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58. How important were resistance and partisan movements in bringing about Germany’s defeat?

Viewpoint: They contributed significantly to Germany’s military defeat.

World War Two was a “total war” in which distinctions between soldiers and civilians were blurred and erased. Most civilians directly or indirectly contributed to their nations’ war-making capacity, which led to their being targeted by blockades and bombs. Many, albeit a minority of civilians in occupied Europe took up arms against the German occupier and its satellites or cooperated with those who did. The result of this erasure of the line between combatants and noncombatants was a higher number of civilian than military casualties. Nonetheless, argues A. W. Purdue, “the victories and defeats of the war were military and not because of civilian unrest, while resistance movements made little difference to the outcome” (Purdue, 1999, 122). The problem with this conclusion is that Allied military victories did not occur in a vacuum. The war was not simply about tactics, strategy, and leadership in battles between regular armies, although these things played a central role in its outcome. The German army’s fighting ability was shaped by its size, the quality and morale of its personnel, its equipment, and the ability of Germany to produce replacements, supplies, and armaments--and deliver them to the front. It is in this context that the contribution of the resistance and partisan movements to Germany’s defeat should be interpreted.

The difficulty with such an approach, however, is measuring the armed civilians’ impact on Germany’s fighting ability. How many German soldiers did they kill? How many did they keep occupied away from the front? How did they affect German soldiers’ morale? How many locomotives, how much rolling stock, and how much railroad infrastructure did they destroy? How did this sabotage affect the Wehrmacht’s supply situation? And its military operations? The historiography offers contradictory answers to these questions, because it is based on contradictory testimony. Partisans exaggerated their kills during the war, in order to increase their value to the Allies, from whom they sought material support

and political recognition. They continued to exaggerate their effectiveness after the war, in order to strengthen their domestic claims to political legitimacy and power. German officers also exaggerated the partisans' effectiveness after the war, in order to justify the extreme measures they had ordered against civilians. Their internal war-time reports of partisan strength were more accurate, although here we must be cautious about German claims to success, because those reporting could not afford to appear as failures. Moreover, "partisan" often served as a euphemism for "Jew." The historiography does not offer enough evidence for a precise assessment of the resistance and partisan movements' contribution to Germany's defeat; however, there is enough to suggest that these movements significantly prejudiced the German military's ability to wage war.

Resistance or partisan movements existed in varying degrees of strength in most of occupied Europe. They were small in the beginning and then attracted more members because of the occupiers' extreme retributive killings. Still more people joined or cooperated with them after Germany's defeat appeared certain. France provided the most famous (albeit often exaggerated) example of resistance in western Europe. It supplied the Allies with intelligence, helped downed pilots return to England, sabotaged facilities important to the German war effort, and engaged German soldiers in armed conflict—most notably in conjunction with the Allied invasion of France. As early as August 1941, Marshal Pétain, the French head-of-state, warned against real and latent resistance on the radio. "From several regions of France I can feel an evil wind blowing. . . . The authority of the Government is being called into question. Orders are not being carried out" (Asprey, 1975, 471). Towards the end of 1942, Marshal von Rundstedt, the German commander-in-chief in France, admitted, "It was already impossible to dispatch single members of the Wehrmacht, ambulances, couriers, or supply columns without armed protection to the First or Nineteenth Army in the south of France." In October 1943, Rundstedt wrote to Hitler of his "alarm" at "the rapid increase in rail sabotage." In September there had been "534 very serious rail sabotage actions, as compared to a monthly average of only 120 during the first half of the year" (Asprey, 1975, 473, 475). Vichy police also reported much sabotage of the French railroads, which had forced the occupiers to bring some 20,000 German railway workers into the country. Moreover, SS units were diverted from the front to guard railroad facilities. Railroad sabotage hit the German forces in a sensitive spot. Only a small part of the German army was mechanized, so the railroad was crucial to Germany's ability to control Europe. It moved troops from one hot spot to another,

and it fed and supplied them. Besides serious logistic problems, Rundstedt's testimony also suggested declining morale and a feeling of insecurity among German officers. Civilian resistance did not liberate France, but it helped to weaken the enemy's fighting ability.

Civilian resistance in eastern and south-eastern Europe also contributed to Germany's defeat. Polish spies provided Britain and the United States with intelligence from Europe and North Africa, including information on and parts of German secret weapons and information about the German army's order of battle. The quality and military significance of this information was suggested by an American intelligence officer, who wrote on two Polish reports, "This is an excellent report" and "This type of information is extremely valuable" (Weinberg, 1994, 545). By August 1944, the Polish Home Army felt strong enough to attempt an open military uprising, which would have worked, had Stalin's nearby troops moved forward instead of allowing German troops to massacre the Polish insurgents, whose politics were inimical to the Soviet leadership's post-war political designs. Partisans in Yugoslavia did not defeat the German army, but their ability to remain in the field and control large areas forced the Wehrmacht to devote troops to counterinsurgency that it desperately needed on the front. By 1943, Tito had some 100,000 men under arms, and this number soon grew to around 220,000. Against this force Germany set some 140,000 German troops and another 66,000 from its satellites. Some of these had to guard against a potential Allied invasion in the Balkans anyway; however, many of them could have been used in Italy or the Soviet Union. The same was true of the German divisions tied down by the less powerful partisan movements in Albania and Greece.

The Soviet Union poses particular interpretive difficulties, because millions of civilians there were deliberately exterminated—especially Jews. German army and SS units often tried to put a gloss on their murders by calling the victims "partisans." This tactic helped soldiers and officers overcome any inhibitions they might have had about killing unarmed civilians, because the German military had never doubted the efficacy and legitimacy of making short work of real and suspected partisans; it had done so in the Franco-Prussian War, the Herero uprising, and the First World War. During their invasion of the Soviet Union, German forces eliminated entire villages in the course of combatting "partisans;" however, SS task force leaders made finer distinctions in their official reports. For example, one officer reported killing 240,000 people, of whom only 1,044 were "partisans" and 8,359

"communists" (Klinkhammer, 1999, 817). As Lutz Klinkammer argues, German operations against partisans in the Soviet Union were a mixture of both counterinsurgency and outright murder of innocent civilians. We have to reject German veterans' claims that their massacres of civilians were purely defensive or retributive measures directed against an omnipresent partisan danger. We must, however, also avoid letting recognition of the Wehrmacht's murderous activities blind us to the existence of a real partisan movement, which threatened German lines of communication, drew troops away from the front, hurt their morale, and took many of their lives. Indeed partisans in the Soviet Union were strong enough by June 19–20, 1944, to explode thousands of mines on railways, bridges, and roads to the rear of Army Group Center, just prior to the Red Army's final assault on it.

Linguistic evidence also points to the real military threat that partisans represented to German forces across Europe. At the beginning of the war, German officers described partisans with the term *Freischärler*, which meant guerrillas and suggested small, relatively harmless numbers of armed civilians or soldiers caught behind the front. The derogatory term *Banden* appeared in 1942. It also described small groups ("bands") of guerrillas, but suggested formations more threatening than *Freischärler* did. In late summer 1944, the growing strength of partisan groups in the Balkans and Italy led one officer to observe that Banden was no longer an adequate description of these irregular enemy forces. "With the exception of the new formations, we are dealing with operatively and tactically well-led forces, who are enviably armed with heavy weapons and buoyed by a dynamic that should not be underestimated, and whose number is constantly growing" (Klinkhammer, 1999, 829–30) The European resistance and partisan movements did not decide the war's outcome, but neither can they be left out of the equation of forces in this "total war." Besides possessing moral, symbolic, and political significance, these movements represented a serious military threat to the German army: They supplied information about it to the Allies; they sabotaged the transportation network upon which it depended; and they attacked it directly, tying it down and undermining its morale, weakening it for the Allied forces' kill.

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