AUTONOMY IN THE GREAT WAR: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE
GERMAN SOLDIER ON THE EASTERN FRONT

A THESIS IN
History

Presented to the Faculty of the University
Of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
The requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

By
Kevin Patrick Baker
B.A. University of Kansas, 2007

Kansas City, Missouri
2012
AUTONOMY IN THE GREAT WAR: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE
GERMAN SOLDIER ON THE EASTERN FRONT

Kevin Patrick Baker, Candidate for the Master of Arts Degree
University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2012

ABSTRACT

From 1914 to 1919, the German military established an occupation zone in the territory of present day Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Cultural historians have generally focused on the role of German soldiers as psychological and physical victims trapped in total war that was out of their control. Military historians have maintained that these ordinary German soldiers acted not as victims but as perpetrators causing atrocities in the occupied lands of the Eastern Front. This paper seeks to build on the existing scholarship on the soldier’s experience during the Great War by moving beyond this dichotomy of victim vs. perpetrator in order to describe the everyday existence of soldiers. Through the lens of individual selfhood, this approach will explore the gray areas that saturated the experience of war.

In order to gain a better understanding of how ordinary soldiers appropriated individual autonomy in total war, this master’s thesis plans to use an everyday-life approach by looking at individual soldiers’ behaviors underneath the canopy of military hegemony. I will also employ a micro-historical analysis specifically to delve into the experience of the German front-line soldier stationed in Vilnius, Lithuania. My research will focus on the letters of ordinary German soldiers stationed near Vilnius as well as the etchings, poems and
musings by ordinary soldiers in the Tenth Army’s trench newspapers, which were also produced near Vilnius. I will argue that ordinary German soldiers cultivated their identities through everyday behaviors and they were individual actors shaping military history, not only as a part of a larger military structure. From looking at the soldier experience at the grassroots level I intend to provide a better understanding of how ordinary soldiers individually contributed, passively and actively, to the military history of the Great War. The ordinary soldier’s behaviors at the front have altered the extraordinary history of World War I, and have contributed to a nuanced social, cultural, and everyday-life history of the war.
APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Autonomy in the Great War: The Experience of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front,” presented by Kevin P. Baker, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Supervisory Committee

Andrew Stuart Bergerson, Ph.D., Committee Chair
Department of History

Dennis Merrill, Ph.D.
Department of History

Larson Powell, Ph.D.
Department of German
### CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. LETTER WRITING IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. SOLDIERS’ NEWSPAPERS ON THE EASTERN FRONT</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. REPRESENTATIONS OF LOSS IN VISUAL CULTURE</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. “Kaiser Wilhelm II”</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. “Never forget the spirit of 1914”</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. “Heroes Cemetery in Kowno”</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. “Memorial for Captain Wichmann”</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. “Memorial Dedication in the Kobylnk Cemetery”</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. “Remembering the Dead”</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. “The land which drank my brother’s blood remains German”</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. “The Lost Comrade”</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. “Remembering the Dead”</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. “Untitled”</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Tenth Army Newspaper Editors by Rank</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study would not be possible without several key individuals. I would like to thank the UMKC History department and faculty for their support. I would especially like to thank Dr. Bergerson, Dr. Merrill, Dr. Powell, and Dr. Kelly-Wray for their unflappable dedication, knowledge, guidance, criticism, and patience throughout this process. I would also like to thank Amy Brost for her helpful advice and for answering my endless questions. To my fellow graduate students, especially Kelsey Rosborough, Chainy Folsom, Kory Gallagher, Dustin Stalnaker, Joseph Jones, and Chelsey Dahlstrom, I cherish every debate, humorous discussion, and moment we spent in the office together. Thank you to my family and friends for being there when I needed you most. And to my darling Laura, I would not have finished this without you. Your love and support mean the world to me.
INTRODUCTION

From 1914 to 1919, the German military established an occupation zone in the territory of present day Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia named *Oberförhälter Ost*, meaning the Supreme Commander of the East.¹ While some arguments about the cultural and psychological implications caused by the German Eastern occupation have been accepted into the mainstream World War I literature, most scholars still view the First World War mainly through the Western Front experience. Yet Germany fought half of its war on the Eastern Front in battles like Vilnius, Tannenberg, Masurian Lakes, Lemberg, and Galicia, which were different than the static, muddy and wet trenches on the Western Front. The soldiers fighting in the east, on fronts that were moving back and forth thousands of miles, faced a unique experience as an occupation force in a strange land. While underneath the structure of military power, ordinary German soldiers maintained an individual existence. The army used several key measures in order to achieve discipline and keep soldiers from openly resisting. The military authorities threatened court martial for the smallest of infractions with punishments that ranged from a simple warning to a death sentence. Junior officers ordered their subordinates to salute whenever passing them, maintain marching discipline, and to keep their uniforms immaculate. At the lowest levels, corporals and sergeants were urged not to use the familiar ‘du’ when addressing their men. By demonstrating permanent control over the troops, the men had no other option but to show their superiors respect.² In a war in which the military structure maintained control, these ordinary German soldiers used creative expressions, both public and private, to strive for

¹ Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, national Identity, and German*

individual autonomy. Though the military pulled their subjects into a homogenous imperial mass, many soldiers carved out personal space. Facing this situation of life or death the soldier lived a life in contradiction. The issue is not whether or not ordinary soldiers instigated violence, which they most certainly did, but how they created a sense of self in an environment where the individual is not supposed to exist: the German military. The soldiers tried to live an autonomous lifestyle on the micro level, but lived in a homogenous army unit on the macro level.

Cultural historians have focused on the role of German soldiers as psychological and physical victims trapped in total war that was out of their control. Military historians have maintained that these ordinary German soldiers acted not as victims but as perpetrators causing atrocities in the occupied lands of the Eastern Front. Historians have not fully appreciated the gray areas within the ambiguous identities of the soldiers. Where cultural and military historians represented soldiers as either perpetrators or victims, recent everyday-life, and micro-historical scholars have argued that ordinary soldiers acted also as individuals who had choices on an everyday basis—not just as automatons following orders without individual autonomy. This paper seeks to build on the existing scholarship on the soldier’s experience during the Great War by moving beyond this dichotomy of victim vs. perpetrator in order to describe the everyday existence of soldiers. Through the lens of individual selfhood, this approach will explore the gray areas that saturated the experience of war.

In order to gain a better understanding of how ordinary soldiers maintained selfhood in total war, this master’s thesis plans to use an everyday-life approach by looking at individual soldiers’ behaviors underneath the canopy of military hegemony. In this initial stage of a larger research project, I examine the everyday lives of ordinary German soldiers
through the lens of their *Eigensinn* (unruly behavior). This analysis will show how front soldiers can shape history even in their limited roles. I will also employ a micro-historical analysis specifically to delve into the experience of the German front-line soldier stationed in modern day Vilnius, Lithuania. My research will focus on the letters of ordinary German soldiers stationed near Vilnius, as well as the etchings, poems and musings by ordinary soldiers, also near Vilnius, in the Tenth Army’s trench newspapers (*Zeitung der 10. Armee*). I will argue ordinary German soldiers cultivated their identities through their everyday behaviors, and by using tactics of eigensinn ordinary soldiers, as individual actors, shaped military history, not only as a part of a larger military structure. More to the point, these individual expressions of letter writing, visual culture, and newspaper articles in the public sphere have changed the way in which military historians look at the Great War. From looking at the soldier experience at the grassroots level I intend to provide a better understanding of how ordinary soldiers individually contributed, passively and actively, to the military history of the Great War. The ordinary soldier’s behaviors at the front have altered the extraordinary history of World War I, and have contributed to a nuanced social, cultural, and everyday-life history of the war.

Traditional scholarship of the First World War adhered to the classic trajectory of military histories. It explained the military strategies of the Great Powers and provided detailed accounts of the battlefield. Traditional histories tended to romanticize the origins of

---

the war and focused considerable attention on national histories. For instance, British historian Liddell Hart began his military history of the Great War by stating simplistically: “Fifty years were spent in the process of making Europe. Five days were enough to detonate it.” He was referring to the process of diplomatic and political maturation leading up to the Great War. Traditionalists argued that the war beginning in August 1914, less than six weeks after Gavrilo Princip assassinated Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand, was inevitable. The great powers fought the Great War across the European continent from Flanders in the west to the Masurian Lakes in the east and Gallipoli in the near east. Over nine million young men died in this “war to end all wars” with tens of millions more wounded both physically and psychologically. These classic military historians provided a solid foundation for researching and writing the Great War.

Like previous wars, the First World War transcended boundaries but nominally saw belligerent countries employ colonial troops on different fronts. More to the point, this war saw millions of idealistic young men volunteer to fight for their respective fatherlands, and millions more conscripted to fight in a war they individually did not approve. British historians like Hart began their studies of the First World War with the Schlieffen Plan. The German High Command had shaped this plan since the late nineteenth century to invade France via Belgium and encircle Paris. They thought this initial thrust would knock France out of the war before Russia mobilized its vast, enormous peasant army to resist Germany’s

---


5 Ibid, 22.

6 Ibid, 35-42.
Eastern advancement. This traditional scholarship built a large foundation for how we traditionally understood the First World War. Their exhaustive research resulted in voluminous classic histories that historians still reference today. In this school of thought, however, the soldiers remained irrelevant to how we understood the war.

German nationalist historians maintained a different position for most of the twentieth century. In national paradigm, these historians asserted that Germany fought a defensive war not for territory but as a victim of geographical circumstance. Germany sat directly in the center of Europe encircled by powerful armies in France and Russia as well as being vulnerable to Britain’s state of the art navy. Many nationalist historians, including Gerhard Ritter and Friedrich Meineke, believed that Germany needed to expand due to a rising population and that Germany wanted to lead a union of nations in the center of Europe named Mitteleuropa. These historians saw this national project as separate from any war plans and perceived this diplomatic mission to solve the encirclement problem.

Dissatisfied with the national paradigm, a wave of revisionist scholars within Germany sought to challenge this precedent. In 1961 the senior German historian Fritz Fischer published his landmark study Griff nach der Weltmacht—euphemistically translated as Germany’s Aims in the First World War. By looking extensively through previously overlooked official papers and documents from the German High Command, Fischer maintained that Kaiser Wilhelm II’s advisers and military leaders created elaborate war plans

7 Ibid, 47.
for conquering parts of Europe and colonizing the East. Fischer revealed that the German High Command had planned to create a German-dominated Mitteleuropa whose greater German empire encompassing Austria-Hungary and the Balkans would rival the other great global empires. Fischer’s assessment differed from the nationalist historians by uncovering the secret war aims that the German High Command planned in the years leading up to the First World War.

In disclosing the German plan to colonize Eastern Europe, Fischer and his contemporaries painted a picture of longitudinal continuities in German history. Already prior to the Great War, German leaders believed Germany needed *Lebensraum* (living space) to survive. Historians surmised that Germany needed this living space in the East so it could colonize Eastern Europe, and import precious materials like grains and oil back into the homeland. Previous nationalist historians believed that Germany’s actions during the Great War reasserted itself during the Second World War. These historians argued that Germany had a special path to political development, or *Sonderweg* rather than the liberal development of England and France. Nationalist historians like Meinecke believed in the Prussian *Kulturnation*, which is a Germany based on political order and cultural superiority; and that the German spirit “has to fulfill its special and irreplaceable mission within the Western

---


11 Ibid, 11.
community.” Where previous historians had seen this Sonderweg in positive terms, Fischer convincingly flipped the connotation of this trait to suggest that Germany’s special path was a negative deviation, and further represented the Prussian military tradition. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians began to push this thesis further to argue that Germany’s actions during the First World War placed Germany on a destructive path toward the Second World War.

For the most part, however, historians of the 1960s and 1970s still focused most of their attention on the Western Front. There was of course good reason to be fascinated by it and its trench warfare. This historical ground is familiar even to most generalists. Fischer and Hart explained that, after the battle of the Marne in 1914, the French, German, and British soldiers constructed and maintained a trench system that stretched for hundreds of miles. The great powers implemented a policy of attrition as each side tried to kill as many opposing soldiers as possible without taking any actual ground. At the battle of Verdun in 1916, the German commander Erich von Falkenhayn famously ordered the German army to “bleed the French white.” The soldiers suffered through day-long artillery barrages, poison gas attacks, constant trench flooding, enemy assaults, boredom, battle fatigue, and homesickness. To be sure, all of these elements of the war are important as they represented much of what ordinary soldiers experienced. The problem with this historiography, however, is that it made trench warfare into the metonym for the war itself. As a result, the Eastern Front was largely ignored because it did not conform to this same pattern.


13 Fischer, 637.

14 Hart, 22.

15 Ibid, 83.
No doubt the Eastern Front remained a mystery to most Western historians due to the scarcity of sources and dedication it takes to learn the multifarious languages spoken in Eastern Europe. The first comprehensive monograph on the Eastern Front, aptly labeled *The Unknown War: The Eastern Front*, was published only in 1931. Pulling information solely from English and German sources, its author, Winston Churchill, provided an engrossing overview of the war in the East. In describing the Eastern Front, Churchill concluded that it was “incomparably the greatest war in history. In its scale, in its slaughter, in the exertions of the combatants, in its military kaleidoscope, it far surpasses all similar human episodes.”

Churchill’s work remained the standard for forty years as many other historians embraced his assessment of this vast, unknown front of the Great War, so different from the West.

Forty-four years after Churchill’s top-down military history of the Eastern Front, and Hart’s general study, Norman Stone revised the field of military history through his meticulously researched Russian study entitled *The Eastern Front 1914-1917*. Stone was critical of Churchill’s contribution, stating that those before him (Stone) “present a purely German view of the Russo-German war.”

Drawing mostly from freshly opened Russian archival sources and building on Churchill’s influence, Stone sought to write an all-encompassing history of the Eastern Front. His argument followed from his method. Where previous historians had claimed that Germany could have won the war if only they pursued an all-out assault on Russia’s forces, Stone argued convincingly that the generals and historians overrated the German victories at Tannenberg, Masurian Lakes, and Kowno. Half-heartedly agreeing with Fischer, Stone asserted that “the idea that Germany had limitless

---


possibilities in the east was a legend, however powerful its influence on Nazi thinking thereafter.”

Stone thus shifted critical attention back to the Eastern Front while at the same time questioning the German Great War narrative.

Still missing from this traditional research into the policies of military and political elites were critical studies of the wartime experience for the millions of ordinary German soldiers. Historians of the 1970s and 1980s finally began to address this lacuna, focusing first and foremost on the lived experiences of the soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front. Authors like John Keegan, Tony Ashworth, Modris Eksteins, Paul Fussell, and Eric Leed addressed the psychological impact of the war on the soldiers who survived it. Eksteins believed that the war gave birth, in 1914-1918, to the modern age and ushered in the twentieth century, but at such a price that it left a lasting psychological and cultural impression on an entire generation of Europeans. The thousands who crowded the busy cities of Berlin and Vienna in 1914 anticipating war wanted this new war to purify them and remove them from their mundane bourgeois existence. Yet most of the enthusiastic war volunteers in the early days never made it to the end of the war to see the consequences. They either died or were wounded unless luck found them. These cultural historians concluded that the same war that destroyed so many lives offered these volunteers a way to

---

18 Ibid, 12.


20 Eksteins, 3.

21 Ibid, 57.

22 Ibid, xiv.
escape modern life. The volunteers, however, found themselves thrust into industrial killing fields on a mass scale that represented the triangulation of industrialization, mechanization, and mass mobilization.

Unlike previous scholars, Keegan, Leed and Ashworth wrote extensively on the soldiers’ actual experiences. While Ashworth and Keegan focused on the soldiers on the Somme and trenches of the Western Front, Leed addressed the tensions between the war and the home front. The soldiers began to see the war as one giant industrial experiment that resembled factories in peacetime. They regarded the mechanization back home in the factory as analogous to the mechanization found at the battles of the Somme and Verdun in 1916. At the Somme, soldiers witnessed the greatest military achievement in mechanized warfare to date. The German machine guns and artillery fired continuously upon the marching British forces killing hundreds of thousands, including sixty thousand on the first day of the battle. Leed surmised that:

In August 1914 the expectation of a profound and precipitate maturation drove many young men to the recruiting offices. Such a transformation of character was cited as fact in many letters sent home from the front….With the conclusion of the war, there were many debates over whether the veterans had been brutalized or ennobled, infantilized or matured by his war experience; but there was no debate over whether a deep and profound alteration of identity had taken place.

In effect, the scholars labeled the soldiers as victims rather than seeing them as active participants involved in wartime atrocities. These historians proposed that the soldiers experienced psychological trauma correlating to trench warfare. At the same time, these

23 Leed, 194.
24 Keegan, 247-251.
25 Leed, 1.
cultural historians set an important precedent for future scholarship by emphasizing the effects of modern war on ordinary soldiers.

Influenced by previous scholarship, George Mosse, Jay Winter, and Robert Whalen examined the relationship between Europe’s dead and the war experience. Gleaning information from literary, archival, and ego-documents, these authors revealed that previous historians had somewhat misinterpreted how the soldiers experienced the war. In these works the authors introduce their readers to violence on a mass scale associated with the Great War. Prior to the war, Europeans had minimally witnessed this mechanized, sustained violence, and did not know how to cope with its consequences. The authors concluded that Europeans dealt with their past by affixing symbols to the war dead. They mourned at national and local cemeteries, read books of the heroes who fell for the fatherland, and remembered themselves as victims. By acting as victims, they could heal and exonerate their nations for sending millions to the killing fields. These historians, however, stressed individual agency when describing the soldiers’ actions, and argued that ordinary soldiers actively participated in violence. At the front, soldiers killed with bayonets, machine guns, artillery, rifles, poison gas, and sometimes their bare hands. Though some seemed

26 The term ego-document refers to sources that provide detailed accounts of individual lives. They come in many forms—diaries, letters, oral testimonies, memoirs, photograph albums, essays, summary statements for legal purposes, or employment applications. Ego-documents are crucial for everyday-life and micro-historical studies. For a detailed analysis of how historians use ego documents see Mary Fulbrook, “Life Writing and Writing Lives: Ego Documents in Historical Perspective,” In Birgit Dahlke, Dennis Tate, and Roger Woods, eds., German Life Writing in the Twentieth Century (Rochester: Camden House, 2010), 26.


28 Whalen, 37.
reticent at first, they succumbed to their orders and violently killed the enemy. 29 From their inquisitive analysis these authors shifted the paradigm and began to see the German soldiers as perpetrators as well as victims.

This surge in cultural histories of the war was followed in the 1980s and 1990s by a spate of new books on “ordinary” Germans’ participation in the two world wars and the Nazi period. This advancement can be tied to the growing interest in Alltagsgeschichte, or the history of everyday life. 30 Led by social historians like Alf Lüdtke and Lutz Niethammer, historians of everyday-life studied everyday people (kleine Leute) in order to advance the debate past the masters’ point of view. Everyday-life historians broke through the historical paradigms that normally viewed people in groups. They examined feminists facing societal oppression to gain “a better understanding of how one’s own individual identity has been shaped and constructed.” 31 In war they could apply this same paradigm to how individual soldiers shaped their identities rather than just grouping them into a mass of green killers.

Practitioners of the history of everyday life believed that this model reduced the distance between rulers and ruled, and they posited that ordinary people shaped history through their individual actions.

29 Mosse, 15.


31 Lüdtke, 4.
Influenced by Lüdtke’s groundbreaking historical analysis, historians like Pamela Swett, Andrew Stuart Bergerson, and Belinda Davis looked at ordinary Germans in extraordinary times. They analyzed cities as large as Vienna or Berlin during short time periods of a few years, or surveyed areas as small as a neighborhood in order to relate the interpersonal relationship between ordinary people with the power structures in control of society. Pamela Swett attributed the Nazi revolution to the block-by-block street fighting occurring in Berlin from 1929-1933. Belinda Davis centered on women of lesser means in Berlin during World War I. She concluded that ordinary people on the home front help Germany remain in the war, not solely the military machine as most historians have claimed. Andrew Stuart Bergerson focused on ordinary Germans living in the midsized provincial town of Hildesheim in the 1920s and 1930s to gain a greater perspective to how ordinary Germans became Nazis. By looking at individual actors on the micro level, historians of Alltagsgeschichte went beyond examining solely meta-narratives or macro-structures that precipitated historical events.

These historians examine how ordinary Germans used tactics of *eigensinn*. In colloquial German, this word means childlike obstinacy or sense of oneself. But historians of everyday-life use eigensinn more precisely to “denote a type of unruly behavior that is potentially liberating for the individual but simultaneously continues to interact with the structures of power.” According to Bergerson, ordinary people used manipulative strategies in order to “challenge power relations and to cultivate an identity that corresponds to their

---

32 Swett, 1.

33 Davis, 2-5.

Eigensinn enables historians to analyze how these ordinary people helped to shape the identity of their society while also shaping their own identity. This model is ideally suited for shedding new light on the Great War. Ordinary soldiers wrote letters home detailing their grievances, formed bonds with loved ones and fellow soldiers, and performed acts of subtle non-conformity in order to cultivate an identity within the military structure of power.

Yet everyday-life historians also insist that ordinary people used strategies for herrschaft in everyday life. This word means dominance or hegemony and refers to the ways in which ordinary Germans “tried to alter the circumstances of everyday life in the hopes of promoting a social and political order in which they would hold power and status.” In war, however, the military structure of power maintained herrschaft over the ordinary German soldiers. But ordinary soldiers also created their own autonomous space within the military hegemony. For instance, soldiers occupying the Eastern Front ruled over their Eastern European subjects laying claim to herrschaft over lands and peoples. These soldiers acted both as rulers and ruled within the military apparatus. For historians of the First World War, a closer inspection of the Frontalltag—everyday-life at the front—can help us understand the war from the perspective of ordinary soldiers, and in turn can reveal a more nuanced war experience than previously assumed.

As a result of this attention to the everyday-life of the ordinary soldier, historians like Benjamin Ziemann and Bernd Ulrich began to question the uncritical representation of German soldiers. Instead of reducing them to victims of a bigger war in which they had no

---

35 Bergerson, 7.

36 Ibid, 9.
real active part, these scholars began to depict ordinary German soldiers also during the First World War as perpetrators. In his provocative microhistory Front und Heimat (later translated as War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923) Benjamin Ziemann sought to relate soldiers’ individual backgrounds with their front experience. Ziemann’s study centers on the personal accounts of Southern Bavarian agrarian communities during the Great War mainly through Feldpostbriefe, or letters from the front. Ziemann analyzed these letters in terms of the mythical events of August 1914, the ordinary men’s experiences at the front, their time at home, their lives back on the farm, and the transformation of life after the war ended in 1918. Ziemann argued, “The soldiers did not fight for something, but instead with the view to something, that is, in the expectation of an upcoming point in time which, at the very least, would provide some escape.”

Ordinary German soldiers fought to come home, even if that meant to obey orders that led to atrocities. By limiting their research to ego-documents from rural, lower-class Bavarian soldiers, Ulrich and Ziemann advanced the debates from military and social history to that of the everyday. This micro-social focus sparked further interest in neglected spaces and peoples participating in the Great War leading scholars to move eastward.

Vejas Liulevicius expanded the perpetrator narrative in his landmark microhistory of the Ober Ost by suggesting the acts performed during the First World War on the Eastern Front foreshadowed the atrocities soldiers created during the Second. Like the cultural historians before him, Liulevicius concentrated on the impact of these soldiers’ experiences

in the Eastern Front occupation zone. When describing these soldiers’ first encounters with the “East” Liulevicius states:

These horrible sights seemed to be ordinary, abiding, and permanent attributes of the East they now surveyed, not just examples of universal human sufferings under the lash of war. Yet the very destruction and disarray held out an alluring possibility to officials. The army could bring order to these lands, making them over in its own image, to realize a military utopia and establish a new German identity charged with a mission of bringing Kultur to the East.38

Liulevicius underscored Germany’s eastern colonization project with grander issues of race and space. From his detailed research of diaries, memoirs, newspapers, letters, and popular literature, Liulevicius argued that “the eastern front experience of the First World War was an indispensable cultural and psychological background for what came later in the violent twentieth century, a preexisting mentality.”39 Liulevicius concluded that the soldiers manufactured negative racial and cultural perceptions of the Eastern people during the First World War that carried over into the brutally atrocious policies of Hitler’s Wehrmacht and Einsatzgruppen in the Second World War on the Eastern Front.

What sets Ziemann, Ulrich, and Liulevicius apart from the bulk of the prior literature is that they emphasized the individual agency of ordinary soldiers. Instead of the frenetic pace of military history measured in battles, years, and casualties, they redirected military history to the everyday, ordinary people experiencing the bulk of killing and death. Moreover, Liulevicius, with a background in Lithuanian culture and history, moved beyond the national tropes of history writing that had characterized German history in the past. By illustrating the transnational interactions between ordinary German soldiers and Poles, Lithuanians, Eastern


European Jews, and quite importantly, the interactions between the soldiers and women, Liulevicius located military history in the practices of soldiering both on and off the battlefield.\(^{40}\) The resulting story helps to frame the Eastern Front experience within the larger history of German interactions in Eastern Europe.\(^ {41}\) Many German soldiers felt a strong affliction toward this “backward” land they had just conquered. They lived far from home and what they thought was civilization or Kultur, and unlike their comrades on the Western Front, many did not think that they had anything in common with the enemy.\(^ {42}\) And yet the emphasis for these scholars was always on what the Germans did when they got there—the practices of everyday-life on the front that shaped the identities of the military community and the occupation society.

Lately, historians are becoming more enamored with Eastern European history. Historians Jesse Kauffman and Timothy Snyder, for instance, both researched the political and social implications of the Eastern occupation. By looking at local records in Warsaw, Kauffman studied the Polish schools established by German officials. Kauffman interpreted the German occupation differently from Liulevicius’ assertions, arguing that the German soldiers who occupied Poland during the First World War acted neither as perpetrators nor victims but actually as teachers and educators. Kauffman proposed that, “The occupation regime devoted an extraordinary amount of time and energy to formulating and implementing an educational policy of a more prosaic sort: namely, the resurrection of a functioning system

---

40 See also Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society* (New York: Berg, 2004).

41 Liulevicius, 6.

42 Ibid, 8-9.
of primary and secondary schools.”

Given these very different kinds of everyday practice, Kauffman concluded that “German ambitions in Poland in the First World War did not anticipate German actions there in the Second World War.”

Ignoring the larger issues of race and space that played such a predominant role in Liulevicius’ work, Kauffman insisted on the uniqueness of each war. Kauffman explained, “The second war was a fundamentally different conflict fought by a very different Germany for very different ends.” Not surprisingly, Kauffman’s study precipitated a controversial debate on how we should be characterizing the ordinary German soldier during the First World War—as carriers of Kultur, perpetrators, victims, bystanders, or all of the above.

Similarly, Snyder examined the geographical area between Germany and Russia, where the vast majority of systematic, non-combatant killing of Jews and national minorities took place in the ‘30s and ‘40s. Like Liulevicius, Snyder recognized the relationship between geography and systematic killing. He called this border region between Russia and Germany the bloodlands to evoke the violent nature of ordered killing within a geographic space. In the First World War the German army still regarded this region as a special Raum (space) that they could inhabit as it had historic significance with Germany’s past. Snyder convincingly asserted, “The origins of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, and of their encounter in the bloodlands, lie in the First World War of 1914-1918.”

Agreeing with Liulevicius, Snyder believed that many Germans held preconceived beliefs “that Poland’s borders were

---

43 Jesse Kauffman, “Sovereignty and the search for order in German occupied Poland, 1915-1918” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2008), 114.


46 Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 1
illegitimate, and its people unworthy of statehood.” Yet Snyder insisted that the brunt of the Holocaust and Soviet atrocities took place not in the concentration camps and gulags where most of the victims survived, but in the fields, pits, and death facilities of Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland. In contrast to most German historians, he blamed this violence not so much on the power of conquering states but the failure of the conquered states, particularly in the case of Poland. Snyder concluded that the Eastern spaces outside of Germany and Russia were agricultural centers both countries needed, and equally served as killing centers outside of the Russian and German public view. He also tried to transcend black and white categories by using various letters, diaries, memoirs and statistics kept by both the perpetrators and victims. Future scholars can reopen these ambiguities by approaching the experiences of ordinary people through microhistory. Using micro-historical methodology, historians can move beyond national histories, and apply transnational, geographic, and anthropological approaches to critical historical epochs.

Historians have explored the micro-historical angle more frequently to explore small geographical spaces. Italian historians like Carlo Ginzburg and Giovanni Levi began conducting case studies to debate meta-narratives and put local actors’ actions into a larger framework. Whether examining village life, the ordinary exploits of a lower class miller, or ordinary soldiers stationed in a small, occupied space, microhistory can provide a different perspective unavailable in national histories. Many historians still see German soldiers through the lens of post-war nationalist literature, but as Ziemann and Ullrich have pointed

47 Snyder, 10.
48 Ibid, 8.
out, many soldiers from certain rural regions did not adhere to the popular attitudes attributed to the middle-class nationalists.\textsuperscript{50} Within World War I studies, a micro-historical analysis will demonstrate how everyday interactions and behaviors in a confined area threaten the national paradigms regarding soldiers’ actions and the nature of war.

Scholarship on the Eastern Front has yet to see a fully integrated everyday-life analysis of its ordinary soldiers, specifically, one that focuses on the operations of selfhood in total war. From this analysis we can go deep within the power structures to build a greater understanding to how ordinary soldiers interacted with one another, Eastern peoples and spaces, their officers, and the modern mechanization of warfare. This inversion will move the debates from the trench warfare experience on the Western Front to a more balanced inquiry into how modern mechanized war wreaked havoc on soldiers both physically and psychologically. Yet while military, cultural, social, and everyday life scholars have appropriately examined the roles soldiers played as both victims and perpetrators (either/or), they have only minimally addressed the ambiguities of identity and selfhood related to this controversial predicament. Scholars have also not sufficiently addressed the ambivalent relationship ordinary soldiers had to the war-time environment; or fully appreciated the implications of the fact that the identities of these soldiers were not all immutable. By using a micro-historical and everyday-life approach I will address these contradictions in identity so that in addition to understanding this ambiguity and absurdity inherent to modern, total war, we can better comprehend how individual soldiers responded to this extraordinary experience with both eigensinn and herrschaft.

\textsuperscript{50} Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, 22.
Unfortunately, some recent historians are turning back the clock on military history focusing on traditional battlefield history. Historians like Michael S. Neiberg have written comprehensive textbooks on the Eastern Front, rather than examining interpersonal relationships between ordinary people and superstructures.\(^{51}\) Though textbooks are necessary in teaching World War I history, these generalizations move historical analysis back to an unrefined, abstract view of the war experience. Since the paradigm has shifted away from soldiers as victims and has taken a conservative turn, very few detractors are voicing their opinions against the perpetrator theses. And very few monographs detail the existence of a soldiers’ experience on the Eastern Front.

In sum, the problem with much of this literature is that it reduces the soldier’s experience to one polemical category when in fact soldiers operated in a “grey zone” of violence and normalcy.\(^{52}\) The way to get beyond this impasse is for scholars to address the operation of selfhood among German soldiers from the everyday life perspective. The cultivation of self was made all the more difficult by the nature of war in the bloodlands. The Eastern Front was not filled with trenches to the same degree as the Western, but even here the environment of total war was absurd in the sense that soldiers sensed the aura of freedom as masters within an occupation environment while still feeling trapped under the aegis of world war. And typical of the Eastern Front in particular, the Ober Ost placed soldiers into regular contact with Eastern European peoples and cultures with which they were not familiar, though the contradictions between their expectations and experience were never sufficiently resolved, both during and after the war. Most Soldiers did survive, however; how


they did is not yet clear. Here I do not mean their physical survival in battle but the survival of the self. They strove for individual autonomy in war where individual autonomy is not supposed to exist. The soldiers viewed their everyday actions as having meaning. Simple acts like writing letters home, reading articles in trench newspapers, and creating art could help them preserve a sense of autonomous selfhood. Within the military framework of the Ober Ost, ordinary soldiers cultivated the self on the micro level through their behaviors that helped to shape policy on the macro level.

This research project will examine the methods by which ordinary German soldiers cultivated this sense of autonomy during the First World War on the Eastern Front. By looking at their everyday behaviors, I will reconstruct their individual experiences and power struggles as well as the artistic expressions they used as tactics of eigensinn under the auspices of total war. By focusing on the Tenth Army stationed in Vilnius, I will use a micro-historical approach that will strengthen my everyday-life methodology. In looking at a small space in a relatively small period of time I can relate this small representative sample to the big questions regarding soldiers and autonomous expressions in war. By going to the micro level we can gain a greater perspective on the grey areas governing individual human behavior.

First, following Benjamin Ziemann’s methods on Frontalltag, this project will examine ego documents written by German soldiers during and after the war. These include several dozen letters from 1914-1918 compiled by Ziemann and Ulrich, which includes several entries by ordinary soldiers stationed near Vilnius. The soldiers in the letters mainly come from the uneducated lower class, both rural and urban. Most of the soldiers held the rank of lance corporal or below which meant that they also belonged to the subordinate

53 Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, ed. Frontallag im Ersten Weltkrieg Wahn und Wirklichkeit: Quellen und Dokumente (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH, 1994).
layers of the military hierarchy. I will also examine a small sample of the letters compiled by Philipp Witkop comprised of university students turned soldiers.\textsuperscript{54} After the First World War, Witkop, who was a professor of modern literature at Freiburg, collected war letters written by university students from various fronts. As he was an ardent German nationalist, he collected them mostly from fallen soldiers in order to attempt to perpetuate the nationalist myth of German heroism and sacrifice. He added to this myth by picking only soldiers who were university educated, thus coming mainly from a conservative, nationalist background. These are relevant as a companion to the working class letters because I am not attempting to break the myths of national cultural memory but instead to look beyond it to operations of selfhood that underlay a variety of political positions. Ego documents provide rich insights into the private experiences of soldiers that archival sources lack and also further our understanding of the soldiers’ positive and negative reactions to the modern war experience.

Second, this study will use trench newspapers published by the Tenth Army stationed in Vilnius from January 1915 to December 1918. I will be focusing on the trench newspaper, \textit{Zeitung der 10. Armee}. Like most trench newspapers, the soldiers of that unit ran and operated it. It contained many articles on the soldiers’ lives in the occupations zone, news from other fronts, and perceptions of the Eastern Europeans. In his 1937 monograph, Karl Kurth accurately determined the rank, specialization, and previous civilian occupation of most of the editors. Due to the bombings in World War II most of the archival records did not survive, but Kurth’s contribution remains an exception to the dearth of empirical data left behind. From this chart, one can reconstruct the social backgrounds of the authors.

\textsuperscript{54} Philipp Witkop, ed. \textit{Kriegsbriefe deutscher Studenten} (Gotha: Verlag Friedrich Andreas Perthes A.-G., 1916); \textit{Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten} (Munich: G. Müller, 1928).
Table 1: Tenth Army Newspaper Editors by Rank

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Captain</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalry Captain</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lieutenant</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Lieutenant</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Officer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergeant</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporal</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lance Corporal</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In other words, the majority of the editors were either low ranking officers or corporals and below: 52% were officers, though none were high ranking beyond the company level, 18% NCOs, and 30% ordinary soldiers.\(^{55}\) Moreover, most had experience in their former occupations analogous to their jobs as newspaper editors. Many were teachers, lawyers, authors, painters, doctors, clergymen, and some worked in business and technology fields before the war.\(^{56}\) They represented a microcosm of the army as it operated on the ground.

Historians have yet to view trench newspapers in those terms. Robert Nelson has argued that the German high command created trench newspapers in order to create a masculine justification to fighting such a long war.\(^{57}\) That is, he viewed these newspapers as a tool of military hegemony. By contrast, I intend to read these newspapers as tools used by both the soldiers and the editors for political gains and individual autonomy. In these newspapers, soldiers published poetry, diary entries, artistic etchings, and stories. To be sure


\(^{56}\) Ibid, 216.

these publications were censored and many were directed towards justifying the war. But they also expressed the individuality and autonomy of the soldier. More to the point, soldiers used this mass media in order to cultivate the self. While still a part of the military hierarchy, they used the newspapers to express themselves privately in a public forum. In other words, a struggle took place between military herrschaft and soldierly eigensinn. Those in charge used these newspapers to spread propaganda to their subjects while the soldiers used the trench newspapers to cultivate their own identity—one that absorbed some elements of official discourse but also developed their own. My argument will also differ from Anne Lipp’s evocative thesis that those writing these trench newspapers did so in order to create a nationalistic discourse that silenced the anti-war sentiment.\(^ {58}\)

No doubt the officers tried to impose models for heroic national sacrifice on the soldiers through propaganda; yet ordinary soldiers used their own writing to construct an alternative sense of self in an atmosphere of violence—one that allowed the soldier to maintain individual autonomy.\(^ {59}\) Taken together, these ego documents and trench newspapers will provide this research project with the source base to reconstruct the everyday methods by which soldiers created and maintained their individual selves within a violent world war.

Ordinary soldiers wrote millions of letters in the First World War. In Chapter One I will examine how the soldiers lived the war through their letters. I will systematically trace how ordinary soldiers experienced a war that exposed young men to the horrors of modern, mechanized war of attrition. Most of the soldiers had never experienced life outside their


neighborhoods, let alone in a strange land and an even stranger environment.\textsuperscript{60} This story will center on how the soldiers experienced violence, killing, and the everyday actions required in modern combat. The soldiers wrote letters home to inform their parents and loved ones of their experiences implicitly and explicitly. The letters had a cathartic effect on both parties. And through the bonding experience that happened while writing and receiving letters, soldiers and loved ones created communities of suffering that included both soldiers and families.

For the two million trench newspapers issued each month on the Eastern Front, millions more soldiers read them. Unless on maneuvers, many soldiers had ample free time to read trench newspapers daily, and many read to curb their boredom. In Chapter Two, I will look at the \textit{Zeitung der 10. Armee}, and how its editors manipulated it as a tool for propaganda while ordinary soldiers used it simultaneously to express autonomy. Much like writing letters, soldiers had a private experience sitting down and writing articles or poems for the newspapers. But by submitting these private accounts for publication in the newspapers, they moved these private experiences into a public forum for other soldiers to read. These defiant tactics of eigensinn, defying the German imperial project, enabled ordinary soldiers to express nuances of warfare through mass media. In a way that was akin to letter writing, soldiers privately read the newspapers and formed communities of sufferers. But this time the suffering communities moved from the private to public sphere and included all soldiers who read these newspapers.

Continuing with my examination of the trench newspapers, in Chapter Three, I will focus on the visual culture published by the soldiers. On the one hand, many soldiers published images of heroic soldiers dying for the fatherland. They helped to perpetuate myths

\textsuperscript{60} Ullrich and Ziemann, 14.
of heroism that, the editors hoped, would unify the ordinary soldiers in this common cause and, at the same time, help soldiers endure the war. On the other hand, ordinary soldiers also published more personal artistic expressions that included the experiences of losing comrades. As I will show through careful semiotic analysis, the act of making these personal expressions public, and of reading them in the public sphere, helped form a community of suffering soldiers across lines of class and hierarchy. In sum, these expressions of loss had a rather ambiguous impact on the ordinary soldiers. Reading these newspapers, the soldiers experienced themselves in part as an arm of the military apparatus; but the ordinary soldiers also used these newspapers as covert media for their eigensinn by publishing art works that depicted social tensions, feelings of loneliness, anti-war sentiment, and individual autonomy.

By approaching this everyday-life study of ordinary soldiers serving on the Eastern Front, this research project aspires to unearth the everyday techniques used by soldiers to maintain an ordinary self in extraordinary times. This venture will show how German soldiers maintained a malleable self under the aegis of total war that could accommodate their roles as both perpetrators and victims of their violent circumstances. By searching for a history from “on the ground,” I will conclude that soldiers on the grassroots level used these constructions in order to appropriate autonomy in their everyday lives. As recent scholars have discovered about the Western Front, the ordinary German soldiers stationed in Vilnius performed covert and overt acts of eigensinn that allowed them to gain power and selfhood within a shockingly violent environment.

---

61 Semiotics is the study of signs, signals, sign systems and sign processes. In other words, messages are formed through codes that can be seen in letters or visual culture. For a more detailed explanation see Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
CHAPTER 1

LETTER WRITING IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

As war broke out in August 1914, millions of young men volunteered for their respective countries. In what Germans called the “August experience” (Augusterlebnis) German soldiers already began to write letters home from school and the train stations where they found themselves shipping off to war, often leaving home for the first time. Unlike previous wars, when thousands of illiterate peasants filled the ranks, the German army in 1914 was highly literate.\(^1\) Thanks to state sponsored compulsory education, German soldiers went to war more educated than previous generations.\(^2\) Ordinary soldiers from the urban proletariat and rural peasants to college students jotted down their personal experiences from the battlefield. They experienced the war on the ground, and through their letters they allowed their loved ones to share their experience. This shared experience allowed each to cope and understand each other’s predicament. Through the act of letter writing, ordinary German soldiers strove to gain individual autonomy in the First World War military apparatus.

In this section I will rely on the soldiers’ letter writing to explain the first days of the war and the ambiguous ways in which soldiers experienced it. Some soldiers felt ecstatic at the thought of leaving home or school and heading off to an unknown adventure. Many others fell in a deep malaise once the German military fired their first shots in August 1914. In many German students’ letters at the time one can see the degree to which their language was couched in nationalist influences. But for urban lower class or rural German soldiers the

---


\(^2\) Ibid, 42.
language suggested even more of a disdain for their service, and an impassioned desire to return home.\(^3\) In their letters they revealed the camaraderie, fatigue, and utter horror associated with the trench experience.

In the period leading up to the Great War, much of the German public thought of war as a heroic experience. On the one hand, nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche influenced many young twentieth century Germans with his philosophies on the will to power.\(^4\) From reading Nietzsche, young Germans believed that the war allowed them to break the chains of bourgeois society, and forge ahead to become new men of action. Nationalist historian Heinrich von Treitschke, on the other hand, proposed that, “there was no greater feat than dying for one’s country.”\(^5\) According to the popular myth further constructed by teachers, professors, and young Germans, German soldiers fought and died as heroes, never as perpetrators or victims. This nationalist paradigm of heroism influenced an entire generation of educated, middle-class students who went to war in 1914.\(^6\) This heroic ethos pervaded their letters home. The German nationalist students writing letters home explicitly and implicitly created an imagined community of front-line soldiers who mostly experienced the same harrowing combat. The heroic myths of Germany’s military past influenced these soldiers, and it was evident in the language present in the soldiers’ letters.

Already in 1916, Professor of modern literature Philipp Witkop of the University of Freiburg began selecting letters he collected from dead soldiers who all came from an

---

\(^3\) Benjamin Ziemann, 125.


\(^5\) Heinrich von Treitschke, Deutsche Geschichte im neunzehnten Jahrhundert (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1908).

educated, middle-class, nationalist background. These letters range from early August 1914 until the last weeks of the war in November 1918. He selected soldiers like Franz Blumenfeld who studied law in Freiburg before the war. Blumenfeld came from an urban family that afforded him the opportunity to pursue higher education. Fritz Franke, who studied medicine in Berlin, lived in Munich before the war, and came from a typical conservative German bourgeois family. And among dozens of others, he selected Otto Ernst Franke, who was born in Shanghai to missionary parents, and studied law in Rostock. All of these soldiers died on the battlefield. Writing in the interwar period, Witkop used their letters to construct official memory of the war in postwar Germany that corresponded to his nationalist principles. But at the time they wrote the letters, these soldiers were busy constructing private memories in their own community. It is worth considering what these letters tell us about the wartime experience before returning, in the end to their relationship to the postwar politics of memory.

In their letters home, many soldiers seemed to support the heroic myth of German nationalism. Walter Schmidt lived an academic life before the war in the quaint town of Tübingen studying natural history and absorbing all of the national rhetoric his professors lectured from their pulpits. Deep in battle Schmidt took the time to write down his feelings,

Our best friends, the most splendid men, have thrown themselves into the arms of this same death, and why should we avoid or dread it? It is the finest thing that can be granted one – and yet nobody wishes to die, because we

---

7 Witkop, 5.
8 Ibid, 17-22.
9 Ibid, 123.
11 Ibid, 338.
cannot help feeling that we have not yet seen enough life, we still know too little of its depths and mysteries…

In this letter the soldier tried to come to terms with others dying on the battlefield. He wrestled with the almost inevitable nature of death in the Great War. Yet he wanted to live. When he said, “it is the finest thing that can be granted one,” he referred to the principle of heroic death. Here, he used nationalist language reflecting the nature of his upbringing. He clearly believed that dying on the battlefield was heroic. And though Schmidt accepted the fate of his fellow soldiers, he kept their memory alive by giving metaphysical meaning to the dead.

Many Germans remember the first days of the war as a time of jubilation where large crowds gathered wishing their young soldiers well as they mobilized for general European war. For many young men living in the banal milieu of Wilhelmine Germany, they saw this war as a liberating opportunity. While still attending law school in Leipzig, Walter Limmer wrote his parents on August 3 describing the mobilization he experienced:

Leipzig (still, I’m sorry to say), At last I have my orders: to report at a place here at eleven o’clock tomorrow, I have been hanging about here, waiting, from hour to hour…This morning I met a young lady I know, and I was almost ashamed to let her see me in civilian clothes. You too, my good parents, you will agree that I am right in saying that I don’t belong in this peaceful Leipzig anymore. We must have a broad outlook and think of our nation, our Fatherland, of God – then we shall be brave and strong.

From Limmer’s letter, one can easily surmise that the German nationalists maintained a positive mood through the first days of the war. And thoughts of masculinization through war helped precipitate this positivity. Through the war’s trial by fire, German students penetrated
the threshold of gender identity, and became men. He was done with peace and ready for war. For many students like Limmer, the war brought a euphoric sense of heroic fate; and these soldiers shared this euphoria with their parents in these letters.

Limmer also attempted to create a feeling of power and authority. Later in the letter Limmer further expressed that,

> I personally have entirely regained my self-possession. I have thought out my position as if I am already done with this world – as if I were certain of not coming home again; and that gives me peace and security. *Solid and true stands the watch on the Rhine.*

To young Walter, war was a transcendent experience. Walter spoke for many young German nationalists who thought that dying for their nation meant ultimate freedom. When including the sentimental line about guarding the Rhine, he expressed himself in national song. And since these nationalist soldiers sang the patriotic song *Wacht am Rhein* many times, these words had a heroic connotation.

Many soldiers experienced the August days in a more nuanced fashion than the young nationalists. Most soldiers brought with them certain romantic expectations to the battlefield formulated by Wilhelmine culture in the late nineteenth century. Most bourgeois newspapers published only stories of the enthusiastic crowds in the big cities enthusiastically welcoming the war. To be sure, not all Germans experienced the days of August 1914 with

---

14 For more on constructions of gender identity through war see Klaus Theleweit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. by Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

15 Ibid, 1.


18 Ibid, 16.
the same chauvinist patriotism. In the proletarian neighborhoods few enthusiastic crowds filled the streets. Instead the people met news of the war with ambivalent feelings of curiosity, fear, and anxiety. In the rural enclaves an even more depressed mood followed. Most farmers and workers knew that their families and crops suffered if they left for only a few days let alone many possible years in a war they held with stark apprehension. In his war diary, Georg Schenk, a carpenter journeyman, recalled on August 1, 1914, “The whole German population was tense, as people were waiting for the mobilization of the German army…Many a tear was flowing and many eyes that had been dry for ten years became wet.” In the early days of the war, many ordinary soldiers from the lower classes chronicled these apprehensions in the letters they wrote home to their loved ones. Early in the war Private Meier wrote from the Eastern Front, “The long period of wartime wears down several former hurrah-jingoists. As I see the circumstances, the whole workers’ movement will find fertile ground after the war.” They already knew much of what to expect from war, since the factory owners had already exploited them in the factories. To them, war was only another form of exploitation with the officers and NCOs supplanting the owners and foremen.

While Germany mobilized, not all young German students felt enthusiastic or captured the glowing mood expressed by many. But instead of war enthusiasm, they reflected the peer pressure involved with those who stayed behind. Another war volunteer, Franz Blumenfeld expressed his reticence about war, but felt he had a duty to participate. He

20 Ulrich and Ziemann, 27.
21 Ibid, 49.
believed that, as a man, he must go or else show timidity. He expressed this ambivalence in letters written to his mother August 1, 1914:

You must not imagine that I write this in a fit of war-fever; on the contrary, I am quite calm and am absolutely unable to share the enthusiasm with which some people here are longing to go to war. I cannot yet believe that that will happen. It seems to me impossible, and I feel sure that things will go no further than mobilization.  

Unlike some of his fellow soldiers, Blumenfeld felt less of the euphoric sentiment toward the upcoming general war. Many of his peers felt war enthusiasm, but he shied away from this war fever. His words helped to relax his mother who knew that she might never see her son again. In writing these letters, Blumenfeld expressed communal bonds with his mother in a dialogue between the two. By conveying his private feelings in this letter, Blumenfeld expressed his individual autonomy and also placed his mother simultaneously into the act of mobilization. Before even heading to the first battles he and his mother experienced the first days together.

While many students went to war embracing the national myth perpetuated by educators and elites, rural soldiers brought with them a contrasting worldview. They did not see the war as liberation, but instead as a burden sending them far away from their families and farms.  

A thirty-eight year old Catholic peasant farmer from Lower Franconia, Stephan Schimmer sent letters home early in the war to his wife who remained in the tiny village raising their six children. In a letter only seven days after the outbreak of war, he lamented that “I can’t say much about us. Nobody knows if we ever face the enemy. I would like it

22 Witkop, 17.

23 Ulrich, 22.
A much older soldier from the peasant class, Schimmer had barely started the war, but shared neither the fanaticism nor the concern for appearing cowardly with the young soldiers. He expressed his autonomy in his letters to his wife by chronicling his everyday experiences. In one letter, Schimmer wrote, “On 25 August, it was my birthday, I went to confession again early in the morning, because we were off duty. It is, after all, the last time for this year. Maybe even for my whole life, for nobody knows where we will be sent to.”

Schimmer held a dialogue with his wife over their faith, his very human existence, and his fear of the unknown. They experienced the war together much like the students writing to their mothers. They expressed their love and devotion to each other through subtle, autonomous correspondence.

From early in the war, soldiers attempted to evade the censors with coded language. Schimmer’s letters from early in the war illustrate this point. Until April 1916, company and regimental officers selected, read, and censored letters as they saw fit. These officers kept greater control of their small units over the censoring of letters, and their soldiers remained somewhat reticent when writing letters. After April 1916, censorship became centralized. Postal surveillance units at the division level controlled groups of letters sent from the field. By eliminating small unit leaders controlling censorship, authorities were unable to “hinder soldiers from expressing even highly critical or subversive views.” Twenty-eight billion letters exchanged hands during World War I, thus making it impossible to check all of them.

24 Ibid, 36.
26 Ibid, 15.
Nonetheless, simple peasants like Schimmer still believed that they needed to alter some words in order to trick the censors.

Cyphered language afforded soldiers the opportunity to get their letters past the local authorities and mailed to their loved ones. Soldiers like Schimmer who fought the war in protest wrote some letters home to relay messages to loved ones. Thirteen days into the war Schimmer wrote,

Time has been hanging heavy on my hands as if I had been here for a quarter of a year. Sometimes I can’t sleep at night. It’s impossible to tell if we are leaving this place. When I write ‘I am fine’, it is the truth. When I write ‘I am fine’ and have underlined ‘fine,’ then you may assume that it means the opposite.27

By including coded language like “I am fine,” Schimmer successfully evaded the censors. By underlying words to alter their true meaning, he subtly resisted the military authorities, and strove for autonomy.

In his letters Schimmer expressed what many proletarian and rural soldiers felt as they donned their uniforms for the first time. They expected not to enjoy the war and wanted to remain at home with their families. When Schimmer expressed his sleeplessness and desperation in wanting to leave, he spoke for many soldiers who felt the same.28 The crowds in Berlin and Munich meant nothing to soldiers like Schimmer. These rural soldiers felt like victims of the circumstances out of their control. In contrast to the heroic myths expressed in public, they wrote personal letters to vent their frustrations and express themselves even in the face of censorship.

27 Ibid, 36-38.
28 Ibid, 38.
These letters also served another purpose: to accommodate the self to the new martial situation. This adjustment enabled soldiers like Schimmer to better cope with the longer war he had expected to last only a short while. He wrote in September, “Very often I can’t sleep longer than two hours because I am in fear of my life. If only I am not killed in action by a shot, just because of you and the children.”29 Only a month after the war he already began to lose all hope. In his hopelessness, he felt less of a bond with the military. He only bonded with his wife at home and the family he left behind. Many rural soldiers like Schimmer found solace in the relationships they maintained through writing letters home to their families.

By maintaining a healthy relationship with his wife, Schimmer preserved a sense of individual autonomy. In October 1914 he tried to carry on his farming responsibilities from the field. “Seed wheat on three to four further acres and don’t stop praying. Please send me two packets of sausages every week, nothing else.”30 He then expressed his feelings of despair, “Please send me two letters every week. I don’t need any bread. Here one can’t feel safe at all even for one hour…I had to cry because of the photograph!”31 He needed these letters from home even if some of the content saddened him. This behavior allowed Schimmer to cultivate the self and still maintain his identity as a rural farmer while in the iron grasp of the German military. The military conscripted him against his will, but he covertly wrote language that his wife understood. These letters allowed his wife to serve on the front with him and he in turn felt her suffering from home. She felt comfort knowing that he still cared about her well-being and the state of their farm. He also felt relief in her words

29 Ibid, 39.
30 Ulrich, 39.
31 Ibid, 38.
to him and the photographs she sent of herself and the family. These letters helped to form an emotional bond between Schimmer and his wife.

He, furthermore, distanced himself from the front by praying with his wife. In several letters he even described a kind of collective praying across the distance between them. “I pray in the field and when I am on guard…Please don’t stop praying for me. And make the children pray for me as well, so that I can return home.”

We should envision him imagining his family praying with him – restoring his family in spirit in order to restore his family in body. Much like his coded language he used in the earlier letter, here he subtly described his plight. Although she resided safely at home, this spiritual act further strengthened the familial bond between them. The act of letter writing and praying served to maintain private communities.

Schimmer also needed a higher power to come to his aid because guard duty caused angst and stress. By writing these letters home he could share his faith with his family as he had so many times in the past. He also explained, “It doesn’t look nice around here, for a battle has taken place here. Many soldiers’ graves are to be seen.”

Knowing that his death might be near, Schimmer pleaded for his family to pray for him. Their prayers became most important for him as he faced injury and death. In his most desperate period of his life, writing letters home caused him and his family to feel as normal as they could feel. By emphasizing prayer in his letters, Schimmer covertly expressed his feelings of fear and unhappiness to his wife.

33 Ibid, 38.
Through these Feldpostbriefe ordinary German soldiers dispelled the myths perpetuated by popular media. The heroism ideal helped many young German soldiers to enthusiastically fight for their country and meant a rite of passage into masculinity.\textsuperscript{34} Many German volunteers and conscripts like Schimmer, however, were not eighteen or nineteen years old, but much older with families counting on them back home. They never talked about German unification, superiority, or heroism that they might endure. Instead ordinary peasant soldiers expressed in their letters the feelings of a neglected community of Germans. By logging their private experiences in descriptive letter writing, ordinary soldiers constructed an ambiguous and nuanced alternative to the official narrative of heroic sacrifice.

Some of what these soldiers experienced was not unique to the First World War. In all wars soldiers die violently, try to kill the enemy, and hope to survive. In the recent wars of the nineteenth century, governments had mobilized citizens to fight for their nation-states and empires.\textsuperscript{35} In most previous wars, however, the majority who fought either hailed from the lower classes or mercenaries paid by local governments. After Germany unified in 1871, Bismarck implemented mass conscription to build up the largest standing army in the world.\textsuperscript{36} And most of the great European powers followed suit. Once the militaries authorized mobilization for the first time, due to railroad expansion, millions of young men went to the front in never ending transports of men and materials. This marriage of industrialization and war culminated in a conflict that grossly affected an entire generation of Europeans.

\textsuperscript{34} Ulrich, 34-35.

\textsuperscript{35} Moyer, 20.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 23.
Trench warfare became the popular way in which to categorize the First World War as a unique wartime experience. But there are several reasons why this representation is historically inaccurate. Warring factions in the American Civil War and Russo-Japanese War already had employed trench warfare, and Japan implemented the machine gun in the Russo-Japanese War. More relevant here is the fact that many of the same combat experiences were shared by soldiers on the Eastern Front who did not face trench warfare per se. In the letters of the ordinary soldiers it was far more mechanized warfare, rather than the trench itself, that spawned the unique combination of death, injury, and trauma. This mechanized, machine-like warfare occurred on both fronts and caused impersonal, catastrophic bloodshed. This industrial, mechanized combat of the First World War was the watershed experience that exclusively categorized this war.

Ordinary soldiers believed that mechanized warfare was the metonym of the Great War experience. Germany, like all other belligerent nations, utilized machine guns as a primary weapon that could destroy thousands of enemy soldiers in a matter of moments. Factory worker Erich Schurack wrote home from the Eastern Front in December 1916,

Yesterday we have accomplished a very hard blood job. We repulsed two attacks by Cossacks with six machine guns. We got them on horseback in the fog, when they were 500 meters away, and then all hell broke loose for them. Only a few could escape. Two horsemen came as close as 50 meters, their bodies were literally sawed up.

In his letter home, Schurak eloquently captured the destructive impact of modern warfare with a surprising metaphor. As both a military technology from the past as well as an elite corps within the military hierarchy often filled with the sons of aristocrats, the cavalry represented the slow-moving, organic society of yesteryear. They faced the machine gun,

37 Ibid, 17.
38 Ulrich, 75.
representing the new mechanized and modernizing society. This young factory worker was not unfamiliar with the methods of modern production, which relied on machines to produce its goods. In war the machines consisted of mechanized weapons operated by soldiers like Schurak to kill an enemy likely in the same predicament. Back home the machines mass-produced tangible goods for mass consumption. In the battlefields in the East and the West, the machines produced mass death.

German soldiers also tried to kill the enemy with machines of war, and they used letters to express how this forced them to find a sense of autonomy while adapting to the ferocity of modern warfare. Another young soldier Erich Reubke found himself on the Eastern Front lying behind a machine gun and contemplating his actions during the cold December days of 1916:

One would not know until experiencing the impact of such a weapon working on its most powerful level while lying behind it. The whole work takes place on the ground – mainly these thirty seconds of the most fabulous work and hurry until the machine gun is in position and ready to fire – and then the handicraft of murder starts. It must be a very strange feeling to lie behind a machine gun shooting at infantry troops moving forward. One can see them coming and directs this terrible hail against them.39

One can sense the fear and reticence in this soldier’s letter as he contemplates what it means to sit behind a machine gun. The soldiers understood the great power they held in their hands. But many never fully came to terms with how powerful modern weapons had become. They also comprehended how this mechanized warfare transformed their everyday lives. Soldiers like Reubke came to terms with the speed involved in this new modern wartime environment that coincided with the speed involved with modernity.

39 Ibid, 75.
Though the machine gun caused horrific damage and remained one of the keys to modern, mechanized warfare, artillery fire resulted in the most carnage. Artillery became synonymous with the First World War. But in contrast to the machine gun, which infantrymen could encounter directly in the field, artillery was projected at a distance and often without much accuracy. In letters soldiers recorded their experiences with this deadly unseen force. The NCO (noncommissioned officer) Hermann Droege reported what most of his comrades probably felt:

I am on the battlefield in the heaviest artillery fire. My beloved, dear Ida! I have no idea if I will get away alive today. If I do fall, you can be assured that my last thoughts were with you and with my dear parents. It is terrible. The earth is trembling. Today I have really learned how to pray and feel very relieved and I will go into death strengthened and consoled, if it has to be. If I can’t write another card, please give my parents notice of this one.

Unlike the machine gun, which killed directly, Droege described the experience of the artillery indirectly—by the way it made the earth, and no doubt him, tremble. Droege did not air his grievance at this horrible war in a public forum directly criticizing the destructiveness of artillery fire. Instead he covertly criticized artillery for its random and sudden mode of death, coming as it were from nowhere and everywhere. In this sense, artillery was far more alienating than the machine gun. He could not control threats of war, but in private he could come to terms with it. Once again, a letter home afforded this soldier the opportunity to restore his autonomy through a private bond expressed in a letter to his wife in Germany.

Many soldiers experienced a persistent fear of death. During artillery barrages, one or both sides dumped thousands of tons of shells on enemy positions causing in some cases shellshock among soldiers who experienced the brunt of the attacks. More to the point, the

40 Ibid, 83.

41 Ibid, 74.
soldiers anticipated scalding hot pieces of shrapnel to rip through their bodies precisely because of the grotesque wounds they saw afflict their comrades. In an exceptional case, an anonymous medical student described his own experience after receiving shrapnel fire in an attack on Belgrade in October 1915. He wrote this letter to his parents detailing his experience:

Oh my dear God, please help, help, save me, have mercy with the shot I am getting. I am prepared to sacrifice an arm or a leg. I also can take a shot in the chest. Considering an abdominal wound I was thinking if my bowels were filled, or if I had been eating a lot recently. If I were shot in the head…I told myself that those were usually fatal. 

In principle, his medical training could have prepared him to cope with his own demise; yet the soldier still felt hopeless in the face of artillery fire. In speaking to God, the soldier further expressed his dilemma and tried to find peace. He negotiated with God and hoped for loss of limb or a non-fatal body wound instead of a fatal shot to the head. In the act of writing down this negotiation and sending it to his parents, the soldier helped alleviate his anxiety. No doubt, they now felt the same anxiety by reading about his experience. But his letters also helped to ease their suffering because they suffered together. Arguably, sharing this suffering in loving relationships relieved the pain they experienced in this war.

In the act of writing letters, ordinary soldiers conveyed their private experience. These elegant letters helped the soldiers to create a private space separate from the public sphere dominated by the German military. The German military owned their bodies, but their thoughts and minds remained free to express on paper personal eigensinnig (unruly) behaviors. From this private act of letter writing they expressed their feelings that only a select few read. Because only their parents, girlfriends or wives read these letters, many

---

42 Ulrich, 71.
soldiers described specific horrors they were facing, poured out their political feelings, and they bonded with their loved ones. By bonding with their loved ones and writing down their personal experiences these soldiers used covert tactics of eigensinn to cultivate the self and maintain autonomy in a homogenous military milieu. Ordinary soldiers acted both as perpetrators and victims in the twentieth century’s first Great War, thus they mostly had ambiguous identities that remained in the gray area.

This small sample of individual letters written by members of the middle and lower classes in the early years of the war suggests everyday similarities in spite of the occupational, class, and ideological differences that could be found within the army’s rank-and-file. To be sure, many of the middle-class students reiterated the heroic myths of German nationalism; but even engineering students feared this unfathomable modern mechanized war. Along with lower class urban and rural soldiers who already despised and feared war, Great War German soldiers wrote letters in order to express their autonomy in an environment where autonomy was not supposed to exist. In the public sphere they followed orders and operated the machines of war; but privately they recorded their inner thoughts and experiences in an effort to bond with their loved ones back home. My argument is that, through these special private bonds of experience and suffering, the soldier and his family formed intimate communities of suffering. These communities had a cathartic effect on soldier and family, providing ordinary soldiers with a feeling of autonomy within a deadly situation seemingly beyond their control. As we will see in the soldiers’ newspapers, these communities will grow exponentially as soldiers make these intimate relationships public.

\[43\] Witkop, 24.
But at least here, in the initial act of writing letters, soldiers and families constructed largely intimate communities that helped them deal with torment, loss, and hopelessness.
CHAPTER 2

SOLDIERS’ NEWSPAPERS ON THE EASTERN FRONT

Commanded by Hermann von Eichhorn, the Tenth Army group battled the Russian army and took the city of Vilnius in September 1915. Many denizens fled with the Russian Army, and the Russians torched much of the city upon their retreat. After the victory, the German soldiers entered the surrounding areas.\(^1\) They occupied Ober Ost for the duration of the war on the Eastern Front, and for the Tenth Army, this occupation resulted in herrschaft over land and peoples. While occupying Vilnius, Tenth Army leaders began editing and distributing trench newspapers. Because of the speed and greater ability to distribute media to the masses, the mass machine age and rise of information technology separated World War I from previous wars. In these newspapers, ordinary soldiers, low and high level officers, and intellectuals wrote articles, poems, and letters that other soldiers read daily.\(^2\) These newspapers gave soldiers the opportunity to publish their eloquent poems, letters, articles, and stories intended for the private and public consumption by their fellow soldiers. Like writing letters home, the soldiers took the opportunity to air their grievances, but with a crucial difference: when published in a newspaper, these private thoughts now entered the public sphere. Though letter writing, through long distance social interactions, helped to create imagined communities of sufferers, mass media afforded soldiers the opportunity to belong to a community that was not separated but face-to-face.

The first issue of the *Zeitung der 10. Armee* was published on December 9, 1915. The editors spoke to the soldiers directly by categorizing this newspaper not as a daily written for

---

\(^1\) BAMA RH 61/1588, vol. III, 1-5.

the public, but a soldiers’ newspaper written by and for soldiers. The issue displayed in large lettering a disclaimer that reminded the soldiers of the romanticized Augusterlebnis. The editors christened these newspapers in the spirit of 1914 stating that the men in those August days were “happy and strong.”³ They described soldiers who are “honorable German men, loyal comrades, and doing God’s work.”⁴ From the beginning of the occupation in Vilnius, the editors saw the purpose of the newspapers to be building an ordinary community of extraordinary soldiers.

During the first months of publishing, the editors used examples of romantic literature to carry on the myth of heroism that Wilhelminian society associated with war.⁵ Knowing that most of their audience held the same knowledge of the German literary tradition, the editors published, as poetry, popular works by Goethe, Hegel, and Schiller. The editors quoted Hegel in saying that war, “is an uplifting experience that nourishes and maintains the health of the nation. If one stays in stagnation, the nation will decay until it dies.”⁶ By citing familiar Hegelian philosophy, the editors struck a nerve with the educated soldiers. They treated the nation as an organism that needed nourishment to survive. The war might be interpreted not only as a war of territory and national renewal but also a war of Kultur.⁷ The editors used the newspapers as a springboard for propaganda and to educate the uneducated. They wanted all German soldiers to know that they were fighting for national survival, unification, and the

³ Zeitung der 10. Armee, 9 January 1915.
⁴ Zeitung der 10. Armee, 9 December 1915.
⁷ Liulevicius, 8.
spread of superior German Kultur. The soldiers must endure this war or else the nation would not survive.

In addition to Hegel, the editors reprinted poetic works by Goethe and Schiller, icons of the German Romantic literary tradition. In “The Life of the Soldier” Goethe described in simple German that, “A soldier is free by the grace of God. The sky is your tent, and the green field is your table. The trumpeter blasts ‘good morning,’ good night.’ And with enthusiasm the soldier awakes.” Many soldiers most likely identified with these poems as they had been in Wandervogel (literally: bird of passage) units as youths with whom they hiked in the country singing patriotic songs and forming communities separate from their parents’ stale, authoritative bourgeois existence. By connecting with these soldiers through nationalist tropes, the editors attempted to bond these soldiers together. They believed that Goethe conjured up emotions deep within the soldiers. By providing a multitude of articles that transcended boundaries of class, the newspapers appealed both to the status-conscious bourgeoisie and the working class soldiers. The editors’ efforts suggest that they sought to strengthen hegemony over the rank-and-file and hoped to bolster troop morale.

The editors realized that the battlefield terrified many ordinary soldiers and the military required the front-line soldiers to experience the war. They published poems like “The Battle” by Schiller to instill a sense of a Volksgemeinschaft (national community) for all battlefield participants.

The front stands silently
Gloriously, in the glowing sunrise.
What is burning here from beyond the mountains?

8 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 9 January 1915.
9 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 10 July 1916.
10 Moyer, 27.
Do you see the enemy’s flag waving?
We see the enemy’s flag waving.
May God be with you. Wives and children!
Excellent! Do you hear the sound?
Drum roll, whistles blow
And belt out toward the ranks.
May God have mercy on your souls, brothers!
And in the other world we will meet again!  

In this passage, Schiller waxed lyrically over the rise of nationalism and the Napoleonic Wars. He used the flag and the family as metaphors for national unity. Many soldiers took with them the motto *Gott mit uns* which, in this context, could be read as either “may God be with you” or “may God be with us.” According to the popular myth, the German soldiers performed God’s work. If the soldiers needed a reason to fight the war, the editors made sure the reasons came down from a higher power in the eloquent language of the romantic poets. Here the editors are subtly associating war with divine providence, German Kultur, a romantic adventure, and the patriotic defense of Germany from foreign invaders. In this sense, the newspapers functioned for propaganda purposes.

Romanticized language and myths perpetuated by some editors could not dispel what these soldiers experienced in daily life. Unexpected victories in 1914 and 1915 left the German army in control of large amounts of land on the Eastern Front. The German soldiers came into contact with places and peoples they only knew about in books and whose traditions and customs were quite unfamiliar to them. 

This shock was made worse when the Russians implemented a “scorched earth policy” where they destroyed villages and land left in the wake of their retreat. German soldiers who had fought in the trenches of the Western

---

11 *Zeitung der 10. Armee* 2 February 1916; 10 May 1916; and 3 January 1917.
12 Liulevicius, 6-17.
13 Ibid, 22.
Front or fresh soldiers who had only read the heroic tales published by Germany’s intellectuals expected the eastern war to compare analogous to the western war. Once the soldiers marched into this alien and ravaged Eastern landscape, many soon realized the difference. According to Liulevicius, the Eastern Front saw “sporadic wars of movement across vast spaces of inhuman scale, along a line of a thousand miles, twice the distance of the Western Front.”

Along with their letters home, many soldiers also decided to express themselves in the public forum through trench newspapers. Perhaps surprisingly, the editors allowed soldiers to publish their own articles and poems detailing their everyday experiences. Soldiers used the newspapers to express individual experiences on paper, but in contrast to the letters, they shared their experiences with their comrades. Through these expressions, akin to the familial bonds created by the letters, soldiers shared a common experience that greatly contrasted with the myth of the hero.

Some lower level volunteers and conscripts published their personal letters for their Tenth Army comrades to read. The young soldier Leo Heller lived his life far away from his home in Germany. Heller spoke in sorrow-felt tones when describing how he was in danger of death and might die by the time his letter reached his love.

I write a field letter.
And it is no more than a love letter.
I want to write this and that in it.
And what came to mind is ‘only love.’
The postal service, who takes my letter
Brings it from the wide fields
Through gun smoke and a cacophony of sound
My dear then reads it by the fiery glow

---

14 Ibid, 12.
Heller wrote of love he left at home, and that love helped him feel better about his war experience. Then, at the end of the poem she writes him back:

Ach sweetheart, be with me and feel no sorrow
Because this letter reached you.
Even though you are in danger of death and harm
Nothing will become of the danger.
Because you are my love.
Only love, only love.

Heller alluded to the fact that he lived every day in serious danger, but their love will live on. Moreover he wanted to write about his experiences, but only love came to mind. By writing a love letter, he formed a private bond between himself and his girl back in Germany. Through this subtle expression, he could feel an individual sense of being even in danger and under the control of the military. This subtle expression allowed the soldier to perform something that he felt was important in a war where he did not feel important. If this letter had been exchanged solely between Heller and his girlfriend, it would have functioned as outlined above: as a private communication. Yet this letter was also published in the Zeitung der 10. Arme. Therefore, he was not only communicating with his girlfriend, but also with his comrades. He published a private experience that most soldiers felt in their everyday lives. And in doing so he bonded with his fellow soldiers much like Blumenfeld and Martens bonded with their families. This helped to form an autonomous community of suffering soldiers.

The editors knew their audience well, and not only wrote some of the articles themselves, but also allowed ordinary soldiers to publish their own writings. In publishing poems describing letters from home, certain authors used specific language that reminded many soldiers of how they felt every day. A light cavalry soldier lance corporal Kippes wrote
this poem “My Love.” It shared many of the same tropes found in the combatants’ private letters, including resistance to blind nationalism, national unity, and lyrical mythology.

Think not and question
How battle is.
Have savage blood
And fight well.
Because of gloomy days
It is not useful to ask.
I am happy, think I am young.\(^\text{16}\)

Kippes reminded his love, and himself, not to ask questions of how he experienced the war. He hinted at the severity and expressed his muffled happiness to ameliorate the sadness she felt. Instead of expressing nationalist rhetoric, Kippes subtly informed his love that his life was not like public perceptions. Instead, he experienced many gloomy days, but told her not to ask. He wanted to calm her, and tell her not to worry. By saying the words “I am happy, think I am young,” he played on both of their emotions. If she thinks they are still young and happy hope will remain in her consciousness. The editors published this poem to promote a sense of community within the ranks. Everything he wrote almost everyone felt. All soldiers felt sadness because they left someone or something behind they could only think about or correspond with via letters. In the crux of the letter, Kippes expressed what many felt at the time. Ordinary soldiers felt mute within the military occupying Vilnius and by reading these letters in private they felt like they had a collective voice. But the editors knew also that by reading this language the soldiers transformed themselves into their true self, which was the front-line soldier.

Like the letters written home, soldiers placed their loved ones at the front with them. Kippes described what many soldiers felt:

\(^{16}\text{Zeitung der 10. Armee, 16 February 1916.}\)
You are my lover on the Rhine.
I ride through the morning till tomorrow
Without worry.
I would like to be with you.
You are my little rose on the Rhine
Yet thunder booms
And blazes the lightning, a short hello
I pull into battle as you imagined

Ordinary soldiers not only had to leave their loved ones behind when they shipped off for faraway lands, but they also had to leave behind their homes. In this instance, Kippes left his lover on the Rhine much like other soldiers had to leave their families. By thinking about her, reading letters, and sending letters he separated himself from the military life. This poem played to the ordinary soldier by symbolizing the folk culture that many thought of when remembering their home in the Rhineland. Ordinary German soldiers from rural areas in western Germany or in places like Mainz and Cologne understood this symbolism and felt like they all belonged to a community of victimized soldiers so far away in Ober Ost. Everyone suffered in the battlefield and their loved ones suffered back home. The soldier and his love privately suffered together, and the soldiers publicly suffered as a unit.

This poem also served to rouse the pathos of German Kultur within many of his fellow soldiers. It signaled the tradition of protecting the Rhineland. For years soldiers sang the song *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine) based on the premise of the constant threat posed by the French across the border. In this contemporary context, it also signified the military culture present now in the soldiers’ lives. The authors also presumably put these letters in poetry form to reach out to the educated soldiers who filled out the NCO and officer ranks. It is not clear whether the works were originally written as poetry, or that the editors only published them as such, but they appeared as poetry within the newspapers. Kippes

---

17 *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 16 February 1916.
printed language such as “I ride through the morning till tomorrow without worry. I would like to be with you. You are my little rose on the Rhine.” He alluded to the romantic poetry in the same way the editors copied Schiller and Goethe. The authors and editors wanted the educated soldiers to form a community of readers and know that these newspapers represented the high Kultur they knew and loved. The editors wanted the newspapers to act as a vehicle for education as well as propaganda. Hence, the authors and editors had ambiguous motives for publishing these works. Through these strategies for herrschaft the editors in Vilnius reminded the soldiers that they fought for Germany and had a common cause. The soldiers reading the newspapers sometimes needed to read between the lines or provide contextual knowledge in order to understand the subversive meaning and the editors expected the soldiers to find that alternative meaning. By expressing their private experiences in the newspapers and exporting them into the public sphere, ordinary soldiers linked all Tenth Army soldiers into a network of autonomous soldiers with individual identities.

As their life at the front dragged on, the soldiers expected to receive letters and became preoccupied with receiving them. One article described how important letters were for the morale of many soldiers.

It does not matter if we are asleep and have to be disturbed. Give us our letters from home. Give us letters from our brides. Give us letters from our last love. Give us letters from our mothers. Give us packages of butter, apples and bread.

18 Ibid.
19 Nelson, 18.
20 Zeitung der 10. Armee 5 November 1916.
The rank-and-file war volunteer Karl Brammer expressed his deepest angst concerning the war. He expressed his loneliness and his private hell dealing with leaving his family and loved ones behind. Much like the previous poem by Kippes, this article attested to the immediate desires soldiers felt while on the front. Soldiers wanted letters and thought about them daily. Soldiers also wanted care packages with homemade food to offset the bland foodstuffs they ate every day in Ober Ost. Kippes also referred to the elation soldiers felt when receiving anything from the home front. Brammer took a private experience: the act of receiving personal things from home, and cunningly expressed it to the trench newspaper readers. When describing “packages of butter, apples, and bread,” or letters from loved ones, Brammer spoke candidly to his readers who he knew felt these desires every day. Once the editors published this in the newspaper, the intimate message distracted soldiers from their military tasks, and evoked feelings the soldiers repressed. This eigensinnig expression helped to form communal bonds between soldiers.

On the home front, the German families, friends, and neighbors of these soldiers were of course extremely curious about their health and happiness. Both the soldiers and their loved ones carried a burden of everyday worries that consumed their lives. Brammer went on to describe the various questions parents and lovers asked when sending their sons’ letters throughout their stay in occupied Vilnius. Mothers worried that their sons had to carry a pack that weighed them down. Or they worried about if their sons washed their clothes or bathed regularly, since lice and hygiene were major issues soldiers faced daily. Girlfriends and wives worried about infidelity and also commented on the extreme cold the soldiers faced on the Eastern Front. In this letter the girlfriend asked, “Will your hands freeze if you write
letters to me? Brammer ended his letter with his correspondent—possible wife or girlfriend—telling him to come back at once and signing it, “Thinking of you from the Fatherland.” Because the soldiers read these letters in the public sphere, the author knew to articulate his article in words and phrases they all found familiar. While the soldiers received letters like these in private, they all could read these articles and resonate with them. For soldiers who did not receive letters for one reason or another, they could feel like they belonged to this community of soldiers experiencing the same freezing cold, heavy packs, and longing to return home. The trench newspapers aided them in forming bonds between soldiers who experienced similar horrors.

Many of the same worries the soldiers expressed in their letters were addressed in the newspapers. Many soldiers still rode horses in the First World War, which prompted the editors to include several articles regarding the role of horses in the soldiers’ everyday lives. One light cavalry soldier portrayed how the horses suffered: “Our horses graze in the meadow, but most are deprived of grass withering because the country is almost empty of people.” Not only did the soldiers suffer from malnourishment, but the horses suffered as well. Tenth Army soldiers described at length their relationship with their horses. These *Kriegspferde* (war horses) grazed majestically in the meadows and fell with regularity much like the soldiers. By reading the newspaper articles and poetry covering their horses, the soldiers felt a special bond that transcended even brotherhood and camaraderie they felt

---

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Zeitung der 10. Armee 4 June 1916; 30 September 1916; 21 February 1917; and 22 February 1917.
toward their fellow soldiers.\textsuperscript{25} The editors further acknowledged the ambivalent feelings many soldiers had with modernity. The soldiers bonded with the horses and many felt hopeless being unable to adequately feed them. This lack of control embodied the World War I experience for most ordinary soldiers on the front lines and they felt helpless in the middle of the mechanized machine. The newspapers worked on this private feeling soldiers felt, and expressed it in the public sphere.

Ordinary soldiers began publishing articles that broached the problems soldiers had with military life. One anonymous young soldier wrote of what many soldiers lived through at the time. In addition to the frequent complaints regarding the weight of their packs, most also complained about hunger. For many soldiers, hunger weighed them down more so than their heavy packs and blistered feet. With substandard food rations, many ordinary soldiers often went to bed with their stomachs only partially full or even empty.

One sits comfortably on his horse. The more one runs, the more one sweats. On my feet there are endless blisters within these narrow boots. My full pack weighs heavy. Light is the stomach, if it is empty. Because the meat is so thick and chewy it exercises our teeth. \textsuperscript{26}

Instead of reveling in the glory of heroism, the young soldier described that ordinary soldiers thought about daily instead of leading a hero’s life. He described it in greater detail, “I can write nothing but the truth, one suffers from hunger here, it makes us sick. It is not any longer bearable.”\textsuperscript{27} Since the soldiers had no formal way of airing their grievances, they utilized the trench newspapers as an avenue to publically express eigensinn. By 1916 and 1917, the officers needed something to boost the morale of their troops. The trench

\textsuperscript{25} Zeitung der 10. Armee 14 January 1916.

\textsuperscript{26} Zeitung der 10. Armee, 16 June 1916.

\textsuperscript{27}. Zeitung der 10. Armee 17 June 1916.
newspapers allowed the soldiers to remain bonded together as sufferers; and from reading these articles the rank-and-file soldiers perceived that everyone experienced the same hunger.

The scorched-earth policy made an indelible impact on the soldiers’ consciousness. Many soldiers could not believe what they saw. In the following passage called, “Page out of a Diary,” a young soldier described the landscape they inhabited in the vicinity of Vilnius.

A light wind blows over the wide meadow. The clouds are white-brown from thick bellowing smoke of burning villages that lie before us. Only old men, women and children remained so the grain harvest could not come in. Almost everyone had fled or was driven out; the land lords, the priests, the farmers, all gone. Russian machine guns cut up the stables, grenades smashed into the damp meadow and shrapnel filled the ground water.28

In this article the ordinary soldier clearly stated the poor condition many in which Russians left the villages when they fled. He alluded to the power vacuum that the German army now filled in the absence of the intelligentsia, who the Russian military had either murdered or captured. This occupation resulted in herrschaft. By mentioning the Russian carnage, the Germans felt good about themselves and their mission. They believed that the Russians fought in an inhumane, barbaric fashion, and these articles confirmed that in the minds of the ordinary soldiers. Articles like this instilled a sense of camaraderie among the soldiers, but the soldiers also read these and found them recognizable in light of their own experience.

For soldiers new to the Eastern Front, who by 1916 were reduced to predominately older and younger men, the articulate speech within these newspaper columns assuaged their fears. Knowing that their readership was all male and many had just arrived, the editors performed self-censorship to maintain morale. According to Robert Nelson, the editors never published articles depicting enemy soldiers negatively because they, like the German

28 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 7 June 1916.
soldiers, experienced the same horrific predicament.\textsuperscript{29} Yet, the newspapers referred many times to the civilian Poles, Lithuanians, and Eastern European Jews as bastions of \textit{Unkultur} (backwards). In the poem “Russian Culture,” the young soldier Conny Brose painted a stereotypical picture of the Eastern peoples:

\begin{quote}
Ragged, ripped and ravenous,
Dirty, buggy, flea-ridden, lousy,
His approach to work lukewarm,
So he is at home in his country.
Such a Panje also doesn’t understand washing,
Something that is every man’s duty.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Soldiers, steeped in German Kultur, read poems like this one and could feel morally superior to the lands and people they conquered. They felt a deeper sense of self-consciousness that culminated in herrschaft, or a sense of being rulers over inferior people who they felt needed to be ruled.

The German army used the information age to their advantage, and like never before they published their experiences in newspapers for all German soldiers to see. The German army thus made private expressions of wartime experience into matters for public consumption. The editors relied on these newspapers to both educate soldiers into believing in the national cause, but also to motivate the soldiers into enduring the war. The publicity of the private served hegemonic ends. The military still ruled over the soldiers, but the soldiers also used their superior position to rule over the native peoples and lands. Where they could not speak their mind formally, by complaining up the ranks about policy, the soldiers also used these articles to their advantage by writing their feelings toward several issues soldiers dealt with daily. Thus, soldiers and army officials alike used the newspapers as outlets of

\textsuperscript{29} Nelson, 36.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Zeitung der 10. Armee}, 24 June 1916.
eigensinn. Through newspaper and letter writing soldiers formed a front-line community and also aided the soldiers in forming individual autonomy. In the next section, similar to published poems and articles, soldiers and editors alike used visual culture to boost morale but also to manifest visual representations of suffering soldiers.
CHAPTER 3

REPRESENTATIONS OF LOSS IN VISUAL CULTURE

Along with letters, poems, and articles, soldiers also expressed themselves through visual culture. The first collective war of the twentieth century saw artists on an unprecedented scale objectively and subjectively interpreting war. In their war art, German artists like Otto Dix and George Grosz publically interpreted their wartime experiences.¹ Unlike the patriotic, nationalist images emblazoned in government-censored magazines and newspapers, art produced at the front challenged nationalist interpretations by emphasizing the harsh realities of mass violence. Within these trench newspapers the editors wanted to speak in a language acceptable to most of the rank-and-file. Therefore, they carefully selected visual material that would not alienate the soldiers but bond them together.² Many ordinary soldiers wanted to display their experience on the pages where other soldiers could read them, but in the same trench newspapers the soldiers also could see many heroic depictions that valorized the war experience. By reiterating the same tropes seen in the articles, poems and letters, the editors allowed Tenth Army soldiers to consume these more authentic versions of events. In the throngs of a war that had lasted for two years and never seemed to end, the soldiers longed for an honorable method in which to remember their war dead.

To many, war was a lonely experience. Death was the last private act a soldier experienced. When a soldier died, many did not know him personally. His individual identity died along with him. He was just another soldier the General sent to his death. By publishing photographs of such private moments, the photographer placed the private act of dying into

² Nelson, 17.
the public context via trench journalism. And along with the poetry, letters, and articles, the editors used these photographs in the public sphere to maintain control over the ordinary soldiers.

The editors published artworks that reflected both nationalist myths and the soldiers’ mood. The soldiers in Ober Ost lived with the fear of death, but more to the point, the longer they survived, the more death they had to witness. In this age of unfathomable slaughter, the soldiers needed a means to cope; and for some, letters were not sufficient. This medium allowed ordinary and elite soldiers to transform the self from soldier to mourner and back to soldier again. By using the same methods already familiar with soldiers who read letters and the trench newspaper articles, the soldier-artists formed strong connections with their readers that played on the emotions of their fellow soldiers. The artist privately created his art, and after this private experience, the editors turned it into public consumption that the army used for political gains. In turn, the artistic depictions of army life also bonded communities of sufferers, but in a more realistic way since the soldiers could see in the depictions what they saw in their experiences.

Some editors tried to perpetuate the heroic mythology prevalent in many soldiers’ letters, but in visual form. Like the poems and articles published by the German army, they published heroic depictions of army life to educate the mobilized soldiers. The trench newspaper editors quickly realized that within the German soldier population a vibrant political culture existed. The editors published some illustrations capturing the heroic mood that a portion of the soldier population held. Some images were constructed on the home front and reprinted throughout many of the trench newspapers, while soldiers created many
Early in the campaign a General Litzmann wrote a story commemorating the Kaiser’s birthday and commissioned an artist to create a realistic depiction of their master.

The artist portrayed Kaiser Wilhelm II in full military dress. Even though all soldiers knew that he was their commander he wanted to remind them of his presence in their lives. His Iron Cross symbolizes Prussian tradition. The artist depicted the Kaiser as an honorable figure, a soldier, and a hero. Editors included these images to boost morale from above. Much like the hegemonic discourse evident in the students’ letters, they thought the soldiers would remember those jubilant August days and remember why they were fighting.

---

3 Nelson, 164-165.

The editors further perpetuated these heroic myths by sustaining that special spirit of August 1914. They already bolstered this narrative in the first issue of the newspaper, but throughout the first year they also allowed for artistic expressions that helped perpetuate this myth.⁵

Figure 2: “Never forget the spirit of 1914,” Zeitung der 10. Armee (January 27, 1916).

In this etching entitled “Never forget the spirit of 1914!” the artist depicted a memorial of the Supreme Commander of the East Paul von Hindenburg. This visual reproduction was used to further express the important duty required of Germany’s soldiers. By using Hindenburg as an example, the editors wanted the ordinary soldiers to know that their leader had given everything for the fatherland. And every soldier serving in Ober Ost must expect to also sacrifice himself. It stated that they laid him to rest in the hero’s grove in Dresden alluding to separate entities that the soldiers surmised. First, in this unrealistic depiction, Hindenburg was given a hero’s burial in the hallowed ground that stood for national sacrifice. Second,

they buried him in Dresden, which the soldiers associated with Prussian militarism and also
the height of German Kultur. Last, the artist insisted that Hindenburg died with the words,
“Never forget the spirit of 1914.”6 Through these separate symbols the artist conveyed a
special meaning aimed to resonate with the soldiers. These signposts kept the heroic myth
alive in the subconscious, and the German soldiers read these stories in the newspapers that
kept it in their heads. Where soldiers bonded with their families, the publications of these
works of art bound these soldiers together. The artist formed autonomy through his private
etching separate from the military, but simultaneously created a public discourse among the
soldiers who read the newspapers.

Many soldiers felt lonely and hopeless in war, and newspaper editors used the popular
medium of photography to ameliorate these feelings. By taking photographs of small plots
the artists gave a more realistic depiction than the artistic etchings could provide. This one
below lies near Vilnius in Kowno.7

6 Ibid.
7 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 21 August 1916.
The name Heldenfriedhof is significant because it literally means “the heroes’ burial ground.” Hero’s groves served as center pieces to remember the fallen as a community who died heroically for the fatherland. In the background, officers can be seen inspecting the crosses as if they were in a battle formation. Yet, the power relations have been reversed: these officers show respect and admiration for the German fallen soldiers. Much like Hindenburg’s “memorial,” the photographer issued a call to sacrifice. Laid to rest in battalion formation and honored by their attending officers, the dead represent a nation’s suffering. Thus, the dead act as a unit of sacrifice that the German soldiers respect. By portraying the fallen soldiers as a uniform community of sufferers laid to rest in peace they conveyed the message to all soldiers that they were not dying alone for the fatherland but as a collective group of heroes.

---

8 Ibid.
The editors published photography that perpetuated the myth of the hero. Many of the images published addressed various depictions of everyday life, the Eastern peoples, and satirical images of war; but many more addressed both death and sacrifice. Along with the hero’s groves, photographers also presented photographs of officers’ burials that attempted to popularize the Prussian aristocratic military. In this photograph a single tomb of a deceased army Captain stood in the forests of Vilnius. Captain Wichmann succumbed to his wounds in the field, and instead of shipping him back home, they buried him in the ground near where he fell but isolated away from the men he led.  

Figure 4: Dr. Schmitt, “Memorial for Captain Wichmann,” Zeitung der 10. Armee (August 21, 1916).

---

9 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 21 August 1916.
The photographer Dr. Schmitz, who I assume was in the same social strata as the captain, presented the tomb, detached from his unit, majestically in the forest. Etched in the stone it said “Memorial of those who have given their lives to the fatherland with honor and purpose.”¹⁰ Thus, this memorial served not only as a resting place of a fallen captain who led his army group, but also a symbol for all who had fallen. Since only some German soldiers saw this tomb in person, the photographer placed this photo reproduction in the trench newspapers to allow all the German soldiers within the Tenth Army to see it. This visual depiction moves the imagined community of sufferers back to a community suffering together face-to-face. The photographer and editors collaborated in continuing the cult of the hero, but this photograph also served as a symbol for all German soldiers who had died in the Great War.

For propaganda purposes, the editors included photos that isolated certain groups. In the photo below, Schmitz portrayed not just the single tombstone commemorating the fallen captain, but the pompous ceremony involved in the burial.¹¹

---

¹⁰ Zeitung der 10. Armee, 21 August 1916.

¹¹ Zeitung der 10. Armee, 21 August 1916.
By July 1916, the war had raged for almost two years with no end in sight. The battles on the Western Front had produced millions of casualties that undermined the morale of Eastern Front troops, who sat on the brink of breaking down over the strain of war. The editors used these two photographs and many others within the newspapers like them to speak directly to the ordinary soldiers. The *pickelhaube* helmets represented the Prussian military tradition, but most importantly for ordinary troops, they gave them a sense of community and a symbol of the homeland to which they so desperately wanted to return. In contrast to the photograph depicting the uniform heroes’ grove, the officers voluntarily stand irregularly, as individuals, around the fallen captain. It also emits an aura of patriotic sacrifice much like the photo of the isolated tomb. And the editors presented this photograph as a symbol of sacrifice in the name of the German nation, Prussian military tradition, the spreading of Kultur to the East, and comradeship. The editors manipulated the troops into rationalizing why they still needed to remain fighting and reminded them through poignant images that they belonged to a greater community of suffering victims.
As ordinary soldiers read the trench newspapers, they also found art etched by the same rank-and-file soldiers with whom they fought. In these images, the artists gave expression to a narrative that ran contrary to popular myth. Along with the heroic depictions of experience, ordinary soldiers also sketched representations of loss. The German army lost millions of young men to the Great War; death and sacrifice became a constant presence in daily life.\(^\text{12}\) Ordinary soldiers lost good friends who they had served with for a long time. Many, however, lost fellow soldiers they only knew in passing, or ones they had failed to get acquainted with due to the high turnover rate at the front.\(^\text{13}\) In a similar experience expressed by soldiers writing letters to their families, the artists constructed a community of mourners by publishing their personal etchings in the trench newspapers.

Unlike national bourgeois German newspapers back in the homeland, proletarian soldiers took full advantage of the trench newspapers publishing their artworks in expressions of eigensinn against the military authority. In 1916, Lance Corporal Weber etched this beautiful engraving, and like many other etchings found in these trench newspapers, the artist portrayed an abstract view of his subjects.\(^\text{14}\)

---

\(^\text{12}\) Liulevicius, 8.


The soldiers behind the one kneeling all appear with expressionless faces and in motionless formation. Weber represented the tension felt between the individual soldier and his military unit. Many soldiers felt alienated from their units due to social tensions, loneliness, fear, and a longing for peace. Furthermore, Weber depicted the subject detached from his group while mourning the loss of a comrade. Like the Captains tomb, the hasty burial represented the soldier’s isolated existence. To this man, the dead soldier mattered, and the editors wanted to represent how ordinary soldiers sacrificed themselves just like the officers for the fatherland. It remains unclear if this etching is critical of the military, and soldiers interpreted it in disparate ways. But it had a didactic function reminding soldiers that others were suffering. By allowing these etchings into the trench newspapers it allowed ordinary soldiers, in the same fashion of the letters, to construct a community of ordinary sufferers.

---

15 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 9 November 1916.
Artists employed folksy methods to tie in their art with regular soldiers enduring the war. Analogous to the various poems that alluded to Romantic Kultur, these artists depicted the soldiers’ life vis-à-vis German nationalism. Weber created a bleak, gray landscape most soldiers understood. The artist depicted the soldiers in Napoleonic era uniforms to recall the emergence of German nationalism during the Napoleonic Wars. From that struggle the German people, who did not constitute a unified national state at the time, bonded together. This artist recreated that common bond in order to speak to the soldiers directly. He wanted the soldiers to realize that they all struggled together as a community and a nation.

Figure 7: “The land which drank my brother’s blood remains German,” Zeitung der 10. Armee (October 24, 1916).

---

16 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 9 November 1916.

Some believed that their fallen belonged to the earth in which they laid. In the above etchings a highly motivated NCO had lost a close comrade in the battle of Vilnius. In Figure 7, his pickelhaube by his side and German banner in hand, he privately laid his comrade to rest. The inscription read, “The land which drank my brother’s blood remains German.”

Like the heroes’ groves, the “brother” represented all soldiers sacrificed in the name of Germany. The two soldiers are a metonym for the German military and for all soldiers. These representations build community metonymically on the basis of loss. And as the soldiers acted in defiance of death, they perform acts of eigensinn against military sacrifice that resulted in claiming herrschaft over the land and peoples they conquered. By publishing the private, isolated acts by individual soldiers the editors flooded the public sphere with political

---

18 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 24 October 1916.

19 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 23 October 1916.
propaganda. They consequently maintained military hegemony over the soldiers enjoying the newspapers.

Like the letters home, artists no doubt had personal, private reasons for creating art. In the art of field painting or using pencil to sketch an etching the soldier experiences a private moment between himself and the page. The letter writer intends for only a small coterie to read his thoughts. He might only intend for his mother or his wife to know what he thought. But in art, the artist designs his painting in order for a public audience to consume it, discuss it, and display it—even if this audience is initially presumed to be small. This private experience of creating art is evident in this etching by war volunteer Peter Weiss presumably of a soldier mourning the loss of his comrade.20

Figure 9: “Remembering the Dead,” *Zeitung der 10. Armee* (November 1, 1916).

20 *Zeitung der 10. Armee*, 1 November 1916.
Weiss drew a sharp contrast that provided a snapshot of an abstract, shadowy figure mourning his lost comrade. This abstract darkness, gives the sense of anonymity to the subject. By representing time and space, with the portrait being either at dawn or dusk, Weiss depicted this soldiers’ seclusion from his army unit. The loss of a friend puts into perspective the loss of self that can occur in such absurd circumstances. The comrade’s self is gone in a shallow grave far away from the soldier’s homeland. Weiss represented the unity of dead, ground, and soldiers as one solid unit of black in spite of obvious differences between dead and living. Set again in an empty landscape, Weiss gave the impression of a bleak outlook, but as published in the trench newspaper, it reached deep into the soldiers’ consciousness. And like the private letters and public articles, Weiss helped to form a community of sufferers.

In his etching Weiss also reflected on the hasty manner in which many buried ordinary soldiers on the Eastern Front. While most officers had hero’s groves and large war memorials, many ordinary soldiers were long forgotten in the fields of Lithuania. In the elegy “The Dead Comrade” underneath his etching Weiss expressed that sense of alienation.

We buried him in faraway Russia. We pulled him from the field out of enemy territory. Out of plain, modest boards we put him down in a coffin and covered it with fir twigs. He is laid to rest. He is the first to die. And so goes the frightening question. Who would be the second through the ranks of brothers? A cross made of birch wood. A wreath made of evergreen. With a helmet on his head, we put him to bed. In faraway Russia he is laid to rest far from his wife and kids shrouded in the dark night.21

Weiss alluded to a common problem of soldiers stationed in Ober Ost. The dead soldier never came home because they had to bury him in Russia. This elegy represented the loneliness all soldiers felt. Weiss described the materials soldiers used to bury their comrades

21 Ibid.
that stood in stark contrast to the materials used to bury the officers in the photographs earlier in the section. And unlike the large stone monuments constructed for officers’ burials, ordinary soldiers used whatever wood they could find in order to build a cross. Here, Weiss represented tensions felt between ordinary soldiers and officers. Many soldiers felt alienated within the military and also from the foreign landscape they occupied. This etching stood in contrast to the pictures earlier representing a German lust for occupation and conquest. This symbolism represented a community of suffering ordinary soldiers who strove for autonomy separate from the military hegemony.

In one sense, this image conveys the classic tension that divided soldiers and officers during the Great War. Ordinary soldiers believed their officers ate better, died in lesser numbers, and lived better lives in the war than them. In these art works the artists hint at these tensions.22 The artist expressed his true feelings toward his superiors in this diminutive version of events. When he said, “He is the first to die. And so goes the frightening question. Who would be the second through the ranks of brothers?”23 He inferred that the rank-and-file died first and in greater numbers than their superiors. By isolating the experiences felt by ordinary soldiers, Weiss’ etching set comrades of the same rank as members of a shared community of suffering.

Some artists combined the unembellished ordinary with the pompous, militaristic extraordinary. In this poignant etching war volunteer Alfons Betzold expressed what many


23 Zeitung der 10. Armee, 1 November 1916.
ordinary soldiers felt either in the trenches of the Western Front, the Italian Front, or the occupation zones of the Eastern Front.  

![Figure 10: Alfons Betzold, “Untitled,” Zeitung der 10. Armee (March 10, 1917).](image)

They felt that they represented a class of human beings as soldiers fighting and dying no matter which country they served. In this etching only the soldier’s helmet remained on another hastily prepared grave ensconced in the Eastern Front’s lush nature. Again, the pickelhaube symbolized his place in the Prussian military tradition. But the natural landscape juxtaposed with it suggests that he died as an ordinary soldier and in a wild land. The artist did not depict him in the same heroic fashion of the officers’ burials. The artist wanted to portray the soldier with nature so it looked like he went home to a living, breathing, and peaceful milieu. In war the artists helped soldier find peace.

Artists like Betzold also helped soldiers find an artistic medium. Underneath his etching Betzold wrote that “Hate has no home but love has a borderless, beautiful fatherland.

---

24 Zeitung der 10. Armee, March 10 1917.
Rebirth is what life is to us. From every hour and every terrible death”²⁵ His etching resembled a dying soldier embodied by nature around him, therefore completing a circle of life, death, and soil. Even in death ordinary soldiers could maintain selfhood through the artistic musing of their fellow soldiers. Loss meant a lot to the soldiers still living. These artists, however, did not express the true nature of how modern warfare affects the body. For censorship reasons, the editors did not allow grotesque descriptions of wounds or etchings portraying limbless amputees analogous to Otto Dix, George Grosz, or of the grieving mothers like Käthe Kollwitz sketched.²⁶ Instead of overtly representing the images of mass death these artists covertly expressed their feelings, which strongly resonated with the ordinary soldiers reading the newspaper.

The images published in the trench newspapers reached the troops in ways that the written word could not. Symbols sometimes resonate with soldiers to a larger degree than the written word, especially when coping with death, and the editors took advantage of this medium of mass communication. By publishing photographs couched in national myth, the editors tried to control the mood in Ober Ost. They wanted to boost morale and ensure that the soldiers endured the war. But ordinary soldiers published their own artistic depictions of the war experience that contradicted the heroic myths perpetuated by their officers. The soldiers publically expressed their feelings of sadness and isolation many felt privately. Through these public tactics of eigensinn, soldiers formed their own communities of sufferers detached from the military project and herrschaft over their military existence. Furthermore, ordinary soldiers used artistic depictions of the sorrowful war experience to

²⁵ Zeitung der 10. Armee, 1 November 1916.

²⁶ Eberle, 96.
help create autonomous space privately while publishing in a public forum for other soldiers to see and reflect.
CONCLUSION

In the interwar years, Germany struggled with how to remember the Great War. The veterans remembered the war privately, but public memory prevailed in national consciousness. After technically losing the war by signing the Treaty of Versailles, paying reparations, and accepting the blame for starting the conflagration, many Germans were not convinced that Germany actually had lost the war. National leaders on the right propagated the myth that leftist bureaucrats and Jews had stabbed Germany in the back by signing the Treaty.\(^1\) Many German citizens and soldiers believed that the German military had not been defeated in the field; and in seeing disabled war veterans and amputees on the streets many only witnessed remnants of the war.\(^2\) For many German veterans of the war, postwar myths collided with their own memories of the war experience. And the contradictory feelings that soldiers felt during the war carried over into the interwar years.

After the war, many Germans politicized the soldiers’ experience in the public sphere. George Mosse argued that, “the reality of the war experience came to be transformed into what one might call the Myth of the War Experience, which looked back upon the war as a meaningful and even sacred event.”\(^3\) The defeated nations like Germany needed to legitimize and justify the war experience to its people who were still in a state of shock over the war’s abrupt end. Mosse posited that a trivialization of the war took place in the interwar period perpetuated mostly by those who stayed home or were too young to participate in the war. But it also appealed to veterans by conflating the cult of the fallen soldier. A not entirely


fictitious myth that Mosse believed “became the centerpiece of the religion of nationalism after the war, having its greatest political impact in nations like Germany which had lost the war and had been brought to the edge of chaos by the transition of war to peace.”

To many Germans in the Weimar Republic, the German soldier, and specifically the fallen soldier, came to symbolize the epitome of German Kultur and Prussian order. Moreover, much like the communities of suffering soldiers constructed during the war, this symbol came to represent a nation of sufferers as a whole.

Influenced by the nationalist literary tradition and wanting to come to terms with their war experience, German soldiers like Ernst Jünger and Walter Flex wrote memoirs that captured the German mood following defeat in the First World War. Though historians and literary critics have exhaustively covered both soldiers, they are invaluable to describe the state of how writers and artists influenced cultural memory during and after the First World War. Flex interpreted the war experience by using nationalist, religious and heroic metaphors most Germans recognized. In his *Wanderer between Two Worlds*, Flex emphasized the importance of a hero dying for one’s country. This heroic myth was strengthened by Flex’s own death in 1918. Akin to the author of “Wacht am Rhein,” Flex synthesizes the patriotic song and the national emotion into eloquent language that caused soldiers to respond with patriotic glee. In speaking of the “sacrificial youth” dying a hero’s death Flex wrote, “His body glows from the choir of the dead. Lightning blasts from the billowing cloud. Then he steps forth with torch and sword. And he leads his German people through eternity’s door.”

---


6 Flex, 22.
Even within the darkest days of the war men like Flex wanted to justify why men died and insisted that they did not die in vain. By publishing memoirs by Flex and others, the German elites constructed a positive narrative to the war that encouraged the German public to believe that their young men who fought and died by the millions did so as heroes. In public, the German people remembered the war in black and white.

Nationalist scholars, who had romanticized the war through Hegelian logic before 1914, returned to influence cultural memory after 1918. Here it is worth revisiting the collection of letters published in 1918 by Witkop. Witkop clearly participated in a nationalist paradigm typical of the Weimar Republic that politicized the soldier’s experience. Witkop was a poet himself and friends with literary giants like Thomas Mann. He attempted to construct the war experience through the prism of elite German students, who could capture what they had experienced in philosophical terms. In his Hegelian visions, Witkop proposed that these young soldiers represented the spirit (Geist) of the nation. According to the World War I scholar Jay Winter, “Witkop’s goal was to preserve and perpetuate idealism of those who had volunteered for duty during the first days and weeks of the war and to show how deeply ingrained in the German nation as a whole were the values of these young men.” But these soldiers and others had already begun to politicize their experiences in a public forum during the war. By writing letters home, soldiers had already made the war public by outlining their private experiences for their loved ones to read and share. In the trench newspapers, soldiers also made their private artistic and lyrical expressions public for other soldiers to see. The soldiers had already constructed communities of readers at the front who discussed their problems freely among themselves. The imagined communities that scholars

like Witkop tried to construct during the interwar period had already been constructed by soldiers during the war.

The memoirs of educated nationalists perpetuated a myth of heroism that defined how much of the German public viewed the war experience during and after World War I. With the politicization of the war the German public began forgetting how their sons actually experienced the Great War. Veterans of the war wrote similar memoirs that aided in forming this narrative. The editors and artists in the Tenth Army’s trench newspapers wanted to portray a more ambiguous version of the experience to enable the soldiers to recognize and form emotional bonds. They used the public sphere to their advantage by publishing certain depictions of war that would boost morale and help form a cohesive community of suffering soldiers. They created myths as well, but since many ordinary soldiers published their art in the newspapers, the editors allowed for these myths to persist. From the public displays of photography and artwork, the soldiers managed their autonomy within a tense military environment wherein they found a place.

This project has in no way been exhaustive. First, a minimum amount of letters exists from soldiers stationed on the Eastern Front. The loss of the Prussian archives during World War II has left the World War I historian with only a dearth of material left from the forces stationed there. With a greater collection of letters from the working class and rural soldiers, I could increase the depth, and expand this thesis into a dissertation. Nevertheless, extant collections of letters exist from other non-Prussian units. For example, Benjamin Ziemann has examined many letters from the Bavarian rural soldiers. Second, I had only minimal knowledge of the editorial process involved in producing the trench newspapers. This lacuna greatly limited the scope of the trench newspaper sections, and a larger investigation could
reveal much more about the relationship between the authors and editors, why the editors published only certain images, and who exactly created the images. This larger examination could also precipitate deeper interpretations of the visual culture. Third, a study of the inhabitants of the Ober Ost, and a deeper understanding of gender relations between soldiers, occupiers, and denizens would greatly benefit a future project. By examining the interactions between men and women, either German or non-German, the project will provide a greater conception of gender roles and their place in the larger history of the Great War on the Eastern Front. A deeper study will also enrich our knowledge of the role violence played on the micro level, and the violent or peaceful relations between German soldiers and native peoples. But that requires language acquisition and would take years to complete. This language dilemma is why only a few studies exist on the Eastern Front experience. By acquiring a larger collection of ego documents and examining social interactions, I would greatly improve my thesis, and form a richer contribution to the field of World War I studies.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archival

Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (BAMA), Freiburg-in-Breisgau, Germany

Reichs -Heer (RH)
RH 61/1588 “Die Schlacht bei Wilna.”
RH 61/1596 Kriegstagebuch Ober Ost und die 10. Armee

Nachlässe (N)
N 241 Nachlass von Hans Meier-Welcker

University of Missouri at Kansas City, Center for Research Libraries
Liller Kriegszeitung December 1914-September 1918


Published


**Secondary Sources**


Fulbrook, Mary. “Life Writing and Writing Lives: Ego Documents in Historical Perspective.” In Birgit Dahlke, Dennis Tate, and Roger Woods. eds., *German Life Writing in the Twentieth Century* (Rochester: Camden House, 2010),


Kihntopf, Michael P. Handcuffed to a Corpse: German Intervention in the Balkans and on the Galician Front, 1914-1917.


Ulrich, Bernd. *Die Augenzeugen: deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933*


VITA

Kevin Patrick Baker was born on August 10, 1977 in Kansas City, Missouri. He served four years in the Marine Corps Infantry from 1999-2003. In 2007, Kevin graduated from the University of Kansas with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History with a co-major in European Studies. He began working on a Master of Arts degree in History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 2009. Upon completion of his degree, he hopes to continue his education at the University of Texas at Austin and pursue a Ph. D. in Modern European History.