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War in the Land of Blood and Iron -
Death in the Land of Blood and Soil:
The Culmination of the German Way of
War on the Eastern Front from October,
1944 to May, 1945

By
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Abstract

This thesis covers how the cultural and historical tenants of the “German way of war” were enacted and unleashed on the Eastern Front during World War II from October, 1944 to May, 1945. The primary source evidence that this thesis relies on as the basis for its empirical claims include professionally translated medieval firsthand accounts, professionally translated nineteenth century legal statutes, and duly recorded recollections and wartime correspondence from World War II, which have been preserved in both books and scholarly journal articles. The secondary source evidence that this thesis relies on as the basis for its empirical claims include scholarly journal articles and books that can be considered either relatively recent and/or recent scholarship - and which also cover all of the historical time periods discussed in this thesis. Lastly, visual evidence with accompanying captions will also be utilized as special primary sources for the dual purpose of both aiding the reader in understanding the historical and cultural material that is being discussed, as well as to further support the overarching argument and subsequent claims of this thesis.

Introduction

The German (and within this, very much the Prussian) way of war as it existed as a mainstay cultural tradition until 1945, was based upon a number of cultural tenants that date back to the founding of Prussia in the 13th Century.¹ This tradition then successively evolved and permeated into the other German states over the centuries - which ultimately culminated in the prolonged, pyrrhic defense of - and then total defeat of Germany in World War II (*Der Weltanschauungskrieg*), and these final battles have been dutifully recorded and recounted by generations of Historians up to the present day. On this, a handful of the most important works pertaining to this overall historical theme include Nicholas Stargardt's book entitled, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945*, with his central argument being that the more that the German war effort deteriorated over the course of World War II - the more radicalized the German nation became in their total support of the state, and thus also of the genocide that was being waged in the form of the Holocaust,² Michael Geyer's and Konrad H. Jarausch's co-authored book entitled, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories*, in which the authors collectively put forth the central argument that there is no singular, overarching narrative in German History (to be understood as *Historie*), but rather numerous (and sometimes competing) narratives that make up German History (to be understood as *Geschichte*),³ Thomas Kühne's

¹ Paul Adair, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat: The Collapse of Army Group Centre June, 1944* (London: Brockhampton Press, 1994, 1995, 1996, 1998), 15.

² Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 463.

³ Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), vii-x.

book entitled, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918-1945*, where he presents his scholarly view that the German nation during World War II (*volksgemeinschaft*) were both fully aware of, and complicit in the atrocities that were being undertaken by the state, all the way until the end of the war,⁴ Isabel Hull's book entitled, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, where her core argument is that the genocidal actions of the German nation and state that occurred during World War II were largely born out of the pre-established "culture" and "tradition" of war that had been fully recognized and practiced during World War I - particularly in regards to the overwhelming tactical and strategic brutality exhibited mainly by the German Imperial Army on all fronts,⁵ Robert Citino's book entitled, *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944- 1945*, where he revisits the final months of World War II as they were experienced by the Wehrmacht - and then asserts that the *Wehrmacht* carried out their last, desperate wartime actions in "cultural-doctrinal accord" with the centuries-old "German way of war" that could be traced back to the reign of the Kingdom of Prussia,⁶ and Ian Kershaw's book entitled, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany*, where he argues both that the fact that the German nation and state collectively carried out their national war effort far beyond the point where a declaration and act of surrender would have normally been invoked historically speaking - and that this was a rather unique phenomenon, as well as saying that it was only because the *Wehrmacht* held out on the

⁴ Thomas Kühne *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 1-2.

⁵ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1-2, 333.

⁶ Robert Citino, *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944- 1945*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 312.

battlefield for as long as they did, that the NSDAP remained in power until the end of the war in May, 1945.⁷ With this literature review established - it must be said that the overarching argument and supporting claims of this thesis very much align with each of these preceding scholarly works, even that of Geyer and Jarausch, for the thematic reason that as this thesis will put forth: it was specifically the *Prussian (Preußische)* “way of war” (with the tenants of *volkskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, and *ostkrieg* in particular) that gradually evolved into the *German (Deutsche)* way of war as it existed until the end of World War II - thereby acknowledging that one of the many historical German States directly influenced the course of their and the other German States’ Military Histories, as well as eventually bringing forth the total “Prussianization” of Germany’s (after unification in 1871) national military culture. This thesis will also build off of the historically-thematically complimentary arguments brought forth by Stargardt, Citino, Kühne, Hull, and Kershaw, in the sense that there *was* an established “German way of war”, as well as that the tenants of *vernichtungskrieg* and *ostkrieg* in particular were synonymous - and that as the battlefield situation on the Eastern Front became increasingly desperate (and eventually hopeless) for Germany (especially for the *Wehrmacht*), the combat actions of German forces in this area of the war became more extreme in terms of the brutality and fanaticism that they exhibited (which thus reveal how the tenants of *volkskrieg* and *verteidigungskrieg*, and the establishments of the *wehrbauern* and the *militärgenze* historically factored in). Furthermore, this thesis will go beyond what Stargardt, Citino, Kühne, Hull, and Kershaw have collectively argued in two combined manners. Firstly, this will be done by

⁷ Ian Kershaw, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler’s Germany, 1944–1945* (London: Penguin, 2012), 5-6.

asserting that the “German way of war” as it was last exemplified during World War II - was first formed by the Teutonic Order during the Northern Crusades in the Thirteenth Century, which then continued for seven hundred years. Secondly, this thesis will not only talk about the “Germans” in term of those residing within the borders of the German States as they existed in their various forms until the end of World War II, but also the German-speakers in historical minority communities (*volksdeutsche*) in Europe, namely in the Baltics and Hungary - and how they too, along with their historically-aligned Baltic and Hungarian neighbors (as well as Scandinavians during World War II), historically and culturally contributed to the formation, evolution, and final culmination of the greater “German way of war” as a concept that was both established prior by the authors above, and through the aforementioned tenants in this thesis. This combined historical argument and its overall timeline have never been brought forth in any serious in-depth scholarly capacity as of yet, and it is therefore the goal of this thesis to create and sustain a new historical discussion within the field of German and more broadly, European Military History.

In this sense, the central research question that this thesis covers is as follows: how did the battles on the Eastern Front (*Ostfront*) from October, 1944 to May, 1945 exemplify the German culture (*kultur*), method, and view of war as understood until the collapse of the Third Reich (*Das Dritte Reich*) - in terms of waging defensive warfare from fortresses, mobilizing, arming, and deploying the a significant section of the population, as well as how the German culture, method, and view of war differed on the historical battlefields of the East and the battlefields of the West? Additionally, the thematic supporting research questions that this thesis covers are:

how did the German nation during the last months of the Third Reich - from the top political and military leadership, down to the ordinary German citizenry and military personnel - perceive the war on the Eastern Front, *how* did these parties see war as part of their collective culture, and finally - *why* did the German nation from the top down wage and fight, respectively, the war on the Eastern Front in the final months of World War II in the manner that they did, and what embedded German cultural conditions that were present at the time, compelled such actions? To comprehend and answer these questions, one must first understand the German historical and cultural tenants (as they existed until 1945) of *volkskrieg* (people's war), *vernichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation), *verteidigungskrieg* (defensive war), *ostkrieg* (eastern war), *wehrbauern* (peasant soldiers), and the *militärgrenze* (military frontier). These were the tenants that made the German way of war what it was - and thus what caused the German defensive combat actions that took place during the final months of World War II on the Eastern Front (and more broadly within the borders of Germany on both fronts), to be carried out in the manner that they were. For the sake of scholarly transparency - it should be stated that save for *ostkrieg* and *wehrbauern* (as German words, tenants, and terms), the rest of the above all have dedicated entries on the *Deutsches Wörterbuchnetz* (Official Online German Dictionary) as hosted by the University of Trier (*Universität Trier*).⁸ On this, even of the aforementioned tenants that have dedicated entries within the online dictionary, only *militärgrenze* has a sizable etymological subsection along with its base definition. Lastly, it's worth mentioning that not only has *ostkrieg* been the main title of one of the books written by Historian and East Tennessee State University History Professor

⁸ "Wörterbuchnetz", University of Trier (website), Accessed May 5, 2024, <https://woerterbuchnetz.de/>

Stephen G. Fritz,⁹ but *vernichtung* as a root word is used a central historical and cultural term in Isabel Hull's aforementioned book, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*,¹⁰ with *vernichtungskrieg* appearing within her cited sources as well.¹¹

As such, the main historical timeline and focus of this thesis will focus on the final battles on the Eastern Front during World War II from October, 1944 until the military surrender of the Third Reich on May 8, 1945. However, in order to establish the proper historical for understanding the events that took place at this time from a Prussian-German and wider European cultural perspective, this thesis will begin by first examining the destruction of the *Wehrmacht* Army Group Center (*Heeresgruppe Mitte*) during Operation Bagration, which lasted from June to August, 1944 - and also saw the total liberation of Belarus, as well as *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* being pushed back to the historical German borders of the time (places where there had traditionally been noticeable German-speaking minorities over the centuries prior to their immediate post-war expulsion). Additionally, for the sake of historical thoroughness and overall clarity in relation to the cultural tenants that were presented above - the respective origins and histories of these tenants prior to their exemplification during the the reign of the Third Reich will be examined and connected to this thesis' main timeline during the 20th Century where necessary - such as these tenants' respective creations, implementations, and then exemplifications during the 13th Century by the Teutonic Order (and the subordinate Order of

⁹ Stephen G. Fritz, *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

¹⁰ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 28, 29, 31, 166, 189, 195, 293.

¹¹ Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 117.

Dorbin and the Livonian Brothers of the Sword) in the Prussian and Livonian Crusades, and later by the Kingdom of Prussia during the German Wars of Liberation during the Napoleonic Wars. These respective historical events, and the historical German-speaking parties involved, were heavily drawn upon and then used as cultural-ideological “weapons” by the Third Reich for their war on the Eastern Front. Thereby, this thesis will conclude with a reflection on how the “shadows” of Germany’s war on the Eastern Front and the legacy of the cultural tenants listed above are still felt in Germany, Ukraine, the Baltics, and Russia today in terms of contemporary military, political, and social conflicts. With this established, let us begin.

Prelude: Understanding Operation Bagration and the Tradition of German Warfare in the East

By June, 1944 - both the Western and Eastern Fronts were closing in on the Third Reich, with American and British Commonwealth forces storming Normandy and fighting to liberate France, and Soviet forces preparing to liberate what was then the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), followed by a further breakthrough into German-occupied Poland and the Baltics, as well as Prussia itself - specifically East Prussia (*Ostpreußen*) - the historical center of Prussian and German militarism. Since many Historians have covered this chapter of World War II (*Der Weltanschauungskrieg*) in terms of a classical military-historical narrative approach with great depth and with tremendous scholarly vigor - namely Paul Adair in his monumental book entitled, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat: The Collapse of Army Group Centre June, 1944*, we will for the sake of this thesis, instead focus on the manner in which German forces (primarily Army Group Center), both led and conducted combat operations at this time - through the distinct cultural-historical lenses of *volkskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, *ostkrieg*, and the *militärgrenze* as they were each “manifested” and/or “invoked”, so to speak - as the subject of the *wehrbauern* is not historically applicable in this section. At this time, the German position on the Eastern Front (*Ostfront*) extended well into Belarus, the north-westernmost fringes of Ukraine, and the Baltics - with the German state of East Prussia (*Ostpreußen*) at this time still being near the front - but not yet in such an exposed position that it would become a *Frontgau* (Front State, or Battlefield State), as this wouldn't happen until October, 1944. The main German forces that took part in Operation Bagration were as follows: Army Group North (*Heeresgruppe Nord*), Army Group

Center (*Heeresgruppe Mitte*), Army Group North Ukraine (*Heeresgruppe Nordukraine*), and Army Group South Ukraine (*Heeresgruppe Sudukraine*). Within this impressive defensive wall of massed *Wehrmacht* forces, the main target for the Red Army (and dually the most importantly geographically situated of these formations for the *Wehrmacht*) was Army Group Center - with its subordinate combined arms formations consisting of the Second Army, the Fourth Army, the Ninth Army, and the Third *Panzer* Army. These formations of Army Group Center would not only be the main victims of the Red Army by the end of Operation Bagration - but they would also be some of the principle *Wehrmacht* formations that would fight in important, costly battles across greater Prussia (including in the Battle of Berlin) until the end of the war.

As such, by June, 1944 - the *Wehrmacht* (like the *Waffen SS*) had been badly battered and bloodied - yet it was still a formidable military organization. Despite taking tremendous losses on the Eastern Front up to that point, the *Wehrmacht* (and namely the *Deustches Heer*, or German Army) - was still a highly disciplined and capable fighting force in a few important manners that can be seen clearly when retroactively examined through the cultural-historical lenses of *volkskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, and *ostkrieg*. By possessing a knowledge of these tenants, one can understand the manners in which the *Landser* and/or *Soldaten* (Soldiers) of Army Group Center saw the combat operations that they took part in at the time on the Eastern Front. Through the lens of the principle of *volkskrieg* - the men of Army Group Center were made up of both German volunteers and conscripts alike, and when this is combined with the fact that the Third Reich was run by the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party) - a political organization that had succeeded in swiftly militarizing every level of

German society (*gesellschaft*) from the youth to the adult sections of the population (a tradition that had been well-established across German-speaking Europe centuries prior to the ascension of the NSDAP), it is no surprise that even while in the midst of waging heavy combat on two fronts - that a fighting force such as the *Wehrmacht* would be able to maintain a certain level of steady operational cohesion in terms of manpower and deployment. It should be noted that this sort of mass mobilization, or total war effort (*totalerkrieg*) in the context of waging a large scale ground war in Eastern Europe against an enemy power from the East - was not at all culturally and/or historically unfamiliar to German-speakers at the time. Both ideologically (in a cultural sense) and historically, the war on the Eastern Front as it related to the then time-honored concept and tradition of *volkskrieg*, dated back to the Middle Ages. The land that lay to the east of what would become the German nation-state after 1871, had traditionally been considered to be a “frontier” from roughly 700 to 1400 AD, and also the edge of European civilization. Thus, this geographic sprawl was seen as ripe for (and even necessary for) conquest by German-speakers for the purpose of spreading Latin Christianity (Catholicism) - as religion and language were essentially the equivalents during the Middle Ages to what the identity concepts of race and ethnicity would be by the time World War II was being fought. This process of colonization, and one could even say “cultural terraforming” - was known as *ostsiedlung* (eastern settlement), which described the seven-hundred year *process* of conquest and settlement, and as the *drang nach osten* (drive to the east), which described the “feeling”, or “destiny” to conquer and settle the lands of Eastern Europe, and even into present-day Russia. It should be noted there that in the latter term, *osten* is used instead of *ost* - and in German linguistic terms, this plural form is used to denote a vast, far-reaching area, as opposed to a fixed area, which one can then deduce the sort

of “mythical” undertones that this term took on. Additionally, this term was not only used by the Teutonic Order during the Northern Crusades (which we will be covering and referring to in this thesis, specifically the Prussian and Livonian Crusades) in the 13th Century, but also by Hitler as the *Führer* (leader in an “inspirational”, or “heroic” sense in German linguistic terms) of the Third Reich before and during World War II. From an academic standpoint, it should be stated that this thesis will do what has not been done before in any in-depth capacity: the connecting of the cultural-historical aspects of medieval and what is commonly termed “modern” European history, in order to form a greater understanding of the cultural and historical depth of the final months of World War II on the Eastern Front as experienced and felt by the Germans (and their sympathetic non-German European allies) during the final months of the conflict. This scholarly approach will be undertaken since the lands that would ultimately become Prussia and the Baltics by the 20th Century - had by then been scarred and “defined” (in a cultural-historical sense) by wars that had both most often and most infamously, faced eastward since the 13th Century, with World War II arguably being seen as the final destructive episode in a long saga of combat over identity and culture. Additionally, scholarship on the Northern Crusades (of which the Teutonic Order, as well as the wider Medieval History of Prussia and the Baltics are the main parts of) is surprisingly limited in overall quantity, as well as the fact that most of the existing scholarship has up until the present - not been written in English, but instead in German, Estonian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Polish, and Russian, mostly. This scholarly reality is touched on by Alan V. Murray in the landmark book that he edited entitled, *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, starting on the matter, “The idea for this volume emerged in the course of papers and discussions at the International Medieval Congress, Leeds, 13-16 July 1998. Several

of the participants agreed that there was a great need for published work in English on the history of crusading and conversion in the medieval Baltic region, to encourage new research as well as to provide materials for teaching, and decided to collaborate on a publication project".¹² As such, the main source of scholarship that will be drawn on for this prelude section of the thesis concerning Operation Bagration, will be Paul Adair's aforementioned masterpiece, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat: The Collapse of Army Group Centre June, 1944*, along with other supporting scholarly sources as well that will also be formally introduced. Since this section's historical focus as it pertains to the 20th Century is focused on a singular combat operation - the aforementioned book will serve as the main definitive evidence. Smaller-scale scholarly sources in the form of articles will also be used in support of this.

Additionally, this section will also draw on scholarly primary and secondary source scholarship regarding the Prussian and Livonian Crusades (and thus the settlement and first legacy of what would be Prussia and the Baltics) from the aforementioned organized collection essays written by an international set of Historians and edited by Allan V. Murray entitled, *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, as well as the Mongol Invasions of Central Europe - all of which occurred during the 13th Century, and as will be argued throughout this thesis - cemented itself within the culture and landscape of the German-speaking areas of Central and Eastern Europe until the fall of the Third Reich in 1945 - with echoes of this traumatic past being heard and felt during World War II on the Eastern Front. The aforementioned scholarly sources

¹² Allan V. Murray, "Preface," in *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, ed. Allan V. Murray (New York: Routledge, 2001, 2017), ix.

that will be invoked and utilized to first adequately argue, and then discuss the medieval foundations of the prior mentioned German cultural-historical tenants and their collective culmination and effects during World War II are the recent (2022) article from the Polish journal, *The Warsaw Institute Review*, entitled, *State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia as a Historical and Cultural Phenomenon*, the University of Virginia's *Virginia Quarterly Review* journal article entitled, *The Junkers: Hostages to the Past*, by A. Whitney Griswold, *The Origins of Prussianism* (also known as *Treitschke's Origins of Prussianism: The Teutonic Knights*) by Heinrich von Treitschke (the officially translated version), the *Golden Horde Civilization* research article entitled, *The Teutonic Knights' Military Confrontation with the Cumans during Their Stay in Transylvania (1211–1225)*, William Urban's book entitled, *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*, Alexander Gerschenkron's book entitled, *Bread and Democracy in Germany* (the post-war edition), the online journal article by *Copernico* (in cooperation with the Herder Institute and the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany) by Daniel Benedikt Stienen, entitled, *Malbork Castle, the Knights of the Teutonic Order, and the "German East" in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, and an journal article from the *English Historical Review* entitled, *The Origins of the Junkers*, by, F.L. Carsten. Lastly, a key primary source that will be reintroduced again further down in this thesis, is the 13th Century primary source account of the Mongol (Tatar) invasion of Central Europe by a monk by the recorded name of "Master Roger" (*Magistri Rogerii*) entitled, *Epistle to the Sorrowful Lament Upon the Destruction of the Kingdom of Hungary by the Tatars*. These sources are presented here for the reader to both serve as a concise literature review prior to moving forth, as well as to transparently present the academic basis of support for the new cultural and historical examination regarding the German experience on the

Eastern Front during the final months of World War II that will be undertaken in this thesis. As such, these handful of secondary sources all share a common theme in that they discuss focus on the historical and cultural importance of the Teutonic Order in the areas of Central and Eastern Europe that they made their presence known in through conquest and defense alike. The last three of these secondary sources bring forth the argument that the *Junkertum* (Landed Aristocracy) were individual descendants and class successors of the Teutonic Order, as well as being the most important leaders in the development and deployment of the Prussian (and later German) Army until the end of World War II, and also in the governance of East Elbia (all the German lands residing to the east of the Elbe River) until that time - with part of this political reign infamously including the collective argument of of these sources that the *Junker* establishment was instrumental in Adolf Hitler's ascent to become the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, and the *Führer* in 1934, until his suicide in 1945. Altogether, these various yet thematically-united secondary sources will serve as evidence to present and discuss the German and (and allied European) military experience on the Eastern Front during the final months of World War II - by showing that the medieval conquests of these lands and their subsequent defense by the Teutonic Order not only served as the historical origins of these lands - but as a crucial cultural and historical factor that made the German experience during the final battles on the Eastern Front not just one of *desperation* as has been argued countless times by countless Historians since the end of the war - but an experience and final violent expression of *culmination*. This will be argued in the sense that over the centuries, the cultural tenants of *volkskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, and *ostkrieg* - as well as the formations of the traditions of the *militärgrenze* and the *wehrbauern*. The main primary source will be used in this

section, Master Roger's recounting of the mass violence and suffering experienced by German-speakers and Hungarian-speakers at the hands of the Golden Horde (the Mongols, then known as the Tatars) during their invasion of Central Europe in the 13th Century, is not only eerily reminiscent of the experiences detailed in the primary source evidence of Germans and Hungarians on the Eastern Front from late 1944 to the end of the war in mid 1945 - but these medieval events too, echoed across the ages, and remained cemented within the German and Hungarian-speaking lands of Central and Eastern Europe until the end of World War II, while also thus being directly connected to the cultural tenants mentioned above. Lastly, historical images such as paintings, photographs, and posters will also be utilized and presented here as primary sources - with accompanying descriptions to better support the reader's understanding of the historical material and argument in this thesis. As such, with this literature review and statement of justification established - let us begin.

The conquests and settlements by German-speakers over the centuries in the areas that would by the time of Operation Bagration - consist namely of East Prussia (*Ostpreußen*), Pomerania (*Pommern*), Silesia (*Schlesien*) and the Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania - with the first two being aligned with Germany during the war on the Eastern Front), were not only of contemporary importance in a military-combative sense for the German war effort, but the defense of these lands against the USSR was also culturally vital to Germans and directly concerned non-Germans alike (namely Balts). On this, throughout the centuries of conquest and settlement by German-speakers during the process of *ostsiedlung*, and guided by the cultural philosophy of *drang nach osten* that lasted from roughly 700-1400 AD - the cultural concept of

volkskrieg was born. This concept was first harnessed in a historically-significant and well-organized capacity in the lands that would eventually formally become East Prussia and the Baltics, during the 13th Century by the Teutonic Order, and the smaller Baltic orders that would become chapters of them, namely the Livonian Brothers of the Sword and the Order of Dorbin.¹³ The Teutonic Order's (from here on, their mention should be understood as costing of the aforementioned three units of the Order) historical creation, and their historical implementation of *volkskrieg* also emerged alongside the cultural concepts and traditions of *vernichtungskrieg* and *verteidigungskrieg* during the Prussian and Livonian Crusades of the Thirteenth Century - which saw these primarily German and Latin-speaking knights wage a total war (*totalerkrieg*) of religious conversion and death (with conversion to Catholicism being seen as assimilation, and thus the "death" of the defeated peoples' old culture and broader identity) against the pagan Prussian and Livonian tribal peoples,¹⁴ and further against the Russian-speaking and Orthodox Christian (a denomination that was deemed heretical by the Teutonic Order) monarchical states just to the east, as part of the broader Northern Crusades. While the Russian-speaking monarchical powers ultimately emerged victorious in the defense of their lands against the Teutonic Order, the tribal pagan Prussian and Livonian peoples were soundly defeated - and the lands that would eventually become East Prussia and the Baltics (with the latter from this point, until just after World War II, being home to prominent and deeply-embedded German-speaking minorities) were renamed the Teutonic Order State (*Staat des Deutschen Ordens*) and the Land

¹³ Kurt Villads Jensen, "Introduction," in *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, ed. Allan V. Murray (New York: Routledge, 2001, 2017), xxii.

¹⁴ Jensen, "Introduction," xxii.

of Mary (*Terra Mariana*).¹⁵ It was around this time that the Order of Dorbin and the Livonian Brothers of the Sword also pledged to become official chapters of the Teutonic Order, due to both of them sustaining heavy casualties in battles against the aforementioned pagan tribal peoples of the Baltics.

By the end of the 13th Century, the tradition of *volkskrieg* had defined the State of the Teutonic Order and Terra Mariana (Prussia and the Baltics) in the manners that these lands were controlled, administered, and defended by a combined military order¹⁶ - with an and all towns and their civilian inhabitants in these lands also being placed within the walls of massive, red brick, uniform fortress complexes known as *Ordensburgen* (Order Fortresses).¹⁷ It should be noted here as well that by the reign of the Third Reich, the term *Ordensburgen* had not been forgotten - and elite NSDAP-run, paramilitary universities that were housed within a number of castles and called *NS-Ordensburgen*¹⁸ existed - their name a very purposeful harkening back to the Teutonic Order for the purpose of resurrecting the Prussian-German militarist medieval past. As such, in the article, *State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia as a Historical and Cultural Phenomenon*, the astonishing and lasting cultural impact (both physically and otherwise) that the

¹⁵ Jensen, "Introduction," xxii.

¹⁶ "State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia as a Historical and Cultural Phenomenon," *The Warsaw Institute Review*, (May 2022): <https://warsawinstitute.review/news-en/impact-of-the-sars-cov-2-pandemic-on-the-tourism-sector-in-the-european-union-3/#:~:text=The State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia is the,time lacked permanent settlement structures.>

¹⁷ Jensen, "Introduction," xxiii.

¹⁸ Lisa Pine, "The NS-Ordensburgen: Training for Political Leadership," *History of Education* 43, no. 2 (February 2014): 233, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0046760X.2014.880750>.

Teutonic Order had on the lands that would by World War II, be Prussia and the Baltics - is asserted in a few notably insightful manners. Firstly, the author mentions that the Teutonic Order eradicated the entirety of the native tribal Prussian populace - the latter having never formed an official state of any kind, the Order would end up “culturally terraforming” the entirety of Prussia until the end of World War II - thereby being seen by the Germans in this area of Europe (until 1945) as the *sole* forefathers of what would become an exceptionally important, German-speaking land. Secondly, the author also asserts that the development of medieval Silesia served as a “model” (in the physical and doctrinal sense of statecraft) for the Teutonic Order in their development of medieval Prussia, and that the Teutonic Order’s castle (*Ordensburgen*) system was not only one of the the largest in medieval Europe during their reign - but also one of the most technologically-advanced (in terms of building materials and overall construction) and well-organized overall. Thirdly, the author states that not only were the settlements within the State of the Teutonic Order some of the most urbanized in all of Medieval Europe - but that the State of the Teutonic Order itself had very well politically-defined and militarily-defended borders.¹⁹ As such, with this historical background established - it becomes clear *how* and *why* the concept of *volkskrieg* emerged so prominently in what would become the German State of Prussia, and why it lasted until the end of World War II: due to the land having been seen for generations of Prussians (and more widely, Germans) as the land that was founded, settled, governed, defended, and overall culturally and historically defined by the Teutonic Order - Prussia became a military state with a militarized populace, as that was the founding tradition and main cultural principle of the land. This historical reality and legacy is further evidenced

¹⁹ “State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia as a Historical and Cultural Phenomenon”.

with the aid of few more sources - namely in the article for *Copernico* by Professor Hans-Jürgen Bömelberg of the Justus Liebig University Geissen (*Justus Liebig Universität Geißen*), entitled, *The Lehdorff Family and the East Prussian Nobility*, the other aforementioned Copernico article by Daniel Benedikt Stienen, entitled, *Malbork Castle, the Knights of the Teutonic Order, and the “German East” in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, and the prior mentioned book by Heinrich von Treitschke originally entitled, *The Origins of Purssianism*. Firstly, Bömelberg asserts both the historical and cultural connection that some of the leading families in the East Elbian area of Prussia (in his study, East Prussia specifically) both had to the Teutonic Order, and to the spiritual continuation of their cultural foundations and historical traditions by saying, “The East Prussian noble Lehdorff family can be traced back to the 13th century”, “The Lehdorffs are an outstanding example of East Prussian nobility, because they embody basic features common to the commemorative tradition of the nobility, namely a long-established bloodline, an agrarian custom appropriate to their class (horse breeding), military lifestyles, but also a long history of producing literary works, which can be verified again and again over centuries”, “Their rise paralleled that of other families such as the Dohnas and the Dönhoffs and was based on the acquisition of former estates of the Teutonic Order, which now became secularized.”²⁰ Secondly, Stienen discusses this topic in his article by stating through the combined use of primary and secondary source commentary, “Theodor von Schön (1773-1856), a high-ranking Prussian civil servant, passed by the castle’s ruins in their desolate state several times in the years after 1800. One day he encountered the place again and would later recall how his view of it was

²⁰ Hans-Jürgen Bömelberg, “The Lehdorff Family and the East Prussian Nobility,” *Copernico* (May 2022): <https://www.copernico.eu/en/articles/lehdorff-family-and-east-prussian-nobility>.

transformed all at once: “Before the war of 1806, I had seen Malbork Castle twice in its deepest state of degradation, but I had regarded it more as a curiosity [...]. In 1816 I saw it again, but this time in a completely different light,” for “only now did the towering work appear in its full glory before my soul”, and “What had happened in the meantime that now made Theodor von Schön look at the castle with such different eyes? On the one hand, he found himself in a transitional period between the Enlightenment and Romanticism – a time when the Middle Ages had begun to displace antiquity as that long-lost and longed-for realm in the past. In this dawning age of medieval romanticism, Malbork Castle had suddenly gained new value and meaning as a symbol of lost chivalry and valiant fighting in the name of the Christian faith.”²¹ Thirdly, the 19th Century Prussian Politician and Historian, Heinrich von Treitschke, comments on this historical and cultural phenomenon by saying, “One who wishes to measure the age of a people will be mistaken if he seeks to do so by numbering the years of its existence; he will find a better approach by way of the more abstruse question, what portion of the past continues to live as history in the soul of this people. Whoever, witnessing the contemporary [1862] struggle against the fundamental structure of the German State, fails to understand that this old country of ours is now growing up for the second time, may nevertheless recognize the youth of our people in the light of some- thing vain to deny-that the Middle Ages are infinitely remote from the consciousness of latter-day Germans”, “Learned investigators have never failed to note the most stimulating episodes of this early phase in our history, the history of Old Prussia, the Ordensland

²¹ Daniel Benedikt Stienen, “Malbork Castle, the Knights of the Teutonic Order, and the “German East” in the 19th and 20th Centuries,” *Copernico* (March 2023): <https://www.copernico.eu/en/articles/malbork-castle-knights-teutonic-order-and-german-east-19th-and-20th-centuries-changes-through-time-and-space>.

colonized by the Teutonic Knights. Who that is endowed with a clear or eager imagination can fail to be allured by the thought of the wonderful strong-holds of this Brotherhood with their refectories bathed in the light of dawn and their obscure underground passages? He wants to understand these enigmatic champions, who were not only swashbuckling soldiers, but also thoughtful administrators; not only abstemious monks, but also venturesome merchants, and (still more remarkable) bold and far-seeing statesmen”, “We are here presented with a history which at one moment produces a sinister impression by the sorrowful narrowness of its provincial particularism, and at the next uplifts the mind with wide vistas upon historical entanglements; a history no less complicated, no less involved, than our ancient escutcheon, with its one-headed eagle which one of the Hohenstaufen Emperors allowed the Grand Master of the Order to adopt, so that it was blazoned in the remote possessions of the Teutonic Knights after the Empire itself had abandoned the emblem-and it was destined at long last to be revived as a symbol of promise by the great German State of modern times. But what thrills us inhabitants of petty German particularist States even more in the history of the Ordensland than its romantic charm, is the profound doctrine of the supreme value of the State, and of civic subordination to the purposes of State, which the Teutonic Knights perhaps proclaimed more loudly and clearly than do any other voices speaking to us from the German past.”²² It should also be mentioned here that the aristocratic families (such as those mentioned by Bömelberg) that had lived for centuries in the East Elbian area of Prussia as both the successors and the descendants of the Teutonic Order only fell from their positions of social prominence - and intertwined political,

²² Heinrich von Treitschke, *The Origins of Prussianism* (*Treitschke's Origins of Prussianism: The Teutonic Knights*) (New York: Routledge, 1862, 1942, 1969), 17, 19-21.

military, and economic power as a result of the total defeat and surrender of Germany during World War II, which according to the Yalta and Potsdam Agreements - ceded these lands to Poland and the USSR (with the special case of the East Prussian city of Memel being ceded to Lithuania - then under Soviet occupation). Additionally, it should be mentioned that older Polish historiography traditionally directly associated the Prussians (and also the Germans more widely) with the Teutonic Order - thus creating a historical reality in which a Historian may observe that not only was there considerable consensus among German-speakers (especially in the East Elbian area of Prussia) about the tremendous importance of the history and legacy of the Teutonic Order, but also to Polish-speakers in a far less romantic manner. Daniel Benedikt Stienen brings attention to this by stating, "Representatives of the Polish national movement reacted to the newly awakened interest in the Order in their own way. They reinterpreted the Order in their own terms and painted a picture of warlike conquest and ruthless subjugation of Slavic territories by Germans. The Crusaders, with whom the Germans as a whole could be identified, appeared as aggressive invaders who used their military superiority to appropriate foreign lands and unrestrainedly maltreated the population. It was an image that lent itself well to embedding the present Prussian occupation within a wider narrative of the age-old and ongoing oppression of Slavs by Germans", and "Renowned writers such as the two most important poets of Polish Romanticism Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) and Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849) and the late 19th-century writers Józef Ignacy Krasiński (1812-1887) and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916) wrote influential novels that left a lasting mark on the Polish image of the Knights of the Teutonic Order. Not all of these works were written with explicitly anti-Prussian sentiment. Some were actually directed against Russian rule

and disguised themselves beneath the cloak of the historical novel to avoid censorship. But they too could be read as anti-German manifestos. In paintings and films, we find a visual reinforcement of the negative myth of the Order. The equation of Knights of the Teutonic Order with Prussians and the latter with Germans was firmly anchored in Polish collective memory and, in view of more recent political and power conflicts, endured well into the 20th century.”²³

Thus, these sources show us that until the end of World War II, it was a common, and deeply-held cultural and historical belief among the Prussians (and later the Germans) - that the traditional enemies of Prussia (and later Germany) were to the East, thereby justifying the historical conquest of the Teutonic Order, and honoring the *Ordensburgen* as symbols that had so tremendously defined the character and look of the land of Prussia (and later Germany as a nation-state), while other groups such as the Poles had long maintained an equally passionate - but directly opposite sentiment about the Prussians (and then the Germans) that would also last until the end of World War II. In summary, the concept and tradition of *volkskrieg* was historically forged in the East by the Teutonic Order in the sense that they as a combined military order - fought, conquered, and settled the land - thereby culturally-defining the whole area of their settlement as a place of German and Latin-speaking (the latter being representative of Central and Western European culture)²⁴ militarism, military power, and cultural supremacy as they, and later generations of German-speakers believed, as evidenced above - and conversely, to which the historical and cultural enemies of the Teutonic Order, such as generations of Polish-speakers, never forgot. Additionally, this same sort of phenomenon appeared in the USSR during

²³ Stienen, “Malbork Castle, the Knights of the Teutonic Order, and the “German East” in the 19th and 20th Centuries”.

²⁴ Jensen, “Introduction,” page xviii.

the interwar era and into World War II (known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia) - with the 1938 film by Sergei Eisenstein entitled, *Alexander Nevsky*, where he recreated the Battle on the Ice (which was fought in 1242 between the Teutonic Order and the Russian-speaking monarchical states) as an unsubtle allegory to promote Russian nationalism and anti-German sentiment (with the Teutonic Order directly symbolizing the Third Reich),²⁵ and once war broke out between the Third Reich and the USSR, Soviet propaganda on a few occasions, used images of the Northern Crusades in this vain to promote the war effort against Germany.

In this sense, the legacy of the Teutonic Order (namely in Prussia, but with countless places in the Baltics being commonly known and referred to by their German names until after World War II) went beyond the cultural omnipresence of both the official history and folk history (*historie und volksgeschichte*) in the region, and in the many *Ordensburgen* that gave the lands of Prussia and the Baltics their unique cultural and historical look, and overall regional feel. The legacy of the Teutonic Order was most strongly seen and felt physically among the specific class that until the end of World War II, controlled this area: the aforementioned *Junkertum*. The *Junkers* as a regional ruling class had both promoted and maintained the legacy of the Teutonic Order - and they had also solidified the cultural, historical, and doctrinal place of the prior mentioned German cultural tenants of war in a few ways. On this, the *Junkers* served as the *de facto* governmental, military, and economic leaders of the East Elbian region of Prussia, and the appearance and condition of the lands that they lived on, governed, and defended very much

²⁵ Russell Merritt, "Recharging "Alexander Nevsky": Tracking the Eisenstein-Prokofiev War Horse," *Film Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (Winter, 1994-1995): 36, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1213094>.

looked like the State of the Teutonic Order that had preceded it until its dissolution, along with the Order itself, in the late 16th Century. This can be seen in the sense that the the Prussian (and later German) military (specifically the Army, or *Heer*) was culturally seen as the premier organization of the state, the political climate of the area was one of staunch conservatism with militarist, communalist, regionalist (and later German nationalist), and monarchist (until the ascendancy and rule of Hitler during the Third Reich) sentiments at its ideological core, and the fact that the physical landscape was rural, with villages being situated around large landed estates that the peasants (*bauern*) worked on. These estates were where the *Junkers* lived and then passed on through the centuries-old feudal custom of aristocratic inheritance, were known as *Rittergüter* (Knights Estates) - with these establishments essentially being seen as the “second incarnation” of the *Ordensburgen* in terms of both their cultural-historical and practical significance to the region. Finally - not only was it the *Junker* class that brought about the eventual unification of the German States and thus the creation of the Second Reich (through the actions of Otto von Bismarck, himself a *Junker*), but also the ascendancy of Adolf Hitler and creation of the Third Reich (through the actions of Paul von Hindenburg, who was also a *Junker*). Hitler himself even admitted to the political support of the *Junkertum* this during his reign, stating, “Our revolution would not have been possible at all if a certain part of the nation had not lived on the land. If we review the revolution soberly we must admit that it would not have been possible to accomplish this revolution from the cities. In the urban communities we could not have reached a position which gave our policies the weight of legality.”²⁶ As one can

²⁶ Adolf Hitler, “Völkischer Beobachter” (April 1933): quoted in Alexander Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy in Germany*, (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc. 1943, 1966), 3.

historically infer - the *Junkertum* establishment had commanded such a tremendous level of respectability among the German nation, that they follow their lead if they politically backed Hitler and the NSDAP. On this, in the same cultural and historical manner that the Teutonic Order's *Ordensburgen* bring revived under the National Socialist banner as the aforementioned *NS-Ordensburgen*, so too were was the *Junkertum* establishment honored with the official establishment of the *Schutzstaffel* (Protection Staff/Squad)-run, *SS-Junkerschulen* beginning in 1937, with the main one being housed in a castle in Bad Tölz,²⁷ after having been first organized in 1934. Furthermore, it was through the tremendous cultural and historical command that the *Junkertum* establishment held over Prussia (and later over Germany), that the colors and iconography of the Teutonic Order would be synonymous with Prussia and Germany, particularly in a military and a political sense. Specifically, black and white as once used by the Teutonic Order as their chosen colors, were until the end of World War II, also used as the official colors of Prussia, and as two of the main national colors of Germany - as well as the cross of the Order being used as the symbolic-historical design basis for the *Eisenkreuz* (Iron Cross) medal, which was first created in 1813 by the order of the King of Prussia, *Friedrich Wilhelm* (Frederick William) III during the Napoleonic Wars, and then awarded until the end of World War II, as well as the *Ritterkreuz* (Knights Cross) medal, which was created by Adolf Hitler during World War II, and named in honor of the Teutonic Order, while the black and white *Balkenkreuz* (Balkan

²⁷ Martin Gutmann, "Debunking the Myth of the Volunteers: Transnational Volunteering in the Nazi Waffen-SS Officer Corps during the Second World War," *Contemporary European History* 22, no. 4 (November 2013): 595, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/contemporary-european-history/article/abs/debunking-the-myth-of-the-volunteers-transnational-volunteering-in-the-nazi-waffenss-officer-corps-during-the-second-world-war/5D5B379D73C65DACCF59655823BCE6#>.

Cross) was used from 1916 until 1945 as the official German military vehicle insignia, in honor of the Teutonic Order. Altogether, these can collectively be seen as the physical symbolical manners by which the legacy of the Teutonic Order was very heavily maintained through the end of World War II and the fall of the Third Reich - thus also showing the cultural and historical power that the legacy of the Teutonic Order held over the Prussian and then German military establishment during this span of time. With this established - it should be said that this recognition of the historical and cultural power that the legacy of the Teutonic Order held over Prussia and Germany through the commanding collective military, political, and social force of *Junkertum* until the end of World War II - was both recognized and recorded by academics during their existence as a class, and thus during a time when Prussia still existed as both a region (specifically East Elbia) and as a state. In his article from 1943 entitled, *The Junkers: Hostages to the Past*, A. Whitney Griswold states, "Of the enemies of responsible popular sovereignty in Germany, the Nazis, of course, head the list. But there are others more difficult to dispose of because more subtle and complicated, and because their roots strike more deeply into German history and the German soil. Foremost among these are the Prussian Junkers, a feudal aristocracy that has survived in unbroken ascendancy all of the revolutions, including Hitler's, that have swept Europe in modern times. Numbering not more than a few thousand families, this proud, medieval cult of virtue and the sword has largely dominated Prussian politics since the thirteenth century and, through Prussia, profoundly influenced the whole course of German history,"²⁸ and Alexander Gerschenkron, in his landmark 1943 book, *Bread and Democracy in*

²⁸ A. Whitney Griswold, "The Junkers: Hostages to the Past," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1943), <https://www.vqronline.org/essay/junkers-hostages-past>.

Germany, says, “The Junker class with its conqueror traditions and instincts had by this time become the essence of what is usually called the spirit of Prussianism. Most notably, the scions of Junker families led and dominated the Prussian, and later the German, Army. The military caste in Prussia was so inextricably connected with the feudal landowning class proper that they too were, in fact, one in interests and general outlook.”²⁹ As one can see - even before the historical collapse of the controlling *Junkertum* class and culture in Prussia and more broadly in Germany, it was a known fact among academics that the *Junkers* themselves were the proud descendants and successors of the Teutonic Order.

The manners of of *verteidigungskrieg* and *vernichtungskrieg* that Army Group Center took part in in June, 1944 during Operation Bagration, were also first implemented into the wider German way of war centuries earlier, by the Teutonic Order in the 13th Century. The historical implementation of *verteidigungskrieg* emerged namely in the senses that the *Ordensburgen* faced to the east as aforementioned - as they were seen as fortress-settlements that were designed to defend against attacks from the east.³⁰ Such a practice in accordance with the tenant of *verteidigungskrieg* was revived by Hitler on March 8, 1944, with his issuing of War Directive 53, declaring, “The fortified area will fulfill the same function of fortresses in former historical times. They will ensure that the enemy does not occupy these areas of decisive operational importance. They will allow themselves to be surrounded, thereby holding down the largest possible number of enemy forces and establishing conditions favorable for successful counter-

²⁹ Gerschenkron, *Bread and Democracy in Germany*, 24.

³⁰ “State of the Teutonic Order in Prussia as a Historical and Cultural Phenomenon”.

attacks.”³¹ Furthermore, this operational directive had the support of one of the top commanders on the Eastern Front and a one of the most well-regarded Senior Officers in the *Wehrmacht*, *Generaloberst* (Colonel General) Heinz Guderian (a Prussian from Kulm), who around the time of Operation Bagration, organized and activated the “Fortress Department of the Army High Command” (*Festungsabteilung des Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/OKH*), and oversaw the dedicated creation and maintenance of various “fortresses” on the Eastern Front, and reflecting on this endeavor after the war, Guderian stated, “A number of the fortified positions then constructed performed their function for a long time. In time to come it will be possible to evaluate correctly the defense at Königsberg and Danzig, of Glogau and Breslau; it is impossible to say now how fast the Russians’ advance would have been, and how much more Germany would as a result have been scorched at their hands, had these fortifications not then been built.”³² The formerly German cities that Guderian chose to highlight here should be taken into special account, due to the fact that Königsberg and Breslau each held out as *festungen* for months during the final months of the war - with Königsberg holding out from January to April, 1945 and Breslau from February to May, 1945, as well as the fact that Königsberg and Danzig were historically significant cities within the State of the Teutonic Order - with Königsberg serving as the second capitol after Marienburg, and Danzig serving as a key commercial city, as

³¹ Adolf Hitler, “War Directive 53” (March 1944): quoted in Bastiaan Willems, “Defiant Breakwaters or Desperate Blunders? A Revision of the German Late-War Fortress Strategy,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 2 (June 2015): 354, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13518046.2015.1030268>.

³² Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (1950): quoted in Bastiaan Willems, “Defiant Breakwaters or Desperate Blunders? A Revision of the German Late-War Fortress Strategy,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 2 (June 2015): 357, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13518046.2015.1030268>.

well as being overall culturally defined by the Teutonic Order.³³ As a result of War Directive 53, the prior mentioned Army Group Center would find itself being ordered to defend various urban areas of Belarus as *fester plätze* (fortresses/fortified centers) during Operation Bagration - with the official “War Diary” of the *Wehrmacht* Ninth Army (a historical formation that we’ll become well-acquainted with in this thesis) stating in an entry written on the opening day of Operation Bagration that, “The Army considers the orders concerning the establishment of fortified areas as particularly dangerous. It is therefore looking with bitter feelings towards the upcoming battles, knowing that it is bound by orders which, according to its conscience, it cannot accept as correct.”³⁴ As once can see, there was a considerable amount of apprehension among the Ninth Army to fight in their section of Belarus in such a manner at the start of Operation Bagration - but it should be noted that this was not simply due to having to hold urban centers as fortresses, but more so because the Ninth Army (which was the spearhead of Army Group Center, as mentioned prior) had faced a serious depletion of arms and armaments, due to them having been transferred to the neighboring Army Groups, and thereby having to then face the realization that they (the Ninth Army) were expected to defend a geographically-critical sector while they were now significantly undermanned and underarmed. Following the catastrophic defeat suffered by the *Wehrmacht* as a result of Operation Bagration and the subsequent Soviet advance to the old Prussian Frontier to the north, the historically Prussian-German states such as East Prussia, West

³³ Sebastian Sobecki, “Danzig”, McGill University, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, University of Pennsylvania (website), Accessed April 24, 2024, <https://web.english.upenn.edu/~dwallace/europe/nodes/danzig.html>

³⁴ *Wehrmacht* Ninth Army, “War Diary” (June 1944): quoted in Bastiaan Willems, “Defiant Breakwaters or Desperate Blunders? A Revision of the German Late-War Fortress Strategy,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no. 2 (June 2015): 354, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13518046.2015.1030268>.

Prussia, Silesia, Pomerania, Mecklenburg, and Brandenburg would also each become an individual *frontgau* (Front State - with it being important to note the historical German linguistic detail, that *Gau* was officially used instead of the traditional *Staat* to designate the various German states during the Third Reich), and their respective major cities were each designated as a *festung* (fortress) by Hitler himself, all between October, 1944 and May, 1945.³⁵ As such, what can be seen here is that the manner in which *verteidigungskrieg* was “manifested” and/or “invoked” on the Eastern Front during World War II was very much in the spirit of the Teutonic Order - that is in the destination and defense of eastward facing *festungen* by the *Wehrmacht* in the same way that the Teutonic Order created and defended their conquered territories with eastward facing *Ordensburgen*. The historical implementation of *vernichtungskrieg* came from the fact that the wars that were waged by the Teutonic Order (and the Livonian Brothers of the Sword and the Order of Dorbin, by extension) against the native populations of Prussia and Livonia were total - with either cultural-religious and/or literal death being the choices offered at by the Teutonic Order at the end of a sword, as mentioned prior. On this, within *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, one of the contributing Historians, Vera I. Matuzova, presents some historical primary source evidence from a Teutonic Knight and Catholic Priest named Peter von Dusberg, which details his (and one can infer his fellow Knights of the Orders’)³⁶ views on the Pagan Native Prussians, with Von Dusberg detailing his outlook

³⁵ Willems, “Defiant Breakwaters or Desperate Blunders? A Revision of the German Late-War Fortress Strategy,” 353-354.

³⁶ Vera I. Matuzova, “Mental Frontiers: Prussians as Seen by Peter von Dusburg,” in *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, ed. Allan V. Murray (New York: Routledge, 2001, 2017), 253-255.

as, “Prussians had no idea of God. As they were foolish, they could not comprehend Him, and as they were illiterate, they could not contemplate Him in the Scripture’ either”, and “They have never had any spare or costly clothes, neither have they got any now; if one takes off his clothes today, he puts it on tomorrow not caring that it is inside out.”³⁷ What we can see is that Peter von Dusberg was not only simultaneously speaking for himself and on behalf of the Teutonic Order when he made such hostile statements towards the Native Prussians, but when taken into the broader context of German History until the end of World War II and with the additional undemanding of how deeply entrenched the legacy of the Teutonic Order was in their former lands until that time, as discussed prior, one may find such sentiments by a German-speaking militarist such as Von Dusberg eerily similar the sentiments echoed by Hitler centuries later. On this, it should be remembered and clarified once more that religion and language were held the place during the Medieval Ages that race and ethnicity would hold by the time of the the existence of the Third Reich and World War II. Additionally, Matuzova brings in her own secondary source scholarly commentary (which I happen to agree with) in her section of this book, such as when she states, “Whether consciously or subconsciously, the author brought to his Chronicle what I once called ‘black-and-white representation’ and what is called the dichotomy of ‘we’ and ‘they’ in ethnic (as well as in group) psychology. The crusader came to this strange, pagan land with the values and norms of his own ethnic culture, with a cultural legacy that could not be shrugged off. Not only was his mentality different from that of the natives, but the

³⁷ Peter von Dusberg, *Chronicon terrae Prussiae* (book 3, chapter 5), *De ydolatria et ritu et moribus Pruthenorum*: quoted in Vera I. Matuzova, “Mental Frontiers: Prussians as Seen by Peter von Dusburg,” in *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, ed. Allan V. Murray (New York: Routledge, 2001, 2017), 254, 257.

chronicler, as a bearer of ethnocentrism, reveals no desire to approach the mentality of Prussians. It is noteworthy that, though he knows the names of Prussian tribes and territories, the concept ‘Prussians’ seems to be used as a collective term in the section under discussion, the description being applied equally to all of them.”³⁸ This historical assessment is quite interesting in the fact that one can very easily notice significant cultural and historical parallels between the outlook that the Knights and Clergy of the Teutonic Order held in regards to their views on the Native Prussians, and the outlook that the men of the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* held towards many of the different peoples of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during battles on the Eastern Front. As such, within these sorts of cultural and ideological conditions - the merciless practice of *vernichtungskrieg* becomes possible. Matusova actually details one such account when she states that, “For Peter von Dusburg the hospitality of the Prussians at their feasts seems to have consisted of drinking-bouts, which finished only when ‘a guest and his hosts, a husband and a wife, their son and daughter get quite drunk’. This Prussian custom was well known to the Teutonic Knights, who once (in an act of revenge) invited Prussian nobles to a feast and killed them when they got drunk.”³⁹ When taken into account within the context of both the primary source accounts of Von Dusberg and the secondary source scholarly commentary of Matusova, what becomes apparent is that not only was this an assassination performed for the intertwined military and political purposes of conquest - it was carried out with violent contempt for the

³⁸ Matusova, “Mental Frontiers: Prussians as Seen by Peter von Dusburg,” 253-254.

³⁹ Peter von Dusburg, *Chronicon terrae Prussiae* (book 3, chapter 5), *De ydolatria et ritu et moribus Pruthenorum*: quoted in Vera I. Matusova, “Mental Frontiers: Prussians as Seen by Peter von Dusburg,” in *Crusade and Conversion on the Baltic Frontier 1150-1500*, ed. Allan V. Murray (New York: Routledge, 2001, 2017), 255.

Native Prussians and their entire cultural being. Centuries later, the concept of *vernichtungskrieg* had been both consciously resurrected and well-defined in the same manner on the Eastern Front during World War II by the time of Operation Bagration from June to August, 1944, with Red Army Soldiers and Partisans alike having been well aware that they faced the prospect of death stemming from either execution upon capture, or from captivity in a *konzentrationslager* (concentration camp) or a *vernichtungslager* (extermination/annihilation camp), should they be captured by the *Wehrmacht* or *Waffen SS*. It should be noted here, that at the beginning of the campaign on the Eastern Front - Hitler himself cemented the aforementioned conditions needed to fully usher in and then unleash the grim realities *vernichtungskrieg* in two speeches - one to the German people (for context, *volk* was the word used for “people” instead of *menschen*, in the political and racial linguistic tradition corresponding to the *völkisch ideologie* or folkish ideology which served as the basis of the beliefs of the NSDAP) on Jun 22, 1941, the opening day of Operation Barbarossa (*Unternehmen Barbarossa*), which was named in honor of the Holy Roman Emperor and military leader in the Third Crusade, Frederick (*Friedrich*) I Barbarossa in purposeful cultural and historical parallel - and one on October 2, 1941, to the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* on the Eastern Front. In the first speech, Hitler summarizes the justification of the campaign on the Eastern Front as, “The purpose of this front is no longer the protection of the individual nations, but rather the safety of Europe, and therefore the salvation of everyone. I have therefore decided today once again to put the fate of Germany and the future of the German Reich and our people in the hands of our soldiers. May God help us in this battle,”⁴⁰ and in the

⁴⁰ Adolf Hitler, (June 1941): quoted in *The Führer to the German People: 22 June 1941*, (Grand Rapids, MI: German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, 2024), <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/hitler4.htm>.

second speech, he does this again by stating, “Filled with the greatest concern for the existence and future of our people, I decided on June 22 to appeal to you to anticipate in the nick of time threatening aggression by one opponent. It was the intention of the Kremlin powers-as we know today-to destroy not only Germany but all Europe. Comrades, meanwhile you will have gained two impressions: First, this opponent had armed himself for attack to such an extent that even gravest apprehensions have been surpassed. Second, God's mercy on our people and the entire European world if this barbaric enemy had been able to move his tens of thousands of tanks before we moved ours! All Europe would have been lost, for this enemy does not consist of soldiers, but a majority of beasts” and “Today begins the last great, decisive battle of this year. It will hit this enemy destructively and with it the instigator of the entire war, England herself. For if we crush this opponent, we also remove the last English ally on the Continent. Thus we will free the German Reich and entire Europe from a menace greater than any since the time of the Huns and later of the Mongol tribes. The German people, therefore, will be with you more than ever before during the few ensuing weeks. What you and allied soldiers have achieved already merits our deepest thanks. With bated breath, the blessing of the entire German homeland accompanies you during the hard days ahead. With the Lord's aid you not only will bring victory but also the most essential condition for peace.”⁴¹ In addition, *Wehrmacht Genraloberst* (Colonel General) Erich Höppner (a Prussian from *Frankfurt an der Oder*, or Frankfurt on the Oder), then serving as the Commander of the Fourth *Panzer Army* (*Panzerarmee*) just prior to the execution

⁴¹ Adolf Hitler, (October 1941): quoted in *Adolf Hitler: Order of the Day to Troops on the Eastern Front* (Chevy Chase, MD: Jewish Virtual Library, 2024), https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/adolf-hitler-order-of-the-day-to-troops-on-the-eastern-front-october-1941#google_vignette.

of Operation Barbarossa - stated his justification for the campaign as, “The war against Russia is the inevitable result of a struggle for existence that has been forced upon us” and “It is the old fight of Germanic peoples against the Slavic peoples, the defense of European culture against the Muscovite-Asiatic flood, and the defense against Jewish Bolshevism. This war must have as its goal the destruction of today’s Russia and must therefore be waged with unprecedented harshness. In conception and execution, every battle must be guided by the iron will to completely and mercilessly annihilate the enemy. In particular, the sponsors of the current Russian-Bolshevik system are not to be spared.”⁴² Before we move on, there are a few important details in these primary source statements that directly pertain to the historical matters that this thesis is concerned with, and which are therefore necessary to discuss. Firstly, though Hitler himself was not a self-identified, and/or a practicing Christian of any denomination (despite being born and raised in Catholic Austria) - as a skilled propagandist, he knew that the vast majority of German-speakers (and more broadly, Europeans), strongly identified with one denomination of Christianity or another, and therefore by very purposefully invoking the titles “God” and “Lord” in the Christian sense in this speeches, along with the campaign that these speeches justified being named after a famous Crusader Holy Roman Emperor (who countless German-speakers and even other Europeans would’ve no doubt known of) - Hitler was able to frame the campaign on the Eastern Front as nothing less than a *crusade* in the same vain as those undertaken by the Teutonic Order centuries prior. Furthermore, Hoepner was equally well-aware of this historical and cultural legacy, and thus he also knew that by using such language as to stir

⁴² Erich Hoepner, (May 1941): quoted in *Territorial Struggle in Europe: Polish and Soviet Civilians, and Soviet Prisoners of War*, (Washington, DC: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2024), 65.

up strong cultural and historical sentiments in this official statement of his motivation to help carry out the war on the Eastern Front, it would carry significant weight among his superiors, peers, and the under his command. Additionally, Hitler's and Hoepner's comparison of the Red Army to the "Huns and the Mongol tribes" (the latter of which devastated Eastern and Catholic Central Europe, and even fought the Teutonic Order - and this will be revisited and expanded upon further down in this thesis) "beasts", and the "Muscovite-Asiatic flood" served to simultaneously conjure up the historical and cultural "memories" of the devastation wrought upon the European Continent centuries prior by the forces of Central Asia, while also dehumanizing the Red Army by specifically labeling them as "beasts" (*bestien*). Altogether, these statements can be seen as carefully-tailored propaganda designed to motivate the Germans and other sympathetic Europeans into seeing the campaign on the Eastern Front as the same sort of *crusade* that the Teutonic Order once undertook - thus justifying the merciless nature of *vernichtungskrieg* against the "historical enemies" of Germany and Europe as a whole. In this sense - the merciless ways of the Northern Crusades and the Mongol Invasions of Europe had not left the minds of German combatants on the Eastern Front during World War II - the latter being seen as a cultural-spiritual continuation of of the former. Therefore, one could argue that despite Von Dusberg fully believing in the religious background of his statements against the Native Prussians, and Hitler only invoking such religious wording for propagandistic purposes - not only did both sets of recorded statements function as propaganda against certain populations to the east of German-speaking Europe during their respective times, but with all the evidence presented thus far, Hitler's statements can arguably be seen as "thematic continuations" of the types of sentiments as expressed by Von Dusberg on behalf of himself and the Teutonic Order.

The statements made by Hoepner, like Hitler's, can be seen as a "thematic continuation" to the sentiments made by Von Dusberg, in the sense that in referring to the Red Army as the "Muscovite-Asiatic flood", he was both referring to the part of the Northern Crusades where the Teutonic Order fought the Orthodox Christian Russian-speaking monarchical states, and the Mongol (or Tatar) Invasions of Europe. This is because Hitler and Hoepner knew that the intertwined history and legacy of the Teutonic Order, as well as the generationally-haunting legacies of the Hun and then the Mongol Invasions of Europe, and the legacy of the campaign of the Teutonic Order against the Orthodox Christians in the Russian monarchical states, were alive and well within vast sections of the German nation and other European nations at the time, notably with religious connotations. On this, the aforementioned prospects of the types of horrible deaths that the the Soldiers and Partisans of the Red Army grimly recognized and accepted that they would face if captured by German forces at the start of Operation Bagration and thus three years into the conflict on the Eastern Front, coupled with the devastation that *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* forces had wrought upon the USSR in the name of *vernichtungskrieg* combined into a collective ferocity that would last until the end of the war - and see the same type of treatment that they and their families had suffered at the hands of the German forces on the Eastern Front, inflicted back onto the *Wehrmacht*, the *Waffen SS*, and the *Desutsches Volk*. In this sense, Operation Bagration was seen as the beginning of the end for the Third Reich, the operation that would bring the Red Army to the Prussian Frontier, and all the way to Berlin.

From the beginning of Operation Bagration until the end of the conflict, the men of the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* knew that if the war was lost against the USSR (and by that point

in the war, more and more Germans were beginning to realize that it was a possibility), unlike on the Western Front, where the traditions of *Westkrieg* and/or *Europäischeskrieg* (West War and European War, the terms traditionally being one in the same) reigned supreme - there would be no quarter given nor expected, the German-speaking lands that the Red Army “liberated” would see the German people experience untold levels of suffering, and any German Prisoners of War sent to Siberian labor camps with little to no hope of ever returning to Germany. To the men of Army Group Center who fought against the combined onslaught of the various Red Army Fronts (the Soviet term for Army Groups) at this time, which consisted of the First, Second, and Third Baltic Fronts, the First, Second, and Third Belorussian Fronts, and the First, Second, and Third Ukrainian Fronts - they (the men of Army Group Center and more broadly, all of the formations of the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* on the Eastern Front) knew that they were all that stood between European civilization and the wrath of the USSR, whom Germans and other sympathetic Europeans (such as Estonians and Latvians) alike, saw not only as a Communist (specifically Bolshevik) political menace and a destroyer of culture (such as religion, as well as national and ethnic identity), but also as both the old Russian-speaking foe that the Teutonic Order had fought against centuries prior, as well as the Central Asian “scourge” that had also invaded the European Continent and fought both the Teutonic Order and other Central European monarchical forces (such as the Duchy of Silesia, or *Herzogtum Schliesen*, and the Kingdom of Hungary, or *Königreich Ungarn*) in centuries past - the Golden Horde. In this sense, Operation Bagration when seen as a single, combined battle for Belarus (a European country), which resulted in a resounding European (namely German) defeat at the hands of a Russian, and more broadly, also a Central Asian force (the Red Army) - it can be rather easily compared to the

Battle of Liegnitz in Silesia, 1241. At the Battle of Liegnitz - a combined monarchical European force (of which, Knights of both the Duchy of Silesia and the Teutonic Order were present) faced off against and were defeated by the Golden Horde,⁴³ a Mongol (then referred to as Tatar) force of considerable power that had previously conquered the Russian-speaking monarchical lands, before they had then turned their attention to the European Continent. In the same way that Operation Bagration had dealt a significant blow to the Third Reich with the catastrophic destruction of Army Group Center, and thus paved the way for a deep advance by the Red Army into Europe - the total defeat of the united European monarchical forces (part of them German-speaking, as aforementioned) at the hands of the Golden Horde allowed for further Mongol invasions and advances into Central Europe as well - with mass death and destruction left in their wake.⁴⁴ As such, the historical and cultural legacies of the aforementioned Battle of Liegnitz, as well as the subsequent Battle of Mohi that occurred as a result two days later (both of them in April, 1241) not only can be seen as arguably serving as historical parallels to Operation Bagration in the sense of the “walls” or “gates” of Europe being catastrophically and violently breached by forces from the East, and thus dealing a severe blow to the defending German-speaking forces and their European allies - but the aftermath of these battles had a far-reaching effect in terms of *how* the culture of these lands were shaped until 1945. Specifically, just prior to the Battle of Liegnitz, the Silesian capital of Breslau (which would be the last German city to fall

⁴³ William Urban, *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History* (Yorkshire: Frontline Books, 2003, 2011, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020), 38.

⁴⁴ Urban, *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*, 39.

in World War II) was burned by its own citizenry in the face of the Mongol (Tatar) advance,⁴⁵ and following this - the Battle of Liegnitz took place, soaking the Silesian battleground in blood just as it would be once more seven hundred years later, and seeing nearly the entire contingent of the Teutonic Knights that were present killed in combat,⁴⁶ as well as Duke Henry (*Heinrich*) II of Silesia beheaded and his corpse then so badly mutilated, that his wife was only able to identify and retrieve his remains so that they could be properly interred in Breslau - due to a benign abnormality in his toes.⁴⁷ The final act of horror that would truly cement this battle in the “cultural memory” of German-speakers until the end of World War II was the fact that the Mongol force accounted for the number of European dead by removing an ear from every corpse and then storing them to be counted.⁴⁸ Following this, with Silesia defeated, the Mongols turned their attention to Hungary - and with the same flavors of ferocity and brutality that would be exchanged seven hundred years later during World War II between the forces of East and West, the ground of Mohi was blood-soaked and strewn with the dead to such an extent that the fallen could be seen lying where they’d fallen for literal tens of miles,⁴⁹ the battle having resulted in a further defeat for the European forces gathered there, followed by the Mongols going onto immolate German-speaking settlement of Pest (later one half of the combined city of

⁴⁵ James Chambers, *The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe* (London: Book Club Associates, 1979), 97.

⁴⁶ Chambers, *The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 99.

⁴⁷ Chambers, *The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 99.

⁴⁸ Chambers, *The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 99.

⁴⁹ Chambers, *The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 103.

Budapest).⁵⁰ Though the Teutonic Order wasn't present at this subsequent battle, its historical and cultural legacy would remain the minds of Hungarians by the time of World War II - with many Hungarians falling in combat alongside their German allies as they both fought defensive battles against the Red Army as it advanced into Hungary in late 1944. On this, a Catholic Clergyman known to history as "Master Roger" provides what has been agreed upon by Historians as the most invaluable primary source account of the fates faced by countless German-speakers and Hungarian-speakers in the aftermath of the European defeats at the Battles of Liegnitz and then Mohi, which is entitled, *Epistle to the Sorrowful Lament Upon the Destruction of the Kingdom of Hungary by the Tatars* (with Latin to English translation and historical annotation performed by János M. Bak and Martyn Rady). As an eyewitness to the Battle of Mohi and the subsequent violent rampage of the Mongols (referred to by him as Tatars) - what becomes clear is not only would such events sear themselves into the "collective memories" of later generations of Germans and Hungarians who lived in the areas that were historically affected - but that by the time the Eastern Front had included the East Elbian areas of Prussia, as well as Hungary to the south during the final months of World War II, the eyewitness accounts of the acts of merciless violence perpetrated by the Red Army would be eerily similar to those of the Mongols as seen and described by Master Roger. This rampage is described by him as, "As we said before, King Qadan, having taken Rodna and captured *ispán* Aristald, selected the best six hundred armed Germans who were under the said *ispán*. Guided by them, they crossed forests, woods, rocks and gorges and arrived beneath the city of Oradea. The city was very famous in Hungary, therefore many nobles, ladies and peasant women had gathered there.

⁵⁰ Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 104.

Even though the bishop had left with some of the canons, I stayed there with the remaining people. We had the castle, which we saw damaged on one side, repaired with a strong wall, so that we could find refuge there should we be unable to defend the city. But when one day the Tatars suddenly arrived and my situation in the city was precarious, I did not want to go to the castle, but ran away into the forest and hid there as long as I could. They, however, suddenly took the city and burnt down most of it and left nothing outside the walls of the castle. Having collected the booty, they killed men and women, commoners and nobles alike, on the streets, houses, and fields. What more? They pardoned neither sex nor age”, and “They seized the warriors, canons, and others who had not been killed by the sword in the attack. The ladies, damsels and noble girls tried to escape into the cathedral. The Tatars ordered the warriors to hand over their weapons and from the canons they extorted by the cruelest tortures all that they owned. Because they could not easily enter the cathedral, they set fire to it and burnt the church, together with the women and whatever there was in the church. In other churches they perpetrated such crimes to the women that it is better to keep silent lest people get ideas for most evil deeds. Then they ruthlessly beheaded the nobles, citizens, soldiers and canons on a field outside the city. They violated the saints’ graves, trampled upon the relics with their sinful feet, smashed to pieces the censers, crosses, golden chalices and vessels, and whatever else was designed for the service of the altar. They dragged men and women alike into the churches and shamefully mistreated and then killed them there. After they had destroyed everything, and an intolerable stench arose from the corpses, they left the place empty. People hiding in the nearby forests came back to find some food. And while they were searching among the stones and the corpses, the Tatars suddenly returned and of those living whom they found there, none was left

alive. And this slaughter was repeated day after day. They finally left for good only when there was no one else to kill”, as well as saying, “We, who stayed in the forest among the border obstacles, took flight at night towards Tămașda, a large German village on the Criș River. But the Germans did not let us cross the bridge, instead many of them insisted that we had to defend their fortified city together with them, which didn’t please us at all. So we turned off to an island, which was being well fortified by the people from Adea, Voivodeni, Iermata, and other surrounding villages”, and finally, “Not much later, the news came that the Tatars had taken at dawn the said Tămașda, the village of the Germans, and all those whom they did not keep alive were beheaded by the sword with horrendous cruelty.”⁵¹ Perhaps the most profound and lasting cultural and historical legacy that the Battle of Liegnitz and the Battle of Mohi, along with their equally violent respective aftermaths at the hands of the Mongols would bestow were that in Silesia, so much of the citizenry had perished, that the land was then heavy re-populated by German-speakers coming from the west⁵² - a fact that would make the battles in Silesia (culminating in the Battle of Breslau) that would last from February to May, 1945 all the more impactful, since those Silesian-Germans who fought there were by in large descendants of those 13th Century settlers. Similarly, the Battle of Mohi in Hungary, and the following wrathful decimation that the Mongols unleashed across Hungary as aforementioned and cited - would also see the land re-populated by among other ethnic groups, German-speakers,⁵³ many of whose

⁵¹ Master Roger, “Epistle to the Sorrowful Lament Upon the Destruction of the Kingdom of Hungary by the Tatars,” (1244): quoted in János Bak and Martyn M. Rady, *Anonymus and Master Roger* (Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2010), 199-205.

⁵² Chambers, *The Devil’s Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 100.

⁵³ Urban, *The Teutonic Knights: A Military History*, 39.

descendants would also perish fighting against the Red Army from late 1944 until May, 1945 when Hungary became a key battleground on the Eastern Front. On one final note for this subsection, it should be noted that the cacophony of violence that had been most proudly exemplified in Silesia and Hungary at Liegnitz and Mohi caused such mass fear among German-speakers and Hungarian-speakers (in a manner not at all dissimilar to the panic that swept through these populations in the aftermath of Operation Bagration and the Red Army's advance into Central Europe during World War II), that they began to spread panic-stricken rumors that humans had not committed such atrocities, but supernatural evil beings⁵⁴ - which can be seen as paralleling the rhetoric of World War II among these populations, with the Red Army being seen as "beasts", and in parts of the Holy Roman Empire (the First Reich), what can be argued as a sort of precursor to the "Judeo-Bolshevism" rhetoric put forth by Hitler and others during World War II, occurred in the form of the massacre of a number of Jews at the hands of their Catholic, German-speaking neighbors who were convinced that those Jews were covertly arming the Mongols, and that the Mongols were distantly related to the Jews.⁵⁵ As such, this can be seen as the combined historical and cultural foundation for the manners in which *volkskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, and *ostkrieg* were "invoked" and "unleashed" centuries later by German forces and their European allies during the last months of war on the Eastern Front.

⁵⁴ Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 105.

⁵⁵ Chambers, *The Devil's Horsemen: The Mongol Invasion of Europe*, 105.

The land that Operation Bagration was fought on, and for which the men of Army Group Center were the defenders, could be seen as a *militärgrenze* (military frontier) of sorts - a namely Austrian (albeit German-speaking) concept that lasted from the 16th to the 19th Centuries that was designed to defend against Ottoman Turkish invasions of Europe⁵⁶ - and which would actually also be revived as part of the plan for the German post-war settlement of Eastern Europe under the Third Reich known as *Generalplan Ost* (General Plan East). In this sense, there was a tremendous weight that was placed on the men of Army Group Center when they faced the Red Army during Operation Bagration - as the land that they were fighting on and the enemy that they were fighting against, was historically, ideologically, and symbolically the same enemy that their symbolic and historical forefathers (the Teutonic Order and by subsequent extension, the *Landsknechte*⁵⁷ - or “Servants of the Land” who fought against the Ottoman Empire and became as much of a core part of the military history of German-speaking Europe as the Teutonic Order before them) had waged wars that could and would each be historically and culturally classified as a *volskrieg*, a *verteidigungskrieg*, a *vernichtungskrieg*, and an *ostkrieg* - along lands that could and would be literally and culturally recognized as a *militärgrenze* alongside those known as *wehrbauern* (peasant soldiers).

With the historical, cultural, and ideological background established - thus allowing for scholarly familiarization with the topic at hand, it is time to examine the manners in which the concepts of

⁵⁶ Gunther E. Rothenberg, “The Origins of the Austrian Military Frontier in Croatia and the Alleged Treaty of 22 December 1522,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 38, no. 91 (June 1960): 493, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4205180>.

⁵⁷ “Landsknechte: Foot Soldiers of Fashion,” The Art Institute of Chicago (website), Accessed April 24, 2024, <https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/2505/lands-knechte-foot-soldiers-of-fashion>

verteidigungskrieg and *vernichtungskrieg* were carried out by Army Group Center during Operation Bagration (and which would continue on the Eastern Front until the end of the war) in terms of weapon system organization, deployment, and use - as well as the fate of Army Group Center in the aftermath of Operation Bagration - by which time the path for the Red Army to to mercilessly attack Prussia and the Baltics cleared. In terms of *verteidigungskrieg* - the *Wehrmacht* (and the *Waffen SS* as well) had shifted their entire doctrinal outlook and practice in terms of tactics and strategy from the top down by the time of Operation Bagration to a combatant mode and method of defensive warfare, and this shift would be maintained and even further promoted by the end of the war. Concerning Army Group Center during Operation Bagration - the main ways that this took shape were the heavy reliance within the *Wehrmacht* on the fielding of the *Sturmgeschütz III* and the *Sturmgeschütz IV* (meaning “Assault Gun” III and IV - and both armed with 75mm long guns), as well as the *Panzer IV* (meaning “Armor/Tank” IV - also armed with a 75mm long gun) in terms of main armor support. On this, in his aforementioned book, *Hitler’s Greatest Defeat: The Collapse of Army Group Centre June, 1944*, Paul Adair brings two important historical assertions to light: firstly - that despite being at least a semi-regular part of *Wehrmacht Panzer*, *Panzergranadier*, and *Infanterie* Divisions - the *Sturmgeschütz III* and the *Sturmgeschütz IV* didn’t fall under the command of the *Panzertruppen* (Armored Troops) Branch, but under the *Artillerie* Branch,⁵⁸ thereby complicating command and control on the battlefield instead of streamlining it, and secondly - that the *Panzer IV* remained in service from its introduction until the end of the war.⁵⁹ The average *Landser* and/or *Soldat* were

⁵⁸ Adair, *Hitler’s Greatest Defeat*, 22.

⁵⁹ Adair, *Hitler’s Greatest Defeat*, 20.

similarly well-prepared for heavy defensive warfare - namely in the senses that by 1943, they had been issued the “Model 1943” or “M43” uniform - consisting of an improved fatigue tunic and trousers, as well as the popular and reliable visored field cap, and most importantly - the rather cumbersome knee-high “jackboots” were prefaced with ankle boots and short canvas gaiters that were far better suited for the urban and rural terrain alike on the Eastern Front. This, combined with the fact that the *Panzerfaust 30 Klein* and the upgraded *Panzerfaust 30* (meaning “Armor Fist 30 Small” and “Armor Fist 30”) throwaway (single use), man-portable anti-armor weapon systems had been mass produced also since 1943 (and would continue to see production with the identical looking but upgraded 60 and 100 models in exceptionally high combined numbers by the end of the war) and caused tremendous grief to Soviet tanks and self-propelled guns (like the famous SU-76) - meant that the formations of Army Group Center were at least theoretically prepared to take part in the type of combat that was defined by the principles of *verteidigungskrieg*. This preparedness came from the fact that an the principles of *volkskrieg* were also being closely followed on the “homefront” in the German Reich. Briefly recall how as discussed in depth prior, in the age of the Teutonic Order, the settlements in the State of the Teutonic Order and in *Terra Mariana* were secured within fortresses, and the main culture of these places revolved around war - the same was true in the Third Reich by the time of Operation Bagration. By this point in the war, the ever-popularized and even mythologized *blitzkrieg* doctrine of warfare had been rendered unfeasible and therefore, *verteidigungskrieg* was what remained, especially by June, 1944. This fact was understood by Hitler himself, down to the lowliest *Landser* - yet the combat effectiveness of the *Wehrmacht* (and for historical clarity

again, the *Waffen SS*), had not diminished.⁶⁰ With Albert Speer serving as the Reich Minister for Armaments and War Production, he'd not only committed himself to orchestrate the continued mass production of arms, armaments, and equipment - and then have them rapidly sent to the front, through a mobilized workforce that was firmly committed to the realities of *volkskrieg* and *totalerkrieg* (after the Reich Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, Joseph Goebbels had announced Germany's move to such a state in February, 1943 in a speech entitled, *Nation, Rise Up, and Let the Storm Break Loose*)⁶¹ - but Speer also made sure that along with the *Panzer IV* with the 75mm long gun (the most produced German tank of the war) - large numbers of economically cheap and very simple to produce *Sturmgeschütz III* and *IV* models, as well as high quality models of *Panzerfaust* anti-armor weapon systems would be sent as produced in earnest and as priority products. On this, two scholarly sources that discuss these historical matters are Hamza Elshakankiri's (and edited by Madi Herron, Emily Bunch, and Asia Walczak) article, entitled, *Albert Speer: A Success not a Miracle*, where two of the main points of historical significance that are brought forth are the fact that Goebbels and Speer worked exceptionally well together - with Goebbels and Speer to promoting the "resiliences" and "triumphs" of the war effort in terms of military industrial output,⁶² as well as the fact that by 1944, Speer had in actuality, successfully consolidated the production of anti-armor weapon system types from

⁶⁰ Adair, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat*, 62.

⁶¹ Joseph Goebbels, (February 1943): quoted in *Nation, Rise Up, and Let the Storm Break Loose*, (Grand Rapids, MI: German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University, 2024), <https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb36.htm>.

⁶² Hamza Elshakankiri, "Albert Speer: A Success not a Miracle," *The Mirror-Undergraduate History Journal* 42, no. 1 (August 2022): 33, <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/westernmirror/article/view/15127>.

twelve to one, and the production of ground vehicle types from fifty-five to fifteen⁶³ - and Ioannis-Dionysios Salavrakos's article entitled, *A Re-Assessment of the German Armaments Production during World War II*, where he presents graphs and supporting text explanations of the quantities of the different types of weapon systems of weapon systems that were produced in the Third Reich during World War II.⁶⁴ The academic importance of these articles is that as scholarly literature, they each provide complimentary historical evidence that is critical to have access to if one is to understand the manners in which *volkskrieg* and *verteidigungskrieg* were exemplified at this point in the war in terms of *what* weapons were being used by German forces, *how* many were being produced, and *when* they were being produced and then deployed. By understanding this technical information that is usually relegated to specialized studies like these, a more complete historical picture of the wartime realities faced Germany from Operation Bagration until the end of the war emerges.

Furthermore, the reason that the technical historical information presented above is important - is because not only was the *Panzer IV* for instance, a highly effective, easy to produce, main battle tank that could be manufactured, maintained, and operated with little overall difficulty - it could also be used to great effect in an *offensive* or *defensive* capacity, and by the time it had been upgraded with a 75mm main gun - the *Panzer IV* had become a dreaded machine for enemy forces on the Western and Eastern Fronts alike. Additionally, the *Sturmgeschütz III* and *IV*

⁶³ Elshakankiri, "Albert Speer: A Success not a Miracle," 31.

⁶⁴ Ioannis-Dionysios Salavrakos, "A Re-Assessment of the German Armaments Production during World War II," *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies* 44, no. 2 (February 2017): 122-123, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/smsajms/article/view/151281>.

assault gun models that were also armed with 75mm guns, were low to the ground, easy to maintain and operate, and thus by June, 1944, they were recognized by the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* as being highly effective (and arguably even *most* effective) in a defensive capacity - with them being able to be used very effectively in ambushes against enemy armor formations in tight areas like forests or urban centers, as well as to act as effective defensive weapon system when tasked holding a town or village alongside Infantrymen. The *panzerfaust* could be used in much the same way - save for that it was man-portable and thus a highly maneuverable weapon system that was also one of the cheapest weapons to mass produce, while also being armed a shaped charge that was so devastating that it became infamous among Allied Forces on the Western and Eastern Fronts alike⁶⁵ - especially when used in an ambush capacity in urban environments, as would be seen from October, 1944 until May, 1945. Despite all of these factors, as a result of the highly effective deception strategy employed by the Red Army prior to the commencement of Operation Bagration known as *maskirovka*⁶⁶ - a large number of the aforementioned tanks and self-propelled guns allotted to the formations of Army Group Center were redeployed to Army Group North Ukraine - thus severely weakening what was until that point - a highly effective fighting force (as detailed above), in a highly critical geographic sector.⁶⁷ It should be briefly noted here that of the units that remained with Army Group Center

⁶⁵ Patrick A. Stallings, "US Army, Tank Security Operations: A Monograph," (master's thesis, School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, 1991), 6-7.

⁶⁶ Adair, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat*, 56.

⁶⁷ Terje Bruøygaard, "Operational Art in Theory and War: A Comparison of Soviet Theory and the Red Army's Conduct in Operation Bagration 1944," (master's thesis, US Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 2013), 24.

were one Royal Hungarian Army Division at the front, along with an additional three in Reserve,⁶⁸ as well as that in the Baltic sector of Army Group North (the former Livonia and *Terra Mariana* which would see the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* faced with heavy fighting as a result of Operation Bagration breaking open the way to Prussia and the Baltics) received the new *Jagdpanzer* 38 or *Hetzer* (“Tank Hunter” 38 or “Chaser” - armed with a 75mm main gun without a muzzle brake, unlike the *Sturmgeschütz* III and IV models), a highly effective self-propelled gun that also excelled in defensive warfare in the manners explained above. The other Army Groups also had by this time, had a number of *Jagdpanzer* IV (“Tank Hunter” IV - armed with a 75mm main gun with the common and standard muzzle brake, like the *Sturmgeschütz* III and IV models). In the end however, Operation Bagration would see the aforementioned annihilation of Army Group Center, and the battle lines of the Eastern Front would be pushed to the Baltics and the Prussian Frontier.⁶⁹

Of note, that even before the operation had fully concluded - it was clear that the historical and cultural tradition of tragedy and catastrophe that had been historically faced by German-speaking military forces in the East (such as the tremendous defeat of the Teutonic Order by the forces of Alexander Nevsky at the Battle on the Ice in 1242 - which halted the Teutonic Order’s advance into the Russian-speaking monarchical lands,⁷⁰ and which was as mentioned prior,

⁶⁸ Adair, *Hitler’s Greatest Defeat*, 62.

⁶⁹ Bruøygard, “Operational Art in Theory and War: A Comparison of Soviet Theory and the Red Army’s Conduct in Operation Bagration 1944”, 26.

⁷⁰ Richard Hellie, “Alexander Nevskii’s April 5, 1242 Battle on the Ice,” *Russian History* 33, nos. 2-3-4 (Summer-Fall-Winter 2006): 283-287, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24664445>.

dually popularized and memorialized as the anti-German film, *Alexander Nevsky*, by Sergei Eisenstein in the 1930's)⁷¹ had not diverted from its legacy of brutality and degradation, when in July, 1944 - 57,000 men (namely from Army Group Center), were disarmed and paraded in their worn out combat uniforms through the streets of Moscow in the event that has become known to history as the "Parade of the Vanquished". To the *Wehrmacht* Prisoners of War, and the Red Army Soldiers, NKVD Guards, and Soviet Civilians who watched them with burning hatred - what became clear was that the cultural and historical tradition and tenant of *vernichtungskrieg* that had been unleashed by the Third Reich upon the USSR - in the same manner that that the Teutonic Order and their subordinate Livonian Brothers of the Sword and the Order of Dorbin had historically unlashd on the peoples of the East centuries prior, would soon come back to Germany, her armies, and her people. Despite this, some in Germany (namely Hitler until just before his suicide on April 30, 1945) held out hope for the *endsieg* or "final victory". For the most part however, by the time Operation Bagration was underway, both sides knew that when Germany lost the war, it was never going to be the same place - for the USSR was committed to destroying every last vestige of the cultural-military traditions that "Prussianism" had been cultivated out of and unleashed eastwards over the centuries. By the time Operation Bagration had ended in a crushing defeat for the *Wehrmacht* in August, 1944 - the boundaries of the Eastern Front had been pushed back to the Baltics and the Prussian Frontier, as aforementioned - and from the German view, it was clear that the war would culminate into the deadliest combined forms of *volkskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, and *ostkrieg* that had been unleashed up until then - and that along with this, the tradition and spirit (*geist*) of the *wehrbauern* (peasant

⁷¹ Merritt, "Recharging "Alexander Nevsky": Tracking the Eisenstein-Prokofiev War Horse," 34.

soldiers) would need to be resurrected to stem the merciless tide of the Red Army as the Eastern Front then became the ultimate *militärgrenze*, and numerous major German cities in the region became *festungen* (fortresses) in the same tradition that the *Ordensburgen* had once been - with some of these cities even having had further permanent fortifications built around them during the reign of the Kingdom of Prussia (*Königreich Preußen*) to bolster the existing defenses that had been constructed during the reign of the Teutonic Order. Additionally, it should be briefly noted that Finland, after its Army had thoroughly been uniformed and armed by Germany, - fought alongside the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* against the USSR during the Continuation War (a geographically-contained, but notable part of the greater campaign on the Eastern Front), which lasted from June, 1941 to September, 1944. At its outbreak, the Commander in chief of the Finnish Defense Forces, Field Marshal Carl Gustaf Emil Mannerheim, justified Finland's entry into the war on the Eastern Front in a manner that strongly resonates with the overall cultural and historical themes discussed in this thesis thus far, with him stating, "I invite you to a holy war against the enemy of our nation....in order to create a safe future for Finland we proceed to a crusade together with the powerful military forces of Germany against our enemies."⁷² One month after the success of Operation Bagration, the hostilities between Finland and the USSR ended in a negotiated armistice, after which Finland then engaged in limited ground combat with the Third Reich in order to uphold the terms of the armistice, in what has become known as the

⁷² C.G.E. Mannerheim (June 1941): quoted in Lauri Hannikainen, "Finland's Continuation War (1941-1944): War of Aggression or Defence? War of Alliance or Separate War?: Analyzed from the International - Especially Legal - Perspective," *Baltic Yearbook of International Law* 17, no. 1 (January 2020): 12, <https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/publications/finlands-continuation-war-1941-1944-war-of-aggression-or-defence->.

Lapland War - which lasted until April, 1945.⁷³ In essence, between this action in the far northern sector of the Eastern Front and Operation Bagration to the south and center, the stage had definitively set for the final act of this Wagnerian tragedy to commence in terms of shock and scale, and thus making the final battles from October, 1944 to May, 1945 the *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods).

⁷³ Hannikainen, "Finland's Continuation War (1941-1944): War of Aggression or Defence? War of Alliance or Separate War?: Analyzed from the International - Especially Legal - Perspective," 17-18.



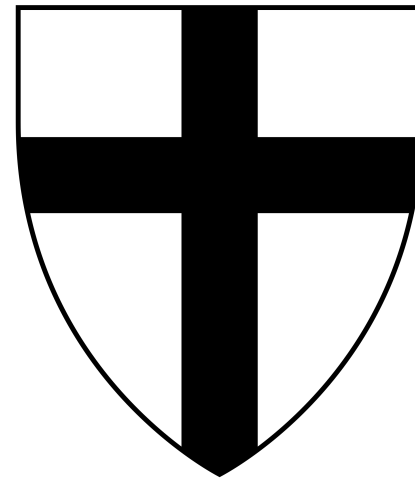
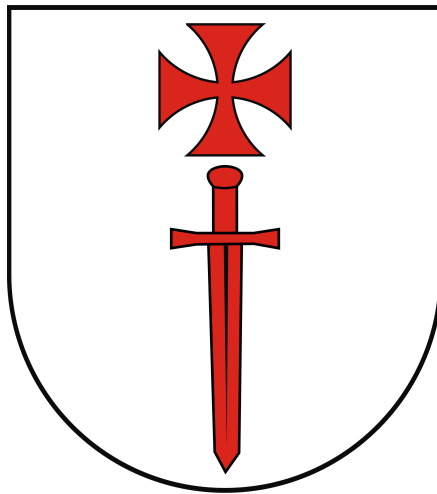
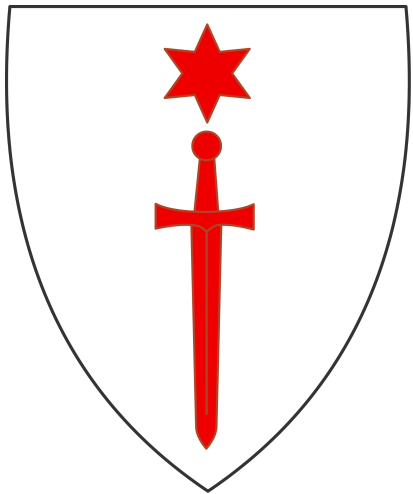
Posters from World War II depicting the battles between the USSR and the Third Reich as modern incarnations of the historical battles fought between the Medieval Russian States and the Teutonic Order in the Thirteenth Century.



Posters from the Third Reich in the prewar years - with the one on the left depicting a Teutonic Order shield with a *Hakenkreuz* on it, as a *Reichsadler* looks to the Prussian cities of the East, many of them being cities founded by the Teutonic Order, and the one on the right being a poster for the “National Peasant Day” - with a peasant being depicted as a knight in gothic armor, facing to the east against a Soviet star.



A Soviet poster from World War II equating the Third Reich with the Teutonic Order.



From left to right: the shields of the Order of Dorbin, the Livonian Brothers of the Sword, and the Teutonic Order.



Thirteenth Century relief from the *Ordensburg* at Marienburg depicting the Teutonic Order in battle during the Northern Crusades.



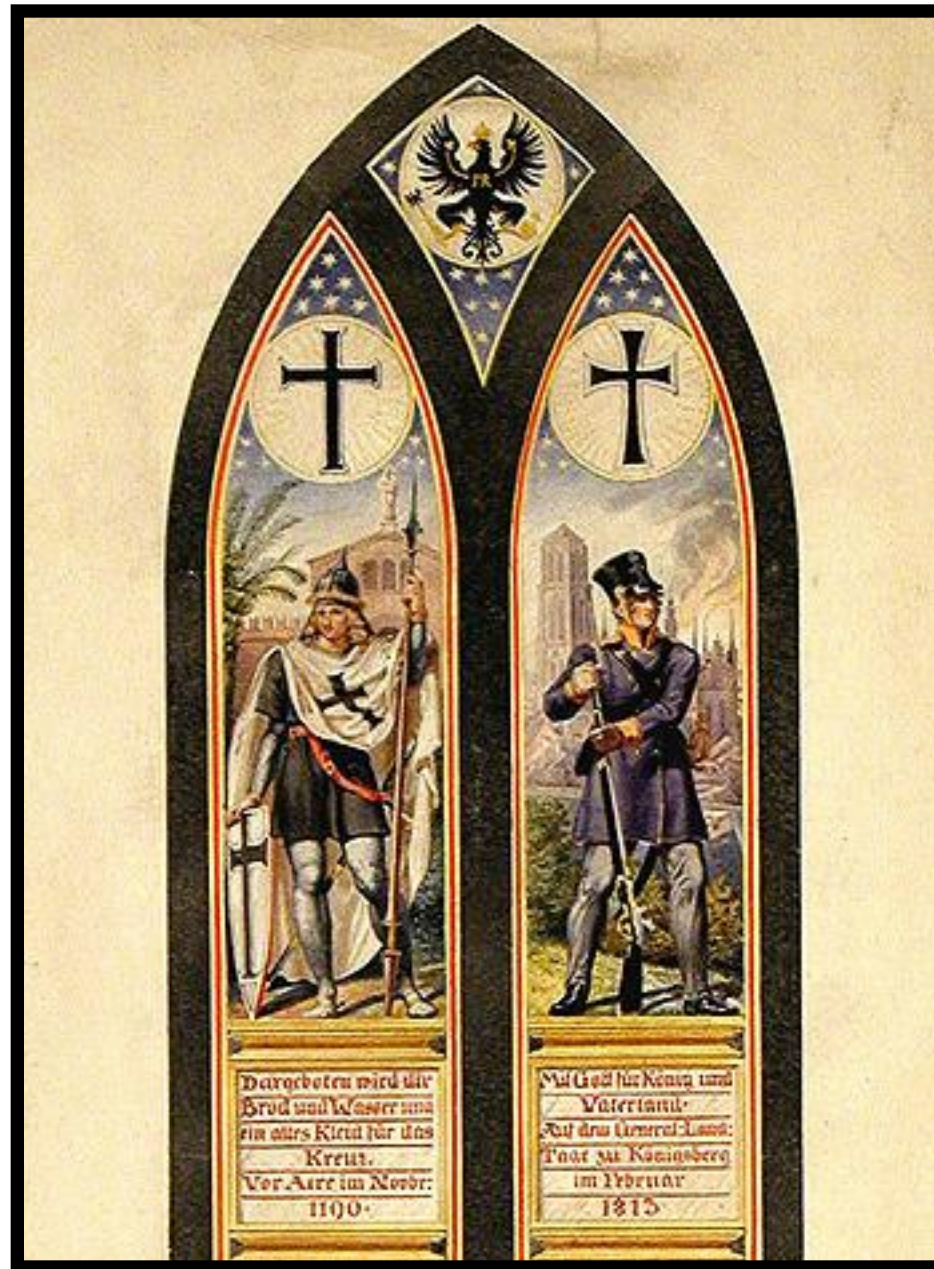
Medieval miniature of the Teutonic Order in battle against the forces of the East (note that this is made clear by the artistic choice of the time being to depict Russian, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian forces being shown wearing rounded and pointed helmets).



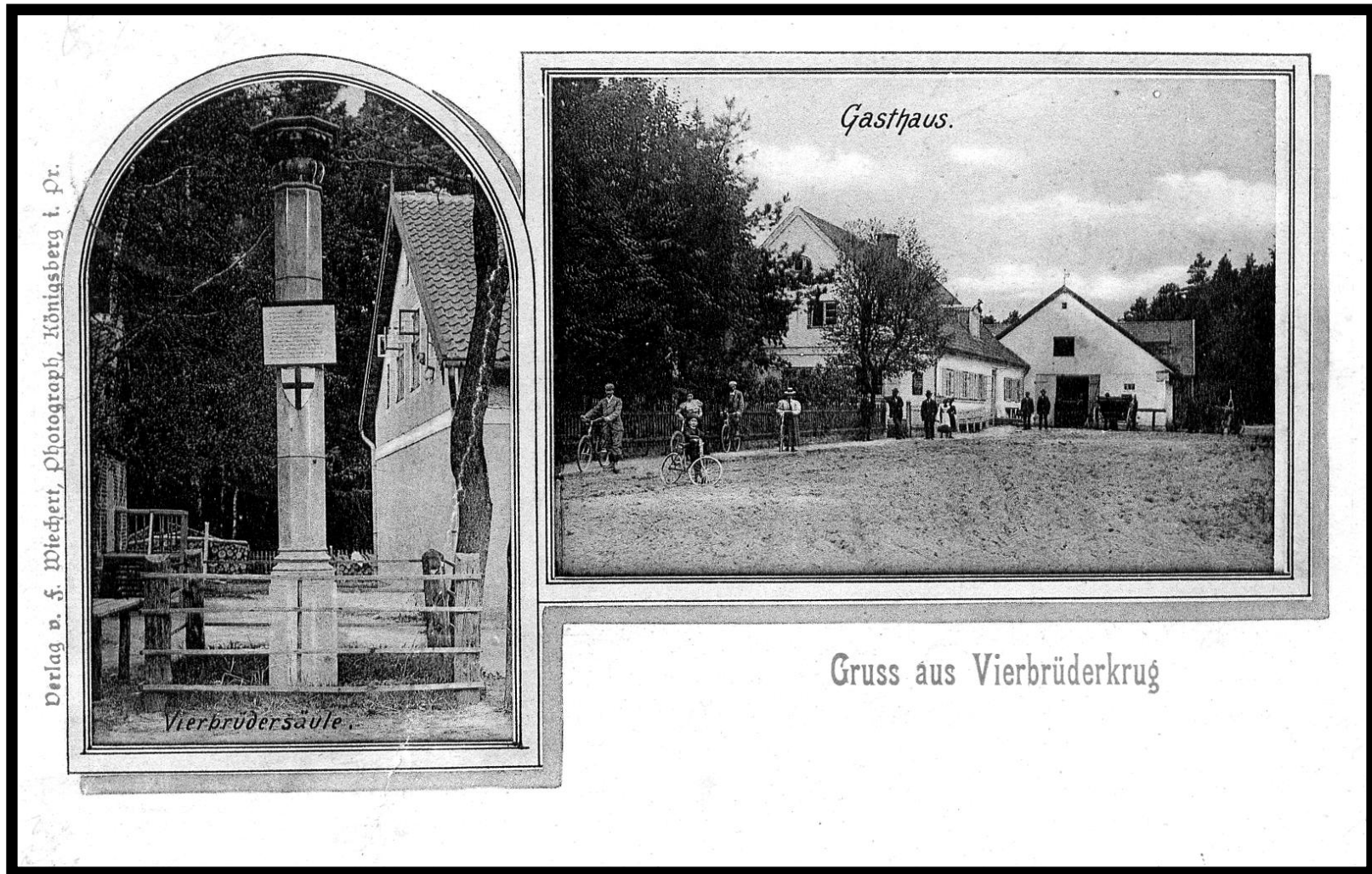
Medieval miniature depicting the Battle of Mohi in 1241.



Medieval miniature depicting the Battle of Liegnitz in 1241.



Nineteenth century Prussian postcard depicting the *Landwehr* as the successors and descendants of the Teutonic Knights.



Teutonic Order Memorial by a Guest House in East Prussia circa the early twentieth century.



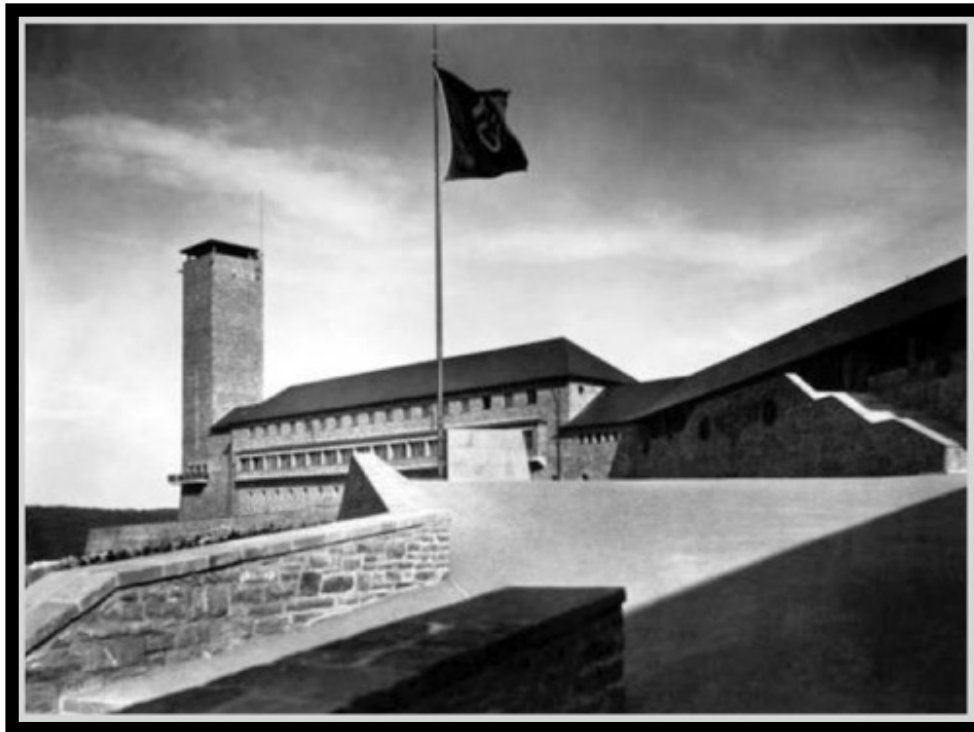
The Tannenberg Memorial in East Prussia - the resting place of Paul von Hindenburg, as well as being a memorial to the First Battle of Tannenberg (1410) and the Second Battle of Tannenberg (1914). Note that the First Battle of Tannenberg was the greatest defeat for the Teutonic Order, and the architectural design of the memorial was made to evoke the *Ordensburg*.



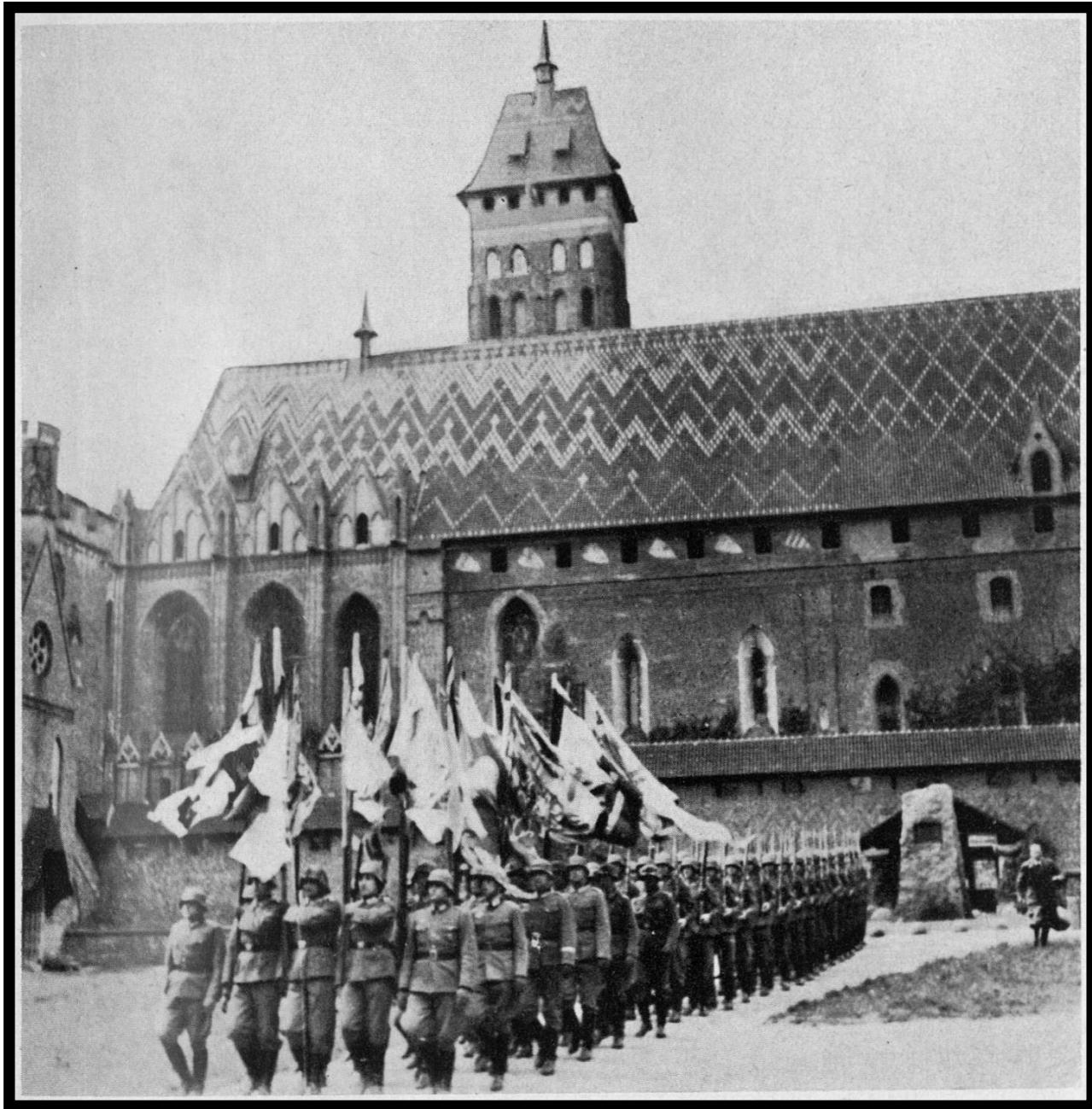
World War I Memorial to Paul von Hindenburg depicting him as a Teutonic Knight.



East Prussian NSDAP Badges from World War II - note that the one on the left depicts a Teutonic Order Shield and the turrets of an *Ordensburg* under the *Parteiadler*, and the one on the right depicts a *Hakenkreuz* with a Teutonic Order Shield on top. The badge on the right is also damaged, as it was found amid the ruins of Königsberg after the battle in 1945.



From top to bottom: the *SS-Junkerschule* at Bad Tölz and one of the *NS-Ordensburg*. Note the purposefully medieval architecture.



Men of the *Wehrmacht Heer* marching with reproduction Teutonic Order flags at the *Ordensburg* at Marienburg during World War II.



Wrecked *Wehrmacht* vehicles that were abandoned during their retreat in the wake of the Red Army's onslaught during Operation Bagration.



A Red Army Soldier inspects two knocked out *Wehrmacht Panzer IV*'s (their 75mm main guns not shown), while a few dead *Wehrmacht* men lay nearby. This photo was taken in the immediate aftermath of Operation Bagration.



Two Senior *Wehrmacht* Officers sit in surrender negotiations with the Red Army during Operation Bagration. Note that one of the Officers is wearing a mid to late war field cap, and that both were recipients of the *Ritterkreuz* (Knights Cross).



Men of the *Wehrmacht Heeresgruppe Mitte* marching in Moscow during the “Parade of the Vanquished”, 1944.



Finnish Army Soldiers wearing *Wehrmacht* field caps, and carrying with a Soviet PPS model submachine gun, as well as a German *Panzerfaust*, and a *Panzerschreck*. Note that the German anti-armor mine is on a tree to act as a potential trap for oncoming enemy vehicles.



Soviet poster depicting the thirty-fifth anniversary of Operation Bagration.

Götterdämmerung: The Last Stands of Prussia, the Baltics, Austria, and Hungary

By October, 1944 - the wartime situation for the Third Reich was not only critical, it was apocalyptic in every sense of the word. On the Eastern Front as we have seen - history “rhymed” (as Mark Twain once argued), with the *Wehrmacht* being forced to retreat out of Belarus and the small area of Northwestern Ukraine that they still held, as well as being tied up in a limited but still harmful conflict in the Finnish Lapland, all while the Red Army bashed their way into the Baltics and the Eastern Prussian Frontier - thematically in the manner that the Teutonic Order and their subordinate Orders had been beaten back after their violent campaigns of conquest in the East centuries earlier, as discussed above. In his landmark book entitled, *Red Storm on the Reich: The Soviet March on Germany, 1945*, Christopher Duffy presents the recorded sentiments of *Wehrmacht Generaloberst* Heinz Guderian, who best emphasized this when he stated, “For us Prussians it was our immediate homeland that was at stake, that homeland which had been won at such cost and which had remained attached to the ideals of Christian, Western culture through so many centuries, land where lay the bones of our ancestors, land that we loved.”⁷⁴ At this time as well, it would be wise to mention that on the Western Front - Aachen would fall to the US First Army, making it the first German city to fall - and the city that was once the center of coronation for the Holy Roman Emperors of the First Reich, and equally importantly, the resting place of *Karl der Große* (Karl the Great, also known as Charlemagne).⁷⁵ On the Eastern Front -

⁷⁴ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (1952): 389, quoted in Christopher Duffy, *Red Storm on the Reich: The Soviet March on Germany, 1945* (Edison: Castle Books, 2002), 46.

⁷⁵ Samuel J. Newland and Clayton K.S. Chun, *The European Campaign: Its Origins and Conduct - The Ardennes Offensive* (Carlisle: US Army War College Press, 2011), 305.

the overall main target land for the Red Army was clear: Prussia, the historical superstate and the traditional center of what would until the end of the war - the birthplace of German militarism - and which the German forces of the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* (and other European *freiwilligen* in the *Waffen SS*) defending it would fight to the death for, arguably with even more ferocity than on the Western Front. In *Hitler's Greatest Defeat: The Collapse of Army Group Centre, June 1944*, Paul Adair summarizes the longstanding historical and cultural relationship that had existed between Prussia and the German Military up to that time as, "The Army had played a unique part in the fabric of the state of Prussia since the eighteenth century and later in the German Empire. Prussian territory stretched from the Elbe to the borders of Russia, and much of the ethos of the 'Warrior State' came from the Orders of Military Monks who carved out their domain from the Slav countries in the east."⁷⁶ The secondary target land for the Red Army were the Baltics, where except for Lithuania - Estonia and Latvia stood with Germany against the USSR. As explained prior, these places were once part of the State of the Teutonic Order and *Terra Mariana*, as well as the birthplaces of the Order of Dorbin and the Livonian Brothers of the Sword. Thereby, the Estonian and Latvian Grenadiers of the *Waffen SS* to fight for and defend their homelands against an enemy that they saw like the Germans - as not only a Bolshevik menace coming to destroy the then-contemporary culture of Europe, but also as just another incarnation of the Russian and Central Asian invaders that their forebears had fought in centuries prior. On this, in his recent article entitled, *Revisionist National Narratives in the Memoirs of Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS Legionnaires*, Karl Stuklis undertook the undoubtedly exhausting, but all the same exceptionally noble task of compiling, analyzing, and comparing,

⁷⁶ Adair, *Hitler's Greatest Defeat*, 15.

and discussing in English - scores of memoirs written by former Estonian and Latvian *Waffen SS Freiwilligen* (Volunteers), stating in summary how the various authors collectively look back one and justify their wartime service as, “The Estonian authors present the Estonian Legionnaires as having fought to restore the rightful independence of the Estonian nation. They stress that they were victims, not sympathizers, of the Nazis and appropriate the suffering of persecuted ethnicities. The Soviet Union and its people are presented as Asiatic and barbarous. Stemming from Nazi wartime propaganda, this characterization serves to contrast the Soviets with the European and civilized Estonians and Germans – both members of a superior race”, and “Latvians and Estonians are depicted as motivated by patriotism and restricted by a lack of choice. Fighting for Nazi Germany was their only option if they wished to defend the existence of their nations from the Soviet Union. Nazi Germany, though also motivated by a desire for conquest, was not an existential threat to their nations. The behavior of states is understood through a national lens. Thus, the Soviet Union served as a vehicle for the Russian nation to destroy and dominate its neighbors.”⁷⁷ Additionally, it’s also worth mentioning that Stuklis also provides the reader with the approximate figures of the numbers of Estonians and Latvians that served in the *Waffen SS*, with these being 15,000 Estonians by 1944,⁷⁸ and that despite some assessment difficulties, the agreed upon range of Latvians that fought with German weapons and wore the uniform of Germany in ground combat stands between 110,000 to 115,000 by the end

⁷⁷ Karl Stuklis, “Revisionist National Narratives in the Memoirs of Estonian and Latvian *Waffen-SS* Legionnaires,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 55, no. 1 (February 2023): 205 and 209, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01629778.2023.2173262?scroll=top&needAccess=true>.

⁷⁸ Stuklis, “Revisionist National Narratives in the Memoirs of Estonian and Latvian *Waffen-SS* Legionnaires,” 201.

of the war⁷⁹ - as well as mentioning that two of these Estonian wartime memoirs were published in an academic collection by the Estonian Academy of Defense in the mid 1990's.⁸⁰

Though there were many individual battles in Prussia and the Baltics from October, 1944 until the end of the war in Europe in May, 1945 - and to cover them each in proper detail is beyond the scope of this thesis, we will again be examining *why* the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* forces fought in the manner that they did based upon the cultural-historical tenants that were introduced and discussed in the prelude section. Additionally, it should be noted prior to proceeding in greater detail that it wasn't only Estonians and Latvians who served in noticeable numbers on the Eastern Front at this point during the war (serving in the 20th *Waffen Grenadier Division* - 1st Estonian, the 15th *Waffen Grenadier Division* - 1st Latvian, and the 19th *Waffen Grenadier Division* - 2nd Latvian) - but also Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians that made up the 11th *SS Freiwilligen Panzergrenadier Division - Nordland* (11th SS Volunteer Armored Grenadier Division - Northland), Ukrainians that manned the 14th *Waffen Grenadier Division* - 1st Ukrainian, and Frenchmen who made up the the 33rd *Waffen Grenadier Division - Charlemagne*. Interestingly, out of all of these *Waffen SS* formations, the ones that have attained the greatest amount of scholarly attention (including in the manner of going through a scholarly translation process into English) are the 11th *SS Freiwilligen Panzergrenadier Division - Nordland*, and the 33rd *Waffen Grenadier Division - Charlemagne*. As such, in their joint article entitled, *The*

⁷⁹ Stuklis, "Revisionist National Narratives in the Memoirs of Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS Legionnaires," 205.

⁸⁰ Stuklis, "Revisionist National Narratives in the Memoirs of Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS Legionnaires," 201-202.

Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front, Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Claus Bundgård Christensen discuss the sentiments of the Danish *Waffen SS Freiwilligen* in terms of how they saw serving on the Eastern Front, as well as making note of how these men were at some of the most prominent battles at the end of the war. For the first part, primary source evidence is presented with some of these historical figures' names being lost to time - while others are duly recorded and attributed in their quoted, and very revealing, remarks. As such, these sentiments range from an unnamed Danish volunteer stating in a letter home, "I want to let you know that I'm returning with packed with a full load of enlightening National Socialism, which will make an impression on my surroundings,"⁸¹ as well as a Danish *Panzergranadier* in the 11th *SS Freiwilligen Panzergranadier Division - Nordland*, then part of the *III (Germanisches) SS Panzerkorps* - who was engaged in ground combat in Estonia in January, 1945, stating in a later home, "Dear Dad and Mum. Hurriedly, a sign of life. I know that it has been a shamefully long time. This time, however, it is due to the war. We have been involved in heavy fighting and as a matter of fact we have not yet finished. All our efforts went according to plan but the modern "flexible warfare" is terribly exhausting, both physically and mentally. We had a trip lasting eight days and nights in the open air, getting our feet wet, which of course made the most thin-skinned very dejected,"⁸² along with a further unnamed

⁸¹ Unnamed (September 1940): quoted in Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Claus Bundgård Christensen, "The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front," *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1999): 76, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081691>.

⁸² Per Sørensen (February 1944): quoted in Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Claus Bundgård Christensen, "The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front," *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1999): 83, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081691>.

Danish volunteer discussing both his views on the USSR and his motivation to enlist in the *Waffen SS* as, “Russia with the Soviets is a product of the Jews ... they are the threat to Denmark,”⁸³ with still a further unnamed Danish volunteer stating in a letter home, “X died as a hero and SS soldier, an SA man for the Grand-Germanic Kingdom, fighting Bolshevism,”⁸⁴ and lastly, a Danish *Waffen SS* Officer named Christian Frederik von Schalburg stated in a letter home at the opening of the campaign on the Eastern Front, “Now hundreds of motors run at full blast in the air: our aeroplanes, we all say - Germans, Finns, Dutchmen, Danes - our planes, we all say, instinctively. The course is east. In the distance to the east a dull rumbling. It starts! The Finnish officer next to me has eyes wet with tears - of joy. We shake each other's hands. The sunrise colours struggle through in the astern sky. The dawn of the new Europe.”⁸⁵ On the second part, the authors state that between late 1944 and early 1945, out of a total wartime strength of 6,000 Danish *Waffen SS Freiwilligen* 1,165 would be reported as either killed or unaccounted for, and that after serving with the 11th *SS Freiwilligen Panzergrenadier Division - Nordland* as one of the most important German formations serving in the Battle of Berlin from April to May,

⁸³ Unnamed (December 1942): quoted in Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Claus Bundgård Christensen, “The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front,” *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1999): 90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081691>.

⁸⁴ Unnamed (February 1942): quoted in Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Claus Bundgård Christensen, “The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front,” *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1999): 90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081691>.

⁸⁵ Christian Frederik von Schalburg (June 1941): quoted in Peter Scharff Smith, Niels Bo Poulsen, and Claus Bundgård Christensen, “The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front,” *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1999): 90, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20081691>.

1945, that casualty figure would rise to 2,000.⁸⁶ As for the 33rd *Waffen Grenadier Division - Charlemagne*, a superb recent work of scholarship on this formation (and other *Waffen SS Freiwilligen* formations as well), is the book entitled, *Soldiers of Germania: The European Volunteers of the Waffen SS*, by Gerry Villani. In this book, Villani not only presents the common sentiments shared by many of the French volunteers (who when discussing their wartime experiences and motivations to serve, speak both for themselves, and on behalf of their former comrades in arms) - but he also diligently covers their collective background as an official *Waffen SS* formation, and subsequently how they fared in combat, particularly late in the war on the Eastern Front. On this, one former *Grenadier* of the formation named, Christian de la Mazière, recalls this time in his life by saying, “I was a fighter, a good fighter, and the French resistance asked me to join them. However, my idea as a young man was that only two ideologies existed which could change the world: one which already changed the world, Marxism, and the other one which was National- Socialism. I did not join the resistance; I was one of them (nationalists),”⁸⁷ and another *Grenadier* named Henri Fenet (who served in the Battle of Berlin), stated in a very long and passionate statement about why he and his comrades served as, “As Frenchmen, we fought for Europe yesterday. Often we were asked the question: “Why did you have to fight on the side of the Germans?” After the turn of the war late 1942 - early 1943 it was clear that Europe was threatened by the Soviet army with the Allies alongside Stalin; this threat was an extreme danger to the fate of our continent and everything depended on

⁸⁶ Smith, Poulsen, and Christensen, “The Danish Volunteers in the Waffen SS and German Warfare at the Eastern Front,” 94.

⁸⁷ Christian de la Mazière: quoted in Gerry Villani, *Soldiers of Germania: The European Volunteers of the Waffen SS* (Morrisville: Lulu, 2016, 2019), 28.

the outcome of the fighting in the East. In 1943, with the agreement of the Government of that time, the French were given the opportunity to enlist as a volunteer in this elite army in Germany. The defeat of 1940 was for many young French men a terrible discouragement; it was necessary to forget what happened back then and to go fight in the East with this elite army. It was the perfect opportunity to forget this discouragement. Because of our love for the homeland, we decided to cooperate with the German forces for the future of our country and the safeguarding of our European continent. Formerly it was our duty to defend Europe, today it is our pride. But what would become of Europe without Europeans? In the same way that the ancient Greeks and ancient Romans have disappeared, so the European identity is in danger today. One who loses his identity is no longer able to defend its territory and its security. After the war, the Germans, especially the young people have been forced to hate their identity. Thus developed this hatred, this complex of guilt, following a technique that was used in the middle ages. As a Frenchman today I have to remember the sacrifice of the German soldiers fallen during the summer of 1944 on European soil. We cannot forget their sacrifice, especially of these brave young men of the LAH and HJ in Normandy, whose blood covers the French soil, fallen for the defense of the European continent. We fought for Europe, for a European community against Bolshevism. After half a century our history can finally accept our choices that we've made during that time. The Russian empire, who made the world trembles on its foundations for more than 50 years, collapsed without foreign intervention. It collapsed under its own weakness and defaults. On the contrary, the world had to mobilize the entire planet to bring down Germany. We also fought for a unified Europe for which many Europeans had been waiting for

in the hope it wouldn't be a miscarriage. We worked our road to independence.”⁸⁸ As far as the historical significance of the 33rd *Waffen Grenadier Division - Charlemagne*, Villani makes sure to discuss the Division's official insignia, and its historical and cultural symbolism in the sense that the half of the shield shaped (as *Waffen SS Grenadier, Panzer and Panzergrenadier*, and *Kavalrie* Divisions all had specific corresponding shapes for their insignias) insignia that is a *Reichsadler* (Imperial Eagle), symbolized East Francia (and thus by World War II, Germany), and the other half with the *Fleurs-de-Lis* represented France⁸⁹ - with both sides together symbolizing the Carolingian Empire (or the First Reich). Villani also makes sure to mention their prowess in ground combat during the Battle of Berlin by discussing how the *Grenadiers* of the *Charlemagne* Division used individual houses and other buildings as *festungen* (fortresses) of sorts, in the sense that they would ambush and destroy Red Army armor by firing *panzerfäuste* from street-facing cellars, which were a common feature on many types of buildings in Germany at that time,⁹⁰ as well as how they fought alongside the 11th *SS-Panzerabteilung* (Armor Battalion) “*Hermann von Salza*”, and a significant number of Hitler Youth in the Neukölln district of Berlin - with the action resulting in the Grenadiers of the *Charlemagne* Division and the Hitler Youth knocking out a number of Red Army armored vehicles with *panzerfäuste*,⁹¹ and finally that these *Grenadiers* were not only some of the last German forces defending *Festung Berlin* to surrender, but that they fought to the end in one of the most critical sectors of the

⁸⁸ Henri Fenet: quoted in Gerry Villani, *Soldiers of Germania: The European Volunteers of the Waffen SS* (Morrisville: Lulu, 2016, 2019), 211-212.

⁸⁹ Villani, *Soldiers of Germania*, 201.

⁹⁰ Villani, *Soldiers of Germania*, 197-198.

⁹¹ Villani, *Soldiers of Germania*, 205.

combat area - the Reich Chancellery, of which the *Führerbunker* was underneath.⁹² With this, what becomes apparent is that regardless of their specific nationality or ethnicity - these foreign European Volunteers who fought on the Eastern Front during World War II, saw the conflict as a whole (as well as their individual and collective service in it) - as a common act of defense of both their respective homelands and of the greater European Continent, against an enemy that was deemed to be an especially villainous threat. On this, it's worth noting for the sake of this thesis's historical theme - that just as in the Medieval Ages, here too during World War II, especially late in the war - Germans and other Europeans served in the same uniform, with common arms, for a common cause in what had come to be viewed as a desperate defensive war against the forces of the East - with symbolic echoes coming through in this manner in ways such as the symbolism of the insignia of the 33rd *Waffen Grenadier Division - Charlemagne* invoking such medieval past as aforementioned, as well as the 11th *SS Panzerabteilung* (Armor Battalion) being named after a famous 13th Century Grandmaster (*Großmeister*) of the Teutonic Order, Hermann von Salza - who while in this position, led the Order during the Prussian Crusade.

Yet still more Europeans answered the German call to fight on the Eastern Front. Among these *Europäisches Freiwilligen* included Hungarians who served in the *Waffen SS*, namely in the 18th *Freiwilligen Panzergrenadier Division - Horst Weßel* (18th Volunteer Armored Grenadier Division - Horst Wessel), the 22nd *SS Freiwilligen Kavallerie Division - Maria Theresa* (22nd Volunteer Cavalry Division - Maria Theresa), the 25th *Waffen Grenadier Division - Hunyadi*, the

⁹² Villani, *Soldiers of Germania*, 207.

31st *SS Freiwilligen Grenadier Division* (31st Volunteer Grenadier Division, note that it was not bestowed a proper name), and the 37th *SS Freiwilligen Kavallerie Division - Lützow* (37th Volunteer Cavalry Division - Lützow). It should be noted that a sizable number of the volunteers that made up the Hungarian formations of the *Waffen SS* were both classified by the Third Reich, and self-identified as *Volksdeutsche* (Ethnic Germans), with these men being the direct descendants of the aforementioned German-speakers who had been in the Kingdom of Hungary since the thirteenth century - and who had witnessed the horrors of the Mongol (Tatar) onslaught across Central and Eastern Europe. Thereby, many of these men saw the Red Army as just another incarnation of that same historical and cultural threat from the East that had decimated their ancestral homeland and fought their ancestors seven centuries earlier. Additionally, notice that the names of a number of these foreign volunteer units such as *Lützow*, *Maria Theresa*, and *Hunyadi* were of classical European figures, such as the Holy Roman Empress, Maria Theresa, and the famous fifteenth century Hungarian Knight, John Hunyadi (*Hunyadi János*) - who fiercely defended the Kingdom of Hungary against the Ottoman Empire when they invaded. This was not random, as the names of these units reflected a sort of “pride” in what we would now term “Old Europe”, that is Europe as it was until the unconditional German surrender, and the end of World War II on the Continent. Lastly, the reasons that these units and the ethnic composition of their volunteers have been presented here, are both to establish how the prior discussed Operation Bagration not only broke open the way for the Red Army to storm the old Teutonic Order lands in the north (which prompted the Germans and other Europeans to tenaciously defend these ancestral lands), but that it resulted in the way being made open for the Red Army to attack Austria and Hungary - two of the most important historical lands of the First

Reich (the Holy Roman Empire), which would ultimately reign and last until the end of World War I in 1918 as the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was in this setting that the haunting legacy of the Mongols' violent rampage through Hungary in the thirteenth century could be seen and felt as an "echo" of the past, with very similar acts of brutality as those described by Master Roger in the thirteenth century, being witnessed by a number of those serving in the German uniform whilst fighting against the Red Army in Hungary in late 1944. On this, Jonathan Trigg, in his primary source collection book entitled, *To VE-Day Through German Eyes: The Final Defeat of Nazi Germany* - details and presents some of these accounts, including the testimony of Josef "Sepp" Allerberger, who said this in regards to what he witnessed of the Red Army's conduct in Hungary, "Dragging them out, the man was hit over the head and tied to a streetlamp. The woman – screaming in fear – was thrown over the bonnet of a jeep, where one of the soldiers proceeded to cut her clothes off with a knife. Accompanied by the yells of his comrades he penetrated her... In order of rank every single Russian proceeded to rape the helpless woman one after the other as she lay motionless across the jeep... It took almost an hour for the twenty-three of them to finish,"⁹³ as well as a *Volksdeutsche Landsler* named Alfred Divisch stating that the Red Army had destroyed all of his belongings and otherwise left his home in a complete wreck, with all that was left intact was a note that was left behind for him which read, "Don't conclude, from the destruction here, that the Soviet people have an evil nature and no culture – everything that is happening here is for revenge."⁹⁴ When read side by side, the medieval accounts pressed

⁹³ Josef "Sepp" Allerberger (1944): quoted in Jonathan Trigg, *To VE-Day Through German Eyes: The Final Defeat of Nazi Germany* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2020), 183-184.

⁹⁴ Alfred Divisch (1944): quoted in Jonathan Trigg, *To VE-Day Through German Eyes: The Final Defeat of Nazi Germany* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2020), 187.

earlier and these modern accounts are hauntingly similar in how the descendants of the parties involved in armed conflict centuries prior, reenacted such tragedies once more centuries later.

With this established, consider these historical and cultural factors, as we go onto review how the prior established cultural-historical tenants and traditions of *volkskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, and *ostkrieg* were exemplified in the battles for Prussia and the Baltics from October, 1944 to May, 1945, as well as during the battles for Austria and Hungary at this time. As a result, all of these lands became tactically and strategically-connected *militärgrenze*, which were defended in part, by a twentieth century incarnation of the *wehrbauern*, as we will see. Lastly, while reading the upcoming sections, also be sure to take into account the sheer historical and cultural weight that these homelands turned battlefields put on their European defenders as they stood against the tsunami of steel that was the Red Army.

From the end of August, 1944 to October, 1944, the Red Army advanced both ever closer to the Prussian frontier in the north, as well as to Polish frontier in the center (during which time the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* reduced Warsaw to rubble during their suppression of the Warsaw Uprising in August, 1944), and finally the to Austrian and Hungarian frontiers in the south. The main obstacle that stood in the way of the Red Army's northernmost advance were the Baltic states - the historical gateway to Prussia. If one traversed the Baltics in 1944, a common feature that one would notice would be a great deal of medieval townships, as well as a large number of *Ordensburgen* that dated back to the reign of the Teutonic Order. In a way, the land hadn't really changed in terms of culture and outlook by 1944, as there had still been large and thriving

German-speaking communities in Estonia, in the *Kurland* or the Courland area of Latvia, and in the easternmost East Prussian city, Memel, which after having been ceded to Lithuania following Germany's defeat in World War I - was then retaken by the Third Reich in 1941. Even with the tremendous amount of defenses that the Baltics hosted in terms of manpower, such as the prior discussed German, Scandinavian, and Baltic volunteers who filled out the various *Waffen SS* formations in the region, and the *Wehrmacht* formations that had escaped the destruction of Army Group Center during Operation Bagration - namely the Third *Panzer* Army, German defenses in the Baltics would all but collapse by October, 1944 - with some pockets of resistance holding out until January, 1945 - and even all the way until May, 1945 in the case of the *Wehrmacht* forces who were hopelessly trapped in the Courland Peninsula. In essence, despite the dedicated defensive measures and actions taken by the German forces in the region, and their equally dedicated collective adherence to the cultural-historical principles that were outlined prior - the Baltics fell relatively quickly after Operation Bagration. This was due to the fact that the German forces that were there were badly battered by the Red Army's Baltic Fronts, during Operation Bagration, as well as because the Baltics were geographically smaller than the Prussian states (which made them easier to for the Red Army to assault and overwhelm), and finally because the Baltics were seen by the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (*OKH*, or Army High Command, the part of the *Wehrmacht* that were in charge of operations on the Eastern Front) as essentially a *militärgrenze* that guarded the access to arguably the most cherished of the German-speaking lands in terms of cultural and historical military significance: Prussia (*Preußen*).

This threat to the German heartland that was revealed once the Baltics had all but fallen save for Courland, beginning at the northeastern Prussian frontier, extending down through Poland and old central Prussian territories, such as the fortress city of Posen, and to the Austrian and Hungarian frontiers further south - an alarm was sounded throughout the entirety of the German nation and state from Hitler himself, down to the lowliest member of the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* that the state the war had truly reached a new level of desperation. As such, the war was not yet over by the time that the Prussian frontier was breached in October, 1944 - and this reality sparked a few factors of combined cultural, historical, and traditional significance, which thus imbued such a motivation to fight within the German nation (and by extension, the sympathetic European volunteers that fought alongside them, as aforementioned), that the war only ended after what many today would view as either a horrifyingly futile (or grimly miraculous) period of combined *volkskrieg*, *verteidigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, and all this all took place on land that had become a *militärdenze*, with some of the main combatants once again, being a twentieth century reincarnation of the *wehrbauern*. By this point in the war, the Baltics, Belarus, and Ukraine may've seen severe losses in terms of territory - and the destruction of Army Group Center, along with the complete isolation of Army Group Courland, may've both been losses that were deemed by many in Germany to be irreplaceable - yet the Red Army's reaching the Prussian frontier not only "brought the war home" both geographically and psychologically - but culturally and historically as well, with the quoted and cited sentiments of *Generaloberst* Heinz Guderian on this matter serving to summarize the common mood shared among those collectively fighting on the German side of the Eastern Front. With this understood, the cultural tenants that we have explored thus far in terms of *volkskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*,

verteidigungskrieg, and *ostkrieg* would be unleashed in a final prolonged and violent culmination, and the East Elbian Prussian lands would be made into a new *militärgrenze* once the Baltics, Ukraine, and Belarus fell. In one final act of military desperation to halt the onslaught of the Red Army, the German nation would be mobilized into an incarnation of the *wehrbauern* that hadn't been seen on a comparable scale since the *Befreiungskriege* (Wars of Liberation) in 1813, during the Napoleonic Wars.

In terms of *volkskrieg* - the greatest examples of this cultural tenant taking form by mid to late October, 1944, took place both near the city that was both the then capital (*hauptstadt*) of East Prussia, and the historical final capital of the State of the Teutonic Order before that - Königsberg,⁹⁵ as well as across East Elbian Prussia. Firstly, dozens of German civilians (namely women and children), along with some French and Belgian Prisoners of War, were murdered by the marauding Red Army in a small village called Nemmersdorf - and the female inhabitants raped as well prior to being murdered. Unlike on the Western Front, German civilians saw from then until the end of the war, that they should not expect to receive any quarter, or otherwise safe passage from the front by the Red Army, and thus they too were now fully immersed in the *totalerkrieg* aspect of *volkskrieg*, with them being deemed no better than a *Landser* or *Soldat* in the *Wehrmacht* or the *Waffen SS* in the eyes of the Red Army. This sort of wanton mass violence committed by the Red Army echoed such acts that the Mongols had unleashed during their prior discussed invasion of Europe in the thirteenth century. As such, this grim and historically-

⁹⁵ Isabel Denny, *The Fall of Hitler's Fortress City: The Battle for Königsberg, 1945*, (London and St. Paul, Greenhill Books and MBI Publishing, 2007), 13.

echoing reality is probably best echoed in the primary source account of Ilse Stritzke in her autobiographical recounting of her formative years a young girl living in East Prussia when it came under wartime occupation by the Red Army, entitled, *Nightmares of an East Prussian Childhood: A Memoir of the Russian Occupation*. In the book, Stritzke recalls how her father, a *Landser* in the *Heer*, firmly understood the difference between the the American, British Commonwealth, and Soviet forces in terms of how they treated the German people (thus part of the difference between *Westkrieg* and *Ostkrieg*). She recounts what her father stated as part of a desperate plea to his wife (the Stritzke's mother) to have her and the family flee with him to the west, "Don't be foolish. This is a war. You heard what the refugees said will happen. The Russians will rape and—Hanna, you don't want to put our family through that, do you? How can you defend your decision when every refugee corroborates the same story?", followed by him being reported as saying, "Hanna, we talked about this. We need to flee to the west. We can fly to Denmark which is neutral ground, or if we must, we can fly to western Germany. In western Germany, the British and Americans won't harm us like the Russians will. Now come on and get your things and—."⁹⁶ The refugees that Stritzke's father mentioned had undoubtedly heard about the Nemmersdorf Massacre, since its gruesome aftermath had been photographed and used as propaganda on the orders of the Reich Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment, Joseph Goebbels. Shortly after the tragedy - Nemmersdorf was liberated along with the larger towns of Gumbinnen and Goldap in late October, 1944 during that was called the "Gumbinnen Operation" - incidentally by the then refitted and rearmed surviving remnants of Army Group Center,

⁹⁶ Ilse Stritzke, *Nightmares of an East Prussian Childhood: A Memoir of the Russian Occupation*, McFarland and Company Inc, 2013, page 8.

namely units of the Third *Panzer* Army and the Fourth Army. On this, one of the best works of scholarship which in part, discusses this part of the war on the Eastern Front is a book entitled, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2*, by Helmuth Spaeter, with two separate forewords by *Wehrmacht Generalfeldmarschall* (Field Marshal) Erich von Manstein,⁹⁷ and *Wehrmacht General der Panzertruppe* (General of Armored Troops) and Knights Cross (*Ritterkreuz*) with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds Recipient, Haßo von Manteuffel⁹⁸ - with this part of the book focusing on the Fourth Army's spearhead formation, the *Führergrenadier Brigade* (FGB) (Leader/Hitler Grenadier Brigade), which served under the *Panzergrenadier Division - Großdeutschland* (Armored Grenadier Division - Greater Germany),⁹⁹ an elite and highly respected unit of the *Wehrmacht* that by the end of the war would see the *Führergrenadier* formation expanded into a Division, and *Großdeutschland* itself expanded into a *Panzerkorps* (Armored Corps). As a result of the German military success of the Gumbinnen Operation¹⁰⁰ - the Red Army was momentarily shaken, but the momentum was still on their side. As such, in his book, Spaeter presents an important primary source relating to this action in the form of the official "Order of the Day", a formal written commendation (that was a Prussian-German military tradition) which was awarded to *Grenadiers* and *Panzergrenadiers* of the *Führergrenadier Brigade* the formation's commander, *Wehrmacht Oberst* (Colonel) Hans-

⁹⁷ Erich von Manstein (September 1958): quoted in Helmuth Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2* (Winnipeg: J.J. Fedorowicz Publishing, 1995), 1.

⁹⁸ Haßo von Manteuffel (May 1958): quoted in Helmuth Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2* (Winnipeg: J.J. Fedorowicz Publishing, 1995), 2.

⁹⁹ Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2*, 431.

¹⁰⁰ Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2*, 440.

Joachim Kahler. The commendatory document reads, "Führer Grenadiers! With our relief from the Rominte Position tonight, we stand at the conclusion of a three-day battle which will remain an unforgettable experience for all who lived through it. The days from the 20th to the 24th of October, which saw the Führer Grenadier Brigade in action in defence of the East Prussian soil of our homeland against the bolshevik hordes, became a crucial test for the young Führer Grenadier Brigade. At the same time it was also a crucial test for many from our ranks. It is up to each individual to decide to what degree each of us passed this test; to what degree the Führer Grenadier Brigade as a unit, one which has the high honour of bearing the name of our Führer, passed its baptism of fire, will be left to the judgement of those whose profession it is to do so. But you, my Führer-Grenadiers, may remember with pride that you had to withstand three days of heavy fighting at a focal point in the defence of East Prussia, and that you succeeded in preventing the enemy from achieving the breakthrough they were striving for. I also express my thanks to all of you Führer-Grenadiers for what was accomplished by you in terms of preparedness, bravery and dutifulness. On this day I join with you, in proud sadness and filled with deep gratitude, in remembering all our comrades who sacrificed their lives for our Fatherland in the past days of fighting. As well as being with the many very young soldiers of our brigade who died heroically (officers, NCOs and men) none of whom will ever be forgotten in our fighting band, my thoughts today are with you, my comrades, but especially with my panzer men, on the occasion of the heroic death of their commanding officer, Knight's Cross wearer Major Horst Freiherr von Uslar-Gleichen. Major von Uslar-Gleichen died a hero's death on the afternoon of 23 October 1944 after he and the crew of his command tank had destroyed eight enemy tanks in heavy tank-versus-tank fighting, providing a shining example to his men.

At this time I would like to thank our outstanding panzer leader, our concerned commander and good comrade. Major von Uslar, who was taken from our midst by such a cruel soldier's death, for all that he was to his battalion and beyond that to the Führer Grenadier Brigade. Because of his life and his effect on others, his bravery in combat and his heroic death, he will go down in the history of the Führer Grenadier Brigade as one of the best. And now, my comrades, we are constantly conscious of our lofty duty, fulfillment of which so often demands of us the deaths of Germany's best men: the duty to always and at any time give everything to cause the enemy's furious assault to break on our iron toughness. It is now up to us to defend the borders of our homeland! And we, as the Führer's grenadiers, are called upon like no others to provide an example in fighting wherever a decision must be reached. The beginning has been made, I am counting on you, my Führer-Grenadiers. Long live Germany! Long live the Führer! Kahler."¹⁰¹

In addition, on December 30, 1944, *Wehrmacht General der Infanterie* Friedrich Hoßbach had his own letter of commendation distributed to the *Führergrenadier Brigade* that read, "On 30 November 1944 the Führer Grenadier Brigade left the Fourth Army. The brigade was placed under the army's command on 30 November 1944 in crisis-filled hours, when the enemy succeeded in penetrating deep into the army's front north of the Rominten Heath. It was the mission of the Führer Grenadier Brigade, together with the 5th Panzer Division attacking from the north, to sever the lines of communication to the rear of the enemy tank forces that had broken through our front by driving into their deep flank from the south. The brigade

¹⁰¹ Hans-Joachim Kahler (October 1944): quoted in Helmuth Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2* (Winnipeg: J.J. Fedorowicz Publishing, 1995), 441.

successfully carried out this mission in the course of difficult fighting which was conducted with exemplary drive and determination. On 21 October 1944 it advanced through Daken as far as Hill 99 and on 22 October 1944 was able to occupy the bridge at *Groß-Tellerode*. On that and the following day the brigade had to fight off heavy attacks against both flanks. In a determined defence the Führer Grenadier Brigade held the ground it had won. Elements of the cut-off enemy were beaten back to the east, but only at the cost of heavy losses. As a result of their defeat the enemy were unable to continue the attack. A breakthrough into the heart of East Prussia was prevented. The Führer Grenadier Brigade played a major role in this, and it can look back at this great success with pride. The Führer Grenadier Brigade also proved itself in attack and defence in the subsequent fighting in the Goldap area which led to the recapture of the city on 5 November. In farewell I wish to express my thanks and recognition to the proven Führer Grenadier Brigade and its commander. I wish that it might also be granted rich success in the future. Signed Hossbach, *General der Infanterie*.”¹⁰² It should be noted that the Rominten Heath (as it is known in English) was part of the the combat area of the Gumbinnen Operation, as well as being an exceptionally important place in Prussian and more broadly, German history and culture - as it was the location of the ancestral hunting grounds and hunting lodge of the Prussian Royal Family from 1572 until 1941, when it was ceded to *Reichsmarschall* (National Field Marshal) and the last *Ministerpräsident* (Minister-President) of Prussia, Hermann Göring, the latter of which was a title that had also been once held by Otto von Bismarck.

¹⁰² Friedrich Hoßbach (December 1944): quoted in Helmuth Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2* (Winnipeg: J.J. Fedorowicz Publishing, 1995), 444.

While the Red Army was battling its way into Prussia on the Eastern Front in October, 1944, on the Western Front - Aachen (then designated as *Festung Aachen*) surrendered US First Army on the Western Front, it was clear to Hitler and many others in German that something had to be done to defend the German Reich - an invocation of *volkskrieg* as stated, not seen since the German Wars of Liberation during the Napoleonic Wars. This second manner in which the German nation was mobilized into a the then-contemporary incarnation of *volkskrieg* was in the creation of the *Volksgrenadier Division (VGD)* (Peoples' Grenadier Division) as a main formation type of the *Wehrmacht Heer*, as well as the organization and mobilization of the *Volkssturm* (People's Storm)¹⁰³ - the former being an official part of the *Wehrmacht Heer* and thus equipped, armed, and uniformed as such. As for the latter, they were well-armed and equipped, as well as bring formally uniformed, only in a case by case basis. The one standard uniform item that every member of the *Volkssturm* possessed however, was a distinctive black and white, and soon after - black, white, and red armband that read, *Deutscher Volkssturm Wehrmacht* (German People's Storm Defense Force). Additionally, the *Volkssturm* was officially classified as a national militia that was made up of male citizenry from the ages of 16 to 60 (and soon after that, female citizenry as well) that weren't already serving in the war effort as uniformed personnel (including in the *Volksgrenadier* formations) that would fight alongside the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* in defensive battles on the Western and Eastern parts of the greater German battlefield, while the *Volksgrenadier* formations were formed out of a combination of combining, re-arming, and re-equipping *Wehrmacht Heer* formations that were understrength, as

¹⁰³ "The Volkssturm," Digital Kenyon, Kenyon College (website), Accessed April 24, 2024, https://digital.kenyon.edu/bulmash_volkssturm/.

well as recruiting male citizenry that had previously not been serving at the front to supplement this strength.

Before we move on - it must be understood that the overwhelming consensus among historians who have covered this combatant formation as part of Germany's experience during World War II (*Der Weltanschauungskrieg*), have done so with the clear and concise common argument that the organization, mobilization, and deployment of the *Volksgrenadier* formations and the *Volkssturm* were both little more than a "last ditch" act of combat desperation in a war that many knew was certainly lost by the time of the mobilization and deployment in the Fall of 1944. As such, it should be noted that unlike the *Volksgrenadier* formations, the *Volkssturm* were under the administrative control of the NSDAP, and that they only came under the overall and immediate control of the *Wehrmacht* during active combat. With that said, this thesis will take a different approach to this matter than other historians have prior, in the sense that what will be argued in the subsequent section here (and reiterated where necessary further along), is that the *Volksgrenadier* formations and the *Volkssturm* were both (in addition to the linguistic specificity of their names), not simply combat formations made out of desperation and National Socialist fanaticism, but two clear resurrections and continuations of the *Landwehr* (Land Defense) and the *Landsturm* (Land Storm) combat formations that had been created in February¹⁰⁴ and March, 1813, respectively, by the then King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm III (Frederick William III)¹⁰⁵ -

¹⁰⁴ Peter Hofschröder and Bryan Fosten, *Prussian Reserve, Militia & Irregular Troops 1806-1815*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2012), 33.

¹⁰⁵ Andreas Dorpalen, "The German Struggle against Napoleon: The East German View," *The Journal of Military History* 41, no. 4 (December 1969): 495, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/240444?journalCode=jmh>.

and which would be celebrated in Germany until the fall of the Third Reich as “folk heroes” of sorts, with them serving as a historical and cultural representation of the *volksgeist* (people’s spirit) that truly represented the “German Way of War”. It should be briefly stated that in the historical case of the *Landwehr* - they were made up of an initial contingent of 20,000 men, followed by an additional 10,000 men - who were between the ages of 18 and 45, with service exemptions being reserved only for school teachers, the clergy and some civil servants.¹⁰⁶

Additionally, they were geographically organized and deployed in a such a manner that would be strongly echoed by the manner in which the *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen SS*, and *Volkssturm* were deployed along the Prussian frontier in World War II on the Eastern Front - in the sense that the *Landwehr* were originally raised in the areas that lay between the Elbe and Oder rivers, Silesia, between the Oder and Vistula rivers, and extending all the way to the border with Russia.

Additionally, the cultural-historical spirit and tradition that the *Volksgrenadier* formations were created in, also came from the *Landwehr*, in the sense that the *Landwehr* wore a distinct aforementioned Prussian (and later German) symbol on their field caps: the *Landwehrkreuz* or “Land Defense Cross”, a stylized *Eisenkreuz* (Iron Cross) that included a minted motto which read, “With God for King and Fatherland” (*Mit Gott für König und Vaterland*), while the *Volksgrenadier* formations were issued with the distinctive uniform belt buckle that read “God with Us” (*Gott mit Uns*), while the linguistic prefix of the *Volksgreandier* formation in organizational name further referenced this distinguished past. In this same sense, such a reference to this same era of the past can be seen in the fact on January 30, 1945 (which would be the twelfth, and last anniversary of the Third Reich) - the monumentally expensive Goebbels’

¹⁰⁶ Hofschröer and Fosten, *Prussian Reserve, Militia & Irregular Troops 1806-1815*, 33.

produced film, *Kolberg*,¹⁰⁷ which was both an allegory for Germany's wartime state at the time, as well as a historical retelling of the famous battle during the Napoleonic Wars in 1807 that occurred in the same Pomeranian fortress city that would see fierce combat once again in March, 1945 - combat in which the *Volkssturm* would take part in. A further point of historical and cultural significance relating to the *Volkssturm* in this historical and cultural manner, is the fact that the activation of the *Volkssturm* itself was announced on October 18, 1944 - the anniversary of the Battle of Leipzig (also called the "Battle of the Nations") in 1813, which occurred during the Napoleonic Wars and saw Prussia unite with the the formerly French aligned German Monarchical States of Saxony and Württemberg (as a result of the French aligned and controlled "Confederation of the Rhine" disbanding at that time) - before then causing the French forces to retreat from the German lands and back into France, thus all but liberating the German lands. It's worth noting that when the preceding *Landsturm* were created in 1813 by King Frederick William III - not only was this organization created at a time when the war effort for the German Monarchical States that weren't part of the Confederation of the Rhine was looking grim (thus the pragmatic need to mobilize the *entire* nation), but the King in his formal declaration and call for the *Landsturm* addressed not only *Prussians* within his domain - but *Germans*. To say this was to call for a sort of "national" unity against the French, and the recognition of the need defend the uniquely *German* homeland (*heimat*) by a uniquely German people (*volk*) would not be inaccurate. The public declaration and call for the raising of the *Landsturm* was entitled, *An*

¹⁰⁷ David Culbert, "Kolberg: Goebbels' Wunderwaffe as Counterfactual History," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 126, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41403666>.

Mein Volk (To My People), and it was presented in writing in both the Prussian Code of Law,¹⁰⁸ and via newsprint in the Prussian city of Breslau, an old fortress city that would also have the grim distinction of being the last German city to fall during World War II, surrendering on May 6, 1945 - only two days prior to the total military and political surrender of Germany, and the fall of the Third Reich. With this understood, one can see that the creation of the *Volksgrenadier* and *Volkssturm* formations were a conscious resurrection of what was until the end of the war, one of the most recognizable aspects of German culture (*kultur*) - *volkskrieg*. Of all the societal groups that were represented among both the ranks of the *Volksgrenadiers* and *Volkssturm*, the group that was credited with fighting with the most terrifying ferocity - and even arguably battlefield effectiveness, were the male adolescent members of the Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*), as well as their female counterparts in the League of German Girls (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*) in the case of the *Volkssturm* specifically. Finally - it's worth mentioning that the *Volksgrenadier* formations developed a reputation of from respect from the American, British, and Soviet forces that they fought, along with the *Volkssturm* actually served in a far more effective and dedicated capacity on the Eastern Front than on the Western Front, due to the fact that they knew that unlike the *Westkrieg* and/or *Europäischeskrieg* that was taking place on the Western Front - where the American and British Commonwealth forces were essentially seen as classical wartime European foes that could be reasoned with post-surrender, their view of the Red Army was as described before - another murderous incarnation of the same Russian and Central Asian foes that their

¹⁰⁸ “Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815 Law on the Introduction of Universal Military Service in Prussia, signed by King Frederick William III, Hardenberg, and Minister of War von Boyen, among others (September 3, 1814)”, German History in Documents and Images (website), Accessed April 24, 2024, https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=3587.

forefathers had fought for centuries prior to the then-current war. Therefore, many in the *Volkssturm* knew that the stakes were even higher than they were for those serving in the *Landsturm* during the Napoleonic Wars.

After the initial setbacks for the Red Army - such as their defeat in the prior mentioned Gumbinnen Operation in October, 1944, the Red Army's terrifying momentum through Prussia only increased as the months passed - particularly by January, 1945. This historical phenomenon mirrored that of the ancestral wars that these lands had witnessed during the Prussian and Livonian Crusades in terms of wartime scale destruction, as well as the weight of the cultural and historical legacy that would be left behind. On this, one of the best examples of scholarship on this area of World War II is landmark book published by the US Army Center of Military History, entitled, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, by Earl F. Ziemke. Within the latter half of the book, Ziemke describes how from the German military view in October, 1944, the main cities in East Elbia that were under the most immediate threat were Memel and Königsberg, both on the easternmost fringes of Prussia - and German resistance in Memel wouldn't be broken until January, 1945¹⁰⁹ - and then Königsberg would face the onslaught of the Red Army beginning in that same month, lasting until April.¹¹⁰ Posen¹¹¹ in the *Warthegau* (Warthe State), as well as other German cities in West Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia such as the

¹⁰⁹ Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1968, 2002), 433.

¹¹⁰ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 470.

¹¹¹ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 425.

aforementioned Danzig,¹¹² Kolberg,¹¹³ and Stettin,¹¹⁴ as well as Frankfurt an der Oder¹¹⁵ and Küstrin¹¹⁶ in Brandenburg would each be defended as *festungen* in combat from between January to March, 1945. During these battles - the German forces that defended these literal and figurative “fortresses” consisted of *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen SS*, and *Volkssturm* forces alike - armed with the principle weapon systems that we have discussed prior, and in the same manner that the Prussian frontier had once been defended by the Teutonic Order in their *Ordensburgen*. In addition, Breslau, Königsberg,¹¹⁷ and Berlin¹¹⁸ were also defended in such a common cultural-historical and military manner as aforementioned - all falling between April and May, 1945. Additionally, just as in centuries prior, the partially Germanic cities of Vienna and Budapest had come under violent attack from the forces of the East, this time in the form of the Red Army, as opposed to the Golden Horde or the Ottoman Empire. As such, despite Hitler’s personal disdain for Vienna and Budapest that date back to his early youth through his young adult years, during his time growing up and then living in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire - and even he couldn’t fully deny that these cities were not only historically and culturally significant to the German-speaking areas of Europe, but they were also strategically located near highly important

¹¹² Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 425.

¹¹³ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 459-460.

¹¹⁴ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 476.

¹¹⁵ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 479-480.

¹¹⁶ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 464-465.

¹¹⁷ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 470.

¹¹⁸ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 494.

supplies of oil.¹¹⁹ Because of this - both were defended against the invading forces of the East with the same ferocity by German and Hungarian forces that they had once been by these mens' ancestors centuries earlier - with Budapest finally falling in February, 1945,¹²⁰ and followed by Vienna in April, 1945.¹²¹

Now, let us return to devoting special academic attention to studying the final stages of war on the Eastern Front specifically through the lens of *verteidigungskrieg*. While we have established that the armor, anti-armor, and infantry capabilities of Germany regarding the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen SS* remained remarkably strong from October, 1944 to May, 1945 despite the perilous military situation it faced - the critical area that was lacking was in the almost nonexistence of the *Luftwaffe* (Air Force) in terms of the near-total unavailability of aircraft, and the near non-necessity of the *Kriegsmarine* (Navy) in terms of seaborne warfare at that point in the war. The effect that this result had when it came to the defense of Königsberg, Breslau, and Berlin was multi-parted (and also applied to other “fortress cities” that were mentioned here prior). In summary - countless *Luftwaffe* and *Kriegsmarine* personnel (thus already part of the total force of the *Wehrmacht*) were transferred to the *Heer* where they were re-uniformed, re-equipped, and rearmed for ground combat, and due to the *Luftwaffe*'s aforementioned severe lacking in available combat aircraft - the masses of *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS Grenadier* and *Panzer* formations and vehicles were all the more vulnerable to Red Army Il-2 ground attack aircraft -

¹¹⁹ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 456.

¹²⁰ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 437-439.

¹²¹ Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, 456.

with German *Panzer* crews and their fighting vehicles at this time being especially common targets and victims of the highly effective and lightweight, thin, bottle-like, aerially-dropped anti-armor shape charge that was dropped from an IL-2 that was known as the “PTAB”. Spaeter makes sure to mention the terror that both these ground attack aircraft and this weapon caused the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen SS* forces at this time was is great, that the Germans called the IL-2 the “Butcher”.¹²² This was one area that German forces from October, 1944 to May, 1945 couldn’t completely counter in terms of *verteidigungskrieg*. Conversely, when it came to ground combat - the aforementioned defenses of Königsberg, Breslau, and Berlin lasted longer than anyone could have imagined then - a fact that still raises passionate discussion among Historians today, as made clear by Bastiaan Willems in his prior discussed article, *Defiant Breakwaters or Desperate Blunders? A Revision of the German Late-War Fortress Strategy*.¹²³ It should be noted on the subjects of *verteidigungskrieg* and *ostkrieg* there are two actions that were part of the wider Battle of Berlin that deserve special attention, due to both of them being some of the most exceptional demonstrations of the tenant: the Battle of the Seelow Heights, and the Battle of Halbe. Between these two battles, some of the best scholarship that comes to mind that covers them are Antony Beevor’s outstanding book, *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, and wonderfully collected and presented primary source account collection by Eberhard Baumgart and Roger Moorhouse, entitled, *Halbe 1945: Eyewitness Accounts from Hell’s Cauldron*. As such, these works will provide the basis of cited evidence for these respective engagements. In April, 1945, the final obstacle that acted as the “Gates to Berlin” and would be used to defend against the relentless

¹²² Spaeter, *The History of the Panzerkorps Großdeutschland Vol. 2*, 436.

¹²³ Willems, *Defiant Breakwaters or Desperate Blunders? A Revision of the German Late-War Fortress Strategy*, 354.

onslaught of the Red Army were the Seelow Heights (*Seelower Höhen*). These heights were in fact hills that overlooked a floodplain which was located on the outskirts of Berlin, and they were under the defense of *Heeresgruppe Vistula* (Army Group Vistula) - with the principle formation under this Army Group being the same Ninth Army that was ferociously mauled during Operation Bagration, and which was now refitted and rearmed as best as could be done at that point in the war. Just before the battle, it was clear to the German defenders that the position they were in on the heights was one of desperation, doom, and determination, with one *Wehrmacht Leutnant* (Lieutenant) expressing his sentiments for the coming battle in a letter home by saying, “You can’t imagine, what a terrible hatred is aroused here. I can promise you that we’ll sort them out one day. The rapists of women and children will discover another experience. It is hard to believe what these beasts have done. We have sworn an oath that each man must kill ten Bolsheviks. God will help us achieve this,”¹²⁴ while a *Wehrmacht Truppführer* (Sergeant Major) replied to an Officer named Wust who asked if he was cold by stating, “We’re not cold, *Herr Oberleutnant*. We’re afraid.”¹²⁵ In For the Red Army - the coming battle was framed in a particularly interesting historical and cultural manner, in the sense that along with some of the Red Army Soldiers preparing to attack the Seelow Heights bring given symbolic cardboard keys, the Soviet publication *Pravda* had distributed an accompanying explanatory article that compared the coming battle of Berlin (of which the Seelow Heights would be the first part), with the Raid on Berlin during in 1760 during the Seven Years War and which read, “The

¹²⁴ Unnamed: quoted in Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002, 2020), 208-209.

¹²⁵ Wust (1945): quoted in Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002, 2020), 209.

keys of the city were taken to St Petersburg for permanent keeping in the Kazansky Cathedral. We should remember this historic example and fulfill the order of the Motherland and Comrade Stalin.”¹²⁶ Curiously, connections between the present war and the Thirty Years War were made by some on the German side as well, with the publicized death of FDR being compared by some to the “Miracle of the House of Brandenburg”, which saved the then Prussian King’s Frederick the Great’s (*Friedrich der Große*) war effort against Imperial Russia from complete disaster!¹²⁷ The battle itself lasted from April 16-19, with the first few days seeing a masterful command of *verteidigungskrieg* undertaken by Army Group Vistula Commander, *Wehrmacht Generaloberst* (Colonel General) Gotthard Heinrici, a combat leadership reputation stemming from his knack for defensive warfare, that when combined with his somewhat diminutive stature, earned him the affectionate nickname of *Der Giftzwerg* (the Poison Dwarf). Alas, when the First Belorussian Front under Marshal of the Soviet Union (Field Marshal) Georgy Zhukov broke through with perhaps the most renowned formation in the Red Army during World War II - the 8th Guards Army, as his Front’s spearhead, the fate of Berlin was sealed. Hitler had long since abandoned his main Eastern Front the “Wolf’s Lair” (*Wolfsschanze*) in Rastenburg, East Prussia, and was by that point commanding what remained of the German war effort from underneath the Reich Chancellery - inside the complex called the *Führerbunker*. As such, with the Battle of the Seelow Heights ending in a Soviet victory, the way to Berlin was clear - and the end for Germany was near. From there, the Battle of Berlin would encompass the entirety of the city itself, as well as further surrounding areas. In terms of *verteidigungskrieg* - the streets, street-facing basement

¹²⁶ *Pravda* (1945): quoted in Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002, 2020), 210.

¹²⁷ Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, 208.

openings, buildings, etc were all used as miniature *festungen* within Berlin as we have covered prior - with the combed forces of the *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen SS*, and *Volkssturm* all holding out in the city itself until May 2, 1945.

Meanwhile - from April, 24 to May, 1 - the Ninth Army, under the command of *Wehrmacht General der Infanterie* (General of the Infantry) Theodore Buße - after having broken out from the Seelow Heights, fought its way away from Berlin itself in a bid to not only protect themselves, but also a large number of German civilians that had joined them after the Battle of the Seelow Heights to escape to the Western Front and thus to American lines and safety¹²⁸. The Ninth Army ended up itself having to fight through the *Spreewald* (Spree Forest) near one of the village suburbs of Berlin called Halbe,¹²⁹ under relentless attacks from the First Belorussian Front under the aforementioned Marshal Zhukov, and the First Ukrainian Front under Marshal Ivan Koniev - whose Fronts were hoping to trap and annihilate the Ninth Army. A number of primary source accounts detail the manner in which the Battle of Halbe proved to be arguably one of the most ferocious combined examples of *verteidigungskrieg* (in terms of the fighting retreat of the Ninth and Twelfth Armies of the *Wehrmacht*) and *ostkrieg* (in terms of the combatants involved, as well as the tradition of mercilessness and desperation that came with it), including, *Wehrmacht Hauptscharführer* (First Sergeant) Ernst Streng of the 502nd Heavy *Panzer* Battalion (*502 Schwere Panzerabteilung*) (a formation which was armed with a number of Tiger I Heavy Tanks and *Hetzer* Assault Guns, as well as a handful of Tiger II (King Tiger)

¹²⁸ Eberhard Baumgart and Roger Moorhouse, *Halbe 1945: Eyewitness Accounts from Hell's Cauldron* (London: Greenhill Books, 2022) vii - xi.

¹²⁹ Baumgart and Moorhouse, *Halbe 1945: Eyewitness Accounts from Hell's Cauldron*, viii.

Heavy Tanks) recounting what he saw as he advanced into Halbe, “Just short of the edge of the wood on the other side, close to the Löpten farm, we came across a narrow pathway bordered by a light screen of hedges. Approaching, we were greeted by German soldiers climbing out of their foxholes, guns held high above their heads and with an ecstatic and grateful look in their eyes. Rarely have I seen bearded faces lined by such extreme exhaustion peering up at me from underneath their old World War I steel helmets. This German combat unit had gone through unimaginably horrendous circumstances just north of Halbe. Totally cut off from all other friendly troops and fiercely assaulted by surrounding Russian tank and rifle units, they had a negligible chance of getting away let alone achieving victory. The open meadow up to the edge of the wood opposite was completely littered with corpses, none of them yet buried, face downward, hands still clutching in anguish at clumps of earth ... others on their backs with eyes full of horror turned upwards, arms flung wide ... After a short stop we hastened on with other, mostly elderly soldiers who had survived the onslaught joining our convoy. Ahead of us: Halbe!”¹³⁰ along with the Mayor of Halbe at the time, Willi Haenecke, stating simply and bluntly, “The horrors that unfolded in Halbe were far beyond what this town had ever experienced in its history,”¹³¹ as well as a *Wehrmacht Panzergrenadier* of the *Panzergrenadier Division - Kurmark* named, Martin Kleint discussing the same sort of reality that Mayor Haenecke had alluded to as, “We reached a paved road, allowing us to advance more swiftly,

¹³⁰ Ernst Streng, “Attack Spurred by Agony” (1945): quoted in Eberhard Baumgart and Roger Moorhouse, *Halbe 1945: Eyewitness Accounts from Hell’s Cauldron* (London: Greenhill Books, 2022), 19.

¹³¹ Willi Haenecke, “How Long Will our House Stay Standing?” (1945): quoted in Eberhard Baumgart and Roger Moorhouse, *Halbe 1945: Eyewitness Accounts from Hell’s Cauldron* (London: Greenhill Books, 2022), 35.

crossed a train track and read the sign saying 'Halbe'. Swerving around the corner, we rolled into the town when suddenly there was a mammoth anti-tank salvo targeting us from all directions. Within minutes three tanks had burst into flames. Crews squeezed themselves out of their narrow hatches completely wrapped in flames. The second tank exploded, my machine gun fell out of my grasp and I sought cover behind a tree. Then an artillery barrage started. Flares shot into the air, shots whipped through the darkness, the rest of our tanks reversed. Eventually ... total silence. All of a sudden someone yelled: 'Don't shoot, these are our comrades!' That was followed by a babble of voices all shouting over each other. Masses of soldiers lurched forwards into the middle of the town. At that moment we came under ferocious attack from the surrounding houses and our group ended up staggering through the town under heavy and accurate fire. Against the glare of burning armoured vehicles, we became a splendid target. The only shelter came from the trees at the sides of the street. Then, from the other western side of the road we were harassed by Soviet anti-tank guns or tanks. In the panic and chaos we couldn't distinguish one officer from the next, or make any sense of the orders being given. We had no maps, no plan – we didn't have the faintest idea of how to break out of this pocket. At long last the voice of a Feldwebel cut through the din: 'Machine guns and Panzerfausts, to the front!' A crew member of a tank slowly swinging around flung an ammunition belt in my direction and, dashing past a burning tank, I returned to the protection of the shrubbery. Now several of us blasted at houses and windows with our machine guns and Panzerfausts. With our fire as cover, others stormed a house on the left side of the road. Dull thuds of our hand-grenades exploding cleared the entry into the building where at long last we found sufficient protection to patch up the injured. Heaps of them were strewn all over the road, wailing, moaning, screaming out in

pain. We gathered them up as best we could and carried them into the cellar. It was an inferno, a ghastly scene of brutality with pools of blood everywhere. The night was pierced by the desperate screams of dying men mixed with the reverberations of countless bombs hailing down and detonating. Aglow with the burning of our own tanks, the town trembled with the rattling of machine guns and shells crashing down. The Russian gunfire was accurate. We were determined to recover one of our comrades who had lost a leg in the shooting and was desperately attempting to claw his way off the street which was all the time being sprayed by enemy fire. We could only watch as one of our own tanks rolled over him literally crushing him to a pulp.”¹³² Such was the hell that met any and all who were with the Ninth Army as they moved into Halbe. Despite all of this, the Ninth Army managed to make contact with the Twelfth Army under *Wehrmacht General der Panzertruppe* (General of the Armored Troops) Walter Wenck - that was near Potsdam engaging American forces just to the West.¹³³ Before deploying the Twelfth army to cover the Ninth Army and join them in a fighting retreat to the west, Wenck articulated this mission to his men as, “Boys, you've got to go in once more. It's not about Berlin any more, it's not about the Reich any more.”¹³⁴ Through the combined efforts and expertise in *verteidigungskrieg* that Buße and Wenck shared - both the Ninth Army and the Twelfth Army, as well as the German civilians that were under their protection, managed to make it across the

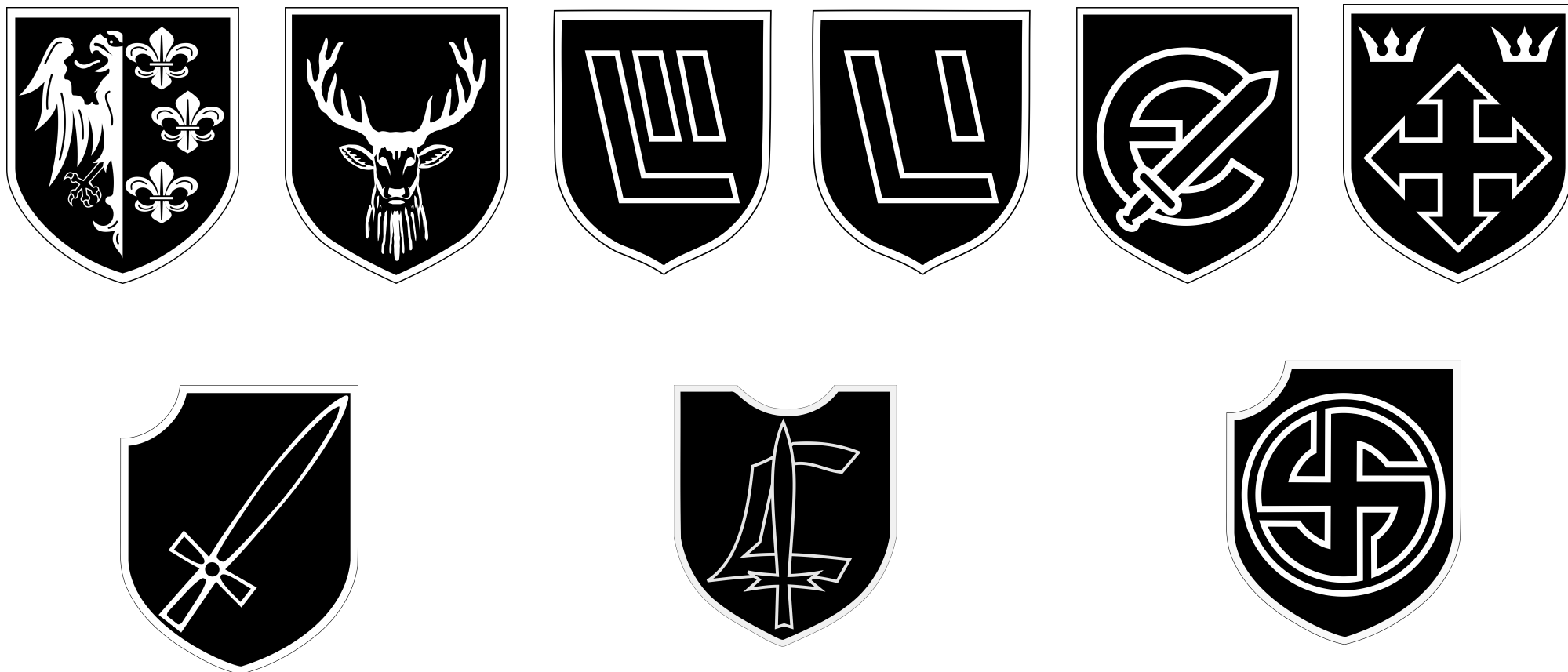
¹³² Martin Kleint, “Ambush at Halbe” (1945): quoted in Eberhard Baumgart and Roger Moorhouse, *Halbe 1945: Eyewitness Accounts from Hell's Cauldron* (London: Greenhill Books, 2022), 38-39.

¹³³ Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, 285-286.

¹³⁴ Walter Wenck (1945): quoted in Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Viking, 2002, 2020), 285-286.

damaged but still usable bridge across the Elbe at Tangermünde and surrender to US Army formations of the Ninth Army.

As one can see, the German-speaking lands the edge of the Baltic, to the east of the Elbe, and to the south in Austria, Hungary, had all become the *militäregrenze* that the southern former had served as in a during the lifespan of the First Reich, and the that the northern latter had acted as during the reign of the Teutonic Order. In this way, the inhabitants of these lands and the military forces deployed there had served in cities that would for one final time - be the fortresses that they had been in centuries prior. These aforementioned inhabitants - German speakers that had been conscripted into the *Volksgrenadier* and *Volkssturm* formations - who would go onto serve on the frontline of this blood-soaked frontier, within fortress cities reduced ton rubble and ash - were the final incarnation of the *wehrbauern*, taking up arms in defense of their homelands in an apocalyptic war. Finally, these last battles as we have seen - were defined by the fear that many Germans held: that military or civilian, the price that they would pay at the very least would be expulsion, and for females whether they be adults or children, rape and death. Such was the reality of *vernichtungskrieg* in its most horrifying manifestation from October, 1944 to May, 1945. It should be noted on this point - that those German civilians who were trapped in places conquered by the Red Army, such as in East Prussia, experienced rape and other forms of physical and psychological violence after the guns had gone silent, as we have seen. This was the reality of *vernichtungskrieg* - and one could say that this was the end result of the combination of the other tenants of the German culture and tradition of war that we have discussed thus far, and over all that this destruction was the ultimate, terrifying exemplification of *ostkrieg*.



Insignia of the French, Hungarian, Scandinavian, Latvian, and Estonian *Waffen SS* Divisions. Note that the black and white were chosen to be evocative of the Teutonic Order, as well as the shape of the insignia on the top row being that of *Grenadier* Divisions, and the two on the left and right being that of *Panzergrenadier* Divisions, and the one in the middle being that of a *Kavallrie* Division.



From top to bottom: uniform armband of the *Volkssturm*, and the cuff band of *Wehrmacht Heeresgruppe Kurland*. Note that the Teutonic Order Shield is on the left side.



Hungarian *Waffen* SS recruitment poster circa 1944.



Portrait of a Latvian *Waffen SS Grenadier*. Note that the Latvian National Shield flash is on his sleeve.



Portrait of a Hungarian *Waffen SS Grenadier*. Note that the “H” on his collar is for the *Hunyadi* Division.



Portrait of a *Waffen SS Grenadier* - his nationality and ethnicity unknown. Note that he was the recipient of the *Eisenkreuz* (Iron Cross) Second Class and the Infantry Assault Badge - as well as having been a Veteran of the Battle of Narva, as seen by his honorary cuff title.



Wrecked *Wehrmacht* vehicles of the Ninth Army that were abandoned during their retreat in the wake of the Red Army's onslaught during the Battle of Halbe.



A *Wehrmacht Landser* of the Ninth Army standing at the bridge at Tangermünde, after having fought in the Battle of Halbe. Note that he is wearing a late war style uniform, as well as being the recipient of the *Eisenkreuz* (Iron Cross) Second Class, as well as the Infantry Assault Badge and the Wound Badge, while also having an American Browning pistol in his belt.



Men of the *Wehrmacht* Ninth Army crossing the damaged but stable bridge at Tangermünde to surrender to the US Ninth Army immediately following the Battle of Halbe.



A Captain (front) and a Lieutenant (back) of the US Ninth Army help escort a German child to safety across the bridge at Tangermünde, after the Battle of Halbe. Note that this child and other German civilians fled with, and sought the protection of the *Wehrmacht* Ninth army during their fighting retreat to American lines across the Elbe during the Battle of Halbe.

Conclusion and the Legacy of the Final Months of the Eastern Front

From the days of the First Reich and the Teutonic Order until the end of World War II - the German lands of what was once East Elbia, as well as those German-speaking areas of what is today Austria and Hungary, were haunted by the ever-present shadow of war as defined in German culture and tradition through the tenants of *volkskrieg*, *vertetigungskrieg*, *vernichtungskrieg*, *ostkrieg*, as well as these lands being part of a greater *militärgrenze*, all of which were propagated by a populace who were ready to be mobilized as *wehrbauern*. These traditions and their practices ended in German-speaking Europe after the fall of the Third Reich, the subsequent dissolution of the State of Prussia in 1947, and the Allied Occupation and then division of Germany until the end of the Cold War. Even though “Old Germany” as it can be called, “perished” in 1945 - the “spirit” of this legacy of German-speaking Europe and the East is still alive in places such as Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and Russia. In the case of the first two, the volunteers that fought in the *Waffen SS* against the Red Army have in the decades since the end of their post-war occupation by the USSR, been remembered as patriots in a centuries-old fight for their lands against a murderous Russia - seeing these *Waffen SS* volunteers in the same light as the Teutonic Order, the Order of Dorbin, and the the Livonian Brothers of the Sword. In this sense, there have been memorials erected to these men, and annual remembrance parades have been held in their honor. This issue has also been brought to the forefront in Ukraine and Russia - even before the current war began. Ever since the independence of Ukraine in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR, memorials and parades have been held as well - along with *Waffen SS* and other Third Reich military insignia being used as anti-Russian symbols alongside medieval

Ukrainian symbols - while in Russia, the “Great Patriotic War” as they know it, has been remembered continuously from the end of the war onward, with an exceptionally high level of historical-mythologizing and nationalism.



Woman laying down flowers and a photograph of a loved one who was a Latvian *Waffen SS* Volunteer in Riga during a remembrance event for the Latvian *Waffen SS*.



Waffen SS Volunteer Memorial in Estonia.

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