

Literature Review: Foreign Nationals in the Schutzstaffel

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Richard Roden

Texas State University

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Literature Review

When looking into struggles among groups one must also understand the historical narrative as to why these groups are in conflict. The Second World War left a scar on the world and Europe in particular. Germany under National Socialism is well remembered, but there were other smaller players that were not from the confines of the Third Reich. Recently, more research has been done examining the role that people from outside of the Third Reich played. This topic is difficult, as there has been bias as seeing those who supported the Third Reich as traitors, with tensions from the war showing up in conflicts such as Ukraine currently or the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990's (Mirković 1996). The Nazi's were divisive and effective at manipulating a population, we can see this most obviously in the Third Reich, but they also took advantage of occupied and neutral countries populous. Before and during the war the fear of Bolshevism, or Communism, was very real throughout Europe. When Nazi Germany went to war against the Soviet Union people from all over Europe chose to fight for the Third Reich because it seemed no one else would prevent the Soviets from taking over Europe. This became a social issue, as Ukrainians, Croats, Danes, Norwegians and many other peoples were recruited and conscripted into the SS. They fought their own countrymen in many cases, even going so far as to only serve against their former neighbors (Khromeychuk 2012). How did the Schutzstaffel exploit the fear of Bolshevism and Jewry to attract recruits from occupied and foreign countries?

Research into the background of the SS and foreign volunteers is often difficult and mired in revisionist history (Guttman 2013). More recently, following the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union, the discussion has changed as Khromeychuk (2012) brings up

with a focus on the Ukrainian Waffen SS volunteers. Khromeychuk (2012) analyzes both sides of the debate from a more neutral tone that does not focus on the crimes committed by the Waffen SS “Galicia” Division, nor praising them as freedom fighters for an independent Ukraine. Khromeychuk (2012) also brings up that many of the men that volunteered not only wanted to serve their home land and fight bolshevism, they also saw the Waffen SS as the most elite of soldiers. While the men of the Galicia Division were working under the authority and with Germans, many found them to be little to no better than their former Soviet overlords, with many feeling alienated during their service in the Waffen SS (Khromeychuk 2012). This demonstrates that, while the SS was effective at manipulating people at first, often foreign volunteers would realize that the cause they were serving was not in their favor.

The Waffen SS Galicia Division was made up of Ukrainians, with this region experiencing an anti-Bolshevik uprising in 1919 that resulted in “deadly pogroms against Jews, Bolsheviks and soviet workers” (Gilley 2014). While not all the men that served were anti-Jew, Bolshevik, and soviet worker, we are still looking at a region has a history of violence towards the groups the Nazis, and more specifically the SS, were trying to eliminate.

Building up cultural alliances and exploiting political and ethnic hatred was a tool employed by the SS as mentioned above, but it can also backfire. By 1942 the SS needed men badly. They decided to focus on the Volksdeutsche in Yugoslavia. This seems logical; get ethnic Germans, even if they are not from within the Reich, to serve in the SS. These people should speak German, often have a history of conflict, and the SS can use them to police the local populous. This did not work out well in all cases as Wittman (2002) discusses, with many Volksdeutsche feeling few ties to the Third Reich and closer to their local region. The SS ended up recruiting ethnic German Croats in 1942, but they fell short of the man power required which

led to the SS enforcing conscription. Wittman (2002) mentions that 25,000 men in 1944 were conscripted from one region of Yugoslavia to serve in the 7th SS Prince Eugen, but later in 1944 the division numbered 21,500. The SS chose to use the division as cannon fodder. The poor treatment of the Croat Volksdeutsche was also on an individual basis, where Wittman (2002) brings up in one example a man named Franz Mag in the seventh company that was forced to do a “punishment detail and stand guard every night” because he could not understand German. I know this is an academic paper, but this shocked me how badly these people were treated. Think about it, you are forced to serve a foreign country; you might not speak the language, and you will be put in purposely dangerous situations all while being treated poorly by your leadership. Even at Staff Headquarters for the 7th SS an Unterscharführer Tscheran referred to his recruits as “Croatian manure” (Wittman 2002). While this unit is an exception, with many foreign volunteers being treated well and being seen as superior to their Reich German colleagues (Guttman 2013) it demonstrates that the SS was not always successful at integrating peoples of different cultures and backgrounds and often poor at cultural differences.

I have discussed how the SS was able to attract foreigners and also how they also failed when working with what would appear to be an easy to use populous. There is a thread that runs through both of these examples, anti-Jewish and anti-Bolshevik rhetoric. The 7th SS was less impacted by such rhetoric, but with at least 5,000 men volunteering in 1942 according to Wittman (2002) one can see that the Nazis were using ancient ethnic hatreds, anti-Jew sentiments, and anti-Bolshevik leanings that existed in the region (Mirković 1996). The interesting thing about the Nazis is that overtime they slowly merged the idea of Bolshevism and being Jewish into one thing, Jews are naturally Bolsheviks going by their logic (Behrends 2009). No longer are we just looking at Bolsheviks, we are looking at a specific group of people that

live in many regions of Europe. We are looking at a new political ideology that has scared the West, ruined an empire, and left millions starving to death; this Jewish Bolshevism is obviously bad for everyone (Behrends 2009). With many educated people already afraid of the Soviet Union and disillusioned by the West's actions following the end of the Great War, the SS was appealing to many people not from Germany (Guttman 2014). By unifying the Bolshevik menace with the Jewish Menace this made Nazi propaganda able to appeal to a broad audience ranging from backwards Ukrainians who were predisposed to anti-Jew actions to academics who feared the Bolshevik revolution. While Mirković (1996) mentions other local ethnic hatreds that also existed, the Jewish Bolshevism fear was consistent in many aspects of Nazi propaganda (Behrends 2009).

In conclusion, we are looking at a very complex sociological topic involving many groups and institutions. The Nazis not only targeted the Jews for slaughter, they targeted groups of people for manpower in their war. The role of propaganda used to manipulate and prey upon people's fears during the war is being looked into more as the wounds of the war begin to be less severe. Reflection about these SS volunteers has also changed to serve nationalistic purposes and to justify conflicts in the modern era. We see the same fears the Nazis exploited in 1941 in Denmark, for example, seem similar to the ones that are currently airing in today's world. While exploitation of the other was not always effective, it was a tool used by the SS. Researching the propaganda and rhetoric used will give insight into the European society's fears at that time, with many of these fears still being alive in Europe. An analysis of the propaganda used by the SS and Nazis in will add to the historical sociology branch, with this research adding to the repertoire for understanding society's fears and how such fears are exploited to further a means that does not represent the best for European society.

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