

The Origin and Continued Perpetration of the Myth of the Clean *Wehrmacht*

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In August 1945, the United States, Soviet Union, and United Kingdom met at Potsdam to determine how to deal with a defeated Germany. One of the most important measures agreed upon was the elimination of the deeply entrenched National Socialist ideology, but how exactly to go about this was not agreed upon. Initially, they pursued denazification to eliminate any trace of the Nazi regime. Swastikas and other memorabilia were taken down, streets were renamed, and former National Socialist members were restricted from working certain professions. Most important, however, was the prosecution of thousands of Germans as war criminals.

While the Soviet Union was altogether diligent, the Western Allies hesitated in the full persecution of former party members. Nazi ideology had permeated German society so deeply that around 10% of Germans were full members by the end of the war.¹ Removing all former members of the party from their occupations would cripple the administration and institutions of allied-occupied Germany. By 1951, denazification had been mostly ended in the West, not because it was “complete,” but mostly out of perceived necessity due to the increasing Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union and the overtures for independence being made by the soon-to-be-established West German government. As a result, a silent permeation of Nazi rhetoric was allowed to remain throughout German society with no effective counter. Some of the propaganda narratives perpetrated throughout the Second World War were highly regarded in Germany until a more active movement to dispel them emerged in the 1990s. Some of these fictions, especially the ones concerning the conduct of the German military during the war, continue to hold considerable influence in the information space. This is the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht*—the *Wehrmacht* being the German armed forces from 1933 to 1945. The myth’s creation shows how a lack of debate surrounding historical topics leads to the perpetration of false narratives that cover up the truth and marginalize opposing sources.

¹ Chris McNab, *Hitler's Masterplan: The Essential Facts and Figures for Hitler's Third Reich* (London: Amber Books, 2011), 22-23.

What the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* entails is different depending on what sources one consults, and its meaning has changed over time. Generally, the myth centers around the regular German military during the Second World War and its participation in the Holocaust, as well as the countless crimes against humanity committed by Nazi Germany over the course of the conflict. The narrative goes that the *Wehrmacht* did not participate in war crimes, and that the atrocities were committed by the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) along with its corresponding subunits. Overall, the myth aims to disconnect the *Wehrmacht* as much as possible from Nazi ideology, arguing that it was an apolitical organization that only conducted combat against regular military forces. The focus of this essay is not to disprove the myth, as it has already been widely debunked by historians. There are countless amounts of evidence demonstrating *Wehrmacht* participation in the Holocaust from the highest levels of command down to the enlisted soldier. Many atrocities and acts of extermination were carried out by regular army, navy, and air force units both with and without the involvement of the SS. Instead of disproving the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht*, this paper aims to explain how the myth was created and how a small number of voices being regarded with complete objectivity, while opposition was ignored, serves as a dangerous example for how history can be written and recounted.

The conditions that enabled the creation of the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* can be traced to the establishment of the West German state in 1949 and the *Bundeswehr* (West German military) in 1955. With the Cold War starting in the late 1940s, and the beginning of the Korean War in 1950, the United States and its allies were worried that their forces deployed in Europe to oppose a possible Soviet invasion of the continent were not sufficient. To supplement their numbers, the formation of a new German Army was slowly put into action. The “genesis” of the *Bundeswehr* thus began with the meeting of fifteen former high-ranking Nazi officers at Himmerod Abbey in 1950, invited by then West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to deliberate on how to build a functional army that would complement NATO forces in Europe. Together, this group drafted and released the Himmerod Memorandum, a “...sweeping document that ranged

from psychologic to political, from military to constitutional consideration” that would form the basis of the *Bundeswehr*’s formation and organization.²

The importance of the Himmerod Memorandum as it pertains to the creation of the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* has to do with its “psychological” considerations mentioned above. Hans Speidel, a former *Generalleutnant* of the German Army (the *Heer*) and future four-star General in the *Bundeswehr*, demanded in the document a “‘Cessation of all defamation of the German soldier (including the *Waffen-SS*) and measures to change public opinion both at home and abroad’ with regard to the military.”³ Regarding demands from the West German government itself, the memorandum stipulated an immediate granting of full pension to all *Wehrmacht* veterans under the motto “Equal rights for all civil servants,” as well as a “... ‘full apology’ to German soldiers for all defamation heaped upon them by Germans and Allies alike.” Equally controversial was a proposal to release of 3,600 Germans incarcerated as war criminals and suspend any further war crimes trials to ensure the “...rehabilitation of the German soldier.”⁴ These former high-ranking Nazi officers, several of whom would go on to fill critical positions in the young *Bundeswehr*, were campaigning for an erasure of the *Wehrmacht*’s “dirty” history. Not only would former *Wehrmacht* soldiers be absolved of their abhorrent past, but members of the *Waffen-SS* would as well, and the history itself would be rewritten. The release of war criminals and a dedicated government effort to influence public opinion regarding the *Wehrmacht* would mean the end, and even reversal, of denazification efforts in West Germany. The end of the program was deemed necessary by both West Germany and NATO to properly create a German military capable of resisting a potential invasion from its Eastern border.

The misrepresentation of the *Wehrmacht*’s conduct did not begin with the end of denazification in 1951; in fact, the establishment of its foundations started while the fighting raged on the Eastern Front. As historian David A. Harrisville puts it in his book *The Virtuous Wehrmacht*,

² Herwig H. Holger. “Aggression Contained? The Federal Republic of Germany and International Security,” NATO, 1996, <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/96-98/herwig.pdf>, 22.

³ Holger, “Aggression Contained,” 24.

⁴ Holger, “Aggression Contained,” 24.

“...the primary pillars of the myth were firmly in place long before the last shots were fired. Its original authors were not politicians or high-ranking veterans but ordinary soldiers recounting wartime events to their loved ones from bunkers and foxholes across the front.”⁵ Letters from the frontlines, eventually numbering over 10 billion, portrayed the fighting in Russia and Eastern Europe to those back home as a noble fight against an otherworldly adversary, with war crimes either not mentioned or justified as necessary actions against an enemy not even regarded as human. Harrisville notes that, following the end of hostilities: “When veterans discussed their wartime service or politicians passed laws protecting former war criminals, they were simply confirming what the German public already ‘knew’: that ‘their’ men had held themselves to a high moral standard, even if others had not.”⁶ To the postwar German public, the Nuremberg Trials and subsequent denazification efforts were the actual attempts to erase history, not the other way around. The end of these efforts and the release of war criminals from prison a few years after the war’s end (almost entirely without serving their full sentences) served as further proof to Germans that their family members, friends, and countrymen had been “right all along” about their non-involvement with the atrocities of the Eastern Front or the necessity of these atrocities in the first place. This mentality would be further inflamed when West Germany was admitted to NATO and postured to fight against a potential Soviet attack as Germans found themselves, much like during the reign of Nazi Germany, being told that the Soviet Union and communism were the enemies of the German people.

When creating the “official history” of the Second World War, Cold War tensions severely impacted the narrative regarding the Wehrmacht. With animosity growing between the United States and the Soviet Union, American army officers directed groups of former German officers to create a comprehensive multi-volume history of the Eastern Front to garner military intelligence about the USSR. This effort was headed by *Generaloberst* Franz Halder (former chief of staff of Army High Command, *Oberkommando des Heeres*); Halder himself had helped draft the infamous Commissar Order and Barbarossa Decree that granted Wehrmacht personnel

⁵ David A. Harrisville, *The Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 209.

⁶ Harrisville, *The Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 210.

the legal ability to execute Soviet civilians and POWs at will without persecution or repercussions during the war.

The “Halder Group,” as it was named, oversaw all writings that the US Army Historical Division, as well as most Western historians at the time, would use. They vetted all texts and demanded rewrites and revisions of texts deemed too different from the agreed-upon narrative authors had to abide by. Due to the Eastern Front being almost solely between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Wehrmacht documents were the only sources historians and Western military personnel used for their writings, whether they were official military records or more irregular historical pieces (letters, unofficial reports, etc.). Soviet sources, or documents from former German allies now part of the Communist Bloc, were not consulted as they were viewed as unreliable propaganda, given the hostile political climate of the time. Historian Bernd Wegner comments on the bias that “The writing of German history on the Second World War, and in particular on the Russian front, was for over two decades, and in part up to the present day—and to a far greater extent than most people realize—the work of the defeated,”⁷ with the eventual result that “In the work of the Historical Division the traces of the war of annihilation for which the Wehrmacht leadership was responsible were covered up.”⁸ With this unprecedented and unopposed control over historical narrative, Franz Halder and his group of veterans rewrote the history of the entire Eastern Front, covering up atrocities with half-truths and lies in an attempt to shift any possible blame from the *Wehrmacht* to Hitler and the SS.

The consequences of the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* were immediate and its effects still permeate our society and information space to this day. Though the myth has been debunked in academic circles since the 1990s, the popular representation of the *Wehrmacht* is still a controversial topic online. Nowhere is this most evident in the “editing battles” that occur on online pages related to the Second World War. Wikipedia articles are allowed to be edited by a large amount of people, leading to a biased editing of pages by individuals claiming to be specialists. As one author states, “...pages reveal that some editors are too reluctant to tie any member of the

⁷ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 229.

⁸ Wette, *The Wehrmacht*, 232.

Wehrmacht—even at times senior commanders—too closely to the Nazi regime and its criminal activities.”⁹ These editors draw the sources for their edits from the same sources once held in such high regard by Western historians: the memoirs of German generals and historical archives dating from the 1950s and 1960s. The problem that continues to fuel the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* is demonstrated by how many regarded these writings as objective. Though nearly all historians agree on the falsity of the myth, the existence of “official” sources published by accredited historians are still used by Nazi sympathizers as justification for the editing of information online. Given the trust that many place on Wikipedia, these misconceptions pushed by “amateur historians” damage common efforts to combat the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* in the modern information space.

Critical to the fabrication of the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* is what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie calls “The Danger of a Single Story.”¹⁰ Adichie focuses on how the existence of a sole narrative about a people or event misleads an audience and pushes stereotypes forward. This could occur simply because there are no other accounts, but in our case the other accounts—i.e., Soviet and other non-German sources—are purposely ignored. Adichie asserts that, regarding stories, “How they are told, who tells them, when they’re told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power,”¹¹ going on to define power as “...the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”¹² The former German officers that created the myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* possessed absolute power over the writing of the narratives that would be used by both the U.S. Army Historical Division and most historians. The lack of any opposition to the established narrative led the myth to be widely believed until the 1990s. It was only with the end of the Cold War, which helped lower the stigma surrounding Soviet sources and saw the new Russian government allowing access to many previously

⁹ David Stahel, “The Battle for Wikipedia: The New Age of ‘Lost Victories?’,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 31:3 (2018): 3, 396-402.

¹⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” TED Conferences, LLC, Oxford, July 2009, 00:00.

¹¹ Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” 09:25.

¹² Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” 10:00.

censored historical archives, that German sources stopped being the “single story” in the popular narrative regarding the Eastern Front.

The myth of the clean *Wehrmacht* was not created by coincidence; the use of incredibly biased sources based off the writings of former German officers, combined with the disregard of any other sources, resulted in a false narrative of the Eastern Front that was, for dozens of years, regarded as the objective truth. As a result, the war crimes Germany committed on the Eastern Front were largely ignored or blamed on paramilitary actors like the SS. The lack of debate on the veracity of these accounts until the 1990s still affects how many perceive the Wehrmacht to this day, with debates and “editing wars” changing its portrayal on the modern information space. This “danger of a single story,” however, is not unique to the Wehrmacht. American audiences would be able to find a very similar example in the “Lost Cause” myth that is widely accepted in the Southern United States and seeks to portray the Confederacy as noble victims in the American Civil War. False narratives are used extensively by Russia to portray its war in Ukraine as a preemptive strike meant to cleanse apparent Nazi ideologues hidden in the government. All these false narratives gain traction due to the absence, or purposeful censorship, of opposing voices, especially online where an increasing majority of individuals get their news and information. The result is the extension of wars, the marginalization of peoples, and the continued revision of history. It is for this result that, to gain a more objective view of the world that protects groups from persecution, we should aim as much as possible to maintain a free and open information space that strives to discern the truth from a wide array of narratives.