinhard-heydrich-aspire-to-replace-hitler%2Fa-39108720&psig=AOvVaw1716iLYyhy3gMPtKULUXrq&ust=1619296169603000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAkQjhxqFwoTCPCqirqalfACFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD)

4.



Lebensraum, the living space deemed critical to the survival of the German race in the eyes of the Nazi regime. This Greater Germany would cement the hegemony and self-sufficiency of the Third Reich in Europe, with the inhabitants of this area systematically starved, murdered, and enslaved overtime. [Lebensraum - Wikipedia](#)

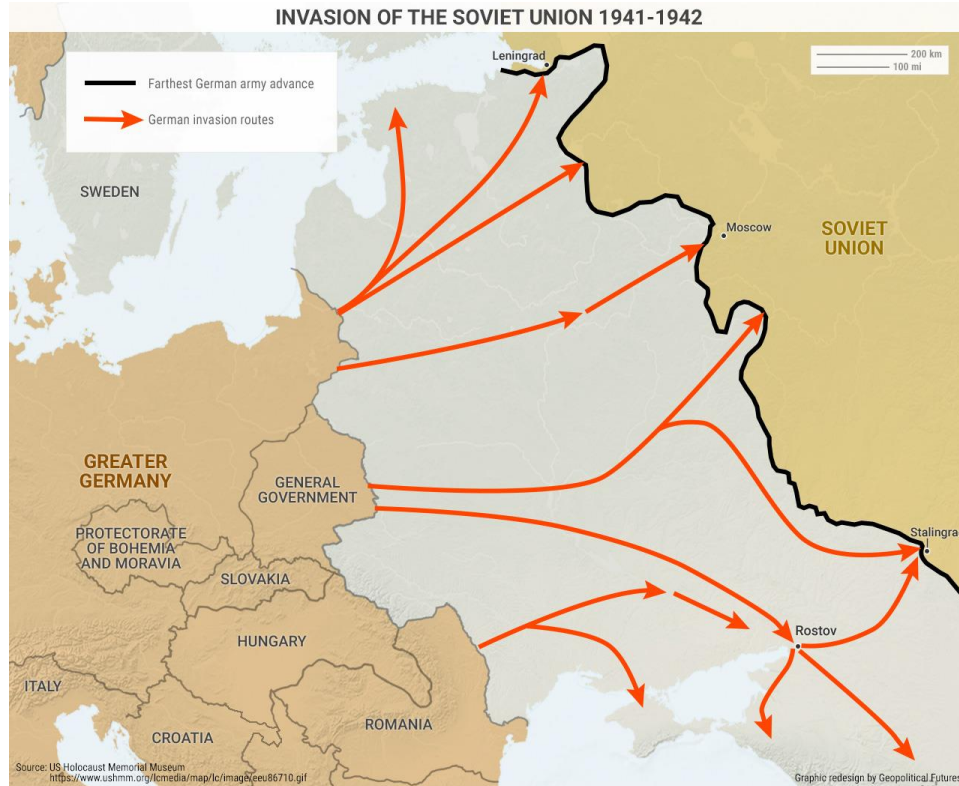
5.



A group of Soviet POWs captured by the Wehrmacht. The experience of Soviet POWs who were not executed immediately experienced inhuman conditions. As the racial and ideological enemies of the Nazi regime, Soviet POWs experienced uniquely horrid conditions as many were used as slave laborers and human shields in the Reich's ideological and racial war.

<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Ftass.com%2Fsociety%2F1153529&psig=AOvVaw26OK0ln-nLbkIxNTJOjTL&ust=1619296489597000&source=images&cd=vfe&ved=0CAkQjhxqFwoTCLCAmYiflfACFQAAAAAdAAAAABAD>

6.



The apogee of the German advance into the Soviet Union. The failure of the Wehrmacht to capture the Soviet capital of Moscow was the first failure of the blitzkrieg tactics perfected against Poland, France, Norway, and the low countries in Western Europe. This led to a protracted conflict the Germans lacked the military and economic resources to sustain. As a result, Nazi ideology was deliberately instilled into the ranks of the Wehrmacht to sustain unit cohesion and encourage regular soldiers to prosecute the Reich's racial and ideological war. [German Intelligence Failures Ahead of Stalingrad | Geopolitical Futures](#)

7.

Timeline:

- January 30, 1939: Adolf Hitler delivers speech in the Reichstag declaring a Second World War would lead to the destruction of European Jewry.
- May 25, 1940: Heinrich Himmler implements his Memorandum on the Treatment of Peoples in the East, declaring Nazi intentions to enslave the inhabitants of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union over time.

- May 13, 1941: Infamous Barbarossa Decree greenlights the waging of war upon the civilian population in the east as the racial and ideological enemies of the Third Reich.
- June 22, 1941: Nazi Germany implements Operation Barbarossa by invading the Soviet Union.
- September 29-30 1941: Largest mass shooting of Jews occurs in Babi Yar in the Soviet Ukraine.
- December 5, 1941: Failure of Wehrmacht to capture Moscow embroils Nazi Germany into a protracted and bloody conflict with the Soviet Union.
- January 10, 1942: Wannsee Conference occurs where the Nazi regime adopted the Final Solution to conduct genocide against Europe's Jews.
- July 10, 1942: Destruction of the village of Lidice in Czechoslovakia in response to Reinhard Heydrich's assassination.
- July 17, 1942-February 2, 1943: German offensive swings South as the Battle of Stalingrad begins. The crushing German defeat would prove the turning point on the eastern front.
- April 19, 1943: Warsaw Ghetto uprising where the liquidation of the major Ghetto was met with massive resistance by its residents, leading to brutal reprisals by the Germans.
- July 5-August 23, 1943: Battle of Kursk. The largest tank battle in history and crushing German defeat that would shatter their offensive capability and force the Germans to fight for national survival rather than Lebensraum.
- June 22-August 29, 1944: Operation Bagration is launched by the Soviets that would push the Germans out of Soviet territory and later Poland.
- August 1944-March 1945: As the Soviets overran German positions in Poland, frantic efforts are undertaken to dismantle the labor and death camps to hide evidence. Prisoners in these camps would subsequently be forced to engage in death marches with the retreating German troops into Germany proper.
- April 30, 1945: The Soviet flag is raised over the German Reichstag in the ruins of Berlin. That same day, Adolf Hitler commits suicide, blaming the German defeat on lack of German willpower and a global Jewish conspiracy.
-

<https://www.sutori.com/story/world-war-ii-timeline-eastern-front--tWT2jzPgB9xD6NXL2iEUKtfd>

