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Review: *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* by Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II

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*The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture.* By Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). xii, 327 pp. \$ 21.99, ISBN 978-0-521-71231-6.

Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies II present an intriguing and utterly compelling argument in their book, *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. Contrary to the stereotypical Nazi villains of popular post-World War II war film, the authors argue that a very different kind of narrative of the German soldier emerged on the Eastern Front. Fueled by the onset of the Cold War and starting in the 1950s, American military officers, politicians and, finally, the public “were uncommonly receptive to a view of World War II as it was fought in Russia that was remarkably similar to that of many Germans, especially leading circles of the former German military and even National Socialists” (p. 2). The key thread in this emerging counter-narrative was the view of a “clean” Wehrmacht (German regular army) which was disconnected from the war crimes committed in the war against Russia.

The first three chapters trace this remarkable revision of history and memory. Chapter 1 recounts the uneasy World War II alliance between the Soviet Union and the United States, in which the authors emphasize the temporary enthusiasm for the Russian ally at this time. More importantly, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind at the end of the war about the atrocities which the German military, with the concerted help of the Wehrmacht, had committed on the Eastern Front. Nevertheless, the immediate onset of the Cold War facilitated a rapid resurgence of latent pro-German as well as anti-Russian sentiments. Provided with this opening, German military officers began to rehabilitate the image of the German Wehrmacht. Led by Franz Halder, who was chief of the army General Staff from 1938-1942, these former officers eventually produced 2,500 manuscripts that would shape the emerging military consensus and affirm a view of the guiltless German regular army. By 1951, even Dwight Eisenhower embraced this nascent consensus when he stated: “I have come to know that there is a real difference between the regular German soldier and officer and Hitler and his criminal group” (p. 75).

In the ensuing chapters, Smelser and Davies convincingly demonstrate how this new mythology grew over the postwar decades. Revered German generals like Erich von Manstein and Heinz Guderian published their memoirs which exonerated the Wehrmacht and themselves from the war crimes on the Eastern Front. This view was perpetuated by popular war novels by Paul Carell and others that found ever larger audiences.. This revision, which shows a remarkable similarity to the “lost cause” mythology of the post-Civil War era, emphasized a benign image of the German regular army and highlighted a valiant and courageous German soldier who was fighting in defense of his family and fatherland. In Chapters 6 and 7, the authors delineate how a group of writers they call “the gurus” and World War II “romancers” fascinated by war games further perpetuated and consolidated this myth in the face of increasing contrarian scholarship. Even more troubling, this admiration for the German military increasingly included an infatuation with the Waffen SS. By 1990s, the internet widened this popular appeal of the romancers even further with the establishment of specialty websites like “Achtung Panzer” and the parallel expansion of reenactment associations. Stripped of its historical context or any discussion of the culpability of the German military, these groups

instead focused on the camaraderie and loyalty of these soldiers as well as every detail of German military units.

Smelser and Davies need to be commended for their fascinating and detailed study. As they emphasize, not only does the “‘good German’ [seem] to be destined for an eternal life” (p.259), but the real sacrifices of the Russian people as well as the horrendous war crimes committed on the Eastern Front are pushed to the sidelines. In the process, history is in danger of being rewritten, exposing once again the malleability of the historical record or what Larry Levine so aptly called “the unpredictable past.”

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