

# War, Genocide and Cultural Memory: The Waffen-SS, 1933 to Today

**By Claus Bundgård Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Peter Scharff Smith. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2023. Pp. 378. Hardcover \$125.00. ISBN: 978-1785279669.**

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With their latest publication, Claus Bundgård Christensen, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Peter Scharff Smith give not only a tour d'horizon through the history and impact of the Waffen-SS but also insight into their own scientific trajectories. More than twenty years ago, they published a book together on Danish volunteers in the Waffen-SS.

Based on the paradox that the Waffen-SS was one of the most extremely elitist military organizations within the National Socialist system and, at the same time, one of the most multinational, transnational, and multiethnic institutions, the three authors explain the development of the Waffen-SS from different perspectives. These changes of point of view are essential for the structure of the book, because they allow not only the top-down view based on files from various archives, but also the bottom-up perspective, for example through letters, reports, diaries, or exculpatory memorial literature of (former) Waffen-SS soldiers.

Starting from its beginnings in 1925, the organization and structure of the Waffen-SS as an elite troop planned by Heinrich Himmler is discussed in the first part of the book. Here the authors ask what the long-term planning and policies of the Waffen-SS were. In the process, the well-known three stages of its development are used to show how the Waffen-SS developed from a relatively small, homogeneous "elite" into an immense multinational and multiethnic army during the war. From 1941 at the latest, we can see strong signs of erosion in its restrictive guidelines. This was accompanied by the inclusion of ethnic Germans, so-called *Volkdeutsche*. A third stage was reached with the recruitment of *Fremdvölkische* ("members of foreign races").

In the second part, the book discusses to what extent the ideological guidelines were implemented within the units, in everyday life but also in combat. Here, the authors show how the motives behind recruitment differed greatly depending on time and place. Political motivation to join the Waffen-SS was more prevalent in the North and West than, for example, in southeastern Europe. Everyday problems in the implementation of Nazi ideology in the diverse ethnic groups of the Waffen-SS are addressed too. In addition, we learn about the legal system, which was equally important for implementing and enforcing the ideology of the Waffen-SS.

Part III shows the development of the Waffen-SS from a national to a transnational army. In this context, the two expansions in 1941 (the Balkan campaign) for the recruitment of ethnic Germans and *Fremdvölkische*, enabled by the high losses in the East in 1942-1943, are of central importance.

The fourth part of the book deals exclusively with the involvement of large Waffen-SS units, such as divisions, down to small units, in the Holocaust, the fight against partisans, and war crimes in general. This part also shows the complexity of command, preexisting local conditions, and personal motives.

Part V is probably the most important one for research. For here the authors break new ground by tracing the aftermath of the Waffen-SS to the present day. Starting with the flight of Waffen-SS units stationed in East and Southeast Europe towards the West (to reach the

territory occupied by the Western powers and escape probable death at Soviet hands), the authors show the attempt of former Waffen-SS members to eliminate their blood-group tattoo and to clear themselves and other Waffen-SS veterans of guilt through exculpatory publications. Building on the research of Karsten Wilke, they examine the development of the HIAG (Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit) and comradeships, which were essential for the self-image of Waffen-SS veterans until the 1990s. It is particularly important to mention the activities of the HIAG, which organized the first rallies, torchlit processions, and crane-laying ceremonies with clear slogans as early as the 1950s. Furthermore, the authors examine the connections and continuities between the Waffen-SS and new right-wing extremist groups and parties. But they also address completely new topics, for example in the section titled “Roleplaying in Waffen-SS Uniforms.”

Despite the authors’ laudable intentions, the book contains some weaknesses. The authors have not taken some of the latest literature into account, especially about East, Southeast, and South Europe. Only three monographs – by Georg Stein, Bernd Wegner, and Jean-Luc Leleu – are mentioned as key literature. The introductory chapter in the important volume *The Waffen-SS: A European History* (2017), edited by Robert Gerwarth and Jochen Böhler, which focuses precisely on the phenomenon of multiethnicity and transnationality of the organization, is not addressed at all. The seminal book by Jan Erik Schulte, Peter Lieb, and Bernd Wegner, *Die Waffen-SS. Neue Forschungen* (2014) is only mentioned on page 144. Although the three authors promise to use numerous different sources, this is only the case for some chapters. Others make do almost exclusively with secondary literature. Also, the old acronyms of the German Federal Archives should be replaced by the new designation BArch.

Some important aspects of the book’s theme are somewhat short-charged, for example in part IV, “Soldiers and War Crimes.” Here, in particular, the question of voluntariness or coercion should be discussed more precisely. Sometimes the authors jump quickly from one place to another, from southeastern Europe directly to northern Europe, for instance in the section “The Holocaust in the Field”. For the reader, it would probably make more sense to stay a little longer in a specific geographical area in order to better understand certain specifics of the Waffen-SS units on the ground. The subchapter on sexuality thematizes Himmler’s notions on the reproduction of “his” Waffen-SS soldiers as well as the sanctioned and unsanctioned sexual exchanges between Waffen-SS soldiers and local populations. One of the following chapters addresses the topics of homosexuality and penalties for it. However, the concrete question of connections between Waffen-SS men and the homoerotic attraction of the organization remains open.

The book’s final chapter is probably the most important one. Covering postwar history and the legacy of the Waffen-SS, the chapter shows that the history of the Waffen-SS continues to reverberate today and has an impact on the extreme right in Europe and around the world.

Furthermore, the book offers a good overview of the subject for newcomers and shows that the Waffen-SS was not a monolithic block but a National Socialist organization with numerous, very different facets, which varied greatly according to time and place.

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