

With the Wehrmacht by Emanuel Litvinoff

DIARY OF A GERMAN SOLDIER, by
Wilhelm Prüller (Faber, 25s).

MR Corelli Barnett, who has contributed a brief preface to this diary, comments that we know the German generals well through their memoirs, etc. (some would say too well) but we do not apparently know the German soldier and he believes that Herr Prüller's diary will give us this insight. It gives an insight, but does not offer any surprises. Herr Prüller performs the almost incredible feat of making those square-headed, Nazi-saluting robots we see in television melodramas seem like real men. This drab Austrian salesman turned Nazi Party functionary, and later Wehrmacht lieutenant, spent his spare time regurgitating "Volkische Beobachter" editorials, writing sentimental or attitudinising entries to his wife, naïvely philosophising about war, and only writing vividly about his experiences in battle.

It is this last aspect that gives the diary its value. From September 1, 1939, when he and his comrades cross the Polish border because the Poles "haven't accepted our rightful demands," through triumphant campaigns and the long, bloody winter of defeat, we watch Herr Prüller turn into a tough professional soldier fighting with skill and tenacity, first for victory, then for sheer survival. It is while he is undergoing this metamorphosis that he captures one's unwilling admiration, even sympathy, although to the very end the Nazi pig remains.

People will read this book to discover how much the ordinary German soldier knew about crimes of his master. According to Prüller there were no crimes. "When the wireless and press here and abroad scream their protest and disquiet at our treatment of Russian prisoners and the Russian civilian population, when they lie about bestial murders and mutilation," he replies that the prisoners and the occupied population were never so well off in their lives. "They are witnesses of the excellent behaviour of the German Wehrmacht." It is an impertinence, he says, "to lie that we have anything to do with these basically filthy sluts." Not one German soldier has even touched a Russian woman. But Prüller is not a particularly reliable witness, for, only a month before this particular entry, he confesses that "after all among the 230 men there are some who can't stand it without female flesh about, even if it's Russian flesh." Otherwise it is the old story. It was a chivalrous war without a single atrocity; all else is enemy propaganda.

Today, the editors of this book tell us, Wilhelm Prüller runs a small souvenir shop on the outskirts of Vienna, a bitter, unrepentant Nazi who believes the world has done his kind an injustice. He has not fared as well as others who have found surprising material consolations in defeat. But how many Wilhelm Prüllers are there waiting in surly impatience for their hour to come again?