

In what way can the Wehrmacht be viewed as complicit in atrocities committed by the SS against Jews, POWs and civilians in Russia?

Following the end of the Second World War much attention was focused upon the atrocities committed by the SS on prisoners of war, civilians and the Jewish population of the countries occupied by Nazi Germany. It was not until forty years later, following the end of the cold war and Germany's unification that some historians started to suggest that atrocities against these groups had not solely been committed by SS forces, but that the Wehrmacht had been complicit in many of these crimes. It has even been suggested by some historians, that many major figures within the Wehrmacht were as guilty of war crimes as the leaders of the SS sentenced during the Nuremberg trials of 1946.¹ The time taken for the discovery to emerge was mainly due to tensions that arose after the Second World War between Western powers and Russia. Although atrocities were committed throughout Eastern Europe, it was not until the German forces turned their focus towards Russia in the summer of 1941 that the Wehrmacht's role within these appears to emerge. The reasons behind the Wehrmacht's complicity must therefore be associated with the way in which the war changed during the invasion of Russia. When looking at ways in which the Wehrmacht can be viewed as complicit in SS atrocities it is therefore important to study the possible reasons why Wehrmacht attitudes to Jews, POWs and civilians changed once they entered Russia.

The war in Russia brought with it unprecedented numbers of deaths on both sides with one third of German frontline soldiers having been killed, lost or wounded by March 1942.² It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the mentality of soldiers within the armies of both Germany and Russia quickly changed during such a bloody conflict. Based on this view, historians have argued that as the war intensified, a desire to enact retribution on prisoners for

¹ Headland (1992), p. 145.

² Mazower (2008), p. 139.

things witnessed whilst fighting in Russia grew within the ranks of the German army.³ Many within the Wehrmacht can therefore be seen to have developed a certain desensitisation to violence that would not be present had they not been witness to atrocities themselves. This led to reprisal killings of a vast scale within Russia, with areas within the Wehrmacht actively cooperating with the Einsatzgruppen killing squads.⁴ One such example of this can be found within an Einsatzgruppen report dated 12 November 1941, which states within that the actions against Jews, communists and partisans in Borispol were carried out smoothly thanks to the ‘energetic’ help of the German army forces there.⁵ This ‘energetic’ willingness to take part in acts of violence against the civilian population of conquered territories was present on both sides. This has led to some historians, such as Mark Mazower (2008), describing the war in Russia as a ‘war of annihilation’ as this is what Hitler asked of his generals when he turned his focus from Western Europe to Russia in 1942.⁶ Another possible reason suggested for the increase in violence by Wehrmacht soldiers is that many Germans at the time had a deep set racial hatred of Russians prior to Hitler taking power, which had been amplified through the vast amount of Nazi propaganda targeting communist Russia. The threat of communism on the western world had been highlighted throughout numerous anti-communist and anti-Russian propaganda drives by the Nazi party once they had taken power in 1933.⁷ This feeling of racial hatred and fear of Russian communism was present in many within the Wehrmacht, with Russian soldiers often being referred to as Mongols.⁸ This racial view was played on by the Nazi propaganda department who issued posters portraying Russians as wolf like figures preying on Germans as well as ones focusing on the threat of Communism

³Mackenzie (1994), p. 491.

⁴Headland (1992), p. 140.

⁵ *Operational Situation Report USSR No.132* (Nov. 12, 1941) Retrieved from <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/sitrep132.html>.

⁶ Mazower (2008), p. 159.

⁷ Welch (1983), p. 208.

⁸ Mazower (2008), p. 159.

taking over Western Europe. This helps to explain why Wehrmacht actions towards prisoners of war changed once they entered Russia.

When the Second World War first broke out in Europe, the International Committee of the Red Cross asked for assurances that the Geneva Convention would be followed in prisoner of war camps by all major parties.⁹ This meant that prisoners of war had to have access to a certain standard of food, labour, shelter and hygiene. Despite this two million red army soldiers had been allowed to starve to death whilst captured by the Wehrmacht.¹⁰ The Nazis further went against conditions stated within the Geneva Convention when Hitler issued the 'Commissar Order' which stated that all captured Russian commissars were to be killed as they were an enforcer of the communist ideology. This moment is significant when looking at the role played by the Wehrmacht in committing atrocities as this is the first truly illegal order that was issued to the Wehrmacht which was followed, and can therefore be viewed as the turning point in Wehrmacht actions during the war.¹¹ The sheer number of Russian soldiers captured during the war is staggering, with an estimated 900,000 being captured in the first week alone.¹² Throughout the period in which Germany was at war with Russia, around 5.5 million soviet soldiers were captured by the German army in total and it has been argued that as a Russian prisoner of war you were in essence sentenced to death by slave labour.¹³ This treatment can be directly linked with the way those who were sentenced during the Nuremburg trials were charged with having committed war crimes, as one case given for war crimes was the murder or ill treatment of prisoners of war. This means that many within the Wehrmacht were culpable of war crimes against soviet prisoners of war as despite the SS's involvement in camps following a decree by Hitler on 19 August 1943,

⁹ Mackenzie (1994), p. 489.

¹⁰ Auron (2003), p. 262.

¹¹ Headland (1992), p. 139.

¹² Mazower (2008), p. 159.

¹³ Krammer (2008), p. 35.

prisoners of war remained solely in the custody of the Wehrmacht.¹⁴ The reasons behind this treatment can be linked to the idea of a racial hatred of communism and the believed threat that the ‘Mongol horde’, as the Russian army was portrayed, possessed to Western Europe. An example of racial thinking being prominent within the German prisoner of war camps can be seen through the account of Bronislaw Szpakowski, a Polish prisoner of war at the Groves Rosen camp. In his account he makes reference to the treatment of eastern European prisoners in comparison to a group of Norwegian prisoners who were at the camp at the same time as him. He explains how those prisoners from countries such as Norway were given different levels of care by the guards at the camp, including better food and access to packages from home.¹⁵ This example helps to highlight that even at a basic level, such as food, racial ideals were prominent in the minds of the German soldiers in charge. He then highlights how the lack of food given to eastern European prisoners of war often led to the breakout of illnesses such as rickets among those held there.¹⁶ Szpakowski’s account further highlights how the conditions specified within the Geneva Convention were not met by many within the Wehrmacht and that some of the higher ranking members were culpable of committing war crimes against those in their custody.

Collaboration between Wehrmacht forces and the specialised SS killing squads known as the Einsatzgruppen is perhaps the most shocking example of how some within the Wehrmacht can be seen as complicit in SS atrocities. Although these elite killing squads operated predominately behind the main bulk of the German army as it advanced into Russia, there are dozens of examples, within the reports sent by Einsatzgruppen commanders to the German high command, of operations in which the killing squads were assisted by members

¹⁴ Vourkoutiotis (2003), p. 105.

¹⁵ Szpakowski, Arbeit Macht Frei, as in unpublished lecture given on time in Groves Rosen prisoner of war camp.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of the German army. The two groups have been long thought of as ‘hostile bedfellows,’¹⁷ and the rivalry between the SS and the Wehrmacht throughout the Nazi regime within Germany had led many to believe that the Wehrmacht leaders had not been aware of the role played by the Einsatzgruppen as they advanced into Russia. Following the end of the war however during the Nuremberg trials, Walter Schellenberg the head of counterintelligence for the Reich Security Main Office stated in his affidavit that he was convinced that the Wehrmacht were aware of the murderous nature of the tasks given to the Einsatzgruppen prior to the war with Russia.¹⁸ Whilst this shows that many within the Wehrmacht were conscious of the systematic killing of Jews within Russia, it was not until the Operational Situation Reports by the Einsatzgruppen were discovered in early 1947 that the true role played by the Wehrmacht was unearthed. This (alongside the strenuous relationship between America and Russia during the decades after the war and Germany’s position at the centre of this) is perhaps one of the main reasons why many high ranking officials within the Wehrmacht were not put on trial for war crimes alongside those key figures within the SS involved with the Einsatzgruppen. Although Wehrmacht leaders were aware of SS activities it is only when you look at how the regular army units took part in the killings carried out that you get a true understanding of the Wehrmacht’s overall role in SS atrocities. Just as seen with Russian prisoners of war, the motivations behind these killings can be viewed as stemming from a mixture of a deep set racially geared view of Jews, as well as in reprisal to crimes committed by Russian soldiers against Axis forces. Both of these motivations can be seen within one report in particular in which several hundred Jews were sentenced to death by Wehrmacht forces in Zloczow in retaliation for the killing of Ukrainians in the area by Soviet soldiers.¹⁹ This example is especially striking as the order is given by commanders within the Wehrmacht instead of the Wehrmacht playing a side role in an Einsatzgruppen task as found

¹⁷ Headland (1992), p. 135.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 138.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 141.

within a lot of the other reports. A source such as this helps to support the view that many within the German army had become desensitised to the brutality of war. While at first the killing of Jews, such as those in Zloczow, can be viewed as sporadic reprisals, the methods used by SS and Wehrmacht forces soon became much more systematic in their nature.²⁰ It was because of this method of warfare that the war with Russia has become synonymous with the term ‘a war of annihilation.’ The scale of atrocities involving Wehrmacht collaboration during this can be clearly seen within a winter draft report for Einsatzgruppe A, in which it states that as of December 1941 ‘about 19,000 partisans and criminals, that is, in the majority Jews’ had been killed by Wehrmacht forces alone in just white Russia.²¹ The Einsatzgruppen reports can therefore be extremely useful when studying the role played by Wehrmacht forces in war crimes carried out during the Nazi invasion of Russia as they give clear examples of how the German army heads not only know of Einsatzgruppen tasks but they actively participated with them.

Although the main role of the Einsatzgruppen was the liquidation of Jews in eastern European territories, the reports also mention several cases of other groups within Russia being targeted by the killing squads, including gypsies and those with mental disabilities. As with the killing of Jews, the Wehrmacht can once again be viewed as being complicit in crimes against these groups. Two separate occasions can be used to show how the Wehrmacht played a role in the deaths of members of groups outside of Jews and prisoners of war. The first is from Polatava in which 595 mental patients were killed following the approval of Wehrmacht commanders.²² The second example once again shows the racial ideology of the Wehrmacht that was present in the murder of other groups within Russia. Wehrmacht actions in the Karasubasar region of Russia led to the murder of 800 gypsies and

²⁰ Mazower (2008), p. 140.

²¹ Headland (1992), p. 141.

²² Ibid. p. 142.

‘insane’ people.²³ The fact that the report gives no reason as to why gypsies were targeted further suggests that many crimes committed by the Wehrmacht were motivated simply by race. These two examples both further support the idea that the Wehrmacht were complicit in SS atrocities and were guilty of committing war crimes against the people of Russia.

To conclude, despite the initial belief that war crimes against Jews, prisoners of war and other civilians had been carried out by the SS alone, it is clear that this was not the case and that the Wehrmacht played an important part in many of the atrocities committed by the SS during the invasion of Russia. Through the emergence of primary evidence such as the Einsatzgruppen Operational Situation Reports, Walter Schulenburg’s testimony at the Nuremburg trials and the personal accounts of surviving prisoners of war such as Bronislaw Szpakowski, historians have discovered the truth of Wehrmacht atrocities. It was only because of political tensions between Russia and the western powers brought about by the cold war in the middle of the twentieth century, and the German position within this, that historians did not study the matter to a greater degree out of fear of shaming the army of an allied nation. The reasons behind the violence shown by the German soldiers have been linked to the bloody and unforgiving nature of the ‘war of annihilation’ that occurred once the German army reached Russia in 1941. This is believed to have desensitised those involved and allowed pre-existing racial views of Jews, Communists and Asiatic people to play a much stronger role in the psychology of the German army. There is therefore no doubt that many within the Wehrmacht were not only complicit in atrocities committed by the SS but also, as shown in attacks on civilians such as the reprisal killings of Zloczow, often acted on their own in committing crimes against Jews, prisoners of war and other groups. These acts of violence against civilian groups and prisoners of war can be directly compared with offenses committed by those found guilty of war crimes at the Nuremburg trials and therefore

²³ Headland (1992), p. 142.

many leading members of the Wehrmacht can also be viewed as guilty of committing war crimes.

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