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Conflicting Loyalties Among Soldiers Fighting Both in the German Army and the Allied Forces

When Allied soldier Wacław fought in the battle of Falaise in 1944, his section hit a German tank. The battle was especially bloody for Wacław's unit, the 1st Polish Armoured Division fighting under Canadian command. Allied forces surrounded the Wehrmacht "like it was a bottle", as British Army Officer Bernard Montgomery would later say,[1] and the division was the cork through which the German army wanted to escape. The victory cleared the path to Paris, and is considered the division's greatest success.[2] Sixty-six years after he had taken part in the action, Wacław articulated his experience:

> On the hill at Falaise I was right there just when the attack happened. It went off like this: cannon, tank, cannon, tank. Artillery firing, suddenly one tank gets hit, the crew jumps out, one guy runs straight for me, straight at our cannon. I look up and this is my brother-in-law. (laughs) Listen, such things only ever happen in the movies![3]

Wacław had attacked his brother-in-law, and his account blurs our understanding of war. We are used to thinking that two clearly defined sides encounter each other on a battlefield. The logic of warfare is based on the legitimisation of all actions against a defined opponent.[4] This requires soldiers to be faithful to their commitments and the orders of their superiors. Soldiers like Wacław knew, or could guess, that there were family members and friends battling on the other side. Their descriptions of existential chaos and a struggle for survival are characterised by a lack of the usual orientation framework that war discourse offers: the loyal fight against a clearly defined opponent.

This article offers a collective narrative portrait of the soldiers who fought on both sides of the Western Front. Over the course of the war, the possibility of non-Jews being included into the German *Volk* increased. In East Upper Silesia, a

1 Bernard Law Montgomery of Alamein, *Inwazja na Europę* (Warszawa: Pantheon, 1948), 48–49.
2 Tim Ripley, *Die Geschichte der Wehrmacht 1939–1945* (Wien: RM-Buch-und-Medien-Vertrieb, 2003), 309.
3 *W. Galios. Interview transcription*, 11. All cited transcriptions and recordings of interviews are archived in the History Meeting House in Warsaw.
4 Sönke Neitzel, Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: Over vechten, doden en sterven,* trans. René van Veen, Marten de Vries and Marcel Misset (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2012), 387.

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region that switched sovereignty from German to Polish after the First World War, and was annexed by Germany at the beginning of the Second World War, 90 percent of the local population that held Polish citizenship were treated as if they were Germans.[5] The degree of loyalty of soldiers like Wacław to the Wehrmacht, as well as their possibility to change their front lines, varied. Nonetheless, it is a fact that one-third of the men enrolled in the Polish Allied forces who fought for the liberation of Western Europe had a history in the Wehrmacht.[6] In order to understand how people like Wacław gave meaning to their war experiences, twelve life interviews were conducted within a broader research project about ex-combatants within the Polish Allied Forces.[7] Although the testimonies display their own logic, they are also examples of individual strategies aimed at placing experiences within collective frames of memory.[8] On the basis of examples from the testimonies, a pattern can be discerned in most of the interviewees.

Postwar Historical Research and Memory

In postwar narratives on war memory, soldiers' conflicting loyalties and their diverse profiles were, for a long time, silenced or marginalised. In West Germany, one at first acted as if National Socialism had never happened. Later, historians proved the wartime condemnation of deserters to have been unjust, and the German Parliament rehabilitated those who were condemned.[9] In Austria, the domi-

5 National categorisation appeared once again extraordinarily flexible after the war, when the region came under Polish sovereignty and most of these so-called Germans were rehabilitated as Polish citizens (Maria Wanda Wanatowicz, *Od indyferentnej ludności do śląskiej narodowości? Postawy narodowe ludności autochtonicznej Górnego Śląska w latach 1945–2003 w świadomości społecznej* [Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004], 52–53).

6 Ryszard Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2010), 322.

7 Between 2009 and 2011, thirty-three interviews were collected with all surviving ex-combatants of the 1st Armoured Polish Division who were still able and willing to talk. The twelve ex-combatants with experience on both sides of the Western Front were born between 1920 and 1926 and spoke for between 1.5 and 12 hours. The interviews were conducted and archived by professional oral historians working for the Polish organisations KARTA and Dom Spotkań z Historią (The History Meeting House). The ex-combatants knew they were being interviewed as a group of last survivors and saw it as a unique chance to speak for the first time at length.

8 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 28.

9 Hannes Heer, Ruth Wodak, "Introduction: Collective Memory, National Narratives and the Politics of the Past- the Discursive Construction of History", in *The Discursive Construction of History: Remembering the Wehrmacht's War of Annihilation*, ed. Hannes Heer et al. (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 9; Benjamin Ziemann, "Fluchten aus dem Konsens zum Durchhalten: Ergeb-

nant narrative has long been that Nazism was imposed on the country from outside, and thus Wehrmacht soldiers bore no responsibility for war crimes. For this reason, the stories of Wehrmacht deserters were difficult to hear for many people.[10] In the United Kingdom, the country's notion of itself as a liberal world power has started to be reconsidered thanks to research focusing on the widening definition of British national identity and racial attitudes towards the recruitment of enemy nationals, such as second generation Italian immigrants and Jewish refugees.[11]

In Poland, it took a long time for the stories of soldiers who fought for both sides to be heard. The first books on the history of the 1st Polish Armoured Division were written by former officers of the division itself, who were interested in spreading the message that loyal soldiers had fought united against National Socialism and for the liberation of Europe.[12] Under communism, some historical studies based on archival research already showed how the soldiers who had fought for both sides were treated once they returned to Poland. They were not always aware that many of them would have their national categorisation checked as part of their rehabilitation procedure – they considered their identification to be obvious, because they had served in the Polish army.[13] A local Silesian mayor sitting on a rehabilitation commission wrote about soldiers like Wacław:

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nisse, Probleme und Perspektiven der Erforschung soldatischer Verweigerungsformen in der Wehrmacht 1939–1945", in *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*, ed. Rolf-Dieter Müller, Hans-Erich Volkmann (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1999), 592; "Gesetz zur Aufhebung nationalsozialistischer Unrechtsurteile." Deutscher Bundestag, accessed on October 20, 2023. www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2012/39010668_kw20_kalender_17mai2002/208558. (voted on in the German Parliament on May 17, 2002.

10 Alexander Pollack, *Die Wehrmachtslegende in Österreich: Das Bild der Wehrmacht im Spiegel der österreichischen Presse nach 1945* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2002), 11. The first Memorial for those persecuted by Nazi military justice was inaugurated in Vienna in October 2014.

11 Gavin Schaffer, "Re-Thinking the History of Blame: British Policy and Attitudes towards Immigrants and Minorities during the Second World War", *National Identities*, 8, 4 (2006): 401–420; Wendy Webster, "Enemies, Allies and Transnational Histories: Germans, Irish and Italians in Second World War Britain", *Twentieth Century British History*, 25, 1 (2014): 63–86.

12 Pierwsza Dywizja Pancerna, *1. Dywizja Pancerna w Walce* (Bruksela: La Colonne, 1947); Stanisław Maczek, *Od podwody do czołga* (Edinburgh: Tomar Publishers, 1961).

13 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 381. There were nearly 230,000 soldiers in the Polish Armed Forces in the West in July 1945; 105,000 decided to return to Poland: Jerzy Adam Radomski, "Losy formacji polskich na Zachodzie po zakończeniu Wojny" in *Walki formacji polskich na Zachodzie 1939–1945*, ed. Witold Biegański (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Ministerstwa Obrony, 1981), 746.

> Penetrating the soul of this man, while at the same time understanding the desirability of the provisions of rehabilitation, is a difficult *salto mortale* of reasoning.[14]

Initially, a Silesian ex-combatant organisation functioned as a go-between to protect ex-Wehrmacht soldiers from expulsion, but later, diversity in how the Polish People's Republic remembered the war became impossible.[15] The official narrative on war memory centralised General Berling's army, which had fought together with the Red Army, and silenced Polish Allied Forces.[16] Wacław experienced the consequences of this when he visited a commission to determine his war disability:

> I'm standing before the committee to determine disability. I get undressed, I'm in my underpants. Just over there there's a standing committee of two colonels and a doctor. The first question they ask is, 'And where did you serve? In the East or the West?' 'In the West,' I say. He looked at me and said, 'Please get dressed.' So that's how I reported to the committee and that was the test. If it had been in the East, it might have been different.[17]

No attempt was made to differentiate between Wehrmacht and Allied experiences. The communists considered themselves the only victors over Nazi Germany and accused the western world of enabling fascism. Following the Thaw of 1956, ex-combatants from the Polish Allied Forces could join the state-monopolised ex-combatant organisation. However, anti-German sentiments were rife among members, who were not promoted to decision-making positions.[18] Wacław entered the ex-combatant branch in 1969 to, as he explained it, receive financial benefits. After the collapse of communism, Polish soldiers who had fought with the Red Army experienced disaccreditation, whereas the ex-combatants of the Allied Forces were lionised as liberators of Europe. Ex-combatant associations multiplied, with Wacław in 2010 becoming a member of the Katowice branch of the Ex-Combatant Organisation of the 1st Armoured Division.

The subject of Polish former Wehrmacht soldiers played a decisive role in the 2005 presidential campaign. Facing Lech Kaczyński (who later died in the Smolensk air crash in 2010) in the run-off was Donald Tusk (a former President of the European Council). Accusations that his grandfather had served in the Wehrmacht are believed to have been a contributory factor in Tusk's losing the election, although this did not prevent him from becoming Prime Minister in 2007.

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14 Zofia Boda-Krężel, *Sprawa volkslisty na Górnym Śląsku* (Opole: Instytut Śląski, 1978), 91.

15 Henryk Rechowicz, *Związek Weteranów Powstań Śląskich* 1945–1949 (Katowice: Śląski Instytut Naukowy, 1966), 43.

16 Joanna Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej 1949–1969* (Warszawa: Trio, 2009), 168.

17 *W. Galios. Interview transcription*, 75.

18 Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć*, 169, 212, 224.

While Tusk said his grandfather had never told him about his past, sociological research revealed inhabitants in Western Poland had often heard Wehrmacht experiences being discussed in family contexts.[19] By the 2010s, veterans like Wacław could talk about their past in the Wehrmacht without losing their status as liberators. As the transformative moment between their two front experiences, desertion became a key narrative element in their story. Even former Wehrmacht soldiers without Allied experiences articulate how they had at least tried to desert.[20] On the back cover of Łucjan Jan Wesołowski's published memoir, for example, we read:

> As was the case with many Polish families the fate of my relatives was a tangled affair. Three of my brothers defended their homeland in the defensive war of 1939: one in Hel; the second in the 64th Infantry Regiment at Bydgoszcz, and then at Bzura; and the third in the 65th Infantry Regiment fought at Modlin, and then defended Warsaw. Following expulsion from Pomerania, I was forced, as a minor, from 14 January 1942 to serve in the Wehrmacht. In that army, among the many vicissitudes and dangers of life, I served until the end of the war.[21]

Information about Łucjan's own experiences in the Wehrmacht is only offered after that of his siblings, who had responsibilities within the Polish army. The author defensively stressed that he had only been a minor, he had been forced, and his life at the frontline had often been in danger.

Over the last two decades, historians have researched the contribution of the inhabitants of interwar Poland to the German Army. They revealed that although National Socialists were reluctant to include foreigners in service, they were also pragmatic. In the end, almost 20 percent of all soldiers in German forces were non-German,[22] and the dividing line between voluntary and forced enrolment was often crossed in practice.[23] From the Polish territories that Germany annexed

19 Lech Nijakowski, "Regionalne zróżnicowanie pamięci o II wojnie światowej", in *Między codziennością a wielką historią*, ed. Piotr Tadeusz Kwiatkowski, Lech Nijakowski, Barbara Szacka (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2010), 236.

20 Barbara Szczepuła, *Dziadek w Wehrmachcie* (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2007), 8, 86.

21 Łucjan Jan Wesołowski, *Gott mit uns?* (Warszawa: Dom Wydawniczy Bellona, 1997), back cover.

22 Rolf-Dieter Müller, *The Unknown Eastern Front: The Wehrmacht and Hitler's Foreign Soldiers* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 257.

23 Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5. Although some consideration was given to the possibility of allowing Poles from occupied territories to join the Wehrmacht as volunteers, this was never an option; see Jerzy Kochanowski, "Polen in die Wehrmacht? Zu einem wenig erforschten Aspekt der nationalsozialistischen Besatzungspolitik 1939–1945: Eine Problemskizze", *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte*, 1 (2002): 59–81.

at the beginning of the Second World War, an estimated 295,000 men joined the Wehrmacht, most coming from Upper Silesia and Western Prussia.[24] Recruitment numbers in the other European regions that Germany annexed remained significantly lower.[25] Having already started in 1939, recruitment increased after the introduction of the *Deutsche Volksliste* (DVL), a means of registering the so-called Germanness of people. By the end of the war, 90 percent of adult Upper Silesians had put their signature under one of the four categories the list offered. It was predominantly members of pre–war German minority organisations that signed up for the first and second groups, after which they received German citizenship. People considered to be of German descent, but who had cooperated with Polish authorities in the interwar years, were put in group four and could only be granted German citizenship in exceptional cases. The third group gathered people of German descent who had, for example, married Poles, or who were ascribed a regional identity. From 1942 onwards, they received German citizenship for a period of ten years, after which it could be taken away. Of the 3,124,000 people who had signed the list in the annexed territories by the end of 1942, 1,960,000 signed as part of group three. Mobilisation within the Wehrmacht was the most direct consequence of signing up for groups one, two and three.

Researching Conflicting Loyalties

Ryszard Kaczmarek's study was influential in unravelling how the definitions and practices of who should belong to group three widened over time; mobilisation increased massively after the German army lost the battle of Stalingrad, as new recruits were needed for the fronts in Italy and Western Europe.[26] Zdenko Maršálek's ongoing narrative analysis of former Wehrmacht soldiers' applications to join the 1st Polish Armoured Division points to "pragmatism" among applicants from Upper Silesia: "What looked like lukewarmness and lack of patriotism from Warsaw, Prague, Paris, Belgrade or Berlin, was thus only an expression of their own, re-

24 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 176.

25 This concerned, among others, an estimated 8,000 men in the Belgian-German borderlands and around 140,000 men in the French-German borderlands and Luxembourg (Peter M. Quadflieg, "Zwangsrekrutierte" und "Ons Jongen" *Eupen-Malmedy und Luxemburg als Rekrutierungsgebiet der deutschen Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Aachen: Shaker, 2008); Eugène Riedweg, *Les Malgrénous; Histoire de l'incorporation de force des Alsaciens-Mosellans dans l'armée allemande* (Strasbourg: Nuée Bleue, 1995).

26 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 53–55, 110.

gional identity".[27] These newer studies belong to a body of scholarship that approaches the practices of inhabitants of Upper Silesia through the conceptual lens of multiple loyalties.

Multiple loyalties are here preferred over the concept of identity, which presumes an essential stable core of an individual's personality; loyalties are, by definition, "partial, mediated and contingent".[28] Loyalties are also relational. Mutual interdependencies among changing groups of rulers and the ruled appear at different moments in time. In addition, the motivations of the ruled to engage may be multiple. Interpreting their acceptance of a power strategy issued from above as an act of passive obedience reduces the potential for obstinacy among historical actors, who could give another meaning to their actions through their behaviour; accepting or distancing themselves from a power structure or power strategy are not necessarily opposing practices, but could appear simultaneously.[29] With reference to Upper Silesia, for example, Brendan Karch demonstrated that, despite the ardency of national activists, local inhabitants "weighed their decisions against other values and consequences". He saw multiple loyalties in "the accumulated choices that arise from such interpretations between nationalist activists and instrumentally minded Upper Silesians".[30]

Multiple loyalties become conflicting loyalties on the battlefield. One either shoots the enemy or is shot by him. Research has been carried out to determine what makes a soldier shoot. While some specialists are convinced that national socialist ideology is a major factor in explaining soldiers' practices of killing,[31] others have concluded that soldiers behaved according to how they believed they were expected to be loyal.[32] The historian Felix Römer, in turn, pointed to soldiers

27 Zdenko Maršálek, "Identity change as a survival strategy: Forcibly mobilized *Wehrmacht* soldiers applying for the Allied armies-in-exile" (paper presented at the scientific conference *The impact of war experiences in Europe: The conscription of non-German men and women into the Wehrmacht and Reichsarbeitsdienst*, University of Luxembourg, October 27, 2022).

28 Martin Schulze Wessel, "'Loyalität' als geschichtlicher Grundbegriff und Forschungskonzept: Zur Einleitung", in *Loyalitäten in der Tschechoslowakischen Republik: 1918–1938: Politische, nationale und kulturelle Zugehörigkeiten*, ed. Martin Schulze Wessel (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004), 10.

29 Alfred Lüdtke, "Einleitung: Herrschaft als soziale Praxis", in *Herrschaft als soziale Praxis,* ed. Alfred Lüdtke (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 13–14 and 50; Machteld Venken, *Peripheries at the Centre: Borderland Schooling in Interwar Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), 63.

30 Brendan Karch, *Nation and Loyalty in a German-Polish Borderland: Upper Silesia, 1848–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 20–21.

31 Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941–45: German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

32 Neitzel, Welzer, *Soldaten*, 375.

having alternated between automatic and reflective practices.[33] Studies on Allied Forces have also indicated that the propagated ideology of fighting to defend liberty could make young men enthusiastic to enrol, but that these men soon became disillusioned on the battlefield. In the same way as in the Wehrmacht, the average American soldier fought not so much out of ideology or personal commitment, but because he wanted to be loyal to his fellow soldiers and he knew fighting would shorten the war.[34]

Researching Conflicting Loyalties through Oral History

Oral history interviews can bring us closer to an understanding of the way soldiers who fought on both fronts weighed their loyalties during and after the war. The way that interviewees expressed how they killed was broadly similar to how imprisoned German Prisoners of War (hereafter POWs) recalled having done so more than sixty years ago, when they were secretly taped in Great Britain. The German POWs expressed no emotion when they recalled killing,[35] something one can also at times observe during the interviews conducted within the research project. Kazimierz, for example, recalled fighting in Germany as an Allied soldier in 1945:

> We were ordered to shoot wherever possible. I remember one time a colleague, sitting in a tank, looking through his binoculars, says to me: 'Kazik, come here, get inside, grab the binoculars and take a look what's going on over there'. I take a pair of binoculars and look. There's a cow standing there. Two German soldiers go up to it with a bucket and start milking it. They want to drink some milk. We load our guns – not with the shells that only penetrate, but the high-explosive ones. Because we had both: the first would penetrate and fly off; the others hit their target and did some serious damage. The cow bellowed, they all fell, the cow, too. It was only the cow we felt sorry about.

The German Army's insistence that a soldier master his emotions had clearly been incorporated to a significant extent. With the basic reason for fighting on the frontline being to kill the opponent, Kazimierz's presentation of murder as a normal phenomenon should not surprise us, although our current norm of moral

33 Felix Römer, *Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht von innen* (München: Piper Verlag GmbH, 2012), 475.
34 John Whiteclay Chambers II, 'The American Experience of the Second World War', in *The American Experience of War*, ed. Georg Schild (Schöningh: Paderborn, 2010), 192.
35 Neitzel, Welzer, *Soldaten*, 94.

conduct may make it difficult to read his testimony. The most important difference when compared to German POWs, however, is that all the interviewees volunteered to join the Polish Allied Forces, which left the Americans and British with no reason to tape their conversations.

At many times in the collection of sources, feelings are articulated. Wacław, for example, stopped his description of the war routine to express his astonishment at discovering his brother-in-law: "Such things only ever happen in the movies!" The interviewees had often encountered situations of conflicting loyalties that also blurred the logic of war. While relating their lives, their current beliefs on moral conduct slipped into their stories about the war back then, leading to an emotionally loaded story they themselves considered meaningful at the time of recording.[36] Thanks to the reshuffling of dominant narratives on war memories over time, the interviewees could find the words to describe the conflicting loyalties they remember having felt.

Whereas the advantage of oral sources certainly lies in their revelation of practices and emotions related to the conflicting loyalties of the former servicemen who fought on both sides, their testimonies should nonetheless be interpreted with caution. It is somehow surprising that we hear interviewees recalling how they witnessed soldiers from the other army who they nevertheless sympathised with being mistreated or killed, or how they executed war orders against soldiers that their superiors considered enemies, orders they did not necessarily approve of. We only rarely hear, however, the interviewees narrating themselves as the main characters, conducting what was at the time considered a war crime, motivated by appeasing their conflicted loyalty. Are these articulations necessarily false because they are by definition unverifiable? The testimonies certainly do not always contain the truth but, as Alessandro Portelli has stated, even "wrong statements are still psychologically true, and this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts".[37] As I wrote in an earlier publication: "Testimonies reveal that reality is not as clear-cut as it appears at a first glance".[38]

This chapter walks us chronologically through the war experiences of soldiers who fought on both sides of the front, from joining the German Army over the recollections of interpersonal contacts within the German Army, to changing sides through desertion or captivity, everyday life within the 1st Armoured Divi-

36 Astrid Erll, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und Erinnerungskulturen*: *Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B.Metzler, 2005), 34.

37 Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?", in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 68.

38 Machteld Venken, *Straddling the Iron Curtain? Immigrants, Immigrant Organisations, War Memory* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 174.

sion in Great Britain before D-Day, the testing of loyalties on the battlefield, and finally operating as an occupying force in Northern Germany in the early days after the war. Through an analysis of fragments from the interviews, the text offers a reconstructed collective portrait of how the former servicemen recall having acted during and after the war. Wacław received a privileged place in the narration not because of the content of his war experiences, but because of his qualities as a storyteller.

Joining the German Army

All the interviewees portrayed their call to serve in the German Army in negative terms. Roman, for example, was sent for forced labour to Hamburg, a place he left once he was called up for service in 1944:

> I didn't know that my father had signed me up. I was underage, my father decided for me. When I went back in 1947, I even argued a little about this with him. "Why?" He said: "They would've killed you!" "Well, so they would have killed me, but they would've killed me as a Pole!" Because this patriotism stayed in me all this time and is still there today. [. . .] Whereupon my father explained that he wanted to protect me, from the beating, from the maltreatment, from being deported to Germany, because he already knew they'd take me away, so he began to try [. . .]. And so he signed me up for the third group.[39]

Roman stressed that his father had signed him up for the *Deutsche Volksliste*. Like many other interviewees, he presented himself as a minor who could not decide for himself and had not even understood his father's intentions.[40] Wacław was older, and signed the *Volksliste* himself:

> In 1942 I was conscripted to the German army. I had a choice to make . . . I reported to the committee with my ID card and there I wrote that I was Polish, my language Polish. A German comes in, reads it and says, "What? Poland?" There was a local sitting next to us. I hid it from him with my hand because he had a lilac pencil and crossed it out and hit me in the face. "Why did you hit him?" "After all, he is not German, he says, he was born here, he's Polish and speaks Polish". The German crossed it out and wrote *Deutsch*.[41]

39 *R. Lipiński. Interview transcription*, 15.

40 See also: Jacek Kutzner, Aleksander Rutkiewicz, *Polacy z Wehrmachtu w polskiej 1. Dywizji Pancernej gen. Maczka* (Warszawa, Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm 2011), 92; *W. Butowski. Interview transcription*, 4.

41 *W. Galios. Interview transcription*, 1.

Wacław said he was not given a free choice. Commissioners were entitled to categorise people based on a questionnaire applicants needed to fill in. Their request to sign it was formulated in ways that did not exclude verbal and physical violence. Enrolment in the *Wehrmacht* was a decisive factor during categorisation and the applications of young male adults were treated with more scrutiny than those of the elderly.[42]

In contrast to what the interviewees recalled, there is archival evidence that enrolment came to be seen as a normal phenomenon after the publication of the Decree of 2 October 1942, which required inhabitants included in the third group of the *Deutsche Volksliste* to enrol for military service,[43] with young men also considering it a way to explore the world.[44] Avoiding military service had become more difficult; whereas in 1941, employment in the coal mines, illnesses or being the sixth son in a family had offered the opportunity to refuse enlistment, two years later, these options were non-existent (with the exception of tuberculosis patients).[45] Interviewees, however, put aside all signs of ideological patriotism or opportunism and took great pains to distinguish themselves from the *Wehrmacht* soldiers who had been more enthusiastic than they recalled themselves to have been.[46]

Interpersonal Contacts within the German Army

Interviewees reported having felt torn between conflicting loyalties during their training, while fighting on the battlefield, and with reference to the Holocaust. Just like other recruits from pre-war Poland, Roman followed a mandatory program organised by the paramilitary association *Reichsarbeitsdienst*:

> We were mixed together with young Germans. I think it was deliberate, because the whole service lasted about three months and after it had finished the majority went home, in particular to Germany [. . .]. We, however, the unruly, were sent with orders straight to the German army.[47]

42 E.M. Serwański, "Przymusowa służba Polaków z Górnego Śląska w armii hitlerowskiej (Studium z zakresu hitlerowskiej polityki narodowościowej)", *Przegląd Zachodni*, 10, 1–4 (1954), 438.
43 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 16, 347.
44 Czesław Madajczyk, *Polityka III Rzeszy w okupowanej Polsce: okupacja Polski 1939–1945*, vol. 1 (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1970), 436.
45 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 144–148.
46 See for example: *A. Jedamski. Interview transcription*, 22.
47 *R. Lipiński. Interview transcription*, 4.

Afterwards, Roman followed a specific recruitment course which focused on shooting, war attack strategies, and ideology.[48] He was introduced to German military values such as bravery, determination and obedience, and learned that cowardice was contemptible. In addition to having an exemplary military attitude, soldiers without "an unlimited state affiliation" needed to be convinced politically by means of special courses, after which they swore an oath of honour to Adolf Hitler.[49] Interviews showed mixed responses to these courses. When Wacław was asked whether he had received political training, he answered:

> I was only trained in artillery there, they only gave us military training, how to handle a gun and so on. I didn't really know much German, so, well, I was with the horses.[50]

As political training was compulsory, it is very unlikely Wacław did not receive it. But because he did not understand German, he probably no longer remembered it, or did not want to talk about it. In the end, he was made to look after the horses so that he could get by without having to speak much German. Wacław's account offers a first sign of the pragmatism applied when including recruits from pre-war Poland. Soldiers speaking Polish were often dispersed throughout units where a majority of soldiers spoke German, in order to increase cohesion.[51] In other situations, they were encouraged to speak Polish. Kazimierz remembered his superior asked:

> 'Why weren't you singing?' 'I don't understand German.' 'And what do you understand?' 'Polish.' [. . .] 'Then sing in Polish.' I say: 'Lads, let's sing *Wojenko, wojenko* (War, little war).' [. . .] And in the next few days, he didn't tell the company to sing. Or say anything in German. He only said: 'Hey, *wojenko, wojenko*!' [. . .] [We were walking] from the suburbs of Hamburg. They [German civilians – MV] admired the way we sang. German troops singing Polish.[52]

Learning how to march while singing appeared more important than singing in German. *Wojenko, wojenko* was the song of the Polish Legions fighting under Józef Piłsudski in the First World War. It gained popularity in interwar Poland as a patriotic song and helped to make the Polish Legions a founding myth of Polish independence. Singing it under the command of a German superior unable to speak Polish, the content took on an ironic meaning:

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48 See also *B. Machalewski. Interview Recording*, *Nr 002*, min. 2.

49 *Dodatek do ogólnych postanowień (15.10. 1943)*, cited in Serwański, "Przymusowa służba Polaków", 467.

50 *W. Galios. Interview transcription*, 48.

51 Kutzner, Rutkiewicz, *Polacy z Wehrmachtu*, 119.

52 *K. Psuty. Interview transcription*, 13.

> Belief is marching, bloody sweat is pouring,
> One, two, step, my brother, one, two, step, my brother,
> Because Poland's heating up.[53]

Integrating recruits from Polish annexed territories remained problematic. In the autumn of 1941, a German Commissioner wrote that despite the potential military value of these recruits, bad experiences made further recruitment impossible. German and Polish speaking soldiers were reported to have been shooting each other.[54] By 1943, the necessary characteristics of a good German soldier were still to emerge in Polish recruits.[55]

That the interviewees focused on disobedience during the schooling process can be explained as follows. Most joined the *Wehrmacht* after the defeat in Stalingrad, when many soldiers lost their belief in victory.[56] That the Allies publicly demanded the capitulation of the German Army and announced they would punish war crimes could also have influenced their mood at the time. In addition, the interviewees were freed from the cultural role model of a good German soldier they were once required to fulfil. Individual voices nevertheless offered alternative meanings. Although an opinion that is much more difficult to articulate today, Wiktor said he felt accepted in the Wehrmacht.[57]

Wehrmacht soldiers from pre-war Poland remained under special control on the battlefield.[58] With the freedom in their sphere of action reduced to a minimum, their accounts consisted of dry descriptions of military actions. Drills appeared to have dehumanised the individual and reduced him to part of the machinery of killing.[59] Only Stanisław recalled trying to sabotage an attack manoeuvre. However, when a telephone operator warned him and his colleagues that they were endangering their own lives, they made sure to behave in a way that was above suspi-

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53 "Polish Patriotic Songs. Wojenka, English translation," Lyrics translate, accessed October 20, 2023, http://lyricstranslate.com/en/wojenka-little-war.html#ixzz3fraBf1I0.

54 *Raport o sytuacji na ZZ 10 (grudzien 1943 – styczen 1944)*, in *Raporty z ziem wcielonych do III Rzeszy (1942–1944)*, ed. Zbigniew Mazur, Maria Rutowska, Aleksandra Pietrowicz (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 2004), 454–455.

55 Der Reichskommissar für die Festigung Deutschen Volkstums Stabshauptamt, Autumn 1941, cited in: Serwański, "Przymusowa służba Polaków", 451, 467.

56 Martin Humburg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges: Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten aus der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Opladen: Westdeutscher 1988), 118.

57 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 212; "Ślaskie losy wojenne. Z Janowa do Wehrmachtu," Wykopalisko, accessed on October 20, 2023, http://www.wykop.pl/ramka/218187/slaskie-losy-wojenne-z-janowa-do-wehrmachtu/.

58 *Raport o sytuacji na ZZ 6 (do 15 VIII 1943)*, in: *Raporty z ziem wcielonych do III Rzeszy (1942–1944)*, 185.

59 Neitzel, Welzer, *Soldaten*, 35.

cion.[60] This behaviour is in line with what analyses of the letters the soldiers sent home showed. Offering insight into the various ways individual soldiers appropriated, integrated or distanced themselves from NS ideology, these sources display a prevailing degree of mental conformism.[61] Nevertheless, wartime controllers who checked the letters that soldiers wrote home reported that ethnic Poles fighting on the Eastern Front, in contrast to German soldiers, did not mention how impatient they were about waiting for a new gun. Nor did they write to express their faith in Adolf Hitler.[62]

The abundance of words that interviewees dedicated to their schooling and service contrasts with their silence about the Holocaust. This seems to correspond to the fact they fought on the Western Front, instead of performing their military service in a concentration camp.[63] The only reference to the Holocaust to be found in the interview collection, however, hints at something different. An episode that Stefan recalled about his Allied service indirectly reflects the opinions he claimed to have held before:

> When I was in Scotland, I'd keep hearing: 'Little one, you do it!' [. . .] They were pushing me around [. . .]. Finally, this one guy says: 'Listen to how they pick on you. At night take a poker and, this guy who's the worst, go and break his legs. You'll have peace of mind.' And so I did [. . .] I was even sitting for a week in jail, but . . . Afterwards this guy says: 'Look guys, give him a break, because I told him to do it. And if he doesn't, then I'll help him and I'll also do the same to you.' [. . .] I heard a joke about Jews. On the front there are two little Jews. [One] says: 'Isaac, am I already dead?' 'No, why?' 'Well, because I already smell!' [. . .] In the evening, I wanted to brag, to make people laugh. And then (. . .) I ask: 'Why did you speak up for me?' [Then he told Stefan he was a Jew. Stefan continued with a breaking voice – MV] I feel like crying today, as I remember this. I was so ashamed![64]

Although Stefan had heard the joke among his Allied colleagues, it is improbable that he did not hold anti-Semitic views when in the Wehrmacht.[65] While meticu-

60 *S. Galikowski. Interview transcription*, 12.

61 Klaus Latzel, "Wehrmachtssoldaten zwischen 'Normalität' und NS-Ideologie, oder: Was sucht die Forschung in der Feldpost?", in *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*, ed. Rolf-Dieter Müller, Hans-Erich Volkmann (München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 1999) 580; Klaus Latzel, "Feldpostbriefe: Überlegungen zur Aussagekraft einer Quelle", in *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte*, ed. Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter, Ulrike Jureit, Horst Möller, Jan Philipp Reemtsma (München: Beck, 2005), 179; Römer, *Kameraden*, 475.

62 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 240.

63 Walter Manoschek, "The Crimes of the Werhmacht in the Second world War", in ed. Heer a.o., *The Discursive Construction of History*, 21.

64 *S. Galikowski. Interview transcription*, 31.

65 Willem W. Hagen argues that: 'In their pre-World War II dynamics the Polish and German variants of political anti-Semitism displayed common features deriving from their embeddedness

lously pointing out differences during schooling, the interviewees did not mention even once that they had different opinions on Jews to those held by their colleagues in the German army. By internalising these opinions, the interviewees seemed to have adhered to social practices. Historical research has indicated such behaviour as being common among young *Wehrmacht* soldiers.[66] Stefan dared to mention his anti-Semitic views in describing himself as a person who had changed his frame of reference when fighting on the Allied side, a change triggered by a Jew who had supported his integration process into the 1st Polish Armoured Division. The fact that the collection only contains one fragment about the Holocaust shows that the former *Wehrmacht* soldiers from Poland interviewed within our project were less talkative than the former soldiers who, visiting a *Wehrmacht* exhibition in Austria, mostly accepted, yet tried to mitigate their role in (and thus responsibility for) the extermination of Jews.[67]

Changing Sides

There were two different ways for *Wehrmacht* soldiers from Polish annexed territories to change sides during the war: being taken captive or desertion. Wacław is one of the interviewed soldiers who deserted:

> I'm up one night and he's talking me into escaping. But I'm thinking, either you're testing me, to check who I really am, or you really want to get away. But I say: 'I'm a German soldier, I'm not running away.' And this stopped him in his tracks a little. Then we later meet in the camp. And he says: 'You were a smart-aleck.' So I ask: 'And are you a German? How can I know if you're being sincere?' He says: 'Yes. I'm a communist.'[68]

This fragment indicates that bonds of disobedience extended the close network of Wehrmacht soldiers from pre-war Poland. Wacław was considered a possible deserter by a communist, who only dared to reveal his political opinions after deser-

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in comparable patterns of socioeconomic development' ("Before the 'Final Solution': Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland", *The Journal of Modern History*, 68, 2 (1996), 351. On anti-Semitic traditions in interwar Poland and Nazi Germany see: Wolfram Wette, *Die Wehrmacht: Feindbilder, Vernichtungskrieg, Legenden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 2002), 103–104; Stephanie Zloch, *Polnischer Nationalismus: Politik und Gesellschaft zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2010), 573.

66 Römer, *Kameraden*, 476.

67 Hannes Heer, "That is what is so terrible – that millions of soldiers were there, yet today they all claim they never saw a thing", in ed. Heer a.o., *The Discursive Construction of History*, 95.

68 *W. Galios. Interview transcription*, 48.

tion. Wacław said he pushed away his internal doubt and disciplined himself by referring to the ideal he had been trying to internalise: he was a German soldier. German soldiers are not supposed to surrender without fighting until the bitter end.[69] The episode also reveals that although the bonds between colleagues within the *Wehrmacht* were often so intense that they preferred being at the front to spending time with their families,[70] ideas about desertion appeared more delicate to share.

Out of a total of 17,300,000 *Wehrmacht* soldiers, the number of deserters is estimated to have been between 100,000 and 300,000 by the end of 1944. During the war, German military tribunals handled the cases of about 35,000 deserters, of whom 22,750 were sentenced to death, a measure which was carried out in about 15,000 cases.[71] Research based on court files revealed that the motives of the accused included political opposition, war-weariness, and soldiers who had previously been punished within the Wehrmacht aiming to avoid subsequent disciplining.[72] Particular scholarly attention has been devoted to cases involving political opponents, but the focus has also been on the alternative conceptions of masculinity that deserters referred to when giving their reasons for desertion, such as an inclination towards autonomy and the desire to survive.[73]

Desertion among ethnic Germans was higher because these soldiers had additional motives. They could wish to desert, for example, when the occupier had confiscated the property of their parents, or had seen a concrete opportunity to fall into the hands of the Allies. Polish Armed Forces in the West included 89,631 deserters and POWs from German forces. Figures from July 1943 tell us that of the 71,000 inhabitants of Upper Silesia who enrolled in the Wehrmacht under the third category of the *Deutsche Volksliste*, only 157 deserted.[74] Our interviewees, however, deserted later. One of them was Franciszek.

Franciszek was sent to the front in Holland. His unit was hiding in trenches when a German colleague of his shouted that he had seen an Englishman. After a first round of shooting, Franciszek recalled:

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69 Maria Fritsche, "Feige Männer? Fremd- und Selbstbilder von Wehrmachtsdeserteuren", *Ariadne. Forum für Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte*, 47 (2005): 61.

70 Müller, *Hitlers Wehrmacht 1935–1945*, 114.

71 Norbert Haase, Otl Aicher, *Deutsche Deserteure* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag 1987), 112; Guido Knopp, Mario Sporn, *Die Wehrmacht: Eine Bilanz* (München: Goldmann 2007), 237.

72 Ziemann, "Fluchten aus dem Konsens zum Durchhalten", 602.

73 Gerhard Paul, "'Die verschwanden einfach nachts': Überläufer zu den Alliierten und den europäischen Befreiungsbewegungen", in *Die anderen Soldaten: Wehrkraftzersetzung, Gehorsamsverweigerung und Fahnenflucht im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Norbert Haase, Gerhard Paul (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), 139–156.

74 Kaczmarek, *Polacy w Wehrmachcie*, 309, 315–316, 322.

> There was a second round of shooting and there was probably then an order to withdraw, but I didn't hear anything, right? They stopped shooting, I take a look, stick my head out: there's nobody there! You know what idiotic thing I did then? Only today am I thinking healthily: when I saw that there was no one there, I took my gun, and fled towards the place where this *Englander* was supposed to be. And well, I ran straight at them![75]

Franciszek used the chaos on the battlefield to make his desertion look like a heroic deed in which he fought until the last bullet. While describing this, he was simultaneously belittling his past action as something silly, portraying himself as not thinking straight, thereby showing that his struggle to give meaning to his desertion was still ongoing. Franciszek continued by describing his encounter with a Polish woman who was likely on guard duty: "She asks, "A Pole? Fighting in the German army? How is this possible?" "Oh, thank God!" is all I can say. I could hardly speak with the emotion of it all." Only at this moment during the interview, did the interviewer interject and use the word that Franciszek had thus far been meticulously avoiding. "So you deserted from the Wehrmacht?", to which Franciszek responded, "I deserted from the Wehrmacht. If only the Germans had known!" Just after relating how speechless with emotion he had been while speaking in Polish on the Allied side, the interviewer precisely identified his behaviour as desertion, which, although something one could be proud of in Poland at the time the interview was conducted, Franciszek immediately indirectly contrasted his action with the German discourse on desertion during the war. Franciszek did not want to be portrayed as a coward. His narration then pointed to an even more complicated conflict of loyalty. Only a little while after Franciszek had his conversation in Polish, his story goes, he saw his entire *Wehrmacht* unit being taken into captivity: "I was so happy to see them again I almost soiled myself." His desertion did not mean he had completely emotionally distanced himself from his former comrades. While happy to see them, he was also scared they would find out he escaped.[76]

The Polish Government-in-exile believed that the enrolment of pre-war Polish citizens in the *Wehrmacht* was illegal; because of this, ethnic Germans with a *Volksliste* categorisation who deserted or found themselves in Allied captivity were not considered traitors, but could join the Polish Allied Forces. *Wehrmacht* soldiers needed to declare whether they considered themselves German or Polish in their application to join the 1st Polish Armoured Division. In this way, a separation was introduced into the camp among the *Wehrmacht* soldiers who had previously functioned as one social group. When soldiers said they were Poles, they

75 *F. Gdaniec. Interview transcription*, 22.

76 Ibid. See also *Z. Dąbrowski. Interview recording*, Nr 001, 00:58–2.10.

were often taunted as traitors by their former colleagues.[77] Jan remembered the difficulties he experienced in situating himself after being taken into captivity:

> I was imprisoned by the British and spent a week in the kitchen. There was a colonel there from the German air force. They'd locked him up in a barn. When I got there, I ripped off all the German stripes from my uniform. They gave me soup to serve to him. As I came up to him with the soup, he asks me what my nationality is. And I tell him: 'Silesian'. He started calling me names: pig, deserter, the worst.[78]

Despite having declared himself Polish when asked officially, in private contact with a German officer, Jan says he identified himself as Silesian, but this did not change his former superior's categorisation of him – he was now considered the worst kind of opponent. Such loyalty conflicts were not unique for soldiers from Polish annexed territories. Similarities were noted among second generation Italian migrants in Great Britain, who were at first interned because they were seen as enemies, but were later given the opportunity to join the British forces. Some decided not to join; most did, however, because until 1943, the British War Office exempted sending them to the battlefield, where they might find themselves fighting against relatives.[79]

Everyday Life in the Allied Forces Before D-Day

Wacław was among the first group of about 2000 deserters and POWs who reached Great Britain in the summer of 1943. He joined the 1st Polish Armoured Division, set up in February of 1942 in Scotland on the model of its predecessor, the 10th Mounted Cavalry Brigade, which had defended Poland during the September campaign in 1939. Its soldiers had fled the country and used various escape routes to France via Romania and Hungary. Many travelled over Yugoslavia, and took the boat to France.[80] From there, they made their way to Great Britain. The 1st Polish Armoured Division embarked for Normandy in August 1944 and during its journey through France, Belgium, the Netherlands and northern Germany, the number of

77 *J. Garski. Interview transcription*, 6–7.

78 Kutzner, Rutkiewicz, *Polacy z Wehrmachtu*, 198.

79 Wendy Ugolini, *Experiencing war as the 'Enemy Other': Italian Scottish Experience in World War II* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 160–162, 186–195.

80 Marian Wlodzimierz Żebrowski, *Zarys historii polskiej broni pancernej 1918–1947* (London: Zarząd Zrzeszenia Kół Odziałowych Broni Pancernej 1971), 414; Evan McGilvray, Janusz Jarzębowski, *First Polish Armoured Division 1938–47: A History* (Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books, 2022).

former *Wehrmacht* soldiers in its ranks increased.[81] Henryk, a division soldier without a past in the German Army, recalled his observations on former *Wehrmacht* recruits as follows:

> One thing you got with the Wehrmacht: discipline, obedience. In the Polish army this wasn't at all necessary. Such clacking of heels! Obviously, this was the fashion for a while but nothing like in the German army. This was the German rigor forced and taught. A soldier who was forcibly conscripted into the German army, carried out everything in the German way. There was iron in them, soulless discipline, which we did not need [. . .] However, a Pomeranian or Silesian soldier who had escaped from the German army was appreciated: well-trained, giving everything of himself, that you had to give them credit for.[82]

Superiors in the Allied forces indeed considered the experience of former Wehrmacht soldiers an asset. This is why Wacław, who had served in the Wehrmacht artillery, received a place in a corresponding unit in the 1st Polish Armoured Division. Once they had switched sides, recruits needed protection from reprisals and had to reorient their practices. As was the case with many enemy nationals in British Forces, pseudonyms were assigned to make them unrecognisable if they fell into the hands of the enemy.[83] Roman remembered having a hard time getting used to his:

> I had to give myself a surname, so as not to forget it. As a scout I had this friend in Toruń, her name was Modjeska. [. . .] Let it be Modrzejewski. [. . .] I was born in Warsaw, I had to remember the house number five, apartment number eight, on Solar Street. 'As in sun, so you don't forget.' [. . .] Because in the night they even woke me up and asked: 'What is your name?' 'Lipiński.' 'What? There's nobody with that name here.'[84]

Unlearning the practices that they had been drilled to perform also proved problematic. Stefan recalled:

> The army had already gathered and this useless lump turned up late, jumped up and did this [performed a Hitler salute – MV]. It was a drill and he just did it automatically, as a reflex. He couldn't help himself. I blushed with shame for him [. . .]. It was so pitiful. But there was no unpleasantness because of this. They understood.[85]

81 Maczek, *Od podwody do czołga*, 130.

82 *H. Kątny. Interview recording*, Nr 003, min. 39.

83 Webster, "Enemies, Allies and Transnational Histories", 80.

84 *R. Lipiński. Interview transcription*, 35–36; see also *J. Prabucki. Interview recording*, Nr 002, min. 10.

85 *S. Galikowski. Interview transcription*, 29.

Stefan wanted to feel accepted by his new peers.[86] His shame for the behaviour of his colleague indicates how important it was for him to adhere to social expectations.

The former *Wehrmacht* soldiers moved from a totalitarian environment to an army based on democratic principles. A small detail in Roman's story reveals how he experienced that more human approach right at the beginning:

> Delousing, a bath, you come out on the other side, there are tables and a soldier: 'What shoe size are you?' I say: 'How am I supposed to know what my shoe size is?' With the Germans, they gave you whatever shoes they had and told you to wear them. And then you walked, no matter if they were half a metre too long or three metres too short. They just didn't care. You had shoes and that was that, you walked in them. 'Show me your feet! Seven!' They were all specialists. 'Uniform. What size? Stand here at attention! Number 1, 65–ish. Right, Number 1, 66.' [. . .] And then here you are, new uniforms, completely brand-new uniforms.[87]

Roman recognised that the Allies guaranteed soldiers more comfort by considering their individual needs. Notwithstanding the uniformity needed in all armies, joining the Allies appeared to be an individual emancipatory experience after having served under a totalitarian regime.[88] We hear this detail at the start of his career in the Allied Forces, but do not find any hint of ideological values such as individualism or freedom later in his interview, or in that of the other interviewees. At home, in 1947, Roman informed his father that he had fought out of Polish patriotism, but in their descriptions of the battlefield, interviewees did not refer to ideology. In this respect, their accounts are comparable to those of Canadian soldiers who reported a swift, disturbing transformation once they engaged in killing.[89]

86 On the role of comradeship in the German Army and the Allied Forces see Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft: Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2006), 109; Whiteclay Chambers II, "The American Experience of the Second World War", 192.

87 *R.Lipiński. Interview transcription*, 23–24.

88 Lewis H. Carlson, *We Were Each Other's Prisoners: An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), XXIII.

89 Jeff A. Keshen, *Saints, Sinners and Soldiers: Canada's Second World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 284.

Testing Loyalty on the Battlefield

Interviewees described how they had felt ambiguous on the battlefield – not towards an anonymous collective opponent, but towards individual surrendering soldiers. Although they should have followed the Geneva Convention prohibiting reprisals, the testimonies reveal that the reality may have been somewhat different.[90] The oral accounts here diverge from what historiographical literature tells us. Most books about the division's activities in Germany only start the analysis after the Second World War had come to an end.[91] Jan Rydel mentioned that division soldiers liberated the concentration camp of Westerbork on the Dutch side of the Dutch-German state border, where they took the Dutch camp officers into captivity and transported them to a camp as POW.[92] Interviewee Kazimierz, in contrast, said he heard of a soldier who often volunteered to bring *Wehrmacht* POWs to camps in order to be able to shoot them himself, thereby taking revenge on the soldiers who had killed his family in front of his eyes.[93]

Interviewees often stated that their superiors used encounters with POWs to check their reliability. They were among the youngest soldiers, and many were added as ordinary soldiers on the bottom rung of the existing power hierarchy. Although the loyalty checks presented here cannot be considered a widespread phenomenon, interviewees recall these experiences as having been especially difficult. Franciszek said that when his army unit captured a German sniper, he was asked:

> 'Well, Franek, show us what you can do. Take care of it!' Good God! Here I am from a Catholic family and they're ordering me to murder. Killing a man in a war is one thing, but specifically to kill a prisoner? 'We didn't see you fighting much.' And this was one clerk, glasses, thick lenses: 'Give him here, I'll take care of it!' I think to myself: Shit, maybe it's possible to save him? 'Right, I'm off now.' And off we went, there was a forest nearby.[94]

While they were walking, the German sniper told him he was 35 and showed him pictures of his three children. Franciszek continued:

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90 "Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929," International Humanitarian Law Databases, accessed on October 20, 2023, https://www.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/305?OpenDocument.

91 Wiesław Hładkiewicz, *Polacy w zachodnich stefach okupacyjnych Niemiec: 1945–1948* (Zielona Góra: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej, 1982); Czesław Łuczak. *Polacy w okupowanych Niemczech: 1945–1949* (Poznań: Pracownia Serwisu Oprogramowania, 1993).

92 Jan Rydel, *'Polska okupacja' w północno-zachodnich Niemczech 1945–1947: Nieznany rozdział stosunków polsko-niemieckich* (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka 2000), 48.

93 *K. Psuty. Interview transcription*, 56.

94 *F. Gdaniec. Interview transcription*, 30–31.

> I say: '*Weglaufen, aber schnell!*' He looks back and I say: '*Aber schnell!*' and fire in the air. [. . .] I was stupid, I didn't know what I was doing. It was disobeying an order.
>
> Interviewer: It's important what you're saying. Very important.
>
> Franciszek: But it wasn't courage, it was stupidity. On the one hand, courage, on the other, stupidity.

Franciszek articulated that he had problems figuring out which social norms he needed to adhere to. He had been asked to show his loyalty by carrying out a command that contravened the Geneva Convention, and expressed his discomfort back then by pointing to his Catholic belief, the German language connecting him to the sniper, and the personality of his victim. During the interview, he still called his disobedience a silly irrational act, and only after the interviewer introduced another moral perspective, that saving the life of a human being is "very important", did he start to evaluate whether bravery might also have had something to do with it. He did not arrive at a conclusion, probably because the interview was the first time he had put his experience into words. Franciszek presented his struggle with a changing frame of reference, in which Christian love of one's neighbour and the virtue of bravery were hesitatingly coming to the fore. Franciszek did not go so far as to say that his deed was motivated by loyalty towards a German soldier, who could have personified the army colleagues he had had in the *Wehrmacht*. Such expressions of loyalty we find in interviews where the POW encountered spoke Polish. One interviewee, whom we refer to anonymously, recalled:

> [The Wehrmacht soldier taken captive] says: 'Oh Jesus, Poles!' The [Polish Allied Army] Commander says: 'And how do you know that they're Poles?' 'Polish eagles.' 'And you, when you shot the driver, did you not see that hussar sign and PL written on the front of the tank? Only now you see that they're Poles?!' 'I left seven children at home, leave me alone, I want to be taken prisoner! I'm fed up with this war, I too am a Pole!' 'Where are you from?' 'Upper Silesia.' He said the Lord's Prayer! Half of it was in Polish, the rest in German. 'Some Pole! You can't even say a prayer?' He just looked and said that he couldn't be captured, he is SS. [. . .] 'Get down!' He threw himself to the ground. 'Driver, come here! First gear!' He guided the tank over him. I only saw how he turned his head in pain. Eyes closed, I say to myself: I do not want to see this, I'm following an order. Try to say you won't do it. They'd report you and that'd be that. You disobeyed an order. The order had to be obeyed. And so we ran over the Pole. A Pole ran over a Pole.[95]

Just like the interviewee, the POW came from Upper Silesia, but unlike the POW, he had a past in the SS and spoke German better than he did Polish. The POW is por-

95 *Anonymized interviewee. Interview transcription*, 62. See also: *Second Anonymized Interviewee. Interview Transcription*, 5–6.

trayed as hoping for the mercy of the Polish Allied soldiers, while at the same time despairing as to whether opting for captivity would be a good decision. For the Allied soldiers, however, he failed their Polish loyalty test: praying in Polish. That he said he was suffering from war weariness and had seven children, was apparently not considered important. The interviewee did not question the command to kill him, as if there were no Geneva Convention. Nevertheless, during the interview he provided insight into the emotions of conflicting loyalties that he recalled having back then.

The interviewee presented himself as the executor of a military command. Interviewees heard about or reported having seen how others decided the lives of POWs, but never presented themselves as decision-makers. We cannot know how interviewees acted back then, nor to what extent interviewees considered such experiences still too difficult to reveal when interviewed during the final years of their lives. Moreover, disentangling the emotions that the soldiers who fought on both sides felt when the situations they described in the interviews took place is impossible; nonetheless, their changing frames of reference at least enabled them to finally articulate these extreme cases of conflicting loyalty into speech, and show the doubts they encountered when giving them meaning.

Testing Loyalty as an Occupying Force

The 1st Polish Armoured Division ended the war in north Germany and operated as an occupying force until its dissolution in 1947.[96] Research on the cohabitation of the civil population and Polish Allied soldiers has shown that the number of reported infringements against fraternisation was on the same scale as that of other Allied soldiers.[97] Former soldiers who fought on both sides articulated the fear that German civilians initially are reported to have felt for what they called the Devil's Division, but they also helped to make the rules understandable for civilians by speaking German.[98] Soldiers commonly concentrated their infringements on symbols of national ideology, and often even took them home as war souvenirs.[99] Kazimierz described entering a house with a picture of Adolf Hitler hanging on the wall. When he found out the German husband was enrolled in the SS, Kazimierz started ordering his wife about:

96 Samantha K. Knapton, *Occupiers, Humanitarian Workers, and Polish Displaced Persons in British-Occupied Germany* (London: Bloomsbury 2023), 50.
97 Rydel, *'Polska okupacja'*, 138, 270.
98 *R. Lipiński. Interview transcription*, 34; *J. Zagórski. Interview Recording*, Nr 004, min. 16.
99 Rydel, *'Polska okupacja'*, 136.

> 'First get on the chair, then on the desk and lower that portrait of Hitler to the floor.' She lowered it so gently that the picture didn't get damaged, the glass didn't crack, and Hitler stayed in one piece. I say to her: 'But you've still not come down from the desk.' I see that portrait of Hitler in one piece. 'Jump from the desk onto the Hitler.' Oh, how reluctantly she did it! What a face she pulled! She put up a little resistance, but I frightened her a little, because I had a gun. She jumped and only then did the glass break on this Hitler.[100]

Although Kazimierz frightened the woman with a weapon, civilians were not, by definition, his opponents. Kazimierz, in fact, like many other Polish Allied soldiers, had a German girlfriend, whom he described as:

> Her sympathies changed. When I first got talking with her, she viewed Hitler like a god and said she couldn't even imagine how it was possible to talk with a Pole. During our chat, though, she became convinced that we are not different people, we are like Germans. She had the same opinion as me.[101]

Her belief in Hitler did not prevent Kazimierz from getting to know her better. In Kazimierz's account, his girlfriend changed her opinion until she eventually shared his conviction that Poles were no different from Germans. Personal contact between Allied soldiers and German civilians played a pioneering role in the re–assumption of Germany's collective guilt,[102] and the soldiers who had fought on both sides held a privileged position, as they had experienced the German army from within.

Conclusion

This article analyses the conflicting loyalties of soldiers who fought on both sides of the Western Front. The interviewees were among the youngest recruits and were mobilised when the definition of the German *Volk* had reached its most elastic. Later, they deserted from the *Wehrmacht* or were taken into captivity, and all of them fought with the Polish Allied Forces. After the war, they were socialised in communist Poland, where their war experiences were most often silenced. In the final years of their lives, they were lionised as Europe's liberators. Shaping all these ambiguities into one coherent story that explains their autobio-

100 *K. Psuty. Interview transcription*, 38.
101 *K. Psuty. Interview transcription*, 61–62. See also *R. Lipiński. Interview transcription*, 69.
102 Petra Goedde, *GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender and Foreign Relations 1945–1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2003), 79.

graphical self, interviewees constructed narratives that, despite their individual logic, do contain common tropes.

Soldiers who fought on both sides recalled having mostly behaved in a similar fashion to their colleagues on the battlefield, whether shooting at one side or another. Their shooting was not driven by political ideology, but rather their desire to be loyal to social expectations.[103] The interviews show that soldiers who fought on both sides did internalise some of the ideological values from each side. Anti-Semitic opinions were widespread among them, but when joining the Allies, they welcomed the individualist human approach that underpinned the democratic army environment.

Interviewees described most of their battlefield actions in collective psychosociological terms, but on the rare occasions when they found more room for individual action, ambiguous individual loyalty conflicts came to the fore. Desertion, for example, was not motivated by political conviction or the search for autonomy, as other *Wehrmacht* soldiers reported.[104] One interviewee escaped once he knew he would encounter a Polish Allied army, but did not attach any ideological meaning to this, and was still concerned about his former *Wehrmacht* colleagues. In addition, in articulating the tests of loyalty they were asked to perform by their Allied superiors when they encountered surrendering soldiers, interviewees externalised their internal dialogue with themselves, vocalising the evaluations of saving a life or killing that they made back then, as well as their ideas of moral conduct at the time the interview was conducted.

They felt most secure when talking about their time as occupying soldiers, because this was a situation in which their conflicting loyalties became an asset. Interviewees presented themselves as masters over their own evaluations of guilt, which varied from punishing civilians to falling in love with them, and allowing a transition period in which civilian loyalties could change. The soldiers who fought on both sides were neither acting entirely of their own volition, nor were they responding to peer pressure and the dictates of social expectations. They were conformists in situations where they had no other option, while at other moments, they made spontaneous decisions outside the normalised loyalty framework in which they were asked to operate. When they were interviewed at the end of their lives, they were still coming to terms with the choices that articulated their conflicting loyalties more than half a century ago.

103 Neitzel, Welzer, *Soldaten*, 375.
104 Fritsche, "Feige Männer?".

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