

Musial, Bogdan: *Sowjetische Partisanen 1941-1944. Mythos und Wirklichkeit*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag 2009. ISBN: 978-3-506-76687-8; 592 S.

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In May 2010, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that a Latvian court had been right to judge Vasilij Kononov, who, with other partisans, had shot dead nine Latvian villagers. Kononov was the first Soviet partisan convicted of crimes against humanity. The Russian government declared the European ruling tantamount to collusion with neo-Nazis. It was a rare occasion when the darker side of Soviet partisan warfare reached a large audience. Part of a growing critical literature about the topic¹, Bogdan Musial's new book aims to separate „myth“ from „reality“ by „research[ing] comprehensively the history of the Soviet partisan movement during the Second World War, while employing the case of Belorussia, on the basis of sources that hitherto largely remained undisclosed“ (p. 11).²

The book's key finding is that the partisans arose and acted more or less independently from Moscow in numerous ways, especially but not only in the first year of the war with Germany. The first partisan units appeared before any central directives to this effect, and Moscow did not even know they existed. The NKVD never quite gained control over espionage among the partisans. Against Moscow's wishes, large partisan zones sprang up and partisans robbed peasants of all their food, attacked Jews (until the spring of 1943), abused alcohol and women, beat and killed arbitrarily, and even destroyed entire villages.

The structure of the book is chronological and thematic. There are chapters about the year 1941, the spring of 1942, the year 1943, and the year 1944, but also chapters about the Central Staff of the Partisan Movement, the „railway war“, Soviet partisan warfare in general, social aspects, and specific ethnic groups (Belarusians, Jews, and Poles). Throughout, Musial presents perspectives from above (Moscow and Berlin), below, and himself. The chapters range in length from 11 pages with 70 endnotes (chapter 5) to almost 70 pages

with 393 endnotes (chapter 6).

Most of the relevant archives were employed, in Belarus, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, and Israel, but there was no access to the archives of the Belarusian and Russian security services. The references are admirably comprehensive, contrary to the deplorable practice of providing only folio numbers. Musial also cites interviews he conducted with inhabitants of a former partisan zone, memoirs³, published contemporary sources⁴, and numerous studies. The focus on Belarus explains why important recent publications about Ukraine are not cited.⁵ When in 2004 Musial was arbitrarily refused access to files in Minsk, „local support“ solved the problem. As he explains, he benefited from „team work“ in the eastern archives and in the employment of sources in general (p. 17). The members of the team remain nameless, perhaps because they fear the consequences of disclosure.

Musial cites, and seems to trust, formally classified Soviet documents that conclude that there were in the territory of present-day Belarus over 282,000 Soviet partisans – most of whom lived there before 1941, lacked a formal affiliation with the Communist party, and took up the fight in or after 1943 (pp. 320-322). He believes they did not make a choice to enlist, but joined because partisans threatened

¹ For example, B. V. Sokolov, *Front za liniej fronta. Partizanskaja vojna 1939-1945 gg.* Moskva 2008; Vladimir Poljakov, *Strašnaja Pravda o Velikoj Otečestvennoj. Partizany bez grifa „sekretno“*, Moskva 2009. Musial's book (p. 538, note 55) gives Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerillas. Soviet Partisans in World War II*, Lawrence 2006 some credit but rarely cites it.

² Alle Zitate sind vom Autor der Rezension aus dem Deutschen übersetzt worden.

³ But not the revealing memoir by Leo Heiman, *I Was a Soviet Guerilla*, London 1959, which is in hardly any library.

⁴ Such as Bogdan Musial (ed.), *Sowjetische Partisanen in Weirussland. Innenansichten aus dem Gebiet Baranoviči 1941-1944. Eine Dokumentation*, München 2004.

⁵ A. Kentij / V. Lozyc'kyj, *Vijna bez poščady i myloserdyja. Partyzans'kyj ruch u tylu vermachta v Ukraïni (1941-1944)*, Kyïv 2005; Aleksandr Gogun / Anatolij Kentii (eds.), „... Sozdavat' nevyynosimye uslovija dlja vruga i vsech ego posobnikov...“. *Krasnye partizany Ukrainy 1941-1944*, Kyïv 2006; Aleksandr Gogun, *Stalinskie kommandos. Ukrainskie partizanskie formirovaniya. Maloizučennye stranicy istorii, 1941-1944*, Moskva 2008.

them with violence or death (p. 329). How this can be reconciled with the statements to the effect that a „large part“ was forced to join by Nazi occupation policies (pp. 443, 218) remains unclear.

The partisans in this book are presented as mainly a pointless failure. They mostly hunted for food (p. 288) and achieved little else. They generally obtained little classified German information. With reference to specific periods, the book refers to „remarkable military successes“ and „great“ or „acute“ threats to German supply lines (pp. 136, 222, 225); but the overall „military results“ were „everything but satisfactory“ (p. 190), certainly in view of the large number of partisans. It was also Stalin's failure: „The Soviet leadership did not manage to turn the mass of partisans into a battle-ready armed force, to erect the second front, and to endanger the German supply lines to an extent that would affect the actual front.“ (pp. 442-443; see also p. 230)

The partisans killed only 6,000 to 7,000 Germans (p. 292), while countless innocent non-Germans died. Many were killed as alleged traitors by the partisans, who deemed them their „main opponents“ (p. 255). Others were killed by Germans who otherwise might have spared them, the book states: „Without the partisan war, the losses of the ethnic Belarusian civilian population brought about by direct German terror would probably have remained small.“ (p. 377) Thus I am not convinced when the final paragraph of the book warns that the above „in no way“ diminishes the merits of those who fought the Nazi occupants „courageously and decisively“ (p. 443).

The book seems to have no printing errors whatsoever, reads easily, and will likely remain for years the most comprehensive description of partisan warfare in Belarus, if only because of its large source base. But it has two key weaknesses. The protagonists, never shown in a picture, do not come alive as individuals, and despite Musial's great skill, his narrative remains too close to the sources. It is not a matter of course that there existed a „Belarusian question“, a „Polish question“, and a „Jewish question“ (pp. 369, 414, 419, 244). More to the point, is „Soviet“ really the best term for the partisans under dis-

cussion if they had such a record of largely independent conduct? Did they even constitute a „movement“, as Soviet propaganda called it and even Musial calls it? The book notes that misogyny and anti-Semitism were widespread among the partisans (pp. 330, 389).⁶ But what was the extent of their loyalty to Stalin's state? What kind of propaganda did they issue? And what might an explicit comparison to other partisans of that time, whether in Belarus, Ukraine, or western Europe, reveal?⁷ Answers to such questions, even if offered tentatively, would have produced a more inspiring and convincing book.

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⁶ The book rejects the concept of anti-Semitism with regard to the Polish Home Army units in Belarus, which also mistrusted and attacked Jews (pp. 435-436).

⁷ This point was also made in another review; see Aleksandr Gogun, „Dwunogie Stalinowskie szakale“?, in: *Przegląd Historyczno-Wojskowy*, 2:227 (2009), pp. 189-196, here p. 194. A shorter Russian version is Aleksandr Gogun, „Zaslugi i grechi partizan“, in *Novaja Pol'sha*, archived at <<http://www.novopol.ru/index.php?id=1240>> (27.09.2010).