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From One Uniform Into Another: Luxembourgish Men Between Nazi “Forced Conscription” and Post-War Military Service (1942–1946)

Introduction

Between 1944 and 1946, the Luxembourgger Ernest Classen consecutively served as a soldier in two disparate uniforms: as a wartime “forced conscript” in the *Feldgrau* of the Nazi armed forces, and shortly thereafter as a draftee in the olive drab of Luxembourg’s post-war army.¹ As bizarre as his wartime *parcours* may seem at first sight, Classen’s military experience in fact mirrored that of 2,290 fellow Luxembourgish men who, in the transition from war to peace in the “long 1940s”, were successively drafted into both the Nazi and the Luxembourgish military forces.

As members of the age cohort of 1925–1927, Classen and his Luxembourgish compatriots undoubtedly experienced a rather turbulent coming-of-age, indelibly marked and shaped by the humiliating occupation and annexation of their homeland by Nazi Germany, the suffering and hardships of war, the exuberant joy of American liberation, and the double militarization under two adversarial political regimes, which reached into the immediate post-war period.² Within the rather short period of four years, Luxembourg’s male population was de facto mobilized and militarized twice. The first was on 30 August 1942, when the Nazi civil administration drafted all Luxembourgish men born between 1920 and 1924 (later to include all men born up to 1927) into the German armed forces and their

1 The research for this chapter was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (Core FNR13714130 and AFR-PhD Grant 14581674).

2 A comprehensive history of Luxembourg in the Second World War still needs to be written. Overviews can be found in: Paul Dostert, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe: Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik und die Volksdeutsche Bewegung 1940–1945* (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 1985); Guy Thewes, ed., . . . *et wor alles net esou einfach: Questions sur le Luxembourg et la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Contributions historiques accompagnant l'exposition* (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2002); Musée National de la Résistance et des Droits Humains, ed., *Le Luxembourg et le 3ème Reich: Un état des lieux / Luxemburg und das Dritte Reich: Eine Bestandsaufnahme* (Sanem : Op der Lay, 2021).

auxiliary branches.³ The second was on 30 November 1944, when Luxembourg's post-liberation government announced the Grand Duchy's rupture with pre-war neutrality and the subsequent introduction of national military service under the Luxembourgish flag.⁴ Even though societal reception of these two drafts could not have been more different – general hostility in 1942 and nationalistic euphoria in 1944/45 – the renewed call to arms still came as a profound shock to those who were again called on to serve. In fact, the young conscripts of the freshly baked Luxembourg Army of 1945 were none other than those who had already been “forced-conscripted” into the German armed forces in 1944. To these 2,290 men, the social reality of post-war military service amounted less to a simple change of uniform than to a continuation of their everyday experience and struggle as reluctant soldiers – albeit now in the ranks of a democratic country's army.⁵ Remobilization – and not demobilization – was thus the order of the day.⁶

The political and societal impact of military service on modern societies has so far attracted a significant amount of scholarly attention, with numerous studies focusing on its everyday and social realities, the role it played in shaping the nation-state, and in consolidating masculine identity (and hegemony).⁷ By contrast, the phenomenon of double mandatory military service (as opposed to voluntary service) in two different armies and under two opposing political regimes and systems has thus far drawn little interest from within the scientific community – despite, or perhaps because of, its historical peculiarity.⁸ As such, the double draft of Luxem-

3 “Verordnung über die Wehrpflicht in Luxembourg,” *Verordnungsblatt Chef der Zivilverwaltung Luxemburg* (Vbl. CdZ), 31 August, 1942, 253.

4 “Arrêté grand-ducal du 30 novembre 1944 portant introduction du service militaire obligatoire,” *Mémorial du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg* 20, 15 December 1944, 143.

5 This number is provided by: Jacques Leider, *L'armée luxembourgeoise d'après-guerre: structures, fonctions, fonctionnement* (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 1993), 246.

6 For a broader take on societal “demobilization” after conflicts: John Horne, “Demobilizations,” in *Europe's Postwar Periods – 1989, 1945, 1918: Writing History Backwards*, ed. Martin Conway, Pieter Lagrou, and Henry Rousso (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 9–30.

7 Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Conscription, Military Service and Civil Society in Modern Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2004); David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People c. 1870–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Annie Crépin, *Histoire de la conscription* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

8 Notable exceptions are the Czech case (Zdenko Maršálek, “Wieder auf ‘unserer’ Seite: Ehemalige Angehörige der Wehrmacht als Soldaten der tschechoslowakischen Exilarmee,” in *Zwangsrekrutierte in die Wehrmacht: Mobilisation – Widerspruch – Widerstand – Gedächtnis in der schlesischen, tschechischen und slowenischen Perspektive*, ed. Zdenko Maršálek and Jiří Neminář (Praha/Hlučín: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR/Muzeum Hlučínska, 2020), 69–98) and the Belgian case (Christoph Brüll, “Entre méfiance et intégration: Les germanophones dans l'armée belge (1920–1955),” *Cahiers Belges d'Histoire Militaire* 4 (2006): 135–166). However, transnational war

bourgish men into the Nazi as well as the Luxembourgish armed forces between 1942 and 1946 represents a fascinating case study in order to explore this switch of uniforms with all its political, social, cultural and gendered implications in detail. In fact, the Luxembourgish example even sticks out as an exceptional case within the broader picture of post-war Europe: while other post-war armies (such as that of France) may have counted a minor percentage of former “forced conscripts” among their draftees, the Grand Duchy’s post-war army consisted nearly entirely of conscripts with a wartime past in German uniform. In Luxembourg, the experience of double military service was thus a nationwide phenomenon, whereas it remained an odd particularity in other European armies.

The present contribution accordingly looks at the consecutive conscription of Luxembourgers into the Nazi armed forces and Luxembourg’s post-war Army. By drawing on Reinhart Koselleck’s concept of “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation”,⁹ this chapter analyses how the wartime experience of “forced conscription” in Nazi uniform shaped individual and societal expectations, as well as the actual day-to-day experience (and public discourse) of post-war military service in the Luxembourg Army. As a first step, the chapter therefore explores the ground-level experiences of Luxembourg’s “forced conscripts” in German uniform. As a follow-up, it looks more closely at the lived experiences of the same men during their military service in the post-war Luxembourg Army. The overall thread running through both sections will be the individual experiences of the double-drafted Luxembourgier Ernest Classen (1926–1982), as told through his military records and his personal letters written between 1944 and 1946, and from which more general observations can be extrapolated (Figs. 1–2).

Classen’s letters were compiled, digitized, and analysed in the crowdsourcing campaign carried out by the WARLUX research project at the University of Luxembourg in 2021.¹⁰ The collection of letters – now in the possession of Classen’s descendants – comprises over 30 handwritten letters, postcards, and notes from his school years, his service in the *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force), and his conscription into the post-war Luxembourg Army. They express both the dynamic experi-

volunteering in different armies has been covered more extensively: Nir Arielli, *From Byron to bin Laden: A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Steven O’Connor and Guillaume Piketty, eds., *Foreign Fighters and Multinational Armies: From Civil Conflicts to Coalition Wars, 1848–2015* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022).

⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255.

¹⁰ Nina Janz, “The participatory aspect of creating a collection on WWII: Collecting ego-documents from Luxembourgish recruits and their families,” *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* 25, no. 2 (2023): 81–103.



Figs. 1–2: Ernest Classen in his *Luftwaffenhelfer* uniform (January 1944) and in the battledress of the Luxembourg Army (July 1945).

Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen (University of Luxembourg) & Luxembourg Army Archives.

ence of events as well as the writer's feelings and thoughts. The contents, style and tone vary with the recipient, as Classen reflects on what his addressees want to read, and how he wishes to portray himself.¹¹ The letters used for this chapter only offer a filtered impression of military service; nonetheless, they still provide a unique insight into personal strategies of coping with harsh experiences (and sense-making) in two different armies. In parallel, Classen's letters are counter-balanced by institutional sources from the Nazi civil and military administration and from the Luxembourg Army, as well as from newspaper records, parliamentary debates, and memoirs and testimonies from fellow recruits. As such, this

¹¹ Ortwin Buchbender and Reinhold Sterz, *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe 1939–1945* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982); Veit Didczuneit, Jens Ebert, and Thomas Jander, eds., *Schreiben im Krieg – Schreiben vom Krieg: Feldpost im Zeitalter der Weltkriege* (Essen: Klartext, 2011); 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): 153–166.

study transcends the divide between structural or social history and experiential history, taking into account both voices “from above” and “from below”.¹²

The main assumption of this chapter, then, is that the experience of “forced conscription” under Nazi rule had a deeply negative impact on the individual as well as on the societal perception of post-war military service, thereby making it almost impossible for the Government and the army of the Grand Duchy to foster a “positive” military identity or public image of military service in Luxembourg after 1945. In this respect, this chapter also provides a differentiated view on personal adjustments in post-war transitions and post-conflict demobilization, as well as the longer legacies of Nazi rule concerning post-1945 European societies and their military communities.

1 “Forced Recruitment” into the German Armed Forces

The act of wearing a uniform has a powerful symbolic meaning that conveys both inclusion and exclusion. According to German historian Sönke Neitzel, it is an essential aspect of the “tribal culture” that characterizes military communities, including their distinctive dress, colours, rituals and chants.¹³ Wearing a uniform, along with other external features such as military boots and a specific hairstyle, is a crucial part of the socialization process that military recruits undergo.¹⁴ By donning a uniform, the recruit enters into an unfamiliar environment with new rules, codes, obligations, tasks and rituals.¹⁵

The young Luxembourgish Ernest Classen probably never thought that he would have to wear a uniform. Born on 24 August 1926 to the housewife Marie Frank and the schoolteacher Joseph Classen in the tiny village of Huldange at the northern tip of Luxembourg, Ernest – or “Erny” – grew up in one of the few socie-

12 Marcus Funck, “Militär, Krieg und Gesellschaft: Soldaten und militärische Eliten in der Sozialgeschichte,” in *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*, ed. Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2000), 173.

13 Sönke Neitzel, *Deutsche Krieger: Vom Kaiserreich zur Berliner Republik – eine Militärgeschichte* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2020), 42, 202.

14 Harald Welzer and Sönke Neitzel, “Der Führer war wieder viel zu human, viel zu gefühlvoll”: *Der Zweite Weltkrieg aus der Sicht deutscher und italienischer Soldaten* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2011), 22.

15 Maja Apelt, “Militärische Sozialisation,” in *Handbuch Militär und Sozialwissenschaft*, ed. Sven Bernhard Gareis and Paul Klein (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006), 29.

ties in Western Europe that had no specific military tradition. In Luxembourg, military conscription had been abolished in 1881, and for 60 years, Luxembourg's male adolescents grew up without ever having to worry about drill sergeants, fatigue duty – or mobilization for war. Unlike other European societies, their “horizon of expectation” was thus not clouded by unavoidable militarization.¹⁶

This was to change with the occupation and de facto annexation of Luxembourg by Nazi Germany on 10 May 1940. After the establishment of the Nazi *Zivilverwaltung* (civil administration), Luxembourgish men and women received orders for the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, mandatory labour service, on 23 May 1941.¹⁷ Military service in the *Wehrmacht* was subsequently announced for all young Luxembourgish men born between 1920 and 1924 (later extended to 1927) on 30 August 1942.¹⁸

In line with Nazi ideology, which considered Luxembourgers to be of “Germanic” ethnicity (*Volksdeutsche*), approximately 15,500 male and female Luxembourgers were conscripted into the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* and/or the *Wehrmacht* (or the *Waffen-SS*). The exact 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.¹⁹ One-third of all conscripts avoided the draft or deserted during the war by not returning to their regiments after their leave. Of all the Luxembourgish soldiers who were recruited, an estimated 2,300 deserted and 1,200 evaded the draft. This amounted to a desertion and evasion rate of around 34.5%, higher than that of *Reichsdeutsche* soldiers.²⁰

The conscription of non-German citizens during the Second World War was a clear breach of international law. Article 23 of the Regulations annexed to the

16 The law of 16 February 1881 had abolished compulsory military service in the Grand Duchy. Between 1881 and 1940, Luxembourg's army was thus an all-volunteer force of ca. 300 men (Paul Spang, “La force armée luxembourgeoise de 1881 à 1940,” *Hémécht: Zeitschrift für Luxemburger Geschichte* 33, no. 4 (1981): 295–323).

17 “Verordnung über die Reichsarbeitsdienstpflicht in Luxemburg,” *Vbl. CdZ*, 23 May 1941, 232.

18 See Note 3.

19 André Hohengarten, “Die Zwangsrekrutierung der Luxemburger in die deutsche Wehrmacht,” *Histoire & Mémoire: Les Cahiers du CDREF* 1 (2010), 13. Another number is provided by: Ministère de l'Intérieur, ed., *Livre d'or des victimes luxembourgeoises de la guerre de 1940 à 1945* (Luxembourg: Ministère de l'Intérieur, 1971), 500.

20 Hohengarten, “Die Zwangsrekrutierung,” 23; Norbert Haase, “Von ‘Ons Jongen’, ‘Malgré-nous’ und anderen: Das Schicksal der ausländischen Zwangsrekrutierten im Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in *Die anderen Soldaten: Wehrkraftzersetzung, Gehorsamsverweigerung und Fahnenflucht im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, ed. Norbert Haase and Gerhard Paul (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1997), 171; Peter M. Quadflieg, “Zwangssoldaten” und “Ons Jongen”: *Eupen-Malmedy und Luxemburg als Rekrutierungsgebiet der deutschen Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Aachen: Shaker, 2008), 115.

Hague Convention IV of 1907 expressly bans compelling nationals of the opposing party to participate in military operations against their own country.²¹ The Nazi administration, as well as German lawyers, were aware of this prohibition, given that the German conscription law of 1935 stipulated that only *Reich* Germans could be drafted into the *Wehrmacht*.²² Prior to the conscription of Luxembourgers, legal issues regarding their nationality had to be resolved. The “Ordinance on Citizenship in Alsace, Lorraine and Luxembourg” issued on 23 August 1943 promised unrestricted German citizenship by revocation (*Staatsbürgerschaft auf Widerruf*) to *Volksdeutsche* conscripts of the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen-SS* from these regions.²³ However, naturalization was only granted after their enlistment in the army. Consequently, conscription in these regions was not a result of citizenship being granted, but rather citizenship was utilized as a means of legitimizing compulsory military service.²⁴ As *Volksdeutsche*, the Luxembourgers were considered to be regular soldiers in the *Wehrmacht*. They were distributed among the units on an equal footing with German citizens, the *Reichsdeutsche* soldiers.²⁵ They had the same duties (to fight and to follow orders, with disobedience punished by exe-

21 “Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land. The Hague, 18 October 1907,” *International Humanitarian Law Databases*, accessed 23 February 2023, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/hague-conv-iv-1907/regulations-art-23#:~:text=A%20belligerent%20is%20likewise%20forbidden,the%20commencement%20of%20the%20war.>

22 The “Law on the establishment of the *Wehrmacht*” (*Gesetz über den Aufbau der Wehrmacht*) of 16 March 1935 (RGBl. I.1935, 375), followed by the “Military code” (*Wehrgesetz*) of 21 May 1935 (RGBl. I 1935, 609–614) reintroduced military service in Germany, and renamed the *Reichswehr* into *Wehrmacht*. The duration of service was initially fixed at one year and extended to two years in August 1936.

23 “Verordnung über die Wehrpflicht in Luxemburg,” *VBl. CdZ*, 31 August 1942, 253; “Verordnung über die Staatsangehörigkeit im Elsaß, in Lothringen und in Luxemburg,” *VBl. CdZ*, 23 August 1942, 254. Relevant here is Paragraph 1, subsection 1: “Shall acquire nationality by law all German-born Alsations, Lorrainers and Luxembourgers who are or will be called up a) to the *Wehrmacht* or to the *Waffen-SS* [. . .].”

24 Peter M. Quadflieg, “Die ‘Zwangsrekrutierung’ im Westen: Eupen-Malmedy, Luxemburg, Elsass und Lothringen,” in *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*, ed. Frédéric Stroh and Peter M. Quadflieg (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2017), 33.

25 Order by the OKW Nr. 1956/43 geh. WFSt/Org(II), Treatment and use of conscripts from the German-administered western territories (Alsations, Lorraine, Luxembourgers), 19 May 1943 (Copy), Bundesarchiv (BArch), RH 10/12.

cution), but they also had the same “rights” to supplies and medical treatment and were eligible for awards and promotions.²⁶

The population of Luxembourg received the news of the introduction of compulsory military service with great indignation and a strong wave of rejection. On 31 August, the day after the announcement, a four-day strike was held, followed by the imposition of a state of emergency, and a court-martial was established to try those who had been arrested for going on strike. The court-martial imposed twenty death sentences, with those convicted being executed in a forest near the SS Special Camp and Concentration Camp in Hinzert.²⁷ The response of the population involved not only strikes and leafleting against the occupiers, but also support for young men awaiting military conscription. Through a network of supporters, thousands of men were either smuggled across the border into France or Belgium before they were drafted, or hidden in mines in the south of Luxembourg.²⁸

Although 1,200 men evaded conscription,²⁹ the majority of Luxembourgers who donned German military uniforms did so in compliance with mandatory military service requirements. However, a smaller number, estimated to be around 1,500, volunteered for various branches of the German military and police forces.³⁰ Although prior attempts at voluntary recruitment were unsuccessful,³¹ some Luxembourgers still chose to enlist. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of Luxembourgers in German uniform were following orders related to their enforced military service.

In the Nazis’ eyes, militarization was ideally meant to start even earlier in the lives of young men, as they were to be “formed” into a fighting community within the Nazi community (*Volksgemeinschaft*).³² However, as the Grand Duchy of Lux-

26 Chef der Heeresrüstung und Befehlshaber des Ersatzheeres, Chef des Ausbildungswesens im Ersatzheer, Richtlinien für die Behandlung der Elsässer, Lothringer, Luxemburger und Untersteirer, 2 February 1943, BArch RH 14/123; Quadflieg, “Zwangssoldaten” und “Ons Jungen”, 151.

27 Jean Hansen, “Streik auf der Schifflinger Schmelz,” in . . . *Wéi wann et eréischt haut geschitt wier!*, ed. Christiane Schmitz and Paul Lenners (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 1993), 77–86; Georges Büchler, “Streikstage: Ein chronologischer Überblick,” in “*Generalstreik*”: *Streikbewegung in Luxemburg, August–September 1942*, ed. Musée national de la Résistance (Esch-sur-Sûre: Op der Lay, 2017), 19.

28 Paul Dostert, “La résistance contre l’occupant allemand 1940–1944,” in . . . *et wor alles net esou einfach: Questions sur le Luxembourg et la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Contributions historiques accompagnant l’exposition*, ed. Guy Thewes (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2002), 108. For a highly detailed account of the individual escapes made possible through such assistance, see: Aimé Knepper, *Les réfractaires dans les bunkers*, 5th ed. (Luxembourg: Aimé Knepper, 2004).

29 Hohengarten, “Die Zwangsrekrutierung,” 23; Haase, “Von ‘Ons Jungen’ und ‘Malgré-nous,’” 171.

30 Dostert, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe*, 170.

31 Quadflieg, “Zwangssoldaten” und “Ons Jungen”, 98.

32 Neitzel, *Deutsche Krieger*, 115.

embourg was only occupied in May 1940, this was not applicable to the first generation of Luxembourgers destined to serve in German uniform. The Nazi system was geared towards educating young people for the *Volksgemeinschaft* from early on. Organisations such as the *Hitler-Jugend* (HJ, Hitler Youth), the *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* (DAF, German Labour Front) and others were considered agencies for “educating the *Volksgemeinschaft*”.³³ Before they were conscripted into the German armed forces, the Nazi civil administration in Luxembourg thus tried to win over and integrate the country’s youth into their *Kampfsgemeinschaft* (fighting community).³⁴ “*Wehrrertüchtigungslager*” (military fitness camps) were regularly set up for *Hitler-Jugend* members “to actively promote a love and inclination for the weapons of the army, especially the infantry, among young people”.³⁵ However, not all young Luxembourgers complied with Nazi ideology. School pupils in Luxembourg City, Esch-sur-Alzette, Echternach and Diekirch,³⁶ for instance, joined in the strike and protest actions after 31 August 1942, and many refused to perform the daily “Heil Hitler” salute.³⁷ As a consequence, several pupils were apprehended on school premises or at their homes and were subsequently sent to Nazi re-education camps. While female pupils were sent to a youth hostel in Adenau, the male pupils (183 boys ranging in age from 16 to 19) were transported to Burg Stahleck on the Rhine.³⁸

During the course of these events, Ernest Classen attended the Gymnasium in Diekirch, one of the country’s largest secondary schools. Since all Luxembourgish pupils were forced to join the *Hitler-Jugend* from April 1941 onwards, we have to assume that Classen (at least nominally) also became part of the Nazi-organised youth movement.³⁹ By the time Classen was called up for military service, the

33 Welzer and Neitzel, “*Der Führer war wieder viel zu human*”, 59.

34 For the *Reichsdeutsche* see: Neitzel, *Deutsche Krieger*, 115.

35 Wehrbezirkskommando Luxemburg, Distribution letter “Cooperation between Wehrmacht and Hitler Jugend” by Stellv. Generalkommando XXII A. K. (Wehrkreiskommando XII), 25 May 1943, Archives Nationales de Luxembourg (ANLux), CdZ-E-0397.

36 Cécile Ries, “La résistance estudiantine,” in *Livre d’Or de la Résistance Luxembourgeoise de 1940–1945*, ed. Nicolas Bosseler and Raymond Steichen (Esch-sur-Alzette: H. Ney-Eicher, 1952), 511–525.

37 Robert Loewen, *Vom Straflager Stahleck ins Gefangenenlager Moskau* (Luxembourg: R. Loewen, 2002), 25.

38 Uwe Bader and Beate Welter, “Die Burg Stahleck – in der NS-Zeit nicht nur Jugendherberge,” *Blätter zum Land Rheinland-Pfalz* 2 (2001), 4. For more details about the “re-education” measurements at Burg Stahleck see: Sandra Schmit, “‘Ons Jongen’ – frühe Luxemburger Frontberichte,” in *Luxemburg und der Zweite Weltkrieg: Literarisch-intellektuelles Leben zwischen Machtergreifung und Epuration*, ed. Claude Dario Conter et al. (Mersch: Centre national de littérature, 2020), 539–544.

39 Philippe Victor, “Tentatives de nazification de la jeunesse luxembourgeoise sous l’occupation nazie (1940–1944),” in *Le Luxembourg et le 3ème Reich: Un état des lieux / Luxembourg und das*

Nazis had already been occupying the country for nearly four years. Classen and his peers were constantly exposed to Nazi rule in their daily lives, through the indoctrination of Nazi ideology in their school curriculums or the ubiquitous presence of swastikas on the streets. It is most likely that, given the close-knit community of Luxembourg, Classen and his family closely monitored reports about the conscription of older Luxembourgers. As a result, they were probably well aware of the deaths of other young men and may have had legitimate fears that Ernest, too, could be sent to the front.

Forcibly Conscripted into the Luftwaffe

Even before their conscription into the *Wehrmacht*, male Luxembourgish secondary school pupils born between 1926 and 1927 were conscripted into the *Heimatflak-batterien* (Home Air Defence Batteries), or *Flak* for short, from April 1943 on.⁴⁰ The first 135 pupils were called up on 14 October 1943,⁴¹ and a total of 297 young men were drafted as *Luftwaffenhelfer* (air force assistants) up to 1 March 1944.⁴² In contrast to the heterogeneous group of Luxembourgish *Wehrmacht* recruits, the *Luftwaffenhelfer* thus formed a rather homogeneous cohort of middle-class, secondary school-educated youngsters.⁴³

The Nazi *Zivilverwaltung* accordingly remained deeply suspicious of these highly-educated Luxembourgish conscripts. A secret report from the Reich Security Main Office (*Reichssicherheitshauptamt*) from March 1944 warned that “the possible deployment of Luxembourgers in the *Heimatflak* is by no means a guar-

Dritte Reich: Eine Bestandsaufnahme, ed. Musée National de la Résistance et des Droits Humains (Sanem: Op der Lay, 2021), 320.

40 “Dienst bei der Heimatflak – ein Ehrenauftrag,” *Escher Tageblatt*, 16 April 1943, 4; André Heiderscheid, *Zwangsrekrutiert: Das deutsche Verbrechen an der luxemburgischen Jugend*, vol. 1 (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2012), 29.

41 Marcel Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen: Ein Luxemburger Schicksal im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Luxembourg: Kremer-Müller, 2000), 45. This was made possible by § 7 paragraph I of the Emergency Service Ordinance of 15 October 1938. The draftees were pupils in 6th and 7th grade from the 1926 cohort of the secondary schools of Luxembourg City, Diekirch, Echternach and Esch-sur-Alzette. Heiderscheid also includes the birth year 1925 (Heiderscheid, *Zwangsrekrutiert*, vol. 1, 29).

42 Nadine Piveteau, *Ein Luxemburger Gymnasiast unter deutscher Besatzung: Analyse von Briefen und Dokumenten aus den Jahren 1942–1944* (Zürich: Nadine Piveteau, 2010), 44.

43 Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939–45* (London: Vintage, 2015), 345. On the *Luftwaffenhelfer* more generally see: Rolf Schörken, “‘Schülersoldaten’ – Prägung einer Generation,” in *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*, ed. Rolf-Dieter Müller and Hans-Erich Volkmann (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1999), 456–473.

antee of positive results. [. . .] It is precisely the pupils at secondary education institutions who are most fanatically opposed to Germanness [*Deutschtum*].”⁴⁴ These words of caution were grounded in recent events: when the first series of *Luftwaffenhelfer* had been called up in mid-October 1943, an entire school class from the Goethe School in Luxembourg City had gone on strike and been sent to Burg Stahleck in Germany for re-education purposes – as had already happened in 1942.⁴⁵

At the *Gymnasium* in Diekirch, however, the pupils complied with the mandatory military service requirements. Ernest Classen – wearing glasses and standing only 1.53m tall – received a draft card but was ultimately excused from both military and labour service as he was deemed “unfit”.⁴⁶ He subsequently passed the medical examination for the “*Kriegshilfeinsatz der deutschen Jugend in der Luftwaffe*” (Youth War Assistance Service in the Air Force), and then for military service as a *Luftwaffenhelfer* in January 1944.⁴⁷ Although anti-aircraft units were considered to be auxiliary services, the pupils were still part of the *Luftwaffe* (air force) and thus the German armed forces, which was clearly against international law as the pupils were minors and were not citizens of the conscripting power.⁴⁸

Service at the *Flak* in Esch-sur-Alzette

In Luxembourg, most German anti-aircraft batteries were set up in the Minett region – the economic powerhouse in southern Luxembourg – to defend the steel plants (vital to the German war effort) from Allied air raids. Thirty anti-aircraft guns were thus placed around the ARBED steel works in the industrial towns of Esch-sur-Alzette, Schiffflange and Differdange.⁴⁹

On 14 January 1944, Classen and his fellow conscripted colleagues from the Diekirch *Gymnasium* boarded a train that took them to Schiffflange, where – together with pupils from secondary schools throughout Luxembourg – he joined

⁴⁴ Quoted in: Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen*, 612.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁶ Entry in the *Wehrpass* of Ernest Classen, temporally unfit for service in the *Wehrmacht* and the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*. Issued on 16 February 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen (University of Luxembourg).

⁴⁷ Letter from the Landrat in Diekirch to Ernest Classen, 14 January 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

⁴⁸ Heiderscheid, *Zwangsrekrutiert*, vol. 1, 25.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

the *Leichte Flakabteilung* 857(o)⁵⁰ with the service number L 52 264.⁵¹ In Lallange the new conscripts moved into wooden barracks that had previously housed slave workers from Eastern Europe (*Ostarbeiter*).⁵² Here, they were issued their new uniform. Marcel Staar – who shared his sleeping quarters with Classen – remembered this as a moment of disillusionment in his memoirs: “I felt miserable in my new outfit. The clothes weighed as heavily as armour. Even though we had swapped gear among ourselves, hardly anything fit properly. [. . .] Some had trousers that reached down to their ankles or wrinkled grotesquely at the back of their knees. [. . .] Some had steel helmets that hung low over their ears, while the helmets of others were far too small and sat like a crown on their heads.”⁵³ In this new attire, the freshly minted recruits were sworn in on 30 January: “I promise to do my duty as a *Luftwaffenhelfer* at all times, faithfully and obediently, bravely and ready for action, as befits a member of the Hitler Youth.”⁵⁴

The particularity of the oath already points to the ambivalence of the militarization that Classen and his compatriots went through as *Luftwaffenhelfer*.⁵⁵ The young “forced conscripts” received summary military training (mostly drill and shooting exercises), and were given practical instruction on using anti-aircraft guns. Recruits had to attend training sessions on aircraft recognition, weaponry, ballistics and radio technology to familiarise themselves with their equipment. At the same time, however, they still had to attend weekly school classes given by secondary school teachers from Esch-sur-Alzette. For many young men, this hybrid deployment on anti-aircraft batteries was physically demanding: school lessons, homework, ideological instruction, marching drills and barracks maintenance during the day, and air raid alerts at night. Even though Classen’s battery and the nearby steelworks were never directly targeted by Allied aircraft during his deployment, *Flak* duty still proved to be both stressful and exhausting (mainly because of the lack of sleep) (Fig. 3).

In his letters, the reluctant *Luftwaffenhelfer* Classen related his life in the barracks and on *Flak* duty to his parents. As he was stationed just 70km from his home town of Huldange, he repeatedly dreamed about simply returning home,

⁵⁰ Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen*, 57.

⁵¹ Letter from Ernest Classen to his family, 14 January 1944; Dienststelle L 52 265, Luftgau-Postamt (L.G.P.A. Frankfurt/Main), Personalausweis Luftwaffen-Helfer Ernst Classen, issued 25 January 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

⁵² Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen*, 99.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Piveteau, *Ein Luxemburger Gymnasiast*, 46.

⁵⁵ On the hybrid status of the *Luftwaffenhelfer* see: Schörken, “‘Schülersoldaten’,” 456–458.



Fig. 3: The *Luftwaffenhelfer* crew of searchlight “Bruno” near Esch-sur-Alzette, early 1944. Classen (wearing glasses) is kneeling in the foreground.

Photographer: Jang Heuschling. Musée régional des enrôlés de force Dudelange, EF-01234.

and implored his parents to send him food provisions.⁵⁶ As the recruits from the *Flak* were forbidden from receiving such parcels, they had to depend on an elaborate network of local Luxembourgish residents who were willing to receive and safeguard their parcels and mail (this enabled the *Luftwaffenhelfer* to bypass military censorship).⁵⁷ During his daily leave, Classen thus visited various local widows who had agreed to receive his packages.⁵⁸ Through these daily encounters and interactions with civilians outside the barracks, Classen was also confronted with the realities of civilian wartime shortages and violent repression by the Nazi occupiers. For instance, one of the widows who had transmitted Classen’s parcels and mail was “resettled” [*umgesiedelt*] by the Nazis in August 1944 (the measure

⁵⁶ Letters from Ernest Classen to his parents, 17 May 1944; 6 July 1944; 11 August 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

⁵⁷ Incoming and outgoing letters only went through official military postal service, and therefore were subject to censorship regulations: Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen*, 105.

⁵⁸ Classen and his classmates attempted to locate postal addresses, mainly of widows who lived near their barracks, so that they could visit them during their free time and collect their mail and packages. In a letter to his parents on 14 January 1944, Classen stated that he was unable to receive packages. However, in May, he found a widow in the neighbouring village of Belvaux, and as a result, he could receive parcels and letters without “getting into trouble” (as he stated in a letter to his parents on 17 May 1944), Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen

was meant to punish those who did not conform to the regime, although the reasons for this woman's resettlement remain unknown).⁵⁹

In their free time, the young *Flak* conscripts were allowed to leave the barracks for activities such as attending church or the theatre, as recounted by Marcel Staar.⁶⁰ Most recruits enthusiastically embraced this opportunity, especially since the repetitive nature of military life in the barracks and at the *Flak* became increasingly boring as time passed. In June 1944, Classen let his parents know that he and his colleagues were “seriously fed up” [*haben alle die “Fläm” sehr*] with the overall situation in German uniform.⁶¹ In fact, the incessant and often dehumanizing drill by their German instructors unnerved most recruits. Classen's compatriot Marcel Staar at times felt “like a robot”. “The sweat flowed in streams, the breath whistled,” he remembered in his memoirs. “It was terrible drudgery that led to complete physical and mental exhaustion. The coarse tone, the vulgar language and indecent insults [. . .] were an integral part of the military argot [of our superiors].”⁶²

However, Classen's letters also testify to his gradual – albeit reluctant – militarization in the *Luftwaffe*. Despite the forced character of his recruitment and the ever-present boredom, Classen still forged a new self-identity in order to cope with his new role as an auxiliary soldier in the overall German war effort. On 18/19 January 1944, he began a letter to his sibling (ironically or wholeheartedly) with “many greetings from your brother from the *Flak*”.⁶³ As he wrote about homesickness and boredom to his parents, Classen urged them to write to him more often, “for there is nothing more beautiful for a *Landser* [German infantry soldier] than a letter”.⁶⁴ Even though it remains unclear whether these statements were written ironically or in earnest, they still show that Classen adapted to his new circumstances in uniform and at least partly self-identified as a soldier in the occupiers' armed forces. This is perhaps best shown through a letter to his parents on 11 August 1944 in which a frustrated Classen recounted a recent air

59 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 11 August 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

60 Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen*, 120, 142.

61 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 9 June 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

62 Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen*, 112, 117.

63 Letter from Ernest Classen to his brother Camille Classen, 19 January 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

64 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 25 January 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

raid: “Just now at 2 o’clock two ‘Mustang’ fighters flew over at low altitude.⁶⁵ They fired at something behind Schiffflange. The *Flak* then fired at them, and they quickly bailed out.” Classen seemed genuinely upset about their escape, but he quickly spotted a second chance: “Just now there’s another alarm. Maybe we’ll have more luck this time and get one down.”⁶⁶

In the end, these thoughts were thwarted by the rapid Allied advance across Western Europe in late summer 1944. Classen expected to be drafted into the *Wehrmacht* in July 1944 – as had been the case for many of his colleagues (Marcel Staar for instance)⁶⁷ – but his German superiors and instructors in the *Flak* unexpectedly fled the scene early in the morning of 1 September 1944.⁶⁸ With the U.S. Army crossing into Luxembourg, Classen removed his German uniform, “deserted” after eight months in the *Flak* and trekked back to Huldange. Here, he hid in a nearby forest until the final liberation of his home village on 11 September.⁶⁹

At that time, military obligations were not a consideration for Classen, and he likely did not expect to face them again in the future. Yet Classen’s experience would soon be repeated – although this time in a different uniform.

2 Military Service in Luxembourg’s Post-War Army

On 30 November 1944, roughly two months after the liberation of Luxembourg by U.S. forces, the Luxembourgish Government proclaimed the introduction of compulsory military service. For the first time in over 60 years, the young male population of the Grand Duchy was to be called to arms – but this time under Luxembourgish colours. In the eyes of the country’s foreign politicians, the new army would contribute to the Allied war effort and assert Luxembourg’s foreign-policy interests by tak-

⁶⁵ Classen writes about “English” Mustang fighter aircraft. Although the Royal Air Force (RAF) of the United Kingdom did utilize the Mustang during the Second World War, it was originally designed and built by North American Aviation in the United States and primarily used by the United States Army Air Forces. Either Classen was mistaken or the Mustang really were flown by the British Air Force.

⁶⁶ Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 11 August 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

⁶⁷ Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 3 July 1944, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

⁶⁸ Staar, *Waffenträger wider Willen*, 613.

⁶⁹ According to Classen’s sister, he first tried to hide in a railway tunnel near Huldange, but was told by locals that it was already filled with German soldiers. Since he did not dare to contact his family, he then chose to hide away in the woods and was fed by a friend from Huldange (email from Army Classen to Nina Janz, 12 May 2023).

ing part in the Allied occupation of defeated Germany.⁷⁰ In the heated atmosphere of early 1945, the measure was initially met with broad consensus within the hyper-nationalistic Luxembourgish society.⁷¹ Serving under the Luxembourgish flag was seen as a patriotic and moral duty, as a recovery of masculine honour and – more broadly – as a symbolic restoration of the nation-state after the occupation.

Still, many of the young conscripts into the new army of 1945 received their draft orders with mixed feelings – for they had already been among the last “forced conscripts” of the German military machinery of 1944.⁷² Their “space of experience” was still encumbered by their time in German uniform; many of them had only narrowly escaped death on the Eastern Front, had suffered for months in Allied captivity, or had deserted and hidden in makeshift hideouts until the Grand Duchy’s liberation in late 1944. Shortly after their reintegration into civil society, they now faced a second round in uniform – albeit a Luxembourgish one. The latter at least provided some veterans with a certain contentment. For Marcel G., who had been forced to fight with the *Wehrmacht* until April 1945, swapping the German uniform for a Luxembourgish one was also an act of pride. “We were somewhat proud to serve in the Luxembourg Army, since we had previously experienced service under the Germans, which had not been to our liking”, the former “forced conscript” remembered in an interview in 2016. “We told ourselves: Why not be in a uniform which belongs to us and our country for a change?”⁷³ While serving in a Luxembourgish uniform evidently constituted a sort of personal satisfaction or even symbolic triumph for some of these battle-worn men, the prospect of having to spend (or waste) yet another year of their youth under arms still caused a widespread feeling of disbelief and irritation among many other former “forced conscripts”. “To a young man returning home from war and captivity, it is just grotesque to be forced into another uniform only to be made to play the fool as a recruit”,⁷⁴ an anonymous “forced conscript” protested in late 1945.

As such, the delicate issue of post-war military service was of highest significance to the *Ligue Ons Jongen*, which had been set up as a veterans’ association

70 Paul Cerf, *Le Luxembourg et son armée: Le service obligatoire à Luxembourg de 1945–1967* (Luxembourg: RTL Edition, 1984), 23; Leider, *L’armée luxembourgeoise*, 46–50; Steve Kayser, “Joseph Bech aux Affaires Étrangères: de 1926 à 1954, la recherche de garanties internationales pour le Grand-Duché de Luxembourg,” *Galerie: revue culturelle et pédagogique* 17, no. 4 (1999): 572–573.

71 Félix Streicher, “The Military Malaise: Towards a Social History of the Luxembourg Army (1944–1959),” in *Militärgeschichte Luxemburgs/Histoire Militaire du Luxembourg*, ed. Thomas Kolnberger and Benoît Niederkorn (Luxembourg: Cappybarabooks, 2022), 343–344.

72 “Arrêté grand-ducal du 16 mars 1945 ayant pour objet la levée des classes 1925 et 1926,” *Mémorial du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg* 13, 21 March 1945, 108–109.

73 Interview between Benoît Niederkorn, Félix Streicher, and Marcel G. (1926–2024), 16 August 2016.

74 Poilu., “Hallo! Hei schwätzt d’Armée,” *Ons Jongen*, 15 November 1945, 3.

and interest group of Luxembourg's "forced conscripts" in late 1944. Although officially an apolitical organization, *Ons Jongen* rapidly developed into a powerful pressure group within the political landscape of post-war Luxembourg, managing to not only influence the Grand Duchy's memory politics for their own benefit, but also to persistently (and sometimes successfully) lobby the country's political circles.⁷⁵ On 23 December 1944, *Ons Jongen's* eponymous newspaper (which boasted around 5,000 subscribers) tackled the burning question of military conscription. "We may regret that, but we cannot change anything about it and we have to act accordingly," the weekly stoically asserted. Yet, when it came to the question of *who* was to bear the burden, the *Ligue* was much less acquiescing in its expectations: "In general, the boys that have already had to serve under the Germans for a while should be spared, in particular if they have had little professional training so far."⁷⁶

Even though it clearly tried to shelter its own veterans from a second military conscription, the initial standpoint of *Ons Jongen* towards military service in the new Luxembourg Army was nonetheless highly complex. While the *Ligue* openly condemned the renewed draft of the age group of 1925/26, it did not oppose the idea of military conscription *per se*. Quite the contrary: it even called on all reluctant draftees – provided they were not former "forced conscripts" – to wholeheartedly do their service as "true Luxembourgish patriots". In the context of the ongoing war, the *Ligue* also offered membership to all recruits of the new Luxembourg Army – even if they had not been "forced-conscripted" during the war. What may at first sight appear an oddity was in fact a clever political manoeuvre. By tying themselves to the new draftees of Luxembourg's post-war army and proposing to act as their mouthpiece, the "forced conscripts" of *Ons Jongen* in fact hoped to retroactively confer upon their plight in German uniform a gloss of self-sacrifice and patriotism. "[Accepting the recruits of the post-war army as new members] can in no way be considered paradoxical", *Ons Jongen* boldly asserted on 31 March 1945. "They will just swell the ranks of those that have already done

75 Eva Maria Klos, "Die Zwangsrekrutierung in Westeuropa: Deutungskämpfe in der Geschichtsschreibung von 1944 bis heute," *Hémecht: Zeitschrift für Luxemburger Geschichte* 69, no. 3–4 (2017): 359–361; Gilbert Trausch, "Mémoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale: Le long combat des enrôlés de force luxembourgeois," in *Du Particularisme à la Nation: Essais sur l'histoire du Luxembourg de la fin de l'Ancien Régime à la Seconde Guerre mondiale*, ed. Gilbert Trausch (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 1989), 407–428.

76 t., "D'Conscription ass do!," *Ons Jongen*, 23 December 1944, 6. For a similar view see: "Me' Logik wir erwünscht," *D'Unio'n*, 17 February 1945, 1.

what still lies ahead of them, that is serve their country on a military level, each in their own specific way.”⁷⁷

In order to do so, the editors of *Ons Jongen* – who considered themselves victims of German militarism – even sought to come up with arguments in favour of drafting Luxembourg’s male youth. “Let us admit that besides serious drawbacks (for example financial ones), there are also undeniable advantages to military service, and that our male youth’s physical fitness and sense of discipline will benefit from it as from a strengthening fountain of youth”,⁷⁸ the weekly stressed in March 1945. On the same note, *Ons Jongen* presented a heavily romanticized account of the departure of draftees from their hometowns in June 1945: “To the sounds of the *Feierwon*⁷⁹ and the cheers of children and girls running behind the coaches [with the recruits], the boys are off on their way to the Walferdange barracks. What a difference from the tragic departures for the *Wehrmacht*!”⁸⁰

Whether Ernest Classen experienced a similar farewell ceremony in his tiny village of Huldange, we do not know. Nor do we know his initial reaction to his renewed call to arms. On 26 April 1945, he was deemed fit for service – despite his poor vision – by a civilian doctor in Clervaux.⁸¹ On the morning of 9 July 1945, he boarded a train in Troisvierges that took him across the tiny Grand Duchy to Dudelange, where together with two friends and 664 fellow recruits, he was integrated into the ranks of the 2nd Infantry Battalion.⁸² “[Upon arrival] we have been divided into groups”, he wrote to his parents in a rather sober, yet reassuring letter. “The three of us have been placed in the same barrack room. Then we have been clothed. The food is also very good.” Yet, a final sentence tainted the overall picture: “[My friend] Pier has become very quiet, I think he had imagined things differently.”⁸³

In fact, Army life in Dudelange was a rather improvised affair. The barracks had been set up in a former Nazi labour camp for Russian and Belgian slave work-

77 r., “La Ligue ‘Ons Jongen’ et le service militaire obligatoire,” *Ons Jongen*, 31 March 1945, 3.

78 Ibid.

79 The patriotic song *De Feierwon* is commonly regarded as Luxembourg’s unofficial national hymn.

80 Br., “Appel sous les drapeaux,” *Ons Jongen*, 14 July 1945, 2. A similar account is given by: O. H., “Garde à vous! De Letzeburger Zaldot geschter an haut,” *Revue: Letzeburger Illustre’ert* 1, no. 6 (1945): 55.

81 “Fiche matricule Provisoire,” 9 July 1945, Luxembourg Army Archives (LUXARMY), Personnel File of Ernest Classen.

82 Personnel File of Ernest Classen, LUXARMY, “Livret Matricule Classen Erneste, N° M^{le} 00948, Classe 1945/26”.

83 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 11 July 1945, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

ers, and the drill ground of the battalion was located on a former football pitch nearby.⁸⁴ The military uniforms and equipment (provided by the British Army) were outdated and often in poor condition. Most of the days were spent on basic instruction: drilling, marching, as well as occasional shooting.⁸⁵ Recreational or social activities, on the other hand, were scarce. As a consequence, boredom rapidly spread among the ranks.⁸⁶ Notwithstanding these shortcomings, public opinion still held the new Army in high esteem. Upon visiting the barracks in Dudelange and Walferdange, the press was full of praise. “We note the presence of a great many different talents, all of whom will contribute to making life in the barracks a stage of life that will later be remembered with contented satisfaction and a certain pride as well”,⁸⁷ the conservative *Luxemburger Wort* noted on 17 July 1945. Military service was thus portrayed as a rite of passage; as a step towards adult age and “true manhood”.⁸⁸ *Ons Jongen* did not disagree: “Anyway, it would certainly not harm anybody if they were exposed to physical hardships [*gudd gestritzt*] and forced to follow orders for some time.”⁸⁹ Even the otherwise antimilitaristic *Tageblatt* could not hold back its enthusiasm and amazement for the new recruits: “We believe that the Germans will be left speechless once our battalions make their triumphant entry into Bernkastel [sic] as occupation forces.”⁹⁰

Private 2nd class Ernest Classen does not seem to have been particularly troubled by his new life as an army recruit. On 23 September, he and his company were detached to guard a contingent of nearly 1,000 German prisoners of war at a POW camp in Ettelbruck.⁹¹ “No more drill; we just stand guard”, he wrote in yet

84 Erny Thiel, *Düdelingen, Garnisonsstadt 1945–1946* (Dudelange: Stadtverwaltung und Kulturkommission Düdelingen, 1995), 57; Cerf, *Le Luxembourg et son armée*, 35–36.

85 “II. Bataillon: Journal d’unité du 9.7.45–21.11.45”, LUXARMY, Folder “Correspondances 1945–1946”.

86 Streicher, “The Military Malaise,” 347–348.

87 = [Mathias Guillaume], “Die ersten Bataillone unserer neuen Armee,” *Luxemburger Wort*, 17 July 1945, 2.

88 Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks*, 274–275; Odile Roynette, “La fabrique des soldats,” in *Une histoire de la guerre du XIX^e siècle à nos jours*, ed. Bruno Cabanes (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018), 267.

89 Poilu., “Hallo! Hei schwätzt d’Armée,” *Ons Jongen*, 25 August 1945, 2.

90 [Paul] M[uller], “Eine Armee im Werden: General Prinz Felix inspiziert die neuen Truppen,” *Escher Tageblatt*, 6 August 1945, 1.

91 Between 1945 and 1947, 4,393 German prisoners of war were employed in the reconstruction of Luxembourg’s war-devastated regions: Louise Debugne, Olivier Felgen and Thierry Paulus, “Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in Luxemburg: Wie aus Besatzern Landarbeiter wurden,” in *Ons zerschloen Dierfer: Der Wiederaufbau Luxemburgs (1944–1960)*, ed. Louise Debugne et al. (Diekirch: Musée National d’Histoire Militaire, 2022), 95–105. For more information on the POW camp in Ettelbruck: Roger Hensel, “D’Krichsgefaangelager vun Ettelbréck,” *De Reider: informatiounsblad vun der gemeng ettelbréck* 20 (1996): 25–28.

another reassuring letter to his parents. "Every second day, for three hours every six hours. On the days in between, we move out with labour units [*Arbeitskommandos*]. To Diekirch and surroundings. Apart from that, all in good health [. . .]."⁹² In an (unsent) letter to his Belgian sweetheart, however, the tone was completely different. "As you can see, I am a soldier now", Classen wrote in a boasting, even cocky way. "We have a great life here. We are staying with the prisoners of war and we are going to watch them working."⁹³ This astonishing change of voice was not only due to the change of his recipient, but may also have reflected Classen's new self-image as a POW guard. To many former Luxembourgish "forced conscripts" who were now wearing a Luxembourgish uniform, the situation in the Ettelbruck camp exposed how thoroughly the positions of power had been reversed. In short, the former oppressors were now being ruled over by the once oppressed, and the latter unscrupulously abused their new positions of power to live out their personal desires for revenge and retribution.

To Ernest Classen and his fellow recruits, this dramatic reversal of roles must have become even more apparent when they re-joined the rest of their Battalion in the occupied German city of Bitburg on 7 January 1946. From 11 November 1945 on, the Luxembourg Army acted as a small Allied occupation power under French high command within large parts of the German districts of Bitburg and Saarburg.⁹⁴ "10 May 1940 [the German invasion of Luxembourg] has been splendidly avenged", the *Tageblatt* echoed. "Parts of the German territory are now under Luxembourgish military rule. The tables are turned: the former Nazis, the oppressors, now have to obey the former oppressed, the co-victors of today. Schadenfreude rises, whether you like it or not."⁹⁵

However, once the new occupiers were confronted with the realities on the ground, the initial enthusiasm over this role reversal proved to be rather short-lived. The infrastructure in the Bitburg barracks (built for the *Wehrmacht* in 1936) was rudimentary at best. The city had been bombed twice in December 1944, when nearly

⁹² Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 29 September 1945, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen

⁹³ Letter from Ernest Classen to Yvonne Walbrecq, 4 October 1945, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen

⁹⁴ Frédéric Laux, "La participation du Luxembourg à l'occupation de l'Allemagne (1945–1955)," in . . . *et wor alles net esou einfach: Questions sur le Luxembourg et la Deuxième Guerre mondiale. Contributions historiques accompagnant l'exposition*, ed. Guy Thewes (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2002), 294–303.

⁹⁵ P[aul] M[uller], "Luxemburgs historische Stunde: Mit dem 2. Bataillon im besetzten Bitburg," *Escher Tageblatt*, 13 November 1945, 2.

83% of its urban core had been razed.⁹⁶ “The roof of our building is completely gone, and the last floor can be used for ice skating”, Classen told his parents. “When it rained last week, we had to evacuate the water with buckets.”⁹⁷ Boredom also remained a dominant feature of army life in Luxembourg-occupied Bitburg. “In the evening, we go to the canteen or to a pub in Bitburg”, he commented in one of his letters. “This evening, there will be a cinema presentation. So far, I have not seen much of Bitburg, because we are only given leave in the evening.”⁹⁸

Just two weeks after their arrival, the troops’ morale seems to have hit rock bottom. “Even though we have now settled in Bitburg, we would all be happy to leave it again”, Classen wrote to his parents on 18 January 1946. “We are all fed up with it, but since I am not allowed to write you that, this letter reaches you covertly through a friend who is on leave. It is just the same as in the Dudelange barracks, exercising, making the bed, locker inspections, rifle cleaning and the whole nonsense.”⁹⁹ In fact, what bothered many former “forced recruits” most were the “bodily techniques”¹⁰⁰ that the Army incessantly forced on them – the mechanical exercising, the rifle drills, the marching – as well as the draconic and humiliating punishments (or the constant threat thereof) that were so reminiscent of the dehumanizing drills in the Nazi armed forces. “The Germans are laughing when we are drilled here”, a former “forced conscript” in the Luxembourg Army wrote to *Ons Jongen*. “They rub their hands in glee and think: The Luxembourgers have learnt a lesson from us! And the boys born in [19]25 clench their teeth in anger at having to go through the whole circus again. Many of them had been up to their necks in dirt on all German fronts.”¹⁰¹

Such testimonies that played on the draftees’ loaded “space of experience” inevitably had a profound impact on public opinion. “We consider it anti-Luxembourgish if our young men were to undergo a kind of drill in our barracks whose occasional recklessness is only too reminiscent of the *Wehrmacht*”,¹⁰² the Luxembourgish Social-

96 Félix Streicher, “Besetzte Räume: Alltag und soziale Interaktionen unter luxemburgischer Besatzung in Bitburg (1945–1955),” *Francia: Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte* 49 (2022), 399.

97 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 18 January 1946, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen

98 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 10 January 1946, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

99 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 18 January 1946, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

100 Marcel Mauss, “Les techniques du corps,” *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 32 (1935): 271–293.

101 rbr. [Robert Bruch], “Hallo! Hei schwätzt d’Arme’,” *Ons Jongen*, 31 January 1946, 6.

102 “Die Stellung der Arbeiterpartei zu den Problemen der Zeit,” *Escher Tageblatt*, 13 October 1945, 3.

ist Workers' Party cried out in the *Tageblatt*. In Parliament, the social democrat deputy Adrien van Kauenbergh adopted a similar tone: "We have to take care not to turn the young recruits into unthinking brutes by making them undergo exaggerated military and physical hardships. Our aim should above all be to develop the young soldiers' intellectual, moral and social competences."¹⁰³ At the same time, his party's representatives in the *Chambre des Députés* took the opportunity to raise the spectre of a long-term contamination of the nation's work ethos through its forced militarization: "Do you not worry that work morale is undermined by military service? If they are now conscripted for one more year, they will have done between two and four years of military service. They have lost much during the war. They could not finish their studies. They could not finish their training as craftsmen, which now they are not allowed to resume. When they ultimately leave the army, they will be too old and unwilling to work",¹⁰⁴ the social-democrat deputy Nicolas Biever lamented in Parliament on 26 February 1946.

Within the Army, the low spirit of the conscripts was certainly no secret (Fig. 4). "The morale of our troops suffers from the men's mentality, which is bad in many cases", the commanding officer of the 2nd Infantry Battalion reported to the *État-Major* (General Staff) in February 1946. "There is no doubt that the fact that the majority of our men were in the German army has had a deplorable impact on them." Many instructors thus found the former "forced conscripts" stubborn and highly unwilling to bow to their authority. "Since they had made it a principle to do the opposite of what the Germans expected, many of them now think that they have to assert themselves through such refusal."¹⁰⁵ During a press visit in Bitburg, a high-ranking officer put the issue in a nutshell: "Most boys have served under the Germans. They have become intractable."¹⁰⁶

In fact, many war-battered conscripts looked down at their inexperienced and militarily untested officers, who had not served in the war and hence struggled to legitimize their authority as leaders. *Ons Jongen* did not hesitate to scornfully hold a mirror up to the verdant officers: "Remember that you are facing quite a few boys who may have more knowledge and experience than you, and who have more moral merits than you."¹⁰⁷ In the army's eyes, however, it was first and foremost such attacks by the press that were at the root of the overall

¹⁰³ *Compte Rendu des Séances de la Chambre des Députés du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg. Session ordinaire de 1945–1946*, 16^{ème} séance (Luxembourg: Victor Buck, 1946), 416.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 433.

¹⁰⁵ "Rapport moral du mois de février", 12 February 1946, LUXARMY, Folder "Rapports mensuels 2^e Bn".

¹⁰⁶ rbr. [Robert Bruch], "Huwelspe'n aus der Occupatio'n," *Ons Jongen*, 15 February 1946, 12.

¹⁰⁷ Poilu., "Hallo! Hei schwätzt d'Armée," *Ons Jongen*, 25 August 1945, 4.



Fig. 4: Many officers within Luxembourg's post-war army considered the former "forced conscripts" under their command to be stubborn and unwilling to bow to their command.

Drawing by Pierre Bergem, undated. Musée National d'Histoire Militaire (Diekirch), Collection Pierre Bergem, BER_211.

problem: "We have recently noted in the Luxembourgish press that the most common means to sway the masses at the moment is to tell Luxembourgish parents that their children are being abused and corrupted by the army. That they are being tyrannized by the officers and that they have to undergo hardships unknown to them even in the German army. Newspapers [like] *Ons Jongen* [. . .] seem to delight particularly in that kind of gratuitous and cheap propaganda."¹⁰⁸

By early 1946, the initially respectful or tolerant relationship between *Ons Jongen* and the Luxembourg Army had thus clearly suffered severe damage. A key event in this sweltering conflict had been the return of approximately 1,000

¹⁰⁸ "Rapport moral du mois de février", 28 February 1946, LUXARMY, Folder "Rapports mensuels 2^e Bn".

“forced conscripts” from Soviet captivity on 5 November 1945.¹⁰⁹ Against the *Ligue*’s appeal to the Army High Command to “be generous in this matter, and to liberate all boys without further ado [*o’ni ze faxen*]”,¹¹⁰ the General Staff had decided to once again draft many of the returnees from the 1925/26 age group. In light of this decision, the mood in the *Ligue Ons Jongen* and among the second-time conscripts grew permanently sour. “It would be a poor principle if we boys were to put up with anything, just because we didn’t fare better under the Germans”,¹¹¹ the former “forced conscript” Robert Bruch objected in *Ons Jongen*. As a consequence, the Ministry for the Armed Forces and Army High Command were flooded with letters from parents asking for the dispensation of their sons from military service.¹¹² Ernest Classen, who had been diagnosed with jaundice and sent to a military hospital in Luxembourg City in early February 1946, also saw his chance. “It would be best to write a plea to the General Staff [. . .] in Luxembourg City [. . .]”, he told his parents on 4 February 1946. “Just tell them that I would like to continue my studies, and that I would like to prepare for the next school year. [. . .] For this year, it might still work. Next year will certainly be much more difficult.”¹¹³

Even though Ernest’s father duly sent a hand-written request (with explicit reference to his son’s forced service as *Luftwaffenhelfer*) to Army High Command, the plea ultimately went unanswered.¹¹⁴ By sheer bad luck, Classen seems to have picked the wrong addressee: while the Ministry for the Armed Forces was rather open to grant exemptions to former “forced conscripts”, the General Staff of the Army – which had received the letter from Ernest’s father – was not. Of the 3,874 recruitable men of the class of 1925/26, only 504 recruits were thus granted an overall exemption from military service, while 1,125 others were liberated after several months in uniform.¹¹⁵ For *Ons Jongen*, this was definitely not enough. What they wanted was a decision in principle – even more so as the French Army had decided

109 Peter M. Quadflieg, “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*, ed. Norbert Franz et al. (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2016), 295.

110 Poilu., “Hallo! Hei schwätzt d’Armée,” *Ons Jongen*, 15 November 1945, 3.

111 rbr. [Robert Bruch], “Hallo! Hei schwätzt d’Armée,” *Ons Jongen*, 28 February 1946, 10.

112 Leider, *L’Armée luxembourgeoise*, 54–55.

113 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 4 February 1946, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

114 Letter from Jos. Classen to the *État-Major de l’Armée*, 8 February 1946, LUXARMY, Personnel File of Ernest Classen.

115 Leider, *L’Armée luxembourgeoise*, 55, 246. In addition, 859 draftees were declared “unfit for service”.

to exempt *all* of its former *malgré-nous* from military service.¹¹⁶ “We call for a total dispensation from military service for the age groups 1925–26, since their normal lives were already uprooted by the *Gauleiter* decree. That is our right, and that is what we stand in for!”¹¹⁷ the *Ligue* repeated on 15 April 1946. Army High Command, however, viewed matters differently: “A proposal for dispensation from military service has been made by certain great patriots. The recruiting officer would like to point out that good patriots should be proud to do military service.”¹¹⁸

By consequence, Ernest Classen was not liberated, but sent back to his unit on 13 March 1946. “Nothing new here but would like to let you know that we are still in Bitburg, and we three [friends] are still doing well, but we painfully long for 1 June, because then we will be liberated”,¹¹⁹ he wistfully wrote to his parents on 28 April. Faced with the endless boredom of army life once again, Classen and his friends subsequently seem to have engaged in what many young and bored recruits did in the beer-brewing city of Bitburg: they drank. On 3 June 1946, Classen was caught in a drunken state by his superior and punished with three days of arrest (*arrêt simple*) in the barrack’s prison cell.¹²⁰ Incidents like these indubitably created irrevocable damage to the public image of military conscription that would remain for many years to follow. “If green boys boast at 4 o’clock on a Sunday afternoon that they have already had 14 beers; if 70% of the conscripts are drunk at least once a week, if not two or three times; if the bar of the Bitburg canteen does not have enough glasses to satisfy all the needs; [. . .] then it is clearly too much of a good thing”,¹²¹ the monthly newspaper *Letzeburger Arbecht* (published by the *Action catholique*) still deprecated several years later. In the case of Ernest Classen however, his youthful escapade had no further consequences. On 9 July 1946 – exactly one year after joining his unit in Dudelange – he was honourably discharged from the Army. “Has always made a good impression”,¹²² the final appreciation report by his unit commander laconically stated.

116 “Hallo! Hei schwätzt d’Armée,” *Ons Jongen*, 22 June 1946, 5.

117 “Unsere Armee,” *Ons Jongen*, 15 April 1946, 10.

118 Report from the G-1 to the Minister for the Armed Forces, 26 January 1946, cited in: Leider, *L’Armée luxembourgeoise*, 55.

119 Letter from Ernest Classen to his parents, 28 April 1946, Project Warlux, Collection Everard/Classen.

120 “Livret Matricule Classen Erneste, N° M^{le} 00948, Classe 1945/26.”, LUXARMY, Personnel File of Ernest Classen.

121 “Coin du Soldat: Ein ernstes Wort,” *Letzeburger Arbecht* 6, no. 12 (1952), 3.

122 “Livret Matricule Classen Erneste, N° M^{le} 00948, Classe 1945/26.”, LUXARMY, Personnel File of Ernest Classen.

Conclusion

In the pseudo-ethnological *Essay on the psychology of the Luxembourgish people* from 1911, the Luxembourgish writer Nicolas Ries presented his readers with the dubious soldierly qualities of the *homo luxemburgensis*: “Not having been trained from an early age on to take orders, neither at school nor, above all, at the barracks, and not standing in the need of serving the interest of higher orders, we are not willingly submissive and we refuse blind obedience to the law, authority, customs or status. We are never passively obedient; we question everything. Revolt and contestation are the trademarks of our minds and our natural disposition. [. . .] We feel acrimonious about obedience.”¹²³ In the immediate post-war years after 1945, similar voices rose all across the political spectrum of the Grand Duchy. “No, Gentlemen, the Luxembourger is not a people of soldiers [*Zaldotevollek*]!”¹²⁴ the conservative deputy Georges Wagner thus reaffirmed in Parliament on 30 April 1947. He was echoed by the communist newspaper *D’Zeitung vum Letzeburger Vollek* only two weeks later: “To sum it up, the Luxembourgish armed forces look too martial; they march too well, most unlike true Luxembourgers!”¹²⁵ The post-war introduction of compulsory military service in the Grand Duchy – after three years of “forced conscription” under Nazi rule – clearly did not sit easily with the country’s culture.

In view of the above-cited voices, the Luxembourgish rejection of military conscription – both in German as well as in Luxembourgish uniform – could appear a foregone conclusion.

Yet, the historical non-existence of systematic short-term military service in the Grand Duchy should not be mistaken for an inherent Luxembourgish antimilitarism.¹²⁶ The latter, for example, would leave no room for explaining the undeniable tradition of war volunteering in foreign armies that existed in the Grand Duchy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹²⁷ The Luxembourgish hostility towards conscription into the Nazi forces and the later reluctance to

¹²³ Nicolas Ries, *Essai d’une psychologie du peuple luxembourgeois* (Diekirch: J. Schroell, 1911), 235.

¹²⁴ *Compte Rendu des Séances de la Chambre des Députés du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg. Session ordinaire de 1946–1947*, 24^{ème} séance (Luxembourg: Victor Buck, 1947), 789.

¹²⁵ “Abreißkalender,” *D’Zeitung vum Letzeburger Vollek*, 13 May 1947, 1.

¹²⁶ This narrative is also questioned by: Vincent Artuso, “Quand l’armée fit triompher le parlementarisme,” in . . . *la volonté de la Chambre qui est la volonté du pays: Un florilège de débats parlementaires luxembourgeois (1848–2008)*, ed. Claude Frieseisen, Marie-Paule Jungblut and Michel Pauly (Luxembourg: Imprimerie Centrale, 2019), 368.

¹²⁷ Sandra Camarda et al., eds, *Légionnaires: Parcours de guerre et de migrations entre le Luxembourg et la France* (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2020).

wards the draft into Luxembourg's post-war army are to be found in more situational considerations and short-term experiences.

For young Luxembourgish men like Ernest Classen, military conscription into the *Wehrmacht* marked a decisive turning point in their adult lives. To start with, men from the Grand Duchy had not been militarized as thoroughly as their German counterparts (even though they had been subjected to up to four years of indoctrination in secondary school and in the Hitler Youth). For many, their experience of military life in the barracks and survival at the front constituted an unsettling and often traumatizing experience. The Luxembourgish "forced conscripts" had to either quickly adapt to the new everyday realities in German uniform while hoping for an early end to the war – or face the dire consequences of desertion or conscientious objection. Even though Ernest Classen's mobilisation into an anti-aircraft battery may have ultimately saved him from a more perilous stationing on the Eastern or Western Front, his *Flak* duty in the ever-intensifying Allied bombing war remained a deeply hazardous deployment.¹²⁸

While the reasons for the aversion to "forced conscription" by the majority of Luxembourgers between 1942–1944 were thus rather obvious – an enemy power had invaded and occupied their country and was drafting young men to fight for its cause – the scepticism and hostility towards post-war military service remains harder to explain. This holds true especially when one looks at the initial euphoric embrace of, or at least the stoic-nationalistic consent to, the introduction of military conscription in liberated Luxembourg in November 1944.

In fact, as the examples of Ernest Classen – and many of his comrades serving a "second term" – show, most Luxembourgers did not struggle with post-war military conscription per se; more so, however, with their insensitive treatment at the hands of Luxembourg's post-war army leaders. Post-war military service was not an issue in itself, but the Government and the Army failed to "sell" it to its reticent and war-traumatized recruits, or society in general. Against the negative experience of "forced conscription", the Luxembourg Army failed to maintain the initial enthusiasm (or at least the good will) of its conscripts. Instead, many draftees felt disillusioned by the repetitive rhythm of army duties – which often reminded them of the everyday realities and "bodily techniques" of the German army – and by the low quality of life in a largely improvised set-up. This is probably best illustrated by a letter from one of Classen's comrades to the *Escher Tageblatt* in January 1946: "Whatever enthusiasm for military service may have been left in our boys, it will have drowned in Bitburg's muddy streets by now."¹²⁹

128 Schörken, "Schülersoldaten," 460–461; Stargardt, *The German War*, 346.

129 A. W., "Freie Tribüne (ohne Verantwortung der Redaktion)," *Escher Tageblatt*, 5 January 1946, 3.

In conclusion, Ernest Classen and most of his colleagues did not enjoy any of their experiences in military uniform. Over the course of the “long 1940s”, military service did not appear appealing or meaningful to Luxembourgish society, but remained an unwelcome, politicized and disruptive duty that had been imposed twice “from above” onto the lives of ordinary Luxembourgers. Even though military service in the totalitarian Nazi forces and the democratic Luxembourg Army were two entirely different experiences, they were still intrinsically linked through the recruits’ “spaces of experience” and their “horizons of expectation”. As such, the post-war situation of the former “forced conscripts” in the newly founded Luxembourg Army triggered individual and societal resistance to the measure of military service in the post-war Grand Duchy, and irrevocably damaged the public image of service in the young institution from its very beginnings.

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