



Reading and studying war letters of WWII – From  
collecting, digitizing, transcribing to reading and  
understanding of ego-documents of Luxembourgish  
conscripts

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# Analysis of ego-documents - here letters

Latzel: always consider the experience (Erfahrungsgeschichte)

- Question about the experiences and interpretation of meaning:
- Naming experiences (Sinndeutung), such as hunger, cold, joy over mail, homesickness, violence and death
- define experience periods (Erlebnisphasen)
  - training, front (here distinguish the places, like Eastern front before and after winter 1942/43 (Stalingrad)),
- “experience community” - age, social class, military ranks, regional/national background
- approach in language/wording analysis - how Germans are defined? How the “enemy”?  
Copying of propaganda language? We/they?
- How to interpret the actions?
  - relevance in the moment? For him/her?
  - “social collective knowledge”

# Research letters

Maintaining a connection to the homeland: About receiving and sending field post, affection, reassurance, longing to return home. In addition, there are 'everyday topics' such as daily duty ("marching", "keeping watch", etc.) and the weather. The corresponding hypothesis is confirmed : The field letters are meant to satisfy basic needs of communication. Certain basic topics have a significant part; they serve to assure mutual attachment and to maintain communication. The letters should give a sign of life.

Humburg, Martin. *Das Gesicht Des Krieges. Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten Aus Der Sowjetunion 1941-1944*. Opladen; Wiesbaden, 1998.

# Limits of Research

- Censorship (external)
- but also the internal censorship - not to worry the family at home
  - I am fine....
- Martin Humburg confirms this finding by pointing out that the trivial and infantile aspects of a soldier's life and everyday war life are widely described in the field letters, but not the "primary realities" of war, namely the armed struggle against the enemy, the mass deaths, the pain and cries of the wounded. Only when the borderline case occurred, when the hope of life sank, did the extremely stressful experiences with the reality of war also push to be communicated (Humburg, Martin. *Das Gesicht Des Krieges. Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten Aus Der Sowjetunion 1941-1944*. Opladen; Wiesbaden, 1998)
- the core of the war, are usually not "put into words". Anyone who wants to recognise and describe the whole reality of the Second World War must therefore know that even the field post letters of ordinary soldiers, which form the most important source material for this book, cannot tell the whole truth (Humburg, Martin. *Das Gesicht Des Krieges. Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten Aus Der Sowjetunion 1941-1944*. Opladen; Wiesbaden, 1998)

# Research possibilities

-”In this way, the life documents from the war reveal both different perceptions and different realities as well as collective patterns of thought and behaviour”

-”The subjective perception and its representation in the letters cannot be emphasised enough. The self-testimonies do not answer questions about the actual reality of the war, but rather about events that were experienced by contemporary witnesses and manifested in private communication (and thus had a personal relevance within the sender-receiver constellation).”

Kilian, Katrin. “Die Anderen Zu Wort Kommen Lassen. Feldpostbriefe Als Historische Quelle Aus Den Jahren 1939 Bis 1945. Eine Projektskizze.” *Militaergeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 60, no. 1 (2017): 153–66. <https://doi.org/10.1524/mgzs.2001.60.1.153>.

# Example – Latzel based his analysis on categories to the individual experience of the soldiers

The war and soldier life

- military and being soldier
- military structure
- reason for the war

Death and violence

- to kill
- danger of being killed

War of extermination

- crimes

Enemies

- portrays of enemies

Occupation/Power/Dominion

- Nazi Ideology
- relation to locals

Individual emotion

- Sense, motivation
- getting you used to the war, getting dull
- belief - Nazi ideology and religion, higher cause?
- masculinity - brave, honor, loyalty

# Research questions:

- What do we learn about the everyday life of war?" (We already know a lot about that, too.)
- "Why did the letter writer communicate exactly this to the recipient and what could he have deliberately concealed and why?"
- What is the social function of the concrete correspondence?"
- "What do the content and language seem to say and what do they really say about identifications?"
- What is the development of the need to make certain identifications, pseudo-identifications, reassurances and the like?

# Experientiality (Erfahrungsgeschichte)

- actor has socially generated knowledge was individually acquired - collective knowledge (background)
- Parallel to situational opportunism (Fickers/Brüll) - decision for a certain action depends on the situation and on the individual factor, but also on the collectively acquired knowledge (home, society, family).

## GENERAL - METHODOLOGY

Level 0 : What happened

Level 1 : summary - paraphrase

Level 2 : intention

Level 3 : non intentional

Level 4: relation - pattern of communication

Level 5: Generalize - Structure

Level 6: keywords - our research questions

# Feldpostbrief-Forschung

Latzel, Klaus. "Kriegsbriefe Und Kriegserfahrung: Wie Können Feldpostbriefe Zur Erfahrungsgeschichtlichen Quelle Werden?" *Werkstatt Geschichte*, 1999.

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Löffler, Klara. *Aufgehoben: Soldatenbriefe Aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg Eine Studie zur Subjektiven Wirklichkeit Des Krieges*, 1992.

Wagner, Melanie. "Private Schriftlichkeit : Sprachwahl Und Verschriftlichungsstrategien in Feldpostbriefen Des 2. Weltkrieges," 2004, 1–6.

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Wagner, Melanie, and Winifred V. Davies. "The Role of World War II in the Development of Luxembourgish as a National Language." *Language Problems and Language Planning* 33, no. 2 (2009): 112–31. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lplp.33.2.02wag>.