Widening the Circle: General Weikersthal and the War of Annihilation, 1941–42

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RECENT scholarship concerning the *Wehrmacht* leadership in Nazi Germany's war against the Soviet Union (1941–1945) has provided a much more nuanced picture of the motivation and responsibility of the uppermost strata of general for the brutalization of the conflict.¹ The generals just outside this inner military circle, however, continue to be largely ignored. Questions on the mentality of lower-ranking, frontline commanders toward the war of annihilation and what latitude they reserved for themselves in carrying out orders remain, like the war on the front itself, one of the least researched topics of World War II.²

Specifically, the ranks of *Generalleutnant* and *General der Infanterie*, usually corresponding to divisional and corps commanders, offer hundreds of potential case studies regarding German army officers entrusted with the realization of Nazi war aims. Colleagues to their generally better-known superiors, these officers could be useful sounding boards as well as critics of their superiors' orders, depending on the nature of their relationship. Unlike the army and army group commanders, they were generally much closer to the action, sometimes personally taking command at the front to restore a situation. *Generalleutnants* were in their usual capacity commanders of the smallest independent army units; they saw more strikingly and lived more intimately with the results of the annihilative war and occupation policies in the east. And unlike the most senior generals selected by Hitler to lead the invasion of the Soviet Union, the *Generalleutnants* and *Generale der*

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¹For the newest standard work, see Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007). See also Jörn Hasenclever, *Wehrmacht und Besatzungspolitik in der Sowjetunion* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010); Christian Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2009); and Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2008).

²Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg 1939–1945*, vol. 21, Bruno Gebhard, *Gebhardt. Handbuch der deutschen Geschichte in 24 Bänden* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag, 2004), 39.

Infanterie that commanded the 184 divisions and 36 army corps on the eve of Barbarossa were supporting actors in the attack, still aspiring to more leading roles. Most all would have hoped that war in the east would have resulted in further promotion. What do their careers, specifically the lack of ultimate success for many of their number, tell us about the experiences, attitudes, and personality traits necessary to reach the pinnacle of Hitler's Wehrmacht? What light do their careers shed on the latitude these generals reserved for themselves in the execution of ideologically driven policies? More specifically, what orders from above were supported, which contested, and which modified? And what insight into the attitudes of these commanders is gained through the orders they themselves issued?

The career of General Walter Fischer von Weikersthal provides an interesting case study to examine these questions. Named commander of the 35th Infantry Division in October 1940, he had ample time to instill his culture of leadership on this division before the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. It was not his first experience of combat in the east: as a junior officer in the Grenadier-Regiment "Königin Olga" during World War I, he was deployed in the spring and summer of 1915 on the eastern front, fighting in September 1915 just miles from where he would lead the 35th Division into White Russia in June 1941. He was promoted to General der Infanterie on December 1, 1941, two days after taking over command of the LIII Corps, then advancing toward Tula, south of Moscow. It was his last promotion in rank. By the end of January 1942, he would be transferred into the *Führer-Reserve*, ostensibly for health reasons, never to return to the eastern front.

Weikersthal is thus an example of a career officer whose military service spans the institutional cultures of the Imperial German army, the *Reichswehr* of the Weimar Republic, and the Wehrmacht. By predating the influence of National Socialism, his first military experience in the east offers an interesting basis from which to compare future behavior. While the record of his experiences as a junior officer in World War I remains sparse, there is evidence this experience helped to inform his conduct as commander of both the 35th Division and LIII Corps toward the civilian populace. In addition to his personnel files and the war diaries of the units he commanded, reports he wrote shortly after World War II for the U.S. Army's Historical Division shed light not only on the military operations he conducted, but also on the points of friction between levels of command. Family papers and interviews with General Weikersthal's family help to round out the picture of a man who, while not himself a Nazi party member, fought to realize their war aims.

Before Barbarossa

In his social profile and education, Weikersthal's early biography is typical of most Wehrmacht generals of World War II. Born in 1890 into an aristocratic family,

the son of a captain in the Royal Württembergische Army, family lore has it he decided for his father's profession after visiting one of the military parades that were common in the militarized society of the Kaiserreich.³ Upon completing Gymnasium in Rottweil and Stuttgart, he entered on June 30, 1909, the prestigious 1. *Württembergisches Grenadier-Regiment*, known as the "Königin Olga" regiment in honor of Olga Nikolajewna Romanowa, formerly a Russian Grand Duchess and then wife of King Karl I of Württemberg.⁴ His first surviving personnel assessment describes him as "a quiet, pleasant character" who "is very eager to educate himself further," "reliable and hard-working," but to the apparent disappointment of the officer passing review, "without temperament."⁵ Wounded once, in France in September 1914, he served on every front, spending altogether sixteen months on the western front and nine months, from December 1914 until September 1915, in the east. In this regard his wartime experience differs from many of his future superiors in the Wehrmacht: while few served longer in the east than he, ten out of the twenty-five future army and army-group commanders served, like Hitler himself, exclusively on the western front.⁶

The eastern front at which Weikersthal spent most of 1915 was in its fluidity of movement the antithesis of the trench warfare of the western front. But although their front line would advance some 300 miles before winter of that year, the German army was unable to force a decision: German soldiers learned that their Russian counterparts were "hard to kill, but easy to defeat."⁷ In front of advancing German forces, the Russian Imperial Army adopted "scorched earth" tactics predating their more widespread application by both German and Soviet forces during World War II: existing infrastructure was dismantled and transported farther east, and what could not be carted off was put to the torch.⁸

Of future consequence for Weikersthal's experience in the east was the fact that his 12th Army, instead of passing through Baltic lands at least somewhat familiar through their ethnic German minorities, drove due east, reaching the river Zelwianka east of Bialystok in September. It was a region characterized by its primeval forests and rural nature, whose inhabitants were divided among Polish, Lithuanian, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, and White Russian ethnicities, but

³Interview with Karl Ulrich Weikersthal, July 10, 2010. For the powerful influence of such military rituals on the youngest generation in Wilhelmine Germany, see Volker Ullrich, *Die nervöse Großmacht 1871–1918* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2004), 402.

⁴This unit had a long tradition, having been formed in 1806 and participating in Napoleon's invasion of Russia.

⁵Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (hereafter HstA), M430/2 Bü 510, PA Walther Fischer von Weikersthal, Personal-Bericht zum 1. Dezember 1913.

⁶Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, 80.

⁷Dennis Showalter, "Comrades, Enemies, Victims: The Prussian/German Army and the Ostvölker," in *The Germans and the East*, ed. Charles W. Ingrao and Franz A. J. Szabo (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press), 217.

⁸Ibid.

often not distinctively. An early account by the German army of the White Russians described them as “very good-willed and submissive, but standing culturally at an extraordinarily low level.”⁹

The transfer of Weikersthal’s 26th Infantry Division to Serbia shortly thereafter limited his experience in the east to these first impressions.¹⁰ At this time, the German occupation policies were more benign than they were to become later in that war, which was still considerably milder than the occupation policies of National Socialist Germany. It would have been unusual, if not highly inconsistent, for his impressions to reflect much more than the sense of chaos, filth, and disease across wide, depopulated spaces that characterized other accounts.¹¹ While hardly positive, such stereotypes and policies did not countenance the physical extermination of the populace, but instead elicited attempts to restore order and raise the level of sanitation and hygiene to German standards.¹² And while perceived Slavic weakness and primitivism took on more sinister tones for the future conduct of the German military—native peoples were now seen “not so much [as] people to whom terrible things had happened as the sort of people to whom disasters always happened, somehow due to their own nature,” their welcome of German troops underscored the cooperation that both parties wished for.¹³

The high attrition rate or “*Ausleseverfahren*” of the German officer caste during World War I made this “versatile front officer” a good candidate to continue in the 100,000-man army.¹⁴ But it was Hitler’s ascension to power in January 1933 and the introduction of conscription in 1935 that ushered in a new era of upward mobility: to the two promotions Weikersthal had in the fourteen years of the Weimar Republic came two more in the first six years of the Third Reich. He reached the first rank of general in March 1938 just days before the *Anschluss* with Austria.

The record is thin on Weikersthal’s reception of National Socialism, although family anecdotes point to conformity and the partial overlapping of goals between

⁹Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 31.

¹⁰HStA Stuttgart, M430/2 Bü 510, PA Walther Fischer von Weikersthal, Personal-Bericht zum 1. Dezember 1913.

¹¹See, for example, an account from another German source: “It was a horrifying sight, these villages, deserted, half burned out and haunted by hungry crows, in which only on occasion, out of a stark, barricaded house with blind, covered windows, from a disgusting door crack would lean out a sad figure, wasted down to bones, which in terrible greeting would vomit on the doorstep and then immediately crawl back into the darkness of these unhealthy, forbidden houses.” Liulevicius, *War Land*, 42.

¹²For a comparison of occupation policies, see Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht*, Chap. 1, “Besatzung und Gewalt im Ersten Weltkrieg,” 1.

¹³Liulevicius, *War Land*, 42.

¹⁴Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, 70. HStA, M430/2 Bü 510, PA Walther Fischer von Weikersthal, Beurteilung zu 10. August 1919.

the National Socialist regime and the German army already established by other scholars.¹⁵ In fall 1918, as general staff officer of the XIIIth Army Corps, he was involved with the demobilization of troops, an action purposefully carried out at night and in secrecy, so as to avoid the danger of the building of revolutionary soldiers' councils. The image of their uncelebrated arrival at the Stuttgart Nordbahnhof was later scornfully remembered at home.¹⁶ Like most German army officers, Weikerthal welcomed Hitler's attacks, both public and private, on the Treaty of Versailles. Meeting Hitler personally in 1933 during maneuvers in the Swabian Alb, he was impressed by Hitler's promise before army officers to replace cardboard facsimiles with authentic tanks prohibited by the treaty, and he supported Hitler's call for military parity with the western democracies.¹⁷ His views on the "Jewish question" are not known. According to his family, Weikerthal's initial, "very positive" opinion of National Socialism lasted at least into 1941, when personal reservations based on the conduct of the war grew.¹⁸

Weikerthal and the War against the Soviet Union

While he missed out on the career boost that the defeat of France turned out to be for other generals, Weikerthal's appointment soon after to command the 35th Infantry Division in late 1940—and the unit's subsequent selection for Operation Barbarossa—brought him to the war that would define his career. Command of this frontline division, consisting of the 34th, 109th, and 111th Regiments and support units, in the largest military offensive ever undertaken in German history was an opportunity and a moral peril. The *rechtsfreier Raum* created in anticipation of the invasion by the *Kommissarbefehl* and the *Kriegsgerichtsbarkeiterlass*, whereby all Soviet nationals—Red Army soldiers and civilians alike—were denied their traditional rights, was expressed most succinctly in Hitler's wish to "shoot all those who as much as look askance" at German authority.¹⁹ It reflected the ideological aim of the campaign to establish Nazi rule over European Russia at the expense of its Slavic inhabitants.

According to one postwar account, the arrival of the *Kommissarbefehl* at divisional headquarters led to a triage of all the senior divisional officers, after which Weikerthal expressly forbade the passing of this order down to the troops.²⁰ It is

¹⁵See, for example, Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat. Zeit der Indoktrination* (Hamburg: Deckers Verlag, 1969).

¹⁶Interview with Karl-Ulrich von Weikerthal, July 10, 2010.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹International Military Tribunal (hereafter IMT), *The Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Tribunal at Nuremberg*, 42 vols. (Nuremberg, 1947–49), vol. 38, Document 221-L, 92.

²⁰Freiherr von Welck, "Kriegsverbrechen des deutschen Heeres," *Soldat im Volk* (January 1980): 3. The order denied the right of political military commissars attached to Red Army units to be

certain, however, that this order did make its way to the frontline troops, and quickly: by the end of the first week of fighting, the division had already reported the liquidation of three commissars “in battle or while trying to flee,” while a member of the division’s *Aufklärungsabteilung* pointed to the order’s broad acceptance, perhaps even popularity, within that unit.²¹ This compliancy is clearly evident elsewhere: the *Guide to the Comportment of German Troops in Russia*, which encouraged “brutal” and “energetic” intervention by Wehrmacht soldiers against every form of active and passive resistance on the part of the civilian population, and the propagandistic flyer *Do You Know the Enemy?*, which exhorted these same soldiers to adopt a no-prisoners mentality in their struggle with the “honorless,” largely “asiatic” Red Army, were passed on to the troops without further comment.²² Clearly in the days leading up to the invasion, both the leadership and grass roots of the division were fully informed of the expectations for the upcoming conflict. At the same time, Weikersthal’s personal directive to his troops for the attack on the Soviet Union is devoid of the ideological language employed by other front commanders, justifying the upcoming operation instead by Germany’s need to “gain a free hand” on the continent before moving to finish off England.²³

Under Weikersthal’s leadership, the 35th Division rang up significant military achievements, largely through its participation in three of the largest battles of encirclement, or *Kesselschlachten*, of World War II: Bialystock–Minsk, Smolensk, and Vyazma, which resulted together in the capture of more than 1.2 million Soviet prisoners of war.²⁴ The operational tension between slow-moving infantry and far-ranging panzer divisions, the desperation with which the encircled Red Army divisions fought, and the ideological incitement of the troops all mutually reinforced the bitterness that characterized these operations. The June 22, 1941, entry of the divisional war diary noted the preference of many surrounded Red Army units to fight “to the end” rather than surrender.²⁵ In each of these cauldron battles, a level of brutality unmatched on other fronts became the norm. At one time or another, most of the 35th Division’s units adopted a no-prisoners mentality that was freely acknowledged. In a battle of late June 1941 that broke the last organized resistance within the Bialystock

treated as combatants and called for their immediate execution. For a detailed analysis of the order, see Felix Römer, *Der Kommissarbefehl* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008).

²¹Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg im Breisgau (hereafter BA-MA), RH24/5 104, Anlage zum Tätigkeitsbericht, June 29, 1941. Gerhard Bopp, a member of the *Aufklärungsabteilung* of the 35th Division, entered into his war diary on June 24, 1941, “In the vicinity a civilian is executed! Reason: Communist functionary. That is, they are all being executed.” Gerhard Bopp, *Kriegstagebuch* (Weissach im Tal and Hamburg: Timon Verlag, 2005).

²²BA-MA, RH26/35 139, entry June 17, 1941, and RH39/377, Merkblatt: Kennt Ihr den Feind?

²³BA-MA, RH39/377, Radfahr Bataillon 35, “Soldaten der 35. Division,” June 22, 1941.

²⁴Figures from Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden* (Bonn: Dietz, 1997), 83.

²⁵BA-MA, RH26/35 35, entry June 22, 1941: Bewertung des Gegners.

pocket, this tenor was again exemplified: the division's Aufklärungsabteilung noted that "regarding the prisoner counts of the last few days, it can be assumed that the enemy body counts far outnumber them, because the troops have mostly taken no prisoners due to their bitterness over their own losses, the butchering of their own wounded, and the insidious tactics of the enemy."²⁶ The divisional leadership recognized the low prisoner counts but remained silent at the time, choosing instead to view such a development *ex post facto* as the "necessary consequence of the conditions of the war and . . . the intensity of the fighting."²⁷ In the above case, the motivation for such tactics on the battlefield was further piqued through commendations sent from Army High Command (OKH) and Ninth Army commander General Strauss to the Aufklärungsabteilung's commanding officer and the awarding of additional Iron Crosses to the most deserving men.²⁸ Weikerthal's silent acquiescence to such arbitrary executions locates him between the encouragement of such measures already vocalized by General Walther von Reichenau and a rare condemnation, captured in an order a week later by another general, Joachim Lemelsen, that characterized these tactics as murder.²⁹

The execution of wounded divisional members taken prisoner by Red Army units, as well as every other violation of international conventions for conventional warfare, were duly noted in the divisional war diaries and led, at least ostensibly, to not a few acts of retribution on the part of divisional members.³⁰ But another early case of retribution illustrates how this frontline division could set its sights on nonmilitary targets, specifically Jews. On June 28, 1941, due to the alleged participation of civilians in a skirmish at the village of Bielica, the commander of the division's *Panzerjägerabteilung* ordered the execution of ten hostages—with one possible exception all Jewish—and the razing of the Jewish quarter.³¹ Whether this instance concerned actual civilians, reservists whose right to combat had been repealed by the *Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlass*, or was fabricated to provide an early lesson to the civilian population, remains unknown. The targeting of the local Jewish population for retribution points, however, to how closely Jews were already identified with Soviet resistance. On the following day, the division set up an *Ortskommandantur* in the larger nearby town of Lida, with the expressed intent "to keep the plundering inhabitants in check."³² During this initial occupation of Lida, frontline troops repeatedly persecuted the town's

²⁶BA-MA, RH39/375, entry June 30, 1941. In four days of combat, only seven prisoners were recorded in the Aufklärungsabteilung's war diary. *Ibid.*, Entries June 26–30, 1941.

²⁷Welck, "Kriegsverbrechen des deutschen Heeres," 3.

²⁸BA-MA, RH26/35 35, entry June 29, 1941, Noon.

²⁹Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, 254 and 363.

³⁰BA-MA, RH26/35 35, entry June 29, 1941, 6:30 a.m.

³¹BA-MA, RH26/35 41, entry June 28, 1941, 7:30 p.m.

³²BA-MA, RH26 35, June 29, 1941, 1:00 p.m.

Jewish population in both arbitrary and organized *Aktionen*, a persecution that culminated in the execution of approximately one hundred Jewish men belonging to the town's intelligentsia.³³

In the larger context of the unfolding war of annihilation, however, these measures seem typical: on the same day that Bielica was razed and its Jewish intelligentsia executed, the 5th Infantry Division, also under the V Corps and fighting alongside the 35th in White Russia, summarily executed fifty "suspicious" Jews from the town of Rozanka as a collective reprisal for the discovery of five mutilated German soldiers.³⁴ Other records of the 35th point to the widespread acceptance of the notion of "Judeo-bolshevism": antisemitic remarks are prominent in the narrative of the war diary of the 14th Company of Infantry Regiment 111 for the opening days of the war, while the division's *Nachrichtenabteilung* reports witnessing a pogrom during which the attacked Jewish population turned, presumably in vain, to members of the unit for protection.³⁵ On July 2, 1941, an officer of the *Aufklärungsabteilung* reported the selection and transport of Soviet prisoners of war, communists, and Jews out of the White Russian *shtetl* of Dwarcec, the latter "of which there were many."³⁶ According to one eyewitness, the Jews of Dwarcec were rounded up by units of the *Aufklärungsabteilung* not to be transported out of the town, but to be made responsible for the death of a German soldier during fighting in the town the previous day.³⁷ That such actions could take place during a reconnaissance mission behind enemy lines further indicates the inclination of the division to fight the war along racial-ideological lines, as well as the often parallel nature between the prosecution of the war and the Holocaust. Given the lack of any written record, Weikerthal's own position on the persecution of Soviet Jewry by his own troops lies between silent acquiescence and undocumented approval.

³³See David W. Wildermuth, "Who killed Lida's Jewish Intelligentsia? A Case Study of the Wehrmacht during the Holocaust's 'First Hour,'" scheduled to appear in *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2013).

³⁴BA-MA, RH26/5 7, entry June 28, 1941, also *ibid.*, "Verstoss gegen das Völkerrecht."

³⁵BA-MA, RH26/35 41, Einsatz der 14./I.R. 111 bei der Gruppe Mandelsloh vom 28. Juni–3. Juli 1941, entries June 28, 1941, and June 30, 1941. See also BA-MA, Msg2/5548, Durchbruch durch die Grenzbefestigungen, Kesselschlacht von Bialystock, entry June 27, 1941.

³⁶BA-MA, Msg 1/3193, Frhr. von R., Bericht: Dwarcec, April 1, 1942.

³⁷See USC Shoah Visual History testimony of Meyer Bronicki, segments 25–26. As a seventeen-year-old boy, Bronicki was part of the round-up of Jews documented by Freiherr von R. in his report entitled "Dwarcec," but his testimony provides crucial details to the special attention that could be given Soviet Jewry by frontline troops not found in the report. Bronicki recalls how "[the Germans] had a machine gun in front of us, and [. . .] they were going to machine-gun us because this German soldier got killed by a [Russian] sniper." Only after the last-minute intervention of one of the town's Gentiles were the Jews locked inside the synagogue until after the departure of the *Aufklärungsabteilung* from Dwarcec. Bronicki's account of the afternoon's events complements Freiherr von R.'s report, which mentioned the death of a single German soldier by a sniper during an initial foray in Dwarcec the previous day.

Weikersthal's approval of the brutality directed toward the Red Army, Soviet Jewry, and other announced enemies of the state contrasts with his desired handling of the remaining civilian population. In this regard he repeatedly found himself at odds with his own troops. As the example of Bielica illustrates, the *Kriegsgerichtsbarkeitserlass* allowing for arbitrary use of force against civilians was well known in the division. Such brutal measures were not tolerated, however, when directed against seemingly friendly populations, such as the Lithuanians. When in the first days of the war units of the 35th Division, fueled apparently by a mixture of "nervousness" and ideological fervency, reacted to sporadic gunfire by arbitrarily shooting Lithuanian farmers and burning their farms, divisional headquarters promised to react "harshly" to those responsible.³⁸

The plight of the friendly and potentially friendly civilian populations that came into contact with the 35th Division remained a recurring theme in General Weikersthal's directives to his troops. As early as July 19, Weikersthal felt obliged to address the incidents of violent requisitioning that had accompanied the division's march into Russia with practical arguments. His call for protection of the local population as workers "desperately needed for Germany" appears one of the earliest usages of such an argument among frontline commanders at a time when the scale of the impending extermination of the Wehrmacht's largest forced-labor pool, Soviet prisoners of war, had not yet materialized.³⁹ Just as important to him were the results of these violent raids on "the reputation of the German soldier as the representative of Anti-bolshevism" that he warned his soldiers would suffer "if violence against the civilian population on the part of the troops became commonplace."⁴⁰ Weikersthal now explicitly expected active intervention on the part of junior officers to keep their men in check.

In the dynamic that developed through Barbarossa between the encouragement by Hitler and the highest Wehrmacht authorities to enforce the methods of the war of annihilation on the Soviet civilian population and its reception by frontline commanders, Weikersthal reveals himself to be a consistent but ineffective brake. During the rapid summer advance into the Soviet interior, OKH decrees that reinforced the image of Soviet civilian as a latent enemy only kept in check by the most brutal methods appeared in a context of dire logistical shortcomings that often left the division "on its own" in regard to its food supply.⁴¹ Official directives to the troops allowing them to requisition whatever was

³⁸BA-MA, RH26/35 35, entry June 23, 1941.

³⁹See BA-MA RH26/35 39 betr.: *Aufrechterhaltung der Manneszucht*.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹The war diary of the division's supply branch (Ib) noted the first difficulties with the normal flow of provisions on June 23, which remained a constant concern due to scarcity of food and inadequate transport capacity. Compare BA-MA, RH26/35 140, Entries June 23, 1941; June 27, 1941; July 13, 1941; Aug. 9, 1941; and Aug. 13, 1941.

needed from the civilian population alternated with plundering on a broad scale and was often accompanied by the terror the Kriegsgesichtsbarkheitserlass seemed to predict. Against such sanctioned use of arbitrary and brutal force, Weikerthal renewed demands at the end of July for “correct and respectful comportment” by his troops toward Soviet prisoners of war and civilians alike, and warned of immediate intervention against “transgressors against the division’s honor.”⁴² But his threat lacked all consequence. By August, the situation had so deteriorated that General Strauss of the Ninth Army decried the increase in “troubling instances of lax discipline” that were to be eliminated “at once”: plundering, arbitrary use of force against the civilian population, and rape, instances of which had even been recorded at the front.⁴³

Weikerthal’s determination to put the genie back in the bottle was again on display when Army Group Center’s front line stabilized for six weeks in August and September 1941. Like all infantry divisions of Army Group Center at this time, it was responsible for holding the front as well as the “*Ruhe und Ordnung*” of the villages along this front line and ranging ten to twenty kilometers deep. In the time the 35th Division rested and refitted for Operation Typhoon, Weikerthal viewed the 4,500-odd inhabitants under his jurisdiction in the villages surrounding Wassiljewa as a resource to be cultivated, one that could help his division in questions of supply and security. Even before arriving in the area, measures were taken to protect against unbridled exploitation of its inhabitants: the order for the establishment of *Ortskommandanturen* also provided for public signs forbidding illegal requisitioning, warning that all such cases would be prosecuted in military court.⁴⁴ More importantly, he did not allow the regiments and independent units assigned to these *Ortskommandanturen* to police themselves, but charged the division’s military police with enforcing this order.⁴⁵

For many residents of the area, a disciplined German army unit may well have appeared a better guarantor of their livelihoods—and lives—than a Soviet partisan movement that, while still in its infancy, was becoming known for its own violent requisitioning and aggression toward recalcitrant farmers. It was a sentiment Weikerthal and his divisional staff seemed intent on fostering, even if it put them at odds with one of the central ideological tenets of the war. Specifically, occupation policy as spelled out in the preinvasion decree known as the “*Grüne Mappe*” had called for the “immediate and highest possible exploitation

⁴²See BA-MA, RH26/35 39, July 31, 1941, Div. Ia notes.

⁴³BA-MA, RH26/35 39, Hinweise A.H.Qu., Aug. 10, 1941.

⁴⁴See RH26/35 172, Aug. 24, 1941, betr.: Ortskommandanten.

⁴⁵According to Freiherr von Welck, Weikerthal’s ordering of the divisional *Feldgendarmarie* to police the villages proved a quick and effective deterrent to further illegal and violent requisitions by divisional troops. Welck, “Kriegsverbrechen des deutschen Heeres.” The 180 divisional court martial records currently housed in the Tsentral’nyi arkhiv Ministerstva oborony in Podolsk, Russia, would provide great insight into the validity of such claims and the general culture of discipline in the division. Previous attempts by the author to gain access to these records were unsuccessful.

of the [soon-to-be] occupied territories for Germany.” Drafted by the Wehrmacht High Command in collaboration with Goering’s *Wirtschaftsstab Ost* and distributed down to divisional level, this policy document had called for the drastic reduction in the food supply of the occupied areas and characterized any effort to restore the local economy as “entirely false.”⁴⁶

Despite the codification of such measures as “the founding principle” of the occupation, it is clear that Weikersthal interpreted these measures much more broadly than higher authorities intended.⁴⁷ The division’s oversight of the agricultural production in the region put the subsistence needs of the populace ahead of the hopes of higher authorities for surpluses.⁴⁸ Acting on its own, the division distributed the prewar grain portions to the local population, additionally entrusting it with the storage of surpluses before transport.⁴⁹ A Thanksgiving feast proclaimed by General Weikersthal and celebrated between the division and locals in traditional costume acknowledged this collaboration publicly. With less fanfare, the collection of foodstuffs from private and collective farms by divisional units proceeded “without difficulty.”⁵⁰

The apparently adequate supply of food for the civilian population led to cooperation in an area of increasing importance as well: anti-partisan warfare. On September 19, inhabitants of the village of Burjkowa alerted the division to the presence of Red-Army parachutists and partisans who were then captured.⁵¹ Such assistance could also be proactive, as the example of the village Sharowy proves: the first and only anti-partisan action undertaken by the division during its stay in the region resulted from intelligence offered by a collaborator.⁵² This action on September 16, 1941, led to the arrest of forty-seven nonresident men and the replacement of the town mayor. The listing of various transgressions in the final report strongly suggests that most if not all of these men were subsequently executed. The release of a further twenty-one nonresidents illustrates, however, that the division was not necessarily intent on resolving every security question with a bullet.⁵³

This cooperation occurred in the context of ever more hostile measures adopted by the Wehrmacht toward the civilian population. The Ninth Army order of

⁴⁶IMT, *The Trial of the Major War Criminals*, vol. 28, Document 1743-PS, 3.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸BA-MA RH26/35 140, 2. Meldung über Ernteeinbringung und Herbstbestellung im Bereich der 35. Division von 8.9.41.

⁴⁹BA-MA RH26/35 140, 4. Meldung über Ernteeinbringung und Herbstbestellung im Bereich der 35. Division für die Zeit v. 14.9.–20.9.41.

⁵⁰BA-MA, RH26/35 88, Tätigkeitsbericht der Abteilung Ic in der Zeit vom 1.4.41 bis 1.3.42.

⁵¹BA-MA, RH26/35 88, Tätigkeitsbericht, June 22–Nov.10, 1941; compare also RH26/35 92, Gefangenvernehmung, Sept. 19, 1941.

⁵²It is likely no coincidence that the collaborator was identified as the miller of the town of W., again underscoring the relationship between food supply and cooperation. See BA-MA, RH39/377, Rad.Btl.35 betr.: Partisanenabwehr.

⁵³Ibid. These men had registered with local authorities as per regulations, but were still to be closely watched by the divisional Ortskommandant of Sharowy.

September 10, 1941, called for the immediate hanging of all partisans and their helpers after capture; should those responsible for a partisan action not be found, a predetermined number of civilians were to be taken hostage and executed if the guilty party was not caught within twenty-four hours.⁵⁴ In the reception of this order, Weikersthal's position in the spectrum of possible responses sought to square the circle: while at once encouraging the troops to the uncompromising position that "every hostile action toward the German army and its facilities will be punishable without exception with death," he did not abandon the hope that such measures could be avoided.⁵⁵ The order was passed on to regimental commanders for implementation with a margin note to instruct the same regarding the need for rewarding collaborating civilians and reemphasizing the specific rewards to be offered: money, but also livestock, food, gasoline, and tobacco.⁵⁶

The emphasis on winning the "goodwilled and submissive" Slav to the German cause can also be seen in Weikersthal's letter to V Corps headquarters shortly before the division was redeployed out of the area. After praising the division's success in reestablishing an ordered administration to the land, one that promised the survival of the villagers through the coming winter, the letter acknowledged the difference between policies adopted by the division and the more widely entrenched exploitation going on elsewhere: "We gradually succeeded in instilling in the population a sense of trust toward the Wehrmacht and by doing so contributed to the building up of [these] newly won areas. Experience has shown that the danger exists, after the redeployment of the division out of its present area, that subsequent troops will interfere with the local economy mercilessly through the taking of the last grain stores and livestock, so that the work begun by the division will be undone. The division asks therefore that for purposes of the maintenance of a constant oversight and economic planning, administrative organs of the army should immediately take possession of [the divisional areas]."⁵⁷ Important here is the perspective on occupation policy that this note illustrates: overshadowing the subtle criticism of rapacious rear echelon troops is the latent opposition to the fundamental occupation policy that had been spelled out in the "Grüne Mappe." Indicative of the differing perspectives on this strategy that could simultaneously exist between the highest political and military authorities and the front was the note's timing: it was issued almost to the day that a new memo by Goering demanded that "principally only those working in the occupied territories for [Germany] should be guaranteed [. . .] subsistence."⁵⁸

⁵⁴National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), T312/Roll 275, Armeeoberkommando 9AOK, Sept. 10, 1941, betr.: Partisanenbekämpfung.

⁵⁵BA-MA, RH26/35 172, Sept. 14, 1941, betr.: Partisanenbekämpfung.

⁵⁶Ibid. For the original directive from the Ninth Army, see NARA, T312/Roll 275, Armeeoberkommando 9AOK, Sept. 10, 1941, betr.: Partisanenbekämpfung.

⁵⁷BA-MA, RH26/35 140, An Generalkommando V. Armeekorps, Sept. 17, 1941.

⁵⁸This memo, issued by Goering's Liaison Staff of the Office for Defense Economy and Armaments and entitled "Notes on the Economy for the period August 15–September 16, 1941," was issued on September 16, 1941. IMT, *The Trial of the Major War Criminals*, vol. 36, Document 003-EC, 107.

When offensive operations started anew for the 35th Division on October 2, occupation policy lost what prominence it had held for Weikersthal and his staff in the face of other challenges. The 35th Division fought almost without pause on the front line from the invasion date through the summer and fall; replacements for the fallen came late, if at all.⁵⁹ The losses to equipment, armament, and the few motorized vehicles the division possessed were not made good, forcing the troops to use captured Soviet material whenever possible.⁶⁰ Soldiers were told to replace their worn-out boots from the dead.⁶¹ By mid-November the divisional doctor reported up to ninety percent of the fighting troops were afflicted with lice, their spirit was “apathetic . . . mixed with gallows humor.”⁶²

As such conditions were typical at this time for the eastern army as a whole, the ability of a front commander to motivate his troops to further sacrifices became the measure of the day. Weikersthal had already proved effective at this: for his leadership during the Battle of Smolensk, he was awarded the second-highest honor in the Wehrmacht: the Knight's Cross, given for bravery and outstanding leadership on the battlefield.⁶³ Additionally, his leadership of the 35th Infantry Division led to his promotion to General der Infanterie and his last assignment on the eastern front, command of the LIII Corps, both around the end of November 1941.⁶⁴

Now a successful and battle-tested commander, Weikersthal would command at different times four infantry divisions and two motorized infantry divisions, as well as units of a panzer division, a particular distinction for a general with little experience in panzer warfare.⁶⁵ The LIII Corps belonged to the Second Panzer Army, then commanded by *Generaloberst* Guderian and the Army Group Center army deepest into Soviet territory. Through the month of December Weikersthal's corps provided the fragile shield for the offensive operations against Tula, upon which all further operations in the sector depended.⁶⁶ By the morning of December 5, the failure of his 167th Infantry Division to relieve neighboring panzer forces in time for an attack on Tula hinted at the outcome of this operation. The “marching difficulties” this unit encountered was a euphemism

⁵⁹The first replacements, a march battalion of 308 men, arrived on August 17, 1941. BA-MA, RH26/35 35, entry Aug. 17, 1941.

⁶⁰BA-MA, RH26/35 40, Ib Beitrag zur Kommandeur-Besprechung am 11.8.41.

⁶¹Ibid., Ib Beitrag zur Kommandeur-Besprechung am 19.8.41.

⁶²BA-MA, RH26/35 72, Zustandsbericht Divisionsarzt 35. Division, Nov. 13, 1941.

⁶³BA-MA, Pers 6/142, PA Walther Fischer von Weikersthal.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵See Georg Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, vol. 5 (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1977), 185. Through December 1941 and January 1942, the 56th, 112th, 167th, and 296th Infantry Divisions, as well as the 25th and 29th Infantry Divisions (mot.) belonged at one time or another to the LIII Corps. In mid-January 1942, units of the 3rd Panzer Division were placed under his command. See NARA Ia Abschrift 13. Januar 1942 Bezug: Fernschreiben Pz.A.O.K. 2, Abt. Ia v. 12.1.42.

⁶⁶NARA, T314/Roll 10310, KTB LIII AK, entry Dec. 5, 1941: “Das Korps steht da und halt den Schild vor, doch ist der Schild an einigen Stellen brüchig.”

concealing that the division, along with the rest of the LIII Corps, was by now a spent force.⁶⁷ Four days later, the Soviet offensive and continued cold paralyzed Weikersthal's 25th and 29th motorized infantry divisions: next to material losses that were expected to result in a complete "write off" of the units, he observed, "The soldiers are no longer able to offer up resistance. They don't fight anymore."⁶⁸

The impossibility of motivating troops to further sacrifices under such conditions was something that divisional and army corps commanders were forced to accept sooner than the field marshals planning the war from a distance. While the crisis led to more pronounced fissures in the Wehrmacht's high command along the fault lines of petty rivalries, a peculiar paralysis set in after equally unappealing operational alternatives had been entertained and rejected. To the lack of answers—and relief—provided by the uppermost levels must be contrasted the actions of the generals at the front. While Hitler formulated no retreat orders demanding "fanatical resistance" among his troops, who should fight "without concern for breakthroughs on the flank and rear," Weikersthal was reporting to Guderian, "One can only appeal to the troops' sense of self-preservation. The will to fight is, due to their complete exhaustion, no longer to be maintained by normal means."⁶⁹ By then, both Guderian and Weikersthal were already following a different strategy of "preserving men" through staggered retreats to better-defensible lines.⁷⁰

Such considerations highlight the working relationship Weikersthal had with Guderian. Besides developing a relationship of trust, seen most clearly by the great freedom Guderian allowed Weikersthal in his withdrawal, the two commanders both shared a traditional understanding of their command, which tolerated little interference as to the tactics they deemed most appropriate to succeed.⁷¹ Hitler's relief of the commander-in-chief of the army, Brauchitsch, as a result of the winter crisis was initially acclaimed by not a few army commanders who believed the move would allow for clearer lines of communication. But it soon proved a challenge to the sovereignty of battle-field commanders. Although Weikersthal lacked the outspokenness of his superior, he was equally as disappointed in the failure of Guderian's attempt to have Hitler's comprehensive "no retreat" order of December 21 rescinded. In a rare direct quotation from the corps's war diary, his reluctance to obey the

⁶⁷Compare NARA, T314/Roll 1310, KTB LIII AK, KTB Entry Dec. 5, 1941: "The Commanding General [Weikersthal] saw the troops as they marched yesterday. Apathetic. One should have no illusions as to the fighting capabilities of the division."

⁶⁸NARA, T314/Roll 1310, KTB LIII AK, KTB entry Dec. 9, 1941.

⁶⁹Percy E. Schramm, ed., *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht*, vol. 1 (Augsburg: Bechtermünz, 2002), Fernschreiben an Heeresgruppe Mitte, Dec. 18, 1941. NARA, T314/Roll 1310, KTB LIII AK, KTB entry Dec. 23, 1941.

⁷⁰NARA, T314/Roll 1310, KTB LIII AK, KTB entry Dec. 19, 1941.

⁷¹Compare *ibid.*, KTB entry Dec. 9, 1941: "The Commanding General [Weikersthal] is considering whether to order the retreat behind the Don tonight. The [2nd Panzer-] Army gives us freedom of decision."

Führerbefehl is preserved in his promise to “act as my conscience dictates and, if need be, offer my resignation.”⁷²

Due to the “scorched earth” policy that accompanied the German retreat in the winter of 1941–42, as well as the singular emphasis Weikersthal now placed on “preserving” his own men, it is clear that civilians were to suffer the greatest depredations in what had become a war for the hearth.⁷³ The first retreat of the German army since the outbreak of hostilities rallied some segments of the civilian population against it, as the sudden and repeated reporting of these incidents, including increased partisan activity, attests.⁷⁴ At the same time, Weikersthal continued to differentiate between those elements and the other “eighty percent of the population [that remained] peaceful.”⁷⁵ Keeping the number of enemy combatants to a minimum through decent treatment of the civilian population did remain a topic, albeit one whose importance paled in comparison to the preservation of Weikersthal’s own troops: if he reminded his divisions at the beginning of January 1942 of the possibility of relocating civilians away from the front line—and their responsibility to shelter these evacuees, then it was primarily to serve the corps as forced labor.⁷⁶ As the retreat of the corps behind the Oka River exemplifies, this would become an ever more impossible proposition: Weikersthal himself ordered on December 23 the “complete destruction and/or incapacitation of all structures that could possibly be used for shelter” and the thorough mining of the east bank of this river. As the Red Army began to unseat the corps from its new position in the following days, this “scorched earth” policy was extended to the west bank.⁷⁷

While such ruthless treatment of the civilian population was fully in line with Hitler’s wishes, most recently formulated in his directive of December 21, the retreat to the Oka itself was not. This independent action contributed to Guderian’s dismissal on December 26 and the promotion of General Rudolf Schmidt to the command of Second Panzer Army. From the beginning of Weikersthal’s working relationship with Schmidt, it became clear that the

⁷²Ibid., KTB entry Dec. 21, 1941.

⁷³Guderian’s Army Order #24 to his corps commanders for the taking of winter positions called for the destruction of virtually all infrastructure behind the retreating army. See *ibid.*, Anlage A, Band 2 zu KTB LIII AK, *Armeebefehl für das Einnehmen der Winterstellung*.

⁷⁴Ibid., entry Dec. 7, 1941: “When the Soviet [armed forces] arrived, the inhabitants participated in the fight. Everyone was there at once. Partisan groups [were also] present”; entry Dec. 10, 1941: “Stalinogorsk not very friendly. Mayor disappeared. Countless people who wanted to infiltrate themselves arrested”; entry Dec. 11, 1941: “A.A.120 (112.I.D.) south of Stalinogorsk has difficulties with the civilian population.”

⁷⁵Ibid., KTB LIII AK, KTB entry Dec. 9, 1941.

⁷⁶Weikersthal suggested evacuated civilians be relocated to areas where additional labor was needed for road maintenance. NARA, T314/Roll 1314, Anlage A zu KTB2 LIII AK, *Generalkdo. LIIIA.K. an 112., 167., 296. I.D. und 4.Pz.Div.*, Jan. 6, 1942.

⁷⁷NARA, T314/Roll 1313, KTB2 LIII AK, KTB entry Jan. 1, 1942.

former would be limited in his tactical decision making. By the day after his promotion, Schmidt had already taken direct control of units subordinate to Weikersthal, ordering their retreat from Kosjolsk, an act that Weikersthal warned would have dire consequences for his corps's attempt to remain on the Oka. In what speaks volumes over their nascent working relationship, Weikersthal would learn of Schmidt's order for this retreat accidentally and after the retreat had already begun.⁷⁸ The retreat from Kosjolsk was, however, the last that the Second Panzer Army under General Schmidt was prepared to sanction: a further army order reinforced that "not one foot of ground should be surrendered" and in a message directly for corps commanders, announced "it is pointless to send requests to Second Panzer Army command for withdrawal. It [the front] must be held."⁷⁹

Weikersthal was at this time in principal not opposed to the chorus of "no retreat" orders reaching him from Berlin and Orel, and had sent out his own order for this soon before learning of the abandonment of Kosjolsk.⁸⁰ His intervention against the "frightening loss of discipline on the battlefield" through the building of commandos under "energetic personalities" that combed the rear areas punishing deserters reveals a commander intent on stiffening the fighting spirit of his corps.⁸¹ It was, however, the further erosion of his own freedom of command through the month of January 1942 that led to such friction between him and Schmidt that it occasioned his departure from the front.

The disparate views of the capabilities of the *Ostarmee* between the uppermost leadership and battlefield commanders took on sharper focus by the day. While Hitler pressed for a reorganization at the front that would make forces available for counterattacks, Weikersthal reminded Schmidt that some places were already bare of German troops and had only meager replacements not up to the job of offensive operations.⁸² A position paper dated January 13 and sent to Second Panzer Army laid out the corps's concerns and reiterated that given the current situation and "despite the disadvantages that an abandoning of some present positions may present," a shortening of the front must be considered.⁸³ This last attempt by Weikersthal to win his superiors over to his

⁷⁸NARA, T314/Roll 1310, KTB LIII AK, KTB entry Dec. 27, 1941.

⁷⁹NARA, T314/Roll 1314, Armeebefehl Nr. 29, Jan. 4, 1942.

⁸⁰NARA, T314/Roll 1310, KTB LIII AK, KTB entry Dec. 27, 1941.

⁸¹See NARA, T314/Roll 1313, Anlage G, Band 2, Fernschreiben an 112., 167., und 296. I.D., Dec. 30, 1941; and T314/Roll 1314, Generalkommando LIIIA.K. an die Herren Kommandeure der 112., 167. und 296.I.d. und 4.Pz.Div., Jan. 5, 1942.

⁸²See NARA, T314/Roll 1313, Abschrift an Oberkommando der 2. Panzerarmee, Jan. 13, 1942: against seven Red Army divisions equipped for winter fighting, the LIII Corps could defend with its three decimated infantry divisions, two-thirds of a further division, and "weak elements" of the 3.Pz. Division.

⁸³See NARA, T314/Roll 1313, Abschrift an Oberkommando der 2. Panzerarmee, Jan. 13, 1942.

position resulted in further encroachment on his command: Hitler now involved himself directly with the deployment of the LIII Corps, ordering it to remain in its present position “to the last moment” to prevent any further penetrations of the front line. To strengthen this resolve, the movements of the LIII corps’s and divisional headquarters without prior approval from higher authorities were also forbidden.⁸⁴

It was the inability of Weikersthal to countenance these constraints that led at this time to his transfer. After some initial success, attacks in accordance with the Führerbefehl bogged down. Weikersthal felt forced to order the local withdrawal of some units threatened with encirclement “after a determined resistance and the expenditure of all ammunition,” although he knew that this was “against the earnest wish of the army to hold [their position].”⁸⁵ The resulting disagreement “gave occasion to a comprehensive exchange of opinions between [LIII] Corps and [Second Panzer] Army” in the face of a renewed suggestion by Weikersthal to shorten the front and build the necessary reserves needed to counter further Soviet attacks.⁸⁶ Weikersthal’s command of the LIII Corps ended two days later on January 25, 1942, when he was sent back to Germany, ostensibly for health reasons.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The study of frontline commanders in the war of annihilation provides valuable insight into how Nazi war aims were received and implemented. The complex picture we receive cautions against equating the issue of an order with its execution. Orders from above were often modified to fit the local conditions as well as the perspectives and priorities of the general entrusted with their execution. Occasionally, these orders could also be openly challenged or quietly ignored.

In the case of General Weikersthal, one finds a general with a differentiated attitude toward the different population groups encountered during the campaign.

⁸⁴See NARA, T314/Roll 1314, Fernschreiben von Pz.A.O.K.2. an LIIIA.K., Jan. 14, 1942.

⁸⁵See NARA, T314/Roll 1313, KTG LIII Corps, entry Jan. 23, 1942. See Walter Fischer von Weikersthal, *Rückzug und Abwehr im Winter 41–42 im Rahmen eines Armeekorps*, aus dem Gedächtnis niedergeschrieben, May 20, 1947.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

⁸⁷General Weikersthal did suffer from ill health which had required him as early as April 1919 to request a leave of absence from his unit. HStA, M430/2 Bü 510, PA Walther Fischer von Weikersthal, Personal-Bericht zum 1. Dezember 1913. While the harsh conditions in the east no doubt impacted his overall health negatively, the timing of his transfer, as well as his orders immediately previous to it, give credence to the interpretation that the question of his health was the occasion, but not the cause, of his return to Germany. Weikersthal himself seems to underscore the possibility of manipulating personal health issues, this time to his own benefit, in his later contesting of a command in Norway, a theater that was regarded as a career “killer,” and subsequent acceptance of a command in the Pas-de-Calais region of France.

His acceptance of the most brutal measures against the Red Army and suspected partisans was entirely in line with what his future chief of staff would describe in the early summer of 1941 as “for an old warrior a somewhat different war.”⁸⁸ In contrast, his view of the Soviet civilian population never seemed to develop beyond the idea of the “very goodwilled and submissive” but culturally primitive Russians of the previous war. His continued emphasis on distinguishing between Soviet soldier and civilian in the face of ever harsher directives that blurred these traditional lines, his proactive stance in punishing violent requisitioning by his own troops, and his appeal for the future protection of the populace around Wassiljewa from exploitation by his own army illustrate a greater willingness to improve the plight of the civilian population than was in general shared by his superior officers.⁸⁹ It also illustrates an important difference between the front and hinterlands in the execution of a hunger plan—or strategy, depending on one’s interpretation.⁹⁰ At least regarding the area under Weikersthal’s direct control during fall 1941, it was not adhered to. While the narrow strip of land under the jurisdiction of the Wehrmacht’s front troops remained tiny in comparison to those administered by rear echelon troops and civilian authorities, the study of Weikersthal’s administration of Wassiljewa and environs raises the question of to what extent occupation policies at the front may have deviated from the more brutal normalcy witnessed farther west.

Such considerations underscore Weikersthal’s intention to preserve the latitude in the carrying out of orders that he had hitherto enjoyed. This was evident in both the implementation of occupation policy as previously discussed and the conduct of the war. As regards the prosecution of the war itself, insistence upon this traditional latitude would not conflict with the uppermost leadership until the winter crisis. Both Weikersthal’s repeated appeals to higher authorities in January 1942 for the consideration of tactical retreats and the ordering of such—against the expressed wishes of these higher authorities—provide evidence of the latitude Weikersthal reserved for himself in commanding his troops. Just as revealing is his reluctance to take the lead of other commanders at this time to stress the ideological component of the fight. It suggests that the generals who survived the winter crisis were the ones who not only accepted the usurpation of their battlefield autonomy, but who at the very least had adopted the ideological language of the campaign as their own.

⁸⁸NARA, Captured German records, T314/1315, LIII Army Corps, Brief July 6, 1941.

⁸⁹Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, 508.

⁹⁰Christian Gerlach argues for the interpretation of a concrete *Hungerplan* in his work *Kalkulierte Morde* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 46. For more moderate positions, compare Rolf-Dieter Müller’s interpretation of a *Hungerstrategie* in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983), 146, as well as Hürter’s characterization of a *Hungerkalkül*, in Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, 491.

There were also limits on the latitude Weikersthal would demonstrate, both institutional and self-imposed. The voice of protest that he raised on numerous occasions with his commanding officers regarding military orders is absent when considering criminal orders such as the *Kommissarbefehl* and the *Kriegsgerichtsbarkeiterlass*. His approval of the execution of hostages and the burning of Bielica in the first week of the war, as well as the public hanging of eight suspected partisans in Wolokolamsk in November 1941 are just two examples of his acceptance of the harshest measures in the war of annihilation to intimidate the civilian population. The record also shows that the civilians of Wassiljewa remained the target of official and unofficial requisitioning to an extent that must question Weikersthal's assertion that their winter survival had been adequately guaranteed: the September 1941 warning from V Corps that in the future the troops would be required to live ever more "off the land" was dismissed by Weikersthal's own supply officer with the margin note "for the present not possible."⁹¹ The limits of Weikersthal's concern for the civilians under his command are perhaps best seen contrastively by his promise, at the height of the winter crisis, to act as his conscience dictated rather than acquiesce to the pointless sacrifice of his troops. Nowhere can a corresponding promise to "act as his conscience dictates" be found in response to OKH directives that called for increasingly brutal measures toward the civilian population. For those Soviet civilians under Weikersthal's control, it must have remained a bitter consolation that he did not mandate the level of brutality and depravity they experienced.

Between his return to Germany in 1942 and his death in 1953, the distance he gained from the war of annihilation appears to have affected him differently from many of his higher profile Wehrmacht superiors. Released in 1947 from an American prisoner-of-war camp, he remained—true to his persona—a quiet former general, eschewing memoirs. He did not participate in the first postwar reunion of the 35th Infantry Division or contribute to any published accounts of any of his commands, a fact that according to his family was not least due to the troubling memories of the "*grauenhaftes Geschäft*" he had been a part of.⁹² Whether the bitterness over his front experience that was at times registered by family members resulted from lost promotions, ethical considerations, or something else remains unanswered.⁹³

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⁹¹ BA-MA, RH26/35 140, Qu.-Besprechung am 18.9.41.

⁹² Karl Fischer von Weikersthal, letter to author, July 16, 2010.

⁹³ Interview with Karl Ulrich Weikersthal, July 10, 2010.