

Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying. The Secret World War II Transcripts of German POWs

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A new book has entered international debates on German soldiers and war crimes with a vengeance: *Soldaten*, heralded by the German political magazine *Der Spiegel* (as the dust jacket states) as ‘nothing short of a sensation ... The myth that the Nazi-era German armed forces [were] not involved in war crimes persisted for decades after the war. Now two German researchers have destroyed it once and for all’. In contrast the German newspaper *Die Zeit* has evaluated the volume, written by historian Sönke Neitzel and psychologist Harald Welzer, in more measured terms as ‘a significant contribution to the mental history of the Wehrmacht’. It is already evident that the title and the dust jacket invite misreadings and a misuse of *Soldaten*, perverting it to a sensational exposé of the German army when it is nothing of the sort.

On first glance the methodology of *Soldaten* seems to replicate that of ‘*Opa war kein Nazi*’ [‘Grandpa was no Nazi’] (1) whose authors proceeded from a sample of 40 families covering three generations: those who were adults during the Third Reich, their children and grandchildren. Individual and group interviews were recorded and analyzed, centering on the re-telling of events, experiences and actions during the Third Reich. In *Soldaten* existing transcripts of German POWs’ conversations amongst each other in British and American captivity are analyzed, centering on the re-telling of experiences, actions, opinions and perceptions of soldiers at war. In both books the interviews are cross-checked against the contemporary written record to help identify where informants had embellished or even invented their testimony.

In *'Opa war kein Nazi'* the intergenerational retelling and remaking of history is central. The conclusions are that a tendency to make a hero out of the ancestor progresses with each generation. Collaboration and participation in National Socialist Germany are downplayed, and acts or intentions of resistance inflated or invented. Historical information that challenges this progressive intergenerational whitewash provokes emotional resistance and we can expect that the next generation will continue this development. The types of challenges posed by *'Opa war kein Nazi'* extend far beyond Third Reich historiography and have relevance to the analysis of other group-narrating enterprises, e.g. Australian public discourses of European settlement and Aboriginal dispossession

In *Soldaten* the raw material is transcripts of covert surveillance; British and American secretly taped conversations of POWs for the purpose of gaining information that would aid the Allied war effort. The limitations of this material are set out thoughtfully in the book: transcripts were only made of what was deemed 'relevant'. Thus, the extensive conversations about women, sex and rape are marginal in the selections of what was kept. Agent provocateurs were sent amongst the POWs, initiating topics. It is also recognized that defiance in captivity and a desire to get on well with fellow POWs, with whom one was locked up for duration unknown, limited disagreements. Yet the constraints of the POW camps are of secondary importance for this study. No explicit examination is undertaken of this 'total institution' and its consequences for the way that experiences were framed and narrations coloured. An analysis of POWs' identities could have utilized a large body of scholarly work, particularly on German POWs in captivity in the United States.⁽²⁾ Instead the book tries to excavate the layers of feelings and perceptions of the soldiers. The methodology to peel back the layers of narration by POWs to find those of soldiers is reflexive, sound and thoughtful. It is, nevertheless, a reconstruction. In *'Opa war kein Nazi'* the situation and context in which the narrations were constructed is the point of analysis. In *Soldaten* the situation of men in captivity is secondary. Interestingly, a far greater number of female historians undertake studies of POWs and Internees than of military operations, at least in Australia. Emasculated, captive men seem a feminine domain, while the battlefield is a masculine prerogative. The choice of the two male German scholars to focus on fighting men, *Soldaten*, seems to have been rewarded in the reception of the book. It has been translated into English within one year of its German publication (*'Opa war kein Nazi'* is still only available in German), and *Soldaten* has received breathless reviews, calling the study 'sensational' for all the wrong reasons, namely that it reveals finally that the German Army committed war crimes. The *Observer's* sub headline, for example, reads 'Conversations between German POWs recorded by British intelligence reveal a chilling attitude to mass murder', and Con Coughlin in *The Telegraph* 'hails a chilling account of German atrocity'.⁽³⁾ The book is more humble in its claims, and gives credit to other historians who have assembled this argument through painstaking historical work.

The British material used contains thousands of individual accounts and conversations, the American some 100,000 pages. Thus Neitzel in a earlier publication concentrated on some 200 conversations among German Generals.⁽⁴⁾ For this task the archival background material was extensive. Files on officers are open and available in the German archive, while material on ordinary soldiers, as Bryan Mark Rigg's book on Jewish Germans in the *Wehrmacht* shows, is hard to come by. Most of Rigg's archival material is either on officers, or from private holdings.⁽⁵⁾

In *Soldaten* transcripts from conversations of a wide range of military personnel are used, including rank and file, army, air force and navy. With such overwhelmingly vast material the authors are confronted with the problem of analyzing the particular and finding the general, a fine balance they undertake to maintain by giving us quotes and summary comments on both exceptional views and opinions held by most men. Yet, ultimately, this study gives way to a desire to find general trends following a German academic tradition, in contrast to a tendency in English-speaking studies to focus on the particular. In the short section on cultural differences of German, Italian and Japanese soldiers, which I regard the weakest of the book, however, the authors depart from their generalizing trend to spell out particularities of German soldiers. This, I believe, is a real pity. It contradicts one of the authors' central conclusions that it was not ideology, but the reality of war and group behavior within it, that enabled violence and war crimes. Bryan Mark Rigg's study comes to a similar conclusion, namely that belonging to a specific military group would override racial ideology and

Third Reich laws. German army officers tended to support, shield, and protect soldiers of Jewish heritage who were part of their unit.

I cannot quite see the need by the authors to introduce a specific German-ness into the equation, especially on a slim picking of comparative studies into Italian and Japanese soldiers' mentality. In addition, especially when analyzing Italian soldiers' accounts, the authors lack a sense of humor. This might seem strange thing to say, for grave topics are discussed in this volume, but really, how can an account that pokes fun at Germans by an Italian POW be summarized with the comment that obviously the Italian 'valued bravery and persistence in battle' (p. 288)? It raises the question of whether the authors overlooked or ignored sarcasm and irony in other parts of the transcripts.

The question of what the specific impact of German-ness is, what this entails, and whether it predisposed German *Soldaten* to commit violence and war crimes of course picks up on a longer debate on the German *Sonderweg*. Daniel Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* concludes that Germans were different to their fellow Europeans, and that it was Antisemitism that paved the way to genocide and the Holocaust.⁽⁶⁾ Neitzel and Welzer side to a large degree with a different argument, namely Joanna Bourke's, that a willingness to kill and even enjoy it grows out of the military structures that emphasize group belonging, and experiences of fighting, killing and death.⁽⁷⁾ Thus, *Soldaten* argues, ideology, particularly Antisemitism, does not explain German soldiers' actions. Anti-Nazis and Nazis alike killed civilians, and anti-Semites and those free(er) of Antisemitism collaborated in the Holocaust. Further, and here the authors depart from Bourke's results, German soldiers did not seem to need extended initiation into obedience, fighting and killing. The German *Sonderweg* was a militarization of German society, beginning in the 1860s and 1870s, that made the transition from civilian life into military life easy and smooth.

It is at this point that I would have firstly liked some comparisons to be made, especially with conscripts, for example during the Vietnam war, to see if integration into military group belonging and army life, and a self-identification as 'soldier', are not more rapid than the authors claim, and not dependent on prior experiences of a martial civilian culture. Secondly I would have liked, as stated earlier, a more extensive debate about the impact of captivity. In my own work on internment of civilians I examined camp structures and transnational influences, and their effect on heterogeneous groups of German men and women, some who had lived in Australia and others who were brought to Australia from Palestine, Iran, and New Guinea. Internment fostered group belonging and ardent German patriotism, so that Australian army dossiers concluded that the camp was 100 per cent pro-Nazi, and needed no segregation.⁽⁸⁾ How much of the more salacious and graphic accounts of violence and killing have their genesis not in soldiers' feelings and perceptions, but in that of captive POWs?

The concluding section of *Soldaten* includes a short transcript of a US helicopter crew firing on civilians in Baghdad in 2007, and the authors apply their findings to contemporary situations. The choice of an air force example is telling. Throughout the book conversations by members of the German navy, army and air force, as well as of the SS, are analyzed, and differences between these groups are drawn out. In analyzing motivations for killing and perceptions of the victims, the authors in the first part of the book (which is devoted to actions) use mostly narrations by members of the armed forces, particularly for accounts of the Holocaust. But in the second part, which focuses on perceptions, group belonging and the impact of ideology, the authors rely a lot on accounts by fighter pilots and members of the German air force. Here Neitzel and Welzer find distance and closeness, identification of individual 'targets' and a general lack of empathy with these targets as human beings, the problem of killing civilians as opposed to enemy combatants, and the space for individual decisions and actions. Thus, I would argue, it is not the German army, the *Wehrmacht*, that is at the centre of this study, but the *Luftwaffe*.

In short, this study is a fine starting point for further inquiries into soldiers' and POWs' mentality. It has to be read as carefully, thoughtfully and critically as the authors' assembly of their arguments, where guesses and possibilities are clearly marked and commented on. This book invites engagement and deserves critical reflection. Breathtaking praise for its supposed sensational revelations does it a great disservice.

Notes

1. Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, 'Opa war kein Nazi': [*Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*](#). [2] (Frankfurt and Main, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For example, Allen V. Koop, *Stark Decency: German Prisoners Of War in a New England Village* (Hanover, NH, 1988); Ron Robin, *The Barbed-Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States during World War II*, (Princeton, NJ, 1995); Arthur Lee Smith, *The War for the German Mind: Re-educating Hitler's Soldiers* (Oxford, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ben Hutchinson, 'Soldaten: On fighting, Killing and Dying by Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer – review', *The Observer*, 30 September 2012; Con Coughlin, 'Soldaten by Sonke Neitzel and Harald Welzer: review', *The Telegraph*, 30 October 2012.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Sönke Neitzel, *Abgehört: Deutsche Generäle in Britisher Kriegsgefangenschaft, 1942–1945*. (Berlin, 2009.)[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Bryan Mark Rigg, *Hitler's Jewish Soldiers: the Untold Story of Nazi Racial Laws and Men of Jewish Descent in the German Military* (Lawrence, KS, 2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, NY, 1996).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London, 1999).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Christine Winter, 'The long arm of the Third Reich: internment of New Guinea Germans in Tatura', *Journal of Pacific History*, 38, 1 (2003), 85–108.[Back to \(8\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/sep/30/soldaten-neitzel-welzer-holocaust-review> [3]

Daily Mail

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2206982/I-liked-shoot--women-kids--kind-sport-Secret-Nazi-tapes-reveal-ordinary-German-soldiers-responsible-war-crimes-just-SS.html> [4]

Daily Express

<http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/350657/Book-Review-Soldaten-On-fighting-killing-and-dying> [5]

Spectator

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/8659491/eavesdropping-on-the-enemy/> [6]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/historybookreviews/9601401/Soldaten-by-Sonke-Neitzel-and-Harald-Welzer-review.html> [7]

Sunday Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9633132/Soldaten-by-Sonke-Neitzel-and-Harald-Welzer-review.html> [8]

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[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/sep/30/soldaten-neitzel-welzer-holocaust-review>

[4] <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2206982/I-liked-shoot--women-kids--kind-sport-Secret-Nazi-tapes-reveal-ordinary-German-soldiers-responsible-war-crimes-just-SS.html>

[5] <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/350657/Book-Review-Soldaten-On-fighting-killing-and-dying>

[6] <http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/8659491/eavesdropping-on-the-enemy/>

[7] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/historybookreviews/9601401/Soldaten-by-Sonke-Neitzel-and-Harald-Welzer-review.html>

[8] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/9633132/Soldaten-by-Sonke-Neitzel-and-Harald-Welzer-review.html>