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# Racial Colonists in the Nazi East: Disabled Veterans and the Malleable Boundaries of Race, Masculinity, and Disability

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## Abstract

The Wehrmacht's stunning victories in the first three years of the Second World War produced a euphoric response among Nazi leaders. Suddenly, the East became a vast expanse of nearly limitless possibilities, and creating a new racial order topped the list. Although most historians have focused on the *Volksdeutsche*, the regime also planned to settle veterans after the war's conclusion to serve as model Germans, farmers, and a "living wall" to defend the East. As the war dragged on into 1942 and these men continued to fight, the regime turned to disabled veterans to garrison the East. The SS designed a racial selection process that proved too restrictive to generate enough applicants and, during 1943 and 1944, settlement officials revised standards. In the process, contingency, constrained practices, and contested ideology all cast the boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and disability as much more malleable than Nazi propaganda projected.

**Keywords:** Disability; masculinity; ideology; National Socialism; race; Second World War

On May 9, 1943, the *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* published the article "War-Disabled as Farmers in Wartheland."<sup>1</sup> The journalist Eugen Petrull noted that the Gauleiter of this land recently conquered from Poland, Arthur Greiser, intended his region to become a "Gau of front-line soldiers." To do this, he would settle men with military experience who could no longer serve in the Wehrmacht during the present war: physically disabled veterans released from military service. War veterans had acquired sixty farms in the Gau in just the past eight months. More farms could have been handed over—but many properties lacked a "mas-sive house ... that would be suitable ... for a German" and "Polish dereliction," and mismanagement had left most farms in a state of disrepair. Despair not, the reporter assured readers, Heinrich Himmler, head of the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) and Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationality (RKFDV), had organized a tour of the farms, and the disabled veterans had already set about bringing German "peace and order" (*Ruhe und Ordnung*) to their extensive plots of land. Farmer Janke, a veteran of three campaigns unable to walk without a cane, planned to tear down a half-ruined shack and "build a proper poultry house in its place." If readers doubted the likelihood of his managing such physically demanding tasks, one need only notice "his young, squeaky-clean wife" whose "energetic face" proclaimed, "Just you wait ... I'll help you get the farm in order and keep it in order, too."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Please note that throughout, all translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Eugen Petrull, "Kriegsversehrte als Bauern im Wartheland," *Ostdeutscher Beobachter*, May 9, 1943.

Farmer Janke was one of several thousand disabled veterans who joined the colonizing mission to establish a new racial order in Europe. The euphoria of the victorious campaigns from 1939 to 1941 had seized men like the eastern researcher (*Ostforscher*) Franz Lüdtké, who boldly stated that “our Eastern Land has finally been liberated” and that “the East of the new millennium stands under the sign of the swastika.”<sup>3</sup> Over the course of 1941 and 1942, the SS’s ambitions swelled into the *Generalsiedlungsplan* (General Settlement Plan).<sup>4</sup> “Liberated” lands now stretched as far east as a line running from the cold Baltic Sea southward to the Black Sea’s warm waters and its Crimean paradise. The site of this would-be German utopia included 48 million “undesirable people.”<sup>5</sup> The regime would drive 31 million of them farther east and out of the empire, while 17 million would suffer physical elimination.<sup>6</sup> These astonishing numbers did not include the estimated 11.3 million Jews in the area. Depopulation would coincide with repopulation. The regime marked millions of *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) for providing the raw biological material to settle the East. After hundreds of years, Nazi leaders envisioned, 600 million Nordic Germans would have occupied, settled, and cleansed the region, a sweeping racial reordering of Europe.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in 1942, disabled veterans served as a vanguard for this continental transformation. But ideology ground roughly against practice as the regime implemented resettlement plans over the course of 1943 and 1944. Stringent ideological requirements of race, gender, and disability collided with the reality of drumming up enough willing applicants, let alone men who checked each box of Germanness. As military victory slipped away, settlement officials pushed forward with the human material they had on hand. Men like Farmer Janke, who served as racial pioneers, looked altogether different from the ideals the SS outlined in 1942. The next two years saw negotiations, complications, and ideological retreats. The disabled veteran was the site of this negotiation as Nazi officials wrangled with one another to fit the veteran’s maimed and unwhole body into the propagandized mold of his able-bodied counterpart, the soldier. This article argues that contingency, constrained practices, and contested ideology all cast the boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, and disability as much more fluid than Nazi leaders and SS officials originally envisioned for their eastern utopia. Disabled veteran as racial colonist disrupts the conventional view that disabled veterans figured for the regime only as pension-seeking threats to financial solvency or as less-productive, but unfortunately essential, workers in a time of total war.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the Nazi attempt to recruit disabled veterans and the men’s own volunteering for the eastern colonization scheme illustrate challenges to Nazi binaries of healthy and sick, beautiful and ugly, German and non-German.<sup>9</sup> The regime hailed physically disabled veterans as heroes in propaganda, but their bodies sometimes more closely resembled those marked for ideological and physical destruction. The contingencies of war loosened

<sup>3</sup> Franz Lüdtké, *Ein Jahrtausend Krieg zwischen Deutschland und Polen* (Stuttgart: Robert Lutz Nachfolger/Inhaber Rudolf Weisert, 1941), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Mechtild Rössler, et al, ed., *Der “Generalplan Ost.” Hauptlinien der nationalsozialistischen Planungs- und Vernichtungspolitik* (Berlin: Akademie, 1993); Czeslaw Madajczyk, *Vom Generalplan Ost zum Generalsiedlungsplan* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Christian Ingrao, *The Promise of the East: Nazi Hopes and Genocide, 1939–43*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2019), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Ingrao, *The Promise of the East*.

<sup>7</sup> Ingrao, *The Promise of the East*, 224.

<sup>8</sup> James M. Diehl, “Change and Continuity in the Treatment of German Kriegsopfer,” *Central European History* 18, no. 2 (1985): 170–87; James M. Diehl, “Victors or Victims? Disabled Veterans in the Third Reich,” *Journal of Modern History* 59, no. 4 (1987): 705–36; James M. Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland: German Veterans after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Nils Löffelbein, *Ehrenbürger der Nation. Die Kriegsbeschädigte des Ersten Weltkriegs in Politik und Propaganda des Nationalsozialismus* (Essen: Klartext, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 67–138.

the strict SS selection process over time and sanctioned new modes of embodiment suitable for representing and protecting the German race.

The centrality of acquiring territory in the Nazi war plans is, of course, nothing new for historians. Early works framed the war in the East as a case of traditional empire-building using modern techniques.<sup>10</sup> *Bevölkerungspolitik* (population policy) shrouded racial goals with a veneer of scientific justification, and modern technology provided a means to transfer populations on a massive scale. The reorientation toward seeing the Third Reich as a “racial state” shifted historians’ attention away from the top leadership toward groups actually implementing ideology, including a cohort of mid-level SS officers and the large population of *Volksdeutsche* they shuffled around eastern Europe.<sup>11</sup> Rather than being lured by the regime into compliance with cynical propaganda and platitudes, for many Germans, Nazi ideology became entangled with desires, beliefs, and lived experience. Binaries such as perpetrator-victim have fallen away in more recent scholarship, revealing the nuanced ways Germans accepted, adhered to, failed to adhere to, and rejected Nazi ideology. Where a generation ago historians wrote simply of Nazi Germany as a bastion of male power, historians such as Thomas Kühne now identify hegemonic masculinities and, crucially, alternative masculinities.<sup>12</sup> Social status and position, confession, sexuality, and race all inflected masculinity to produce alternative ways of navigating a dangerously racist society and a deadly war, even as these alternatives oriented themselves in relation to the hegemonic ideal of the aggressive, strong, and disciplined soldier. How closely a man aligned himself with martial values proved the “yardstick against which a man’s worth was measured.”<sup>13</sup> Historiographically, Nazi plans to subjugate and transform eastern Europe now come bundled with the limits of racial indoctrination and the persuasive power of ideology, generational conflicts and continuities, individuals’ anxieties and ambitions, and the embracing of and resistance to pervasive structures of gender and sexuality.

Rarely noted is that the hegemonic masculine ideal, the soldier, played a crucial role in Nazi Germany’s *Generalsiedlungsplan*. The *Volksdeutsche* provided the mass of *Menschenmaterial* to colonize the East, but settlement authorities quickly became disillusioned when they encountered “Germans” who could barely speak the German language, if at all, and who seemed alien in their behavior and supposed lack of German hygiene.<sup>14</sup> Historians have enumerated the issues involved in the SS’s attempt to divide and select only the best racial

<sup>10</sup> Robert L. Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy, 1939–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941–1945: A Study of Occupation Policies* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981); Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik. Die Zusammenarbeit von Wehrmacht, Wirtschaft, und SS* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1991); Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2002); Isabel Heinemann, “Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut.” *Das Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt der SS und die rassenpolitische Neuordnung Europas* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Kühne, “Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity: Soldiers in the Third Reich,” *Central European History* 51, no. 3 (2018): 394. See also Anette Dietrich and Ljiljana Heise, *Männlichkeitskonstruktionen im Nationalsozialismus. Formen, Funktionen und Wirkungsmacht von Geschlechterkonstruktionen im Nationalsozialismus und ihre Reflexion in der pädagogischen Praxis* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2013); Bernhard Gotto and Elke Seefried, *Männer mit “Makel.” Männlichkeiten und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2017); Thomas Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler’s Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Jason Crouthamel, “Homosexuality and Comradeship: Destabilizing the Hegemonic Masculine Ideal in Nazi Germany,” *Central European History* 51, no. 3 (2018): 419–39.

<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Geheran, “Remasculinizing the Shirker: The Jewish *Frontkämpfer* under Hitler,” *Central European History* 51, no. 3 (2018): 444.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 158.

material from the mass of *Volksdeutsche*.<sup>15</sup> But racial science provided no definitive biological characteristics to ensure exact classifications. The transformation of these people into true Germans would be the work of generations. Hitler's anxiety flared that he might win the war against the Soviet Union only to lose everything in a "wave ... foaming down from Asia" that would surprise "a Europe numbed by civilization."<sup>16</sup> Rather than a wall of brick and mortar to dam the flood, he railed that "we must meet it with a living wall."<sup>17</sup> Another *Ostforscher*, Theodor Oberländer, opined that the living wall, a biological boundary between peoples, should be stocked by men "willing to sacrifice and fight, whose highest aim in life is to settle the new soil and take root in it."<sup>18</sup> These warrior-farmers (*Wehrbauern*) would spurn "compromises and ... half-measures" as they prosecuted Germany's mission in the East.<sup>19</sup> After the Soviet Union fell and the Allies sued for peace, the soldier would move on to his next role as a veteran who colonized and defended the Nazi East.

But in 1942 the Soviet Union doggedly resisted defeat, and the Allies jabbed at Germany wherever they could. The ideal settler still fought on the front line, and it was altogether unclear when he might become available for his next duty. As 1942 eclipsed into 1943 and military setbacks foreclosed utopic dreams, an opportunity presented itself. Rather than waiting for a successful conclusion of the war and the expected flood of settlement applications from able-bodied war veterans, disabled veterans could settle, hold the line as defenders of the East, and act as model Germans for the *Volksdeutsche*—at least until their able-bodied counterparts could arrive after the war. These men had all suffered physical impairments as a result of woundings in the First, but primarily the Second, World Wars. Nazi policy excluded men with known psychological wounds.<sup>20</sup> The veterans had all been released from the Wehrmacht and entered the pension system. The regime had, therefore, administratively labeled them as "disabled," a legal appellation with all the consequences in German society for men with amputated limbs, unseeing eyes, disfigured faces, the physical markers and visible memories of the ravages of war.<sup>21</sup> In the historiography, able-bodiedness—and what constituted able-bodiedness—is taken as a self-evident aspect of the Nazi masculine ideal. Nazi propaganda claimed as much in its numerous pictures and films, which contrasted whole, complete, and beautiful "healthy bodies" with broken, dirty, and macabre "disabled bodies." But when the SS began drawing up the disabled veteran settlement application process, their careful work to delineate standards of racial heritage, personality characteristics, fertility, and able-bodiedness produced a vision of the ideal settler that differed markedly from the ideal soldier. After all, the social profile of the Wehrmacht as a conscript army cut across all the divides of German society; though

<sup>15</sup> Markus Leniger, *Nationalsozialistische "Volkstumsarbeit" und Umsiedlungspolitik, 1933–1945. Von der Minderheitenbetreuung zur Siedlerauslese* (Leipzig: Frank & Timme, 2011); Gerhard Wolf, *Ideologie und Herrschaftsrationalität. Nationalsozialistische Germanisierungspolitik in Polen* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012); Maria Fiebrandt, *Auslese für die Siedlergesellschaft. Die Einbeziehung Volksdeutscher in die NS-Erbgesundheitspolitik im Kontext der Umsiedlung, 1939–1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> "Table Talk 24: 25 September 1941, midday," in Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's Table Talk*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> "Table Talk 24: 25 September 1941, midday," in Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's Table Talk*, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Theodor Oberländer, "Völkische Sozialpolitik und unsere Ostaufgabe," *Deutsche Monatshefte. Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Gegenwart des Ostdeutschtums* 7, no. 9–10 (1941): 365.

<sup>19</sup> Oberländer, "Völkische Sozialpolitik und unsere Ostaufgabe," 369.

<sup>20</sup> The literature on Nazi policy toward psychologically disabled veterans is now quite voluminous. For a brief introduction to veterans' experiences, see Jason Crouthamel, "Nervous Nazis: War Neurosis, National Socialism and the Memory of the First World War," *War and Society* 21, no. 2 (2003); Jason Crouthamel, *The Great War and German Memory: Society, Politics and Psychological Trauma, 1914–1945* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009), 189–219.

<sup>21</sup> This relates to the social process of becoming disabled rather than equating physical impairment with disability. What is considered disabled varies temporally, spatially, and is situationally dependent. See Lennard J. Davis, "Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–16; Colin Barnes, "Understanding the Social Model of Disability: Past Present, and Future," in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. Nick Watson et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), 12–29.

all these men had fought in the Nazi project for supremacy, though all had sacrificed their corporeal wholeness in this pursuit, though all had occupied the role of soldier, settlement standards deemed many unfit to help bring about the utopic German future in the East. Matthew Stibbe has noted that “there are some limits to what gender can explain, especially as the Third Reich prioritized race over gender when it came to reordering German and European society.”<sup>22</sup> The Nazis sought not soldiers, the ostensible masculine ideal, but rather *German* soldiers who would be able-bodied *enough* to settle the East.

### Idealizing the Disabled Racial Colonist (1942)

The order to settle the war-disabled came as Nazi Germany approached its territorial zenith and as Himmler began to speak of a greater Germanic Reich rather than merely a greater German Reich. The settlement of disabled veterans paved the way for an empire of Germanic blood (*germanisches Blut*) under German leadership (*deutsche Führung*), the selection of all Nordic-Germanic blood throughout Europe.<sup>23</sup> Himmler set the plan in motion on August 10, 1942, when he signed General Order 14/IV, the Preferential Settlement of the War-Disabled, War-Disabled of the World War, Fighters of the National Uprising, and Their Surviving Family Members in the Newly Acquired Areas of the German Reich.<sup>24</sup> Himmler circulated the order to the highest Reich authorities on September 14 and noted that he would begin drawing up detailed regulations for settlement operations and the application procedure.<sup>25</sup> On October 19, 1942, the order officially appeared across the Reich and announced that farmland and its mobile properties had been earmarked for disabled veterans in the incorporated eastern territories, Lower Styria, Upper Carniola, and Alsace-Lorraine.<sup>26</sup> Local and regional occupation authorities, the Wehrmacht, and Hermann Göring’s Main Trustee Office for the East (*Haupttreuhandstelle Ost*) all played roles in finding applicants and divvying up space for them in the East. Himmler tasked the RKFDV with finding suitable farms and jobs for the settlers and coordinating with other agencies that took part in the process. The SS retained final approval on matters of racial fitness. The euphoria caused by the wide-scale destruction of reeling Soviet forces led to visions of massive territorial aggrandizement but also the possibility of precisely shaping the population that would people these spaces.

Accompanying the order were guidelines for the arduous process of applying for settlement, which included a time-intensive evaluation to racially certify settlers’ Germanness that operated against eagerness to expedite settlement. In the *Altreich*, the Nazi regime relied on the self-mobilization of ordinary Germans to investigate their family genealogies and to prove their racial membership in the *Volksgemeinschaft*.<sup>27</sup> Some undesired members, however, fell through the cracks. Records of descent might be incomplete; genealogies could be falsified. Thus, even for married applicants, the marriage certificate of hereditary health proved insufficient. Officials also rejected both the Aryan certificate (*Ariernachweis*), though it certified a German to work as officials of the government, and the Greater Aryan certificate (*Großer Ariernachweis*), proof enough for SS membership, as sufficient demonstration of

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Stibbe, “In and Beyond the Racial State: Gender and National Socialism, 1933–1955,” *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* 13, no. 2 (2012): 159.

<sup>23</sup> Heinemann, “Rasse, Siedlung, deutsches Blut,” 419.

<sup>24</sup> Heinrich Himmler, Allgemeine Anordnung Nr. 14/IV über die bevorzugte Seßhaftmachung von Kriegsverehrten, Kriegsdienstbeschädigten des Weltkrieges, Kämpfern der Nationalen Erhebung sowie deren Hinterbliebenen in den neuerworbenen Gebieten des Deutschen Reiches, August 10, 1942, in Bundesarchiv (BArch) NS 6/338.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from the Office of the Reichsführer-SS to the Highest Reich Authorities, September 14, 1942, in BArch R 2/13919.

<sup>26</sup> NSDAP Party Chancellory, Rundschreiben Nr. 161/42, October 19, 1942, in BArch NS 6/338.

<sup>27</sup> This process is best documented in Eric Ehrenreich, *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

suitability for settlement in the East. Some Germans might descend from the proper genetic lineage, yet still not manifest a true German character. The East would not suffer from these problems. The East offered the chance to rejuvenate the desiccating German race, or even to build it anew. Only the settlement certificate (*Ansiedlungsschein*) testified to an applicant's racial fitness and appropriate character. The thorough examinations required to award the certificate fell within the domain of SS experience and expertise; the SS would attempt to gatekeep the new lands from the very beginning.

Though the SS never attained absolute power to do so, Himmler strove to secure the organization's position against all other authorities in the incorporated territories. On August 4, 1942, less than a week before Himmler signed the order to settle the war-disabled, the SS Race and Settlement Main Office made its position clear that typical party leaders such as the gauleiters should have no authority over the process of selecting settlers.<sup>28</sup> Settlement was primarily a matter of blood, not economics, nor could the East become a breeding ground for political nepotism. Two days later, the RKFDV circulated a memo that war-disabled settlers would require an *Ansiedlungsschein* like other hopeful applicants. The war-disabled occupied a special position as a select group of early settlers in the East. Nevertheless, membership in the Wehrmacht, tenacious fighting against Germany's foes, the loss of their able-bodiedness, none of this qualified the veteran to settle. A veteran's military achievements might qualify him for other perquisites regarding the approval or disapproval of his application or concerning the plot of land the settlement office awarded him. But at the root of the entire process stood the racial and hereditary biology examination.<sup>29</sup> On August 10, 1942, Himmler signed the general order expanding the requirement of an *Ansiedlungsschein* for acquiring ownership of industrial enterprises, urban real estate, and to establish new businesses in the eastern territories.<sup>30</sup> Himmler hoped to stymie the proxy acquisition of property by unvetted Germans in the *Altreich*. Other means existed and other authorities granted favors in the plundering of the East, but the SS constantly attempted—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—to expand its authority in its bid to ensure that the new territories were appropriately racially molded.

The General Order for Preferential Settlement of Disabled Veterans outlined a deceptively straightforward process for applicants. Four of the five requirements for acquiring the settlement certificate referred to either political acceptability, such as the low hurdle that their district NSDAP leader declared no objection to their settlement and that their military representative had approved the applicant, or to the fact that the applicant himself desired to settle by verifying that he had no professional or personal reservations. Buried between these low-bar requirements, however, was the stipulation that “the applicant and his family meet the health requirements imposed on settlement applicants.”<sup>31</sup> For public consumption, SS settlement authorities tended to couch racial and hereditary issues under the broader and innocuous-sounding heading of “health.” To the SS, sacrificing one's body in the Wehrmacht—a conscript army without thorough racial entry requirements—did not in itself prove one's racial worthiness. But forthrightly proclaiming this fell outside the bounds of political acceptability among the German public. Himmler refused to yield on the issue of disabled veterans requiring a settlement certificate—and thus also being subject to the racial examination.

On the surface, the settlement application appeared little different from other bureaucratic forms. Applicants filled out their names and those of their spouse and children, along with their current place of residence.<sup>32</sup> Unknown to many applicants, however, some fields were of particular importance. Unrelated professions might disqualify an

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Chief of Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt (RuSHA) to RKFDV Staff Chief SS-Gruppenführer Greifelt, August 4, 1942, in BArch 49/234.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Greifelt to Himmler, August 6, 1942, in BArch 49/234.

<sup>30</sup> Himmler, General Orders 15/III and 16/III, August 10, 1942, in BArch 49/234.

<sup>31</sup> Himmler, General Order 14/IV, August 10, 1942, in BArch NS 6/338.

<sup>32</sup> Office of the Reichsführer-SS and RKFDV, Sample Settlement Certificate Application, in “Erste Durchführungsbestimmung zu der Allgemeinen Anordnung Nr. 15/III,” May 5, 1943, in BArch R 69/600.

applicant in a process that favored farmers. The marriage status of the applicant proved crucial, at least in theory, as did the number of one's children—proof of procreative ability. Other fields spoke to future issues that might arise in constructing the East, but that would mostly be shelved in the name of expediency. Religious confession appeared on the form, but the SS was in no position in 1942–1943 to attempt religious ideological conformity. Likewise, membership in the NSDAP mattered little. Military achievements, especially those related to bravery, might play a large part in an application, but the prospective settler's military disability, despite the expected rigors involved in settling and farming the East, mattered surprisingly little, provided the veteran could find a way to work the land properly.

Perhaps most important at this stage were the photographs of the prospective settler and each family member over the age of six who were attached to the application. A disfigured face from war wounds would present no problems. In fact, the regime might prefer these men in the sparsely populated East rather than remain in the *Altreich* as highly visible reminders of the war's toll. Much more importantly, if SS administrators could not place the family members into general racial categories of how a German should look, the application would be dead in the water. If, however, the application passed this first hurdle, the SS arranged a "health examination" at the applicant's residence. Family members would be examined at the same time. The SS settlement representative processing the application would then contact local health authorities to inquire whether the applicant or any of his family members had any known adverse health or hereditary issues. If the SS found no derogatory information here, the SS administrator determined the outcome of the application. For favorable outcomes, the administrator attempted to place the applicant in the region he desired. Special exceptions might be made if the settler were a repatriate, for example, if Poles had confiscated his or his ancestor's heritable property after the First World War.

Once the SS had hammered out the settlement procedure with local civilian agencies and the OKW, the application process generally proceeded smoothly, though slowly. The racial examination proved to be the hitch in the *Ansiedlungsschein* process. Too often the "scientific racial examiners" conducted nothing more than a character exam.<sup>33</sup> Examiners reduced biological racial characteristics to such qualities as body shape, head length, eye wrinkle formation, cheekbone development, hair texture and waviness, eye and skin color, and the ambiguous and possibly dangerous category of "unusual abnormalities" such as "traits of non-European foreign races."<sup>34</sup> In lieu of scientific certainty, examiners often relied on what they considered proxies of racial biology: character. Even the choice to examine applicants in their place of residence was merely a ruse to inspect the living conditions of the family, to check for proper German cleanliness and behavior, and to ensure that it manifested itself outside the public spotlight. Examiners could not pass up a chance to survey the domesticity of the wife. The wife played a vital role in home life within Nazi ideology but occupied an especially important role for prospective settlers. From a practical standpoint, she "has to manage the settler's place to a greater extent due to the reduced operational capacity of the war-disabled person."<sup>35</sup> Was she financially thrifty, or had she frittered away her husband's income on trinkets around the house? Fertility also played a large part in the value of the settler's wife. A large brood of children would prove this worth but, in the absence of such clear biological proof, physical characteristics of her body indicating fecundity might, in conjunction with a properly ordered and cleaned house, suffice. But the eastern project always focused not on individual, isolated settlers, but building communities in the East that were committed to fostering the *Volksgemeinschaft*. It was the disabled veteran's duty to participate in and physically aid this community. The same was true within the

<sup>33</sup> Koehl, *RKF DV*, 177.

<sup>34</sup> Sample Settlement Certificate Application, in BArch R 69/600. For background racial hygiene and the selection of *Volksdeutsche* settlers, See Fiebrandt, *Auslese für die Siedlergesellschaft*, 439–556.

<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Habel, "Die Ansiedlung von Kriegsbeschädigten," (PhD diss., University of Leipzig, 1940), 24.

household itself, where the veteran might falter through his impairment. His wife and children needed to pick up the slack. Authorities expected the settler and every member of his family to strive to become comrades within the community and promote the “disappearance of social antagonisms between the settlers.”<sup>36</sup> Authorities expected them to contribute just as much as any family without a disabled head of the family. Once the disabled veteran’s wife acquainted herself with life in the East, she would be free to occupy a larger role within the community. Plentiful opportunities existed to build the community for veterans’ wives: serving as female models for *Volksdeutsche* women as to how a proper German woman acted, cleaned, and managed a household; teaching language skills to *Volksdeutsche* who might require refinement or extensive training; and the *NS-Frauenschaft* alerted wives to other opportunities to help build the community.<sup>37</sup> Young girls aided in the *Bund deutscher Mädel* and boys in the *Hitlerjugend* taught *Volksdeutsche* children how to grow up properly German.<sup>38</sup> The Nazi East required the best available material and SS examiners, at least in the beginning, sought to ensure that only the best made it through the process.

But arduous processes that used fuzzy criteria slowed down the settlement process at a time when Himmler and other Nazi leaders urged it forward at full speed. Occasionally, hectic, poly-cratic governing hampered the screening process. Both Erich Koch, Reichskommissar of the Ukraine, and Göring’s numerous economic agencies interfered with the SS’s process because in later 1942 and 1943, the war effort and its demands took precedence over settlement.<sup>39</sup> For the most part, however, the examination procedure simply took too long. While SS planners in April 1942 had argued for the most thorough examinations possible to ensure racial purity in the East, by February 1943 reality had begun to set in and objections about the arduous procedure arose.<sup>40</sup> It took until May 1944 for the SS to loosen regulations, and even then it did not significantly speed up the process. Men who had applied for and received a new farmer’s license (*Neubauernschein*) from the *Reichsnährstand* could dispense with the eastern settlement racial examination.<sup>41</sup> That certificate process also examined the applicant’s and the applicant’s family’s racial and mental attributes.<sup>42</sup> The SS’s decision avoided two lengthy examinations, but likely benefited few disabled veterans, a group less likely to approach the settlement application through the *Reichsnährstand* rather than the numerous avenues available to veterans and those soon to be released from service in the Wehrmacht.

Although the Wehrmacht and SS designated officers specifically to alerting veterans to opportunities in the East, the Reich’s main propaganda offices played the role of advertiser. The regime sought exemplary men who would conceal the gap between the able-bodied veteran and his disabled substitute. The propaganda machine found this man in twenty-six-year-old infantry lieutenant Gerhard Hein, winner of the distinguished Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross for combat on the eastern front in 1942. An article in the *Strassburger Neueste Nachrichten* announced that Hein was one of fifty disabled veterans who had settled in the Warthegau as of October 1942, a vanguard of the 20,000 expected shortly after the conclusion of the war. The regime invested in the story, hoping for a large return in the form of additional settler applicants—the property was valued at 100,000 RM and was a far grander settlement than any other nonnoble or non-high-ranking disabled veteran received.<sup>43</sup> Gerhard Hein’s stint as a *Wehrbauer* did not last long. It’s likely it never began at all because by the time he received the property, the Hitler Youth had already

<sup>36</sup> Habel, “Die Ansiedlung von Kriegsbeschädigten,” 9–10.

<sup>37</sup> See Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East*.

<sup>38</sup> Caroline Mezger, “Entangled Utopias: The Nazi Mobilization of Ethnic German Youths in the Batschka, 1930s–1944,” *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 1 (2016): 87–117.

<sup>39</sup> Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941–1945*, 291.

<sup>40</sup> “Remarks on War-Disabled,” February 11, 1943, in BArch R 11/464.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from RuSHA Obersturmbahnführer to RuS-Hauptamt Stabsführung Berlin, May 22, 1944, in BArch NS 47/25.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Siemens, *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler’s Brownshirts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 223.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Buddrus, *Totale Erziehung für den totalen Krieg. Hitlerjugend und nationalsozialistische Jugendpolitik* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2003), 212.



appointed him the Reich Inspector of Military Training Camps. Hein's short stint on his farm did not impede the propaganda office from milking the story nearly a year later after Hein had already moved on to his next assignment. Gauleiter Arthur Greiser celebrated the anniversary of the Wartheland's "liberation from Polish rule" with lavish celebrations and rallies, culminating in a ceremony in which he officially and personally handed the settlement farm to Hein.<sup>44</sup> The propaganda ministry exploited the occasion in visual media in the weekly newsreel *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*.<sup>45</sup> Hein and his dutiful wife toured the extensive premises surrounded by a coterie of military men and Warthegau officials, before the veteran smartly saluted Gresier and accepted the property transfer. Dozens of Hitler Youth boys and Bund Deutscher Mädel girls in precise rows and columns flanked the ceremony in precise rows and served as an honor guard, but also as a symbol of the Nazis' generational ambitions—Hein's cohort had conquered the east and the next would need to emulate them to defend and preserve it. Another newspaper, *Der Führer*, took the opportunity to gain propaganda points with the Hein story and quoted Greiser's speech calling for a settled East won by the sword, tilled by the plow, and manned by farmers who carried a sharp sword.<sup>46</sup> As so often occurred with disabled veterans in Nazi propaganda, the newspaper text merely mentioned his disabled status while photos and newsreels showed no sign of any physical disability. Hein looked clean and whole in his crisp Wehrmacht uniform. The Nazis proclaimed that men with pioneer spirits had answered the call to strike out east.

Despite media coverage, by November 1942, the expected initial flood of applications had not materialized. Long-time NSDAP member Werner Wächter in the propaganda ministry proposed a change of tack.<sup>47</sup> Rather than relying on Wehrmacht and SS settlement liaison officers to peddle the East to any soldier willing to listen, glossy pictures showing the lure of the East might appeal more. The Propaganda Ministry ordered 8,000 copies of "*Deutscher Osten—Land der Zukunft*" ("German East—Land of the Future"), a pamphlet conveniently published earlier that year and edited by Hitler's official photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann. Marketed as a Christmas gift from the regime, the small initial print run targeted wounded soldiers recuperating in military hospitals or awaiting discharge from the military due to disability. Wächter hoped that the former would keep the East in mind while awaiting the successful conclusion of the war, while the latter could immediately apply due to the law granting preference in settlement for disabled veterans.

Goebbels's preface provided some celebrity power to the brochure. The propaganda minister posited a break with the recent imperial and democratic past. The East, he claimed, "is no longer a dumping ground for civil servants and officers who failed in the Reich, no longer an experimental ground for new economic theories, no longer a punishment for short-sighted authorities."<sup>48</sup> Rather, the East beckoned the most intelligent and the strongest of spirit. German blood had always rejuvenated the East culturally and materially, even as lesser races ate away at the edges. The sword, the plough, and German technocratic methods combined to bridge a storied past with a future of plentiful sustenance, peace, and "a rich and inexhaustible German cultural life."<sup>49</sup> In line after line, the brochure intimated a material, grounded reconnection with the past through resettlement on land nourished by German blood and cultural achievements over the centuries. Teutonic Knights had begun colonizing the East Prussian provinces 800 years before and German warriors had defended the Upper Silesia region a century later.<sup>50</sup> The glorious distant past starkly contrasted with

<sup>44</sup> "Bereits über 60000 Familien im Wartheland angesiedelt. Drei Jahre Reichsgau Wartheland—Existenzgrundlage für 20000 Frontkämpfer," *Strassburger Neueste Nachrichten*, October 25, 1942.

<sup>45</sup> *Die Deutsche Wochenschau*, episode 686, aired 1943.

<sup>46</sup> "Bauernhof für einen Eichenlaubträger. Ausdruck des Dankes der Heimat an die Front—Jedem Kriegsteilnehmer seine Existenzgrundlage," *Der Führer*, October 24, 1943, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Werner Wächter to Minister of Propaganda, November 18, 1942, in BAArch R 55/907.

<sup>48</sup> Heinrich Hoffmann, ed., *Deutscher Osten. Land der Zukunft* (Munich: Heinrich Hoffmann Verlag, 1942), n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*.

<sup>50</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*, 17, 108.

recent history; the Treaty of Versailles had wreaked havoc in East Prussia, and dilapidated Polish huts dotted the landscape in the Warthegau.<sup>51</sup> The future of German colonization would escort those shabby huts into a “bygone era,” and clean German villages would spring up throughout the Gau. The largest dam on the continent, currently under construction at Lake Rożnów, would bring German “engineering and ingenuity” to the culture-less General Government.<sup>52</sup> The brochure painted a picture of Polish decay interrupting a long history—and a long future—of German culture and order.

The brochure presented an East that held prospects for everybody, a land of opportunity that, no matter the disposition or preferences of the settler, a settlement region existed that would fulfill him and his family. High-quality images depicted flowing waves of wheat surrounding quaint West Prussian farmhouses and large tracts of tilled farmland. Spaced between bucolic agricultural images appeared crowds greeting the Führer astride his gleaming Mercedes triumphantly bearing him into Danzig, industrious German construction workers erecting docks branded the “Gateway to the East,” and towering power lines spanned not just the distance across the region, but bridged premodern and modern life. These images conveyed to the prospective farmer-settler that he could enjoy the open spaces of rural life, but also take his family on a weekend jaunt to a more sophisticated and urban setting when the mood struck. Pictures of the General Government communicated the opposite. Little German culture existed there and only the sword could instill it. The introductory image of this section showed three Wehrmacht soldiers hoisting a massive German flag at the peak of a building dominating Cracow’s sweeping vista. In other photographs, imposing German buildings loomed over people and cars and Cracow University’s memorial claimed Nicolaus Copernicus, a man with ideas on the largest scale, for the German occupation. Giant dams tamed broad rivers and giant tractors domesticated vast fields. Three Wehrmacht soldiers, actively engaged in combat during the Polish campaign accompanied the reader through the close of the section with a final exhortation that swords had conquered this land and opened the way for the German destiny, so that settlers could become tomorrow’s soldiers.<sup>53</sup> The General Government was a place where Germany, figuratively and literally, must tower over all else.

While Danzig and West Prussia allowed a settler to remain comfortable with German amenities and the General Government spoke to those hoping for the continuation of a soldier’s life, the Wartheland was a traveler’s last true stop before the German border.<sup>54</sup> Here was a region for those wishing to work hard and order a land beset by “laziness, softness, cowardice, and disloyalty ... the Polish lack of culture.”<sup>55</sup> Photos show industrious German men in business suits and farmer trainees learning to operate modern farm equipment. A stern but caring teacher instructed a smiling group of young Germans on their place in the new order and afterward the students enjoyed an excursion in the vast expanses of nature. The industrious settler could make this “German land for eternity,” he could be the “*Wehrbauer* in the German East.” This, however, was not enough, for “there are still numerous foreigners living on this ancient German soil. If the new German East is to become German land for eternity, then the features of its face must also be unadulteratedly German.” The editor exhorted the future *Wehrbauer* that “in every hour of his day he must at the same time be a soldier of the German people, ready for action.”<sup>56</sup>

The original brochures made their way to 2,400 military hospitals, which meant that each hospital acquired only three or four copies—far fewer than demand apparently warranted. Four months after the initial order for *Deutscher Osten*, and two months since the beginning of its distribution, the propaganda ministry ordered a much larger print-run of 30,000

<sup>51</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*, 17, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*, 134.

<sup>53</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*, 143.

<sup>54</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*, 58.

<sup>55</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Hoffmann, *Deutscher Osten*, 81.

copies—a not-inconsiderable number for a 145-page brochure of photographs on glossy paper in the latter half of the war when paper and ink shortages afflicted the regime.<sup>57</sup> Although the second print-run was large by the standards of March 1943, the number of military hospitals speaks to the numbers of wounded and newly disabled men confronting the regime. Settlement officers expectantly awaited responses from the hundreds of thousands of wounded, the tens of thousands of disabled. As late as December 1943, officials in Litzmannstadt expected a possible influx of 30,000 applications from the war-disabled.<sup>58</sup> It was wishful thinking.

The settlement application, the propaganda surrounding Gerhard Hein, and *Land der Zukunft* all spoke to different audiences. The application represented the culmination of the SS's vision of the racial structure that Germany would build in the East. Social divisions and racial problems endemic in Germany would not find their way to the utopic East, and so planners baked in racial purity and "proper German character" from the beginning. They were hopeful that coverage of Gerhard Hein might lead some disabled veterans to apply, but newsreels and photos provided comforting images and information for audiences back home. Where the Weimar Republic had spurned its disabled veterans, the Third Reich cared for them and provided them the means to become productive Germans once again. *Land der Zukunft* invited wounded soldiers and disabled veterans to imagine themselves ruling the spaces that had claimed their able-bodiedness. The East offered these men unlimited opportunities, provided that they were willing to represent Germandom. All these publications, however, evoked an image of the disabled veteran as a man who could use his military experience and his remaining able-bodiedness to rejoin the Nazi project, remain a member of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and find fulfillment in his life.

### Compromised Bodies, Contested Ideology (1943–1944)

Propaganda attracted few of the tens of thousands of disabled veterans that began returning to Germany by the beginning of 1943. Records tracking the number of disabled veterans who successfully settled across the East remain impossible to verify as many offices dispensed with reporting actual settlement numbers in favor of disclosing either total applicants or applicants successfully selected through the SS process but who had yet to settle. Reporting the number of applicants boosted numbers to make settlement appear more attractive and was considered proof that the regime provided opportunities for disabled veterans. The *Strassburger Neueste Nachrichten* went this route when they reported in July 1943 that the settlement offices were currently processing 1,000 applications. This was an amount far larger than the number of applicants who would both pass the racial/character examination and for whom the regime could scrape up plots of land.<sup>59</sup> Reporting of unsettled selected applicants hid the difficulties the RFKDV encountered finding suitable land. Disabled veterans applied in far lower numbers than the SS expected and the paucity of applicants compromised the SS's ability to sift through and find the "true racial pioneers" that fit the extensive list of racial, physical, and behavioral criteria.

The most comprehensive remaining records of successful settlements come from the SS Settlement Staff in the district of Soldau in East Prussia. The office began to track disabled veterans as an independent category of settlers in 1943 and by June, 205 had settled along with their 394 family members.<sup>60</sup> After a large initial influx of backlogged settlers in the first three months of the year, the next three months saw only 21 disabled veterans and 42 family members settle. One year later, on June 30, 1944, the total number had grown by no more

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Werner Wächter to Propaganda Minister, March 17, 1943, in BArch R 55/907.

<sup>58</sup> "Remarks on Guidelines for Employment of War-Disabled," December 1, 1943, in BArch R 49/1269.

<sup>59</sup> "Vergebung von Bauernhöfen an Kriegsversehrte. Einweisung der ersten Kriegsversehrten im Reichsgau Wartheland," *Strassburger Neueste Nachrichten*, July 9, 1943, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Author calculated data from statistics located in BArch R 49/306.

than 145 disabled veterans and their 271 family members.<sup>61</sup> Greater precision is impossible because the district office switched to tracking “scheduled” settlers rather than those who had actually planted themselves in an eastern colony. Based on either set of numbers, though, the average number of children per family never exceeded one, a stark discrepancy with the desired four children per *kinderreich* family the SS hoped to attract. Convincing veterans focused on reclaiming their daily lives and managing disability to strike out east proved a difficult task. Convincing many men who had three or four children to do so, given the evidence from district Soldau, at least, proved impossible. Furthermore, the number of confirmed, settled *Volksdeutsche* dwarfed the amount of disabled veterans and their families. The two most common categories in Soldau were the Narew Germans (*Narewdeutschen*) and the Lithuanian Germans (*Litauendeutschen*) at 4,383 and 3,801 people, respectively.<sup>62</sup> Disabled veterans and their family members were spread thinly across the East, hardly forming the kind of fortified garrisons of Germandom the regime had envisioned.

Not only did most veterans prefer to stay in urbanized Germany rather than settle in the East, a substantial portion of those who did apply for colonization favored urban settlement over the life of a *Wehrbauer*. At times, obvious reasons intruded. The case of veteran Ernst Alex exemplifies some of the restrictions that veterans and settlement officers faced. Ernst Alex, a twenty-seven-year-old former sergeant from Kassel, had proven his battlefield courage crewing armored artillery vehicles against the Soviets and won the coveted Knight’s Cross. But his wounding resulted in the amputation of both legs, and even with the help of his wife and children, he could not become a *Wehrbauer*. Instead, after a course provided by the Reich Chamber of Film, Alex would settle in Posen to run a theater.<sup>63</sup> Much more worrisome for a regime that intended to de-urbanize the East, was that obtaining a business there appealed to veterans more than becoming a *Wehrbauer*, as evidenced by more than 10,000 applications to do so by the beginning of 1942—ten times more than applications to become farmers.<sup>64</sup> This stark discrepancy did not translate into comparable settlement ratios, but it still influenced the demography of disabled veterans in the East. In East Prussia in early 1943, settlement authorities assigned 56 percent of disabled veterans to cities to assume non-agricultural professions.<sup>65</sup> A year later the portion had only dropped to 51 percent.<sup>66</sup> The relatively high number of urban settlers can be attributed both to the regime’s practical need for labor productivity and the preferences of veterans themselves.

Settlement officers in charge of approving applications found themselves in a unique—and often frustrating—position as they tried to select the men who would play the role of German racial paragons. Aligning precise racial-hygienic boundaries to men whose own corporeal boundaries defied uniformity hounded officials’ ambitions throughout the settlement period. Apart from lengthy bureaucratic procedures, fundamental questions plagued the settlement process: What counted as a properly earned, war-related disability? And of those who had one, who should be allowed to settle? Planners wrangled with these questions in numerous and sometimes acrimonious debates. Although it was obvious that German soldiers had conquered with the sword, this achievement was not proof-positive that the soldier had what it took to wield the plough on newly conquered lands. Who had the strength to settle this land, to cultivate nature and tame it, to bring order to the space along German cultural lines? It was no easy task. Eastern researchers imagined broad swathes of Poland as consisting of little more than dead space where the Poles had been unwilling to or incapable of imprinting the land with engineering efforts that aimed to tame nature, or cultural

<sup>61</sup> Author calculated data from statistics located in BArch R 49/307.

<sup>62</sup> Author calculated data from statistics located in BArch R 49/307.

<sup>63</sup> “Großdeutschland sorgt für seine Kriegsversehrten,” *Der Führer*, December 11, 1942.

<sup>64</sup> Müller, *Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik*, 28–29.

<sup>65</sup> SS Ansiedlungsstab, “Soldau Settlement Statistics,” in BArch R 49/307.

<sup>66</sup> SS Ansiedlungsstab, “Soldau Settlement Statistics,” in BArch R 49/307.

achievements that signified they truly deserved the land. Hitler believed “the eastern frontier created a ‘sturdy stock’ that would prevent Germany sinking into ‘softness.’”<sup>67</sup> But how many “hard” Germans remained, after decades of urbanization and the Great War’s blood-letting? Settlement authorities answered this question when sorting through the large numbers of *Volksdeutsche* by rigorously sorting them into two broad groups: “those fit for the ‘racial struggle’ in Eastern Europe, and those who needed to be detained on traditional German soil for the foreseeable future, as they did not seem strong enough for racial competition with Poles, Jews and other hostile racial groups.”<sup>68</sup> In a twist of irony, then, the *Altreich* acquired those considered most racially weak, further diluting Germany’s blood, which simultaneously placed more necessity on racial success in the East.

For disabled veterans, reality tempered ideology when it came to deciding who should be allowed to settle in the East. Ideologically, settlement planners considered disabled veterans essential both as models of character for the *Volksdeutsche* and as experienced fighters to defend the land. Who counted as war-disabled became a thornier question. Disabled civilian bomb victims from the *Altreich* caused the most consternation.<sup>69</sup> Because they had been disabled through acts of war, Joseph Goebbels considered it propagandistically necessary to include them as preferred settlers.<sup>70</sup> Allied bombs devastated cities and produced homelessness, spreading disaffection across the home front. Propaganda that continuously droned on about the wondrous surplus of space that German soldiers conquered did not align with increasing numbers of homeless Germans huddled in cramped shelters. At least through mid-1943, administrators resoundingly rejected the settlement of bomb victims.<sup>71</sup> Far from Berlin in the Warthegau, however, an *Ostdeutscher Beobachter* article seemed to suggest that Gauleiter Arthur Greiser skirted the judgments and accepted bomb victims as settlers.<sup>72</sup> The wide latitude given to administrators in the East and the discrepant policies arising from them prompted a meeting to decide new guidelines specific to the Warthegau in October 1943. Warthegau propaganda could continue to boast that it housed homeless Germans but, in reality, authorities would authorize their settlement only in extremely rare circumstances. Apparently, skirting the rules had not worked out as previous “experience has already shown, these persons will as a rule try to return to their homes as soon as they have the opportunity to do so.”<sup>73</sup> The Warthegau would not become temporary housing for civilians preferring the comforts of the *Altreich*. It would, however, accept Germans dispossessed of their homes and farms during the interwar period (1918–1939) when Polish authorities confiscated Germans’ property.<sup>74</sup> These Germans posed little risk of absconding from the land at their first opportunity to leave for the *Altreich*.

Even among actual frontline soldiers disabled during combat, settlement authorities could not easily draw the line. The occurrence of borderline cases erupted into numerous debates and handwringing. The regime would not leave empty-handed non-Germans who aided the Wehrmacht but were subsequently left disabled through enemy action. But they could not apply to become settlers; rather, *Kriegsversehrtenheime* (homes for the war-

<sup>67</sup> David Blackburn, “The Conquest of Nature and the Mystique of the Eastern Frontier in Nazi Germany,” in *Germans, Poland, and Colonial Expansion to the East, 1850 through the Present*, ed. Robert L. Nelson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 155.

<sup>68</sup> Daniel Mühlenfeld, “Reich Propaganda Offices and Political Mentoring of Ethnic German Resettlers,” in *Heimat, Region, and Empire: Spatial Identities under National Socialism*, ed. Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann and Maiken Umbach (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 200.

<sup>69</sup> “Remarks on War-Disabled,” February 11, 1943, in BArch R 11/464.

<sup>70</sup> Müller, *Hitlers Ostkrieg und die deutsche Siedlungspolitik*, 38.

<sup>71</sup> “Remarks on War-Disabled,” February 11, 1943, in BArch R 49/2658.

<sup>72</sup> Petrucci, “Kriegsversehrte als Bauern im Wartheland.”

<sup>73</sup> Reichsstatthalter des Reichsgaues Wartheland, “Richtlinien für die Behandlung von Sonderfällen im Arbeitsausschuss für den Einsatz von Kriegsteilnehmern in Betriebe der gewerblichen Wirtschaft,” April 12, 1944, in BArch R 49/3137.

<sup>74</sup> Letter from RKFDV Wirtschaft Division to RKFDV Stabshauptamt in Berlin, June 2, 1942, in BArch 49/234.

wounded) and medical attendants would house and care for them for an unspecified length of time.<sup>75</sup> The case was different if the non-Germans were racially Germanic—after little debate, authorities answered this question affirmatively. In 1943, the question of disabled veterans with partial Polish ancestry remained open.<sup>76</sup> Could these men maintain the line of racial difference as Germans ruling over a helotized Polish population? Would they breed spiteful future generations that might seek revenge on their German overlords—the very reasoning used when considering the fates of Jewish children? The need for more settlers balanced precariously with concerns over racial quality concerning veterans whom the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (VoMi, the Coordination Center for Ethnic Germans) racial examiners had previously registered as Category 3, racially below average Germans.<sup>77</sup> The SS's VoMi compiled the *Deutsche Volksliste* to decide whether an ethnic German living outside the *Altreich* should be allowed to settle in the East, a privileged position belonging to those in Categories 1 and 2, or be sent back for closer observation and Germanization in the Reich for those in Categories 3 and 4.<sup>78</sup> The regime considered Category 3 and 4 Germans suitable for forced labor or conscription in the Wehrmacht. Settlement authorities would undoubtedly find themselves deciding whether a verified member of the German race who had lived in the East and had been disabled to win those lands in the East was suitable for settlement in those same lands. Authorities seem never to have answered this question. Practical issues of settling the East always vied with ideological and racial motivations.

Lacking more specific guidance, settlement authorities looked to Himmler to decide special cases. The impetus for publishing guidelines arose from the case of former platoon sergeant Kerrutt in March 1944, whom the Wehrmacht released from service in 1942 with a Class Two disability due to a head injury. His superiors rated his mental disposition and character traits as excellent and “judged his performance in combat as particularly exemplary and distinguished.” For his efforts, the Wehrmacht had awarded Kerrutt the Iron Cross Second Class, Iron Cross First Class, and the Infantry Assault Badge. He displayed “correct conduct and tireless enthusiasm” in his work in the timber trade after his discharge from the military and showed that, despite his disability, he could manage hard labor.<sup>79</sup> Kerrutt had also managed in 1942, unlike many other veterans disabled while single, to find and marry a woman. In every respect but one, Kerrutt appeared the ideal settler for the East and submitted his application at a time when the RKFDV struggled to find potential settlers. In the eyes of the SS, his flaw and the reason the RKFDV approached Himmler for a final decision arose from Kerrutt's homosexual behavior between 1932 and 1936. At the age of sixteen, Kerrutt allegedly entered a “strong relationship of dependence” with an older man. For the next two years, Kerrutt engaged in mutual masturbation and oral sex with multiple men before spending the next two years exclusively with a “considerably older man.” Under Paragraph 175, Germany's notorious anti-homosexuality law, judges sentenced Kerrutt to nine months in prison in January 1937, though he was released early for good behavior. His excellent conduct and achievements as a soldier prompted the removal of the sentence from his criminal record; it is unclear whether Kerrutt had disclosed on his settlement application about his incarceration or the RKFDV discovered it during their own thorough examinations. Himmler ruled on the case quickly and in line with the prevailing sentiment in the SS that only a minority of men guilty of homosexual acts were

<sup>75</sup> Letter from Health Department of Reichskommissar für das Ostland to Reichskommissar für das Ostland in Riga, November 30, 1943, in BArch R 92/670.

<sup>76</sup> “Remarks on War-Disabled,” February 11, 1943, in BArch R 49/2658.

<sup>77</sup> “Remarks on War-Disabled,” February 11, 1943, in BArch R 49/2658.

<sup>78</sup> Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, 191.

<sup>79</sup> “Remarks on Issuance of Settlement Certificate Despite Behavior in Violation of Paragraph 175,” March 1, 1944, in BArch R 49/3137.

incorrigible and that most were victims of seduction.<sup>80</sup> In this case, Himmler noted that Kerrutt had committed the offenses at a young age and that recidivism seemed unlikely. The RKFDV, he continued, should award the veteran an *Ansiedlungsschein*—after a few years and only if he continued to conduct himself properly, a condition of which was successfully begetting two children with his wife.<sup>81</sup> Himmler's hysteria over homosexuality aside, the decision accorded with the broader notion of the disabled veteran settler as a model for other settlers, particularly the *Volksdeutsche*. Behaviors and character traits could infect a population, much as Himmler believed homosexuality stemmed mostly from contagious contraction from the "truly incorrigible." The East would not suffer an outbreak of homosexuality if Himmler could help it, and he ordered the RKFDV to forward any similar cases to him in the future.

The case spurred the enforcement of guidelines that settlement and Warthegau civilian authorities had preliminarily drawn up during the October 1943 meeting and, by April 1944, the policy clarifications relieved Himmler of much need for ruling on special cases. Pursuing racial demographic goals, unmarried applicants could receive a settlement certificate, but they would not be permitted to purchase their plot of land at the end of their initial lease unless they had found and married a suitable partner. For married, but childless applicants, the issue was slightly more complicated. Young potential settlers raised no objections because they had plenty of time to procreate. The inheritance issue was ideologically vital. The RKFDV must ensure that, if a male heir existed, whether he would live in the East with his parents or not, he must be physically capable of working the land and willing to inherit it. Exceptions would be made for applicants whose sons had all died, even if the birth of more sons was neither likely nor possible. In all cases, settlement authorities were obligated to give preference to married applicants with children. This served the practical needs of the veteran to work his farm, but most importantly the racial goal of populating the East with *kinderreich* families.

Contrary to the expectation that work in the East would be too arduous or impossible for the severely disabled veterans, the guidelines stipulated that those with the severest disabilities should not face rejection out of hand. This included those considered to have the worst war-related disability, the blind, and those with the most intractable disabilities, the cases of traumatic brain injury. The former category is not entirely surprising given Nazi decisions in social and cultural arenas. Although the blind had long been the most pitied of the war-disabled prior to 1933, the Nazis espoused their typical mantra of life as struggle and overcoming adversity.<sup>82</sup> The latter category, those with brain injuries, is surprising given the Nazis' intense distrust of anyone with potential psychological issues—and given the history of euthanizing psychologically disturbed veterans.<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, settlement selection officers tried to weed out any traumatic brain injury cases manifesting as apparent and noticeable psychoses. Besides, the settlement program needed all the men it could reasonably find, and there already existed examples of blind and brain-damaged veterans successfully settling. Ironically, at the late stage of the war in mid-1944, the RKFDV decided to award the *Ansiedlungsschein* to the severely disabled—who planners had previously considered unsuitable for the rigors of the East—and now decided against the Category 1 (*Stufe I*) disabled veterans, those at the lowest level of war-disability, but who had been found unable to fully participate in military action. These men should tour the East to cement their desire to colonize the East and authorities should award them the settlement certificate. Plans to settle

<sup>80</sup> Harry Oosterhuis, "Male Bonding and the Persecution of Homosexual Men in Nazi Germany," *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 17, no. 4 (1991): 30. See also Geoffrey Giles, "The Denial of Homosexuality: Same-Sex Incidents in Himmler's SS and Police," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1-2 (2002): 256-90.

<sup>81</sup> Letter from RKFDV to Gauleiter of Upper Silesia, April 7, 1944, in BArch R 49/3137.

<sup>82</sup> Though this did not spare the hereditarily blind from sterilization; Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, 85.

<sup>83</sup> See Roman Behrens, *Vernichtung lebensunwerter Soldaten? Die nationalsozialistische Militärpsychiatrie in der deutschen Kriegsmarine—das Beispiel Wilhelmshaven* (Oldenburg: Isensee, 2013).

them were shelved until the end of the war because they were likely to be called up for some kind of work duty to free available manpower for the front.<sup>84</sup> At the very end of the war, they might find themselves called up for *Volkssturm* duty.

The remainder of special cases pertained to racial or political liability. Much like in the Sergeant Kerrutt case, anyone with a criminal record would have his application thoroughly examined. The RKFDV expected few of these cases because almost all prison sentences disqualified men from service in the Wehrmacht. The Gau civil administration under Arthur Greiser pushed for and succeeded in acquiring a rescission clause in farmland purchase contracts to revoke the settlement of any man who, in their first five years in the East, committed an offense punishable with a prison sentence. The guidelines also finally handed down a verdict on those with Polish blood. Veterans received a negative response for consanguinity of less than four degrees; thus, even a Polish great grandparent was too closely related, an even harsher directive normally applied to Jews. Veterans related to Polish women through marriage could not receive the settlement certificate unless, once again, the familial affinity reached the fourth degree. Even such degrees of separation provoked settlement authorities' anxieties, and the settler could not reside in the same district as his or his spouse's relatives. Disabled veterans who had served in a foreign army presented no such problems; many foreign nations required compulsory military service, and men who lived outside the Reich would have had no choice but to serve a foreign power. Veterans disabled while knowingly and purposefully fighting against Germany in the Great War or the current war would be rejected unless there existed mitigating circumstances.<sup>85</sup> Throughout the guidelines, the drafters emphasized race: the racial attributes of the applicant and his family and their racial fecundity. Questions of political reliability tempered these concerns, but even here authorities, both civil and the SS, from lower-ranked administrators up to Gauleiter Greiser and Himmler, left the way open for exemptions due to mitigating circumstances. Only questions of race consistently provoked hard lines.<sup>86</sup>

The low number of applicants forced settlement authorities to partially abandon the ideals of 1942. Disabled veterans' preferences and the exigencies of war frustrated plans to de-urbanize the East. Racial purity of the veteran remained the strongest determinant for approving an application, but concessions were made to account for traces of Polish ancestry. Large numbers of *kinderreich* families never materialized, and officials had to content themselves with the hope that small families would prove more fertile in the future. For men like Sergeant Kerrutt, physical proof of fertility might allow one to reenter the ranks of idealized masculinity, something that even heroic soldiering could not accomplish. Perhaps most surprising are renegotiations of able-bodiedness and disability. Practical matters sometimes intervened to determine an applicant's fate along the lines of denial, urban settlement, or rural settlement. However, acceptance of blind veterans overturned a long history of pity and low expectations, and men with head injuries, so often subject to suspicion of mental instability or illness, were handed the reins to colonize the East. In the absence of able-bodied frontline veterans, despite the purported demands of the application and

<sup>84</sup> Reichsstatthalter des Reichsgaues Wartheland, "Richtlinien für die Behandlung von Sonderfällen im Arbeitsausschuss für den Einsatz von Kriegsteilnehmern in Betriebe der gewerblichen Wirtschaft," April 12, 1944, in BArch R 49/3137.

<sup>85</sup> Reichsstatthalter des Reichsgaues Wartheland, "Richtlinien für die Behandlung von Sonderfällen im Arbeitsausschuss für den Einsatz von Kriegsteilnehmern in Betriebe der gewerblichen Wirtschaft," April 12, 1944, in BArch R 49/3137.

<sup>86</sup> The sources are silent about Jews who Hitler sometimes declared "honorary Aryans" for exemplary bravery and success in combat. Perhaps this issue never arose because honorary entrance into the racial community did not extend to permission to join the NSDAP and, more importantly, did not grant authorization to own farmland, jealously guarded property reserved ideologically for "true" Aryans. Bryan Mark Rigg, "Hitler's Jewish Soldiers," in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 121–22.



examination process, and in apparent contradiction to propaganda, a motley group of disabled veterans *de facto* assumed the mantle of ideal racial colonist, if only for a brief time.

### Cataclysm (October 1944)

Neither for the intended purpose of becoming *Wehrbauern* nor as the economic expediency of business owners and industrial workers did disabled veterans make the impact in the East that the regime hoped they would. In July 1943, just as settlement got into full swing, manpower shortages began demanding the return of disabled *Waffen-SS* and *Ordnungspolizei* men who had settled in the Latvian agricultural sector. Rather than serving as *Wehrbauern*, these men were transferred to administrative and clerical positions throughout the Reich in agencies that conscription had hollowed out. The SS's commissioner general of Riga promised the men they would receive official certification for their experience so that it would count toward their agricultural apprenticeships and any agricultural vocational training they registered for after their return to the East after their service to the war effort ended.<sup>87</sup> Dreams of eastern settlement had not ended after Stalingrad, nor by the middle of 1943, as some disabled veterans began to return even as others settled.

Institutions continued to operate until Soviet soldiers plucked each hectare of colonial farmland away. The RKFDV and VoMi shuffled *Volksdeutsche* settlers farther west as security proved inadequate and the colonists "became targets for terrorist attacks, and ... partisan bands raided German settlements with impunity."<sup>88</sup> Resettlement (*Umsiedlung*) was now referred to as rehousing or relocation, but with more than a hint of "evacuation" (*Umquartierung*).<sup>89</sup> The SS gave up on using settled disabled veterans as protection for the *Volksdeutsche*, but these *Wehrbauern* and their families were not evacuated west with the *Volksdeutsche*. They would provide the rear-guard action of manning the border as the Soviets drove the Wehrmacht back. Some of the writing had been on the wall since October 1943 when Warthegau leaders had decided that *Stufe I*, the least disabled veterans, should not yet settle until after the war because they were likely to be recalled to some kind of service.<sup>90</sup> Some disabled veterans had already been called back to service mere months prior to that meeting. By October 1944, even more had been called back to service. The SS now scrambled to employ the *Wehrbauern* for one last combat mission in Danzig/West Prussia: to protect the wives and children on the farms of those disabled veterans who had been called up. Because it was only the lightly disabled who had been conscripted again, the SS hoped to employ the more severely disabled for this task. The SS claimed the disabled veterans would provide "economic care," but admitted that this would be unlikely, considering that, though they were mostly young men, they were all amputees who would be unable to provide much productive farm labor.<sup>91</sup> The SS requested a list of women most in need of economic care—but the designation was a circumlocution for physical security. A week later, the SS ordered the local agencies to provide the list immediately.<sup>92</sup> The dire military situation probably prompted the exhortation: the Soviets had captured the important city of Riga the day before, and on the day the letter was written Soviet forces began a major offensive to penetrate the borders of East Prussia itself. The local police leader listed twenty-four locations that needed the aid of a disabled veteran; only sixteen men were scraped together to provide the defense.<sup>93</sup> During the back and

<sup>87</sup> Letter from SS Commissioner General in Riga to Commissioner of the Mitau Area, July 14, 1943, in BArch R 91/202.

<sup>88</sup> Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, 197.

<sup>89</sup> Koehl, *RKFDV*, 174.

<sup>90</sup> "Guidelines for Special Cases for the Settlement of Reichsgau Wartheland," October 22, 1943, in BArch R 49/3137.

<sup>91</sup> Letter from RuSHA to Police Leader Weichsel, October 10, 1944, in BArch NS 47/42.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from RuSHA to Police Leader Weichsel, October 16, 1944, in BArch NS 47/42.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Police Leader Weichsel to RuSHA, November 1, 1944, in BArch NS 47/42; letter from SS Detachment XXXXI to Police Leader Weichsel, November 15, 1944, in BArch NS 47/42.

forth lasting more than a month, Wehrmacht forces temporarily stymied Soviet operations into the Polish colonies.

But many disabled veteran settlers had lost their farms to the encroaching Soviet army. Disabled SS man Jerke began a tour of the Gotenhafen region in northern Poland to find these men temporary work positions. Jerke was not picky and visited seven local firms and farms that might employ the men. All seven refused, citing lack of sleeping accommodations and the fact that they were already caring for other suffering men.<sup>94</sup> Others occasionally offered to lend a hand; a Director Lorenz offered forty positions for disabled Wehrmacht and SS veterans who had been driven from the East.<sup>95</sup> These forty positions would provide “training of the farmers to become managers in order to have effective specialists at hand when the East is regained.”<sup>96</sup> An interesting rationale at the end of October 1944. The men who had conquered the East, who had applied for and been selected to colonize it, were now refugees, beset by the forces over which they were to have reigned. Settling the East had come to an end.

Actual practice and implementation had ground roughly against ideology. The euphoria of victory in 1941 and 1942 elicited plans for the settlement of vast tracts of land in the East. But elusive military victory continually deferred constructing the living wall of able-bodied veterans with front-line experience. In fact, it was the military setbacks, the blood-letting in the Soviet Union, that both caused the problem and delivered its solution. Able-bodied veterans could not man the wall until victory over the Soviets; vicious warfare against the Soviets produced the disabled bodies that would garrison the East in the meantime. Yet, the more disabled bodies the war produced, the fewer able-bodied soldiers remained to win the war. Nazi Germany never managed to break the cycle. The inability to break the cycle resulted in much more than the substitution of able-bodied veterans with their disabled counterparts. Nazi ideology and propaganda advanced the soldier as the ideal masculine role for men. Yet the *Wehrmacht* was composed mostly of men conscripted from a pool of German citizens, including men of questionable political beliefs and, more perniciously, men whose blood might be tainted by Polish or even Jewish ancestry. Extensive racial examinations purportedly provided Nazi Germany with the ability to ensure the racial purity of the nascent, superior German race blooming in the East. Theoretically, the Nazis had a chance to sculpt the race as they saw fit. The able-bodied veteran with a record of proven soldierly deeds and a certificate of confirmed racial purity in hand—a veritable superman by Nazi standards—would become the model Germans that racial inferiors on the other side of the living wall would fear and that *Volksdeutsche* would emulate. As the atrocious feed-back loop cycled through, the regime opted for disabled veterans to assume the role of racial colonist, broken as they might be by Nazi body standards.

The substitution challenged Nazi ideology in profound ways, and the host of settlement authorities wrangled with one another to iron out the boundaries to decide which disabled veterans might assume the mantle of ideal racial colonist in the East. Demarcating racial boundaries resulted in disabled veterans with Polish ancestry being held up as model Germans to “full-blooded” *Volksdeutsche*. So long as the veterans did not have “too much” Polish blood. The confines of gender, sexuality, and masculinity shifted to include men who had previously been prosecuted for homosexual acts, as long as they married women and produced babies for the colonization effort. Able-bodiedness itself was redefined in the Eastern context as settlement authorities authorized men with brain trauma, blindness, or missing limbs to join the colonial project, provided that they contributed to the economic productivity and protection of the budding eastern *Volksgemeinschaft*. In lieu of able-bodied front-line veterans, all of these physically impaired men, men outside or on the fringes of

<sup>94</sup> Letter from Police Leader Weichsel to RuSHA, November 17, 1944, in BArch NS 47/42.

<sup>95</sup> “Aktenvermerk. Besichtigung der Dienststelle durch Hstuf. Hempel,” October 27, 1944, in BArch NS 47/42.

<sup>96</sup> “Aktenvermerk. Besichtigung der Dienststelle durch Hstuf. Hempel,” October 27, 1944, in BArch NS 47/42.

Nazi ideological acceptance, joined the utopian project as the racial colonist of the East. Nazi propaganda broadcast an ideological world of binaries: racially pure/impure, heterosexual/homosexual, and able-bodied/disabled. The realities and contingencies of war exposed the instability of these categories as Nazi officials scrambled to shore up the coherence of Nazi ideology and the legibility of its disabled veterans. Settlement officials exhorted disabled veterans to protect the women and children settlers marooned in a dying, ideological dream. Total defeat ended officials' struggles to find coherence, but for settlers the dream of colonization ended in a very real and material way in flight or bloodshed.

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