



PERSPECTIVES ON EUROPE

Pre-Dissertation Fellowship Research Report

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I. Dissertation Abstract

My dissertation examines the reactions of “ordinary Germans” to the experience of total war between 1943 and 1945. Specifically, I address questions about the nature and endurance of popular support for the Nazi regime under conditions of military, economic, social, and political dissolution. I explore how traditional values and Nazi ideology framed popular perceptions of the war and reactions to impending defeat. Did violence and deprivation change people’s relationship to the Nazi regime and facilitate political and ethical re-evaluation? Did new assessments influence popular behavior and responses in day-to-day life?

I approach these questions from a holistic perspective that treats German civilians as special combatants and soldiers as integral members of civilian society. I contend that between 1943 and 1945 most Germans actively participated in total war and that their actions and experiences spanned the entire spectrum between victimhood and culpability. Also, I argue that the interactions between German military and civilian populations shaped the overall German response to the war; this dynamic receives particular attention.

My examination is based on a qualitative analysis of archival sources, including German newspapers, Nazi morale and censorship reports, and citizens’ private letters. Additionally, I analyze previously underutilized Allied intelligence reports to reconstruct the values and attitudes of ordinary Germans during the dissolution of the Third Reich.

II. Central Themes of Preliminary Research

In February of 2010, I submitted my dissertation proposal to my dissertation committee consisting of Professor Richard Breitman, Professor Eric Lohr, and Professor Max Paul Friedman of American University, Washington, DC. I successfully defended the proposal later that same month and began planning my summer research trip to Europe.

I aspired to an examination of how “ordinary Germans” experienced the final and for them most lethal period of World War II. Specifically, I wanted to investigate how the violence and deprivation of those years impacted people’s relationship to the Nazi regime. What meaning did Nazism—both as a system of governance and as a secular faith—have for “ordinary Germans” under these difficult conditions? Did they justify or delegitimize the regime and its policies? Did the war re-enforce or alter the political and ethical universe people inhabited? Ultimately, I hoped to draw general conclusions about the nature of popular support for the Nazi regime and about Germans’ ideological transition in the postwar period.

It struck me that in many ways, the final war years were the logical culmination of the Nazis’ totalitarian project. Believing itself encircled by enemies outside and infiltrated by enemies within, the regime

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orchestrated the all-or-nothing existential struggle that lay at the heart of Nazi ideology. United, the German nation would triumph or perish forever. To this end, ever younger and ever older generations of men were called to the front, while the militarization of civilian society proceeded with the drafting of women, children, and the elderly into labor and auxiliary military services. Moreover, in their attempt to mobilize all national resources, Nazi authorities issued an avalanche of laws and regulations that aimed to control virtually all areas of life, including food, travel, schooling, entertainment, and housing. Noncompliance with the Nazi war effort carried heavy sentences as authorities escalated their persecution of alleged saboteurs, deserters, and defeatists in the ranks of the army and the general population.

Paradoxically, this attempt at totalitarian control occurred against the context of social, political, economic, and military dissolution. With Germany's military situation ever more desperate and its economy collapsing, the Nazi regime increasingly lacked the means to enforce its policies at the fronts and at home. In other words, between 1943 and 1945, German society faced extreme regulation as well as new opportunities for free action and expression. I wanted to know how people reacted to these developments. By what ideological or other value systems did they interpret their world? How did they make sense of this increasingly invasive yet crumbling system? How did they understand the battle they were fighting? What was Nazism to ordinary Germans as they faced its simultaneous culmination and dissolution?

III. Sources

For my preliminary research trip in June and July 2010 I chose to focus particularly on three record groups in German and English archives that I expected to become the main documentary source for my project. My aim was to familiarize myself with the quality and quantity of these records to the point where I would be able to adjust the scope and foci of my project accordingly. Happily, my preliminary examination showed that these sources largely met my expectations and resulted in only minor revisions of the project outline.

I spent the first five weeks of my stay in Freiburg, Germany, where I explored the holdings of the federal military archive (Bundesarchiv/ Militärarchiv). Because of the nature of my project, I focused on all those records revealing a relationship between war experiences and soldiers' conduct or attitudes during the Second World War. These included surveillance records detailing the moods and attitudes of German troops at different points in the war. Also, I pursued all available mail censorship reports to gain insight into the topics of concern and conversation between German soldiers and their friends and families at the home front. Finally, I paid attention to any records issued as disciplinary orders or detailing disciplinary proceedings in an attempt to understand the overall patterns of conduct by German soldiers.

My most important find were the few dozen surviving mail censorship reports of mid-1944 record group RH 13/48 and RH 13/49. The German army commands issued monthly morale reports (so-called Feldpostprüfberichte) about the mood of the troops

based on intercepted letters. To be sure, these reports have been widely used by historians concerned with the political allegiances and motivations of German soldiers, such as Marlis S. Steinert, Wolfram Wette, and Sven Oliver Müller. But while these reports are no new source, they certainly are a very rich and suggestive one, especially when used in conjunction with alternative material.

One element that makes these reports unique is the fact that they offer some rare statistical or quantitative sense about how often certain topics were discussed, who discussed them, and how the regime reacted to these conversations. The statistical part entails the number of letters screened, their origin and destination, and how many transgressions against military secrecy or political uniformity were committed within the sample. The main body of the reports is then taken up by a narrative summary of the censor's impression. These summaries detail the overall consensus on subjects including the course of war, front experiences, political allegiances, relationships between troops, between soldiers and superiors, and reflections on food supplies and war materiel.

In some cases, the censor also provides a mirror description of the sentiments of the home front, based on letters sent from Germany to soldiers in the field. These insights are especially valuable for my project, as it pursues the argument that the attitudes and preoccupations of the home front "combatants" were very similar to those serving at the actual front. Moreover, information gleaned from letters from the home front is rare because the nature of the warfare made it harder for soldiers to actually preserve the correspondence they received. Thus, while the majority of the so-called Feldpost actually traveled from Germany outward, most of the surviving records are letters written by soldiers to their families and friends. The Feldpostprüfberichte therefore allow for a more balanced examination of both fronts and of the perhaps reciprocal relationship between prevailing attitudes, if only for a very brief period of the war.

In order to support their summaries and arguments, many German army censors included a series of relevant excerpts from intercepted letters in their reports. These make it possible today to analyze the quality and methods of the regime's morale assessment against the actual primary sources. My preliminary analysis of these records suggests that there are often significant quality differences between different censors. The best of them, however, provide what appears a very nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the material at hand that allows for important insights into the moods and attitudes of the troops and their families at home. The material appears to support some of my working hypotheses regarding the similarity between reactions to war on the home front and at the front. It also seems to support my initial assertion that the war had not a depoliticizing but rather a radicalizing effect on the German population.

I arrived at a similar conclusion from my preliminary analysis of English intelligence material generated during the war. I was able to spend three weeks working at the British National Archives in Kew, where I surveyed the roughly 17,000 transcripts of surreptitiously taped conversations between German prisoners of war. This enormous—and possibly illegal—intelligence operation was organized by the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation

Centre or CSDIC, a British intelligence organization created for the purposes of interrogating German prisoners. However, it was in their secret tapings of soldiers in their cells that the CSDIC captured significant insights into the morale, interests, attitudes, and capabilities of the German enemy. My initial survey of the material in Kew resulted in the selection of some 2,800 transcripts for the period of November 1942 and April 1945, which will be the most important documentary base for my dissertation.

My preliminary analysis of the material has resulted in a number of fascinating insights that I believe will become a valuable contribution to the field. For example, I have examined soldiers' conversations about domestic and international situations, politics, religion, and personal matters to gain a better understanding of what "Nazism" or "National Socialism" actually meant to these men. I have found that most of them had a very limited understanding of these concepts, which they tended to use to describe a political system marked by corruption and incompetence. Complaints about unfair, small-minded, and corrupt superiors in civilian and military life were ubiquitous, as was the regret over the Nazis' broken promise of an egalitarian and just national community.

Interestingly, while these soldiers are very vocal about their rejection of "Nazism," they use the very language that we today associate with Nazi ideology. They talk in terms of German racial superiority and English and American inferiority on account of Jewish control. They regret the annihilation of Europe's Jews but less because of humanitarian or moral concerns and more because of fears for retaliation and concerns over the dilution of German military power at a critical point in the war. In sum, these soldiers appear to have internalized many of the most important aspects of Nazi ideology and Nazi propaganda and their main regret lies with the shortcomings of the Nazi regime, not with its essence.

I find these initial conclusions are also supported by some of the reports of the Foreign Office that were generated by German refugees and friendly POWs in an effort to give the British a better understanding of their enemies. Such reports on civilian morale often highlight the extent of the investment of regular Germans in the Nazi cause even as much grumbling and complaints about food shortages and corruption seem to suggest an alienated population. Since I spent most of my time at the British National Archives working through the CSDIC transcripts, I was only able to superficially survey the Foreign Office records and will have to return for at least four more weeks of research at a later point. At the moment, however, I will make due with similar material available at the American National Archives in College Park, which is easier for me to access for sustained research.

Finally, I was able to spend a week at the Imperial War Museum (IMW) in London, where I found a number of relevant sources. These included two separate reports of former CSDIC officers detailing the workings of their organization and their own role in it. More importantly, the IMW also held several German morale surveillance reports detailing the moods and attitudes of the civilian population between 1943 and 1944. Again, their quality depends on the author's dedication to detail and nuance but several of them are of very high quality and will be an important substitute to the Nazi surveillance reports available in published format.

The two months of preliminary research afforded by the CES Fellowship put me in the ideal position of surveying most of the European records I intend to use in my dissertation and, in the case of the CSDIC transcripts and German military censorship records, I finished examining the whole collection. Consequently, I was able to spend the fall semester analyzing my notes and copies while continuing research of American intelligence records at the National Archives in College Park. In February 2010 I began writing my dissertation based on the European and American records I have already gathered. I have decided that the quality and quantity of my material will allow for sound conclusions that I can fine-tune with additional short research trips to the National Archives in Kew and the German Federal Archives in Berlin and Freiburg, to which I hope to return in August or September 2010.

I am thrilled that my material appears to support my working hypotheses that distinguish my work from existing scholarship. First, I suggest that throughout the war, "ordinary Germans" were less "ordinary" and more ideologically committed than the current scholarly consensus allows. It is my working hypothesis that the war had not a depoliticizing but a radicalizing effect on the general population and that many Germans increasingly abandoned "ordinary" moral and ethical codes.

Second, I think that people's positive motivational factors and convictions need to receive more attention. Much scholarship in the field has focused on what Germans were afraid of and were fighting against. I want to understand what they were defending, what they were fighting for, whether in material, ideological, or any other terms.

Third, I believe that rigid scholarly distinctions between military and civilian populations are misleading for a period when all Germans lived and fought total war. The Nazi regime treated all Germans as combatants. So, too, did the Allies, whose military strategies aimed at both German soldiers and civilians. My research suggests that many Germans - with or without uniform - assumed for themselves the role of active participant in the existential struggle of their nation. In fact, ordinary people's attitudes and reactions to total war grew out of a paradoxical identity as both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, this project treats German civilians as particular types of combatants and considers German soldiers as integral members of civilian society.

Fourth, I argue that the interactions between civilian and military combatants are crucial for our understanding of the overall German perception of and response to the war. This dynamic receives particular attention in my analysis. I want to highlight identity boundaries as well instances of fluidity as German soldiers and civilians shared the experience of total war.

I am sincerely grateful for the generous support of the CES Pre-Dissertation Fellowship which enabled me to examine my dissertation's most important documentary bases in one highly effective research trip, and which has allowed me to stay on schedule with my project. I expect to finish the first draft by the spring semester of 2011 and defend my dissertation by summer 2011. I thank you once again for your support.

ALEXANDRA LOHSE is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at American University.