

Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East by Stephen G. Fritz.
The University Press of Kentucky, 2011.

Ostkrieg is a big book in every sense: the text is 488 pages long, and there are 119 pages of notes and bibliography. In his introduction the author, who is Professor of History at East Tennessee State University, acknowledges that much of the ground has been covered by other specialists in the field, and his aim is to synthesise the best of current thinking on Operation Barbarossa. It is an aim that he certainly fulfils.

Ostkrieg is divided into ten chapters with a preface and conclusion: Dilemma, Decision, Onslaught, Whirlwind, Reckoning, All or Nothing; Total War; Scorched Earth, Disintegration; and Death Throes. The events it describes have been well-rehearsed elsewhere, though the scale of the Nazi assault on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the sheer size of the forces ranged against each other when Fascist and Communist armies traded blows, the brutal treatment of cities, towns and villages, the mass murder of Jews and others, the Nazis' grandiose plans of resettlement, still leave the reader in a state of amazement and disbelief.

For me, the great strength of Ostkrieg is the way in which it demonstrates that a lot of Nazi policy, far from being coldly and calculatingly planned, was created on the hoof, often without any preparation or strategizing; so the outcomes that history delineates were not or could not be predicted.

In some cases, as Fritz details, the Nazis had a long run of good luck in their military adventures, though it still seems extraordinary that the nazification of significant parts of the armed forces of the Reich so emasculated them that the folly of attacking the vastness that was Soviet Russia could not be blocked by those who were destined to fight for the aim and die in its pursuance.

The parts of Ostkrieg which may be somewhat controversial are those concerning the origins of the Final Solution, and whether it emerged from a hard ideological base, or was an extreme response to the ongoing challenge of resettling captured territory with ethnic Germans and the 'problem' faced by the Nazis when they found themselves controlling territory with hundreds of thousands of Jews who they wished to move elsewhere.

Fritz puts the case for his argument clearly and readers will need to decide whether they are persuaded.

As the decades since the Second World War roll onwards, there is a sense in some quarters that the new Europe demands that the old Europe's wars be consigned to history in the face of a constructive modern reality; Ostkrieg and other books of its ilk are the sharpest possible rebuttal to that view and a powerful reminder of why the world war, and particular the actions of the forces of the German Reich, remain a byword for brutal savagery and senseless destruction.

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