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Review of *Violence in Defeat: The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944-1945*
by Bastiaan Willems

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– and perhaps unsurprisingly – fails to provide a definitive answer. At a meeting at a pub in Holborn the day before, Reginald Dunne was said to have declared that he would ‘do something’. This perhaps suggests the killing was, as is most commonly suggested, carried out on the initiative of the killers. Their guilt was, though, never in question and – ultimately half-hearted – plans to rescue the two men were hatched and aborted alongside a public campaign for clemency. Dunne and O’Sullivan were executed on 10 August 1922.

McGreevy’s study builds on the late Keith Jeffery’s masterful biography of Wilson, drawing effectively on British and Irish newspapers and newly released archival material. Long passages of background material will, however, offer relatively little that is new to scholars of the period. Some of this – a discussion of republican assassinations going back to 1798 in Chapter 7, for instance – may even feel a little superfluous to the casual reader. But, on the whole, this is a well-written, engaging, and handsomely produced book. While we may never be able to fully attribute responsibility for the decision to shoot Wilson, *Great Hatred* is a timely reminder of its wider significance.

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Bastiaan Willems, *Violence in Defeat: The Wehrmacht on German Soil, 1944-1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Xvii + 348pp. 4 maps + 27 illustrations. ISBN 978-1108479721(hardback). Price £29.99.

When looking at the Eastern Front towards the end of the Second World War, specifically at how German civilians suffered once the front line crossed the German frontier, most work focuses on the Red Army’s actions and little else. Since there were many atrocities committed by Red Army soldiers following the suffering forced upon them by the Nazi invaders, they are the easy target for the majority of the blame when considering acts of violence against the German populace. For the longest time the actions of the retreating Wehrmacht, full of battered and traumatised soldiers who were numbed to the war of extermination between the opposing ideals of National Socialism and Communism, were not examined in depth. The actions of Nazi Party officials and their policies up to and during the invasion of Germany have similarly often escaped scrutiny.

REVIEWS

Violence in Defeat seeks to change this narrative and restore agency to the Wehrmacht with their violent actions examined and the truth of their conduct brought to light. Violent actions not only against the advancing Soviets but against the people they were meant to protect. It would be impossible to encompass the entirety of Eastern Germany during the final months of the Second World War. With the actions of all the key actors involved, there is simply too much material for a single in-depth study. Willems overcomes this by looking at one section of the Eastern Front, East Prussia, from the Summer of 1944 until its capture in 1945. Through this study, Willems aims to change the perception of the Wehrmacht and its conduct when dealing with the German people. He demonstrates how the war hardened the common soldier against brutality and oppression, and shows how Wehrmacht policy and actions closely resembled actions against Soviet citizens in the earlier years of the war. Willems also illustrates the ways in which the decisions of the Nazi local elite translated into violence against the community as well as brutal oppression.

The sources used in *Violence in Defeat* are wide ranging and extensive, using many primary sources such as records from the Wehrmacht, the Nazi Party as well as diaries and memoirs sourced from the general populace in East Prussia. The amount of archival material used in the study is impressive due to the fact, as Willems also identifies, that the archives from East Prussia which were relevant to the time are fractured, destroyed or simply lost. Although there have been efforts to remedy this in recent years, it is still a problem for studying a topic such as this.

The study has several chapters detailing the topic of the war on German soil, starting with the run up to the Wehrmacht retreating into the German frontier in 1944. The study first details East Prussian life up to 1944, their role in the overall German war effort as well as the effect of 'Total War' on the East Prussians as the War progressed. The study then progresses to look at the changing perceptions of the East Prussian populace as war inched ever closer to their borders and at war's hardening nature and its numbing effect on Wehrmacht soldiers by the time they re-entered Germany. The idea of a 'Festung' or 'Fortress City' and what the strategy behind it as well as what life was like in these front-line cities is discussed, with the clashes between Army and Party officials over who had higher authority being a common theme. The study then looks into the evacuation policy in East Prussia, often last minute and hectic due to the Nazi Party being unwilling to evacuate civilians. The studies look into the efforts involved from overland refugee movements to the evacuation by sea from cut off cities like Königsberg. The final chapter details the horror of military law in place in East Prussia and the harsh punishments handed out such as summary executions by military and party tribunals. The study also notes the radicalisation through the use of these laws and how it seemed to get more brutal as the war went on. The conclusion wraps up with an examination of the mark the Wehrmacht left on the German wartime

community and how public perceptions of the army changed because of the brutality in the last year of the war.

Violence in Defeat is a tremendously useful study because few others look into this aspect of war on German soil, highlighting German on German violence and making it stand apart from the more widely covered Soviet on German violence, or the widespread racist violence already present. One weakness is that it only focuses on East Prussia and doesn't include other parts of Germany effected by the same issues, however, this might well be necessary due to the sheer scope of the conflict.

Violence in Defeat is an impressively researched study and would be a great aid for military historians looking into conditions on the Eastern Front in the final year of the war, as well as looking into how an army traumatised by years of brutality and merciless war acted towards its own people once it was back on home soil. Historians studying the German Home Front, as well as *Volkssturm* actions on the Eastern Front, would benefit greatly from looking into Willems' study as these topics are covered in great detail.

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Peter Caddick-Adams, *Fire and Steel: The End of World War Two in the West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Bibliography, Index, xxxv + 464 pp, 6 maps. ISBN: 978-0190601867 (hardback). Price £30.40.

This is the third and final volume of the author's magisterial narrative history of the last year of the war in the West, and it offers a useful corrective to popular perceptions that from early 1945 the conflict 'was all over bar the shouting'. Large parts of the German armed forces were ready, indeed eager, to fight for their homeland as it was assailed from West and East by Allied forces. This volume concentrates on the West and the western allies struggle to bring the war to an end. The final hundred days of the war were momentous and challenging, and Caddick-Adams reminds us that the Rhine offered a formidable obstacle for the Allied armies seeking to get into the heart of Nazi Germany. For the tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians the outcome of the war, and their personal futures, hung in the balance until the last possible moment.