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FROM IMPERIAL ARMY TO BUNDESWEHR: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE ROLE OF THE MILITARY IN GERMAN HISTORY

Willensmenschen: über deutsche Offiziere. Edited by Ursula Breymayer, Bernd Ulrich and Karin Wieland. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999. Pp. 239. ISBN 3-596-14438-8. DM 28.80.

Die anderen Soldaten: Wehrkraftersetzung, Gehorsamsverweigerung und Fahnenflucht im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Edited by Norbert Haase and Gerhard Paul. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995. Pp. 240. ISBN 3-596-12769-6. DM 19.90.

Das Nationalkomitee 'Freies Deutschland' und der Bund Deutscher Offiziere. Edited by Gerd R. Ueberschär. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995. Pp. 304. ISBN 3-596-12633-9. DM 24.90.

Twentieth-century Germany's (military) history has been the subject of heated, sometimes acrimonious controversies in the Federal Republic. In recent years, historians and the German public have been engaged, for example, in debates over the relative merit of different kinds of German resistance against National Socialism, and over the place of deserters in German history of the Second World War. Such soul-searching has culminated in angry debates over the role of the Wehrmacht in crimes against humanity which followed in the wake of the exhibition 'Verbrechen der Wehrmacht' (crimes of the Wehrmacht) in Austria and Germany. The books under consideration here all have a contribution to make to our understanding of this troubled and contested past, and in particular to the question of the role of the military in German history.

Willensmenschen highlights the role of officers in German history, emphasizing in particular the continuities that existed between the Wilhelmine army, the Reichswehr, Wehrmacht, and Bundeswehr. The contributions focus on officers in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany, highlighting continuities in their mentalities and social standing. Indeed, the same men often occupied leading military roles in successive German armies, having been able to make the transition, despite lost wars, into the army that took the place of the defeated one.

Against this background, and given Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of two world wars, it is no exaggeration if the editors of *Willensmenschen* claim that '[t]he Germans can probably not be understood without their officers' (p. 10). The collection attempts to illuminate, and to some extent explain, the officer in German history – his self-perception, and perception by society, the traditions and the continuities in his role, attitudes, and behaviour. The elevation of the Schlieffen Plan to a near-certain recipe for victory is a good example of the myths that were created around the German army and its officers. Together with the myth of the stab in the back and a German army that had been 'undefeated at the front', it aimed to preserve the greatness of the Imperial army that had been for so long the foundation of German military thinking. Another telling example is Bernd Ulrich's account of the 'heroic' death of Ernst Lindemann, commander of the *Bismarck*, who met his end on board the sinking vessel standing to attention with a military

salute, having previously telegraphed to Hitler: 'We are fighting to the last in our belief in you, my Führer, and in the steadfast trust in Germany's victory' – an early version of similarly 'heroic' statements from Stalingrad barely two years later (pp. 11–12). Rather than contemplating surrender, Lindemann condemned himself and his men to fighting 'to the last grenade' – and as a result the vast ship took 2,221 men with it when it sank in May 1941. This 'hero's death' was self-consciously staged in an effort to salvage something of Germany's military tradition and grandeur (p. 14). It was this willingness to make sacrifices, even the ultimate sacrifice of one's life, that accorded to officers the exalted position that they occupied even in peace-time, and that earned them the respect and admiration of civilian society (p. 23).

An officer was in a unique position of immense prestige and power, particularly following the glorious victories of the so-called wars of unification. Aspired to by many, being an officer was always unattainable to a large number of 'undesirables'. Only the right background and religion would qualify one for this revered position: aspirants from a low social background, Socialists, non-Prussians (in the Prussian army), most Catholics and Jews (with some exceptions, as Werner Angress demonstrates here) were all largely excluded. At the same time, officers and their uniforms attracted reverence among those who could only aspire to this exalted position. Women were sometimes sexually attracted to the uniform and its associated social standing, while officers' wives and daughters seem to have been imbued with, and largely conformed to, a particular military mind-set. Thus, not just officers were *Willensmenschen*, but so, too, were their wives and daughters, as Gudrun Schwarz and Karin Wieland show in their contributions.

However, it was becoming increasingly difficult for officers to meet the high demands society placed upon them. Stig Förster's contribution summarizes his thesis of the German General Staff's expectation of a long war before 1914 and shows that the 'demi-Gods' of the Prussian General Staff had actually come to the end of their wisdom in the years before the First World War. Germany's officers no longer knew how to fight a successful (short) war in an age of industrialized warfare (p. 27).

The Wilhelmine officer corps faced other threats, too, such as a growing and vociferous criticism of militarism from widely differing social circles, not just from social democrats, pacifists and left-liberals, but increasingly also from politicians in the Centre party and of the National Liberal party. Moreover, the time of peoples' wars had dawned. In the age of general conscription, wars would become harder to control. It would become increasingly difficult to predict their duration and nature, and, ultimately, increasingly difficult to wage them at all. At the same time, the military had lost its traditional monopoly on questions of war, as future wars relied on the help of the economy, political parties, pressure groups, and the population at large, without whose support modern war could no longer be waged (p. 26). It looked as if the basis for the German military's exalted position – being able to fight successful wars – was being steadily eroded. And yet, despite their pessimistic view of the future war, Germany's generals also longed for it. War was even seen as an end in itself for a group of people whose sole purpose in life it was to train and prepare for it.

The defeat of 1918 did not harm Germany's officers in the way that one might expect. In the interwar years, some former officers even began dreaming of a future war in which they could avoid the mistakes that had been made in 1914–18, and many were able to play a decisive role when Germany fought another world war. But even after two lost wars, officers were still able to capitalize on their special position within German society.

Both after the First and Second World Wars, a conscious effort was made to build on personnel continuities. For the Bundeswehr, this move demanded (implicitly and explicitly) a rehabilitation of German soldiers. The ‘defamation of the Wehrmacht’ had to cease and the German people were to be educated into recognizing and appreciating ‘true soldierly spirit’ (p. 50). Detlef Bald’s ‘Alte Kameraden’ makes for depressing reading in this context. All forty-four generals and admirals that had been recruited into the new Bundeswehr by the autumn of 1957 had been exclusively taken from the large pool of former Wehrmacht generals and admirals, and by relying on such old and trusted officers (a large number of them from the former General Staff, particularly from the operations section of the war in the East), it had been possible to assemble a new officer corps ‘very quickly’. Four years after the founding of the Bundeswehr, of the 14,900 professional officers of the new army, 12,360 had already been an officer in the Wehrmacht. In addition, 300 officers had been taken from the leadership of the SS, some of whom were even promoted to generals (p. 51). The available statistics show that the Bundeswehr in the 1950s constituted a collective continuity of a military world that spanned the years from the Kaiserreich to the Nazi regime, for the youngest general to have been taken over was forty-eight, and the oldest sixty-two years old (with the average age at fifty-seven (p. 51)). Many of these resented and objected to attempts in the new Republic to introduce (finally) the primacy of the civilian over the military, and the majority of the new officer corps begrudged the parliamentary control under which the new German army was placed. Firmly located within the tradition of previous armies and officer corps, it was inevitable that frictions would occur vis-à-vis those institutions which were likely to put limitations on the military.

As Werner Bühner shows in his contribution ‘Offiziere im “Wirtschaftswunderland”’, some officers who were unable to continue their military career in the Federal Republic none the less managed to salvage something of their former status in the country of the ‘economic miracle’, and many achieved an ‘almost frictionless change into leading positions in the economy’ (p. 37). In many ways they were well placed here. Not only did the military and economic elites both feel unfairly blamed, criticized, and persecuted for the criminal acts committed in Germany’s name during the war, but both used the same moral high ground from which to defend themselves: having acted out of love of the fatherland, a willingness for sacrifice, and a sense of duty (p. 38). While initially both their futures seemed bleak, the Cold War soon made their rehabilitation possible. Many officers, forced to take a break from their military careers during this time, found a new, more lucrative home within the economy, where their military training and thinking was put to good effect, particularly when it came to training staff for leading positions. For such a civilian career an officer seemed ideally qualified and no re-training was considered necessary. However, ultimately their role in the economic ‘miracle’ of the post-war years was relatively insignificant. Increasingly, instead of the military values of thriftiness and simplicity, society began to value consumption and the beginnings of luxury, while among the young, there was an increasing distancing from the military spirit and the values of the officer corps. By 1968, a public opinion survey revealed that ‘officer’ ranked lowest among a list of fifteen professions (p. 47). The exalted state of the officer in German society, as someone to whom one both looked up and aspired, was finally being eroded.

Anti-communism had been an important bridge for the continuity that had connected all officer generations with each other since the end of the Kaiserreich, and it had provided the common link throughout all the different political systems. In fact, it even increased in ideological importance after 1945, for anti-communism allowed the advancement of

a revisionist interpretation of the military during the National Socialist regime. The war in the East, and anti-communism after 1945, acquired a symbiotic relationship, and German officers, among them the former chief of the General Staff Franz Halder, made themselves and their expertise available to continue with the 'war against Bolshevism' from the newly erected frontline in western Europe (pp. 61–2). From here to rearmament it was only a small step.

However, as the collection *Die anderen Soldaten* ('the other soldiers') demonstrates, it would be wrong to assume that the history of the German army was throughout the twentieth century only one of obedience and compliance. Some soldiers were able to make choices, and at times to refuse orders which they considered unacceptable; some deserted from the army and from their comrades in the knowledge that their punishment, if captured, would be almost certain death. Addressing the history of those whose conscience led them to refuse to join the war in 1939, or of those who deserted the fighting during it, has been a particularly thorny issue for Germans, for several reasons. Old military traditions and values have long denied deserters and 'shirkers' the right to be publicly remembered or mourned. Their widows were not eligible for state pensions, and their death was portrayed as a disgrace to their families. Moreover, increasingly accepting of the fact that they are regarded as a people of perpetrators ('ein Volk von Tätern'), it is still controversial in Germany to point out the fact that among those perpetrators there were also victims, and that not everyone accepted the role that the National Socialist regime had allotted them. Not everyone had been prepared to fight for the German Reich, or if at first they had, they were not willing to fight to the bitter end and die a heroic death, following Ernst Lindemann's example. Until the German Bundestag debated the question of a rehabilitation of victims of the National Socialist military justice system in September 1994, such German victims had been largely ignored. They were not among the dead that the country honoured on remembrance days, and as 'shirkers' and cowards, they did not deserve the respect accorded to their comrades who had died fighting for (Nazi) Germany. Nor did they make it into the ranks of honourable (civilian) resisters.

The controversial exhibition of crimes of the Wehrmacht has only recently brought home to Germans that the crimes against humanity committed on the Eastern Front and elsewhere could not have been carried out, indeed had not been carried out, without the support of the Wehrmacht, of 'ordinary soldiers'. Until that point, it had been widely believed among the German public that the 'clean' Wehrmacht had not been implicated in such crimes, and that the atrocities committed in the East had been the responsibility of the SS. But at the same time, as the editors of *Die anderen Soldaten* emphasize, even within that complicit Wehrmacht, there were always individual soldiers who refused to obey the murderous regime, who recognized the wrong in the orders they were given, and who sometimes even went as far as to oppose them. The volume focuses on those groups and individuals. This is particularly commendable because, as Haase and Paul show, interest in studying this important phenomenon of German military history had until the mid-nineties been very limited among historians of modern Germany. Even when resistance became the topic of the day in the 1980s (and when the term was stretched 'almost intolerably' to include even those who did not so much resist as refuse to be indoctrinated), the resistance of ordinary soldiers in the Wehrmacht did not attract the attention of historians, let alone the public (p. 9).

As Manfred Messerschmidt outlines in his contribution, the Nazis' expectation of obedience was able to draw on a long tradition. He traces such attitudes back to the early

nineteenth century to show that the mentality on which the Nazis based their expectation of obedience and sense of duty had been well established in Germany. One hundred years of general conscription, from 1814 to 1918, had left their trace on German society, and resulted in peculiar military modes of thinking (p. 19). Already under Wilhelm II, soldiers were expected to be apolitical, to be convinced of the necessity of absolute obedience, and as early as 1891, German soldiers could be asked to shoot their own relatives, if an order demanded it of them (p. 24). Long before German soldiers swore an oath of allegiance to Hitler and were then duty-bound to fight his war, they had sworn allegiance to Prussian kings and German emperors.

Die anderen Soldaten and other subsequent publications on the topic received an enormous boost by the opening of archives in Eastern Europe after 1989. General readers are well advised to use this work as a starting point, as well as some more recent publications by some of the contributors to the volume (e.g. Detlev Bald, Johannes Klotz, and Wolfram Wette's *Mythos Wehrmacht* (Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001); Wolfram Wette's collection *Pazifistische Offiziere in Deutschland, 1871–1933* (Donat Verlag, 1999); and Manfred Messerschmidt's *Was Damals Recht war: NS Militär- und Straffjustiz im Vernichtungskrieg* (Klartext Verlag, 1996)).

The third volume under discussion also benefited from this new archival evidence and offers new interpretations on another fraught topic in recent German history: resistance in Nazi Germany. At times, that discussion threatened to include almost everybody in the circle of resisters who had ever objected to anything the Nazi leadership had done, and yet, some active resisters have received very little attention, and even less public recognition. A particularly controversial aspect of German resistance is the role of the 'Nationalkomitee "Freies Deutschland"' (NKFD) and the 'Bund Deutscher Offiziere' (BDO), whose role in the history of German resistance had been 'tarnished', at least in many West German eyes, by their association with communism, and by having colluded with the enemy, i.e. the Soviet Union, during the war.

The NKFD was founded in July 1943 in collaboration between the Soviet leadership and German communists in exile, and recruited its members from among German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union (p. 31). With the help of regular radio broadcasts and press releases, the group attempted to undermine the German regime. The League of German Officers was founded in September, and both organizations soon worked together for similar aims. The German officers who became its members had to absolve a remarkable leap of faith, away from the Nazi belief in the sub-human nature of 'Jewish-Bolshevists'. It is unclear to what extent the Soviet leadership might have regarded the NKDF as the possible nucleus for a new post-war German government, although it does seem certain that it hoped to be able to guarantee a certain future to the KPD once the war was over (p. 35). For many West Germans after the war, however, the activities of the 'Nationalkomitee' and their members' collaboration with the enemy amounted to treason, rather than resistance.

Gerd Ueberschär's volume combines German and Russian views of the role of the 'Nationalkomitee', and aims to break away from the tendentious, anti-communist interpretations of the role and importance of the group which had dominated in West Germany. Until quite recently it had been possible to dismiss their efforts and to portray them merely as 'traitors'. Their role within German resistance has always been contested, but much like that of deserters, is now increasingly being considered as a legitimate and laudable attempt at resistance against the Nazi regime.

The collection presents for the first time research based on sources that had been unavailable before 1989 and, following the end of the Cold War, also accounts that can afford to dispense with the political partisan attitude that coloured the many post-war accounts of the activities and motivations of the group. As Ueberschär points out, however, this is not an attempt to put the members of the committee on a pedestal. Of course, in East Germany, the group's reputation had been rather different. Celebrated as a decisive 'marker in the history of German anti-fascist resistance', an abundance of memoir literature had been published in the GDR, and East German historians never doubted the fact that the 'Nationalkomitee' and the 'Bund deutscher Offiziere' deserved a firm place in the history of German resistance to Nazism, as Paul Heider's essay shows.

The volume includes documents from newly accessible Russian archives, including the group's first manifesto directed at the Wehrmacht and the German people, demanding 'an immediate decision of us Germans' to 'help save the Fatherland from its lowest disgrace' by refusing to obey the Nazi regime's orders and fighting to liberate Germany (pp. 265–8). In addition, it contains new documents relating to the post-war trial of the Officers' League's president Walther von Seydlitz by a military tribunal in Moscow in 1950, whose criticism of the Soviet Union led to a trial against him on grounds of crimes against humanity, committed under his command in Novgorod in 1941 (Leonid Resin, 'Der Moskauer Prozess gegen General von Seydlitz im Spiegel russischer Dokumente'). The volume also includes personal accounts from former members of the NKFD and BDO which indicate, for example, the motivation of some officers for joining the BDO while prisoners of war in the Soviet Union: 'We ... considered the BDO a good thing, because we were convinced that the war was lost and that any further blood shed was a crime. We might not have joined the BDO if we hadn't experienced the inferno of Stalingrad. Initially this was no stand against Hitler yet' (p. 214). Indeed, as Ueberschär shows, the leadership in the Soviet Union was able to capitalize on the shock and anti-Hitler mood following the horrific battle at Stalingrad to recruit German prisoners of war to this new opposition group.

Although the work of the two groups had become the subject of academic discussion in the 1980s, there was a public outcry when it was revealed that their members should feature in the planned permanent Berlin exhibition 'Resistance against National Socialism'. Such prejudice was only being eroded following the tumultuous events of 1989/90, and the book under discussion is an excellent example of the results of this sea-change.

It is true that, realistically, the effect that both institutions could have had was rather limited, although the Nazi leadership did fear their propaganda. This should not mean, however, that their role within German resistance should be regarded as negligible or even ignored. Rather, they made a serious attempt to fight against Hitler and his regime, from within the constraints of their position as prisoners of war abroad. After decades of politically motivated denial of their importance, historians are finally recognizing that the history of resistance to Nazi Germany's leadership also included those whose aims or motivations (in some cases) had for so long been considered ideologically 'suspect'.

These debates highlight more than just the importance of the military in German history. Recent research on the subject has revealed evidence of the continuities in military values, from Wilhelmine Germany to the Federal Republic. Moreover, anti-communism was a powerful link between the 'Third Reich' and the Federal Republic, and its effects were not only felt in the passionate debate that was at times conducted over the role of 'the wrong' resisters to the Nazi regime. The recent heated debate over German war

crimes on the Eastern front has been just as affected by the lingering belief in some quarters in the presumed evil of the Soviet Union and the alleged brutality of communism. German war crimes, in this reading, were merely a reaction to the brutality and inhumanity of barbarous Bolshevism. Even the end of the Cold War, indeed the demise of the Soviet Union, has not brought an end to such views. But despite such continuities, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the military's predominance in German society seems well and truly broken. Few young Germans today aspire to being an officer, and Germany's fraught (military) history no doubt has played a large role in effecting this change.

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