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VIOLENT TURNS: SOURCES, INTERPRETATIONS, RESPONSES

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The violent turn in soldier's letters

Introduction

In my contribution to this conference, I aim to explore the utilization and depiction of 'violence' in soldiers' letters during the Second World War.

To begin, I will discuss the significance of soldiers' letters as a valuable source for research. Next, I will define the concept of violence in warfare. Furthermore, I will present examples from soldiers' letters during the Second World War, focusing specifically on Luxembourgish soldiers in the Wehrmacht.

Soldier's Letters

First and foremost, soldiers' letters or ego-documents serve as a valuable source of information. They provide a unique glimpse into the subjective experience of individuals, capturing their emotions and thoughts at the time. However, it is important to recognize that the content and style of these letters can be influenced by the intended audience. Despite this inherent limitation, letters remain a valuable resource for researchers interested in delving into the personal narratives of war.¹

Even it is expected in war letters to read about war and violence, these letters contain mainly mundane aspects of their daily lives, such as sleeping, marching, or traveling. It is crucial to bear in mind that these documents are highly subjective and reflect the biases and perspectives of the individual writers.

By exploring war letters, we can gain insights into soldiers' perceptions and paths during the war, particularly in relation to their understanding and use of violence. This aspect is crucial for

¹ Ortwin Buchbender, *Das Andere Gesicht Des Krieges: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe, 1939-1945* (Munich: Beck, 1982); Veit Didczuneiet, Jens Ebert, and Thomas Jander, *Schreiben Im Krieg Schreiben Vom Krieg. Feldpost Im Zeitalter Der Weltkriege* (Essen, 2011); Katrin Kilian, "Die Anderen Zu Wort Kommen Lassen. Feldpostbriefe Als Historische Quelle Aus Den Jahren 1939 Bis 1945. Eine Projektskizze", *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 60, no. 1 (2017): 153–66, <https://doi.org/10.1524/mgzs.2001.60.1.153>; Klaus Latzel, "Vom Kriegserlebnis Zur Kriegserfahrung. Theoretische Und Methodische Überlegungen Zur Erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Untersuchung von Feldpostbriefen", *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 56 (1997): 1–30.

comprehending the human aspect of armed conflicts. By shifting the focus from the collective to the individual, we can better understand how soldiers grappled with the complexities of violence in war. Through this lens, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of armed conflicts and its impact on those directly involved.

Historiography

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest in studying soldiers and participants in wars from a personal perspective, particularly through the analysis of war letters. Wolfram Wette's "Der Krieg Des Kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von Unten" (1995)² emphasized the importance of focusing on individual soldiers rather than solely examining the military institution. This approach raises thought-provoking questions about soldiers' experiences, the impact of camaraderie, orders, and discipline on their perceptions of war. Scholars such as Buchbender,³ Fritz,⁴ and Latzel⁵ have utilized first-person documents to delve into the individual experiences of soldiers.

Violence – Types Violence and War

Violence during warfare refers to the use of force, often involving weapons and military tactics, by opposing parties engaged in armed conflict. It encompasses various forms of aggressive actions, including physical harm, destruction of property, and the application of lethal force against combatants and non-combatants alike. Violence during warfare can take many forms, such as direct combat engagements, bombings, shelling, guerrilla warfare, acts of terrorism, and other aggressive acts intended to achieve military objectives

In other words, violence during warfare is in a form organized violence.⁶ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the nature of warfare underwent a significant transformation due to industrialization. The advancements in weapon technology greatly amplified the destructive power of warfare. As a result, the mass mobilization of armies led to significantly higher casualties, both on the battlefield and in the broader impact of war, as evidenced by the First World War.⁷

During World War II, the violence reached unimaginable levels.

² Wolfram Wette, ed., *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes. Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, 2nd ed. (München, Zürich: Piper, 1995).

³ Buchbender, *Das Andere Gesicht Des Krieges: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe, 1939-1945*.

⁴ Stephen G Fritz, *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington, KY: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995).

⁵ Klaus Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten-Nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung 1939-1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1998).

⁶ Sönke Neitzel and Daniel Hohrath, eds., *Kriegsgreuel. Die Entgrenzung Der Gewalt in Kriegerischen Konflikten Vom Mittelalter Bis Ins 20. Jahrhundert* (Paderborn; München; Wien; Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008), 9.

⁷ Neitzel and Hohrath, 23.

As the Nazi Germans prepared to attack the Soviet Union from spring 1941 onwards, the Wehrmacht, their military, began to adopt a new form of warfare. In 1939, an amnesty decree was issued, pardoning soldiers for their violent actions in Poland.⁸

In 1941, the Barbarossa decree declared that the war against the Soviets would be a campaign of extermination, aimed at wiping out Russia's political and intellectual elites. And then there was the infamous Commissar Order, issued on June 6, 1941, which ordered the direct execution of Soviet commissars. These decrees reflected a racial ideology and authorized unrestricted violence.⁹ These order gave the soldiers a “blank check”, the authorization to use the violence.

Examples – WWII

The violence in WWII

By studying the "theories" and intellectual justifications present in decrees, military strategies, and orders, we can gain insights into the foundations of violence. However, it is equally important to examine the personal testimonies of the men who actually carried out these acts of violence under the guidance of their commanders and generals. War letters serve as valuable sources for comprehensively understanding the various manifestations of violence inherent in a soldier's mission.

It is crucial to recognize the distinct characteristics of racially motivated wars, like Germany's participation in World War II, especially in the Eastern Territory. Additionally, we must take into account the soldiers' deployment locations and the origins of the letters they wrote. For example, soldiers deployed in France often discussed different subjects compared to those deployed in Ukraine.¹⁰

Violence by soldiers

The primary duty of soldiers revolved around employing violence to achieve victory or ensure their own survival. As a result their letters often reflected their understanding and use of violence

⁸ The "amnesty decree" in the context of the Wehrmacht refers to a specific policy implemented by the German military during World War II. It was issued by Adolf Hitler on September 4, 1939, shortly after the outbreak of the war. The decree granted amnesty to German soldiers who had committed disciplinary offenses, such as desertion or unauthorized retreat, during the invasion of Poland. It aimed to maintain discipline within the armed forces by offering a pardon for certain infractions committed during the early stages of the war.

⁹ The "Kommissarbefehl," or Commissar Order, was another significant directive issued by the German High Command, specifically the OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht), on June 6, 1941, prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union. This order instructed the German troops to identify and target Soviet political commissars embedded within the Red Army units. It effectively sanctioned the execution of these commissars upon capture, considering them as ideological and political adversaries who posed a threat to the German war effort. The Kommissarbefehl reflected the Nazi regime's intention to undermine and eradicate the leadership of the Soviet forces and eliminate any potential resistance or political opposition. It was a clear example of the extreme brutality and disregard for international laws and norms exhibited by the German military during World War II.

¹⁰ Kerstin Wölki, 'Und Ab Ging Die Reise!« Kriegserfahrung Deutscher Soldaten in Frankreich', in *Schreiben Im Krieg Schreiben Vom Krieg. Feldpost Im Zeitalter Der Weltkriege*, ed. Veit Didczuneiet (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 2011), 514.

as a significant theme. In my research, I look into the soldiers' perceptions, beliefs, and motivations concerning the use of force and their role as armed combatants. Despite the clearly defined role of soldiers, there remains room for further exploration and analysis regarding the dynamics and implications surrounding the concept of force.

In their letters, soldiers often employed more neutral language to describe acts of killing or injuring the enemy, using terminology that implied these actions without explicitly stating them. It is noteworthy that the soldiers commonly referred to themselves as a collective unit, employing the pronoun "we," rather than emphasizing individual agency.

In Klaus Latzel's analysis of soldiers' letters from World War I and World War II, he presents several significant insights. As previously mentioned, and as Latzel confirms, the majority of the letters primarily focus on the daily hardships endured by the soldiers, including long journeys, waiting times, inadequate housing, and poor hygiene. However, within these letters, there are also discussions that touch upon the act of killing.

Expressions such as "shooting them down" and "bombarding" are present in both contexts, representing the simplest and most brutal forms of violence. However, the remaining descriptions reveal distinct attitudes towards death and killing in the First and Second World Wars.

In the First World War, soldiers openly and ruthlessly described killing as "butchering," "annihilating," "destroying," "firing at," and "receiving fire."

In contrast, the language used in the Second World War became more detached and colder. Soldiers spoke of "contributing to losses," "taking care of," "eliminating," "smoking out," and "finishing off the rest".¹¹

Latzel's research demonstrates that the language used in soldiers' letters varied, and it was not always explicit in conveying acts of violence. For instance, soldiers would sometimes mention close combat ("Nahkampf") which implied they would have likely killed or wounded the enemy. Another example is the phrase "caused a lot of harm among the Poles" ("viel Unheil angerichtet bei den Polen") which suggests causing damage and potentially resulting in enemy casualties.¹² These instances indicate that soldiers employed indirect or euphemistic language¹³ to allude to acts of violence without explicitly stating it. By studying the specific ways soldiers wrote, we

¹¹ Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten-Nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung 1939-1945*, 247.

¹² Latzel, 244.

¹³ "Euphemistic" refers to the use of indirect or mild language to express something that may be considered harsh, unpleasant, or offensive. It involves substituting a less offensive or more socially acceptable term or phrase for one that is more direct or blunt. Euphemisms are often employed to soften the impact of certain words or concepts, making them more palatable or less disturbing to the listener or reader.

can better understand how they described their experiences and emotions regarding violent actions. They also talked about violence in terms of weapon effectiveness, using words like "hit" or "strike" to measure the outcome of their actions.¹⁴

Study WARLUX War letters from Luxembourgish soldiers

During WWII, Luxembourg was occupied by Nazi Germany. Luxembourgers were forced or influenced to join the German Wehrmacht and participate in the war. Some may have joined willingly due to economic pressure, fear, or ideological alignment. It's crucial to recognize that the motivations and circumstances of individual Luxembourgers varied, and we should avoid making generalizations.

In my research, I focus on studying the war experience of Luxembourgers and other non-Germans who fought on the German side during World War II. Through the analysis of soldiers' letters, I gain valuable insights into their perspectives on violence and its implications.

Specifically, I examine the correspondence between two brothers, Albert and Nicolas Pierrard, whose letters provide a glimpse into their wartime journey.¹⁵

Both brothers were deployed at the Eastern Front, in today Belarus. Their units experienced daily casualties and injuries.

In his letters to his family in February 1944, Nicolas discusses the partisan operations in Belarus, referring to the combatants as "bandits" while acknowledging the use of German machine guns.¹⁶

While he doesn't directly talk about killings or direct combat, the mention of "partisan operations" and German machine guns unmistakably suggests the existence of violence.

Partisans were resistance fighters who opposed the occupying forces and engaged in guerrilla warfare tactics. However, the German forces perceived them as a threat to their control and took measures to suppress their activities through targeted operations. Also Albert acknowledges the

¹⁴ Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten-Nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung 1939-1945*, 249.

¹⁵ WARLUX collection, University of Luxembourg. During a crowdsourcing campaign in 2021, around 5,000 letters and 20 diaries were collected by the WARLUX team, see <https://digiwarhist.hypotheses.org/699>.

¹⁶ Letter from Nicolas Pierrard to his family, 17 February 1944, WARLUX Collection, Collection Pierrard. "Banditen richten nämlich allerhand Unheil an (...) aber zum Kampf stellen sie sich selten. Sie scheinen etwas Angst vor dem deutschen Maschinengewehr zu haben."

“partisans becoming more active in a letter to his brother in August 1943.¹⁷ His unit was highly engaged in active fighting, with violence being a prominent aspect. Especially on the eastern front, the most frequently discussed topic among German soldiers was partisan operations, which posed significant danger to them.

Why did I choose this example? Contextualization is crucial in understanding the situation. It is important to consider where the soldiers were deployed and which unit they belonged to. Were they stationed in the rear of the front or directly at the front? Key words like "partisan" or "close combat" can indicate the use of violence.

As Nicolas aptly notes, the term "partisan operations" inherently implies the use of forceful counterattacks and the deployment of industrialized weapons, such as machine guns. It was not uncommon for the Germans to execute locals who were suspected of assisting the partisans by providing shelter or food.¹⁸

Not every aspect of war can be reduced to "killing". There are instances where different expressions and actions imply the use of force or violence, such as mistreating the local population or employing threats. In a letter from Nicolas in September 1943, he uses the term "hamsteren," which suggests the acquisition or trading of goods through theft from the local population.¹⁹ Moreover, the letters provide vivid accounts of violence and destruction. For example, Nicolas' description from August 1943 recounts the burning of villages and the displacement of local inhabitants. These narratives vividly depict the tangible consequences of violence during wartime.²⁰

It is important to acknowledge that Luxembourgers, as forced conscripts in the German Wehrmacht, had distinctive experiences separate from those of average German soldiers. Luxembourgers found themselves participating in a war of extermination and holding weapons. The violence in their letters home shows how being part of the war affected them. Even though Luxembourgers didn't have the same reasons as the Nazis, they were forced to be part of violent actions because they were drafted into the German forces. This complicated situation highlights the moral challenges they faced and helps us understand the many different aspects of their experiences during the war.

¹⁷ Albert to Nicoals Pierrard, 18.08.1943, Collection Pierrard, WARLUX University of Luxembourg

¹⁸ M. Mazower, 'MILITARY VIOLENCE AND NATIONAL SOCIALIST VALUES: THE WEHRMACHT IN GREECE 1941-1944', *Past & Present* 134, no. 1 (1 February 1992): 131, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/134.1.129>.

¹⁹ For example, Letter from Nicolas Pierrard to Jean Pierre Pierrard, 23 September 1943 (in LU), WARLUX Collection, Collection Pierrard.

²⁰ Letter from Nicolas Pierrard to Albert Pierrard, 13 August 1943 (in LU), WARLUX Collection, Collection Pierrard.

Conclusion and outlook

To conduct a more thorough analysis, we need to consider additional factors, such as the diverse backgrounds of the individuals involved, including their age, profession, and where they came from. It's also important to think about whether they chose to be there or were forced to participate, as well as the specific military unit they belonged to, like the Wehrmacht or Waffen-SS.

In summary, war letters from frontline soldiers, known as ego documents, have been extensively studied from different angles, providing valuable insights into the concept of "violence." While violence is often associated with killing, these letters show that soldiers mainly talk about non-lethal aspects of war in their writing. They describe their official duties, work environments, and experiences related to basic needs like food, drink, and where they sleep.

In today's conflicts, we can find similar personal accounts on social media. For example, in the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, soldiers share writings, photos, and even videos that depict violence and atrocities. These posts and images could be used as evidence in future legal proceedings against Russian troops or help us understand acts of violence.

These sources give us insight into how soldiers, as a group, understand and interpret violence, influenced by societal morals and the messages promoted by military institutions. These letters are important for understanding the extent, significance, and reasons behind violence, in addition to official military orders and decrees. They are crucial for analyzing fundamental aspects of violence in warfare and contemporary conflicts.

By studying soldiers' letters, researchers, as I am, contribute to a deeper understanding of violence in warfare and contemporary conflicts.

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