

What Ordinary Germans Knew and the Role of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust **By Walter S. Zapotoczny**

From the evidence, one would think that most Germans should have been aware of what today is called the Holocaust. This assertion applies even more to the *Mischlinge* who had opportunities to find out about the Holocaust. However, most refused to believe or failed to assess the incriminating evidence they heard or witnessed. Although many doubted the accuracy of the death certificates of relatives that stated that they had died of "natural causes in the camps," they did not believe their relatives had been systematically murdered. Many could not understand why the people they had grown up with would want to kill them or their families. Deported Jews often led their *Mischlinge* relatives to believe that their deportation was not serious.

Since the victims themselves alleged that it was beyond their imagination they would be gassed and killed, one should not expect ordinary Germans to know much more. Holocaust records show that Jews themselves often refused to believe what was happening in spite of the evidence of their own eyes. Even those who received information frequently reacted with disbelief or repressed it. The average German, who had even less contact with those who were persecuted was highly unlikely to suspect the extent of the Holocaust. Within the Wehrmacht, there is evidence that some knowledge of the Holocaust existed, while not all agreed with it.

Despite the post-war belief that the entire German military was indeed behind the horrors of the Holocaust and fervently supported the genocide policy, which became the main reason for continental anti-German insurgency, a few interesting facts must be examined. First, despite the racial propaganda instilled within German society and the military, there were several influential and successful German officers, even from the SS, who openly disapproved of the Party polemic and resisted the rhetoric emanating from Berlin. A prime example occurred during a meeting in 1941 of ranking *Waffen SS* field commanders, when *Oberfuehrer* Wilhelm Bittrich openly opposed Himmler's policies on racial cleansing in the east.

A more serious question concerns the role of the Wehrmacht in the killing operations conducted by the Einsatzgruppen and their accomplices. Although there have been no documented cases of Wehrmacht members participating in the actual killings, it is equally true that the Wehrmacht created the conditions in which the killings could take place. First, most of the killings occurred while martial law or conditions similar to it prevailed. Second, in many cases, the first "Jewish laws" (concerning wearing yellow identification badges and food distribution) were established by the Wehrmacht commanders in regional or municipal areas. The "Jewish laws" frequently were issued within the first days, sometimes hours, of occupation. There is no question that top ranking officials in the Wehrmacht could have stopped the killings had it been determined to do so, and that the atrocities took place on the Wehrmacht's watch. It is clear that the large masses of German soldiers did not know about the orders to kill the Jews, but it is equally true that Hitler and all of the SS and SD hierarchy had coordinated the killings with the Wehrmacht command. The killings could not have taken place nor the anti-Jewish laws issued without the knowledge of the Wehrmacht supreme commander, Field Marshal Keitel.

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