

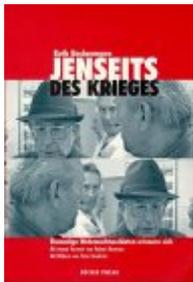
## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

### ***Friday Film Fest Series***



#### ***Jenseits des Krieges – East of War***

Director: Ruth Beckermann - 1997



*Precis – Allen Krumm*

*Jenseits des Krieges* (East of War) is a record of the reactions, recollections and testimony of the visitors to an exhibition called **Vernichtungskrieg - Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 – 1944**. The filming was done in Vienna in the fall of 1995. Ruth Beckermann, the director, followed a very simple formula: she strove to limit the commentary of each person interviewed to what they knew of the war

beyond war (*Jenseits des Krieges*), that is, of the large scale killing of civilians and POWs on the Eastern front.

Beckermann must be credited for employing a starkly simple technique, and for allowing her subjects to talk freely and relate their memories as well as their beliefs about those memories. What is said by these men is often extremely painful to hear, intensified by the searing knowledge that discussions and exhibitions and history books can never reverse the fate of the many Jews, Ukrainians, Russians and others who were killed. The attitudes of the individuals interviewed run the gamut from defiance to remorse. The testimonies are unrehearsed, usually quite frank and occasionally remarkably insightful.

The interviews of these former soldiers are significant because the subject matter resonates with issues relevant to societies and nations today. As Faulkner noted: "The past is not dead. It is not even past." History is always relevant and contemporary. Some of these issues are controversial, some are not. Some are subject to a variety of interpretations, some are not. For purposes of brevity these issues may be reduced to four questions: *What happened? Was what happened unique? Is there a collective responsibility for what happened? And lastly, could it happen again?*

The first issue, **the issue of what happened**, is starkly simple to deal with. There is little dispute about the vicious nature of the warfare on the eastern front between 1941 and 1944. Although it was never more than a minority of the total number of German soldiers involved in that brutal campaign, that minority killed large numbers of innocent civilians and noncombatants. To assert that there was brutality on the Russian side, when the latter was given the chance, does not mitigate those acts of brutality committed by the Wehrmacht.

Cicero's aphorism that "Laws are silent in time of war" compels us to ask if there something in the very nature of war that makes such acts as those committed by the Wehrmacht virtually inevitable. After all, war is about

killing and being killed. Grappling with the brutal dynamics of war forces one to grapple with **the question of uniqueness**. Were the acts committed by members of the Wehrmacht unique?

A positive answer to this question would point to Hitler's role as a demonic political pied piper, a racist warlord whose biological politics led to an unprecedented brand of biological warfare. And of course, the proponents of this argument point out, he did not do it alone. Countless numbers of Germans aided him in his megalomaniacal grasp for power.

A negative answer would point out that the armies and governments of other societies have been capable of atrocities and gross barbarism. The Armenian genocide of 1915, the Ukrainian harvest of sorrow in the early thirties, the Cambodian killing fields of the seventies and the slaughter of the Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda in 1994 come readily to mind. Whether it is based on race, class, politics or madness, mass killing is mass killing.

The third issue concerns **the concept of collective responsibility**. Where should the line be drawn in terms of responsibility and guilt? Should responsibility stop with those who directly committed the acts? Or with others who watched and did nothing to prevent the crimes? Or with citizens who suspected what was going on but said nothing? Or with the entire generation alive at the time of the crimes? Or with subsequent generations born into the society that perpetrated those crimes?

Some contend that the concept of war crimes is neither moral nor legal, but rather political. In a perfectly just world, this logic asserts that Joseph Stalin should have died along with Hitler in 1945. Instead, he sat with Roosevelt and later Truman and helped them draw the map of postwar Europe. Why? Because, at the time, he was their partner in world politics. He had been Hitler's eager accomplice in carving up the Baltics and Eastern Europe until June of 1941.

We speak of just war tradition, continues the argument, and the ethics of war, but in the end both concepts are said to be rhetorical devices employed by the victors. In war, guilt and responsibility is mainly a concern of the losers. Whatever the merits of this argument, it does nothing to change the fact that so many innocent civilians died on the Eastern front between 1941 and 1944, nor, it should be also noted, that so many German civilians died between 1945 and 1947.

The fourth and final question is the one hardest to ask and answer. For those of us not German by birth, and not of that time and that place, for those of us granted the mercy of a "late" or "elsewhere" birth, this question compels us to probe our own culture, our own history and seek to know ourselves.

The court historians of America have long maintained that our wars were perhaps nasty, but always necessary and noble. This public orthodoxy was maintained to a greater or lesser degree until Vietnam. That war demonstrated that American soldiers were indeed capable of killing civilians. But Vietnam is the easy, popular example. Here is a quote by a participant in another American war: "What kind of a war do civilians suppose we fought, anyway? We shot prisoners in cold blood, wiped out hospitals, strafed lifeboats, killed or mistreated enemy civilians, finished off the enemy wounded, tossed the dying into a hole with the dead..." This was the commentary of an American war correspondent accompanying troops in the Pacific theater during World War II.

It is unsettling to confront the reality that given the right combination of circumstances, pressure, indoctrination, etc., many otherwise decent individuals could engage in such behavior. Primo Levy wrote an essay called "The Gray Zone" in which he noted that "the greater part of historical and natural phenomena are not simple, not simple in the way we would like." It is tempting to simplify things and say that the behavior of the soldiers of the Wehrmacht in 1941 – 1944 was unique and uniquely evil among soldiers and armies. The behavior of some of

those soldiers was indisputably evil, but demonstrating its uniqueness is much more difficult.

One of the former Wehrmacht soldiers who visited the exhibition summed up his memories of the terrible things seen and done between 1941 and 1944 with the words: **"Ich weiß keine Antwort darauf "** (I have no answer to that). He had no answer to what had happened, and no answer as to how he might have handled it otherwise. He had been sent to war unequipped, unequipped to deal with the weather and unequipped to deal with the moral vacuum of the gray zone beyond war.