

## Why He Fights: The Forgotten Crusaders of Operation Barbarossa

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Konrad Jarausch was eager. He hoped to usher in a great spiritual awakening within the Soviet Union. His planned religious revival would be achieved by handing out bibles to Soviets he encountered. While Jarausch worked for his Christian revival, he needed only to turn his head ever so slightly to witness mass starvation. Soviet prisoners of war under a policy of “deliberate neglect” were left to die in the hands of the German army.<sup>1</sup> This paradox will be the subject of this work. How could a German soldier such as Konrad Jarausch seek out a religious revival while the army of which he was a part was expected to be the very harbingers of a violent Nazi ideology in the east? To answer this question, an understanding of both emotions and values is necessary. The sources considered in this work offer a glimpse into the direction that the literature has taken on individual motivation in the Wehrmacht in the years since Edward Shills’ and Morris Janowitz’s interviews with former German soldiers, Omer Bartov’s study of propaganda and criminality in the German military, and, most recently, David Harrisville’s work on the so-called “traditional values” of the Wehrmacht. This piece synthesizes the literature on this matter, and introduces primary source documents from the Richard Lester Collection, located at the University of Southern Mississippi, that are used to further interrogate cultural and religious values within the Wehrmacht.

In this study, some definitions are necessary. Terms such as horizontal and vertical motivation are used extensively in the work. Horizontal motivation refers to some of the more mundane or tangible structures that develop a willingness to fight, such as camaraderie, food, shelter, or reprieve from immediate harm more broadly. Vertical motivation refers to ideological structures that develop a desire to fight. These ideological structures varied, often encapsulating things such as the preservation of culture, religion, racism, or masculinity. In her work *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700*, One of Barbara Rosenwein’s key heuristic devices in play was “emotional communities.” Rosenwein defined emotional communities as “groups—usually but not always social groups—that have their own values, modes of feeling, and ways to express those feelings. They may be very close in practice to other emotional communities of their time, or they may be...marginal and unique.”<sup>2</sup> In this work, the three main emotional communities which are noted are the Nazi Party, the German Wehrmacht, and the Soviet citizens encountered by Germans.<sup>3</sup> Each of these groups in the east during World War II did not just make up emotional communities, they made up *different* emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Harrisville, David. “Unholy Crusaders: The Wehrmacht and the Reestablishment of Soviet Churches during Operation Barbarossa.” *Central European History* 52 (2019): 625, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938919000876>.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.

<sup>3</sup> The *Wehrmacht* consisted of the *Luftwaffe*, *Kriegsmarine*, and *Heer*. These branches of armed service were Nazi Germany’s air forces, navy, and army, respectively. The *Heer* (army) will be the main focus of this work. The activities of the *Luftwaffe* and *Kriegsmarine* along the Eastern Front are beyond the scope of this paper.

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communities. In Rosenwein's definition of emotional community, there was a term used which will prove to be integral to the argument presented in this work: *value*. Emotional communities embody certain values. Indeed, emotions and values are linked to one another, and the Canadian philosopher Ronald de Sousa also suggests this. In his article "Moral Emotions," de Sousa makes the argument that emotions and value are intertwined in what can only be described as an "axiological hypothesis." In this idea, emotions are not just accessible from the point of view of value systems, value systems are made accessible through emotions. In other words, emotions reveal values just as values reveal emotions.<sup>4</sup>

What de Sousa reveals for the reader is that values and emotions are inextricably linked. This idea is crucial in understanding the paradox which Germans like Jarausch experienced on the Eastern Front, and why these paradoxes inhabited the same space. In a work titled, "Forum: History of Emotions," Alon Confino, in dialogue with other thinkers on emotions history, noted that even if there is a prevailing ideology or prevailing set of values, not everyone's understanding of what is valuable will align with the status quo.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, briefly, that this piece is not an apology of the German soldier of World War II. Rather, it is an attempt to bring to light the complex nature of their humanity in an age of total war and violent ethnocentrism.

In the summer of 1941, the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. This war in the east was a war of extermination, or *Vernichtungskrieg*.<sup>6</sup> Any notion of sympathy, any opportunity for common humanity to glean, would be confined within ethnic parameters for the Nazis. But how did so many come to this conclusion? By the opening years of the nineteenth century, a "cult of manliness" consumed Germany, particularly within the Kingdom of Prussia as it struggled against France during the Napoleonic Wars. According to Karen Hagemann, "valorous manliness" was reinforced with vigor as patriots and "combat ready men" were needed in a "people's army" for the purposes of liberation from Napoleon's France. It was during these Wars of Liberation, according to Hagemann, that German identity, German nationalism, was born.<sup>7</sup> This ideal of what it meant to be a courageous and strong man persisted into the Second World War within the German army. Take the case study of Willy Leopold. In writing to a love interest just before deploying to Africa, he stated, "I want to confront my future wife not as a coward who tells his children how nice the war was in... Butzbach or somewhere else in Germany. No, if other comrades can go to the front, I can do the same."<sup>8</sup> Leopold's correspondence with his wife

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<sup>4</sup> Ronald De Sousa, "Moral Emotions," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* vol. 4, no. 4 (June 2001): 120, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27504181>.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Biess, Alon Confino, Ute Frevert, Uffa Jensen, Lyndal Roper, and Daniela Saxer, "Forum: History of Emotions," *German History* vol. 28, no. 1 (March 2010): 76. <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghp108>.

<sup>6</sup> David A. Harrisville, *The Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 4, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Karen, Hagemann. "Of 'Manly Valor' and 'German Honor': Nation, War, and Masculinity in the Age of the Prussian Uprising Against Napoleon," *Central European History* 30 (1997): 187-220, <https://www.jstor.com/stable/4546697>.

<sup>8</sup> Willy Leopold to Miss Renate Winkert, November 18, 1941, Richard Lester Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

is illustrative of the pressures that ideals of masculinity often placed upon those that went into the service.

By the time Operation Barbarossa began in the summer of 1941, according to David Harrisville, most German soldiers, since the days of their childhood, thought about the world in terms of “Christian principles, military virtues, traditional nationalism, and middle-class norms.” In essence, a modern westerner, Christian or humanist, might consider the average German soldier entering the Soviet Union at this time to be a relatively “moral” individual who possessed a conscience regarding “right” and “wrong” conduct. But as Harrisville points out, without Nazism, Barbarossa would never have taken place.<sup>9</sup> Nazism, therefore, must be acknowledged as a moral system which German soldiers took into consideration. In a letter to his wife, Private First-Class Walter Rebel expressed that he was blessed by the Lord. While this may have something to do with his wife and their wedding anniversary, it may also have something to do with the extreme pride he felt while witnessing a Nazi parade in France. Upon witnessing this parade, the author noted on multiple occasions that he was proud to be a part of the Wehrmacht. “Looking at it, one feels proud of being a part of the German Wehrmacht.”<sup>10</sup> Nazism enjoyed a central position within the doctrinal studies of the German Wehrmacht. Harrisville, however, argues in *Virtuous Wehrmacht* that a “broad array of more traditional value systems still played a major role in its discourse and actions on the Eastern Front.” According to Harrisville, while these traditional value systems aided the Nazi agenda in the east, there were a handful of occasions where these traditional value systems hindered the Nazi party’s progress in Russia.<sup>11</sup> This piece argues that while the war in the east was indeed a *Vernichtungskrieg*, it was more than that. It was a “holy war” calling not just for physical and ideological annihilation, but spiritual rehabilitation in what was perceived as a morally bankrupt land.

There are several historians who have written on the matter of morality during this conflict. Some of the first historians to wrestle with soldiers’ motivations in the Wehrmacht were Edward Shils, Morris Janowitz, and Peter Weidenreich. During the war, Weidenreich conducted a number of interviews with German prisoners of war, asking them what kept them in the fight. Weidenreich concluded, after these interviews, that there were a number of key factors which kept the German soldier motivated in his struggle against the allies. Among them were, “comradeship, fear, good leadership, and faith in Hitler.”<sup>12</sup> Not long after Weidenreich’s oral project, Shils and Janowitz, writing just after the war, argued that the German soldier found his sense of purpose in his fellow soldiers rather than in ideology. Shils and Janowitz, however, claim that ideology still played a significant role in motivating some soldiers. With regards to Naziism’s influence over enlisted men, Shils and Janowitz argued that only a “hard-core

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<sup>9</sup> Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 9, 11.

<sup>10</sup> PFC. Walter Rebel to Mrs. Emmi Rebel, July 29, 1942, Richard Lester Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

<sup>11</sup> Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen Fritz, “‘We are trying...to change the face of the world’-Ideology and Motivation in the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front: The View from Below,” *Journal of Military History* 60, no. 4 (Oct. 1996): 683.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2944661>

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minority” of German soldiers truly adhered to the ideology, even though many expressed great faith in Hitler.<sup>13</sup> By 1978, however, the precedent which horizontal comradeship had over vertical adherence to ideology was challenged by Victor Madej. Madej understood the dominance of horizontal comradeship to be inaccurate, and he instead made the case that unit cohesion developed because of “training and military skill” due to the Wehrmacht’s professionalism as a warfighting organization.<sup>14</sup> In *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945*, Martin van Creveld makes the case that the “average German soldier...did not as a rule fight out of a belief in Nazi ideology...instead he fought for the reasons that men have always fought: because he felt himself a member of a well-integrated, well led team whose structure, administration, and functioning were perceived to be equitable and just.” In essence, the German soldier’s social and psychological needs were satiated.<sup>15</sup> In his article “Ideology and Primary Groups,” Elliot P. Chodoff distinguished between “precombat motivation” and combat motivation. According to Chodoff, in precombat motivation, ideology is important. During actual combat, however, that vertical motivation gives way to horizontal motivation as the soldier becomes both physically and psychologically reliant on his comrades.<sup>16</sup>

Omer Bartov, however, took this conversation in a different direction all together, arguing that ideology played a significant role in soldiers’ motivation both prior to and during combat. Bartov suggested that horizontal motivation through kinship and brotherly affection was torn apart by combat. Thus, the only access to motivation any soldier had was through vertical motivation, through ideology. Harrisville, Lauren F. Rossi, and Burleigh have all contributed to this conversation on soldier motivation. All three have noted that while ideology and comradeship were integral to the invasion of the Soviet Union, traditional systems of morality also motivated the soldier to make some kind of difference in his environment. Lauren Faulkner Rossi’s work noted the desire Catholic clergymen had in ministering to other Christians and combating the establishment of Communism in the Soviet Union.<sup>17</sup> Karl Berkhoff made the claim that many Soviet citizens were, in fact, happy to see religious revivals and initially saw the German army as a harbinger of religious freedom in the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> According to both Harrisville and Harvey Fireside, these religious revivals in the Soviet Union, manifesting themselves as *church reopenings*, “were for the most part spontaneous events driven by chaplains, soldiers, and civilians on the ground, usually with little active involvement from

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<sup>13</sup> Fritz, “Ideology and Motivation,” 683.

<sup>14</sup> Fritz, “Ideology and Motivation,” 684. See also, W. Victor Madej, “Effectiveness and Cohesion of the German Ground Forces in World War II,” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 6 no. 2 (Fall 1978): 233-248. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45293685>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 163-165.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* See also, Elliot P. Chodoff, “Ideology and Primary Groups,” *Armed Forces and Society* 9 no. 4 (Summer 1983): 569-593. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45305679>.

<sup>17</sup> Lauren Faulkner Rossi, *Wehrmacht Priests: Catholicism and the Nazi War of Annihilation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 141-44.

<sup>18</sup> Karel Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine Under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 232-43.

military authorities.”<sup>19</sup> These events developed under the very nose of Berlin, but were not officially sanctioned or supported.

Ideologically speaking, the Nazi party held mixed conceptions of Christianity. Religion, while an effective tool in controlling the masses, was understood to be “soft,” Jewish, and too ethnically inclusive for *völkish* ideology.<sup>20</sup> Despite the Party’s stance upon faith, ninety-five percent of Germans identified as either Catholic or Protestant, and most German officers supported the Christian faith.<sup>21</sup> Because of religious experiences and similarities with western Europeans in occupied western Europe, “inhibitions toward religious contact lowered” as more and more troops moved east in support of the invasion of Russia.<sup>22</sup> An imagined community began to take shape between occupier and occupied in many corners of Europe. Indeed, when Operation Barbarossa began, Christian leaders in Germany supported the invasion.<sup>23</sup> For many Germans in both Catholic and Protestant circles, Bolshevism, and its supposedly atheist principles, represented one of the most dangerous threats to the German people. For many Germans, this was a showdown between Christian civilization and atheism. The Nazi party understood the potential of this religious eagerness and promptly coopted it for propaganda purposes, framing the war against the Soviet Union as “Europe’s crusade against Bolshevism.”<sup>24</sup> But as the Germans pushed into the Soviet Union, unforeseen consequences of the attack soon arose.

Emotional communities that bear a common identity can disrupt distant calls to action from authorities that seem worlds away. Church reopenings demonstrated this. Under the jurisdiction of chaplains, the guidance of crusading propaganda of the Nazi party, and a vague understanding of a Christian mission to bring Russia back within the bosom of Christendom, “German troops quickly set to work cleaning church buildings, converting them to their original purpose, and holding rededication ceremonies across the army’s line of advance.”<sup>25</sup> The historian Ute Frevert notes that if commonalities are discovered between emotional communities, then that leaves room for *sympathy* to develop. “Increasing resemblance would engender increased sympathy.”<sup>26</sup> Once resemblance or common identity is allowed to take root between two emotional communities, the fostering of “social integration and moral consensus” is allowed to develop *between* the two (or more) emotional communities.<sup>27</sup> What then follows is an eclipse of emotional interests. Scholars of emotions history refer to this as an overlapping of emotional communities.<sup>28</sup> As the openings commenced, and as the emotional communities of both the

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<sup>19</sup> Harrisville, “Unholy Crusaders,” 623. See also, Harvey Fireside, *Icon and Swastika: The Russian Orthodox Church under Nazi and Soviet Control* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 117–23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 627.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 627–628.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 631.

<sup>23</sup> Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 489.

<sup>24</sup> Harrisville, “Unholy Crusaders,” 632.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 637.

<sup>26</sup> Frevert, *Emotions in History*, 154–155.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Biess, Alon Confino, Ute Frevert, Uffa Jensen, Lyndal Roper, and Daniela Saxer, “Forum: History of Emotions,” 67–80.

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Wehrmacht and the Soviet citizenry overlapped, the eclipse of emotional interest resulted in an “emotional and spiritual high point among the events of the summer and fall of 1941.”<sup>29</sup> Soviet citizens, especially Ukrainians, were “euphoric.”<sup>30</sup> “The women prayed, all the time wiping away the tears that were trickling down their cheeks. People greeted each other as if it were Easter. From both sides of the church...one could hear the refrain ‘Christ has risen!’ and ‘The Lord wished us to live to see this happy day.’”<sup>31</sup> Holidays could also prove to be a powerful binding force that could transcend ideological concerns and construct an orbit of tentative harmony, even in a place as harsh as the Eastern Front.

Seeing the fruits of their labor, many Germans felt that the presence of God was truly in their midst. While indoctrinated to perceive Slavic peoples as racially inferior, Harrisville argues that feelings of “empathy” assumed prominence at the forefront of the German soldier’s mind in cases such as those of the church reopenings.<sup>32</sup> The activities brought solidarity between common emotional communities and, ultimately, conflict between other emotional communities.<sup>33</sup> Hitler himself would put an end to these religious affairs in occupied Russia, believing that the efforts of church reopenings undermined the true objectives of the invasion. The reactions from many troops involved in these activities were varying degrees of disappointment and feelings of betrayal.<sup>34</sup>

The scholars who considered this topic following the Second World War placed emphasis on both vertical and horizontal motivation. Some emphasized one over the other, and some weighted both equally. While Nazi ideology, loyalty to Hitler, and soldierly comradeship spurred the German soldier ever onward into the vastness of the East, scholarship on the initial moral, Christian, even evangelical, feeling of responsibility many German soldiers had as they ran headlong into the citizens of a so-called atheist state, is thin.<sup>35</sup> Utilizing theory from the history of emotions, German soldiers in Russia like Konrad Jarausch become three-dimensional, as we see him forced to reconcile with, in his own heart and mind, the expectations of the Party, the expectations of the officers, the expectations of the men to the left and right of him, the expectations of his moral upbringing, and the expectations of his own conscience.

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<sup>29</sup> Harrisville, “Unholy Crusaders,” 637.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 638.

<sup>31</sup> Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*, 241. See also, Harrisville, “Unholy Crusaders,” 638.

<sup>32</sup> Harrisville, “Unholy Crusaders,” 640.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 639-644.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 644-645, 647.

<sup>35</sup> Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 10.