

Yaron PASHER: *Holocaust versus Wehrmacht. How Hitler's "Final So-lution" Undermined the German War Effort*, Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 2014, 364 pp, ISBN: 978-0-7006-2006-7

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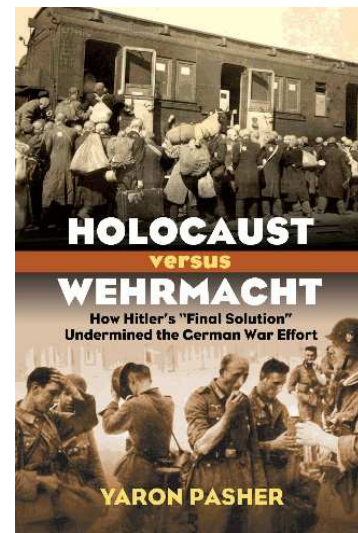
The two sides of National Socialist's war effort: ideology, strategy and logistics in World War II

In his book, Pasher looks for the answer to a question that is far from being "original". It is easy to assume that most historians (as well as many students) dealing with the Second World War and the Third Reich asked themselves how much the realization of National Socialist's extermination plans affected the war conduct and how realistic was to assume that those plans critically undermined the German war plans. Pasher's work fits in the line of research attempting to consider the Holocaust within the German war plans and efforts.

This perspective was already mentioned by Gerhard Weinberg in his *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994), as well as in other works dealing with the *Wehrmacht* and the military operations and occupation strategies of the National-Socialists in Eastern Europe. From this point of view, the author provides an interesting perspective with a powerful support of sources, with some exceptions in the third and fourth parts, and providing intriguing and yet challenging hypothesis.

The book is divided in four parts, with the first two further divided into four chapters and the last two in three. Three quarters of the book focus, as one may imagine, on the Eastern front, while the final part deals with the entanglement between the extermination of the Jews in Eastern Europe and the failed resistance against the Allied invasion of France. The author did not make his life easy. He develops a detailed analysis of the war logistics, highlighting the moment in which the transport by train became crucial to the German war conduct instead of road transport. Then, he moves on in estimating (as complete and clear statistics are difficult to find) the number of trains normally needed to transport a certain amount people to the concentration camps, or equipped soldiers to the front or tanks and other military supplies. This quantitative approach may seem a bit too "arid" as war events are not merely a question of numbers. However, it helps the reader getting the correct attitude to follow Pasher's line of thought.

Given the limited number and capacity of Eastern European and Soviet railroads and the necessity of adaptation works to allow German trains to use them, the author analyzes how logistics and priority in the use of infrastructures affected the war in the East. For a good first part of the book, the reasoning of the author may seem simple mathematics: given a certain capacity of the railroad in specific moments he is estimating how many



troops and equipment could not be shipped to the front because the infrastructure was being used to deport prisoners to the concentration camps. However, Pasher goes deeper and analyzes the war strategy and the logistics at the front, and proves to be able to entangle the war events with the deportation and extermination process.

The narrative flows almost parallel with the German invasion of Russia progressing on one side and the ethnic cleansing of the SS being executed on the other. Particularly, the book examines how in crucial moments of the war the decision-making process was influenced by the ideological goals and potentially affected the result of a battle. It is particularly interesting, furthermore, to see where the Army and the SS appeared to have clear conflicts of interest.

In the second part, Pasher suggests that the slowing down of the German invasion, until the catastrophic defeat at Stalingrad, could have been avoided assuming all the necessary resources could be shipped to the front. Specifically, he tried to entangle the precise moments in which the use of resources for the deportation of people to the concentration camps prevented the supply of the troops at the front. While this reasoning provides a convincing argument that the Holocaust severely burdened the logistical capabilities of the Wehrmacht in certain crucial moments, it does not seem enough to prove that one additional division or some additional tanks could have changed the military outcome of a battle.

However, Pasher did not merely “count the trains” but develops an exhaustive reasoning on the war at the East with a critical analysis on previous research considering the weather conditions, the inadequacy of German equipment and other factors as the reasons behind the German defeat. At the end of the day, Pasher’s hypothesis looks convincing but not flawless. In some passages, one may have the impression that the factors other than the Holocaust-related issues have been underestimated to add weight to the main thesis. While the productivity of the German industries is depicted as much quicker than the ability of the Army to deploy tanks and troops, the ability of the Soviets to retrieve troops from the Far East of the country – and the amount of these troops - to reinforce the front, for instance, is never mentioned.

The third part throws a bridge between the Eastern front and the war against the Allied. Once again, the debacle at Kursk, as Stalingrad, is analyzed keeping into account that additional forces could have been deployed by the Wehrmacht if the extermination of the European Jews had been at least paused for a while. By describing the insurrection in the Warsaw Ghetto and the amount of forces and resources deployed to repress it, Pasher gives another important clue on how ideological motivations of the National Socialist often led to poor judgement in the war conduct in general. However, here one has, once again, the impression that the capability of the SS deployed in Warsaw to make the difference at the front may have been a bit overestimated.

Where the narrative of Pasher starts to feel too stretched is at the end of the third and for the whole fourth part. Concerning the invasion of Sicily, for example, his account seems to rely too much on memories, including disputed ones as that of Otto Skorzeny. Furthermore, the relation that the author suggests, that the liquidation of the Hungarian Jews came in the way of an effective defense against the Allied landing in the north of France, seems a bit stretched. It is undeniable that the operations in Hungary distracted

resources and infrastructure that could be used to redeploy troops from the Eastern front. However, if in the Russian scenario the direct conflict in the use of infrastructures between the Wehrmacht and the SS was straightforward and it is not hard to understand how it had a major influence on the military operations, for the Western front one shall not over-see that other factors played a dominant role. In fact, Pasher does not refrain to account for those other factors, such as the lack of railroads in northern France and the constant threat of Allied bombings, but still it seems to overestimate the events in the East.

It may be true that the Germans were able to quickly replace bombed trains and repair bridges and railroads, but the overall effect of Allied bombings and the increasing lack of resources at the end of the war played probably a most significant role. That said, that in such a complex situation the activities related with the Holocaust and the concentration camps still distracted a considerable amount of resources is certainly worth pointing out.

The feeling that somewhere in the book the author may have stretched his thesis too much, however, does not change the fact that the conclusion, that the Holocaust and the all process of deportation and extermination of the European Jews (and other social and ethnic groups) severely damaged the German war operations, is something to agree with. Is the same Pasher to put aside the hypothesis that the war could turn out completely different without the Holocaust that was, in fact, strictly related with the goals of the conflict in the world-view of National Socialism. What Pasher shows in a convincing way is that ideological elements often severely affected the judgement of the final decision-maker, Adolf Hitler, and strongly influenced the prioritization in the use and allocation of resources during the conflict.

Altogether, Pasher's book is, above all, an essay on logistics and decision making in the Third Reich, as well as a very well written analysis of the conflicts between the military and ideological goals of the National Socialist regime. It manages to successfully integrate the history of the Holocaust in the military history of World War II and it is successful, more than previous attempts, in estimating the importance of ideology in the peculiarity of the conflict, especially at the Eastern front. As stated at the beginning, many historians may have found themselves asking how much the ideology of National Socialism affected the German war efforts. Pasher took the chance to "do the math" and the result, despite some critical moments, is a well-documented, insightful and well-written book.