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I WAS LOOKING FOR GOD: A STUDY OF WEHRMACHT PERSONNEL AND THEIR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH RELIGION

by

Christopher Bishop

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

Dr. Andrew Wiest, Committee Chair
Dr. Brian LaPierre
Dr. Joseph Peterson

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

The Wehrmacht was Germany's fighting force in the field during World War II. Its brutality and discriminatory practices rivaled that of the Nazi paramilitary and police units dispatched alongside them in newly conquered areas during this conflict. Coming from a society that was not at all unfamiliar with Christianity, some within the Wehrmacht related to Christianity in some form and attempted to use it to either justify actions or make sense of the world around them.

While considerable scholarship exists on the Nazi Party's relationship to Christianity as a convenient propaganda tool for both soldier and civilian alike, the historiography surrounding Wehrmacht personnels' individual relationships to Christianity is underdeveloped. Using soldier correspondence from the home front, the Western Front, and especially the Eastern Front as well as wiretapped conversations from allied interrogation camps, the thesis argues that both soldiers and their loved ones did not just actively participate in Christian rituals under a totalitarian regime. They clung to Christian rituals and Christian faith in times of extreme uncertainty. This argument demonstrates how Nazism, and faith in Hitler, were often awkward bedfellows with a Christian worldview among the enlisted personnel of the Wehrmacht.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are several people I am indebted to for the formation of this thesis. I must offer thanks to my advisor, Dr. Andrew Wiest, for his willingness to listen and bounce ideas around with me during my time as an infant graduate student. His decision to show me the Richard Lester Collection at the McCain Library & Archive at the University of Southern Mississippi brought me closer to realizing my dream in becoming an historian. I can never repay that debt. Additionally, I must offer thanks to Richard Lester himself. Our conversations via email sparked the excitement and motivation necessary to commit to hours of solitary writing on a profoundly difficult topic, a topic that consumed my thoughts for most of my time at Southern Miss.

Next, I must thank Dr. Joseph Peterson. Joe's kindness, gentleness, helpfulness, and keen incite into my work proved not only integral to this work but also proved to be a kind of respite from the demands of graduate school. That will never be forgotten. Additionally, Dr. Brian LaPierre's incites into my work are equally worthy of praise. His wisdom, eloquence with words, captivating ideas, and unrelenting critiques of this project serve as a motivation to do this topic well out of respect for those who fell victim to Nazi criminality. I am thankful for Dr. LaPierre's reminder of what is at stake in taking on such a topic. His words will remain a defining point in my career as an historian.

On a personal note, I would like to thank my colleagues at Southern Miss for providing me with moments of joy, encouragement, council, and even a couple of groomsmen during this season of my life. Finally, I thank my mother, Paige, for instilling

in me the dreaming spirit necessary to pursue the long and challenging road of the historian. Without her, I would not have gone anywhere near a college classroom.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my lovely fiancée Savannah. Her beauty, wisdom, confidence, convictions, and unfathomable love for me inspire me to search for my own voice in an intimidating world. Finally, to the indomitable Grant David Henry (1998-2016) for believing in me. I know that he would be proud.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

What This Thesis is Not

While this thesis is about the Wehrmacht, it is not a defense of the institution. Because so many of these soldiers found themselves fighting along the Eastern Front, religious expressions could be used as a coping mechanism to either make sense of or justify wartime atrocities. The historian Timothy Snyder estimates that, between 1941 and 1944, German soldiers starved an estimated 4.2 million Soviets in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Around 5.4 million Jews were murdered over this three-year period, and thousands of Warsaw citizens were murdered by the hands of the German armed forces during the Second World War.[1] And these statistics only cover a part of the atrocities committed by so many within the Wehrmacht in the name of a false cause. More numbers could be considered. Indeed, whole other fronts could be considered. And the mass killings that occurred particularly against eastern Europeans was indeed a climax of what had been in development in the German military prior to the Nazi era.[2]

Wehrmacht church reopenings are discussed in this thesis, and while these unusual occurrences happened, these vignettes and narratives of "religious liberation" should never be seen as ammunition for a rebuttal against the horrors that awaited so many throughout the Soviet Union and other key areas of contestation as the Wehrmacht annexed territory. While this is a study of the religious reflections of a handful within an institution that played an integral part in mass killings, to explain is not to forgive. To

[1] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 411.

[2] Bryce Sait, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht: Nazi Ideology and the War Crimes of the German Military* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 4.

pursue an academic vein of inquiry that leads the scholar to the people behind Hitlerian Germany is not, by any means, absolution.[3] Human judgement alone failed to show these men an ethical solution to their time in uniform. For while some Wehrmacht personnel in this study were profoundly thoughtful, most of these soldiers ultimately depended on and believed in a society that was dominated by Hitler and his murderous ideology.[4] The men in this study were Hitler's willing foot soldiers. Regardless of any reservations that may have been tucked away or not, they all donned the same uniform—the swastika stitched upon their chests.

This is, however, a study of human beings and their thoughts captured, no matter how briefly, in writing. And, as Christopher Browning noted in *Ordinary Men*, a delicate deployment of empathy is required from the historian's toolkit even with studies as sensitive as this one if a scholar is to come to terms with the day-to-day experiences of these soldiers.[5] Nevertheless, this is not a defense of the Wehrmacht, rather, it is an attempt to glean the complexities of belief and the human condition within the broader context of criminality. The thesis makes no attempt to whitewash the racist brutality that these soldiers, in one form or another, were a part of.

Secondary Sources

The endgame was a final stand. The Wehrmacht, an institution that placed boot prints over most of continental Europe, was at a turning point for the worst. The Sixth

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[3] Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1992), xx.

[4] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 294-295.

[5] Browning, *Ordinary Men*, xx.

Army, clambering for one last gasp of life at Stalingrad, was exhausted and decimated by January 1943. In the frigid temperatures, surrender, like low hanging fruit before a faceless mass of starving corpses, was tantalizing. To the south, Army Group A failed to seize and control the Caucasus, an area rich in oil reserves that was necessary for the struggling German war effort. The anxiety was palpable. In response to the strategic quagmire plaguing the German army, a German non-commissioned officer wrote, "I read now 'Not everyone that saith unto me "Lord, Lord," enters into Heaven, but rather those who do the will of my Father in Heaven.' In general, one says that war has its own law … You see, the war brings not only a re-evaluation, but a revolution in the moral sphere. It has its own law?"[6] This German soldier's concerns, wonders, and religious reflections are seen throughout many letters German soldiers, and their loved ones, wrote in response to events of the Second World War. This piece is a study of Wehrmacht personnel and their personal relationships with Christianity. The thesis argues that enlisted men, junior officers, and their loved ones, in many instances, clung to a Christian faith to make sense of and justify the world around them in response to the uncertainties and anxieties that a total war in Europe generated.

The Wehrmacht is all too often understood as a monolithic and ideologically unified organization that relied on two forms of primary motivation: ideological (vertical) motivation and horizontal motivation through comradeship, leadership, or training. This was not entirely the case. While there is staunch disagreement among scholars over the rigor of indoctrination in the Wehrmacht, the scholarship demonstrates that Nazis often

[6] Jeff Rutherford & Adrian E. Wettstein, *The German Army on the Eastern Front: An Inner View of the Ostheer's Experiences of War* (South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books, 2018), 169.

experienced difficulties in their attempts to unequivocally transform thousands of young, impressionable men, and their families, into ideal voices for Nazism.[7] Pragmatism and compromise often ruled the day. Ultimately, Christianity proved to be an awkward bedfellow with Nazism in the hearts and minds of many under the banner of the Third Reich.[8]

Scholarship on the religious beliefs of the Wehrmacht is underdeveloped, and many scholars disagree on the rigor of the rank and files' political indoctrination in Nazi Germany. This Master's thesis investigates the religious culture of the Wehrmacht and how these men related to Christianity on personal levels. How did these men use Christianity as a tool to cope with their realities in the field? While scholars such as David Harrisville, Bryce Sait, and many others, offer chapters on the issue of Christianity in the Wehrmacht, this thesis delves into the issue of Christianity and the Wehrmacht more comprehensively. It offers a more rigorous and detailed analysis on the study of Christianity in the Wehrmacht than what has previously been done in the historiography of Wehrmacht ideology, motivation, and indoctrination. Antonia Leugers wrote a monograph that focuses entirely on Catholic Jesuits in the Wehrmacht, *Jesuiten in Hitlers Wehrmacht: Kriegslegitimation und Kriegserfahrung*. There were over 700 Jesuits that served in the German military during World War II. This study looks beyond the borders of the Jesuit Order.

[7] Felix Römer, *Comrades: The Wehrmacht from Within*, translated by Alex J. Kay (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 8. See also, Sait, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht*, 6.

[8] Sait, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht*, 130-135.

Scholars have been writing about soldier motivation and soldier identity in the Wehrmacht since the end of the Second World War. In the late 1940s, Edward Shils, Morris Janowitz, and Peter Weidenreich conducted interviews with German prisoners of war. In Weidenreich's estimation, German soldiers stayed in the fight against the allies for four reasons: "comradeship, fear, good leadership, and faith in Hitler."[9] Shils and Janowitz, however, placed heavier emphasis on comradeship after their interviews with prisoners of war. Shils and Janowitz, also writing in the late 1940s, argue that the enlisted personnel of the Wehrmacht found their sense of purpose in each other rather than in ideology. "By the cohesion of [the soldier's] immediate primary group … certain basic needs, such as comradeship, esteem, concern, and a sense of well-being and power [were met.]"[10] This can be understood as "horizontal motivation." Insofar as ideology was concerned, Shils and Janowitz argue that only a "hard-core minority" of German soldiers adhered to Nazism even despite consistent expressions of faith in Hitler.[11] This can be understood as "vertical motivation." Christianity falls under this category.

By the 1970s and 1980s, the historiography began to change. The scholarship of these two decades emphasized not just horizontal comradeship, but also the training, administration, and leadership of the Wehrmacht as catalysts for soldier motivation. The precedence that horizontal motivation had for over 30 years was challenged by scholars such as Victor Madej. Madej understood the dominance of horizontal comradeship to be

[9] Stephen G. Fritz, "'We are trying...to change the face of the world'-Ideology and Motivation in the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front: The View from Below," *The Journal of Military History* 60 no. 4 (Oct. 1996): 683, https://doi.org/10.2307/2944661

[10] Fritz, "Ideology and Motivation," 683.

[11] Ibid.

inaccurate, and he instead made the case that unit cohesion developed because of "training and military skill" due to the Wehrmacht's professionalism as a warfighting organization.[12] Martin van Creveld, on the other hand, argues that it was both horizontal comradeship and the institution's skills that kept the soldiers going. In Creveld's work, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945*, he argues that German soldiers did not fight out of a belief in Nazi ideology. Instead, "he fought for the reasons that men have always fought: because he felt himself a member of a well-integrated, well led team whose structure, administration, and functioning were perceived to be equitable and just."[13] But not all the scholarship prior to Omer Bartov's *Hitler's Army* denounced ideology as a peripheral matter in terms of motivation and meaning. In the summer of 1983, Elliot P. Chodoff's article "Ideology and Primary Groups" was published. Chodoff's article brought the conversation back to Nazi ideology. In the work, Chodoff distinguished between "precombat motivation" and combat motivation. According to Chodoff, in precombat motivation, ideology is important. During combat, however, that vertical motivation gives way to horizontal motivation as the soldier becomes both physically and psychologically reliant on his comrades.[14] Bartov, however, changed the conversation entirely.

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[12] Fritz, "Ideology and Motivation," 684. See also, W. Victor Madej, "Effectiveness and Cohesion of the German Ground Forces in World War II," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 6 no. 2 (Fall 1978): 233-248. Https://www.jstor.org/stable/45293685.

[13] Ibid., See also, Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 163-165. Additionally, see Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 159.

[14] Ibid., See also, Elliot P. Chodoff, "Ideology and Primary Groups," *Armed Forces and Society* 9 no. 4 (Summer 1983): 569-593. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45305679.

Bartov contends that ideology played a significant role in soldier motivation both prior to and during combat. Because of "incessant Nazi propaganda," the Wehrmacht proved remarkably cohesive because of the "binding force" of ideology.[15] With regards to horizontal motivation, Bartov suggests that brotherly affection and kinship were torn apart by the realities of combat. Thus, the only access to motivation any soldier had was through ideology (vertical motivation). Bartov's works set a defining precedent in terms of how readers understood both the falsities of the clean Wehrmacht myth and the essential role Nazi indoctrination played within the rank and file of the German armed forces during World War II. But under the umbrella of Bartov's defining work on the Wehrmacht and the Third Reich, scholars at the turn of the century started their own intensive studies of this organization. In the early 2000s, Karl Berkhoff, in *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine Under Nazi Rule*, argues that many Ukrainians were happy to see the Wehrmacht in Ukraine, at least initially. With religious revivals following the soldiers, the Ukrainians classified the German soldiers as harbingers of religious freedom from an atheist regime.[16] Units of Army Group South in Ukraine reinstated the right to worship to over 1,500 churches in the occupied country. In May 1942, one German soldier recalled:

> Yesterday I received a deputation headed by a Russian priest with a long beard, staff, and flowing robe with a request to build a Russian church. 'God protect the liberator Adolf Hitler who has given Russia back its God!' He proclaimed, as I declared to him that we were giving permission. He then stooped to the ground and promised we would be eternally in the people's thoughts and prayers … Nothing can be done here without religion; it gives the

[15] Ibid., 685.

[16] Karel Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine Under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004), 232–43.

> elderly a real sense of belonging, which can be politically exploited, and can more easily direct the spiritually lost youth towards a moral way of living.[17]

Army Group North performed similar actions in its sectors of action, ensuring that places of worship were reasonably respected, though executions, racial contempt, and common cases of rape abounded. Ben Shepherd suggests that the religious revivals, while winning the tentative trust of older Soviet generations, were not as successful in winning the hearts and minds of the young—a Soviet generation more concerned about the reopening of "theaters, cinemas, and dance halls," though the occupation did not allow these businesses to reach the financial success they enjoyed prior to the war.[18]

In recent scholarship, Nicholas Stargardt challenged the "long lasting consensus" of German defeatism late in the war in his work, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945.* While defeats in the field led to a "catastrophic fall in the regime's popularity," patriotism was never called into question by the German people. "However unpopular the war became, it still remained legitimate – more so than Nazism itself." Stargardt continues, "mid-war crises resulted not in defeatism but in a hardening of social attitudes." And it is precisely these social attitudes that concern Stargardt in *The German War.*[19] Sait's work, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht: Nazi Ideology and the War Crimes of the German Military,* puts emphasis back on military education and training within the Wehrmacht. In his work, he looks to training and education not to revisit the matter of horizontal motivation, but rather, to put forth the argument that millions of men

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[17] Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 282.

[18] Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers*, 282, 285.

[19] Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945* (London: Vintage, 2015), 8.

who served in the Wehrmacht before and during the Second World War were indoctrinated according to Nazi tenets through military education and training programs. Sait asserts that to rely on Bartov's contention regarding the Hitler Youth and the Reich Labor Service or Christopher Browning's peer pressure/orders theses, while crucial to understanding Wehrmacht indoctrination, is not enough when considering Nazi indoctrination of the armed forces.[20]

Felix Römer's book, *Comrades: The Wehrmacht from Within*, draws from recently discovered intelligence records from Fort Hunt, an American interrogation center near Washington D.C., in the United States. Field post letters were vulnerable to both Nazi censorship and self-censorship, diaries were the luxury of an educated minority, and memoirs reflected mostly on strategy. These conversations between German prisoners of war were listened to and recorded in secret by American intelligence officials at the prison and provide an unparalleled source base regarding the enlisted personnel of the Wehrmacht. With over 3,000 Wehrmacht personnel accounted for at Fort Hunt outside of Washington D.C. and 102,000 wiretapped conversations considered in this monograph, the source base offers unrivaled material on the Wehrmacht. The work "offers an account of the Wehrmacht's history of mentalities based on the soldiers' own language."[21] Römer argues that the Wehrmacht was far more ideologically diverse than scholars have given the institution credit for. Additionally, the author notes a small

[20] Sait, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht*, 4-6, 9.
[21] Römer, *Comrades*, 2-9.

but controversial point: While politics certainly had an impact on thinking in the Wehrmacht, "many soldiers were not very aware of political matters."[22]

Scholarship as recent as 2021 continues to challenge those that argue for the monopoly the Nazis ostensibly maintained over the hearts and minds of the men in field gray. Indeed, the regime, according to David Harrisville, was a competitor with other more traditional worldviews within the Wehrmacht community. In *The Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944*, Harrisville argues that "a broad array of more traditional value systems still played a major role in its discourse and actions on the Eastern Front. The relationship between Nazi morality and these value systems was complex." While these value systems hindered Nazi goals in the east, Harrisville argues, these traditional value systems proved "more a boon than a detriment to the Nazi cause."[23]

Primary Sources

In September 2019, Richard Lester, a former graduate student at the University of Southern Mississippi, contacted the founding director of the Dale Center for the Study of War & Society at the University of Southern Mississippi, Dr. Andrew Wiest, to propose a donation of one of the largest collections of German field post letters in the United States. In the 1960s, Lester made several trips to Germany and Austria to study primary source documents surrounding the Hitler Youth. At the time, the historiography on Nazi youth movements was thin. But the oral histories he set out to perform failed him as former

[22] Ibid., 8.

[23] David Harrisville, *The Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 9.

Hitler Youth members expressed little interest in meeting with him to talk about their past lives in the Third Reich. Nevertheless, Lester managed to have successful interviews with the former chancellor of Austria responsible for the *Anschluss*, and the Gestapo agent who arrested Anne Frank, one of the most famous victims of the Holocaust.[24] Despite his failure to secure a wealth of oral interviews, the German letters and Nazi documentation gathered throughout Lester's time as a researcher came to define his study of Nazi Germany, as well as the friends he made along the way.[25]

Wilhelm Gehlen, a former citizen, and soldier of the Third Reich was in the *Deutsches Jungvolk* and *Hitlerjugend* during his adolescence and throughout the war. An eyewitness to the Battle of the Bulge, he was called up as a child to defend what remained of the Third Reich during the closing months of the Second World War.[26] After the war, he emigrated to the United States and eventually settled in Telford, Tennessee. It was here in America where he became acquainted with Lester. Gehlen offered Lester, in support of his writing endeavors, hundreds of translated field post letters. Gehlen acquired these letters from dealers in Germany, who in turn obtained them from family estate sales in central Europe. Not long after this project, Lester published these translated letters into two volumes, both of which can be found at Southern Mississippi's McCain Library & Archive. Additionally, Lester tasked a dealer by the name of Roberto Stemmer to locate and acquire as many documents from the Nazi period as he was able to. By 2019, Lester contacted the McCain Library & Archive and Dr. Wiest with the

[24] The *Anschluss* (union) was Nazi Germany's annexation of the Austrian state in 1938.

[25] (Richard Lester, email message to Chris Bishop, September 28, 2022)

[26] Wilhelm Gehlen & Don Gregory, *Jungvolk: The Story of a Boy Defending Hitler's Third Reich*. (Philadelphia & Newbury: Casemate, 2008), vii.

intent of donating all these documents to the archive, many of which have not been published or translated.[27]

The University of Southern Mississippi now holds one of the largest collections of German wartime correspondence in the United States.[28] The Richard Lester collection contains letters from soldiers, civilians, children, and parents. While the letters reveal tales and thoughts of all kinds, the focus of this study is strictly on worldview, religion, and motivation through the writings of German grassroots communities under the banner of the Third Reich. This thesis is a study of religion and motivation within the Wehrmacht and the civilians associated with this military institution. Apart from one letter in the collection, there are no letters written by members of the *Waffen-SS*, though members of field police units are within the collection. Additionally, the collection contains French and Nazi newspapers and official Nazi publications, but much of this is beyond the scope of the study.[29]

Another key source for this study is Römer's work *Comrades.* Drawing from recently discovered intelligence records from Fort Hunt near Washington D.C., the work makes use of wiretapped conversations from German prisoners of war during the Second World War. Over 3,000 German soldiers were recorded at Fort Hunt, and over 102,000 conversations are made available in this monograph. One of the limitations surrounding soldiers' letters was censorship. Soldiers, knowingly or unknowingly, indulged in self-censorship when they engaged in letter correspondence with loved ones. Additionally, the

[27] (Richard Lester, email message to Chris Bishop, September 28, 2022)

[28] (Richard Lester, email message to Chris Bishop, September 28, 2022)

[29] None of the translations from German into English are the author's own, and the thesis is entirely reliant on Wilhelm Gehlen's translations of the letters. And it is understood that this is a weakness to the study in question.

field post letters were potentially subjected to government censorship prior to delivery. While this is a key limitation to this study, these wiretapped conversations from Fort Hunt offer a bypass to these issues.[30] Sönke Neitzel & Harald Welzer's monograph *Soldaten*, while controversial, received high praise in Römer's work for its use of recorded conversations from German prisoners of war. Like *Comrades*, *Soldaten* contends that many soldiers in the German army were apolitical, thus creating a rift in the historiography.[31] Römer and Sait disagree with each other on how to interpret Neitzel & Welzer's conclusions on German soldiers being mostly "apolitical." Sait's work, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht*, was written as a direct rebuttal to the conclusions found in *Soldaten.* With regards to the soldiers themselves, their letter writing revealed a diverse array of concerns. Most wrote of furlough. Some wrote of cigarettes, food, and warm clothes. Others wrote of loneliness, despair, or allied air raids over the Reich. Still, others expressed the inner dread they felt in anticipation of service along the Eastern Front. Some, like Walter Rebel, displayed an unusual ability to think theologically.

Walter Rebel was just a Private First-Class stationed in France upon writing to his wife in December 1942. But his writing demonstrated a desire to understand, abilities in descriptive writing, and a worldview grounded in Christianity. "I know it now, I was looking for God, to a meaning in life, where the center is focused on Christianity. I think of the cleansing of the temple with a whip by Jesus, I think you know what I mean by that. My view gets clearer by the day, I think from now on I will face other people with [skepticism] and alarm. Once I get the right feeling for that, then I know, I am the right

[30]Römer, *Comrades*, 5-7.

[31] Ibid., 6. Römer describes *Soldaten* as a "groundbreaking" work in the historiography.

man in life."[32] While this is but a glimpse into the writings of PFC Rebel, it is never revealed in any of his letters what he meant by referencing Jesus's "cleansing" of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem, an historically holy place in Jewish history. What can be inferred from this opine, however, is that this German soldier sought to use an event recorded in the gospels of the Christian New Testament to justify a personal belief in his search for meaning in an occupied country. A myriad of letters from the Richard Lester collection reveals such vulnerability and existential angst under the watchful gaze of Nazism and the demands of total war.

Another primary source base crucial to this study is Dirk Chervatin's *Eastern Front: 500 Letters from War*. This work is a collection of published field post letters from Dirk Chervatin's late grandfather, Josef Chervatin. Discovered in May 2020, Chervatin found his grandfather's letters stored away in his grandmother's home in Germany. Originally looking for cello sheet music, Chervatin and his grandmother sifted through various books and sheet music until they came across this collection of letters found in *Eastern Front*.[33] Chervatin decided to publish his grandfather's field post letters. A bearer of a fascinating life story, the finer and introductory details of Josef Chervatin's background are discussed in chapter two of this thesis.

Guy Sajer's memoir, *The Forgotten Soldier*, is also considered in this thesis. While Sajer revealed skepticism towards religion, his memoir is littered with vignettes of religious experiences, thoughts, frustrations, questions, and open skepticism balanced out

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[32] PFC Walter Rebel, Navy Command, France, to Mrs. Emmi Rebel, Mannheim Neckarau Germaniastr 26, December 31, 1942, Richard Lester Collection, McCain Library and Archives, The University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS.

[33] Dirk Chervatin, ed., *Eastern Front: 500 Letters from War* (Duisburg: EK-2 Publishing, 2022), 4-5.

by spiritual turmoil as he tried to figure out how to come to terms with his life along the Eastern Front.[34]

Chapter Organization

Chapter two is a study of the field post letters written by German soldiers. This section reinforces the argument by presenting case studies of men, who, in writings to and from family members demonstrated a capacity to latch on to Christianity as a means to cope with their realities along the Eastern Front. This chapter demonstrates that a conflict of interest existed between the Wehrmacht's "traditional values" and the tenets of Nazism through soldier correspondence.[35] Chapter three is a study of soldier correspondence to and from the Western theater of operations. This chapter offers analysis on the religious writings of those soldiers tasked with defending Fortress Europe from the western allies. In turn, both chapters capture a collective consciousness interested in Christianity on several corners of continental Europe. Additionally, both chapters propose sub-arguments surrounding victimhood within the Wehrmacht. These sub arguments contend that many within the Wehrmacht felt that their livelihood, whether through violence or social isolation and loneliness, had been ruined. These men felt victimized by the conflict resulting in bitterness, hopelessness, disappointment, and fantasies of peace from war. This hope for peace is a common theme throughout the letters. But this thesis distinguishes this desire for peace from other motivators for peace,

[34] Historians continue to debate the reliability of Guy Sajer's historical account, especially considering Sajer's primary concern in writing the work was narrative rather than historical authenticity.

[35] Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 9. For an introduction to the Nazis' views on Christianity, see Harrisville, David. "Unholy Crusaders: The Wehrmacht and the Reestablishment of Soviet Churches during Operation Barbarossa." Central European History 52 (2019): 627, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938919000876.

such as the “Final Victory,” another common theme found in these letters. Chapter four offers concluding remarks regarding the arguments made in this work and what ultimately amounted to a misdiagnosis of “evil” insofar as a religious context is concerned.

In considering these four chapters, a holistic understanding of the men behind the field gray of the Wehrmacht may be gleaned. With the support of these sources, the German soldier’s humanity, convictions, and most importantly, his spirituality, come to the forefront of the conversation surrounding Nazism, barbarity, and ordinary men.

Definitions

Religion and Christianity are used interchangeably in this thesis. The faith, arguably, held deep roots in the central European state. This thesis takes the liberty of using these two terms interchangeably. While the diversity of Christian thought and denominational difference within the German context is noted, the definition of “religiosity” or “Christianity” in this piece is limited to letters that reference, in varying capacities, the Christian trinity in some form, historical moments recognized by the faith, or simple expressions of a divine other. Additionally, this thesis also defines religion as a coping mechanism that Wehrmacht personnel used in their writings as a means to make sense of their realities.

CHAPTER II - HE TOO IS IN THE LOVED LAND OF THE WORKER

The 4th Panzer Division of Army Group Center performed its job well. Cherikov, a town in Soviet Belarus, was cleared of resistance and declared secure in July 1941. The following morning, a Sunday, a young junior officer, Lieutenant Fritz Farnbacher of the 103rd Tank Artillery Regiment sang the following from Psalm 36: "Your loving kindness, O Lord, extends to the heavens, / Your faithfulness reaches the skies."[36] Not long after, Soviet deserters were brought before Farnbacher and his superior officer, Major Hoffmann. Looking at them with disgust and recalling the bodies of his dead men, Hoffmann requested his "Jew-comforter," a club mockingly littered with Soviet insignias. Hoffmann bludgeoned one of the Red deserters, thought to be a Soviet political officer, prior to having him shot. While not entirely opposed to the Soviet's fate, Lt. Farnbacher found the method repulsive on "moral and religious grounds."[37] As a professing Christian, Captain Axel Freiherr von dem Bussche, prostrated before the SS after the murder of over a thousand Jews at an airbase in Ukraine, refused to obey orders in a demonstration of "common humanity" on behalf of those murdered.[38] In a letter to his wife, a German non-commissioned officer, describing the Soviets as the "tools of Judas," wrote of the necessity for invasion. Brutality and "lofty ideas about the value of human life" needed to be jettisoned in the war against the Soviet state because "that is what God wants."[39] The Wehrmacht was a community of contradiction. Its writings not only reflected a subconscious ideological compromise with the Nazi regime but also whispers

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[36] Stargardt, *The German War*, 166.

[37] Ibid., 166-167.

[38] Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2000), 711.

[39] Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*, translated by Deboran Lucas Schneider (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 173-174.

of victimhood that are far too often forgotten about in discourses on the German rank and file of World War II. The ideological juxtapositions not only touched the young officers of the Wehrmacht. Its effects reached the enlisted personnel as well.

One of the more blatant examples of this ideological contradiction were church reopenings. As the Wehrmacht gained ground at the outset of Operation Barbarossa in the summer of 1941, there were sporadic church reopenings across parts of the axis of advance into Soviet territory. According to Harrisville, these "religious revivals" along the Eastern Front, "were for the most part spontaneous events driven by chaplains, soldiers, and civilians on the ground, usually with little active involvement from military authorities."[40] While religion was on the decline in parts of the Soviet Union, some Soviets, particularly in Ukraine, saw the religious revival proctored by German enlisted soldiers as a renaissance in the spiritual life of Soviet Ukraine in response to the prevalence of so-called "Soviet atheism."[41] Indeed, as the Wehrmacht gained ground in Ukraine, one Ukrainian stated, "I never thought, children, that I would live to see the day, but now you see, the Lord had mercy. Pilate's Empire is coming to an end."[42] Some soldiers in Ukraine, like Hanz Rahe, reflected upon the German invasion of that country and, after conversing with some of his comrades, believed that "the hope grew again in me that in a free Ukraine perhaps Christian preaching would be possible again. This wish is also a goal for me, for which it is worth fighting."[43] Upon seeing the effects of their small, but significant, religious revival unfold, some German soldiers felt that their

[40] Harrisville, "Unholy Crusaders," 623.
[41] Ibid., 638.
[42] Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*, 242-243.
[43] Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 105.

abstract sense of Christian duty in their conquest of the Soviet Union was fulfilled as Orthodox churches opened their doors once more. But this Christian solidarity with emotional communities, stigmatized as enemies of the Third Reich, did not last. Hitler himself ended the church reopenings declaring that such actions undermined the true object of the invasion.[44] While the church reopenings did little to nothing in impeding Nazi hegemony in the Soviet Union, the Nazis had an altogether different experience dealing with their own ranks.

The church reopenings demonstrated that Nazism did not have an ideological monopoly over the hearts and minds of many within the Wehrmacht. Indeed, the soldiers' own correspondence with their loved ones bear out this conflict. PFC Gerhard Richter of the 32nd Infantry Regiment had his mind on Whitsun while serving on the Eastern Front, "Over Whitsun I will think of you a lot. These are not holidays for me. I will be out on patrol. Walking is nice, but here in Russia it is something different."[45] Sergeant Hans Oehler's Panzer Grenadier regiment was posted along the Donets River in the summer of 1943. Even along the Eastern Front, Oehler wrote of his unit's revelries in celebration of Whitsun to his parents. After chastising his son for disobedience in the letter, he asked his family what their plans were for the day; he encouraged them to "go for a walk in God's nature." While Oehler also wrote in the letter that he hoped to forget the celebration that day, the significance of the celebration is without question.[46]

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[44] Harrisville, "Unholy Crusaders," 644-645, 647. See also, Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*, 252.

[45] PFC Gerhard Richter to Oskar Richter Ofensetzmeister, Neustadt in Saxony Sebinitzerstr 4, May 29, 1941, RLC. Traditionally, Whitsun is a celebration of Pentecost, an event recorded in *The Acts of the Apostles.*

[46] Sgt. Hans Oehler, 3rd Panzer Grenadier Regiment, to Richard Oehler Rödlitz, Glogau Saxony, Hindenburgstr 69b, June 13, 1943, RLC.

In the source base, a remarkable number of soldiers and their families wrote about Whitsun. Regardless of whether the feelings towards this Christian holiday were rooted in a sincere belief system or cultural ritual, it is telling that so many wrote of this under a regime that was oftentimes hostile to Christianity. Other Christian rituals practiced under the Third Reich included rites of passage for infants. Christian Caspar, an infantryman who served along the Eastern Front fondly recalled how healthy "Little Wolfgang" became since his christening at birth two years earlier in the summer of 1940.[47] The christening of the child suggests a reliance on the Christian church in some capacity to fulfill cultural traditions, even in the families of Nazism's right hand in foreign policy exercise—the Wehrmacht.

Josef Chervatin was an older man who volunteered for army service in October 1941. Born in 1903 in what was once the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he was an ethnic Italian. His family moved to Oberhausen, Germany before the First World War broke out. In 1927, he married and moved to Ahlen in the Westphalian region of north-western Germany, and he made a living in Germany as a musician prior to his enlistment.[48] He joined the 329th Infantry Division, also referred to as the *Hammer Division*, and this unit was attached to Army Group North and their push towards the Demyansk area of operations. It remained in service until its surrender to Soviet forces in Courland in February 1945.[49] In the spring of 1943, Chervatin wrote to his wife about his son, Hansi, and his "thought processes" regarding "religious affiliation." He was thankful that his wife

[47] Christian Caspar, Infantry Regiment 739, July 3, 1942, RLC.
[48] Chervatin, *Eastern Front*, 4.
[49] Ibid., 4-5.

raised their son's concerning thought pattern about the subject of religion to his attention. Diagnosing his son's thoughts on the divine, he wrote, "I attribute the whole thing to religious education, which is taught incorrectly to children in this regard. I remember when I was his age, I was so fanatical through teaching to believe that anyone not Catholic should go to hell." Evidently, Chervatin's religious fanaticism persisted into his final years of schooling when he and his fellow students "got a clergyman for religious instruction…" The clergyman taught Chervatin and his fellow students a kind of religious universalism, a form of coexistence, "anyone, Catholic, Protestant, Mohammedan, or whatever else he was, could be blessed and go to heaven if he only firmly believed what his religion told him to believe."[50]

Chervatin's worldview, at that point in his life, had changed. "This was a very sensible clergyman," he told his wife. The German soldier speculated that Hansi had the wrong teacher, and this "caused him to degenerate into aversion," but he also wondered if his own family was to blame for his son's waywardness; Chervatin also suggested that his wife's former Protestant affiliation might have also contributed to their son's questions. "The sister sins against such harmless children's minds, and she should be thoroughly enlightened about it … Tell Hansi he should like you even more because you became a Catholic because of him. And then teach him that God is not to be sought in the church alone but is to be found much more outside in nature and everywhere if you open your eyes …I will tell him about it." The last thing Chervatin wanted to see in his son was religious fanaticism.[51] Despite his universalist leanings, his writings to his wife reveal a

[50] Ibid., 83.
[51] Ibid., 83.

respect for, at the very least, the imposing presence that any church imagery might leave on the psyche. In that same year 1943, Chervatin went into detail about a church his unit came across in the Soviet Union. Describing it as "a wonderful church," it was evident that Soviet forces had occupied the religious space. "They had used the pictures hanging there as targets for pistol shooting and had stabbed the faces of those depicted with knives. It is true what they say about such things. The population is glad they are gone."[52]

Holidays such as Christmas and Easter were among some of the most significant celebrations in Germany.[53] The Christmas story was often shared, songs sung, and presents from home opened. Indeed, the Christmas spirit pierced even the halls of imperial politics. Gina Hirsche, writing to the State Secretary in Krakow, Poland wrote, "I wish you a very merry Christmas and Happy New Year, and when you light the candles on the tree, remember the birth of Jesus Christ and be happy from your heart."[54] Eager to share his report card with his father, Sgt. Franz Wimmer, Erich Wimmer eagerly jotted down his educational progress. What is even more telling, however, is the young boy's mentioning of the "Easter Resurrection procession" that he and the family planned on attending considering the Easter holiday.[55] Upon learning of his son's medical emergency back home, Private Karl Göbel wrote, "the boy is like us, the good Lord will look after him, so we will be happy with him. When I watched him sleeping in his pram, what a heavenly

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[52] Ibid., 92.

[53] Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 110-111.

[54] Gina Hirsche, Vienna IX, Höfergasse 18/12 to Hedwig Prott, Office of the Governor General, Krakow 20, State Secretary, December 1, 1941, RLC.

[55] Erich Wimmer, Vienna 114, Pötzleinsdorfer straße 99/4, to Sgt. Franz Wimmer, Central Spare Parts Depot C/I/34 Koblenz-Lützel, March 20, 1940, RLC.

feeling it was, to have a child like that."[56] Over the Christmas holidays, Josef Chervatin was often interested to know what the "Christ Child" brought his family. On one occasion, he told his loved ones that once the war ended, he would come home with "a whole sack of presents for you, my dear good wife, and for you, my dear Hansi, from Santa Claus and the Christ Child."[57] In another instance, Chervatin was eager to find out from his son whether or not he had the opportunity to ride the sleigh that the Christ Child gave to him for the Christmas season of 1942. There were several instances in which this historic tradition of the Christ Child's gift giving was mentioned in Chervatin's letters home to his family.[58] Other soldiers' writings, however, demonstrated a far more intimate relationship with the faith that went beyond mere celebrations of traditional holidays or educational anxieties.

Prior to the likelihood of seeing combat, PFC Carl Launinger of the 43rd Pioneer Battalion, at the outset of Operation Barbarossa, expressed his feelings of anxiety to his brother and how he planned to cope with the fog of war:

> A hard time for the soldiers in the East has now started, and we do not know what will happen to all of us. We are all making preparations now. The fighting is only 28 kilometers away from us. You will hear it all on the radio, I am not allowed to tell you more for now. The three of us, brothers, we must serve the Fatherland now, and all three not of the youngest age. But we will give our best, as it is our duty. We shall pray to God every day that we are going towards peace.[59]

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[56] Pvt. Karl Göbel, 3rd Rifle Battalion 14th Regiment, Nordlager Prag, Block 8 to Mrs. Hilde Göbel, Zöblitz Erzgeb, Marienberg 54, October 23, 1944, RLC.

[57] Chervatin, *Eastern Front*, 54.

[58] Ibid., 58-59, 61, 66.

[59] PFC Carl Launinger to Willy Launinger, 1st Artillery Reserve 260, Ludwigsburg K.6. Camp, June 26, 1941, RLC.

Hans Caspar, the day Operation Barbarossa began, wrote home to his family informing them of the "great struggle" that was about to begin between the Soviet Union and Germany. Caspar wrote that "with God's help, we shall defeat this enemy, too, and all four of us will be at the Front." Caspar continued by asking his brothers to pray for a swift end and to hope for the "very best." In the letter, he addressed his father, a veteran of the First World War, by telling him that "in this war, we fight along the same fronts that you did in the last war. There will be some hard days ahead of us, but we do it with pride, for our Fatherland, so the enemy stays out of our country."[60] At the time this letter was written, Caspar was stationed in France, but he understood what the invasion of the Soviet Union meant for himself and his family.

In July 1941, Heinz Küchler wrote home about the general temperament of he and his comrades at the front. He stated that, generally, conversations dwelled on current events and what was ahead for everyone. "No outlook seems promising," he wrote. "Only fresh individual courage for life will know how to master the future times, in which lying ideals, false gods and untruthful wisdom will and must be smashed … happiness will no longer be allotted to this generation; war will go on for many years, if not centuries!" Küchler hoped that the long and harsh part he would soon play in the unfolding of events in the east would "lead toward truth and knowledge."[61] A couple of months later, he wrote about death and the existential struggle he believed he needed to face on a personal level. "I understand the endeavors of men to give their death a meaning, in that they

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[60] Hans Caspar, 15th Bakery Company, to Johann Caspar, Frankenau, near Frankenberg/Eder Kassel, June 22, 1941, RLC.

[61] Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 116.

conjure for themselves a picture of the soul, of a battle for a great, just, holy cause … My own battle is different … The struggle for the truly human, personal values, for the timeless cause of the spirit, the spirit that creates the tie between man and God, in constant endeavor for knowledge and truth." According to Küchler, this unique existential fight for what was valuable, this quest for the spirit of truth and a kind of abstract union with God was to be fought not just internally but materially as well.[62]

PFC Kari Walterskirchen not only turned to God in his time of growing fear but also expressed despair at the prospect of a prolonged conflict in continental Europe, "A year ago today I arrived here, and everything is still the same. I have no hope that the war will end anytime soon. I am of the opinion that the war will go on and on for a long time to come. I can hardly believe that there will be a time again where we are together. Please pray for peace and for me and ask God that I am coming home one day. Greetings to all, may God protect you."[63] The letter reveals not only an indirect plea to a higher power for deliverance from earthly destruction and loneliness but also a complaint. It is a profession of victimhood directed at the conflict itself; a conflict that Walterskirchen was a direct participant of as a member of one of two *Flakkorps* prepared for the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941.[64] The letters in this piece reveal a naked and sincere call for help during one of the most destructive times in human history. But not all agree with this diagnosis.

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[62] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 116.

[63] PFC Kari Walterskirchen to Mrs. Elisabeth Walterskirchen Vienna 1, Singerstr 16, February 11, 1942, RLC.

[64] Georg Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939-45. Erster Band: Die Waffengattungen - Gesamtübersicht* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1977), 363.

In his work *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II*, Stephen Fritz dismisses religiosity in the Wehrmacht as something "often tinged with arrogant self-pity, betraying anger at what they saw as both their own and Germany's undeserved fate."[65] While many of these letters certainly reveal a swath of arrogance and self-pity, Fritz fails to grasp the entire story in his chapter titled, "Withstanding the Strain." While self-pity is a valid critique of many of the writings, the sensation of self-pity is not necessarily synonymous with fear, worry, or doubt over the future unfolding of events. Late in the war, Gustav Schandler of Panzer Pioneer Battalion 815 expressed an all too human reaction when faced with overwhelming odds:

> Our offensive in the West looks very promising, so far. Today, we were able to listen to the Wehrmacht report on the radio, and the main pressure from the Americans has been eliminated. All we want now is the end of the air raids … At last, we can look into the future with some confidence. Next year, Christmas will be celebrated in peace at home. If we all get home in one piece, we will participate in rebuilding our home and country. So, I wish for you … all the very best. God's blessing.[66]

What this letter demonstrates is a propensity to hope for an escape. "God's blessing" indicates, regardless of theological sophistication, a religious conscientiousness and hope for all things cherished to be "in one piece" upon the return journey home. While the arrogance rests in Schandler's failure to grasp the precariousness of the German strategic situation by the end of 1944, historians have the indispensable luxury of hindsight, something that Fritz does not readily acknowledge when making his claim about religion in the Wehrmacht. Additionally, while it cannot be gleaned as to whether beliefs in the

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[65] Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 101.

[66] Gustav Schandler, 815th Panzer Pioneer Battalion to Frau Else Schandler, Minden, Westfalen, Hufschmiede 3, December 26, 1944, RLC.

"Final Victory" flavor the writing, even if it did, clearly, this soldier's primary concern, a justifiable concern that goes well beyond mere "self-pity," was the immediate well-being of himself, his family, and his country despite the devastation around him. The pragmatism and naivete gleaned in the letter juxtapose the understandable anxieties found in the writing; anxieties that the home front felt as well in response to the gathering clouds in the east.

Late in the war, Martha Lötzsch, writing to her husband deployed in Poland, encouraged her husband to stay focused on his duty and to not rely on "city folks [because] they talk a lot, and that is all … these people are not generals." After referencing a soldier who was missing in action, she closed with "God bless you."[67] Throughout writing to her husband, Lötzsch continued to call upon God's blessings for her husband as he performed his duties.[68] The Csala family, writing to Pvt. Gottfried Csala, did nothing but express their hopes that God might save him, "I hope to God that the present winter will stay mild. We can surmise after all the news that Stalingrad is a hopeless matter now. [All] we can do from here is turn to God and pray … we pray for you … God bless you."[69] Other family writings reflect a similar vein of anxiety in response to the defeat at Stalingrad. Mrs. F. Hannoever wrote to her son, a *Feldjäger* named PFC Friedrich Hannoever, that she hoped to see "our soldiers get out of Stalingrad." She prayed for an end to the war, calling upon Hannoever to do the same.[70]

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[67] Martha Lötzsch, Venusberg Spinneret, Erzgebirge, to Erich Lötzsch, 2nd Company, 192nd Grenadier Battalion, July 7, 1944, RLC.

[68] Martha Lötzsch, Venusberg Spinneret, Erzgebirge, to Erich Lötzsch Sa, Aus b. Abteilung 4 Eilenburg, Mulde, September 6, 1943, RLC.

[69] Csala Family, Wien Mödling Fürstenstr 12 to Pvt. Gottfried Csala, January 12, 1943, RLC.

[70] Mrs. F. Hannoever, Nateln-Ülzen, to PFC Friedrich Hannoever, Field Police Battalion 510, January 29, RLC.

In another letter, Mrs. Hannoever wrote of the "God believing" nature of a letter she received from "Jochen."[71]

The 45th Infantry Division saw action in both European theaters of operation. By December 1941, the division was part of the push to take Moscow. But by the end of the year, the unit was in full retreat as Soviet counter offensives pushed them west. Because the unit was dependent on horse drawn artillery, much of the heavy equipment was abandoned as their means for transportation died off in frigid temperatures. Despite declarations of combat ineffectiveness made by the Chief of the General Staff to Berlin, the unit remained at the Eastern Front into 1942.[72] Sgt. Franz Brunner was an NCO in this division. Upon sending a letter to his comrade, Hans Danner, he was met with expressions of religious jubilation. In the letter, Danner thanked God that he received a letter from Brunner, and aside from speaking of his own personal sense of duty to the home front, suggested to Brunner that they both "pray to God" for Brunner's health and his return home.[73] Writing to Sgt. Emil Kuenzer, the Kuenzer family wrote, "We think of you all the time during these hard battles, and we put our trust in God and ask him to protect you. One day, the sun will shine for us again."[74] Kuenzer never received the letter. In the summer of 1944, he was captured by the Red Army and died as a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union in September 1944.[75] In *Virtuous Wehrmacht: Crafting the Myth*

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[71] Mrs. Hannoever, Nateln-Ülzen, to PFC Friedrich Hannoever, Field Police Battalion 510, January 7, 1944, RLC.

[72] Samuel W. Witcham, Jr., *Hitler's Legions: The German Army Order of Battle, World War II* (Briarcliff Manor: Stein & Day, 1985), 73.

[73] Hans Danner, Wartberg Kreis Ennz to Sgt. Franz Brunner, 45th Infantry Division, March 17, 1942, RLC.

[74] Kuezner Family, Heimbach-Nahe to Sgt. Emil Kuezner, 18th Artillery Regiment, June 25, 1944, RLC.

[75] Ibid.

of the German Soldier on the Eastern Front, 1941-1944, Harrisville astutely notes the "complex picture" that is revealed in the value systems of the Wehrmacht. Nazism infected the ranks and produced "great inroads in the army's culture."[76] But many soldiers' writings often revealed a cry in the wilderness:

> I am safe here, and nothing will happen to me. Above my bed there are hanging several religious pictures, which is normal here in Poland. Along the road outside … there is a big stone cross with the figure of Jesus hanging on it. I always stop there for a while and pray for you, and tears come to my eyes. Well, I must not get sentimental too much, life has to go on. I know that you cry everyday … I cry, too … Victory will be ours in the end … I will sit down and write a long letter to you. It will be written with tears … God will help us to overcome.[77]

While this quotation reveals a profound level of arrogance regarding the potential for a German victory at this strategic point in the Second World War, the letter also reveals a hopelessness desperately mended by naked faith in a higher power. The clutches of death also forced religious words out of Wehrmacht personnel. Upon learning of the death of his mother, PFC Caspar held on to his firm conviction that "God has saved her from more pain, [and] she will rest in his arms. May God help us to overcome this war and give our father the strength to carry on."[78] When a Soviet artillery barrage forced Harry Mielert into the deepest crevices of his fighting hole, he reflected upon the experience saying, "Here and now the Russian artillery fire pushed me into the deepest corner of my foxhole and teaches me the prayer of distress: Lord, have mercy upon us …! The last fatalism, the feeling of being completely in the hands of God and therefore

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[76] Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 53.

[77] Kurt to Holde, In the East, November 21, 1944, RLC.

[78] PFC Christian Caspar, Infantry Regiment 739, to Johannes Caspar, Frankenau- Kassel, Walwerkerstr 26, July 22, 1941, RLC.

surrendered to his mercy, I still don't have."[79] During an intense firefight with Soviet infantrymen, Leopold von Thadden-Trieglaff wrote, "I myself dashed forward in order to direct the firefight … I knew that must mean death for me, but God stood next to me."[80]

As the war in the east dragged on into 1942, many German soldiers, ever increasingly, began witnessing, or partaking in, assaults on prisoners and civilians for varying reasons. Soviet forces could present a stiff resistance to Wehrmacht personnel, even for the smallest of villages. Some captured Soviets set off grenades near their captors, Soviet snipers harassed the German rank and file regularly, and German soldiers sometimes found the mutilated corpses of their own men. This particularly brutal way of war in the Soviet countryside, villages, and cities wreaked psychological and emotional havoc on the men in field gray. On top of an already brutal invasion, the Wehrmacht sanctioned the brutalization and murder of Soviet prisoners of war, Soviet civilians, and the destruction of Soviet villages in their struggle for conquest. In the village squares, German soldiers erected gallows for those suspected of partisan activity. In response to guerilla tactics, the Wehrmacht left no quarter. Because of these rapidly deteriorating conditions, Hans Albring opined to a comrade:

> Just to be alive still seems like a gift from God, and I don't just want to give thanks with words if we survive this … and life-eating ogre Russia with all our limbs intact. The sight of bestially mutilated corpses which wear the same uniform as you cuts into your whole mental map of where you are. But also, the staring faces of the hanged. The pits full of the shot … You can never forget it, even if you want to. [It] gives us something instead of the harried creature, of the pitiful, impoverished man. Our path here is strewn with some kind of self-portraits … you find yourself in them. It is just like those who sit by the path of the Gospels,

[79] Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 62.
[80] Ibid., 40.

> plagued by this and that, until the Savior comes. I have not yet found a poem that encompasses what is happening here, much must remain forever unsaid.[81]

As the war continued, religious German soldiers began to doubt their abilities to cope with what they witnessed when faced with a prolonged, unpopular war as well as the horrors of sustained violence. Oftentimes, "Prayers for endurance replaced prayers for a quick victory."[82] The home front felt the toll war inevitably took in their hearts and minds as well. Upon witnessing an allied air raid over Berlin, R. Shurawitski wrote, "the old Saint Arminus church burned from the ground floor upwards … the spire stood like a torch in heaven, God will be angry, all his houses are being destroyed … we are going down before it gets any better."[83] For many soldiers and their loved ones, a realization began to take root. There would be no short victory. Religion and adherence to a vertical motivation beyond the conventional tenets of Nazism often served as the stabilizer for these inescapable realities. Upon learning of the death of his best friend, Alois Ditterstorfer described his "somber mood" to a comrade, "It was a shock for me, when I heard about it. For several hours I was saddened, then I said to myself, 'Alois, we shall see each other again, if it is God's will, maybe earlier than we think.' Now Ernst, youthful as he was, is in heaven … I am the one who suffers most … One thing I know, God is leading me, but I do not know where to."[84] With a friend killed in action at one of the most climactic battles of the Second World War, Ditterstofer found solace in religion.

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[81] Stargardt, *The German War*, 166-167. See also, Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 127.

[82] Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 111.

[83] R. Schurawitzki Plön Holstein, Gaffel weg 55, to Angela Enders, Gladbeck Westf. Horst Weseel Str, February 13, 1942, RLC.

[84] Alois Ditterstorfer, 68th Pioneer Battalion, to Mr. Norbert Volgsam, Hospital, Kirchhkoff - Krems, Ober Donau, September 9, 1943, RLC.

And, perhaps to interject some notion of purpose into his grief-stricken existence, looked to God to direct his footsteps. Harrisville notes that the Wehrmacht never arrived at a general consensus regarding death. A myriad of interpretations emerged within the ranks. Death rituals influenced by nationalism and Nazi ideology were present, but death rituals influenced by Christianity were also significant. These rituals "sometimes overlapped and sometimes conflicted."[85] This conflict of thought may be gleaned throughout the writings of German soldiers and their loved ones.

Lt. Harry Leihener, a junior grade army officer, saw action along the Eastern Front. He wrote to his loved ones that he took part in the Battle of Kursk in southwestern Russia, and while he was eager to see "retribution" in response to the allied air campaigns over Germany, he was thankful for his reassignment to a reserve unit in Königsberg. Many referenced in the letter experienced the traumatic effects of the allied bombing campaigns over the Reich. Soldiers who returned home on leave often appeared on the doorstep of bombed out communities and homes. Some soldiers never returned to the front either due to desertion or falling victim to the air raids themselves. Because of the air raids on Solingen, the Westphalian city closed its schools. Upon learning this, Leihener expressed his concern and offered up his worry to a higher power: "So they are closing the schools for the duration of the war, that will hamper the students later in life for sure, but there is no other way out. I think a lot about you and pray to God that he might protect you from all harm. It looks like we will have to try and stay calm in these hard days." Leihener continued, "I know that the present situation [gets] on one's nerves,

[85] Harrisville, *Virtuous Wehrmacht*, 185.

I know it from the Stalingrad time, if one loses everything, then life is not worth living. There will not be much news now, [we] just have to put our trust in God."[86]

In the closing months of the war, PFC Fritz Hansen of the 304th Motorcycle Machine Gun Company wrote to his wife of his strong sense of duty, suggesting to her that they should put their trust in "the Führer, Adolf Hitler. He will manage this time again. We have to … stand fast and think about what would happen if we lose this war."[87] Hansen continued his letter by reassuring himself, and his wife, that God would "protect" them from the overwhelming "storm coming from the east."[88] When faced with overwhelming odds, soldiers found ways to cope with a rapidly deteriorating strategic situation, and narratives of hope often formed a kaleidoscope of salvific fantasies ranging from personal resolve, God, Hitler, and even state of the art weaponry in correspondence.[89] Sgt. Horst Hähner's correspondence with his family also reveals this inspirational range. In one letter to his parents, Hähner's bias for Hitler was clear when he exuded a spirit of high praise for Hitler's speeches, describing them as, "as usual … excellent."[90] In another letter, written by his father a couple of months later, Hähner's father congratulated his son on earning the esteemed Iron Cross. After asking what deeds his son performed to earn the medal, he closed his writings with, "may God protect

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[86] Lt. Dr. Harry Leihener, Königsberg, 1st Pioneer Reserve Battalion A, to Dr. Erich Leihener, Solingen Weyer/Rhineland Baverstr 5, July 14, 1943, RLC.

[87] PFC Fritz Hansen, 304th Motorcycle Machine Gun Company, to Mrs. Anni Hansen, Steinack - Thuringia, am Bahnof 20, January 31, 1945, RLC.

[88] Ibid.

[89] PFC Hansen, among others, expressed hope in "new equipment and weapons" months before Germany's unconditional surrender to the allied forces.

[90] Sgt. Horst Hähner, 102nd Infantry Regiment, to Arno Hähner, Gunnersdorf, near Frankenburg in Saxony, November 10, 1941, RLC.

you."[91] Simple phrases such as this were common occurrences throughout the writings of the Wehrmacht and their families. And even if the sincerity behind the gesture was lacking, the very notion that the minds of these people fell back to such hopes and pleads as "God protect you" speaks volumes to both their cultural contexts and how they decided to channel their anxieties and hopes; these sensations were often channeled through religious descriptions.

Chervatin also called upon God in a similar fashion on several occasions. On one occasion, Chervatin wrote home about three soldiers who earned the Knight's Cross. The ceremonies, Chervatin noted, always took place at headquarters. Additionally, while these ceremonies took place, a grenadier regiment was able to spare some musicians in the ranks to play music "more often." But Chervatin never began this letter describing either one of these instances. Instead, the first words that came to his mind were about the relative peace that could only be found behind the front, but he described this ideal setting in religious terms. Indeed, he thanked God that "a heavenly peace has been here for a long time."[92] Upon hearing of an air raid back home, Chervatin had two things on his mind: the safety of his family and the safety of his musical instruments. "One can thank God," Chervatin wrote, "taking the cello into the cellar is probably useless. It is too damp there, and the instrument will break."[93] In another letter home, he wrote about his sixteenth wedding anniversary. "Whether I can congratulate you, my dear wife, I don't know, you have had to go through a lot of bad times with me in these 16 years, but you

[91] The Hähner Family, Gunnersdorf -Frankenburg, Saxony, to Sgt. Horst Hähner, 102nd Infantry Regiment, January 25, 1942, RLC.

[92] Chervatin, *Eastern Front*, 80-81.

[93] Ibid., 84.

have been the best, dearest, and most faithful wife to me during this time, as no other would have been … I pray to God that he will keep you and our boy safe, and I ask him to grant me to be able to repay you a little for everything in the years to come."[94] Chervatin also used protecting language when using religious language in his writings to home. At times, the allied air raids were so frequent that it convinced Chervatin that he was safer where he was in the east given the circumstances at home. "I have to write to you again and again that I am doing well," he told his wife. "It must be reassuring for you that I am reasonably safe here. You are not even as safe as I am here because an air raid can always happen, but we don't want to think about that. May God protect us from it."[95]

Chervatin, like many others within the Wehrmacht, often positioned their concerns, fears, and hopes within phraseology that called upon a higher power's protection, oftentimes it was God. Regarding the destruction of his home, Chervatin wrote, "In a letter of the 9th, you wrote that a direct hit had destroyed our house. I was so shocked in my knees that I was useless for the whole evening … A telegram has not arrived yet. I probably won't get a leave permit. That only happens when relatives die … May God protect me from that."[96] In another letter, Chervatin revealed not only his faith in God but also his faith in Hitler, a reminder that while many within the Wehrmacht were religious, indeed Christian, Hitler's disinformation and cult of personality remained absolute and true in the eyes of the vast majority of these men. Three months before the 329th Infantry Division's surrender in Courland, Chervatin wrote to his wife about his

[94] Ibid., 89.
[95] Ibid., 106.
[96] Ibid., 145.

unit's precarious situation in Latvia. “You ask if we can get out of here again? Yes, darling, that is in God’s and the Führer’s hands. If we are destined to hold the area until the last, we will probably ‘go down in history.’ But let us hope we will one day be transported out of here and return to Germany … Maybe everything will be alright.”[97]

Siegbert Stehmann, writing in August 1941 after most of his company was wiped out in combat, described his isolation to his reader(s). “To us lonely men one thing has been revealed in the hopelessness: that reality is nothing, miracle is, however, everything. This keeps us going. No man can help us, only God alone.”[98] Bartov describes this soldier’s writings as nothing more than “nihilist romanticism.” He goes on to astutely note that Hitler’s soldiers, “even among the most disillusioned,” remained ever ready to “sacrifice themselves for what they still believed would be a better future.”[99] Stehmann continued, “Germany, the eternal Job of world history, sits everywhere on the ruins of its still, beloved world, and waits passionately for the releasing word of God, who can heal the broken … The material worries weigh lightly when one contemplates our *volk* … A thousand-year Reich is going to the grave … God will help us … No one in the world is more blessed than our *volk*…”[100] While the statements made reveal, as Fritz suggests, arrogance and self-pity, it is not entirely apparent that it is, in Bartov’s words, nihilistic. Indeed, while the writings of Stehmann reveal a belief in the “reality of nothing” or Germany as the “Job” of world history, nihilism, by definition, implies the belief in the inherent nothingness of life, and, by extension, a life devoid of any hope outside of the

[97] Ibid., 147.
[98] Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 173.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., 173-174.

perplexities of naked existence. Stehmann's writings, while rife with victimhood and extreme trauma after losing almost an entire company of men in the field, retains subtle doses of optimism—optimism, more specifically, in the notion that God would help him and his country.

Writing in March 1943, Chervatin told his wife of his division's retreat from their position northeast of Demyansk. "Everyone here says, thank God we have our backs freed. The area that was abandoned was also worthless to us. All swamp, no cultivated land at all." He then shifted topics to the allied air raids over Germany. He was confident that the Royal Air Force would "stop one day," and he was frustrated, asking how it was possible that so many allied bombers could penetrate the skies over the Reich so easily in "broad daylight?"[101] He wondered if his home in Ahlen, Westphalia had been hit by the raids. "It will soon be worse for you than it is here. Dear wife, you don't have to worry so much about me. God will protect me. And you are right. After this, there will come a time when we can belong to ourselves again and when we can live for ourselves. This hope keeps us all going."[102] When Sterkarde was hit by allied air raids, Chervatin also used religious language to express his grief over the attack. "One can only wish that the revenge for the English may come soon, and it will certainly come. It is terrible for all who have to go through this. Would God that you would be spared from such things." Chervatin's wife took shelter in their cellar so many times, he started to worry about her health, but all Chervatin felt that he could do was place his trust in the divine with the

[101] Chervatin, *Eastern Front*, 74.
[102] Ibid.

hopes that his wife's health would not deteriorate given the war time circumstances.[103] But even in moments of grief and a desire for vengeance, Chervatin still expressed his eagerness regarding whether or not he "could be with [his wife] for Easter and Hansi's communion."[104] Chervatin's letters bear out his concern for the Christian sacrament of communion. Indeed, taking leave just to see his son's communion was, evidently, a matter of great importance to him. Just four months prior to his letter on his son's Easter communion, he wrote a similar letter about the very issue of his son's participation in this sacrament. Chervatin "strongly expect[ed] to come on leave in April for Hansi's communion."[105]

Chervatin also took an invested interest in not just his son's act of participating in communion, but also the education he received regarding this religious sacrament. "As you write, the children were taken hard in communion class. Thank God they all got over it well, and hopefully, they will get it a little easier now. How did the communion Sunday go? Did all the visitors who had been announced come? For you, such and other holidays are the worst, my dear wife."[106] Chervatin also wrote home regarding the Christmas Day communion that was offered in his unit in 1942. "Due to the beautiful home packages and the Wehrmacht allocations, we had plenty of everything," he wrote. "This morning at 7 o'clock, we attended the Wehrmacht Mass with communal communion. Unfortunately, I could not go because I was at the celebration yesterday afternoon and had telephone duty this morning. It's my turn for New Year's." In the same letter, he also took a moment to

[103] Ibid., 84.
[104] Ibid., 77.
[105] Ibid., 55.
[106] Ibid., 81.

reflect on his reasons for serving. He longed for home as he told his wife that "longing for you is doubly great on such days. But then again, we must remember that we are standing here to prevent Christmas from being taken away from us and our homeland."[107] Unfortunately for Chervatin, despite writing incessantly about his young son's first communion, he failed to make an appearance at the event. He wrote home expressing his regret on several occasions. He could not secure furlough for the event, but he wrote a letter addressed to his son and only his son. Chervatin reminded his son that, "in the next few days," he would take his "First Holy Communion." Chervatin continued, "I would have loved to be with you on that day, but unfortunately, that is impossible. There are still so many fathers here where the children make the communion, and if they were all to go on leave, then the Russians would become aware of that and would then break through to Germany, and that must not happen. You understand that, don't you, my boy?"[108]

In January 1942, a soldier who was transferred to a combat unit along the Eastern Front wrote to his sister about his experiences along the front. He also made it clear to his sister that he had no desire to see his dark tales repeated to his pregnant wife for fear of negatively affecting her health. "There is a reason why I am writing this letter to you, in the eventuality that God does not pass me by with the bitter chalice of death, for then, as soon as you receive the news, you can relay this letter as my farewell greeting above all to Lotte, but also to all the others…"[109] He encouraged his sister to "Believe in Jesus Christ, there is no one else who can remove the sting of dying. God knows how very

[107] Ibid., 59
[108] Ibid., 58 76-78.
[109] Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 528.

close I am to Lotte and Klaus." The writer missed his family terribly, but he tried to comfort his family by telling them that if he failed to ever see any of them again, they would "see each other when Jesus Christ summons us to the last judgment." He warned his family not to simply dismiss his message. He meant what he said. He hoped that his family would never "betray" their Lord and live in accordance with how the "Lord of life and death" revealed himself in the scriptures. "If this is not the case," he wrote, "then we will never see each other again, then death will really be a hideous visage, and then one's entire life will have been a pointless egotistical struggle."[110] Yet again, in both instances, there is an exchange of some kind of juxtaposition. Correspondence between soldiers and the home front reveals a conflict of ideals and vertical motivation not just on the political front but on matters of race as well.

No serious academic work would ever question the reality of the race war the Wehrmacht willingly participated in along the Eastern Front. Wehrmacht correspondence is often littered with racial quips against those that the Nazis considered racially inferior. A kaleidoscope of feeling may be gleaned from this angle, too. In the summer of 1940, Fritz-Dietlof von der Schulenberg volunteered for the Wehrmacht. Serving in the 9th Infantry Regiment, he wrote that he was "filled by God and adolescent awe in the midst of the most perfect war machine seen for centuries, or even thousands of years."[111] While serving as a junior grade army officer along the Eastern Front, he "took exception" to the mass, and spontaneous, shootings of Soviet prisoners "because it would lead to the disinhibition of the common soldier and the unleashing of 'drives' which would be hard

[110] Ibid., 529.
[111] Ibid., 710-711.

to rein in." To Schulenberg, while the Bolsheviks deserved "no pardon," he thought it best if the Soviets were either killed in action or, because they ostensibly had no "drives to set free," the officers assume jurisdiction over when and when not to execute captured Soviets.[112]

Writing to a member of a *Feldjäger* unit stationed in Serbia, Mrs. A. Eckert reminded Police Inspector Theo Eckert to continue developing his prayer life. In the next sentence, she asked him whether the gypsies in Serbia behaved themselves.[113] PFC H. Morgenstern described himself as "brown like a Negro" when he opined on his summers spent in the Soviet Union. And this racist generalization was also paired with a brief revelation that all things were in God's hands, "we are back in Russia again … that is three months in this dirty forlorn Russia … If you have not been here, you hardly believe what is known about the country. I cannot write about it. It would fill a thick book. One day I will tell you about it when I am home. But when that will be, only God knows."[114] In both letters, racialized quips that harbored the full and unequivocal support of Nazi thinkers shared the same space with coping mechanisms centered around religion.[115]

While church attendance was in decline in western Europe, ninety-five percent of Germans identified as either Catholic or Protestant.[116] Indeed, some people on both the home front and the battlefronts described their experiences with the church,

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[112] Ibid., 711.

[113] Mrs. A. Eckert, Quierschied/Saar, Talstr 12, to Police Inspector Theo Eckert, Field Post Office 610, September 10, 1942, RLC.

[114] PFC H. Morgenstern, 120th Luftwaffe Communication Regiment, to Mr. Alfred Kern, Grimma, Saxony, Markt 77, August 2, 1942, RLC.

[115] Klaudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 106, 331.

[116] Harrisville, "Unholy Crusaders," 627-628.

demonstrating an importance to their respective qualities of life. Sgt. Hans Grasberger received a letter from his wife that described both her own sense of faith and the contributions that the church had towards combating the infrastructural and social destruction that the allied bombing campaigns inflicted upon the German home front:

> Heartfelt Sunday greetings from your wife … I hope you feel better now. I am praying for you. Today is *Somagesima* day and … Sunday March 7, is *Quinquagesima* and then … Lent … begins. On March 14 is the first Lenten Sunday and so it goes on. So now I am going to church my dear and write later. I have to meet up with Sister Adelgunde. Yesterday, a letter came from Valentine, they waited to be moved, probably to the Russian Front again. One day, all of this must change, but my own belief is, it will become worse. The war worries will get bigger, and the enemy bombers will make life a misery. Yesterday I packed all the things and linen from upstairs, everyone is packing suitcases, looking around, I can imagine that within an hour in a raid, one ends up poorer than a beggar, and our husbands and sons are in enemy country. Right now, I am in a somber mood and have to stop thinking about it. I could cry just thinking of you. Leni went to Nuremberg and looked around, that is what you can call a total war, but let us put our trust in God who will steer us through all bad times. Or shall we say it is God's will? I beg you to keep praying for us, too … Sister Adelgunde … keeps praying for all of us. She has a lot of work, too, with the orphanage … ten of their children will have their first Communion this year, if all stays well, we [will] send them to the parents over Easter … A sweet Sunday kiss, too, and to a speedy reunion.[117]

PFC Friedrich Vohs of the 78th Infantry Regiment offered his parents a "Sunday greeting" telling them that, "the time has come for the Major to arrive, and I am going to church with him." As Vohs's writing reveals, the *es spirit de corps* between the officers and men was strong. On one occasion, the division commander sat with Vohs and discussed current events, and the entire regiment participated in an evening party with its

[117] Barbara Grasberger, Neunkirchen near Erlangen, to Sgt. Hans Grasberger, 545th Panzer *Jäger* Regiment, February 25, 1943, RLC.

officers that same evening.[118] Mrs. Weber, a Hanoverian woman, wrote to her "beloved boy" about her walk to church and the religious ceremonies that followed. At church, she, among others, celebrated the confirmation of a new admittance into the church collective. Traditionally, a confirmation in the Christian church refers to the baptism of a recent convert to Christianity, but they are especially common in the baptizing of infant children. "Dr. Beil was not there," Mrs. Weber wrote, "a telegram had called him home on short notice. His mother had died suddenly. Dr. Rösch, therefore, did the [confirmation] ceremony, and he did the best that he could do." That evening, Mrs. Weber hosted a gathering at her home, but by nine that evening, "everyone [left] because an alert … sounded."[119] Mrs. M. Lerche, writing to Staff Sergeant Otto Lerche from Dresden, wrote of her experiences with church. During the New Year's festivities, she, among others, went to church in the evening and described the pastor's sermon as a "warm sermon."[120] Surrounded by the relentless rumble of allied aircraft, the aerial engagements overhead, and the uncertainty that perpetually plagued everyday life in many German cities, the community-based lifestyle that the church offered still played a key role in the lives of many Germans. Indeed, emotions were often tied with both the church and faith.

A year prior, and only a Sgt. at the time, Otto Lerche received welcomed news. He was informed after his "checkup" that he was to be sent, for the time being, back

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[118] PFC Friedrich Vohs, 78th Infantry Regiment, to Heinrich Vohs, Neuenkirchen 43 near Melle - Osnabrück, November 23, 1941, RLC.

[119] Mrs. Weber, Kriegstr 20, Hannover, to Eduard Weber, Reich Labor Service 421, February 21, 1944, RLC.

[120] Mrs. M. Lerche, Dresden A 19, Comeniusstr 119, to SSgt. Otto Lerche, Wehrmacht Command Abteilung Frankfurt Oder Wilhelmsplatz 12, January 2, 1944, RLC.

home to Germany. Sgt. Lerche was jubilant upon receiving the news. He wrote to his wife that he "thanked our Lord for it."[121] But the bliss did not last long. Four months later in December 1943, the newly promoted SSgt. Lerche found himself in lands distant from Germany once more. Mrs. Lerche wrote to her husband around the Christmas holiday expressing her disappointment that she would not be able to see him during that time. "Faith is against us now … The uncertainty is getting me down, and there is nothing I can do," she wrote. In her loneliness and in her anxiety, she told her husband, "may God give you good health and a long life."[122] In times of fear, and in times of excitement, utterances towards God were a common form of expression, even in times of disappointment.

Walter's mood was somber. The letters reveal very little about Walter other than the fact that he was a service member in the Wehrmacht. Given context clues from other letters, however, it is likely that this was Walter Rebel. He wrote to a significant friend, Kurt, that he was no longer interested in exchanging correspondence with him. Kurt's style of writing struck Walter as insincere. The "personal touch" that Walter valued in writing simply lacked a presence in Kurt's writings to him. And without that, "a letter is not worth more than a piece of paper." Because of this seemingly disingenuous gesture by Kurt, Walter ceased all correspondence with his friend: "We had many nice hours together, and I am thankful, and I still think of them, and I wish you for the future all the very best. Most of all, that you return home when this terrible war is over, may God give you what you are looking [for] and hope for." That same day, Walter wrote to another

[121] Sgt. Otto Lerche to Mrs. Kaethe Lerche, Dresden A 19, Comeniusstr 119, July 2, 1943, RLC.

[122] Mrs. M. Lerche to SSgt. Otto Lerche, Wehrmacht Command LS, Frankfurt Oder Wilhelmsplatz 12, December 28, 1943, RLC.

friend, Anton. “Faith” had not been good to Anton, Walter explained, particularly during combat. Anton had a fiancée waiting for him back home. With an understanding of this burden, Walter expressed his sympathy for Anton, hoping that he might find a “true comrade” on the front. “Death is never that far off,” Walter explained, “everyone is his own close comrade, too, on the front. I am glad to hear that your unit has found a place worth [defending] now, with God’s will, you [will] get through the winter.” Walter also informed Anton on his state of mind as a soldier. He wrote in broad terms regarding circumstances that required “all [his] strength to cope.”[123]

Walter, like Anton, missed his loved ones back home, too, and Walter knew that Anton could, in turn, sympathize with his own feelings about homesickness: “You know what that means. It got to the stage where I [had to] fight with myself inside, and a victory inside me is more to me than a victory on the whole. Only a few can understand that, and I know you can.” Walter also wrote of his excitement regarding his opportunity to “hear holy mass every Sunday.” He closed his letter by offering Anton prayers.[124] Religion’s place within the Wehrmacht, and the home front that supported the organization, is telling. So, too, is the regime’s response.

The military in Germany, historically, had always maintained intimate ties with religion. Patriotism and religion, therefore, often overlapped in much of the nation’s military history. By the time the Nazis assumed jurisdiction over the military before and during the Second World War, the Nazis faced a significant problem, a problem that, in truth, was never fully resolved. Religion in the Wehrmacht, specifically Christianity,

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[123] Walter to Kurt, July 24, 1942, RLC. See also, Walter to Anton, July 24, 1942, RLC. One of Walter’s complaints was the failure of leadership amongst the officers who lead his combat unit.

[124] Walter to Anton, July 24, 1942, RLC.

"caused more dissent among soldiers within the military than perhaps any other belief system." And Christianity's place in the military ultimately became a point of contention and debate amongst the Nazi elite.[125]

The subconscious ideological compromise was not unknown to the National Socialists in power. The men that were conscripted and recruited from all different walks of life in Germany brought the influences of their families and cultural backgrounds with them into their lives as military men and students under a National Socialist military educational system. And despite efforts to re-educate Nazi Germany's warriors, Sait notes that "many soldiers and officers had, to varying degrees, maintained their Christian beliefs."[126] As Marshal Konev's forces closed in on the southern portion of Berlin in April 1945, Corporal Helmut Fromm took pause to write of his and his comrades' situation. The Soviets crossed the Neisse and attacked Cpl. Fromm's position that same morning. "We had to pull back. I was left with a machine gun and two men. I am the only one who knows how to use a *panzerfaust*, most of the others have only done office work … Ivan's guns are firing." Many of Fromm's comrades were already wounded at that point. One was carried away to relative safety screaming after being wounded. "To our left a flak 88 is under fire. I'm trying to dig as deeply as I can." Above him, Soviet aircraft buzzed ominously overhead in search of promising ground targets. "If I survive, I shall give thanks to God," Fromm wrote.[127]

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[125] Sait, *The Indoctrination of the Wehrmacht*, 118.
[126] Ibid., 119.
[127] Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers*, 512.

Chervatin, writing in 1942, begged his wife not to get "so worked up" over the possibility of his death. "It won't get any better," he told his wife. "We are all in God's hands; whoever will be hit will be hit."[128] In another instance, Chervatin wrote home to his son about a house cat, reassuring his son that they would order a "little sister or a little brother soon. Pray to God that he will send us one soon."[129] While certainly one of the more trivial instances in which someone beckoned for God's aid, it does speak volumes to how deeply rooted spirituality and monotheism were in some families of the Wehrmacht. When writing about his experiences with the harsh weather climates in the Soviet Union, he primarily wrote about snow in one instance. While Chervatin crashed his vehicle on multiple occasions because of the snow's propensity to pile up and obscure ditches, the winter season at that point in time was "relatively mild and bearable. God grant that it will continue like this for a long time," he wrote.[130]

Like so many other German soldiers enduring both the finer and blunter realities of war, Chervatin wanted to go home. His anxiousness to return home was often paired with religious language, too. In 1942, he wrote to his wife that it had been two months since he last saw her. After his next tour of duty, he hoped that his next request for a furlough would be granted, "God willing." In this same letter, Chervatin's commanding officer came to him and asked if he was interested in the "army recreation home." It was expected to be a four weeklong hiatus from the front at Lake Ilmen in Russia. The officer was ordered to send at least one of his troops there for rest and recuperation. While

[128] Chervatin, *Eastern Front*, 14.
[129] Ibid., 51.
[130] Ibid., 53.

Chervatin agreed to go, what he really wanted was to go home to his family. "I said nothing more. October on leave, January in a recreation home, April, God willing, on leave again; you can't really complain…"[131] In early 1943, Chervatin wrote of a much heavier topic than just the weather, cats, or a lake retreat—his sense of duty:

> I became a soldier and had to become a soldier, you must understand that correctly, that was my duty. I have already explained my reasons earlier and, as you know, I have taken something very difficult upon myself. But I think I would have been ashamed all my life and would never have been happy again if I had shirked my duty. Once the whole thing passes here, and when we experience it, let us rejoice in our lives, and then I will be grateful to God for every day that I am allowed to live in peace with you, my dear ones.[132]

In the same letter, now written to his son rather than his wife, he expressed great joy that his son received the package he sent to him. And he was grateful to hear that both he and his wife were in good health. He closed the letter by asking whether the "Christ Child" had brought him anything over the recent Christmas holiday.[133] But despite fantasies of home that the crisis of war so often brings, crises also have the potential to spark a rallying cry and offer servants of a cause ample amounts of ideological validation.

When the bomb plot against Hitler's life failed in July 1944, German soldiers were horrified at the prospect of terrorist cells within the senior officer corps of the Wehrmacht. Afterall, these officers were leaders among leaders, men expected to set an impeccable example of martial integrity before all in their unflinching devotion to National Socialist Germany in both the conference room and the field. But when the dust

[131] Ibid., 60.
[132] Ibid., 65.
[133] Ibid., 66.

settled, they were declared phony and traitorous. The gallows, some thought, were a fitting end to their distinguished careers. But the calls for retribution, and the vague references to "providence" granting Hitler life were not all that some reflected on after the attack. Some soldiers latched this language to more specific religious tokens pertaining to thankfulness. "I and all members of the company were struck dumb by the announcement of this revolting infamy. Praise to God that providence has preserved our Führer for the salvation of Europe, and it is now our holiest duty to bind ourselves to him even more strongly, so as to make good again what the few criminals … have committed without any consideration for the people as a whole."[134]

As the situation along the Eastern Front began to deteriorate and the lifespan of the Reich transitioned from a matter of years to a matter of months, soldiers still clung to the divine to cope with the realities of a Fatherland in subjugation to a foreign adversary. By November 1944, Chervatin's *Hammer* Division was in Courland doing what it could to mount a defense. At this stage, Chervatin's writings reflected an anxiousness quite akin to what so many other soldiers felt when the strategic or tactical scenarios proved grim. Chervatin convinced himself that the only way he had survived for so long was due to "God's help." And, espousing an all too familiar theme, he hoped that God would "continue to protect [his wife]" back home.[135] In a letter written just a month later, Chervatin recounted an instance in which swarms of Soviet aircraft assaulted his unit's position in October of that same year. "I couldn't get into the foxhole, so I threw myself flat on the ground. I thought the world was coming to an end … Then I already knew that

[134] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 172.
[135] Chervatin, *Eastern Front*, 146.

to the left of me, it was at most 1.5 meters, a bomb had hit, and 3 to 4 meters behind me, another 5 to 6 hits." Chervatin's friends marveled at the living miracle; Chervatin survived the air assault unscathed. "One stands in God's hand," he wrote. "A little more to the right or to the left, and it would be over."[136] By January 1945, Chervatin struggled to contain his fears for his country.

Chervatin knew that if a strategic miracle failed to save Germany, then it would be the beginning of the end. If nothing could turn the tide of the war, Chervatin was convinced that the Soviets would "overrun Germany, and we will lose the war. God may grant that this will not become a reality." And while he wrote this, even at this stage in the war, a glimmer of confidence still gasped for life in his writing. If the situation was as "hopeless" as it seemed, he thought, then surely his division would have been pulled back into Germany in preparation for the final defense of the Reich. In a fit of relentless uncertainty, however, he still feared the unthinkable. If the Soviet offensives into the west could not be repulsed, if the Red Army entered the Third Reich, Chervatin understood what that meant—"Germany is lost." What was not destroyed, Chervatin thought, would be trudged off to Siberia. "But God will not allow that and will help us out of this great danger." And even now, when the end was inevitable, Chervatin still believed that a grand decision was to be made, "whether we win the war or are completely done for."[137] Chervatin was, at this stage, stuck between blind ideology, blind religiosity, and utter despair.

[136] Ibid., 151.
[137] Ibid., 156.

In February 1945, another soldier reflected on the state of Germany and the ongoing war with the allied powers. Like many scholars and primary letters reveal regarding reactionary responses to the realities of war, Rolf Hoffmann's despair evolved into fatalism. "You must know to come to terms with your lot, even if it is tragic," he wrote. Hoffmann believed in the inevitability of time; all things come to an end. And in Hoffmann's estimation, that included war. But once the dust settled over his and his country's fate, Hoffmann reaffirmed, in his own writing, his commitment to his country. "As long as I breathe, I'm not given up for lost. So it is with our beloved Fatherland. We have held out for six long years against a world of enemies; we knew only battle and work and battle again. Do we deserve in the end to be smashed and destroyed?"[138] His reaffirmations of devotion and existential question were also reinforced by a vertical motivation placed in the divine. He wanted to believe that God had not nor would ever abandon Germany in war. In the end, God might "give back to it at the end of this mighty struggle its right to life on this earth. That means waiting until a better future is granted us."[139] Walter Wenzl, another soldier reflecting on the closing stages of the Second World War in Europe, described his rather unusual beliefs. He wrote of righteous prosecution against the guilty and a deserved fate. But the recipient of Wenzl's harsh language was not the western allied powers, or even the Soviets— it was Germany. "What has befallen us and is still descending upon us is deserved in its entirety. And only when we have served our guilt and when peace for us is again more than quiet and

[138] Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 102.
[139] Ibid.

idleness, only then will this sacrifice come to an end … Then what will also come will come from Him and He will find us ready."[140]

The language and imagery are striking. While Wenzl, only a couple of months prior to Germany's unconditional surrender, wrote out of a belief in Germany's war guilt, sacrificial language may also be gleaned from his writing. Whether Wenzl implied a sacrifice made from nobility or a sacrifice born of tragedy, national embarrassment, or crimes committed, remains nebulous. Additionally, language surrounding worthiness is found in the writing. Wenzl believed that the war, its tragedies, its crimes, and the sacrifices, whether they be noble or inherently tragic, were conditioning the German nation for "His" standard. Given the context, "He" and "Him" refer to the divine; Wenzl believed that this war was, above anything else, a test of national faith in God.

Guy Sajer, a Franco-German who served with the *Großdeutschland Division* along the Eastern Front, wrote of religious experiences and conversations throughout his memoir, *The Forgotten Soldier*. But Sajer was not a religious man. And his memoir reveals a man who held a muddled relationship with Christianity as a principle or way of life. Nevertheless, his account of his experiences revealed exposures, often traumatic ones, to religion and a plea to the divine. In one instance, near the Belgorod-Kharkov front in 1942, Sajer recalled in his book a comrade who was shot in the lower jaw after a Soviet air attack on their position was stunted by the Luftwaffe. In a fit of tearful panic, Sajer applied what medical attention he could to the wound his comrade had received that shattered the lower jawbone in the engagement. Making use of a nearby Soviet truck,

[140] Ibid.

Sajer moved his wounded friend out of the combat zone to find security and medical assistance. "Choking back my tears, I prayed, without reason or thought, saying anything that came into my head. 'Save him. Save Ernst, God. He believed in you. Save him. Show yourself.' But God did not answer my appeals … The man struggled with death, and the adolescent struggled with despair, which is close to death. And God, who watches everything, did nothing." Sajer begged the heavens to let his friend live through that day, but Ernst did not survive.[141]

A year later in the summer of 1943 near Belgorod, Sajer and his unit successfully assaulted and captured a Soviet position. Not long after, the Germans dug into the Russian soil in preparation for the Soviet counterattack. Luftwaffe fighter-bombers did what they could to neutralize Soviet artillery positions along the Soviet line, but the pilots' efforts proved inadequate. As the aircraft left the combat area to refit and refuel, Soviet artillery promptly continued its sustained strikes on the German position. When Soviet artillery finally fell silent, Sajer recalled his thoughts: "Nothing remains for those who have survived such an experience but a sense of uncontrollable imbalance, and a sharp, sordid anguish which reaches across the years unblunted and undiminished … Abandoned by a God in whom many of us believed, we lay prostrate in our demi-tomb."[142] In moments of sheer terror, a Wehrmacht trooper, openly skeptical of religion,

[141] Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier: War on the Russian Front, a True Story*, translated by Harper & Row Publishers Inc. (London: Orion Books Ltd., 1999), 118, 121-122.

[142] Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier*, 209, 239.

within a division known for its war crimes across the war fronts, could not help but wonder if the divine would ever save his life from the metal jaws of artillery shells.[143]

By the autumn of 1943, Sajer's unit was in full retreat. Sajer and his comrades arrived at the Dnieper River to the north of Crimea where they dug in along the western bank. As days turned into nights, they waited for a Soviet attack. And as the first snows of winter began to settle on the ground, Sajer recalled the inner "despair" he felt. "We were exhausted, and had no hope of future respite. Where could we find it? How far would we have to withdraw?" Sajer recalled, in vivid detail, the thoughts he had as the temperatures plummeted and as they waited for the enemy. He recalled the difficulties in writing about his experiences and further reflected on what little vertical motivation he could muster in his relationship to the divine, "I know that one can call on all the saints in heaven for help without believing in any God: and it is this that I must describe, even if it means plunging back into a nightmare for nights at a time."[144] Fear of the unknown, fear of death, forced soldiers into a psychological corner. Whether it was out of a gesture of sincerity or scramble born out of desperation, soldiers filled the unknown with coping mechanisms. Indeed, the vast, endless tundra of the Soviet Union alone convinced Sajer that it was "almost necessary to believe in God."[145]

In the closing months of the war, Sajer wrote a letter home. The letter was rife not with pleas to the divine, but with indifference towards the divine. In his writings to someone named Paula, he no longer expected "anything more from the ordinary world,

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[143] For more on the debates surrounding the *Großdeutschland* Division's part in wartime atrocities, see Raffael Scheck's *Hitler's African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[144] Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier*, 271-272.

[145] Ibid., 369.

from which we seem entirely cut off. I read your lines as our comrade Smellens, who is lucky enough to believe in God, recites his prayers. Nothing can help us anymore, Paula." Sajer compared a prayer life to vodka, suggesting that, like vodka, all a prayer can do is "blunt the cold for a moment."[146] Sajer's personal account reveals two immediate things: first, Wehrmacht personnel did not necessarily have to be "religious" or "Christian" to call upon, reflect upon, or wrestle with the divine as a means towards vertical motivation to cope with the realities of warfare in the field on behalf of, ultimately, Nazi foreign policy. Second, even if the war drained what little religiosity any of these men possessed, it seems apparent that at least some of them still felt compelled to wrestle with doubts, questions, and frustrations regarding some divine other that had, for whatever reason, an immovable indifference to their sufferings in combat.

Hans Caspar von Wiedebach-Nostitz served along the Eastern Front with a reconnaissance unit of the 20th Panzer Division. At the outset of the invasion of the Soviet Union, he was eager. He often wrote of duty and comradeship, and he marveled at the early encirclements of Soviet forces in the field. But his writings were not without vulnerability and the cold sting of reality. Soviet counterattacks and the faces of dead comrades claimed pages of his diary, too. During one mission in particular, Caspar barely escaped a Soviet ambush on his reconnaissance patrol. "I let the clutch go and the vehicle brakes. To the front there's the sound of a detonation on a vehicle that sounds much louder than the sound of our 2.5cm gun. I detect a strong blast of air and the inside of the vehicle is filled with gunpowder smoke. To begin with, I have no idea what's happening:

[146] Ibid., 483.

then it is clear that our vehicle has been hit."[147] At that instant, he and his recon team inside the vehicle were thrown about like rag dolls. Caspar heard one of his comrades yell "reverse!" But their vehicle failed to perform accordingly due to the damage it just received. To cheat death, the survivors abandoned the vehicle and jumped into a nearby trench and returned to headquarters to make their report on their contact with the enemy.[148] Caspar, among others, returned to the ambush point to assess the damage to man and machine:

> At the front of the vehicle, a plate has been smashed by the impact of a heavy mortar shell, and the fire hatch and gun have been ripped off. Nothing can be done with the gun. Now we clear all the things out of the vehicle, wrap them in tent sheets and head off in a truck to battalion headquarters, I have also been able to salvage my honey. We are finished for today. Key and I sort out the things belonging to Kublitz and hand them over … The plate at the front is unscrewed, and Kublitz is removed. Then we bury him. In the evening, *Oberleutnant* Kischnik holds a memorial service with the whole company on the edge of the grave. We say good-bye to our comrade. It is only in the evening when I am falling asleep among my things outside that I am able to reflect on the day's experience for the first time. I will never forget it for the rest of my life. With gratitude, I perceive the miraculous hand of God that protected me and which will further watch over me.[149]

During times of great duress, soldiers, and their loved ones, looked for solutions that could salvage what was left of their lives. That solution, among many other motivations, manifested itself as a kind of religious escape from the traumas, turmoil, and uncertainties that plagued a national community tasked with fighting, and enduring, a futile conflict under the auspices of a lost, and false, cause. The majority of Wehrmacht

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[147] Frank Ellis, *Barbarossa 1941: Reframing Hitler's Invasion of Stalin's Soviet Empire* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2015), 304, 330.

[148] Ellis, *Barbarossa 1941*, 330.

[149] Ibid., 330-331.

personnel saw action along the Eastern Front during the Second World War. And within this war of ideological annihilation and imperialism, soldiers, and their families, sought to make sense of what they heard, felt, and saw. And those intellectual and emotional opines did not always fit the mold that Nazism envisioned for its men in field gray. The following chapter shifts the primary focus to the Western Front and Wehrmacht writings on religion in that sector of action.

CHAPTER III- IT WILL NOT BE ANOTHER 1917 FOR THEM

On May 10, 1940, Hitler addressed the Wehrmacht in preparation for the invasion of the French Third Republic. "Soldiers of the Western Front! The hour of the most decisive battle for the future of the German nation has come … the hour has come for you. The battle which is beginning today will decide the fate of the German nation for the next thousand years. Do your duty."[150] With this declaration, the stage was set for Germany's annexation of most of western Europe and Nazi hegemony in that region of the continent. In December 1941, Hitler declared war on the United States. Under conditions as both an occupying force within a relatively quiet sector of conflict and conditions that bore witness to the largest amphibious invasion in human history, Wehrmacht personnel, much like their comrades in the east, reflected on intimacies most pertinent to their thoughts. Oftentimes, religion was the subject of choice.

In 1940, Pvt. Josef Walther and his comrades gathered at the mess hall on Christmas Eve. Candles, with their gentle rays of light, warmed the holiday space as wreaths were hung and soldiers jovially played violins and the piano. Sauerkraut, sausage, potatoes, and "free beer" were served to the men as the snowfall danced around the building outside in the cold air. Carols were sung, and spirits were high as the men talked of home and recalled family. In between the revelries, a pastor rose before the crowd of German soldiers and spoke "a few good words" to the bunch. He offered the men a sermon on the Christmas story. Regarding the sermon, Walther believed that "it was something I had never experienced before." The Christmas tree, laced with presents,

[150] Alistair Horne, *To Lose A Battle: France 1940* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 280.

was decorated with the traditional star and angels. To Walther, it was one of the more memorable Christmases of his life, even when the commanding officer ruined the mood of the environment with his inebriated words when it was time for the holiday speech.[151] In more ways than one, religion offered meaning to the lives of many soldiers and their families, and it was not improbable for secular authorities to dampen that reality.

A survivor of the Falaise Pocket in France, Franz Flügermann expressed concern over a comrade who was taken prisoner by Soviet forces in Romania. Flügermann knew that Arnold Groß, a father to a newborn son, and his unit were surrounded by Soviet forces. "He went into a POW camp," Flügermann wrote to Arnold's wife. "[I] was sent to the 198th in the west. Our battle area was Mulhouse - Belfort. Dear Mrs. Groß, I believe that Arnold will return one day. I did not know that Arnold was [a] father [to] a baby [boy]. May this boy be a comfort to you, and may God bring Arnold back in good health."[152] Flügermann "got caught in the pocket" and took shrapnel to the leg in an engagement with allied forces. It was not his "will … to stay wounded on the field and create sadness for my mother," he told Mrs. Groß. He wished Arnold's wife a Happy New Year, instructed her to "be brave," during those times of worry, and wished her a Merry Christmas, although he questioned whether wishing someone a Merry Christmas was "permitted" in his letter.[153] Whether this brief question in the letter was sincere hesitancy or a sarcastic jab at his own government's policies on censorship and free speech remains unclear.

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[151] Pvt. Josef Walther, 257th Vet Company, to parents, December 25, 1940, RLC.
[152] Franz Flügermann to Mrs. Groß, Fulda, December 12, RLC.
[153] Ibid.

Ludwig Knüppel of the 772nd Rifle Battalion, like so many others on both European fronts of the war, struggled to come to terms with his homesickness. He desperately missed his wife, often describing it as "torture" to be away from her for such an extended period of time. He certainly wished for reciprocation, and he threw his emotional turmoil upon God, desiring that God reunite them the following year. For Knüppel, life had lost its triviality as the realities of war tore him away from those he held most dear.[154] Working on the German island of Heligoland, SSgt. Ludwig Wolters received a letter from his wife who wrote about the importance of community over the Whitsun holiday as well as her hope that God might protect him as he served with the 122nd Naval Artillery Regiment on the island.[155] Others, however, were far more prolific in their writing and religious imagery.

PFC Walter Rebel knew something was in development as troops entered Paris. A mechanized and well-armed *Waffen-SS* element moved along the Seine towards the Plaza Etoloire. The typical Parisians were nowhere to be found as the SS rolled towards the plaza in preparation for the parade that was scheduled the same month. Rebel described his feelings to his wife in response to such an imposing picture of firepower:

> The array of weaponry was enormous, and, for the first time, I saw a light 20mm flak gun and a machine cannon with four barrels. They are kept very busy here because enemy planes are constantly crossing the city and all quad batteries let loose, you can imagine the racket when about 100 batteries of quads [fire] all at once. The parade went on and on, there were even panzers and reconnaissance cars, even a Russian *Panje* Wagon with a Soviet pony all fully equipped for winter war in deepest Russia. SS soldiers with gas masks and polished bayonets. Looking at it, one feels so proud of being a part of the German Wehrmacht. A unit of

[154] Ludwig Knüppel, 772nd Rifle Battalion, to Mrs. Hildegard Knüppel, August 7, 1941, RLC.

[155] Christel Wolters, München-Gladbach, Lindenstr 6, to SSgt. Ludwig Wolters, 122nd Navy Artillery Regiment, May 13, 1940, RLC.

> ten-year-old *Jungvolk* kids march along. The Hitler Youth was present in full force, too. The SS Hitler's bodyguard was present, too … I met up with Sepp Dietrich, the commander of Hitler's personal bodyguard … I go to sleep thinking of you, and you know why? I am so proud inside myself. I love you, and it feels so holy and wonderful to have you as a wife, a wife that belongs to me. [May] God bless you my darling.

Knowing that the day prior was his wedding anniversary, Rebel woke up on the day of the parade feeling the "blessings of the Lord" upon him. While his wedding anniversary sparked a form of spirituality in his mind, the military parade put on by some of Nazi Germany's most devoted combat disciples also contributed to this moment of heightened religiosity.[156] Bartov contends that many German soldiers in Rebel's generation often viewed their love for their spouses and their love for Hitler as a "single entity symbolizing the spirit which united the whole German *Volk*."[157] Nevertheless, unlike many within the Richard Lester collection, Walter Rebel's correspondence reveals a man with an unusual awareness of religious matters and a faith that went beyond superficial calls to a higher power.

Rebel believed in a life well lived. "I don't have to show that I loved a comrade very much. I believe in a sad, but proud, condolence." No one, in Rebel's estimation, needed to fear death so long as a legacy of fulfillment was left. Writing to his wife, he offered his critiques of a death notice he found in the papers. Indeed, he even critiqued the names of the children of the deceased mother, suggesting that while the names had nothing to do with German history, they bore religious significance. In the death

[156] PFC Walter Rebel, 35th Artillery Regiment, to Mrs. Emmi Rebel, Manheim, Neckarau Germaniastr 26, July 29, 1942, RLC.

[157] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 151-152.

notification, there was no reference to God, and Rebel found this to be a gross misrepresentation. "Because the word God is missing [from the notification], a religious and Christian person knows that there is something missing. I almost would say the man had no time for much religion but more for earthly matters." Rebel suggested that in light of this, the mourning husband did not possess a firm grasp of Christian doctrine. He even proposed his own revisions to the man's death notice: "God almighty took, yesterday, my beloved wife … into heaven. She lived a happy life and was an example to many. In sad memory: Walter Rebel, her husband and comrade … You might think that this death notice is short, but it is an epitaph that [does not] require much imagination."[158] Rebel did not just possess a strong sense of Christian purpose, he felt comfortable enough to interject that purpose upon others' lives. Aside from reflecting on the "falsehood of humanity" or how to make beer, Rebel also offered a small, but noteworthy, quip on the cohabitation of science and religion. In response to a poem he read about a wedding, he told his wife that "it does not happen often that a scientist is interested in poems and that he will praise God's nature and harmony put in the right place."[159]

In other writings, Rebel expressed concern over his wife's dreams, among other topics of discussion. His wife's dreams unsettled him, but he believed the culprit behind his wife's trouble to be the war. Afterall, he hated the war as much as she did. On top of his concern over his wife's night terrors, he became increasingly aware of the fact that he started to become a social recluse, no doubt a side effect of his homesickness. "I am at the stage where I, more and more, retreat into myself. I hardly talk. I just want to be with

[158] Walter Rebel, Navy Communication Command, to Mrs. Emmi Rebel, Mannheim Neckarau Germaniastr 26, November 22, 1941, RLC.

[159] Ibid.

you."[160] His despair, however, was balanced out by patriotism, albeit a patriotism that did not fit the ideal mold of Nazi expansionism. Rebel desired to see a "secure Fatherland," but he espoused something akin to mutually assured destruction between France and Germany with each side hiding behind the Maginot Line or the West Wall as the most expedient means towards a Germany free from its sworn enemies in the west.[161] He was confident that an invasion of Germany would never happen given the ineptitude the western allies demonstrated in their logistics, but he also knew that the Eastern Front consumed Germany's attention at that time in 1942. His social worries, however, still plagued his thoughts, and, by extension, his writing.

Mentioned in the previous chapter, Rebel's cessation of correspondence with Kurt still bothered him. Indeed, he noted how his friendship with Kurt helped him "to overcome a difficult time in life that almost pulled [him] under." In light of his inner turmoil, Rebel believed himself to be a fundamentally weak person, but he attributed his salvation not just to Kurt but to God and his "guardian angel" whenever loneliness found him.[162] Additionally, Rebel devoted some of his time to church, and he offered a detailed account of the sermon's message as well as his own opinion of it. "I prayed for you very much in church," and he continued writing to his wife:

> The sermon from the pastor was very good. He spoke about the following: the Savior cried and said that one day he can foresee that no stone will be left on top of each other, Jerusalem will be in ruins. That warning was not heeded by the people, and is there not a comparison to the floods that overwhelm the Jews nowadays? The blood will come over us and our children one day. This will be, for us, a great warning and a tragic result. It is a fact that all

[160] PFC Walter Rebel, Navy Communication Command, to Mrs. Emmi Rebel, Mannheim Neckarau Germaniastr 26, July 26, 1942, RLC.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Ibid.

> nations that have denied or fought Christianity by any means available will be defeated and destroyed. Tell me, what is left of the all-conquering Romans, the mighty Greeks, and so it will happen to all, to us, too, if we do not adhere to God's law. Does it sound terrible? It is.[163]

Rebel, like others in the Wehrmacht, used the words of a Christian authority, his own understanding of the Christian gospels, and current events to shape his own understanding and rationale for antisemitism. It does not end there, however. In Rebel's belief, just as the Jews, Greeks, and Romans ultimately met their fates due to spiritual disobedience, so too, might Germans meet an abrupt demise if God's law was not kept. Rebel, like others in the Wehrmacht, divorced Christianity from its Jewish roots seeing the two religions as hostile and mutually exclusive rather than intimately tied at the hip, historically. On the home front, it is apparent that Rebel's wife, Emmichen Rebel, also considered church a relative importance in her daily routines.[164] In one instance, she wrote to Rebel that she offered prayers upon hearing of his sudden illness. She also spoke of the bishop's distribution of newsletters and the potency of the sermon delivered, describing it as "appropriate" and a "pity" that Rebel was not able to hear it.[165]

Rebel also had words for his reflections on God's reactions to the global struggle and the inevitability of the world's destruction. In his words, an expression of fatalism may be gleaned as he described the "mire" that was the world and its condition: "The war will go on for a long time, and that depresses me. I was taken away from you and home. So far, we have not had much from our marriage. I have seen the world getting worse and

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[163] Ibid.

[164] Emmi Rebel, Mannheim Neckarau, Germaniastr 26, to PFC Walter Rebel, Navy Command and Communication, Western France, August 23, 1941, RLC.

[165] Emmi Rebel, Neckarau, to Walter Rebel, March 15, 1942, RLC.

worse, and my heart bleeds, and [I] believe that God is getting fed up with it. What are we poor humans, we will be pulled into the mire of the world, but I will hold together with you. Our God is above us and protect[s] us."[166] In another instance, Rebel wrote to his son about the sadness they both felt upon the expiration of his furlough time and his return to his duty station. He wrote of the inevitability of his fate, and he "rather would have stayed home, but that is faith … Anything else will come as it has to with God's help."[167] This Calvinist like fatalism was common throughout Rebel's writings to his family. Rebel recognized the psychological burden that the war inevitably inflicted upon his mind. He seemed to have succumbed to what he saw as the unequivocal dissolution of the world order as he understood it, and his relationship with his wife and child was not to be excused from such a mire. But as he succumbed to, and grieved over, his fatalism, he clung to his belief in an all-powerful God that maintained the capability to preserve what little optimism Rebel still had for peace.

On Christmas Eve, Rebel wrote to his wife. He wrote of his longing to be home with his wife and "Goldie," his son. It was "the nicest thing he could imagine." He opined on the excitement his son would have upon seeing and opening the presents during the holiday. Nonetheless, during the Christmas season, Rebel's "heart long[ed] for God," particularly during "holy Communion," a Christian sacrament Rebel planned to partake in on Christmas Day.[168] Thinking about home Rebel opined that "the center of each house is now the tree, the angel, the nativity set, and all the people sing the beautiful

[166] PFC Walter Rebel, Navy Command, Western France, to Emmi Rebel, Mannheim Neckarau, Germaniastr 26, November 9, 1942, RLC.

[167] Walter Rebel to "Goldie," May 17, 1942, RLC.

[168] Walter Rebel to Emmi Rebel, December 24, 1942, RLC.

Christmas carols. Our George will play the piano … the snow covers the ground, [and] our hearts are warm. Jesus Christ is born. Hand in hand, we walked home." Christmas was a spiritual phenomenon for Rebel. And the sense of togetherness he felt during Christmas, he believed, was tarnished during those "hard times" that total war brings to communities. "You and I," he told his wife, "we fought, we suffered, and won, so let us never forget how happy we are." He concluded the letter by telling her that at 5:15 in the morning the next day, he would be at church in preparation to celebrate the beloved holiday.[169] But while Rebel spoke of a dreary outlook on the condition of the world at the time, as suggested in the previous letter, he also clung to a spirit of optimism. On New Year's Eve, 1942, Rebel wrote to his wife regarding "God's reward" of a happy marriage. Rebel, while he spoke of a world in decay, wrote also of God's protection over his family and his bestowment of peace in the coming days.[170] German soldiers, like Rebel, often maintained worldviews that were intimately tied to Christianity. But while religious language was used in the construction of identity and worldview, the pictures painted could also be radical and violent.

In yet another instance of stoic like fatalism, one soldier wrote about a comrade, Fritz Lehmann, who was killed in action. "He has fulfilled the most beautiful duty of a soldier and has become an example for us all, which we have to follow. We still have to gain what he will no longer be allowed to experience, namely the victory over our craftiest enemy [England]. We will achieve this goal. Our lives belong to God and to the

[169] Ibid.

[170] PFC Walter Rebel, Navy Command, France, to Mrs. Emmi Rebel, Mannheim Neckarau Germaniastr 26, December 31, 1942, RLC.

Fatherland, and may they decide our fate."[171] But the cohabitation of religion and National Socialism was not just contained in the army.

Often seen as an elite branch of the Wehrmacht, the submarine arm of the Kriegsmarine was widely praised in German news reports and propaganda. In the Second World War, the German surface fleet paled in comparison to the might of the Royal Navy's surface fleet, a warfighting institution that was six times the size of the German navy at the start of the war. Many German sailors as early as 1941 had a keen understanding of their strategic inferiority on the battlefields of the ocean.[172] As Römer points out in *Comrades*, the submarine arm of the German navy was composed mostly of the generations that matriculated through the Hitler Youth and "were particularly loyal to the regime."[173] While some German sailors were skeptical in the part they had to play in a final victory for the Reich, others, such as First Lieutenant Egon Rudolph, exuded an uncanny spirit of optimism when faced with long odds at sea: "German soldiers will be everywhere. Gibraltar will go up in smoke. Bombs and mines will be exploding everywhere. Our U-boats will lie off London. They'll get such a bellyful! There'll be air raids day and night! They'll have no rest. Then they can creep away into their rabbit-holes in England and eat grass. God punish England and her satellite states."[174] While most sailors naturally fought for a German victory even if they were plagued with despair, Lt. Rudolph displayed views held by, according to Neitzel and Welzer, a

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[171] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 151.

[172] Sönkel Neitzel & Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing, and Dying, The Secret Second World War Tapes of German POWs*, translated by Jefferson Chase (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 195, 197.

[173] Römer, *Comrades*, 190.

[174] Neitzel & Welzer, *Soldaten*, 196.

minority of sailors. Despite his National Socialist convictions, his antisemitism, and his blatant Anglophobia, Lt. Rudolph called upon God's wrath to "punish" the British Empire. This dualism of vertical motivation, no matter how small, may be gleaned not just in the German army, but the navy as well.

Karl Völker, a navy Midshipman, also expressed a radical viewpoint with undertones of a Christian worldview. Influenced by propaganda magazines such as *Der Stürmer* as well as his time in the Hitler Youth, Völker regurgitated well known stereotypes of Jews, "I know what the Jews did," Völker told a comrade. "About 1928 or 1929 they carried off the women and raped them and cut them up and the blood—I know of many cases—every Sunday in their synagogues they sacrificed human blood, Christian blood."[175] Völker's comrade asked where the Jews captured the women, and Völker answered by telling him of how some of the women were lured into Jewish shops and taken to the synagogue through underground passages. Völker again emphasized to his friend his firm belief that Jewish doctrine demanded a sacrifice of Christian blood every Sunday.[176] This expression of blatant antisemitism was also laced with religious suggestions, suggestions that might inspire some, like Völker, to harbor a profound and uncanny level of hatred for Jews. Wilhelm Heidtmann, however, had a slightly more nuanced view in his understanding of his struggle with the western powers.

Heidtmann possessed some grasp of the Fascist experiment in Europe. He believed that "many Anglo-Americans fight in their belief that they speak for Christ's cause when they defend the democratic form of state … The western powers have the

[175] Ibid., 232.
[176] Ibid., 233.

advantage of an open profession of the Christian belief; thereby we are forced into the role of the opponent of the Christian faith." Additionally, Heidtmann believed that the allied coalition in the west outpaced the German armed forces because of their "unbroken belief in the practical consequences of the power of God in this world." God was on the side of those who offered homage; In Heidtmann's estimation, Germany was not offering it, and he hoped that something might be learned from that.[177] Indeed, some soldiers injected into their writings a sense that they were punished by God for transgressions performed. In November 1943, Ewald H. wrote of emotional numbness. He could no longer experience "the happiness and misfortunes of this world." War was a "monster," a monster that smashed the world with one swift stroke. "God, you have directed these events, why are you so inscrutable, so cruel and harsh? Build a new world, and allow this death to find an end."[178]

The Italian theater of operations during the Second World War brought considerable defeats to the Wehrmacht during the war. In September 1943, the Germans had sixteen divisions along the Italian peninsula, and this number doubled the following year. In January 1944, the allies began their landings at Anzio, a coastal region of Italy southwest of Rome. The previous year, the Luftwaffe was decimated in the Mediterranean theater of operations leaving German ground forces virtually defenseless from aerial assaults on their positions. Almost 3,000 allied aircraft covered the Anglo-American maneuvers along the coast at Anzio. The Luftwaffe, upon withdrawing from the area, only spared 233 aircraft for defensive operations. A junior grade army officer

[177] Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 102.
[178] Ibid., 88.

with the 144th Light Division in Italy marveled at the sheer fire power the allies brought with them in their conquest of Anzio. "It was something the world has not yet seen … If only our Luftwaffe could at least help us."[179] The situation was dire for German units in Italy once the allies began their push to take the peninsula and Rome. Friedel Wiegmann, a German grenadier stationed in Italy, wrote to his wife about the slaughter that took place at the Sangro River as the allies attempted assaults against the Gustav Line.[180] "Now the worst battles are fought at Cassino and Anzio," he told his wife. "But do not worry about me, God will protect the both of us. Remember, you are the most loved part of mine in this world."[181]

In May of that same year, Wiegmann wrote to his wife about a successful assault on allied observation posts. Their assault started in the morning with an artillery barrage prior to their movement to contact. "We took the observation post and surprised the occupants, soldiers from India, in their beds inside the bunkers." Wiegmann wrote that he and his comrades took 40 prisoners once the attack ended. Not long after, the allies quickly launched a counterattack to retake the position that Wiegmann and his comrades overran. Wiegmann described the allied artillery strike as if he was witnessing the "Day of Judgement" all around him. "They kept firing all day," he wrote his wife. About 40 allied tanks led the counterassault against Wiegmann's position, "but in this difficult ground around here, they could not fully operate, but kept up a constant fire. All day, our

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[179] Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers*, 398.

[180] Lt. Col. G. W. L. Nicholson, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, Volume II: The Canadians in Italy 1943-1945* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1956), 270-304, https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/themes/defence/caf/militaryhistory/dhh/official/book-1956-army-ww2-2-en.pdf.

[181] Friedal Wiegmann, 754th Grenadier Regiment, to Mrs. Karla Wiegmann, Hannover Kohlrauschstr 7, February 29, 1944, RLC.

[medics] were busy transporting the wounded to the first aid base."[182] Working with a supply unit in November 1944, Pvt. Hans Harbold wrote to his wife that he and his comrades were eager to see an end to the war. His primary motivation was to get back home and see his wife once more. "How long will we have to wait?" He pondered. "We have to pray and beg the Lord that he will make it possible that we can see each other again … The best years we have already lost because of the war … if only this war would end … God will be with us."[183] Also along the Italian Front in August 1944, Franz Rainer reassured himself that the "Lord must still see and once more help us out of this predicament." But he could not help but wonder, "are we really the wicked who have been condemned to destruction? … Will the others still succeed to triumph over us, we who had ventured forward too far and already believed ourselves to be like God?"[184]

Nevertheless, German units familiar with mountain warfare dug into the rocky and mountainous Italian peninsula in preparation for the inevitable allied advance. Obstacles, bunkers, mines, and pillboxes, placed in depth and integrated with the natural environment, proved an imposing defense even against "Algerian and Moroccan attackers who were well acquainted with mountains."[185] In response to the relative success the Germans experienced in the mountains of Italy, one soldier declared, "God and nature are helping us here! It's all the more gratifying that our redoubtable troops are bringing in more and more prisoners (mainly English officers)."[186]

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[182] Friedal Wiegmann, 754th Grenadier Regiment, to Mrs. Karla Wiegmann, Hannover Kohlrauschstr 7, May 14, 1944, RLC.

[183] Pvt. Hans Harbold, Supply Abteilung 164, Italy, to Mrs. Ilse Harbold, Geyersdorf Annaberg Erzgebirge 82, November 24, 1944, RLC.

[184] Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 170.

[185] Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers*, 400.

[186] Ibid.

Ultimately, while *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring was successful in keeping the allies bogged down south of the Winter Line in Italy, allied operations on the peninsula evolved into diversionary strategies bent on keeping the Wehrmacht's resources away from northern France in preparation for Operation Overlord. But even here along the Italian Front, German soldiers tasked with defending this occupied territory experienced miseries and bouts of loneliness as potent as any forward operating area along the Eastern Front. And, by extension, they were just as susceptible to the phenomenon of channeling their miseries and sensations of victimhood through a religious lens to dial down their personal feelings of fear and loneliness. As early as 1942, there were some German soldiers who expressed similar anxieties. Pvt. Fritz Pinkus wrote home to his wife confiding in her that he hoped that the "end of the war was near." He desired to go home and see his wife and remarked that most of his unit concurred with how he felt. Nevertheless, Pvt. Pinkus thanked God that he could rely on his wife back home to take care of things as his unit recently moved to a training camp in northern France.[187] The wrath of the vengeance weapons unleashed upon England late in the war, Pinkus thought, was also associated with God's wrath and grace.

Writing twelve days after the Normandy landings, Marga Bley thanked God for Germany's "reprisals" against England. The radio "*Volks* Concert" spoke of the new vengeance weapons, weapons that were supposed to be "very effective."[188] Indeed, just two days prior to Bley's letter, the Wehrmacht announced that London and the

[187] Pvt. Fritz Pinkus, 336th Artillery Regiment, to Herta Pinkus, Sebnitz Saxony, Blumenstr 6, March 7, 1942, RLC.

[188] Marga Bley, 19 Werningerode Harz, Kreis Hospital Abt. Keller V, to Cpl. Kurt Boßdorf, Munich, 11th Communication Regiment, June 18, 1944, RLC.

surrounding suburbs were hit by "new explosives of the highest caliber."[189] But optimism in the V-1 rocket faded at an alarming pace, but just as civilian confidence in the rocket died down, the V-2 offered a revitalization to this hope found in miracle weapons. Sgt. Kunz, an infantryman, wrote on how the V-2 rocket impressed him. He described the weapon as a German "doomsday weapon" that could pulverize the allies, and anything else in its way, if used. Kunz cited a speech given by Hitler on the new weapon and its seeming potential, "If all should fail, then the most terrible weapon humanity could ever devise will be used. May God forgive me if I use that weapon."[190] Neitzel & Welzer argue that two kinds of faith kept Germans optimistic, no matter how briefly, in the vengeance weapons to push the allies to the negotiating table, a "quasi-religious" faith in Hitler and a "comparable faith in technology."[191] But it is also reasonable to suggest that some Germans clung to their own personal feelings of faith in God during these times of unproven theories and anxieties. But confiding in God due to uncontrollable circumstances and the necessity to fight the war often occupied the same space, even within some of the higher corners of the military bureaucracy.

Major Oswald Gebauer was "called up" to serve on August 1, 1939. Five years later, he was still alive performing his duties. "Often, I have seen death in the face, the course of the war has changed, too. The early blitz victories have turned into retreat … and I suppose our leaders know why they have turned to that. I am confident in our leadership, and they will change the course of this war soon. The senseless mass attack of

[189] Neitzel & Welzer, 187-188.
[190] Ibid., 190.
[191] Ibid.

the Russians will not help the allies in the west. Who knows what it will be good for anyway." When the Nazi leadership announced total war measures, Gebauer felt that the "decision made would surely help us to overcome the crisis that we are in." The new measures enacted by Berlin over the radio reminded the Major of "shirkers" in his social circle who would jump at the opportunity to avoid their call to serve the Fatherland. "The Kestners and many others," he thought, were work shy. "Some women send in their applications that their husbands are needed in the factories, that is not an excuse. They have to do their bid in the fighting, too."[192] While the defeats the Wehrmacht experienced grew heavy on the shoulders of the officer, he did not shirk his sense of duty or his confidence in his senior leadership and their abilities, even if the days of the *Blitzkrieg* were long gone. And close beside this martial spirit and confidence in the capabilities and cause of the Reich, the Major was "thankful to God that [he] survived these long five years."[193] Other officers, however, arrived at different conclusions given their circumstances.

Locked away as a prisoner of war at Fort Hunt near Washington D.C., Second Lieutenant Count Wolfgang von Plettenberg concluded that once a "monarch or a leader becomes criminal: No, as soon as someone places themselves outside of the divine or worldly order, at that moment a sworn oath can no longer be valid." These feelings that the government in Berlin had fallen outside of the "divine" or the "worldly" order was partly in response to the profound danger that Plettenberg, and others at Fort Hunt,

[192] Major Oswald Gebauer, Transport Park 513, Cambray, France, to Mrs. Lotte Gebauer, 10 Kamenz, Saxony Fürsten Str 9, July 29, 1944, RLC.

[193] Ibid.

believed Hitler put the country in.[194] Second Lieutenant Helmut Schwortzer, a Saxon pastor, also came to the conclusion, as a prisoner of war in Fort Hunt, that his oath to Hitler "might have long since become obsolete." Indeed, in a dialogue between von Plettenberg and Schwortzer, they both concurred that the "oath of allegiance ceased to be valid 'if it's used for unholy purposes:'"

> S: By means of the oath, we were weaved, forced into a situation where we weren't aware of its full scope. And when today this same man takes the view that we are obligated to him as a result of this oath, that we have to remain loyal to him to the end, that there can be no surrender and that an entire nation can go to the dogs and must perish—then it begs the question whether I morally have the right to—
> P: Well.
> S: —whether such an oath has the right, whether the oath has to be kept for moral reasons. I know very well that I'm breaking it and that I'm thereby committing a sin. But I believe this is a lesser evil than the other one….
> P: I thought I'm swearing this holy oath before God, and I can no longer call this oath holy if, and so on—
> S: if it's used for unholy purposes. Yes. That ought to be correct. That's definitely correct. That's also what reassured me. So, I no longer see any obligation to keep the oath. An obligation to people and Fatherland, sure—
> P: Yes, definitely.
> S: —but not to the National Socialist.[195]

Using "theological tenets" to justify his position on the oath, the Saxon pastor had to constantly reassure himself that what he was saying to his fellow prisoner was okay to interject, thus suggesting the grip that Hitler's cult of personality had over many within the Wehrmacht. Their sense of duty as soldiers and officers on behalf of *volk* and Fatherland, however, remained steadfast. Even still, the likelihood of these kinds of

[194] Römer, *Comrades*, 235.
[195] Ibid., 235-236.

conversations being common practice throughout the ranks of the German military was rare.[196] In an extreme instance of both perception and opinion, Schwotzer also revealed in conversation with a comrade his disdain for "extreme violence." While the bulk of his time serving with the Wehrmacht had been along the Eastern Front, by 1945, the junior officer had been captured and sent to Fort Hunt in the United States. He revealed not only his disdain for rampant violence but also his knowledge of the "systematic nature of the murder of the Jews." Like so many of his generation, he was born into a Germany rife with nationalism in the opening years of the twentieth century, but his membership with the Protestant Confessional Church, his ministry to a "penal institution," and his subjection to government surveillance by the Gestapo all contributed to his stance on sustained violence. His intellectual abilities in conversation with his fellow prisoners at Fort Hunt, while profoundly remarkable, were in the extreme minority of prisoners. Indeed, many Wehrmacht personnel imprisoned at Fort Hunt discussed atrocities. Several were recorded debating on whether they would have participated in the lynching of downed allied pilots. Many believed that a "normal person could not do such a thing."[197] But others were not so naive. Others understood that, given their own experiences with total war in the east, that such claims wreaked with naivete. "No, you only feel like that now," a Fort Hunt prisoner told a comrade in response to his disdain at the notion of lynching allied pilots, "I've seen a lot."[198]

[196] Ibid., 235
[197] Ibid., 354.
[198] Ibid., 354-355.

In a letter with both the writer and the recipient's name lost to history, the writer expressed thanks for receiving a New Year's letter. The letter contained a photograph of the writer's late brother, someone the writer was evidently close to. "It's hard to believe that he is not with us anymore. George wrote, too, and asked why faith has taken our best brother away from us. He was the one we understood and respected. But there you are, God always takes the best."[199]

[199] Unknown to "My Dear All," Dornitz, January 5, 1944, RLC.

CHAPTER IV– CONCLUSION

Kurt Elfert enjoyed playing chess with his grandnephew. To Römer, he was the "grandfather I'd never had." Elfert also suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. As a veteran of the Wehrmacht and a survivor of the invasion of the Soviet Union, questions were inevitably asked, and stories demanded of him. Mere words, however, could rip apart Elfert's social composure like glass smashed on concrete. Words like "Russia'" or "St. Petersburg" could bring the man into a fit of uncontrollable trembling and sobbing. Elfert never shared his war stories, and the terror he felt then was just as aggressive as the terror he felt in the woods and fields of the Soviet Union.[200] For so many others who had a similar experience, something, some idea, needed to keep them in the fight. Something needed to smother emotional vulnerability for the sake of a demanding job. Oftentimes, it was religion.

In total, the Wehrmacht was able to muster 18 million men to serve on behalf of the Reich.[201] These men carried with them 18 million different worldviews, worldviews that were in flux throughout their lives as they encountered and engaged with the world around them, people and ideas they believed to be superior to themselves, and people and ideas they believed to be inferior in relationship to themselves. These men, ranging from 16 to 60 years old, brought with them all sorts of baggage, thoughts, and convictions to their various professional military education courses, most of which were politically hijacked by the Nazi Party. These men were, therefore, profoundly impressionable, and just as profoundly misinformed regarding reality and humanity. The home front

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[200] Römer, *Comrades*, 1.

[201] Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Hitler's Wehrmacht: 1935-1945*, translated by Janice W. Ancker (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 35.

supported them and their attempts to confront their struggles with emotional composure in the face of adversity and their sense of duty to their country and supreme commander, Adolf Hitler. Atrocities were committed in the name of this cause, but to what extent a grasp of Nazi policy and high politics influenced this remains a core bone of fierce debate in the historiography surrounding this organization. Insofar as religion itself is concerned, a vibrant community of scholarship continues to develop a historiography on the Wehrmacht chaplaincy and the priests who offered their services to the combat arms. But with regards to the soldiers themselves and their personal, intimate relationships to Christianity, scholars have and continue to either dismiss this issue as a serious point of contention in the historiography, or attempt to generalize a diagnosis for what these people were writing in their letters and why they were writing it. Rolf-Dieter Müller suggests in *Hitler's Wehrmacht* that Hitler, recognizing the "contradiction" between what was ultimately Nazism's opposition to Christianity and the German nation's roots in Christianity "put the brakes" on Nazi religious reform and Germany's numerous, albeit declining, church affiliations in both civilian life and the military.[202]

Müller also points out, however, that "in principle … calling on a higher power competed with the Führer's claim of absolute dominance … Instead of a religion, National Socialism was to become a *Weltanschauung*, or worldview. In place of the Fatherland, nation and race now took center stage." Müller concludes that Hitler harbored hostility towards religious conservatism within the Wehrmacht. Hitler made this clear in his "war of worldviews and race" speech in February 1939. The Catholic and Protestant

[202] Müller, *Hitler's Wehrmacht*, 44.

churches in Germany were, therefore, subjected to accusations of high crime if they breached the social, cultural, or political policies of the Third Reich with any "reference to a higher authority."[203] In Müller's estimation, while the connection between Christianity and the German military survived the defeat of 1918, the connection did not withstand the strain of rearmament and the Wehrmacht's introduction to the German armed forces in 1935.[204] This thesis proves otherwise.

Religion and the war effort proved intimately entwined as both the cause for German expansionism and personal religious convictions went hand in hand into battle. A woman, in one instance may petition for God's blessings upon the "man of her heart" while also washing his camouflage smock in preparation for his next battle against allied forces. Or, as was common in many letters, a call for God's "protection" over the lives of those who were in harm's way. Religion, in more ways than realized, was a part of everyday life and the discourses found between soldiers and loved ones in the Third Reich.[205] Ultimately, however, while religion and Nazism were, indeed, awkward bedfellows within the rank and file of the Wehrmacht, the men in field gray enforced violence, acts of policy, and war crimes often motivated by racial animosities in the name of Karl Haushofer's *Lebensraum* and Hitler's war of worldviews and racial annihilation on behalf of that idea. And, as Müller notes, when it came to the paradoxical nature of

[203] Ibid., 44-47.

[204] Ibid., 47-48.

[205] Hedwig Dietrich, Munich 23 Victoriastr 28, to Wolfram Dietrich, 570th Communication Regiment, June 29, 1944, RLC. See also, Lt. Heinz Hartig, 208th Communication Company, to Mrs. Luise Fichtner, Rottach Tegernsee, Maltgruberstr 147, August 27, 1944, RLC.

obedience towards the Nazis' military "ethos" and "loyalty to the principle of humanity and responsibility to a higher authority, very few people found an ethical solution."[206]

The men who went to war against the allied coalition believed that "evil" had been diagnosed. Perhaps Hitler diagnosed it for them, or maybe they arrived at their own conclusions: It spawned from the halls of the White House, it rose, like a mighty beast, in the east, or it was over the English Channel. Some, believing themselves to be genuine men of upstanding character or Christians even, marched before the banner of the Swastika to combat these perceived threats. Most of them lost their lives, many returned home disillusioned with their personal convictions and scared for the rest of their lives only to return to yet another divided Europe. When Albrecht Haushofer, the son of Karl Haushofer, was executed by the SS for treason days before the Third Reich's capitulation, a poem was recovered from his body. He wrote:

Doch schuldig bin ich anders	But I am guilty differently
als Ihr denkt	than you think
Ich musste früher meine	I had to recognize my duty
Pflicht erkennen;	sooner;
Ich musste schärfer Unheil	I had to name evil
Unheil nennen—	evil more precisely—
Mein Urteil habe ich zu lang	My judgement I reigned in too
gelenkt…	long…[207]

These words from the poem "Guilt" capture Haushofer's realization about his own country. But these words were not the reality for most. "Evil" and "duty" were hallmarks of Wehrmacht thinking—a duty to combat, in their minds, an "evil" manifesting itself as "Judeo-Bolshevism" in the east or liberal democracy in the west.

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[206] Müller, *Hitler's Wehrmacht*, 49.

[207] Helmut Walser Smith, *Germany, a Nation in its Time: Before, During and After Nationalism, 1500-2000* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 425.

Christianity, the kind that is heartfelt, genuine, ceremonial, and oftentimes mundane but thoughtful, was a part of this narrative, a narrative of total war, gross misinformation, and a tragedy of the human experience.

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