

## HISTORY

# The Wehrmacht's War

A searing exhibition provides proof of atrocities perpetrated by a supposedly "honorable" army

By BRUCE VAN VOORST HAMBURG

**W**ITH THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF the May 8 defeat of the Hitler regime close at hand, many in Germany had hoped that the benchmark would serve as a *Schlussstrich*, or end, to World War II memories. But within the drab confines of a Hamburg factory, a searing exhibition has opened old wounds by attacking a myth that long consoled many Germans. Despite testimony to the contrary at the Nuremberg trials, popular belief separated the conduct of regular army members in the supposedly "honorable" Wehrmacht from the notorious crimes of Heinrich Himmler's SS, the Gestapo and the Special Operational groups.

But today stunned visitors to the Hamburg exhibit are confronted with powerful evidence to the contrary. "The Wehrmacht killed Jews and other minorities with the same abandon as the other units and as a matter of policy," says Hannes Heer, director of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, which organized "War of Annihilation," subtitled "Wehrmacht Crimes: 1941-44." The institute used new material from Soviet archives and other sources to compile a 700-page volume of evidence, along with the pictorial exhibition.

Viewed from above, the display on 8-ft.-high, curved steel panels forms a Knight's Cross—the Wehrmacht's highest decoration for bravery. The arrangement is a bleak irony, for the walls are a shrine of shame striated with hundreds of black-and-white photos of Wehrmacht troops shooting Jews, hanging partisans, hurling murdered civilian women and children into graves. Wehrmacht atrocities committed in Serbia and White Russia figure prominently, but the most extensive and memorable records are of barbarism by the 6th Army, en route to its own eventual destruction at Stalingrad.

During the advance, the Wehrmacht participated in the slaughter at Babi Yar and hundreds of other sites in Ukraine. Of 5.7 million Soviet soldiers captured by the Wehrmacht in this campaign, 3.3 million died—of starvation, exposure or mistreatment in forced-labor camps.

The most compelling evidence is provided by photographs and letters—many found on dead or captured German sol-

mans who served in the Wehrmacht on the basis of criminal conduct by a minority. Former Bundeswehr general Jürgen Schreiber, president of the Union of German Military Organizations, complains, "To conclude from these isolated incidents that the Wehrmacht as such was a criminal organization is an outright distortion of historical fact." Former Chancellor Helmut Schmidt says, "There is no collective conscience; there is only personal conscience. There is no collective guilt; there is only personal guilt."

Considerable evidence does suggest, however, that official Wehrmacht policy encouraged the abuse and even the execution of prisoners and civilians. An order from Hitler to the army on May 13, 1941, decreed that all political commissars in the Red Army were "in principle to be shot."

The Wehrmacht's own high command declared in August that Bolsheviks have "lost every claim to treatment as soldiers under the Geneva Conference." A training manual instructed soldiers that "wherever there are partisans, there are Jews; wherever there are Jews, there are partisans."

The disclosures about Wehrmacht misdeeds are particularly painful for the contemporary Bundeswehr, which has had to deal with the ambivalence of its own origins. Senior officers emphasize the Bundeswehr's departure from the past, pointing to a code of conduct that is clearer than virtually any other in the world in delineating a soldier's moral responsibility for carrying out or refusing

orders. Says General Klaus Naumann, the Bundeswehr's top officer: "There cannot be even the slightest hint of equating the Bundeswehr and the Wehrmacht."

The assault on the Wehrmacht's reputation is stirring deep public passions as well. Angry and obscene telephone callers have threatened Heer with assassination. By contrast, the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* was moved to comment, "Of all the observances of this 50th year, this exhibit is perhaps the most important; it is surely the most gruesome and disturbing." And some were able to draw hope from the encounter. Handwritten in the visitors' book at the exhibit's entrance was this comment: "The secret of reconciliation—with ourselves and with history—is remembrance." ■

## EVIDENCE from Soviet archives gives anguishing new details of war crimes committed by German soldiers



THE ARMY was supposedly more honorable than the SS, but atrocities like this one in Pancevo, Serbia, in April 1941 contradict that belief

diers and newly available from the Russian state archives in Moscow. Dozens of pictures show alleged "partisans" hanged en masse by Wehrmacht soldiers. After the beginning of "Operation Barbarossa," the Nazi invasion of Russia, a young soldier, "Franz," reported to his parents in July 1941, "Up to now we've sent about 1,000 Jews to the great beyond ... beaten with clubs and spades." Echoing that account, a major in the 6th Army wrote home that at Lutsk on July 2, "we shot 1,000 Jews in the old citadel." A Wehrmacht corporal, W.H., recorded that his colleagues discussed the "Jewish" question, and "to my surprise, everybody agreed that the Jews must disappear from the world."

Critics object that it is unfair to generalize about the estimated 18 million Ger-