

# Dueling Book Review

## *SS Foreign Divisions & Volunteers of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, 1941-1945: Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives*

Reviewed by<sup>1</sup>  
CDR Vincent Bove  
U.S. Navy

The images held in most people's minds of the European Theater during World War II consists of landing crafts approaching the beaches of Normandy, soldiers marching through shelled cities in France and Germany, and emaciated and starving victims of the Nazi Party's "Final Solution." Few understand the cost and participation of nations beyond the big three of both belligerent sides. In *SS Foreign Divisions & Volunteers of Lithuania Latvia & Estonia, 1941-1945: Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives*, Ian Baxter, through limited words and previously uncollected images taken in the Baltics from 1941-1945, brings the story of the nations other than Germany and Italy who fought against the Allied Powers. The images provide a narrow view into the recruitment and services performed in the name of Nazi Germany by volunteers and conscripted soldiers and police officers from the three Baltic States throughout the war in Eastern Europe. Though all images are well captioned, Ian Baxter fails to tell a coherent story from the Nazi Invasion to the Russian liberation of Eastern Europe from German rule. He largely ignores the participation of all three nations in the Holocaust.

*SS Foreign Divisions and Volunteers* is a collection of photographs and propaganda

Reviewed by<sup>2</sup>  
Todd Healey  
U.S. Dept. of State

Pictures are worth a thousand words. In instances when words are unable to completely describe a situation, photographs may be priceless. Under such logic, Ian Baxter's *SS Foreign Divisions & Volunteers of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia 1941-1945: Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives* might be considered priceless. The book is part of the *Images of War* series and covers the German SS Foreign divisions of volunteers and conscripts from Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia during World War II. Baxter is a military historian and a prolific collector of war time photographs, which he uses to tell the horrific stories of war.

In *SS Foreign Divisions & Volunteers of Lithuania, Latvia & Estonia*, Baxter presents a series of photographs used by the German Wehrmacht for propaganda. During World War II the Germans were adept at using propaganda, particularly images, to manipulate populations to mobilize support from the Baltic states—since images convey information so readily. Baxter starts each chapter with a contextualizing explanation of how the German Wehrmacht eastward advance stalled because of Russian resistance. Within that context, Baxter's selection of images develops a narrative of German forces running out of basic supplies,

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taken by Nazi Germany photographers in the Baltic Region and the Eastern Front of World War II, starting with over 3 million German Soldiers attacking the Russian Red Army in the Baltics and ending with the surrendering of German forces in 1945. Each chapter begins with a few pages of context for the images that follow. Still, those pages lack the detail and analysis necessary to be taken as a serious history book. Notably, there are no citations or references to where the author is drawing his conclusions. Without sourcing, it is challenging to reach one of the author's most significant claims: Lithuania did not provide a National Legion of volunteers to the Nazis as both Latvia and Estonia did. The author comes off as apologetic for Lithuania, even though over 50,000 Lithuanians volunteered to serve in various German occupation forces. The images collected in the chapter dedicated to "Foreign Recruitment" are Latvian and Estonian soldiers. The reader is left to wonder if the author concluded that Lithuania did not participate on the Eastern Front because of a lack of images in the wartime archives or if there simply were not many photographers who captured Lithuanians in action east of the Baltics. In either case, the author does not adequately address the role of Lithuania in the war.

One of the few images in the book that places Lithuanians as the subject of the photograph is a formation of people dressed in ragged clothes behind a uniformed soldier with an armband displaying the swastika of the Nazi party. The author's caption describes the murder of 80% of Lithuanian Jews, with the remaining 43,000 lives sent to work in concentration camps for the remainder of the war. The photograph is of a Lithuanian policeman who has rounded up Lithuanian Jews and Romani for execution, forced labor, or, perhaps, both. Considering how little written text is in the book, the author goes to great lengths to paint Lithuania as expecting liberation from Russian forces and as non-participants in the German fight against

ammunition, and men as they battled against the Red Army. The images in the book depict the German SS as good-hearted forces welcomed by the civilian population of the Baltic States. Many of the civilian population perceived the German soldiers as liberators from Russian oppression. Some photographs show women carrying water to the SS soldiers as they marched through villages, while other images depict *freiwillige*—volunteer soldiers—happily posing with their families before going off to war. While Baxter's empathetic take may strain credulity for some, it is also honest. War is often a choice between the lesser of two evils. While people often have involuntary reactions against propaganda, Baxter's is a fascinating study into how propaganda works. Baxter's provocative take should incite a critical response, wondering why the image works and maybe what is happening off camera. In one of Baxter's photographs, a Lithuanian recruit stands in front of a group of Lithuanian Jewish citizens lined up in formation. It begs questions about the circumstances that would drive someone to support a clearly vicious force.

Most of the volunteers from Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania took up arms alongside the SS Divisions to free their countries from Stalin's rule. According to Baxter, volunteers from Latvia and Estonia were more apt to join the German SS divisions while Lithuanian volunteers were hesitant to join the German Wehrmacht. From 1941-1945, almost 100,000 men from the Baltic States joined to fight off the yoke of communism. The recruitment of east European men meant that the SS had to alter Henrich Himmler's original recruitment requirements with regards to "racial purity." Propaganda is ultimately about practical means to an end: The Germans needed soldiers to fight and the men from the Baltic states were keen to fight the Red Army. The men of the Baltic were not alone. Hundreds of thousands of foreign troops flocked to Germany to fight under the swastika in World War II. Most were far-

Russia while ignoring the Lithuanian participation in the genocide. As for Latvia and Estonia, the author focuses on their National Legion efforts and is silent on genocidal programs in their nation.

The third chapter of four, titled “The Last Year, 1944-1945,” is likely the inspiration Ian Baxter had for writing the book. Even skipping the captions, the reader can quickly distill the harsh conditions faced by Latvian and Estonian troops fighting alongside German Forces. Mud and bone-chilling cold drove the battlefield conditions. The composition of the everyday events of the images almost leads the reader to compassion for these souls.

*SS Foreign Divisions and Volunteers* is a thought-provoking story of the role of the Baltic States in the battles fought across Eastern Europe. The lack of references for further study and investigation and the gaping void of information on the role of the Baltics in the Holocaust leaves this book as a forgettable collection not worthy of a prime spot on a coffee table, save if your passport is from Lithuania.

right nationalists who looked to the Nazis to liberate their homelands from communists or Western imperialists. Others were motivated by racial hatred. Some were simply enemy POWs who chose to enlist rather than spend the war in prison camps.

If taken as a study of Wehrmacht propaganda, the quality of the photos becomes an important issue because the details of the composition were carefully selected and crafted. The images are printed in a medium quality on flat paper, which does them a disservice. Most of the photos lack a specific location or provide a time frame when the image was taken. For instance, on page 16 there is an image of a German motorcycle unit driving through a war-torn city somewhere in Lithuania but lacks a specific city and year. On the opposite page, a crowd of people are surrounding what appears to be a German tank and other military vehicles. The caption describes the SS soldiers being hailed by the crowd of people; however, the image is low quality. The low-quality images make it hard to determine what is actually happening and undercuts Baxter’s research.

The book makes a reasonable contribution to the scholarship of World War II, particularly through the revealing of previously unpublished photographs. It certainly will be helpful to scholars looking for war time photographs and images of the German Wehrmacht as they traversed the Baltic region in pursuit of the Red Army. Readers may be troubled by Baxter’s seemingly empathetic take, but that is reflective of his scholarly approach, requiring objectivity and a discomfiting neutrality. That sense of discomfort should promote reasonable, critical responses not knee-jerk opposition. With the advent of social media platforms, messaging apps, and other means of reaching wide audiences, recognizing propaganda and responding deliberately is more important than ever.

**Book Information:**

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*Rare Photographs from Wartime Archives*

By Ian Baxter

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