

Alltag am Atlantikwall. Erfahrungen und Begegnungen der Wehrmacht in Nordwesteuropa

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It might seem a somewhat implausible endeavor to search for the „ordinary“ in extraordinary times, for the daily life and quotidian experiences of soldiers and civilians, occupiers and occupied in times of war. The workshop „Alltag am Atlantikwall. Erfahrungen und Begegnungen der Wehrmacht in Nordwesteuropa“, organized by Krijn Thijs (Amsterdam) at the German Institute Amsterdam in cooperation with the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, ventured on this endeavor fully aware that the investigation of the „experiences and encounters“ in the „daily life“ of Wehrmacht soldiers carries with it a conceptual tension. It is an exploration that can only work if one dares to ignore – or better: embrace – the basic contradiction inherent in this approach. That it opens new and fruitful perspectives was impressively demonstrated by the range of papers this workshop brought together on the Dutch, Belgian, French, and Norwegian histories during World War II.

Its overarching theme was an invitation to explore the perceptions and experiences of Wehrmacht soldiers in the territories that came under German control with the aggressive Western expansion of the Nazi empire from the spring of 1940 onwards. The case studies focused in particular on the relations between the occupiers and gentile society, on the (by definition) asymmetric nature of the ensuing contacts and encounters, and to consider the transnational dimensions of these experiences that indeed should be

placed within the wider European context of Nazi expansionism. This approach widens the perspective on individual national histories horizontally as well as vertically: first, it opens the historiography on the military occupations in Northern and Western Europe towards the broader scholarship on World War II, integrating these territories' histories into narratives about genocidal warfare and National Socialist imperialism that commonly focus on the Eastern and Southern fronts. Second, by critically employing the concept of *Alltagsgeschichte*, it finds innovative ways of capturing the variety and complexity of human experiences and (mutual) perceptions in times of war and occupation, thereby transforming the still wanting scholarship on the practice and reality of military conquest into a cultural history of modern warfare.

The presented papers dealt with various (interrelated and overlapping) types of „encounters“ ranging from observation to day-to-day relations to physical violence. Granted that, on a fundamental level, any „encounter“ in the wake of a military invasion is infused with violence it still seems useful to differentiate between the various forms of contacts to capture with sufficient nuance the great diversity of experiences and perceptions. Such a differentiation also avoids the schematic perpetrators/victims-dualism and instead unfolds a spectral view on the social roles, identities, and actions of individual historical subjects in the „everyday“ reality of war.

The first category, observing encounters, was explored in four papers, two of which were based on textual sources such as front letters and „travel guides“ custom-written for Wehrmacht soldiers in France and Belgium. The other two analyzed mostly amateur photographs taken by Wehrmacht soldiers and Dutch civilians. All four papers demonstrated the degree to which war and occupation could be experienced as „adventure“, „travel“ or even a crude form of „going native“ from the perspective of the occupiers. KRIJN THIJS studied the letters and writings of the Wehrmacht soldier Carl Hartmann. With some unease he recounted the idyllic Dutch landscapes Hartmann sketched down for his family in letters and for the

home front in brochures and newspaper articles. With the "*Endsieg*" in mind, Hartmann had internalized the Nazi narrative that underpinned the invasion of the Netherlands as „Aryan brother nation.“ Hopeful that the occupied would soon develop into enthusiastic compatriots in the future Germanic empire, Hartmann’s idealistic expectations and hegemonic fantasies led him to create a very „German Holland“ in his writings. This „idealism“ and his ultimate disillusionment was rather typical among Wehrmacht soldiers stationed in the Netherlands. Just as typical seems the smooth transition into an expert on Dutch affairs and German-Dutch cultural relations in postwar West Germany. How to reconcile and narrate these experiences within the context of total war is a relevant, still open question.

A similar form of observing encounters was the subject of THOMAS WILLIAMS’ (Brussels) paper on tourist publications for Wehrmacht soldiers stationed in France and Belgium. With equal sensibility Williams analyzed the curious mix of touristic information, cultural guidance, propagandistic indoctrination, and imperial arrogance with which these official texts were infused. War was, after all, not just a „trip“, it was a serious undertaking in the service of Hitler’s Germany and touristic literature produced for German soldiers contained well-dosed passages on the principles, rules, and expectations a soldier was to follow and fulfill during his service in newly-acquired territories and vis-à-vis occupied peoples.

Photographs are a most peculiar form of observation for they tell us as much about what they show as about those who took them. They are a relatively new subject of historical investigation and the workshop excelled in giving these sources a prominent podium and voice. The sheer number of photographs available on the years 1940-1945 is overwhelming; ever more photo collections arrive at the NIOD every month, as its senior photo historian RENÉ KOK (Amsterdam) reported. This goes back to the birth-cry of the institute in May 1945: ordinary Dutchmen were asked to bring in personal albums to let future generations know „what our people has lived through and how it has pre-

ailed.“ Secret amateur photos of repressions against Jews, resisters, and forced laborers are especially precious because only a few have been found thus far. Since historians still seem to be occupied with locating, gathering and inventorying these pictures it is understandable that both papers on photography presented photos in great numbers but offered only occasionally a „close reading“ and in-depth analysis of selected pictures. PETRA BOPP (Hamburg) deciphered the seemingly benign touristic snapshots and located notions of conquest in the way soldiers took pictures of each other on newly occupied territory. The classical tale of the victorious conqueror often to be found in Western front pictures stands in stark contrast to the horrors of genocide that thousands of photographs document for the Eastern front.

New territories were explored by those papers dealing with mutual relations between occupiers and occupied, ranging from friendly to businesslike to hostile. The case of the Norwegian town of Kirkenes was the subject of RUTH SINDT’s (Kiel) paper. Sindt stressed the relatively harmonious German-Norwegian relations there and focused on the potential dangers and opportunities that framed these relations. She found that the German occupation altered the town’s social equilibrium in fundamental ways and illustrated the difficulty of writing an integrative history of both sides involved. LAURA FAHNENBRUCK (Groningen) analyzed images of Dutch women in Wehrmacht publications ("*Tornisterschriften*") with a focus on the rules and principles an „Aryan“ soldier was to follow if he engaged in sexual contact. These texts carried highly stereotypical images alongside paradoxical messages – oscillating between the duty to keep the „Aryan race pure“ and the permission to fraternize with Dutch women to „relieve“ himself from the stress of soldierly life. For the enemy in this case was not really the enemy but a potential ally. Still, the German soldier was encouraged to view himself as a conqueror, taking a country (turning the wheel of a windmill with one hand as one cover illustrated) and its women.

KATJA HAPPE (Freiburg) spoke about a work in progress on the little-known inter-

views the British secret service conducted with Dutch refugees coming to England by boat (*"Englandvaarders"*). Even though the interviewers were most interested in military, infrastructural, and geographical information they also asked some questions on „German morale.“ To Happe, the study of these questionnaires promises to enrich our still limited knowledge about the mindset and behavior of German soldiers in the Netherlands and their interactions with the local population. Preliminary results of her analysis are that the interviewees portrayed their occupiers on the whole as loyal, confident and disciplined executors of Hitler's expansionist plans; the Dutch population appears as patriotic and optimistic about the Allied war effort while many interviewees critically reported the quite frequent fraternization of Dutch women with German soldiers. Richly contributing to a European perspective, CAMILLE FAROUX (Paris) analyzed the relationships between French women who collaborated with the Germans as civilian workers in Paris and Berlin between 1940 and 1945. She focused on the many thousand volunteers – estimates range from 50,000 to 100,000 – who got involved with German military men. Based on a fascinating set of archival records from judicial courts in Germany during the war (cases of theft, abortion etc.) and in France thereafter (collaboration), the paper explored the potential power these female volunteers could attain by allying themselves with the occupiers as well as the potential consequences these relationships could entail for these women.

The question of power, i.e. of hierarchical order and violent practices, was most thoroughly addressed in the first two papers dealing with the political and military contexts within which various „encounters“ occurred. Both contributions focused on the Dutch case. JOHANNES KOLL (VIENNA) argued that the outward division of labor between German civilian and military authorities was often blurred. Due to Hitler's decision to put the Netherlands under civilian administration, Reich commissioner Arthur Seyss-Inquart held superior powers over the Wehrmacht in theory and practice. The attempt to conceal a military occupation as

brotherly act of imperial expansion was to result in the „self-nazification“ of the Netherlands. This peculiar setting along with the relatively strong position of the SS in Holland partly explains the highly „effective“ persecution of the Dutch Jews. JENNIFER FORAY (West Lafayette) provided an analysis of the Wehrmacht's criminal record and thus offered an expansion of Koll's perspective. Stressing the Wehrmacht's role in the hunting down of resisters and Jews in hiding, Foray convincingly argued that even in the Dutch case, in which the local population needed the occupiers more than vice versa, the German military forces were deeply involved in the execution of Hitler's racial program.

Finally, a keynote paper on the historiography on German soldiers in the last 30 years or so given by KLAUS LATZEL (Braunschweig) provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their own academic and generational standpoint, the interests, paradigms, and assumptions that inform their research today. Reviewing the works of Lutz Niethammer, Hans Joachim Schröder, Martin Humburg, his own, Sönke Neitzel, Harald Welzer and Felix Römer, Latzel identified three waves of scholarly exploration of the hearts, minds, and actions of German soldiers. Based on varying, newly discovered sources, they each look differently at the Wehrmacht's conduct.

In the first wave, scholars conducted pioneering oral history interviews in search of the suffering and heroism of the „little man.“ The second wave discovered letters from the front, asking similar question and arriving at similar conclusions: the „little man“ pays the highest price and knows it; his victimhood is center stage, questions of ideology and (his) guilt caused unease and were mostly left untouched. Latzel stressed that these studies were politically inspired, that is by a democratic empathy and an emancipatory impetus on the part of the researchers who sought to give „the many“ a voice. Along the way, they became disillusioned after discovering that their idealised subjects had been complicit in Nazi crimes in various forms as well.

A third wave arose with the discovery of secret service protocols of conversations amongst imprisoned rank and file as well as

high-ranking Wehrmacht personnel. Some of the analyses published thus far are controversial because of a lack of nuance and sophistication in the interpretation of the sources and the ostentatious matter-of-factness of the overreaching narratives, which place (and thereby normalize) the Wehrmacht's warfare within the context of any modern war. While praising Römer's balanced analysis of these highly ambivalent sources that led him, ultimately, to the same conclusions as older studies (indoctrination indeed played a significant role in the brutalization of warfare), Latzel was skeptical of Welzer's and Neitzel's study for its bold interpretation of the material and its perfusion with references to present-day discussions of military matters.

Latzel's comprehensive paper helped contextualize the present generation's interest in the „daily life“ of soldiers, the „ordinary“ relationships and encounters in extraordinary times. The „pragmatic“ (Krijn Thijs), unideological attitude of the projects presented here promises fresh insights into World War II history. It inspires transnational curiosity and multiple-perspectives-approaches and fosters the integration of diverging experiences in different places and circumstances, thereby converging the Western with the Eastern front. Last but not least, the focus on the „daily life“ in war and the (seemingly) quotidian thoughts and actions of the contemporaries might offer new answers to the question why and how the Nazi regime was so effective in carrying out its racial schemes across Europe.

Conference Overview:

Begrüßung und Einführung Krijn Thijs (Amsterdam)

Panel A: Die Gewalt der Wehrmacht

Johannes Koll (Wien): Reichskommissariat und Wehrmacht in den Niederlanden. Grundlinien des Verhältnisses zwischen ziviler Besatzungsverwaltung und deutscher Armee

Jennifer Foray (West Lafayette): The 'Clean' Wehrmacht in the German-Occupied Netherlands: Myth and Realities

Panel B: Besatzung und Begegnung

Ruth Sindt (Kiel): Kann man Alltag okkupieren? Das Beispiel der norwegischen Grenzgemeinde Kirkenes 1940-1944
Krijn Thijs (Amsterdam): ‚Going native‘ in den Niederlanden. Begegnungen deutscher Besatzungssoldaten im ‚germanischen‘ Nachbarland

Keynote:

Klaus Latzel (Braunschweig): Selbstzeugnisse von Wehrmachtsoldaten in der neueren Historiografie zum 2. Weltkrieg. Eine methodische und quellenkritische Zwischenbilanz

Panel C: Krieg als Reise

Thomas Williams (Brüssel): Propaganda, Ideology and Everyday Life. Tourist Publications for Wehrmacht Soldiers in France and Belgium

Petra Bopp (Hamburg): Zwischen Westfront und Atlantikwall. Fotografische Spuren des Krieges von Wehrmachtsoldaten 1940-1942

Panel D: Eroberung und Verführung

Laura Fahrenbrück (Groningen): Sexualität, Anbindung, Eigen-Sinn. Oder: ‚Was hat der Soldat im Schlafzimmer verloren?‘

Camille Fauroux (Paris): Armed Women? French Women and German Soldiers in Paris and Berlin 1940-1945

Panel E: Spiegelungen und Blickfilter

Katja Happe (Freiburg): ‚German Moral‘. Deutsche Soldaten als Thema in den Interviews des britischen Geheimdienstes mit niederländischen Flüchtlingen

René Kok (Amsterdam): Dutch Snapshots. The twisted Images of the Occupier and the Occupied

Abschlussdiskussion

Kommentar: Gerhard Hirschfeld (Stuttgart)

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