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The War Experience of Non-German Soldiers in the Wehrmacht – The Luxembourg Case

1 Introduction

The Second World War witnessed the recruitment of over 18 million men into the German Wehrmacht, a substantial portion of whom lacked indigenous Reich German citizenship by birth. An estimated half a million individuals from various nations were compelled to wear the Wehrmacht's grey uniform and serve in Hitler's extensive army.¹ This chapter undertakes a comprehensive examination of the experiences of non-German soldiers in the Wehrmacht, with a specific focus on those of Luxembourgish origin. By delving into primary sources such as war letters, this study aims to unravel the unique challenges faced by these soldiers and their individual perspectives on military service.

Luxembourgers, like other non-German soldiers, were forcibly recruited as “*Volksdeutsche*” based on their Germanic ethnicity and were fully assimilated into Hitler's army as German Wehrmacht soldiers. In a bid to develop a comprehensive understanding of Luxembourgers' complex experiences in the German military, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore their perceptions and understanding of military service. Despite the dearth of knowledge about their front-line experiences, this study contributes significantly to existing scholarship, aiming to capture individual perspectives on the war experience based on war letters.

Over 10,000 Luxembourgers were conscripted into the German Army, and their post-war memoirs, interviews, journals and testimonies serve as valuable resources. While they commonly discuss the injustices of conscription, their narratives are intertwined with reflections and contemporary discussions about their role in the war.

¹ In addition to the 10,200 Luxembourgers, approximately 130,000 French citizens, including Alsace-Lorraine residents, were subjected to mandatory enlistment. Moreover, 90,000 men from Upper Carniola and Lower Styria, 8,500 men from Eastern Belgium, and between 375,000 and 500,000 Silesians were conscripted, see Pierre Rigoulot, *L'Alsace-Lorraine pendant la guerre 1939–1945*, (Paris: Presses univ. de France, 1997), 64; Kranjc, Gregor. “Fight or Flight: Desertion, Defection, and Draft- Dodging in Occupied Slovenia, 1941–1945.” *Journal of Military History*, no. 81 (January 2017): 133–62; Peter M. Quadflieg, “*Zwangssoldaten*” und “*Ons Jongen*”: *Eupen-Malmedy Und Luxemburg als Rekrutierungsgebiet der deutschen Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2008), 6; Ryszard Kaczmarek, *Polen in der Wehrmacht* (Munich: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017), 25.

The present study primarily utilises wartime documentation, especially personal letters from the front, to offer insights into soldiers who self-identified as non-German. The examination encompasses their biographical trajectory in the military, their motivations, their experiences as soldiers, and their encounters with comrades, superiors and the local population, with the aim of unravelling how they identified themselves, particularly in their role as soldiers.

Post-war narratives predominantly adhere to the victimisation theory, offering limited details about soldiers' military service. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on personal wartime letters, emphasising the importance of this neglected source in understanding Luxembourgers' military service and front-line encounters. It aims to evaluate the feasibility and significance of personal letters as historical artefacts during wartime, utilising the war correspondence of two brothers, Albert and Nicolas Pierrard, as a central focus. The siblings' exchange of letters while they were actively serving in the military offers a unique window onto their perceptions of military service. The primary objective of this research is to ascertain whether these letters can yield valuable insights into the cultural context, specific challenges, and unique circumstances encountered by Luxembourgers serving within the German military. Crowdsourced during the WARLUX project, albeit limited in scope, these letters nonetheless offer valuable insights into the military experiences of this particular group, presenting varied perspectives. The study recognises the inherent subjectivity in the expression of letters but emphasises their capacity to enhance our understanding of Luxembourgers' engagement in the German military. While this is a preliminary endeavour, these letters serve as a foundation for future research efforts that could leverage larger datasets and employ textual analysis to unravel the intricate facets of Luxembourgers' experiences in German uniform during wartime.

Luxembourgers in the Wehrmacht as German Soldiers

Following the occupation and establishment of the occupation administration under Gauleiter Simon, both male and female Luxembourgers were recruited for various Nazi services. After the imposition of mandatory labour service (*Reichsarbeitsdienst*, RAD) for men and women on 23 May 1941,² men were called up for

² Verordnungsblatt (VBl.) Chef der Zivilverwaltung (CdZ) Luxemburg, Verordnung über die Reichsarbeitsdienstpflicht in Luxemburg, 23 May 1941 (Luxembourg, Regulation on compulsory national labour service in Luxembourg), p. 232.

military service on 30 August 1942.³ The policy initially applied to those born between 1920 and 1924, but the latter year was later extended to 1927. When conscription was officially announced in 1942, it applied to men aged between 18 and 22. The announcement of conscription triggered strikes in Luxembourg, which were met with ruthless persecution, a state of emergency, and death penalties for those involved. In this climate of fear and force, the first recruits were transported by train to military training camps in October 1942.⁴

Prior to the occupation, Luxembourg did not maintain its own military force or mandate compulsory military service for its male citizens. Although the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg had maintained its neutral status since the 1867 Treaty of London and abstained from implementing universal military service, Luxembourgers did engage in various foreign armies, including the French Foreign Legion and a small contingent for the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army.⁵ Since 1881, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg had kept a modest volunteer company known as the *Freiwöllegekompanie* for the defence of the homeland. However, the company's size never surpassed 1500 men, which was later integrated into the German forces during the occupation.⁶ In addition to the approximately 10,200 conscripted soldiers, some Luxembourgers also joined the Wehrmacht voluntarily, as well as the Waffen-SS and the SS. However, determining accurate numbers is challenging, with estimates ranging from 1,800 to 2,000 volunteers for the Wehrmacht and around 300 for the Waffen-SS.⁷

3 Vbl. CdZ Luxemburg, Verordnung über die Wehrpflicht in Luxemburg, 31 August 1942 (Regulation on compulsory military service in Luxembourg), p. 253.

4 Dostert, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe: die deutsche Besatzungspolitik und die Volksdeutsche Bewegung 1940–1945*, 176.

5 Vincent Artuso, *La collaboration au Luxembourg durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, 1940–1945 Accommodation, Adaptation, Assimilation* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), 331; Ulbe Bosma and Thomas Kolnberger, "Military Migrants: Luxembourgers in the Colonial Army of the Dutch East Indies," *Itinerario* 41, no. 3 (2017): 555–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115317000687>.

6 Michel R. Pauly, "Die Freiwilligenkompanie unter dem Hakenkreuz," in *Militärsgeschichte Luxemburgs: Grundzüge einer transnationalen Entwicklung von Militär, Krieg und Gesellschaft = Histoire militaire du Luxembourg: principales caractéristiques d'un développement transnational de l'armée, de la guerre et de la société*, ed. Kolnberger, Thomas (Esch-sur-Alzette: Universität Luxemburg, 2022), 257–70.

7 Dostert, Paul, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe. Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik und die Volksdeutsche Bewegung 1940–1945*, 169, 171. Most men who joined the Waffen-SS volunteered. However, in some cases it is difficult to distinguish whether a person was forcibly conscripted or actually volunteered. If the entry date into the Wehrmacht was before August 1942, when compulsory military service in Luxembourg began, it typically indicates a clear volunteer. However, other cases are more challenging to discern. The line between volunteering and coercion can be blurred and must be investigated on a case-by-case basis.

“Volksdeutsche” Soldiers

Conscription during the Second World War was justified based on the ethnic origin of men from Luxembourg and Alsace-Lorraine (as with other similar groups such as Silesians and men from Carniola and Lower Styria), who were granted Reich German citizenship (*Staatsbürgerschaft auf Widerruf*) as a result.⁸ Luxembourgish soldiers were classified within the Wehrmacht as equal to Reich German soldiers who had been conscripted based on the Reich German Military Conscription Law of 1935.⁹

The Wehrmacht issued guidelines in February 1943 on the treatment and training of new recruits from annexed territories such as Alsace, Lorraine and Lower Styria.¹⁰ These guidelines emphasised the need to integrate Luxembourgers carefully and to encourage a conviction that serving in the German army was an “honourable” duty to the German people. The document emphasised the importance of being fair and considerate towards the new recruits, who were likely to be reserved and have negative expectations. Another directive from May 1943 issued by the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces (Armed Forces High Command Staff) instructed that Luxembourgers should not be treated differently from Reich German soldiers, but highlighted the importance of paying special attention to their training as they may initially lack some of the prerequisites required to fulfil their duties as German soldiers. The directive expressly forbade any jesting or mockery concerning the soldiers’ language or accent so that the Luxembourgers would not take offence. This initial stipulation highlights an

The author is currently conducting a study on the war experiences of Waffen-SS volunteers from the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg). This study, funded by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant (Horizon Europe), is being carried out at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies in Amsterdam (<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101063708>).

⁸ Verordnung über die Wehrpflicht in Luxemburg (Regulation on Conscription in Luxembourg), in: Verordnungsblatt (VBL) Chef der Zivilverwaltung (CdZ) Luxemburg, 31 August 1942, p. 253; Verordnung über die Staatsangehörigkeit im Elsaß, in Lothringen und in Luxemburg (Ordinance on Nationality in Alsace, Lorraine, and Luxembourg), in: VBL. CdZ Luxemburg, 23 August 1942, p. 254.

⁹ Wolfram Wette, “Deutsche Erfahrungen mit der Wehrpflicht 1918–1945. Abschaffung in der Republik und Wiedereinführung durch die Diktatur”, in *Die Wehrpflicht: Entstehung, Erscheinungsformen und politisch-militärische Wirkung* (Munich, 1994), 100.

¹⁰ Chef der Heeresrüstung und Befehlshaber des Ersatzheeres, Chef des Ausbildungswesens im Ersatzheer, Richtlinien für die Behandlung der Elsässer, Lothringer, Luxemburger und Untersteirer, 12 February 1943, Bundesarchiv (BARh) RH 14/123.

awareness within the Wehrmacht of potential linguistic and cultural differences, particularly in the case of Luxembourgish soldiers. Nevertheless, the Wehrmacht insisted on treating Luxembourgers as equals alongside German soldiers.¹¹

Approximately 10,211 young Luxembourgish men complied with the conscription order and joined the Nazi forces.¹² Some individuals evaded military service by hiding or joining the resistance, while others deserted during their leave and did not return to their regiments. Recent studies show that Luxembourgers proportionally deserted more frequently than *Reichsdeutsche* soldiers: an estimated 2,300 Luxembourgers deserted and 1,200 evaded military service, accounting for approximately 34.5% of Luxembourgers recruited.¹³

After receiving their training and preparation for front-line service, Luxembourgish soldiers were deployed to various branches of service and fronts. However, despite guidelines promoting equal integration, restrictions were placed on the use and deployment of Luxembourgers from the start. In December 1942, the Chief of Army Armament and Commander of the Reserve Army,¹⁴ General Army Office, issued a ban on deploying soldiers from the German-administered territories in the West (Alsace-Lorraine and Luxembourg) in France, Belgium and the Netherlands.¹⁵ Exceptions were made for war volunteers whose political reliability was beyond doubt, who could serve in Western theatres. In May 1943, the High Command of the Wehrmacht announced that in the Reserve Army, the distribution of soldiers from Alsace, Lorraine and Luxembourg should not exceed

11 Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, Nr. 1956/43 geh.WFSt/Org (II), Behandlung und Verwendung von Wehrpflichtigen aus den deutsch verwalteten Westgebieten (Elsässer, Lothringer, Luxemburger), 19 May 1943 (copy), BArch RH 10/12.

12 The numbers vary depending on the source and publication. Official figures are still cited today, with references to 10,211 conscripted men and 3,614 women. See André Hohengarten, *Die Zwangsrekrutierung der Luxemburger in die deutsche Wehrmacht. Eine Dokumentation.*, ed. Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, vol. 1, Histoire & Mémoire. Les Cahiers Du CDREF (Luxembourg: Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, 2010), 13.

13 Hohengarten, 1:23; Norbert Haase, "Von 'Ons Jongen' und 'Malgré-nous' und anderen. Das Schicksal der ausländischen Zwangsrekrutierten im Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *Die anderen Soldaten: Wehrkraftzersetzung, Gehorsamsverweigerung und Fahnenflucht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1997), 171; Quadflieg, "Zwangssoldaten" und "Ons Jongen". *Eupen-Malmedy und Luxemburg als Rekrutierungsgebiet der deutschen Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, 115.

14 Chef der Heeres Rüstung und Befehlshaber des Ersatzheeres, Allgemeines Heeres Amt.

15 Chef H Rüst und BdE/AHA/IaVIII Nr. 5619/42 g. K., 1 December 1942, see mentioned in OKW Nr 1956/43 geh.WFSt/Org(II), 19.05.1943, Behandlung und Verwendung von Wehrpflichtigen aus den deutschen verwalteten Westgebieten (Elsässer, Lothringer, Luxemburger), BArch RH 10/12.

8% as a rule, but could exceptionally (and temporarily) go as high as 15%, with a limit of 5% for fighting troops.¹⁶

This was intended to prevent the formation of groups and promote better integration, possibly leading to the Germanisation of Luxembourgers in the military. Leave bans¹⁷ and deployments that were mostly in the East were implemented in response to an increase in desertion rates among soldiers from Luxembourg and Alsace-Lorraine. Nevertheless, the integration of Luxembourgers into the Nazi military was initially quite seamless, with the Nazis hoping to shape them into brave and obedient soldiers who would follow orders without question. They were expected to fully embrace Nazi ideology and the notion of serving the “*Fuehrer, Volk und Vaterland*” and to act as German soldiers.

Historiography

The enrolment of *Volksdeutsche* soldiers in Hitler’s army has been relatively overlooked in scholarly discussions, particularly in comparison to studies on non-German volunteers in the Waffen-SS.¹⁸ While there is a wealth of research on non-German soldiers, especially volunteers from Western and Northern European countries,¹⁹ smaller nations like Luxembourg have received limited attention.²⁰ Studies exploring the conscription of *Volksdeutsche* soldiers from various

16 Abschrift OKW Nr 1956/43 geh.WFSt/Org(II), 19.05.1943, Behandlung und Verwendung von Wehrpflichtigen aus den deutschen verwalteten Westgebieten (Elsässer, Lothringer, Luxemburger), BArch RH 10/12.

17 A leave ban was imposed from December 1943 onwards for recruits from Alsace-Lorraine, Luxembourg, Lower Styria and Carniola, see Chef CdZ im Elsass to Chef of OKW, Keitel, 21.01.1944; on the leave ban for *Volksdeutsche* from CdZ-Regions, BArch NS19/2179.

18 David Stahel, *Joining Hitler’s Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Jochen. Böhrer and Robert. Gerwarth, *The Waffen-SS: A European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Hans Werner Neulen, *An Deutscher Seite. Internationale Freiwillige von Wehrmacht und Waffen- SS* (Munich: Universitas, 1985).

19 To name just a few, Geir Brenden and Tommy Natedal, *Norwegian Volunteers of the Waffen SS = Die Norwegischen Freiwilligen in der Waffen-SS* (Solihull, West Midlands: Helion et Company Solihull, West Midlands, 2016); Aline Sax, *Voor Vlaanderen, volk en Führer : de motivatie en het wereldbeeld van Vlaamse collaborateurs tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1940–1945* (Antwerpen: Manteau Antwerpen, 2012); Evertjan van Roekel, *Veldgraauw Nederlanders in de Waffen-SS* (Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2019).

20 Few scholars mention Luxembourgers, merely that they were probably part of the “Wiking” Division, see J. Lee Ready, *The Forgotten Axis Germany’s Partners and Foreign Volunteers in World War II. 1 Part One: Part Two (Chapters 9–23)* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Jefferson, NC,

nations into Hitler's army remain scarce and are mostly confined to a national-level perspective.²¹ Recently published collections of studies have delved into different cohorts of *Volksdeutsche* soldiers conscripted from occupied and annexed regions, such as Alsace, Lorraine, Silesia and Slovakia. Works by Zdenko Marsalek and Jiri Neminar in 2021, along with those by Peter M. Quadflieg and Frédéric Stroh in 2017, offer valuable insights into the enlistment of the non-German soldiers who underwent a process of naturalisation following annexation.²²

Luxembourgish historiography initially addressed the subject of forced recruitment primarily through popular histories centred on personal experiences that incorporated Luxembourgish recruits into the national narrative of sacrifice.²³ The prevailing narrative of forced recruitment has predominantly centred on the victim theory, particularly focusing on “our boys” (*Ons Jongen*) who were forcibly taken by the Nazis to serve in German uniform. Luxembourgish killed in action while serving in German uniform were attributed the status of “Mort pour la patrie” (“Died for the homeland”).

From the 1980s onward, scholars such as Paul Dostert, Gilbert Trausch and André Hohengarten produced comprehensive research on the topic, but this remained primarily within the national context.²⁴ In scholarly discourse, forced re-

2012), 297. Other sources, particularly post-war trial files from the Luxembourgish authorities who tried SS volunteers upon their return to the country and sentenced them for treason and collaboration with the Nazis, indicate that Luxembourgish were also part of Waffen-SS units such as the “Das Reich” Division, the “Totenkopf” Division, and the “Hohenstaufen” Division.

21 For example in the case of Silesian and Polish conscripts, see Kaczmarek, *Polen in der Wehrmacht*; Jerzy Kochanowski, “Polen in die Wehrmacht? Zu einem wenig erforschten Aspekt der nationalsozialistischen Besatzungspolitik,” *Forum Für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte in deutscher Sprache* 1, no. 6 (2022): 59–82.

22 Zdenko Marsalek and Jiri Neminar, eds., *Zwangsrekrutierte in die Wehrmacht. Mobilisation - Widerspruch - Widerstand - Gedächtnis in der schlesischen, tschechischen und slowenischen Perspektive* (Praha/Hlučín: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR/Muzeum Hlučínska, 2021); Frédéric Stroh and Peter M. Quadflieg, *L'incorporation de force dans les territoires annexés par le IIIe Reich 1939–1945. Die Zwangsrekrutierung in den vom Dritten Reich annektierten Gebieten 1939–1945*. (Strasbourg: PU, 2017); Haase, “Von ‘Ons Jongen’ und ‘Malgré-nous’ und anderen. Das Schicksal der ausländischen Zwangsrekrutierten im Zweiten Weltkrieg.”

23 Gilbert Trausch, “Die Bedeutung des Zweiten Weltkrieges und der deutschen Besatzung für die Geschichte des Grossherzogtums Luxemburg,” *Hémécht* 3, no. 39 (1987): 360.

24 Hohengarten, *Die Zwangsrekrutierung der Luxemburger in die deutsche Wehrmacht. Eine Dokumentation*; Dostert, Paul, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe. Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik und die Volksdeutsche Bewegung 1940–1945*; Trausch, “Die Bedeutung des Zweiten Weltkrieges und der deutschen Besatzung für die Geschichte des Grossherzogtums Luxemburg.”

Klos and Quadflieg also focused on the post-war period, on veterans' organisations, compensation and the return of forced recruits. Eva Klos, “Umkämpfte Erinnerungen. Die Zwangsrekru-

cruitment has been part of broader research on World War II, as exemplified by Paul Dostert's work. The groundbreaking study by Peter M. Quadflieg on forced recruitment in Eupen-Malmedy and Luxembourg was the first to approach the subject from a comparative perspective, including conscripted former Belgian nationals in Eupen-Malmedy.²⁵ While Quadflieg explores the recruitment process, the WARLUX research project (2020–2024) at the University of Luxembourg focused on the biographical profiles of those affected, their social networks, motivations, and personal experiences. This article is one of the outcomes stemming from this project. Other studies on this topic have mainly concentrated on the post-war experiences of this demographic within their respective home nations. Eva Klos, in particular, has made noteworthy contributions by illuminating the challenging quest for acknowledgment (and compensation) by victims of the Nazi regime in post-war Luxembourg, Alsace and East Belgium.²⁶

War Experiences Based on Letters and Other Personal Accounts

A significant body of research has explored the wartime experiences of German soldiers, drawing upon sources like war letters and personal accounts. Until the 1980s, this realm remained relatively unexplored in German historiography. However, there has been a growing scholarly engagement with the subject, initiated by scholars like Ortwin Buchbender and Reinhold Sterz.²⁷ Wolfram Wette further advocated for an examination of military history “from below”, emphasising the perspective of the “Kleinen Mannes”, the average man.²⁸ Subsequent scholars, such as Stephen Fritz, Klaus Latzel and Martin Humburg, have em-

tierung im Zweiten Weltkrieg in Erinnerungskulturen Luxemburgs, Ostbelgiens und des Elsass (1944–2015)” (Luxembourg, 2017); Peter M. Quadflieg et al., “Mal Blumenstrauß, mal Handschellen: Luxemburgische und ostbelgische Wehrmachtsrückkehrer zwischen gesellschaftlicher Teilhabe und sozialer Ausgrenzung”, in *Identitätsbildung und Partizipation im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert: Luxemburg im europäischen Kontext*, Études luxembourgeoises / Luxembourg-Studien (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), 293–307.

25 Quadflieg, “Zwangssoldaten” und “Ons Jongen”. *Eupen-Malmedy und Luxemburg als Rekrutierungsgebiet der deutschen Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg*.

26 Klos, “Umkämpfte Erinnerungen. Die Zwangsrekrutierung im Zweiten Weltkrieg in Erinnerungskulturen Luxemburgs, Ostbelgiens und des Elsass (1944–2015).”.

27 Ortwin Buchbender and Reinhold Sterz, *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe 1939–1945* (Munich: Beck, 1983).

28 Wolfram Wette, *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten* (Munich and Zürich: Piper, 1995).

braced and expanded upon this approach.²⁹ Moreover, “Feldpostforschung” (research on field post) across wars is continuing to gain traction, not only within historical studies – see for example the 2011 edited volume by the Feldpostarchiv in Berlin from 2011³⁰ – but also across various disciplines.³¹ This sustained interest reflects the enduring significance of personal letters as invaluable historical artefacts that offer unique insights into the experiences and perspectives of individuals during wartime.

Nonetheless, a notable research gap exists regarding the experiences of Luxembourgers (and other non-Germans) in the German forces during World War II. This study seeks to fill this void by examining personal experiences in the private realm. Despite the existence of several memoirs, articles in newspapers and magazines, and collections of testimonies (often in the form of interviews), the research has not extensively explored the personal testimonies of Luxembourgers during this period.³² Although valuable, veterans’ memoirs and personal accounts have frequently portrayed a narrative of victimhood, as seen in titles such as “Opfer in Feldgrau” (“Victim in Field Grey”).³³ While anthologies or letter collections have been published sporadically,³⁴ a comprehensive scholarly examination

29 Stephen G Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995); Klaus Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten - Nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998); Martin Humburg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges: Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten aus der Sowjetunion 1941– 1944* (Opladen/Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998).

30 Veit Didczuneiet, Jens Ebert, and Thomas Jander, eds., *Schreiben im Krieg - Schreiben vom Krieg. Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege* (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2011).

31 To name just a few studies here: Vogel, Detlef and Wette, Wolfram, eds., *Andere Helme - Andere Menschen? Heimerfahrung und Frontalltag im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Ein internationaler Vergleich*, *Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte* (Tübingen: Klartext, 1995); Marko Neumann, *Soldatenbriefe des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts: Untersuchungen zu Syntax und Textstruktur in der Alltagsschriftlichkeit unterschiedlicher militärischer Dienstgrade*, *Germanistische Bibliothek*, Band 68 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2019). An up-to-date bibliography on this topic is consistently provided by the Feldpostarchiv: <http://www.feldpost-archiv.de/english/e5-literatur.html>.

32 Georges Even, *Krichserlebnisse 1940–1945. Luxemburger Zeitzeugen erzählen* (Luxembourg: Edition Guy Binsfeld, 2003); Georges Even, *Ons Jongen a Meedercher die gestohlene Jugendzeit* (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2012).

33 Leo Schuller, *Opfer in Feldgrau* (Luxembourg: Luxemburger Genossenschaftsdruckerei, 1951).

34 Nico Everling, *Liebe Jett: Feldpost eines luxemburger Zwangsrekrutierten* (Luxembourg: Martine Everling, 2013); Norbert Hostert, “Briefe eines luxemburger Zwangsrekrutierten in der Wehrmacht,” *Hémecht: Zeitschrift für luxemburger Geschichte = Revue d’histoire Luxembourgeoise* 56, no. 3 (2004): 241–71; Marie-Thérèse Feider-Wenkin, *Trei Der Hemecht! Alphonse Wenkin - Zwischen den Fronten. Briefe eines Zwangsrekrutierten, Vermisst in Russland seit Januar 1944* (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2004); Camille Robert, “Briefe an Valerie,” in *Beetebuerg Am Laf Vun Der*

has yet to be conducted, with the exception of a linguistic study on Luxembourgish war letters by Melanie Wagner, which will be explored in more detail later.³⁵

2 Approach and Dataset

When exploring the personal experiences of Luxembourgers in the German army, war letters stand out as a pivotal source. This choice arises because of the absence of individual records of Luxembourgers in the Wehrmacht containing evaluations of individual roles or performance. Given the dispersion of Luxembourgers across various units, a unit-based approach is impractical. Consequently, war letters provide a unique and comprehensive glimpse into the experiences of Luxembourgers in German uniform.

In the post-war years, personal testimonies or ego-documents such as letters, diaries and memoirs about wartime experiences proliferated. However, these accounts, produced years after the event, often involved reflections and adaptations of memories. This study, in contrast, focuses on contemporaneously conveyed wartime experiences, particularly in letters written during the war itself. This approach aligns with Katarzyna Wozniak's methodology in her study on Polish forced labourers, showcasing the efficacy of using wartime documents to capture the immediate feelings, self-image and momentum of individuals.³⁶ Wozniak's work emphasised that concentrating on the wartime period can avoid relapses into national narratives. Similarly, this chapter leverages contemporary war testimonies to gain insights into individuals' immediate experiences during the war, adopting a perspective from below, as conceptualised by Wette.³⁷ This approach centres on studying the experiences and perspectives of ordinary soldiers, emphasising their daily lives, their attitudes towards war and violence, and the impact that military service had upon them. Analysing personal accounts, such as letters and diaries, promises valuable insights into soldiers' experiences on the front lines.

Zäit: Notizen Iwwer Dgeschichtlech Entwécklung vu Beetebuerg, Fenneng, Hunchereng, Näerzeng an Obeler (Bettembourg, 2014), 17–221.

³⁵ Melanie Wagner and Gilles, Peter, "Private Literacies in the Period of World War II. Strategies for Writing Luxembourgish," in *Linguistische und soziolinguistische Bausteine der Luxemburgistik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 203–28.

³⁶ Katarzyna Woniak, *Zwangswelten. Alltags- und Emotionsgeschichte polnischer "Zivilarbeiter" in Berlin 1939–1945* (Paderborn: Brill | Schöningh, 2020), 2.

³⁷ Wette, *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*.

War Letters as Source

War letters, often referred to as front or soldier letters, are fundamentally private correspondences. For this analysis, they are defined as letters sent during German military service, including those from training camps, rear areas, or front lines. These letters contain subjective perceptions of wartime events. Rather than addressing the objective reality of war, they focus on the experiences of contemporaries as conveyed in private communications. This gives the letters personal relevance within the sender-receiver relationship, making it crucial to understand to whom the soldiers were writing.³⁸ The narrative is crafted from select details chosen by the writers, highlighting how soldiers frequently engaged in discussions about non-lethal aspects of war. They described their official responsibilities, work environments, and experiences concerning basic necessities like food, drink, and sleeping arrangements—mundane yet essential aspects of their lives. Despite their subjective nature, war letters offer valuable insights into the events experienced, their processing, and the consequences of war.³⁹

The use of ego-documents, such as letters, has limitations. Writers sent letters via the official “Feldpost Service” of the Wehrmacht, with the possibility of being opened and read by censorship officers. The letters were subject to numerous regulations, such as not revealing the location of the troops or other military tactical information.⁴⁰ Censorship officers were required to investigate serious offenses by identifying the writer and his unit through the field post numbers and then handing him over to the respective disciplinary authority or military court.⁴¹

A notable case involves Albert Gaviny, a forced conscripted Luxembourgier who faced conviction based on his letters. Gaviny expressed intentions to desert and persuade friends to join him, while his parents prepared hiding spots. His correspondence was intercepted, resulting in his arrest and subsequent military court trial. He was executed on October 20, 1944.⁴² Soldiers were keenly aware of

38 Katrin Kilian, “Die anderen zu Wort kommen lassen. Feldpostbriefe als historische. Quelle aus den Jahren 1939 bis 1945. Eine Projektskizze,” *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 60, no. 1 (2017): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1524/mgzs.2001.60.1.153>.

39 Klaus Latzel, “Vom Kriegserlebnis zur Kriegserfahrung. Theoretische und methodische Überlegungen zur erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Untersuchung von Feldpostbriefen,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 56 (1997): 4.

40 Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten - Nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945*, 27.

41 Vogel, Detlef, “Der Kriegsalltag Im Spiegel von Feldpostbriefen (1939–1945),” in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes : Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Munich: Piper, 1995), 208.

42 WARLUX Collection University of Luxembourg, Collection Degrell-Konsbrück. See for more information about this case a blog post on <https://digiwarhist.hypotheses.org/588>.

the necessity to adhere strictly to these regulations, understanding the potential risks involved. This vigilance extended to refraining from criticizing military leaders, the NSDAP, and Hitler, given the widely acknowledged repression of the Nazi regime and the pervasive fear of consequences. Numerous instances demonstrate evidence of intercepted letters, often with sections redacted or removed.⁴³

Reports from the Wehrmacht “Feldpostbriefestelle” (field post letter office) and censorship officers’ records indicate that soldiers from newly annexed territories, such as West Prussia or Silesia, who were granted German citizenship through the Deutsche Volksliste, had their letters deliberately monitored, opened, and reported upon.⁴⁴ Although similar documents have not been preserved in the same collections for soldiers writing from Luxembourg, it is likely that Luxembourgish front-line correspondence underwent similar scrutiny. The fact that letters were indeed opened did not encourage soldiers to freely share their thoughts and experiences from the front on paper.

External censorship by military and state authorities was not the only force that limited the information conveyed in letters, as internal or self-censorship also played a role. Self-censorship refers to the conscious or unconscious decision by letter writers to withhold certain information, thoughts, or feelings. This can occur for various reasons, such as fear of consequences, a desire to protect the recipient, or an effort to present a certain image of themselves. Recognizing and accounting for self-censorship is crucial in letter research, as it can affect the understanding of the writers’ authentic experiences and views. Self-censorship may lead to letters presenting a filtered or adjusted version of reality, rather than a complete picture.⁴⁵ This limitation is especially important when investigating perceptions of war topics, such as violence and killings, and the involvement of Luxembourgers in the Nazi war of extermination and atrocities.

In letters written by Luxembourgers during the war, references to atrocities are rare, likely due to self-protection and the censorship imposed by German authorities. Wartime correspondence does not always accurately convey the true nature of warfare. These letters differ significantly from those written during peacetime, as

⁴³ Léon Beckius (born 1923) was forcibly conscripted but evaded military service and survived the war. He later published a memoir recounting his and others’ experiences of evasion. In his memoir, Beckius includes a letter from his friend Louis Krass, who served in the Wehrmacht. This letter was evidently censored, with several paragraphs blacked out, see Léon Beckius, *Vergeben? Verzeihen? Schicksalswege von Refraktären und Flüchtlingen 1940–1945* (Luxembourg, 2011), 49.

⁴⁴ Feldpostprüfberichte, 1944, BArch RH 13/49.

⁴⁵ Humburg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges: Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten aus der Sowjetunion 1941–1944*, 100.

some experiences, such as killing or the destruction of villages, are difficult to articulate. Soldiers may also choose not to disclose these details to spare their families from the harsh realities of war, or to alleviate their own trauma.⁴⁶

Despite these limitations, the chosen dataset offers new perspectives, enriching our understanding of the experiences and roles of Luxembourgers during the war. Before delving into the dataset, it is crucial to clarify the concept of experience. These documents provide insights into individuals' self-perception as well as their specific cultural, linguistic, material, and social contexts.

Experience – Term and Definition

The term “experience” is multifaceted and can be defined as an “actual observation” involving “facts or events”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary.⁴⁷ It encompasses carefully chosen and contemplated observations of events, perceived individually and variably by each person. These perceptions are influenced by personal history, previous experiences, as well as social and cultural backgrounds and upbringing. Situational observations thus undergo a personal interpretation or sense-making process.

This contribution proposes to extend the term “experience” beyond the events themselves to encompass soldiers' subjective interpretations and meaning-making. This construct aligns with the concept of “Erfahrungsraum” coined by German historian Reinhart Koselleck, which emphasises the role of historical events in shaping human perception and experience.⁴⁸ The implication is that soldiers not only encounter events, but also engage in a subjective reality or experience production.⁴⁹ For instance, a soldier marching through Russian streets experiences a multitude of sensations, from physical discomfort to encounters with landscapes, villages, cities and comrades, eliciting various emotions. The interpretation of these experien-

⁴⁶ Humburg, 196.

⁴⁷ “Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles. A-M.” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 899.

⁴⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, ed., *Vergangene Zukunft: zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Wissenschaft 757 757 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), 349–75.

⁴⁹ Klaus Latzel, “Wehrmachtsoldaten zwischen „Normalität“ und NS-Ideologie, oder: Was sucht die Forschung in der Feldpost?,” in *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*, ed. Müller, Rolf-Dieter and Volkmann, Hans-Erich (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2012), 579, <https://doi.org/10.1524/9783486852028>.

ces, the sense-making, and the resulting narratives can vary significantly from one soldier to the next.⁵⁰

Latzel emphasises that war experiences, like all other experiences, are shaped by individuals, although not solely on an individual level.⁵¹ According to his perspective, individual experiences and the meaning constructed within them are intertwined with self-images, external images, prejudices and judgments, all of which contribute to societal knowledge and are often preserved linguistically. Similarly, he emphasises that each soldier, including Luxembourgers, carries a unique cultural and personal background that significantly shapes their wartime experiences.⁵² Furthermore, Latzel stresses the importance of distinguishing between external factors that shape the overall military scenario and the subjective, personal viewpoint of those engaged in military and front-line service. Luxembourgers in particular bring distinct observational “lenses” compared to Reich Germans who were raised within the framework of the Nazi system. This cultural and personal divergence contributes to unique perspectives on the war and military service among Luxembourgish soldiers.

The War Experience in Letters

War letters, particularly prevalent in modern wars with a significant emphasis on the 20th-century World Wars, serve as rich sources. This private correspondence provided soldiers with a unique outlet to grapple with their experiences, offering us an invaluable window onto their perspectives. However, it is essential to acknowledge that, while these letters are valuable, they may not comprehensively mirror the soldiers’ inner feelings, and their reliability can be questionable. Collectively, they might not present the full spectrum of soldiers’ internal states.⁵³ Despite these limitations, letters illuminate the soldiers’ perspectives, presenting their experiences and viewpoints through direct quotations and statements in their original language.

50 Latzel, “Vom Kriegserlebnis zur Kriegserfahrung. Theoretische und methodische Überlegungen zur erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Untersuchung von Feldpostbriefen,” 13.

51 Klaus Latzel, “Feldpostbriefe: Überlegungen zur Aussagekraft einer Quelle,” in *Verbrechen Der Wehrmacht: Bilanz Einer Debatte*, ed. Jureit, Ulrike, Hartmann, Christian, and Hürter, Johannes (Nördlingen: beck.sche reihe, 2005), 177.

52 Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten - Nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945*, 125, 126.

53 Schreiben im Krieg - Schreiben vom Krieg: Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege”, 2011, p. 121

Rather than offering direct answers to questions about the actual wartime reality, the letters, as demonstrated in studies based on wartime or front-line correspondence, often document mundane aspects of soldiers' daily lives, such as the weather and food.⁵⁴ Additionally, they include brief and reassuring messages to loved ones. Instead of focusing on comprehensive accounts of wartime events, the letters concentrate on situations witnessed and conveyed through private communication. This holds personal significance within the sender-receiver relationship, with personal and private communication centred on the sender and receiver playing a crucial role in these letters. The sender actively shapes what the recipient should know and how they should perceive it.⁵⁵

Examining these different levels – what soldiers saw, what they thought and what they chose to write – requires a detailed and careful approach during a close reading of the letters. Understanding more about the background of the writers, the Pierrard brothers, their role and their journey into the military is essential. Official documents of Luxembourgers serving in the Wehrmacht will be considered when introducing the letters and discussing individual moments within the brothers' war experiences.

While it is important to recognise the value of these sources, it is equally crucial to acknowledge that they might not represent the overall Luxembourgish wartime experience. Instead, they provide a glimpse into how individuals personally perceived and understood the military aspects. The research process involving these letters is complex due to factors such as subjectivity, censorship, internal censorship, and the need to contextualise the information they contain, regardless of its perceived accuracy. Notably, there are gaps that must be considered, as soldiers experienced much more than what they explicitly stated in their letters. But despite their limitations, letters offer a unique insight into the subjective experience of an event, capturing the emotions and thoughts of the writer at the time.

The term "war" is inherently broad and complex, encompassing various facets. Although Luxembourgers directly experienced the Second World War with the beginning of the occupation in May 1940, their exposure to the challenges posed by neighbouring Nazi Germany commenced as early as September 1939. This exposure encompassed difficulties in travel, economic impacts, diplomatic challenges, and the personal fear of events unfolding across the eastern border. When referring to the war experiences of Luxembourgers in German military

54 Nina Janz, "Between the Front and Home – War Letters of Luxembourgers in Nazi Forces and Organisations during WWII as a Source to Study Their Individual War Experiences", Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH), University of Luxembourg, 2021.

55 Kilian, "Die anderen zu Wort kommen lassen. Feldpostbriefe als historische. Quelle aus den Jahren 1939 bis 1945. Eine Projektskizze," 163.

uniform, the focus is specifically on their time served as soldiers in the German Wehrmacht (1942–1945). This includes periods not only directly at the front-lines but also in various military functions, including training camps and rear areas.

The Letters by the Pierrard Brothers

Numerous war letters, particularly those from Luxembourgers serving in the German Wehrmacht, have survived, though often in a fragmented state.⁵⁶ To address this archival gap, the WARLUX project at the University of Luxembourg launched a call to contribute war letters in 2021. This call specifically targeted ego-documents, such as diaries and letters from the families of former forced conscripts, both male and female. The primary aim was to enrich the archival record and provide a more comprehensive understanding of Luxembourgers' experiences in the German Wehrmacht during wartime. Coordinated by the author, the collaborative efforts of the research team successfully curated a highly insightful collection of approximately 5,000 war letters, including some diaries, from Wehrmacht soldiers of Luxembourgish origin.

The material used for this article, namely the letters from the Pierrard brothers, is drawn from this crowdsourced collection established by the WARLUX team.⁵⁷ This article predominantly relies on the significant collection generously provided by the Pierrard family, comprising a total of 150 letters. The majority of the collection consists of correspondence exchanged between brothers Nicolas and Albert Pierrard, who consistently communicated with family and friends throughout the war.

The transcription process was facilitated using handwritten text recognition with Transkribus (by ReadCOOP).⁵⁸ Subsequent qualitative-hermeneutical research employed a meticulous approach involving close reading. As the WARLUX project was a pilot initiative focused on the letters of forcibly conscripted soldiers, this contribution serves as the first overview and article from this collection, with the expectation of more to follow. Larger scale text analysis methods, such as topic modelling and text mining, were not applied due to the dataset's limited

⁵⁶ A Centre for Documentation and Research on Forced Enlistment (Centre de documentation et de recherche sur l'enrôlement forcé – CDREF) was established in 2005 within the Ministry of State (Ministère d'État) but was dissolved in 2016.

⁵⁷ Nina Janz, "The Participatory Aspect Of Creating A Collection On WWII Collecting Ego-Documents From Luxembourgish Recruits And Their Families," *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* XXV, no. 2 (2023): 81–103.

⁵⁸ <https://readcoop.eu>.

size. Nevertheless, for the analysis of the now machine-readable letters, a relational database (“nodegoat”) was used primarily to store the data, including meta-data such as author, recipient, date, place, unit information, and family details.⁵⁹

The author conducted a qualitative text analysis, drawing on the work of German author Klaus Latzel, who conducted a comparative study of German soldiers’ letters from the First and Second World War.⁶⁰ The author adapted Latzel’s category set, focusing particularly on aspects of the war itself, such as deployment, front-line events, aspects of cohesion and integration into the Wehrmacht, and signs of exclusion. Attention to language, code-switching, and the use of German terms or names was crucial in this context. The text was annotated, and tags were set following Latzel’s framework. Although this may appear to be a simplified approach, this is a conceptual study aiming to explore the value of letters

59 The WARLUX project included a detailed case study on the town of Schiffflange, examining the impacts of war experiences on individuals and their families. A relational database (Nodegoat by Lab 1100: <https://lab1100.com>) was created to “map” the lives of these individuals, covering their military service, cases of relocation, resistance, and internment, along with short biographies. This database also served as a repository for data and metadata for researchers. Due to archival restrictions and data privacy regulations, only parts of the database are available online: <https://warlux.uni.lu/?language=en>. For more about the data model and the procedure of mapping the lives of the conscripted men, see Nina Janz, “Mapping Biographies in a Relational Database. Biographies of Luxembourgish Soldiers in the Second World War,” ed. Eero Hyvönen et al., *Biographical Data in a Digital World 2022*, 16 January 2024, https://doi.org/doi.org/10.3986/9789610508120_3.)

The database and website provide short bios, linking networks and deployments of these individuals. Alongside the Schiffflange case study, WARLUX developed a crowdsourced digitised war letters collection. Although the majority of the letters are not accessible to the public yet, the online collection (<https://warlux.uni.lu/letters?language=en>) contains 163 letters, which are fully text searchable and can be filtered by the name of the sender, recipient, type of service (Wehrmacht service or Reichsarbeitsdienst), type of letter (home to front, front to home, POW camp to home), and location of the front. These letters include those from men featured in the Schiffflange case study and other collections, such as the Pierrard brothers’ letters (only part of the Collection Pierrard is published (https://warlux.uni.lu/letters.p/0.m/embed.v/viewer.p|1|2202|filter|8122_OD_22208_8068-OR:8068-9664021|grid|?language=en)).

60 Latzel’s category set:

A. Military and War without Combat, B. Intra-Military Relationships, C. Foreign People, Countries, and Resources, D. Combat, Death, Enemy, E. Jews and Persecution of Jews, F. External Situation, G. Personal Situation; Meaning of War, H. Political-Military War Goals, Meaning or Meaninglessness of War and One’s Own Role in It, I. Border Front – Home leave, K. Personal Relationships in War, L. Left Behind Self-Employed Professional Existence, M. Air War, N. Expectations for the Post-War Period, see Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten - Nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnisse, Kriegserfahrung 1939–1945*, 116.

from non-German soldiers and to identify potential differences compared to other established literature on soldiers' subjective war perceptions.⁶¹

A larger dataset is necessary to extend the project and apply advanced analytical methods, such as topic modelling and text mining, to obtain more detailed and comprehensive results.

The Pierrard Brothers

The Pierrard family, originally hailing from Rambrouch near Diekirch in northern Luxembourg, constituted a middle-class household with five children – Joseph (born 1917), Adolphe (born 1919), Albert (born 1922), Nicolas (born 1923), and Catherine (born around 1925). The father, Jean-Pierre, earned a living as a tailor, while the mother passed away in 1931. After the start of the Nazi occupation, Jean-Pierre continued his tailoring work, while some of his children were compelled to join various labour and front services. Following the enactment of the conscription law on 30 August 1942, initially applicable to the birth cohort 1920–1924 and later extended to 1927, Albert and Nicolas were conscripted, while the elder sons were exempt.⁶²

The comprehensive collection encompasses approximately 200 letters, primarily correspondence between the brothers and their family, but also some letters exchanged with friends. Interestingly, a discernible shift in language and content is noted within the collection, particularly when the brothers wrote from RAD or military training camps and from the front. The letters addressed to their father (and other family members) tend to adopt a more generalised tone, whereas those directed to Catherine in particular emphasise topics related to food, cooking specifics,

⁶¹ For this article, the author utilized a category set primarily based on Latzel's framework, while also making modifications. In **A**, "Military and War Without Combat," the author included specific regulations for non-German soldiers, integration efforts for Luxembourgers, and punishment. In **B**, "Intra-Military Relationships," the author added encounters with other non-German soldiers, interactions with Reich Germans, considerations of group cohesion—including integration and exclusion—and signs of adaptation. For **G**, "Personal Situation," the author specifically included aspects of identity as Luxembourgers, questioning or doubting military service, and acts of rebellion and aversion toward military service. In **I**, "Front – Home," the author focused on the situation at home in occupied Luxembourg and family attitudes toward the occupation. Additionally, the author introduced two new categories: **O**, "German Identity and Culture," and **P**, "Language," which examined the use of language (German or Luxembourgish), code-switching, and the use of German terms.

⁶² Although Catherine was theoretically required to serve in the RAD, the author's examination of the documents did not provide clarity on whether she was indeed called up. The correspondence with her contains no information regarding her conscription status.

and requisitions for additional provisions such as saccharin, cookies, or equipment like warm gloves.⁶³ For this preliminary conceptual study, the primary focus lies on the letters exchanged between the two brothers, although consideration is also given to other correspondence and communication with family members and friends.

Limited information is available about the Pierrard brothers before the onset of the occupation. Nicolas attended a boarding school in Luxembourg City, while Albert likely contributed to his father's tailoring business before joining the Labour Service/RAD in Hanover, Germany, in April. Subsequently enlisted with the first cohort in September 1942, Albert underwent training in Denmark during the winter of 1943, specialising as a radio operator, and was later deployed to the Eastern Front.

Aged 17 at the start of the Nazi occupation, Nicolas continued his education, maintaining regular correspondence with his family. Conscripted into the RAD in late 1942 and subsequently into the Wehrmacht, Nicolas served in artillery, specialising in operating machine guns. Following a training camp in Lubiatoŭo (*Lübtow*), today Poland, in July 1943 he was sent to Belarus for further training. After completing their training, both brothers served in combat units at the Eastern Front. Nicolas, assigned to the 4th Field Replacement Battalion 178, later transferred to the Grenadier-Ersatz-Battalion 145 Konstanz, where he met his demise on 6 March 1944 in Brody, Belarus.⁶⁴ Albert served in Belarus and survived the conflict.⁶⁵

The brothers, along with their siblings, were raised by their father in a small rural town, receiving a church-based education, which is reflected in their letters. If Luxembourg had not been occupied, they likely would have pursued occupations in tailoring, mirroring their father, and would have married, had children and enjoyed life's simple pleasures. The stability provided by their father's work as a tailor would have shielded them from concerns about war and military service, given Luxembourg's neutral stance. The country did not have mandatory military service, meaning that the brothers would not have been obliged to enlist. When Nicolas was conscripted, Albert, as the elder sibling already in the military, expressed in letters to his younger brother, who was serving in the RAD, his hope that Nicolas would not be sent to Russia.

⁶³ Given that the collection predominantly features letters from the wartime period, the completeness of the collection is uncertain. It is likely that the brothers wrote more letters which may not have been preserved. Although there may be additional letters, the surviving collection was maintained within the family, particularly by the brothers' niece, the daughter of Joseph Pierrard, who gave the letters to the University and engaged in informative discussions with the author regarding her family and the brothers.

⁶⁴ BArch B 563–1 KARTEI ZA P-1051/109.

⁶⁵ No military documentary sources about Albert Pierrard are available in the former Wehrmacht Archive (*Wehrmachtauskunftstelle*), now the Bundesarchiv Berlin.

Analysing the nuances in communication, it is clear that the letters between the Pierrard brothers exhibit distinct patterns depending on the recipient. When corresponding with their sister or father, the content often revolves around general well-being, food, and requests for additional parcels. Notably, Albert shares with Nicolas details about encountering attractive girls during his travels. Consistent in their reassurances to their father and sister, the letters convey a sense of security and the overall well-being of the brothers.

Scrutinising the letters provides insights into their military service, offering a multifaceted view. The content reveals aspects of military discipline, conduct, and the dynamics of relationships within the military realm. Additionally, the letters shed light on the complexities of navigating a dual identity as both Luxembourgers and soldiers in German uniform. This exploration encompasses considerations of integration, potential special treatment, advantages, prejudices, or instances of exclusion within the Wehrmacht. Further detailing their military roles, Nicolas, assigned to artillery and operating heavy machine guns, clearly had a specialised combat role. In contrast, Albert's service as a radio operator in the infantry signifies a crucial communications function. These distinctions underscore the diversity of experiences within the military. Nicolas did not return, succumbing to the rigours of war. After the conflict, Albert continued in the family tradition, becoming a tailor and establishing his own business. However, his life was cut short by illness, and he passed away at the age of 53 in 1975.⁶⁶

3 The Luxembourgish War Letters

Before delving into the specific letters written by the Pierrard brothers, various themes emerge as reflections on the Wehrmacht, the war and the front, contributing to a broader discourse on military service. This investigation aims to delineate the narrative landscape within the letters, focusing on key aspects such as the soldiers' identity, linguistic expressions, perspectives on the military institution, and temporal experiences as German soldiers. The primary focus of this analysis is directed towards the military domain and the temporal dimension encapsulated within the epistolary expressions, considering the contextual framework that places these letters within the period of the brothers' active military service.

⁶⁶ Avis de décès 3 Page 6. In *Luxemburger Wort*, 128. vol., no. 74 (29.03.1975), p. 6.

[Digitised by the National Library of Luxembourg, <https://persist.lu/ark:70795/xhvg2mcb2/pages/6/articles/DIVL2387>]

In a world devoid of war, mandatory military service would not have been a typical part of the brothers' life plans. When the war began, alternative possibilities, such as joining the French Foreign Legion, may have been contemplated. Their father, Jean-Pierre (born circa 1898), who had experienced the First World War, the occupation of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg and the presence of German troops, may have shared his experiences with his children, influencing their views on the notion of war, although this is uncertain. Nevertheless, the brothers were not mentally or physically prepared for war, unlike their neighbours in Nazi Germany.

Although they were aware of their country's recent history, most Luxembourgers did not consider military deployment, except in cases of voluntary enlistment. The prospect of military service and the life of a soldier were likely to have been distant considerations for the average young male adolescent, whose life path would have been shaped by routine civilian pursuits. Perceptions of conscription and military service varied significantly between the German community, which had become militarised and viewed serving the "Reich and the Führer" as an honour, and Luxembourgers, who perceived the situation as "forced recruitment" and an obligation imposed upon them against their will.⁶⁷

The War and Military Service – Expectations and Prior Knowledge

Understanding wartime experience necessitates delving into the expectations, knowledge and cultural background that moulded Albert and Nicolas before they entered the military. Analysing their mental "baggage" and their understanding of what awaited them, along with their perception of military service as discussed by scholars like Ute Frevert, reveals a sense of societal duty, patriotic commitment or obligation. This sheds light on their clear understanding of why they engaged in such actions, even though they might not have explicitly shared these motivations.⁶⁸ According to Latzel, war experiences are shaped by societal knowledge, including in this case the lack of military service and the constructed meaning imposed by society, culture and individuals.⁶⁹

Anticipation and expectations regarding military service were moulded by the knowledge and influences that Albert and Nicolas carried with them. Albert,

67 Dostert, Paul, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe. Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik und die Volksdeutsche Bewegung 1940–1945*, 146.

68 Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks. Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

69 Latzel, "Feldpostbriefe: Überlegungen zur Aussagekraft einer Quelle," 178.

part of the first cohort, may have had certain insights, and others in their social circle who volunteered before mandatory conscription may have contributed to their collective understanding of what lay ahead of him. However, it is important to note that since the beginning of the occupation in 1940, the brothers would have been exposed to relentless propaganda. Ongoing attempts to recruit volunteers for the Waffen SS and the Wehrmacht, even preceding mandatory conscription, would have left an indelible mark on their awareness. These recruitment efforts were prominently displayed on posters and featured in newspapers.⁷⁰

Their exposure to propaganda, combined with two years of awareness of the Nazis, inevitably influenced their perspectives. Nicolas, having attended a Germanised and Nazified school, would have been particularly immersed in this ideology. Moreover, the brothers were not insulated from the repercussions of the occupation. They experienced a strike movement in September 1942 (as a reaction to the conscription of young men) and subsequent repressive measures, including death penalties for those involved in the strike and Nazi restrictions in Luxembourg.⁷¹ This background undoubtedly coloured their expectations and perceptions as they approached military service during a tumultuous period marked by the complex dynamics of the German occupation.

The announcement of mandatory RAD service in May 1941 marked a crucial juncture. Having been called up in early 1942, Albert became the first member of the Pierrard family to experience Nazi methods and establishments. Following the announcement of conscription in August 1942, he promptly arrived at the training camp in October of the same year. In a poignant reflection on military attire, Albert expressed his dismay and potential shock at having to wear the German uniform when he wrote to his family in German:

70 Dostert, Paul, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe: Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik und die Volksdeutsche Bewegung 1940–1945*, 167.

71 The General Strike in Luxembourg in 1942 was a significant labour protest against the German occupation during the Second World War. On 1 September 1942, Luxembourgish workers protested against the policies imposed by the Nazi occupiers. The strike was prompted by forced conscription of Luxembourgish men into the German military, economic exploitation, and overall oppression by the Nazis. In response, the German authorities took severe measures, arresting and deporting many striking workers to concentration camps. The Nazi regime also suppressed the resistance movement in Luxembourg, causing additional hardships for the local population. Georges Büchler, Paul Dostert, and Marc Gloden, “Generalstreik”: *Streikbewegung in Luxemburg, August–September 1942* = “Grève Générale”: *Mouvements de Grève Au Luxembourg, Août - Septembre 1942*, Musée National de La Résistance Esch-Sur-Alzette 10 10 001074696 (Esch/Sauer: Op der Lay, 2017).

When I saw the hat next to the steel helmet in my wardrobe a few days ago, my heart became heavy. But I told myself, it won't be for much longer, and: Everything passes, etc.⁷²

At this point, Albert was already a member of the Wehrmacht, whereas Nicolas was initially called up to RAD service. Informed by Albert's letters detailing the military training camp and insights into the German armed forces, Nicolas harboured the optimistic notion that his service in the RAD might be extended, sparing him from immediate induction into the Wehrmacht. In a letter to Albert during his RAD service in Greece in March 1943, Nicolas revealed uncertainties about his return, acknowledging the potential prolongation of his deployment:

I was supposed to come home at the end of March. But things are very uncertain, and the operation may well take longer. Yes, as long as I am here, I don't have to join the Wehrmacht. I have been lucky in a way; otherwise, I would already be with my other comrades in the Wehrmacht.⁷³

As conscriptions proceeded, friends, classmates and neighbours were enlisted one by one. A friend, Nicolas Gollignan, corresponded with Nicolas in July 1943, expressing apprehension as individuals were conscripted into the Wehrmacht. The prevalent fear of impending conscription and circulating (albeit false) rumours about conscription for those born from 1910 onward were palpable among friends, highlighting the pervasive anxiety in the community. The friend wrote to Nicolas Pierrard:

I am already afraid of it. Today, many went off to the Wehrmacht, including Isidor Provost. There is much talk that they will conscript all age groups from 1910 onward.⁷⁴

The residents of Luxembourg were acutely aware of the realities of military service, the associated dangers and the pervasive fear of being the next to be conscripted. The close-knit and well-informed community shared collective experiences and diverse opinions. Thus, Nicolas was well informed about the impending circumstances, primarily through Albert who, as the elder brother and the first family member to don the German uniform, imparted his experiences to others, fostering a shared hope that the challenging chapter might soon draw to a close.

While undergoing training, Albert wrote a letter to his family in which he provided a glimpse of his upcoming deployment and the significant challenges awaiting him on the Eastern Front. A noteworthy moment transpired during his interaction

⁷² Albert to Jean-Pierre and family, 24 October 1942, *WARLUX-Collection, University of Luxembourg, Collection Pierrard*.

⁷³ Nicolas to Albert, 1 March 1943, *Collection Pierrard*.

⁷⁴ Nicolas Gollignan to Nicolas Pierrard, 5 July 1943, *Collection Pierrard*.

with a non-commissioned officer (*Unteroffizier*) serving as his trainer. Albert's trainer, having first-hand knowledge of the Eastern Front, shared poignant observations with him, highlighting a solemn pre-battle practice among soldiers:

The non-commissioned officer was in the East last winter and mentioned that he had seen some soldiers before the battle. They would go behind a wall and fold their hands in prayer.⁷⁵

This revelation suggests that the soldiers turned to prayer, potentially as a personal and ritualised act. Such a practice could signify a profound means of seeking solace, summoning courage or deriving spiritual support before confronting the myriad challenges and uncertainties inherent in combat. This practice underscores the severity and emotional toll of fighting in the East. Albert undoubtedly harboured a sense of reluctance and fear about his impending deployment to this challenging theatre of war. This insight provides a glimpse of the arduousness and adversity that characterised deployments to the Eastern Front during this period.

The militarisation of educational settings and leisure activities (including those organised by the Hitler Youth) began as early as the onset of the occupation in May 1940. The school system imposed on the country, encompassing both German language studies and exposure to German media, contributed to this expectation. Albert's prior engagement in the RAD further exposed him to external indoctrination, facilitated by German media.⁷⁶ In December 1942, merely weeks after the start of his own service in the Wehrmacht, Albert corresponded with Nicolas, discussing acquaintances who had already enlisted in the Wehrmacht. The interconnectedness of the Luxembourgish community was made possible by the country's compact size and the efficient operation of military postal services. This efficiency enabled the prompt delivery of letters: it sometimes took just a week for correspondence to travel from Belarus to Luxembourg.

When it was Nicolas' turn to enlist in the armed forces in the summer of 1943, Albert sought to uplift his younger brother, demonstrating acceptance and adaptability while also expressing hope for a return to normality in their professional and civilian lives.

Yeah, Nikla, I believe that this military service is now somewhat damned. I know what it was like for me during training. You just have to sing to yourself: In life, everything passes, even the hardship and the drill of military service. You can believe me, Nikla, I'm starting to like it again with time. Hopefully, both of us can soon return to civilian professions.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Albert to Jean Pierre and family, 22 November 1942, Collection Pierrard.

⁷⁶ He mentions going to the cinema during his RAD service, Albert to Jean-Pierre and family, 28 June 1942, Collection Pierrard.

⁷⁷ Albert to Nicolas, 15 July 1943, Collection Pierrard.

Deployment and War/Front

Information about the war, killings and fighting is notably scarce in the letters, a trend observed by various scholars. Instead, the brothers predominantly discuss the day-to-day experiences of being a soldier, encompassing topics such as traveling, marching, boredom, food, weather and the unsanitary conditions in the barracks, including issues with lice. Both brothers found themselves deployed to the Eastern Front, primarily in Belarus.⁷⁸ Regarding their deployment, their correspondence focuses mainly on interactions with local resistance and guerilla groups,⁷⁹ commonly referred to as “partisans” (*Partisaneneinsatz*) by the Wehrmacht.⁸⁰ In a letter from July 1943, Nicolas, still undergoing machine gun training for his artillery unit, wrote to Albert:

We didn't have much contact with the partisans. They fired about half a dozen grenades first, and then we also fired some. We felt too weak and immediately returned home. This is how one company after another slowly 'hobbles along' without being able to achieve much. We have to intimidate them here and there a bit because these bands make it a kind of amusement to almost derail the train almost every day.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Finding information about the exact unit and deployment location of soldiers can be challenging. The individual Wehrmacht records may not always provide details about subsequent assignments. Alternatively, the *Erkennungsmarke* (individual soldier's ID) can offer a pathway for more in-depth research.

⁷⁹ The warfare against partisans in Belarus during the Second World War was marked by extreme brutality and high casualties. German forces conducted widespread and violent anti-partisan operations, resulting in significant destruction and loss of life among both combatants and civilians, see more Ben H. Shepherd, *War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674043558>; Richter, Timm C., “Die Wehrmacht und der Partisanenkrieg in den besetzten Gebieten der Sowjetunion,” in *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*, ed. Müller, Rolf-Dieter and Volkmann, Hans-Erich (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2012), 837–56, <https://doi.org/10.1524/9783486852028>.

⁸⁰ Nicolas to Jean-Pierre and family, 13 February 1944, Collection Pierrard. The exact details of Pierrard's deployment and the specific unit he served in are not known. His letters only indicate that he was in Belarus. His personal dossier at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin (formerly the Wehrmachtauskunftsstelle, now part of Department PA) contains only information about his initial reserve unit and the confirmation of his death (BArch B 563–1 KARTEI ZK P 1051–109). Although his unit could potentially be traced starting from his reserve unit in the Reich using his *Erkennungsmarke* (soldier's ID tag) number, this was not possible during the research period. The relevant lists (*Erkennungsmarkenverzeichnisse*) were being digitised at the time, which prevented access to this information. Consequently, detailed context about his deployment remains unknown. It is crucial that this information be obtained in the future to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Pierrard's service.

⁸¹ Nicolas to Albert, 24 July 1943, Collection Pierrard.

Later on, during his service, in February 1944, Nicolas complained about the “partisans” in a letter to his father:

We have to monitor a road for a length of 10km. One patrol goes out before midnight, and another goes after midnight. The bandits cause various problems. Just the other night, they went and sawed down eighty telephone poles along the road. (They were still standing during the first patrol, but they were lying around during the second.) They cause all sorts of mischief, but they rarely engage in combat. They seem to be somewhat afraid of the German machine gun. However, we endure many sleepless nights. During the day, we can rest for a few hours, then it's back to duty. For me, it's not so bad⁸²

Nicolas expressed frustration with the local “bandits” who disrupted daily life and posed a threat to him and his comrades. Initially questioning the purpose of his duty in the Soviet Union, like many soldiers, he eventually adapted to his sense of duty. Nicolas viewed the local resistance fighters in Belarus as a danger to him and his unit, as seen in his use of the term “bandits”. This raises the question of whether Nicolas is praising the effectiveness of German machine guns or is simply relieved to be protected by them, given that his grey Wehrmacht uniform makes him a clear target for partisans. Nicolas found himself in a relatively calm section of the front, expressing annoyance at the disruptions caused by the local armed resistance. However, he appeared to be content, considering that Albert's unit was facing daily losses and injuries; Albert reported the deaths and injuries of their compatriots in a letter to their father in April 1943.⁸³

Signs of Adaptation

The brothers also expressed signs of adaptation, or acceptance. Nicolas tried to see the positive aspects, writing the following while he was in artillery training, stationed at the former Red Army School in Belarus.

The service here in the army school has been quite enjoyable lately. Every morning, we head out to the training facility, engaging in war simulations. We practice attacks, counterattacks, and occasionally, strategic withdrawals. I am paired with a soldier from Lorraine at the heavy machine gun. We always use blanks and make it sound like gunfire is coming from the barrels. Lately, the weather has been favourable; though cold, it has been mostly dry. One tends to get used to it. However, one thing is quite bothersome – we often have to march through swamps, and it's rare to return in the afternoon without wet feet. We console ourselves by saying: ‘Don't get upset, just marvel!’ In the afternoons, we have sports sessions,

⁸² Nicolas to Jean Pierre and family, 17 February 1944, Collection Pierrard.

⁸³ Albert to Jean-Pierre and family, 13 April 1943, Collection Pierrard.

sometimes formal training, and once a week we go for a swim. Following these activities, we clean our weapons, and then the day comes to an end. As you can see, it's bearable.⁸⁴

Just as Nicolas describes the situation as becoming “bearable”, author Elke Scherstjanoi concurs that an extended duration at the front-line often initiated a process of habituation. Over time, soldiers would become accustomed to their surroundings, perceiving things with less intensity and adopting a more relaxed outlook. The constant presence of death became more normal, and as a result, soldiers became less communicative. Consequently, the letter writer would assess this change in perception for the impact it would have on communication, tailoring the information according to the intended recipient and the purpose of the communication.⁸⁵

Nicolas adapts and appears to accept the circumstances imposed by the military service, finding a sense of pride in evolving as a German soldier within the ranks:

We are now back together with new recruits. We mostly have work duty while they undergo training. It reminds us of our own training when they lie down and crawl on the ground. Sometimes we have to participate to avoid forgetting what we've learned. Nevertheless, we are treated more leniently because we are already counted among the ‘Landser’ out there in the trenches.⁸⁶

Nicolas notes that they are treated more leniently, as they are already considered as experienced soldiers (“*Landser*”) who have been through trench life. The tone suggests a mixture of reminiscence and recognition of their current position in the military hierarchy. He continues about the improvement of his service as he rose up through the hierarchy:

My service is getting better from now on. I am now so ‘self-important’ that I am allowed to help with training. So, I play the role of assistant instructor. Can you imagine that, when a bunch of men aged 36 to 39 stand before me? (About turn, march, march! – Form up in line, march, march.) Typical Wehrmacht. Looking back, I've truly been fortunate. Many of my comrades have already fallen or been wounded. I heard about one yesterday (Gaston Loser, Reckange) that lost a leg. I was with him throughout my entire training, and we were together in the partisan deployment. At least I am still lucky enough to go on leave before being thrown into the mud up front.⁸⁷

84 Nicolas to Jean-Pierre and family, 24 October 1943, Collection Pierrard.

85 Elke Scherstjanoi, “Als Quelle nicht überfordern!: Zu Besonderheiten und Grenzen der wissenschaftlichen Nutzung von Feldpostbriefen in der (Zeit-)Geschichte,” in *Schreiben im Krieg - Schreiben vom Krieg. Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege*, ed. Veit Didczuneiet, Jens Ebert, and Thomas Jander (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2011), 123.

86 Nicolas to Jean-Pierre and family, 28 November 1943, Collection Pierrard.

87 Nicolas to Jean-Pierre and family, 13 February 1944, Collection Pierrard.

He shares that their military service has evolved, and they now serve as assistant instructors, contributing to training efforts. There is a palpable sense of pride or self-importance in this role. Nicolas perceives himself as a trained and experienced soldier, appearing even conceited, yet he also acknowledges that many of his comrades have lost their lives, considering himself fortunate. There is a sense of fatalistic acceptance of his own destiny, coupled with an awareness of his luck, knowing that it could also be over for him at any time, that death is a constant possibility.

Nicolas' positive portrayal of his military service can partly be attributed to the potential for censorship and a reluctance to cause undue concern to his family at home. The Pierrard brothers carefully avoided overtly expressing dissatisfaction with their service or questioning their roles as soldiers in the Wehrmacht. Although they did raise concerns about issues such as lice and poor food and expressed a desire for home leave, they never hinted that they may have wished to desert or abandon their unit. This does not necessarily imply exemplary military conduct; rather, it suggests a deliberate choice to adhere to established rules and regulations, demonstrating a keen awareness of the potential risks associated with non-compliance.

A recurring theme in the brothers' communications is their shared anticipation of home leave and a fervent desire for the conclusion of the war.

I had a partisan patrol early this morning, and now there's no point in lying in bed for another hour. The weather outside is beautiful at the moment. It gets terribly warm during the day. Tomorrow, the course I'm participating in will end. Whether I'll go on leave immediately afterward is not determined yet. I would have gone next week but, as you've probably heard in the military report, the Russians have been causing trouble in our area for a week now. Our sergeant told me yesterday that I won't be allowed to go home soon because radio operations need to be reinforced. If I have to stay longer, it's tough luck. The temperature is always around 14 degrees Celsius. At this time, radio operators are returning from leave. I hope that I can go on leave soon and that there won't be a leave ban. If that's not the case, I won't make it on the 4th of the month. If I go next week, I'll find out on the first day of that month; in that case I'll inform you directly. Dear Nikla, I wish you could be home then. That would be nice. But I believe the war will end soon because victory is within reach.⁸⁸

Albert expresses uncertainty about taking leave immediately afterward because of renewed fighting and disturbances caused by the Soviets in the area, as reported in the military report, which affected plans. Interestingly, Albert does not contemplate the consequences of a Nazi victory, such as the continued occupation of his home country. Instead, he expresses a desire for victory solely for the pur-

⁸⁸ Albert to Nicolas, 29 July 1943, Collection Pierrard.

pose of returning home, and he expresses a belief that the war will end soon because victory is imminent.

Integration into the Military Community

Both brothers write about their fellow soldiers and their “career” in the Wehrmacht. In July 1943, Albert shared news of his promotion with his younger brother Nicolas, revealing a sense of conflicted emotions. He conveyed the news in German, stating:

“I have been promoted to private with effect from 01.07.43!” before switching to Luxembourgish and humorously adding, “You must be thinking: He must be a good Prussian.” In a more serious tone, he then switched back to German and said, “But no, you know how it works.”⁸⁹

Here, Albert begins to switch languages, a topic we will delve into in more detail in the next section.

This blend of emotions in Albert’s message mirrors the intricate realities faced by Luxembourgish soldiers in the German army. His use of humour and self-deprecation suggests a desire to play down his promotion, possibly anticipating criticism. Concurrently, his recognition that the promotion was dictated by either the system or the Wehrmacht conveys a sense of resignation about the circumstances he was thrust into. This highlights the fact that the brothers were integrated into the army and were serving as regular soldiers. In a military context, Albert’s promotion was a way of fostering trust in Luxembourgers, treating them as ordinary German soldiers, and providing opportunities for learning and leadership responsibilities.

Nicolas specifically mentioned being appointed as an assistant trainer, a role indicative of trust in his abilities. Determining the sincerity or sarcasm within Nicolas’ statements about increased responsibilities is challenging. Nevertheless, the fact that he was assigned crucial tasks, such as training new soldiers despite being of Luxembourgish origin, indicates that he was highly regarded and experienced enough within the unit to effectively instruct and guide new recruits.

The trajectories of the Pierrard brothers illustrate the seamless integration of Luxembourgers into the military community, where they earned promotions and recognition from their fellow soldiers. Although there were varying attitudes to-

⁸⁹ Albert to Nicolas, 17 July 1943, Collection Pierrard. In German “Preuße”, in Luxembourgish “Preis”, Prussian was the notion of “German people”.

ward military service among Luxembourgish soldiers, they experienced no apparent discrimination or disadvantage compared to their German counterparts, as long as they adhered to the rules – although of course they had to grapple with the inherent risks associated with being a soldier. However, the significant rise in desertion rates among Luxembourgers (and men from Alsace-Lorraine), particularly during home leave, prompted the implementation of a ban on leave for Luxembourgers and individuals from Alsace-Lorraine starting from December 1943 onward.⁹⁰ Desertion was met with severe consequences, including capital punishment, of which the brothers were highly aware. Additionally, the families of deserters faced forced resettlement in Luxembourg. The apprehension regarding these potential repercussions was well founded, as evidenced by the brothers' discussions in their letters. They acknowledged that resettlement served as a punitive measure for various infractions, from political opposition to desertion or conscription evasion.⁹¹

Exclusion as a Group vs Cohesion

The Pierrard brothers frequently discussed the composition of their unit in their correspondence, often mentioning the number of soldiers from Luxembourg and Lorraine serving alongside them and recounting their encounters with them. This served to reassure them that they were not alone among Reich Germans but were accompanied by fellow Luxembourgers and Lorrainers. In a letter to Nicolas, a friend emphasised this sense of camaraderie, acknowledging the shared experience of entering military training camp.

"How are you, dear Nikla? You have many Luxembourgers and Lorrainers with you. That is a small consolation," the friend said in his letter to Nicolas.⁹² Albert also acknowledged and envied Nicolas, stating in one of his letters, "But you are lucky to have so many Luxembourgers with you. And the Lorrainers are also not to be dismissed".⁹³

⁹⁰ Chief of the Alsace civil administration, Robert Wagner, to the chief of the High Command of the Wehrmacht (OKW), Wilhelm Keitel, about the leave ban for ethnic Germans from the CdZ regions, 21 January 1944, BArch NS 19/2179. This ban affected recruits not only from Luxembourg but also from Alsace-Lorraine, Lower Styria and Carniola.

⁹¹ See the article "*Desertion leads to resettlement*" – *The consequences of desertion and draft evasion on the families of Luxembourgish soldiers (1942–1945)* by Sarah Maya Vercruysse (p. 241–278).

⁹² Nicolas Gollignan to Nicolas Pierrard, 5 July 1943, Collection Pierrard.

⁹³ Albert to Nicolas, 20 June 1943, Collection Pierrard.

In the event that a single Luxembourgish found himself isolated within a company, he would seek out other like-minded individuals from Lorraine or Alsace to associate with.⁹⁴ Nicolas even mentioned activities like cooking together and sharing goods, emphasising the importance of forming bonds with individuals from similar backgrounds:

The Luxembourgish on our staff are staying here, we've been given a break for a while as if we were home. This morning, we received some potatoes with bacon. I've organised with another Luxembourgish two portions for tonight. For a small packet of saccharin, six eggs went over the counter, and then it was enough for the bread. I cut a few slices of bacon from my piece and into the pan they went, together with a bit of butter afterward. We baked a nice pan full of potatoes and then scattered eggs on top. The delicacy is in the oven now. I have to say it how it is: I have been living the good life. That's something to enjoy. We bake ourselves a pan of potatoes every Sunday evening if we only have the ingredients. What one doesn't have, the other does.⁹⁵

Being together cheered Nicolas up until after the training camp, when he found himself more alone:

I have indeed lost most of my Luxembourgish comrades, now we are still seven Luxembourgish and four Lorrainers. We are assigned to a company in the Army School where almost everyone is Bavarian. However, I feel that I get along well with them, even though they are quite stubborn. There is also a Berliner company here, and they are always having arguments with them. They accuse them of wanting the war, while 'we Bavarians', on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with it. Today is a splendid Sunday. In the morning, I went with two Luxembourgish to a beautiful lake just behind the barracks. To my delight, one of them had a camera. So we immediately took some beautiful photos. We might take some more this afternoon. We have a pass. Then we will meet up with several Luxembourgish again, because a few hundred metres up, there is another barracks with many Luxembourgish and Lorrainers.⁹⁶

Self-confirmation and identity play a significant role in the letters of both brothers. They consistently reassure each other that they are not alone in their military service and are serving alongside fellow Luxembourgish and men from Lorraine. In June 1943, Nicolas had the opportunity to watch a football match with his fellow Wehrmacht soldiers (still in training in Germany):

⁹⁴ Marc Trossen, *Verluere Joëren - Zwangsrekrutierte, Refraktäre, Deserteure, Resistenzler, aber auch Kollaborateure, Kriegsfreiwillige . . .* (3 Volumes), ed. Les Amis de l'Histoire Luxembourg / Geschichtsfrënn Lëtzebuerg asbl (Luxembourg: Imprimerie Centrale, 2015), 1108.

⁹⁵ Nicolas to Jean-Pierre and family, 25 July 1943, Collection Pierrard.

⁹⁶ Nicolas to Jean-Pierre and family, 25 September 1943, Collection Pierrard.

The four companies are competing for the championship. So far, we have it. Our team consists of five Luxembourgers, three Lorrainers and three from Saxony. It is the one with the most Luxembourgers playing. You should hear the roar when we cheer our people on.⁹⁷

Although it was a leisure activity, Nicolas emphasised the significance of acknowledging the diverse backgrounds of the players and supporting his team. The Pierrard brothers were aware of the presence of regional patriotism, pride and group cohesion among Reich German soldiers. This awareness extended to an understanding of how the soldiers hailed from various regions, each characterised by distinct cultural identities.

Nicolas did not mention any personal conflicts or close friendships in his correspondence. Having spent months, if not years, within the German military, Luxembourgers had to develop personal relationships with their fellow soldiers and superiors in order to survive and cope with the challenges they faced. This raises the question of whether they experienced conflicts with Reich Germans or developed camaraderie among themselves.

The Pierrard brothers, intertwined with their comrades, including Reich Germans, particularly in perilous situations, exemplify Felix Römer's concept of a "compulsory community".⁹⁸ The concept characterises the military milieu that is founded on cohesion and obedience. The demands of being in enemy territory accentuated the repercussions of individual detachment, resulting in social exclusion and heightened vulnerability. In contrast, integration into the group not only bestowed recognition but also provided crucial protection, proving indispensable for survival amid the challenges of wartime.

Compared with other troops, Luxembourgish soldiers were relatively young when they were conscripted: most Reich German troops were born between 1911 and 1915, followed by those born between 1916 to 1920, according to Christoph Rass' age pyramid.⁹⁹ So when the first Luxembourgers (initially those born between 1920 and 1924) were conscripted in October 1942, they were younger than most other soldiers in the units. Luxembourgers had strong connections with their compatriots and found a sense of belonging, also with non-Luxembourgish soldiers. This bond not only counteracted the negative aspects of war, it also provided valuable knowledge for new arrivals and inexperienced soldiers. Through their interactions with their more experienced comrades, Luxembourgers gained

⁹⁷ Nicolas to Albert, 14 June 1943, Collection Pierrard.

⁹⁸ Felix Römer, *Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht von innen* (Munich: Piper, 2012), 160.

⁹⁹ Rass, Christoph, "Das Sozialprofil von deutschen Kampfverbänden des deutschen Heeres 1939 bis 1945", in *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg: Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939 bis 1945. Politisierung, Vernichtung, Überleben*, vol. 9/1 (dva, 2004), 677.

practical skills essential for their survival on the battlefield. Furthermore, camaraderie, especially with their compatriots, served as a crucial source of emotional support for Luxembourgers who found themselves far from home, grappling with the challenges of war.

Language

The theme of language difference has been hinted at several times. Use of language was another noteworthy factor shaping the integration or exclusion of Luxembourgers in the military community. Although German was the predominant language, many soldiers opted to write in Luxembourgish or added greetings and expressions of affection in their native tongue when corresponding with their families.¹⁰⁰

Nicolas subtly hints at his Luxembourgish identity and the linguistic diversity he shares with his compatriots: “We Luxembourgers, it cheers us up and we can only laugh when we hear someone swear in French from time to time.”¹⁰¹ His remark not only emphasises his familiarity with the French language, it alludes to cultural and linguistic distinctions between Luxembourgers and Reich Germans. It also highlights Nicolas’ assertion of his Luxembourgish identity and the potential lack of understanding of French among Reich Germans. These references emphasise the unique perspectives and experiences that Nicolas and his compatriots brought to the military community.

Albert Pierrard frequently switched between German and Luxembourgish in his communication. As previously quoted in his letter from July 1943 about his promotion (see Integration into the military community), he announced his promotion in German but then added an aside in Luxembourgish to Nicolas, explaining that this is the way the Wehrmacht functions. He also said that it was not his

100 Luxembourgish has been classified as a dialect of the German language. However, perceptions of the language began to change at the beginning of the 20th century, with Luxembourgers starting to view Luxembourgish as their native language. During the Second World War, self-identification changed as Luxembourgers sought to distinguish themselves from Nazi Germany. Resistance movements used flyers to encourage people to resist the occupation, asserting that Luxembourgish was their language, not German. According to Wagner and Davies, Luxembourgish helped promote self-identification and “patriotism” against the Nazis, and the war proved to be a turning point in the use and perception of the language. See Melanie Wagner and Winifred V. Davies, “The Role of World War II in the Development of Luxembourgish as a National Language”, *Language Problems and Language Planning* 33, no. 2 (2009): 117–18, <https://doi.org/10.1075/lplp.33.2.02wag>.

101 Nicolas to Albert, 5 July 1943, Collection Pierrard.

intention to be given this promotion, suggesting an apology to Nicolas for an “undesired” promotion and implying that the decision was imposed by the Nazis. This information in Luxembourgish indicates that he wanted Nicolas to have this insight exclusively, possibly to avoid the censorship officer’s scrutiny if the letter were to be opened.

In a letter to Nicolas, Albert discussed the static nature of the front lines and the defensive stance of the Wehrmacht. In German he wrote, “You know, here the front doesn’t shift back and forth much,” and in Luxembourgish he added, “At most, maybe once backward, but forward definitely not.” This could imply that his unit was not making progress and that the fight seemed challenging or even hopeless. By using his native language as a truth filter, he may have been expressing the gravity of the situation rather than directly addressing the overall war scenario.¹⁰²

Using Luxembourgish in personal communication during the war was a powerful symbol of trust and resistance against the oppressive regime of National Socialism, as noted by Melanie Wagner in her study on Luxembourgish war letters.¹⁰³ Albert may have reverted to his native language for personal information as it held strong associations with home and family, while German was associated with the enemy and the war effort.¹⁰⁴ This linguistic choice demonstrated a willingness to resist the imposed regulations and maintain a sense of identity and autonomy.

The phenomenon of shifting between languages is referred to in linguistics as code-switching. It denotes the dynamic practice of employing more than one language within a single communicative episode, whether spoken or written, as observed in various linguistic interactions, including written forms such as letters. As defined, “code choices can index both solidarity and power, include and exclude others, and speakers can use code-switching to index social class consciousness, political-ideological or ethnic affiliations, and preferences”.¹⁰⁵ This linguistic strategy can be motivated by specific topics or directed towards particular addressees, serving as a means to emphasise, elaborate or evaluate a point within

102 Albert to Nicolas, 20 June 1943, Collection Pierrard.

103 Melanie Wagner, “Private Literacies – Strategies for Writing Luxembourgish in World War II”, 2011, 21.

104 Wagner and Gilles, Peter, 9.

105 Arja Nurmi and Päivi Pahta, “Social Stratification and Patterns of Code-Switching in Early English Letters”, *Multilingua – Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication* 23, no. 4 (1 January 2004): 419, <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.2004.23.4.417>; Carol M. Eastman, “Codeswitching as an Urban Language-contact Phenomenon”, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 13, no. 1–2 (January 1992): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.1992.9994480>.

the discourse, as exemplified by Albert's change in greeting at the end of a letter in German in March 1943 to his family.

In German, he writes:

For today, I've told you all the news.
Many greetings to everyone,
Albert
Just keep your spirits high!

And in Luxembourgish: "And a hello to the neighbour Jeng, and he should also drop a line. We feel that it is time. Don't worry, I will be back soon because the war will be over in a few months."¹⁰⁶

For Albert Pierrard and numerous other Luxembourgers during the war, Luxembourgish served as a more comfortable and familiar means of expression, despite their proficiency in German. In the military community, German was ubiquitous and inescapable, yet in personal communication, they often reverted to their mother tongue. However, as evidenced in our case study and Wagner's research, language use during the war varied, highlighting the individual agency of soldiers and their families.

Moreover, Luxembourgers were frequently the sole representatives of their nation in their units, immersed in a German-speaking environment day and night. This required them to navigate and adapt to the linguistic landscape for practical survival in their role as soldiers. While retaining their native language for personal and emotional reasons, proficiency in German was also essential for practical purposes. The use of language during wartime thus emerged as a complex issue shaped by practical, emotional and identity-based considerations.

As demonstrated in the Pierrard brothers' letters, solidarity among Luxembourgers was strong, and they sought each other's company. Luxembourgers often expressed in their letters a desire to converse in Luxembourgish or French, perceiving language as a "mirror" reflecting their identity or self-description. Linguistic studies emphasise the symbolic value of writing,¹⁰⁷ as reflected in Albert Pierrard's deliberate choice of Luxembourgish to convey his feelings, connect with home and differentiate himself from his Reich German comrades. Although German dominated wartime communication, many Luxembourgers also incorporated their native language in asides or expressions of love within their German

¹⁰⁶ Albert to Jean-Pierre and family, 18 March 1943, Collection Pierrard.

¹⁰⁷ Wagner and Davies, "The Role of World War II in the Development of Luxembourgish as a National Language," 121.

letters. The choice to write in Luxembourgish held symbolic significance, representing notions of home and resistance against Nazi oppression and regulations.

4 Conclusion and Outlook

In conclusion, this chapter has endeavoured to explore the experiences of Luxembourgish soldiers in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War through the lens of the Pierrard brothers' correspondence. The letters primarily document everyday aspects such as travel arrangements, living conditions, updates from home, and personal exchanges, illustrating the routine challenges faced by front-line soldiers, which is not uncommon in such correspondence.

An intriguing aspect of these letters is the brothers' portrayal of their service in the Wehrmacht. Their tone often conveys endurance and pragmatic acceptance, with Albert reassuring Nicolas that their trials will eventually pass—a reflection of resigned adaptation rather than a wholehearted embrace of their military role. Moreover, despite their cultural and linguistic background, the brothers found acceptance and even promotion within the Reich German ranks, a theoretical equality amidst practical instances of exclusion and occasional feelings of alienation.

Their adept use of German military terms and assimilation of language from the military milieu, as suggested by Römer, reflects their skill in navigating the military structure. As they collectively expressed hope for the war to end, their desires were simple: a return home and an end to the tumultuous circumstances they were facing. The prevailing sentiment was not to extensively ponder the consequences but to yearn for a swift conclusion to their wartime ordeal.

However, these are the events and emotions that the brothers chose to convey to each other or their family back home. It is likely they experienced far more than what is documented in their letters, such as their involvement in "Partisaneneinsatz." Did they take lives? Witness atrocities? Participate actively? Were they gripped by fear or exhaustion? What were their perspectives on Nazi ideology, the enemy? Did they feel compassion, or did they develop resentment towards locals and the Red Army, influenced by Nazi ideology and "anti-Bolshevism"? These questions remain unanswered, as the brothers chose not to disclose such thoughts in their letters, highlighting the complexities of external and self-imposed censorship.

Furthermore, the correspondence highlights intriguing aspects of language and identity. Albert and Nicolas Pierrard emphasised their Luxembourgish heritage, exchanging news from their homeland and forming connections with fellow soldiers from Luxembourg and Lorraine. Language played a pivotal role, func-

tioning as a symbol of trust in their home community and resistance against the oppressive Nazi regime. The soldiers adeptly employed German military terminology to effectively communicate within their unit and with German soldiers and officials, recognising the necessity of linguistic adaptation. Despite this adjustment, the letters underscore the soldiers' unwavering resilience and commitment to maintaining their Luxembourgish identity amidst challenging circumstances. Language thus served as a powerful tool for reaffirming their sense of self and resisting the influences of the Nazi regime. Overall, the letters depict Luxembourgers navigating a dual identity, skilfully managing their roles as German soldiers while maintaining a strong desire to connect with their compatriots.

Their experiences, as suggested by Latzel, imply that Albert and Nicolas may have witnessed more than they chose to reveal. Their backgrounds before the war—lacking military training, growing up in a rural environment shaped by church and family values, and devoid of exposure to militarized lifestyles—likely influenced how they processed and conveyed their experiences. Despite these factors, their primary message in the letters emphasised resilience and pragmatism. This approach likely influenced their decision not to openly criticise the Reich Germans and Nazis in their correspondence, given the severe risks of prosecution and strict censorship measures in place at the time.

Acknowledging the constraints imposed by external and internal censorship pressures, this study acknowledges its preliminary nature. Understanding the usability and significance of these letters requires contextualizing them as limited communication sources between soldiers and their families. Future research with larger datasets, including more crowdsourced WARLUX letters, could further enrich our understanding, particularly through comparisons with other collections of letters from forcibly recruited soldiers, such as those from Silesians and Slovenes. This study opens avenues for deeper investigations into wartime experiences, identity negotiation, and the broader socio-cultural impacts of military service on post-war identity narratives.

Luxembourgers forcibly conscripted into the Wehrmacht likely grappled with feelings of alienation and internal conflict, serving in a military representing an occupying power with an ideology they did not necessarily support. Struggling to reconcile their duty with personal beliefs, they likely experienced isolation within the military community, leading to feelings of loneliness and detachment. Nonetheless, as a survival strategy, they managed to maintain their Luxembourgish identity by staying connected with compatriots in Wehrmacht uniform and with their families at home, as revealed in the letters. The letters illuminate the complexities of Luxembourgish soldiers' experiences in the Wehrmacht and their efforts to reconcile their national identity with their role in the broader German military community.

Although the letters offer only a fragment of the soldiers' likely experiences and reflect their selective sharing with families (whether truthful or not) of what they took from their experiences, these sources provide a glimpse into the lives of Luxembourgers scattered throughout Hitler's vast army.

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