



Terror in the Balkans: German Armies and Partisan Warfare

By Ben H. Shepherd

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Germany's 1941 seizure of Yugoslavia led to an insurgency as bloody as any in World War II. The Wehrmacht waged a brutal counter-insurgency campaign in response, and by 1943 German troops in Yugoslavia were engaged in operations that ranked among the largest of the entire European war. Their actions encompassed massive reprisal shootings, the destruction of entire villages, and huge mobile operations unleashed not just against insurgents but also against the civilian population believed to be aiding them. *Terror in the Balkans* explores the reasons behind the Wehrmacht's extreme security measures in southern and eastern Europe.

Ben Shepherd focuses his study not on the high-ranking generals who oversaw the campaign but on lower-level units and their officers, a disproportionate number of whom were of Austrian origin. He uses Austro-Hungarian army records to consider how the personal experiences of many Austrian officers during the Great War played a role in brutalizing their behavior in Yugoslavia. A comparison of Wehrmacht counter-insurgency divisions allows Shepherd to analyze how a range of midlevel commanders and their units conducted themselves in different parts of Yugoslavia, and why. Shepherd concludes that the Wehrmacht campaign's violence was driven not just by National Socialist ideology but also by experience of the fratricidal infighting of Yugoslavia's ethnic groups, by conditions on the ground, and by doctrines that had shaped the military mindsets of both Germany and Austria since the late nineteenth century. He also considers why different Wehrmacht units exhibited different degrees of ruthlessness and restraint during the campaign.

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Editorial Review

Review

A sophisticated look at a bloody chapter in the history of World War II. Avoiding simplistic explanations, Shepherd digs deep into both the archives and the theoretical literature to produce the most convincing explanation yet for the brutality of German anti-partisan operations in Yugoslavia. He is, in particular, the first to locate the origins of the atrocities on the Eastern Front with those officers of the Wehrmacht whose careers began in the Habsburg Army in the First World War. Like his earlier *War in the Wild East*, *Terror in the Balkans* is a fresh and provocative book. (Robert Citino, University of North Texas)

Shepherd brilliantly establishes and contextualizes the Wehrmacht's central role in Nazi Germany's campaign of terror and genocide in the Balkans during World War II. Focusing on middle-level field commanders, the work convincingly traces the army's counterproductive counterinsurgency policies to the officers' experiences of 1914-1918 and their aftermath. (Dennis Showalter, Colorado College)

Shepherd's book is important for a number of reasons. The first and most basic one is the fact that it gives an additional historical dimension to studies about the war on the Balkan front which has not been granted the same generous attention by scholarly research as have other war theaters. Another aspect that Shepherd raises is that an analysis of the murderous manifestation of Nazi ideology is based on principles that had already been formulated at the end of the nineteenth century and were applied in the test case of the Balkan arena...Shepherd's careful and precise research proves that the Wehrmacht was a partner in the war crimes that Germany executed during the course of the war...His book has the ability as well to cast light on the cultural background for the war crimes and racial murder carried out during the 1990s after the breakup of Yugoslavia. (Tal Tovy *H-Net Reviews* 2012-08-01)

In this nuanced analysis of German counterinsurgency operations in the Balkans, 1941-43, **Shepherd** eschews the facile explanation that Nazi ideology and indoctrination explain the genocidal conduct of German soldiers in WWII. Instead, Shepherd concludes that a multitude of diverse and disparate forces interacted, leading mid-level German commanders to demand, and their soldiers to wage, campaigns of genocide and terror in war-torn Yugoslavia. German commanders were indeed radicalized and brutalized under the Nazi regime's tutelage, but their actions were also governed by specific social, cultural, and institutional influences that were magnified by the harsh conditions, insoluble ethnic rivalries, and ruthless enemy they encountered. Influenced by his previous work on German anti-partisan operations in the Soviet Union, Shepherd mines the appropriate primary sources and cites the most recent scholarship for this latest effort. If his apologetic qualifications regarding the extant sources create doubts for some readers, these will be quickly dispelled by his adept handling of one of the most vexing issues confronting scholars of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. (D. R. Snyder *Choice* 2012-11-01)

About the Author

Ben Shepherd is Reader in History at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Users Review

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