

Violence in Defeat: The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944–1945

By Bastiaan Willems. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xvi + 366. Hardback \$39.99. ISBN: 978-1108479721.

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Bastiaan Willems' book is an excellent study of the Wehrmacht's role in the Nazi regime's violence against its own population in the closing stages of the war. The book is part of the burgeoning literature on the Third Reich's demise, which includes Alexandra Lohse's *Prevail Until the Bitter End* (2021) and Nicole Eaton's forthcoming *German Blood, Slavic Soil*.

Violence in Defeat explores German-on-German violence, or what Willems calls "intra-ethnic violence" (3) as the Allies conquered Germany. Historians have largely blamed Hitler and the Nazi Party for the violence they unleashed against the Germans who wavered in their resistance in the west and the east. Some scholars have also connected the German-on-German violence in 1945 to earlier practices of the Nazi dictatorship such as rounding up political opponents in concentration camps. Willems brings the Wehrmacht into the picture by focusing on East Prussia and its capital Königsberg, which was designated by Hitler as one of the fortress cities to be defended to the last bullet.

This is the author's first book, which grew out of his dissertation at the University of Edinburgh. The book is based on an exhaustive list of German archives, including documents from the Wehrmacht, the SS, the Nazi Party, central and local authorities, newspapers, as well as personal sources such as letters, diaries, and memoirs. Occasionally, Willems also draws on Soviet sources.

The monograph has an excellent introduction that discusses the state of the historiography in great detail. The book is divided into six chapters. The first one deals with the state of East Prussia prior to the Red Army's arrival. The second chapter explores the Army Group Center's experiences of dealing with civilians in the Soviet Union and how it brought some of those practices to East Prussia. In chapter 3, Willems examines how General Otto Lasch and the Wehrmacht wrestled control of East Prussia from Gauleiter Erich Koch and the Nazi Party. In chapter 4, he argues that propaganda in Königsberg emphasized East Prussia over the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community). Chapter 5 deals with the Wehrmacht's destructive impulses in East Prussia, the prioritization of military interests over civilians needs, and how Lasch's determined defense of the city led to needless deaths. The final chapter explores the violence the Wehrmacht unleashed against civilians and its own members who wavered in resisting to the very end, as well as its callous use of poorly trained and equipped *Volkssturm* battalions.

The book makes two important contributions. First, it argues successfully that, in the closing stages of the war in the frontline areas, the Wehrmacht, not the Nazi Party, was the dominant player in intra-ethnic German violence. Second, it argues that Wehrmacht practices in the Soviet Union were carried over to East Prussia. It is Willems' second contribution that I will focus on in this review.

Willems argues that the Wehrmacht, having gotten used to engaging in genocidal warfare on the Eastern Front, continued some of those policies on German soil. Hence, the "intra-ethnic violence" of the Third Reich's dying days can be best explained by the Wehrmacht commanders' understanding of military necessity, which utterly subordinated the interests of civilians to battlefield needs. Willems here builds on recent studies of the Wehrmacht by

historians such as Felix Römer (*Comrades* [2019]) and Jeff Rutherford (*Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front* [2014]). These scholars emphasize the primacy of military necessity over ideology in the war of annihilation in the Soviet Union. In this interpretation, the Wehrmacht engaged in genocidal practices in the East, even though the acceptance of genocidal ideology by the officers and men was far from universal. One striking example Willems offers is that the Army Group Center, which eventually retreated into East Prussia, had “transported” (although “enslaved” would be a more accurate term) more than half a million Soviet civilians to the Third Reich by October 1943 (86). They did so in order to deny potential manpower to the Red Army and to increase German manpower in factories. As Willems rightfully argues, the Wehrmacht could not completely unlearn its conduct and how it viewed civilians when the army crossed the border into East Prussia.

Willems’ insights are original and helpful in thinking about how the Wehrmacht waged war on German soil. However, in my view he takes the concept of necessity too far in trying to explain the Wehrmacht’s conduct. Willems demonstrates that the German army was brutal to perceived malingerers and defeatists and that it displayed criminal indifference to German civilians seeking to flee further west, as it always prioritized the interests of the military, while characterizing commanders’ approach to German civilians as “criminally negligent” (241). As examples of continuity in genocidal practices from the Soviet Union to East Prussia, Willems also cites the presence of 600,000 Hiwis (Soviet auxiliaries) in the Wehrmacht, the flooding of urban areas to slow down the Red Army, the deployment of Jewish and Polish prisoners to build defensive positions, and the looting and destruction of property. All of these are valid points, but none indicate that the Wehrmacht targeted Germans in the war of annihilation. There were no mass shootings of German civilians or systematic burnings of German villages. Clearly, the trail of physical and human destruction the Wehrmacht left in the Soviet Union was greater than in Germany, even based on evidence Willems offers. Thus, military necessity can only go so far to explain the German army’s treatment of civilians.

Overall, *Violence in Defeat* is a vital contribution to our understanding of how the war ended in the East, and anybody interested in the Eastern Front and the Third Reich’s downfall should read it.

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At the Edge of the Wall: Public and Private Spheres in Divided Berlin

By Hanno Hochmuth. Translated by David Burnett. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2021. Pp. xiii + 350. Cloth \$145.00. ISBN: 978-1789208740.

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Contrary to expectations, this is less a book about the Berlin Wall (or “antifascist protection barrier”) than about the urban cultures and identities immediately on either side of it. Hanno Hochmuth’s focus on the neighbouring boroughs of Friedrichshain and Kreuzberg is more apparent in his German title: *Kiezgeschichte*. The term “Kiez” conveys the unique sense of identity and belonging that the streets and bars of a particular neighbourhood can engender, even to less deeply embedded tourists and outsiders. In exploring how the