

**Inclination Toward Death:
Suicide, Sacrifice, and State Collapse in First World War Germany**

by

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The judge smiled. Men are born for games. Nothing else. Every child knows that play is nobler than work. He knows too that the worth or merit of a game is not inherent in the game itself but rather in the value of that which is put at hazard. Games of chance require a wager to have meaning at all. Games of sport involve the skill and strength of the opponents and the humiliation of defeat and the pride of victory are in themselves sufficient stake because they inhere in the worth of the principals and define them. But trial of chance or trial of worth all games aspire to the condition of war for here that which is wagered swallows up game, player, all.

—Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985)

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Dedication

For Cheyenne Pettit: I could not have completed it without you.

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Abstract

“Inclination Toward Death: Suicide, Sacrifice, and State Collapse in First World War Germany” examines the history of self-destruction in German-controlled territory from 1914 to 1918. It reconstructs the historically-situated meanings and experiences of wartime suicide, their relations to the concept of “sacrifice,” and how these relations ultimately influenced and inflected the political behavior of Germany’s denizens. Drawing on the surviving military, juridical, and medical records on German suicides; diaries, letters, photographs, and other personal documents held in both private and public archives, as well as published collections; the extant statistical data; and a variety of governmental and military records, “Inclination Toward Death” explores how moral assumptions about the righteousness of sacrificing one’s life for a higher cause combined with state-mandated bureaucratic and military practices to enable both soldiers and civilians to categorically separate “suicide” from “sacrifice” throughout the war. While the deaths contemporaries defined as “suicides” were rare and exceptional, they highlighted the specific ways that the political and military authorities’ wartime decisions engendered the mass shattering of socio-emotional ties and moral certainties, which proved integral to the Imperial regime’s delegitimization and eventual collapse.

Simultaneously, “Inclination Toward Death” examines the bureaucratic, archival, and historiographical processes through which the Imperial state attempted to obscure these histories of self-destruction and the larger socio-emotional devastation left in their wake, the role those processes played in the history of the regime’s collapse, and their continuing effects in the

present literature. When the latent, implicit self-destructiveness of the sacrificial consensus of 1914 became blatant and overt over the course of 1918, sacrifice “became” suicide, and Germans rejected calls for a “final battle,” ultimately refusing to continue fighting in 1918—collapsing the regime and permanently removing Imperial Germany from the geo-political map in the process. From the very beginning of the war, suicide was not the inverse or “flipside” of sacrifice, but its largely unspoken, implicit shadow: what sacrifice risked becoming in the absence of an adequate victory. “Inclination Toward Death” thus explores how and why the Imperial German regime ended in the course of the First World War, how this violent end inflected the specific conditions of possibility for the new Weimar regime, and what this history of death and erasure can illustrate about the methodological possibilities of history and the meta-historical nature of social and political power.

Introduction:
Suicide, Self-Destruction, and Wartime
(in Germany, 1914-1918)

Lena: Why did my husband volunteer for a suicide mission?

Dr Ventress: Is that what you think we're doing? Committing suicide?

Lena: You must have profiled him. You must have assessed him. He must have said something.

Dr Ventress: So you're asking me as a psychologist?

Lena: Yeah.

Dr Ventress: Then, as a psychologist, I think you're confusing suicide with self-destruction. Almost none of us commit suicide, and almost all of us self-destruct. In some way, in some part of our lives. We drink, or we smoke, we destabilize the good job... and a happy marriage. But these aren't decisions, they're... they're impulses.

—*Annihilation* (2018)

Messy, isn't it?

—Apocryphal suicide note of Richard Brautigan (1984)

This is a story about loss. More specifically, it is a story about loss in war. It is, in the first place, a social and cultural history of German suicides during the First World War—that “great seminal catastrophe” of the twentieth century and Germany’s “unmastered defeat” (*unbewältigte Niederlage*).¹ It is a study of those citizens and subjects of Imperial Germany, the *Kaiserreich*, who took their own lives from 1914 to 1918; how their self-inflicted deaths were interpreted by both state and non-state actors; and the ultimate historical significance and consequences of these

¹ The former is George Kennan’s famous phrase; the latter, the apt title of Gerd Krumeich’s recent monograph: George F. Kennan, *The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875–1890* (Princeton University Press, 1979), 3; Gerd Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage: Das Trauma des Ersten Weltkriegs und die Weimarer Republik* (Freiburg: Herder, 2018).

acts of self-destruction and the interpretations they generated. It is about “loss” as both a euphemism for and description of death, and its multiple and particular significances in wartime: loss of a life; loss of a war; loss of a regime.

This history of suicide is necessarily part of a larger history of the experiences and encounters with death the specific circumstances of the First World War engendered for those under the official political authority of the Kaiser. Suicide was only one cause of permanent, irrevocable loss from 1914-1918, and an exceptional one at that. Contemporaries certainly counted suicides a rarity, in a literal sense. According to the Imperial Statistical Office (*Statistischen Reichsamt*), 58,674 Germans killed themselves between 1914 and 1918: 38,909 men and 19,765 women.² Soldiers’ suicides were, allegedly, even rarer. In 1923, the Statistical Office published an estimate of 5,106 German soldiers’ suicides from 1914-1919.³ A decade later, the official *Medical Report on the German Army in the World War (Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkrieg 1914/18)* recorded that 3,828 soldiers killed themselves between August 1914 and July 1918.⁴ By contrast, 70,278 German soldiers died in combat during the war’s first three months alone.⁵ Indeed, historians at the conflict’s centennial estimate

² Statistisches Reichsamt, *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 276 (1922): 393; Statistisches Reichsamt, *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 316 (1926): 34*. The former contains data for 1906-1916; the latter for 1913-1923. The data for the overlapping years 1913-1916 are identical. It is unclear the extent to which these figures incorporate military suicides. In the table breaking down suicides and suicide rates for the various German states and regions from 1913 to 1916, footnote 2 states that in the 1916 suicide numbers for the Kingdom of Bavaria there are “149 suicides of military personnel, whose division between Bavaria to the right of the Rhine and Bavaria left of the Rhine could not be established. [149 Selbstmorde von Militärpersonen, bei denen eine Scheidung rechts des Rheins und Bayern l. d. Rh. nicht durchgeführt werden konnte.]” *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 276, 394. This is the only mention of military personnel in either of the relevant statistical compilations by the *Reichsamt*. It thus implies that the numbers do include the suicides of soldiers and sailors that took place in one of the relevant states, though this would mean it likely still excludes any suicides at the front or at sea. The number provided does accord almost exactly with that found in the surviving statistical indices of suicides in the Bavarian Army, which counted a total of 150 suicides for 1916: Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv (hereafter: BHStA IV), Kriegsministerium (hereafter: M Kr) 10918 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1916.”

³ Statistisches Reichsamt, *Wirtschaft und Statistik* Jahrg. 3, Nr. 18 (26 September 1923): 583.

⁴ Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 27.

⁵ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 140*-143*.

that a total of 2,037,000 German soldiers died during the war,⁶ while the *Sanitätsbericht* itself put the figure only slightly lower at 1,900,876.⁷ Officially recorded suicides accounted for only a fraction of a percent of Germany's military losses during World War I.⁸

It would be a mistake, however, to infer from this official statistical insignificance a larger *historical* insignificance. These suicides were exceptional and extreme acts to be sure, as they have been in virtually all times and places. Indeed, it is almost trite to point out that most people do not kill themselves, even in periods of perceived suicide epidemics.⁹ Yet scholars of suicide have long recognized that the act of self-destruction is one inherently weighted with social, cultural, and political significance, to say nothing of its emotional and moral significance to both the decedent and those left behind. After the first wave of this historiography solidified in the 1980s,¹⁰ its initial focus on the question of the “secularization” of suicide in early-modern Europe was, in essence, a narrowed version of this question: what the history of suicide could

⁶ Antoine Prost, “The Dead,” in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 588, Table 22.1.

⁷ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 12. The adjective “slightly” here is meant only in the quantitative context of mass death, wherein all estimates circle around 2 million. Obviously the deaths of 137,000 people is not “slight” in any other sense.

⁸ Thus, according to the *Medical Report*, suicides accounted for only 0.20 percent (i.e. one-fifth of one percent) of total deaths in the army from August 1914 to July 1918.

⁹ For instance, while suicide rates have been increasing in the US since 1999, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide was only the 10th leading cause of death in 2015, representing 1.6% of deaths nationwide: National Center for Health Statistics, *Health, United States, 2016: With Chartbook on Long-term Trends in Health* (Hyattsville, MD, 2017): 18. On the increase in US suicide rates and perceptions of an epidemic, see: Ritu Prasad, “Why US suicide rate is on the rise,” *BBC News*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44416727>; “Suizidraten steigen in den USA stark an,” *Der Spiegel Online*, 3 July 2018, <https://www.spiegel.de/gesundheit/psychologie/usa-suizid-zahlen-steigen-stark-an-a-1216341.html>. Significantly, these were all developments prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

¹⁰ Some of the most important of these earlier works include: Richard Cobb, *Death in Paris: The Records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine, October 1795-September 1801, Vendémiaire Year IV-Fructidor Year IX* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, and Murder in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Markus Schär, *Seelennöte der Untertanen: Selbstmord, Melancholie und Religion im alten Zürich, 1500-1800* (Zurich: Chronos Verlag, 1985); Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Georges Minois's *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999 [1995]) is a survey of the history of suicide primarily built on this earlier literature.

reveal about the deeper shifts in the socio-cultural and political structures of these societies.¹¹

Suicides were not themselves causal in these larger reconfigurations, but they did shine a particularly revealing light on them.

While immensely valuable, many of these studies focus only on “completed suicides,” i.e. “successful” suicide attempts that result in death.¹² At the same time, and perhaps as a result, these studies tend to accept the categorization of their historical actors: what counts as a suicide is what contemporaries recorded as one. Especially as more recent histories of suicide tend to contextualize it within—and use it as a vehicle to explore—the history of medicine, and more particularly the history of psychology, the category of “suicide” itself is often taken as a given.¹³ This trend continued even after the historiographical focus shifted into the twentieth century—

¹¹ The debate around the “secularization” of suicide began with the publication of Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy’s *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), which set the agenda for much of the research on the topic into the twenty-first century, including a decided focus on the early modern period. See, for example, the indicative title of the 2004 volume edited by Jeffrey Watt: Jeffrey R. Watt, ed., *From Sin to Insanity: Suicide in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). Some of the most important works focused specifically on German-speaking Europe include: Vera Lind, *Selbstmord in der Frühen Neuzeit: Diskurs, Lebenswelt und kultureller Wandel am Beispiel der Herzogtümer Schleswig und Holstein* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Jeffrey R. Watt, *Choosing Death: Suicide and Calvinism in Early Modern Geneva* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2001); Andreas Bähr, *Der Richter im Ich: Die Semantik der Selbsttötung in der Aufklärung* (Göttingen: Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 2002). More recently, this secularization paradigm has been challenged by a ‘hybridization’ thesis, spearheaded by Susan Morrissey, which argues that both “sin” and “insanity” conceptions of suicide coexisted together through the Enlightenment: Susan K. Morrissey, *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹² Ursula Baumann’s 2001 study is exemplary in this regard. It also remains a significant touchstone within the literature due to its impressive depth of research, and is a rare study that bridges the early-modern and modern periods. Like Morrissey, Baumann’s focus is chiefly on the nineteenth century: Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod: Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 2001).

¹³ Beyond the older historiography cited above, one can see the continuation of this trend in two recent works on suicides during the American Civil War, one on the North, the other on the South: Larry M. Logue and Peter Blanck, *Heavy Laden: Union Veterans Psychological Illness, and Suicide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Diane Miller Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018).

with its legacy of world war, political violence, and genocide.¹⁴ Indeed, those minimal works on suicide during the Great War—notably, all essays—follow this same pattern.¹⁵

This has obscured two foundational ambiguities which, perhaps ironically, imbue the act of self-destruction with much of its particular analytic significance. First, the definition of suicide is itself deceptively complex. Émile Durkheim’s famous 1897 study, for all its many faults, still productively captured this complexity in his definition of the term itself.¹⁶ Durkheim

¹⁴ Above all, the focus has shifted to Nazi Germany, though strikingly, the first exemplary monographs on Nazi Germany and the early Soviet Union appeared in consecutive years: Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kenneth M. Pinnow, *Lost to the Collective: Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism, 1921-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). Baumann’s earlier 2001 study also deals with the Nazi period, though relatively briefly: *Vom Recht*, 323-379. Approached from a very different methodological angle, Darcy Buerkle’s study of suicide and the work of the painter Charlotte Solomon is also noteworthy here: Darcy C. Buerkle, *Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and an Archive of Suicide* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013). More recently, Nicole Schweig has done a comparative historical study of suicide and masculinity in the *Wehrmacht* and the Navy that also centers on the NS-Zeit, despite its official longer time frame: Nicole Schweig, *Suizid und Männlichkeit: Selbsttötungen von Männern auf See, in der Wehrmacht und im Zivilen Bereich, 1893-ca. 1986* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2016). Finally, Florian Huber has explored suicide and self-destruction at the end of the Second World War in a more popular-historical vein: Florian Huber, *Promise Me You’ll Shoot Yourself: The Downfall of Ordinary Germans in 1945*, trans. Imogen Taylor (London: Allen Lane, 2019 [2015]).

¹⁵ E.g. Susanne Hahn, “Minderwertige, widerstandslose Individuen...’ Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Selbstmordproblem in Deutschland,” in *Die Medizin und der Erste Weltkrieg*, eds. Wolfgang U. Eckart and Christoph Gradmann (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1996): 273-297; Denis Rolland, “Le suicide aux armées en 1914–1918: Une première approche quantitative globale,” in *La Grande Guerre: Pratiques et expériences*, ed. Rémy Cazals, Emmanuelle Picard, and Denis Rolland (Laon, 2005): 269-280; Patricia E. Prestwich, “Suicide and French Soldiers of the First World War: Differing Perspectives, 1914-1939,” in *Histories of Suicide. International Perspectives on Self-Destruction in the Modern World*, eds. John Weaver and David Wright (University of Toronto Press, 2009): 135-155; Simon Walker, “‘Silent Deaths’: British Soldier Suicides in the First World War,” in *War Hecatombe: International Effects on Public Health, Demography and Mentalities in the 20th Century*, eds. Helena da Silva, Paulo Teodoro de Matos, and José Miguel Sardica (New York: Peter Land, 2019): 25-52. Suicide appears only fleetingly in Walker’s subsequent monograph, as his ultimate focus is elsewhere: Simon Harold Walker, *Physical Control, Transformation, and Damage in The First World War: War Bodies* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

¹⁶ While it still enjoys a prominent place in many studies of suicide (although often in a qualified or more elemental form), Durkheim’s approach has been under serious critique since the late 1960s, begun most prominently by the American Sociologist Jack Douglas. He argued that suicide statistics reflected not an objective sociological reality, but the assumptions, capacities, and interests of specific individuals in specific historical circumstances. See: Jack Douglas, *The Social Meanings of Suicide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). And while of course there are those who have done quality work using what one might call neo-Durkheimian methods, such as studies by Jeffrey Watt and Victor Bailey, the amount of spurious correlations one can make in regard to suicide statistics is quite staggering, e.g. “Males with tattoos are more likely to use guns in their suicide, while those with brown eyes are more likely to choose hanging or poison.” Mark Etkind, *...Or Not to Be: A Collection of Suicide Notes* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997): 13. Indeed, one seemingly needs to be fortunate enough to have a particularly robust statistical source base, which is a rarity for most places and time periods. See: Watt, *Choosing Death*; Victor Bailey, *“This Rash Act”: Suicide across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

defined “suicide” as “all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive [e.g. shooting oneself] or negative [e.g. starving oneself] act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result;” that is, as self-aware self-death.¹⁷ Intention has no place in the definition of suicide. Rather, the word describes a *spectrum of behaviors*, defined by points of intersection along two axes: the probability that a given action will result in one’s own death; and one’s knowledge and awareness of that probability. Second, suicide is inevitably situated within a broader spectrum of self-destructive behaviors and attitudes toward death which imbue it with its historical significance (and much else besides). As Róisín Healy notes, “[t]he ways in which individuals responded to deadly situations reveal as much about their attitudes toward death as successful suicides do.” Indeed, “in examining suicide, historians should recognize that it was normally just one of several options available to people in difficulty.”¹⁸ To understand the spectrum of actions coded and categorized as “suicide” thus requires attention to the broader spectrum of self-destructive behaviors of which “suicide” is only a part, and this in turn is only comprehensible when viewed in its larger historical context.

Thus the “object” of this study is what the essayist and Auschwitz survivor Jean Améry later termed an “inclination toward death” (*Todesneigung*): a continuum of self-destructive behaviors, at the far-end of which is *explicit self-destruction*—instances of self-aware self-death recorded as such by contemporaries. But this continuum encompasses much more than the expressly or obviously suicidal, including, importantly, behaviors which are overtly *oriented* toward life, but nonetheless *inclined* toward death: that is, cases of *implicit self-destruction*. Améry gives the example of Jean-Paul Sartre ingesting twenty-five amphetamine pills a day

¹⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951 [1897]): 44.

¹⁸ Róisín Healy, “Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Sept 2006): 919.

while writing the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* as a specific instance of someone “burning the candle at both ends” who, despite wanting to live and facing towards life, had nonetheless inclined himself in the direction of death through his actions.¹⁹ But this implicit range also includes those, in the most extreme instances, whose self-destruction was conditioned entirely externally, by the state. Indeed, the superlative example would be the so-called *Musselmänner* in Auschwitz, particularly as described by another writer and Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi.²⁰ In contrast to the Freudian concept of the ‘death drive’ (*Todestrieb*), Améry’s analytic and its central geometric metaphor not only emphasizes behavior and external socio-historical factors that condition self-destruction before internal psychological dynamics. It also inherently poses the question of the role of the state in each case of individual self-destruction.²¹

¹⁹ Jean Améry, *Hand an sich legen: Diskurs über den Freitod* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1976): 90-101. One might think of Christopher Hitchens for a more recent example of someone oriented toward life but inclined toward death: Christopher Hitchens, *Mortality* (New York: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2012). There is of course the risk of the *Todesneigung* becoming a tautological concept, since its apparent opposite—a *Lebensneigung*, or ‘inclination toward life’—is ultimately impossible: no one lives forever. Thomas Ligotti makes the point in an anti-natalist vein when he observes that “reproduction makes one an accessory before the fact to an individual’s death.” Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror* (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010): 79. Given that, when talking about the variations in *Todesneigungen*, what one is really talking about is orientation and inclination towards more or less life—a longer or shorter life—than about the possibility of an ‘inclination towards life’ that is the opposite of what Améry articulated; that is, about actions that will increase or decrease the probability of one remaining alive for a greater or lesser amount of time.

²⁰ “To sink is the easiest of matters; *it is enough to carry out all the orders one receives, to eat only the ration, to observe the discipline of the work and the camp.* Experience showed that only exceptionally could one survive more than three months in this way. All the musselmans [sic] who finished in the gas chambers have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; *they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down into the sea.*” Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1996 [1947]): 90. Emphasis added. It also strikes me as far from incidental that both Améry and Levi eventually killed themselves, and used a nearly identical geometric metaphor to describe the thanatological reality of Auschwitz, though exploring this in any detail would require a separate historical study.

²¹ As Mark Fisher forcefully argued prior to taking his own life like Améry and Levi before him, even taking a purely psychological approach to the subject requires attention to the political: “It would be facile to argue that every single case of depression can be attributed to economic or political causes; but it is equally facile to maintain—as the dominant approaches to depression do—that the roots of all depression must always lie either in individual brain chemistry or in early childhood experience.” Indeed, the deliberate eliding of the human—often mortal—costs of public policy perversely serves to insulate the very people responsible for creating the conditions under which increasing numbers of people turned to suicide from criticism. As Fisher wrote, “I don’t wish to argue here about whether or not specific cases of suicide were caused by the new legislation [which drastically reduced welfare benefits and eligibility]. But I do want to contest the bizarre idea that, in principle, suicides could not be adduced as evidence against the changes in the welfare system. If people dying as a consequence of the

This story of the *Kaiserreich*'s suicides during the First World War is thus simultaneously a story of the larger inclinations toward death of which they were a part and the relations between them: both the spectrum of individual self-destructive behaviors *and* the dynamic external conditions within which those individuals necessarily acted—and by which their courses of action were constrained and limited.²² But to study any aspect of modern wartime in whatever context, however nebulous that temporal designation has become by the twenty-first century,²³ is still to study a nexus of social, cultural, and political forces foundationally centered on death—and specifically on death in armed mass conflict.²⁴ As Michael Geyer observes in his reflections on the place of war in the context of general history, “[t]he study of war is thanatology more than anything else. In the twentieth century it is the study of mass death: its public uses and utilities for a democratic age.”²⁵ One could perhaps as easily

implementation of measures cannot count as evidence that the legislation has detrimental effects, what would?” Mark Fisher, *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*, ed. Darren Ambrose (New York: Repeater, 2018): 507-509.

²² As Marx famously noted, “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” Quoted in Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Autumn 2003): 113. It is worth noting that Johnson introduced this quote at the start of his article as the basis for a reformulation of the concept of agency within the historiography of American slavery, in contrast to an older historiographical mode which, he argues, “represents the alienation of enslaved people from the historical circumstances and ideological idioms of their own resistance, from Marx’s ‘circumstances’ and ‘traditions’ which interpellated them as subjects and conditioned the meaning of their actions.” *Ibid.*, 118.

²³ I use the adjective “modern” here and throughout specifically in the sense of *Neuzeit* (“new time”) as described by Reinhart Koselleck: Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 [1979]), esp. 9-25, 222-254. Crucial for this analysis, Koselleck’s conception foregrounds the shift in the experience and understanding of time as the definitive—in the sense of “definition”—aspect and essential undergirding condition of “modernity,” not progress towards a particular socio-political telos or a specific configuration of political economy. The efficacy of the modifier itself is, of course, a fraught and long-standing matter of debate, well exemplified in the now decade-old roundtable on the subject published in the *American Historical Review*: “AHR Roundtable: Historians and the Question of ‘Modernity,’” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 116, No. 3 (June 2011): 631-751. On the complexity of “wartime” in the twenty-first century: Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁴ John Keegan noted in 1993 that earlier societies also had armed conflict, but on a much smaller scale. The mass nature of (especially interstate) wars in the twentieth century, particularly given the prevalence of conscription in the century’s first half, is thus a defining characteristic: John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

²⁵ Michael Geyer, “War and the Context of General History in an Age of Total War: Comment on Peter Paret, ‘Justifying the Obligation of Military Service,’ and Michael Howard, ‘World War One: The Crisis in European

say that it is the study of the distance and relations between the realities of death in armed mass conflict and the “official” stories told about those losses; between the full embodied reality and consequences of lives ended through the violence of war and its “public uses and utilities.”²⁶

The story unfolds in two parts, each comprised of three chapters. Part I describes and analyzes the emergence of Imperial Germany’s inclination toward death at the start of World War I and how and why it persisted for the next four years. Chapter 1 begins the analysis with an examination of the recorded suicides of the war’s first months in the broader context of the “spirit of 1914” and the spontaneous mobilization for war. These suicides, while officially statistically insignificant, highlighted the deceptively intense social, emotional, and moral dislocation, confusion, and anxiety directly engendered by the German state’s decision for war—key factors in the erosion of the *Kaiserreich*’s legitimacy over the course of the conflict and latent vectors of the state’s ultimate collapse in 1918. But the particular spectrum that formed at the start of the war extended far beyond these explicit suicides and included a range of behaviors—the most prominent of which being volunteering for military service—which subtly brought self-destructive death into the socio-emotional center of daily life across *Front und Heimat*. But Germans across the political and social spectrum did not interpret these behaviors as

History’.” *Journal of Military History* Vol. 57, No. 5 (Oct. 1993): 162. Geyer further expounds on this thesis in: Michael Geyer, “Eine Kriegsgeschichte, die vom Tod spricht,” in *Physische Gewalt. Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, eds. Thomas Lindenberger and Alf Lüdtke (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995): 136-161.

²⁶ The French historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker identified a similar issue more specifically within the historiography of the First World War taking stock of the literature at the start of the new millenium: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 15-44. For too long, they argued, historians of the war had neglected the embodied reality—in the full psycho-somatic sense—of wartime violence, creating a sanitized portrait of the war, one which made fundamental aspects of its history incomprehensible in the process. Significantly, however, this was not solely an issue of historiography. As they point out, soldiers not only produced an unprecedented number of first-hand accounts of their war experiences during and after the conflict, but explicitly and self-consciously “set themselves up as historians of their own experience, reacting against and wanting to correct the distortions and misperceptions in the home front’s view of them.” *Ibid.*, 37. The resulting documentary corpus thus contains a number of specific silences surrounding taboo subjects and aspects of violence and the experience of warfare, including suicide, which has in turn resulted in a subsequent historiographical silence on those taboo topics.

self-destructive. Rather, those behaviors were perceived, coded, and experienced as acts of *national sacrifice*: an individual “giving something up” for the collective “higher good.” Personal self-destruction “became” national sacrifice in August 1914, and this sacrificial consensus remained a contested but essential factor in Germans’ willingness to endure.

The next two chapters then trace how and why this particular thanatological configuration—a wide spectrum of self-destructive behaviors experienced and coded as necessary sacrifices—persisted into 1918. Chapter 2 focuses directly on the state sphere. It analyzes the official reporting procedures for soldiers’ suicides during the war and the resulting narratives implicit in the shape, structure, and content of the resulting archival corpus. Reporting regulations and standardized forms implicitly separated suicides from other military losses by delimiting which deaths the German state considered legitimate war losses and which were not on the level of reporting procedure, before any given case was even recorded or any interpretation of the data offered. The soldiers and bureaucrats tasked with writing and filing these reports then followed this interpretative trajectory within the reports’ specific contents, implicitly absolving the state of any responsibility for these deaths in the process. In nearly every instance, the reports record no “service-related reasons” (*dienstliche Gründe*) for any of these suicides, instead explaining each case via the individual soldier’s psychological make-up, maladies, and personal circumstances—papering over the socio-emotional traumas wrought by Germany’s involvement in the war in the process. Through these epistemological means, I argue, the German state ultimately asserted itself as the moral arbiter of wartime death through its bureaucratic influence over archival production—a legacy still subtly present throughout the historiography.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus away from the explicit sphere of the state and towards the thanatological experiences and expressions of the population at large—and thus to both the endurance and accruing costs of the sacrificial consensus “on the ground.” To do so, the chapter analyzes soldiers’ suicide notes in their broader epistolary, material, and behavioral context, where the larger spectrum of wartime self-destruction appeared in microcosm all the way into the war’s final months. Soldiers deployed a common set of generic conventions across these missives, relying above-all on the highly-gendered emotions of “honor” and “shame” to explain their deaths to their loved ones, whether by suicide, in combat, or even by execution. As these letters physically circulated across front and home, they formed dynamic networks of wartime bereavement, linking soldiers and civilians in their mourning of the dead. The formation of this community in mourning, with the new political potentialities latent within this larger thanatological reconfiguration, thus constituted an essential affective precondition for the outbreak of the German Revolution later in 1918.

Part II chronicles the collapse of the sacrificial consensus over the course of 1918 and its most significant consequence: the permanent destruction of the Imperial state. These three chapters proceed chronologically. Chapter 4 begins in the winter of 1917-1918 and follows the preparations for and initial successes of Operation Michael, the first operation of the German Spring Offensive, which marked the final period of optimism both at the front and at home. But because that optimism was based on the prospective success of the offensive and an express understanding of it as the last great effort necessary to finally bring the conflict to an end, it contained latent seeds of immediate disillusionment. When the second operation, Georgette, also ground to halt in April, military morale began an irreversible downward slide from which the Army could not recover.

Chapter 5 covers the deceptively critical months between May and August 1918, which saw the emergence of a new pessimism throughout German society that intensified over the course of the summer. A spike in Field Army suicides in May signaled the onset of this pessimism, which brought with it a crucial change in soldiers' political behavior. Especially after the Allied victory in the Second Battle of the Marne in July, German soldiers began to behaviorally prioritize their own survival and refused—through a variety of behaviors, from malingering to desertion—to continue risking life and limb in a war they now knew they could not win. This significantly eroded military discipline by making it chiefly contingent on the extent to which following orders could increase a given soldier's chances of survival. But because these remained the actions of individuals and small groups, the threat to the state's survival that this hollowing out of command authority represented remained latent, even if it was now inching ever-closer to the surface.

Finally, Chapter 6 covers the last three months of the conflict, when the forces governing wartime Germany debated the efficacy of calling for a *levée en masse* to continue the war in the face of inevitable defeat. But when faced with this prospect of national self-destruction, the *Kaiserreich's* final leaders rejected the idea. Crucially, however, this rejection came months after the mass of combatants on the ground had already behaviorally repudiated the possibility. When the Naval High Command then issued their infamous order to attack the British on 29 October, it drove the final nail into the coffin of the regime's legitimacy by illustrating the deep, lethal disconnect between the military and political elite pulling the levers of state who continued to demand further sacrifices with no prospect of victory, on the one hand, and the soldiers and sailors on the ground tasked with making them on the others. It consequently imbued those combatants' refusal of further sacrifice with a new anti-state political content which shifted their

concerns with personal survival into the realm of collective politics—the critical spark for the sailors’ mutiny, the subsequent revolution, and the collapse of the *Kaiserreich*. Germans ended their war with a national rejection of national suicide, a rejection which was then intentionally buried by the very men responsible for Germany’s defeat and the Imperial regime’s destruction. Loss—both the word, with all it hides, and the event, with all it destroys—thus necessarily sits at the heart of this study. It is a story about death and erasure: the loss of lives and the memories of those lives; present histories and absent historiographies. It is the story of how all these losses—loss of a life; loss of a war; loss of a regime—related to one another. And it is a story about violence, the losses it causes, and the stories told about that violence and about those losses. As such it is a human story of a particular kind. Man need not be the cruelest animal to inflict and endure great suffering. He need only be a man, in all his ambiguous complexity and possibility, born into the right historical moment.

Part I: Formation and Endurance

Scholars have long noted the essential speed and spontaneity with which Europeans mobilized for war in 1914. Indeed, the French historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker noted in 2000 that more than any “war enthusiasm” as such, “the reason why the consensus in the belligerent countries was so effective and long-lasting, despite the suffering endured, was that it was basically driven by a spontaneous mobilization.”¹ Germany was no exception.² This spontaneity meant improvisation, as much for the generals and politicians as for the millions of

¹ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 110. By the early 2010s, the myth of ‘war enthusiasm’ had been dismantled for all the major belligerents who joined the war in 1914. See, *inter alia*: Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985 [1977]); Adrian Gregory, “British ‘War Enthusiasm’ in 1914: A Reassessment,” in *Evidence, History and the Great War*, ed. Gail Brayborn (New York: Berghahn, 2003); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Joshua Sanborn, “The Mobilization of 1914,” *Slavic Review* Vol. 59, No. 2 (Summer 2000): 290–315; Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mark Cornwall, “The Spirit of 1914 in Austria-Hungary,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* Vol. 55 No. 2 (2015): 7–21.

² Critical historical studies of Germany’s mobilization and “war enthusiasm” began in the 1970s and 1980s with social-historical studies focused primarily on German workers, but shifted to local studies of the *Augusterlebnis* per se in the 1990s. See: Klaus Dietrich Schwarz, *Weltkrieg und Revolution in Nürnberg. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1971); Volker Ullrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung vom Vorabend des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Revolution 1918/1919* (Hamburg: Lüdke, 1976); Volker Ullrich, *Kriegsalltag: Hamburg im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Cologne: Prometh, 1982); Friedhelm Boll, *Massenbewegungen in Niedersachsen 1906-1920. Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den unterschiedlichen Entwicklungstypen Braunschweig und Hannover* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1981); Michael Stöcker, *Augusterlebnis 1914 in Darmstadt. Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Darmstadt: E. Roether, 1994); Wolfgang Kruse, *Krieg und nationale Integration: eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedenschlusses 1914/1915* (Essen: Kartext Verlag, 1993); Christian Geinitz, *Kriegsfurcht und Kampfbereitschaft. Das Augusterlebnis in Freiburg. Eine Studie zum Kriegsbeginn 1914* (Essen: Kartext Verlag, 1998). A short, condensed selection from Kruse concisely summarizing his argument on ‘war enthusiasm’ appeared in English as: Wolfgang Kruse, “War Euphoria in Germany in 1914” in *The Outbreak of World War I: Causes and Responsibilities*, Sixth Edition, ed. Holger H. Herwig (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997): 98-104. The definitive and most significant work on the subject in English remains: Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

individuals whose lives had been suddenly upended.³ And it is here that the significance of these “enthusiastic” crowds resides, “for although they may have expressed the views of a minority, they were the advance guard of a widespread popular support for the war based on resignation, acceptance, sometimes despondency, and later a growing resolve,” as Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker aptly summarize.⁴ They found their equal and opposite in their fellow citizens dead by their own hand: the shadow of this vanguard.

³ Roger Chickering, “World War I and the Theory of Total War: Reflections of the British and German Cases, 1914-1915,” in *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 35-53; Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 95.

Chapter 1
The Suicidal “Spirit of 1914:”
Personal Self-Destruction as National Sacrifice

Anyone can end their own life—for good reasons, for bad reasons, or for no reason at all. Suicides can be intentional but also, sometimes, accidental—they can be personal or political, carefully planned or haphazard, tragic or comic, dramatic or absurd, spectacular or forgotten... Then there are the rest of us who die a little every day by living... There is a universality to suicide...

—Eugene Thacker, *Infinite Resignation* (2018)

On 19 February 1915, Heinrich Resch gave a lecture to a group of military doctors at the Bayreuth Garrison on the topic of “Mental Illnesses and War.” Resch, a psychiatrist working at the mental hospital in Bayreuth, began by observing that a rich literature on mental illness during the war had already emerged across a variety of media. He then noted that articles appearing in the daily newspapers “consistently tend to have an enlightening and partly calming effect on readers.” This was, in Resch’s view, “surely not unnecessary:”

Because if we take only the daily newspapers from the first days of the mobilization, there we read about many suicides, about many mental disorders [*Geistesstörungen*] which have allegedly occurred or arisen out of worry for relatives being pulled to the front and fear of an enemy invasion on German soil. We read among the death notices [*Todesanzeigen*] about the sudden and unexpected death of a young, powerful officer or a tried-and-true military official.¹

¹ Heinrich Resch, “Geisteskrankheiten und Krieg,” *Allgemeine Zeitschrift für Psychiatrie und Psychisch-Gerichtliche Medizin* Vol. 72, No. 2 (1915): 121. “Seit Kriegsbeginn ist schon eine reichhaltige Literatur über Geisteskrankheiten im Kriege, sei es in wissenschaftlichen, sei es in belletristischen Zeitschriften oder in Tageszeitungen erschienen. Die letzteren haben durchweg die Tendenz, aufklärend und zum Teil beruhigend auf die Leser zu wirken. Und das ist sicherlich nicht unnötig. Denn nehmen wir nur die Tageszeitungen der ersten Mobilmachungstage her, da lesen wir von vielen Selbstmorden, von vielen Geistesstörungen, die aus Sorge um ins Feld ziehende Angehörige und aus Angst vor dem Einfall der Feinde in deutsches Land geschehen oder entstanden sein sollten. Wir lesen unter den Todesanzeigen von dem plötzlich und unerwarteten Tod eines jungen, kräftigen Offiziers oder eines erprobten Militärbeamten.”

It was for this reason that Resch thought the question of “does a war really have an influence on mental-illness?” must “absolutely be answered with ‘yes.’”²

In many ways, Resch’s observations about the mental and emotional distress with which many Germans greeted the outbreak of war are unsurprising. It has now been decades since a group of revisionist historians definitively dismantled the narrative that a widespread, bellicose ‘war enthusiasm’ gripped Europeans in July and August of 1914, instead pointing to the complex, dynamic, and often contradictory emotions and reactions displayed at the outbreak of the war.³ In the German case, this revisionist literature culminated with Jeffrey Verhey’s 2000 monograph *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany*.⁴ Through a

² Ibid. “Hat ein Krieg wirklich Einfluß auf die Erkrankungen an Geistesstörung? | Die Frage ist unbedingt mit ja zu beantworten.”

³ In regard to Germany, this literature consists chiefly of histories focusing on a specific city or locality. These began in the 1970s and 1980s with social-historical studies focused primarily on German workers, but shifted to local studies of the *Augusterlebnis* per se in the 1990s. See: Klaus Dietrich Schwarz, *Weltkrieg und Revolution in Nürnberg. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Stuttgart: E. Klett, 1971); Volker Ulrich, *Die Hamburger Arbeiterbewegung vom Vorabend des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Revolution 1918/1919* (Hamburg: Lüdke, 1976); Volker Ullrich, *Kriegsalltag. Hamburg im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Cologne: Prometh, 1982); Friedhelm Boll, *Massenbewegungen in Niedersachsen 1906-1920. Eine sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den unterschiedlichen Entwicklungstypen Braunschweig und Hannover* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1981); Michael Stöcker, *Augusterlebnis 1914 in Darmstadt. Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Darmstadt: E. Roether, 1994); Wolfgang Kruse, *Krieg und nationale Integration: eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedenschlusses 1914/1915* (Essen: Kartext Verlag, 1993); Christian Geinitz, *Kriegsfurcht und Kampfbereitschaft. Das Augusterlebnis in Freiburg. Eine Studie zum Kriegsbeginn 1914* (Essen: Kartext Verlag, 1998). A short, condensed selection from Kruse concisely summarizing his argument on ‘war enthusiasm’ appeared in English as: Wolfgang Kruse, “War Euphoria in Germany in 1914” in *The Outbreak of World War I: Causes and Responsibilities*, Sixth Edition, ed. Holger H. Herwig (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997): 98-104. By the early 2010s, the myth of ‘war enthusiasm’ had been dismantled for all the major belligerents who joined the war in 1914. See, *inter alia*: Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1985 [1977]); Adrian Gregory, “British ‘War Enthusiasm’ in 1914: A Reassessment,” in *Evidence, History and the Great War*, ed. Gail Brayborn (New York: Berghahn, 2003); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Joshua Sanborn, “The Mobilization of 1914,” Scott J. Seregny, “Zemstvos, Peasants, and Citizenship: The Russian Adult Education Movement and World War I,” *Slavic Review* Vol. 59, No. 2 (Summer 2000): 290–315; Joshua Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse: The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mark Cornwall, “The Spirit of 1914 in Austria-Hungary,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* Vol. 55 No. 2 (2015): 7-21.

⁴ Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

thorough reading of the existing literature combined with assiduous archival research, Verhey convincingly illustrates that ‘war enthusiasm,’ to the extent it existed, was an almost entirely urban, middle-class phenomenon—albeit one that often transcended gender lines—found principally amongst the educated youth. Their “enthusiastic” displays emerged in reaction to, first, news of the Habsburg ultimatum to Serbia, and then, later, to the declaration of the state of siege on 31 July and the declaration of war the following day.⁵ The peak of this ‘enthusiasm,’ such as it was, came in the latter half of August in response to Germany’s early victories, not in the first days of the mobilization.⁶ Nonetheless, the myth of a universally-felt “spirit of 1914” attained “widespread acceptance” during the conflict, in large part because it served as a national narrative Germans could unite around in wartime as a way to give meaning to the murderous conflagration.⁷ As he summarizes, “[t]he essence of the August experiences was not so much enthusiasm but excitement, a depth of emotion, an intensity of feeling. It was a time lived and perceived by the participants as a historical time.... The Germans united, not in their enthusiasm but in their purpose.”⁸ Subsequent research has largely confirmed his characterization of the *Augusterlebnis* (‘August experience’), with only slight modifications.⁹

⁵ Ibid., 40, 60-65. Verhey also precisely dated the emergence of the myth of widespread war enthusiasm to 26 July, when the conservative press reported on the crowds of the previous evening: 31.

⁶ Ibid., 108-113.

⁷ Verhey further specifies two forms of the ‘Spirit of 1914’ myth: “There was a social myth, a collective narrative of a past event, a representation of the nation. Alongside it was what I term a transcendental myth, a claim that through faith one could overcome difficulties that could not be overcome through a more rational approach.... These two forms of myth served different functions, and met different intellectual and emotional needs. The social myth spoke to the need to represent to the German people the nation that they were fighting and dying for; the transcendental myth spoke to the need to find a way out of this crisis.” Ibid., 10-11.

⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁹ See, for instance, the historiographical summary in: Gerhard Hirschfeld, “‘The Spirit of 1914:’ A Critical Examination of War Enthusiasm in German Society” in *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Lothar Kettenacker, and Torsten Riotte (New York: Berghahn, 2011): 29-40. Alexander Watson has modified Verhey’s estimate and characterization of German war volunteers, but still agrees with his broader conclusions and characterization of the *Augusterlebnis*. For Watson’s initial critique, see: “‘For Kaiser and Reich’: The Identity and Fate of the German Volunteers, 1914-1918,” *War in History* Vol. 12, No. 1 (2005): 44-74. For his characterization of the reactions to the outbreak of war in Germany and Austria-Hungary, see: Alexander

What Resch's observations highlight, however, is that there were, at a minimum, three other noteworthy—and *noted*—phenomena occurring simultaneously in August 1914. Alongside the cheering crowds and patriotic rhetoric were “many” 1) suicides, 2) combat deaths, and 3) instances of intense emotional distress at both the potential and actual lethal consequences of the newly-begun conflict. Indeed, if the *current* was one of a rapidly-formed emotional and socio-moral consensus, “of a widespread popular support for the war based on resignation, acceptance, sometimes despondency, and later a growing resolve,” as the French historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker aptly summarize it,¹⁰ then the *undercurrent* was a substrate centered on self-destruction, mass death, and the resultant emotional trauma. Further, the Bayreuth psychiatrist at least implicitly understood that all three elements were not only *concurrent*, but inherently *interrelated*: together, they constituted a thanatological nexus at the

Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014): 73-103. More recently, Erik Ringmar has attempted a more foundational critique of this revisionist literature as a whole and its place as “the new orthodoxy.” Erik Ringmar, “‘The Spirit of 1914’: A Redefinition and a Defence,” *War in History* Vol. 25, No. 1 (2018): 26-47. However, while the broad thrust and direction of his intervention—a call to adopt the history of emotions as a fruitful lens with which to approach the “spirit of 1914”—is indeed a promising one, the specifics of his arguments are plagued by a host of historical, conceptual, and methodological problems to such an extent that his essay serves only to further solidify the conclusions of that “new orthodoxy.” He argues for a form of epistemological nihilism which would render almost all study of the past impossible, e.g. “Historians can have no direct experiences of the experiences of others since the others tend to be dead. What we have before us is instead the source material as passed down to us.... At best such texts contain a person’s reflections on her experiences...yet what the relationship is between felt experiences and experiences as reflected on we do not know.... By failing to make a distinction between felt and recounted experiences, we can conclude, the revisionists have stacked the odds in their favor.” *Ibid.*, 33. Notice, too, the implication that one might be able to have “direct experiences of the experiences of others” if those “others” are still alive. Further, his argument for the value of “public mood” as a superior analytic for understanding European responses to the outbreak of war in 1914 1) cites no primary sources of any kind; 2) relies entirely on an outdated secondary literature to broadly and reductively paint pre-war society in all of Europe as suffering from neurasthenia (e.g. “The public mood which we have described makes sense of the enthusiasm that existed in 1914 in a way which none of the existing revisionist accounts can do. We know why some people supported the war—because war was going to cure the emasculated city-dwellers of their neurasthenia; it was going to be a heroic, manly enterprise, which would take them far away from the routines of modern life and provide them with opportunities to assert themselves.” *Ibid.*, 45); and 3) completely ignores James Joll’s decades-old work on “the mood of 1914.” See: James Joll, *The Origins of the First World War*, 2nd Edition (Harlow: Pearson, 1992): 199-233. A condensed version of the relevant chapter appears as: James Joll, “The Mood of 1914,” in *The Outbreak of World War I: Causes and Responsibilities*, Sixth Edition, ed. Holger H. Herwig (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997): 15-20.

¹⁰ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 95.

center of the new quotidian reality of global war, one which rendered “enlightening” and “partly calming” newspaper articles “not unnecessary.”¹¹ It is thus all the more striking that while the latter two elements in Resch’s triad have received a great deal of attention within the literature, the former has virtually no presence at all in the historiographical record.¹² The suicides of 1914 have yet to make it into the investigations surrounding the ‘spirit of 1914,’ or indeed, almost any explorations about the war at all.

Here, however, I examine the ‘spirit’ and the suicides of 1914 *together* in the context of Germany’s spontaneous mobilization for war. What emerged rapidly in August 1914 was a constellation of behavioral inclinations toward death, conditioned generally by the German state and more particularly and immediately by the army, sitting within the broad socio-moral consensus of the ‘spirit of 1914.’ I argue that the recorded suicides from the war’s opening

¹¹ While the war was not ‘total’ right from the outset, it was global from its earliest days. For the war’s immediate worldwide scale, see: Hew Strachan, *The First World War Volume I: To Arms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Lawrence Sondhaus, *World War One: The Global Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jay Winter, ed. *The Cambridge History of the First World War, Volume 1: Global War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 403-555. For the ways the war increased in ‘totality’ through improvisation, see: Roger Chickering, “World War I and the Theory of Total War: Reflections of the British and German Cases, 1914-1915,” in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 35-53.

¹² There are a few exceptions to this general silence on the topic of the suicides of 1914. It is noteworthy, first, that the opening paragraph of Resch’s lecture appears in Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann’s edited primary source volume on German soldiers during World War I: Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds. *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010): 24. Their chapter on the war’s outbreak also contains two other excerpted sources that mention suicides: *Ibid.*, 33. Second, in his exhaustively researched ‘total history’ of wartime Freiburg, Roger Chickering notes almost in passing that a building contractor committed suicide in September 1914 in response to the early socio-economic disarray the war unleashed: Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 119. In both cases, suicide appears only fleeting and peripherally. While this is of course understandable given that the authors in question are engaged in other projects that aren’t focused on suicide, it is nonetheless indicative of suicide’s place within the literature more generally: in the rare places where it appears, it is in passing and on the periphery, not at the center of analysis. The literatures on combat deaths and psychological suffering during the war are both too vast to enumerate in detail here, especially the former, which has been represented in at least some form in military histories of the war since the conflict itself. Jay Winter provides a concise overview of the major developments in Great War historiography which attends to both of these topics in: Jay Winter, “General Introduction,” in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 1: Global War*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 1-10. For a more detailed analysis of the *longue durée* of First World War historiography, see: Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

month illustrate the intense social, emotional, and moral dislocation, confusion, and anxiety directly engendered by the German state's decision for war. While these suicides remained exceptional and extreme acts, in their extremity they formed a counter- or 'shadow' vanguard to the 'enthusiastic' crowds of that summer: a pessimistic counterpoint to the optimism of the war's early days. This shadow vanguard was then a harbinger of the mortal stakes of the conflict, both personally and politically, which highlighted key social, moral, and emotional vectors of the ultimate collapse of the Empire's legitimacy in 1918. But implicit self-destruction enveloped explicit suicide. But the suicidal substrate—the undercurrent of self-aware self-death—extended far beyond this shadow vanguard and actually included *the* quintessential 'war-enthusiastic' figure: the war volunteer (*Kriegsfreiwilliger*). While not recorded or understood as explicitly suicidal, volunteering for military service was the most prominent form of a widespread set of *implicitly* self-destructive behaviors, as the thousands of men who rushed to the colors that August did so despite widespread public knowledge of the new war's massive lethality. The personal self-destructiveness of the entire enterprise was in turn buried under and concealed by its emotional experience as a *Pflichtgefühl*—literally a 'feeling of duty'—and moral coding as national sacrifice in line with the 'spirit of 1914' by both state and non-state actors. The specific suicidal nature of the actions which that 'spirit' called for was thus rendered largely invisible, as the emotionally-powerful surface current imbued the new thanatological reality with a broadly palatable, transcendent meaning. But, as Resch intimated, that masking was not complete: contemporaries glimpsed the suicidal substrate in the implicit confusion, incomprehension, and depression of some at the broader rush to sacrifice at the outbreak of hostilities.

If one looks at what contemporaries *said*, one sees an explicit, conscious, and ultimately enduring *orientation* toward sacrifice, lauded as a moral good. If one looks at what

contemporaries *did*, one sees an implicit, unconscious, and equally enduring *inclination* toward death and suicide—the orientation reframing and therefore justifying the inclination. In August 1914, for millions of Germans, personal self-destruction “became” national sacrifice. As such, when the *Kaiserreich* entered into the struggle, it put its foundational legitimacy—and therefore survival—at stake.

1.1 Explicit Self-Destruction: The Suicides of 1914

To get an overview of the explicit end of the self-destructive spectrum, one must begin with the surviving suicide statistics, which best sketch this end of the continuum on the macro level. This inherently poses a methodological problem for the historian, however, as the surviving figures are limited in myriad ways. First, while German suicide statistics ultimately became reasonably reliable over the course of the twentieth century, suicide was massively underreported during the war.¹³ This problem was compounded by the fact that, as Christian Goeschel notes, “front-line soldiers could easily commit suicide by exposing themselves to enemy fire, and such cases would not be recorded as suicide.”¹⁴ Second, those suicide statistics that were compiled during the *Kaiserreich* usually recorded only absolute numbers, not rates, and thus did not account for relative population sizes, creating a skewed and often misleading picture. Finally, while some states did compile statistics on cause of death (and therefore suicide), these were regulated at the

¹³ For the (un)reliability of German statistical data on suicide, see: Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod. Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 2001): 204. On the underreporting of suicide in the German army during the war, see: Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 39-40; for the (under)reporting of soldiers’ suicides prior to the war: Andrew G. Bonnell, “Explaining Suicide in the Imperial German Army,” *German Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2014): 276-295.

¹⁴ Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 13.

state level and did not use any uniform criteria.¹⁵ The statistical data that survive from the period, then, are rough and imprecise. Nonetheless, they are indicative of some larger trends that cannot be accounted for via analysis of individual cases alone, although it is ultimately through contextual analysis of those cases that the significance and meaning(s) of these suicides emerges most clearly.¹⁶ That is to say, these suicide statistics are *suggestive*, not definitive: they sketch in outline the contours of the far end of the wartime inclination toward death, particularly at the moment it first emerged—explicit suicide in collective silhouette.

According to the Statistical Office of the Reich (*Statistischen Reichsamt*), both the suicide rate (Figure 1) and the suicide numbers (Figure 2) decreased from 1913 to 1914, with the rates and numbers for men and women falling comparably, though men killed themselves significantly more often than women did. From 1913 to 1914, the male suicide rate fell from 35 to 32.8 per 100,000—a decrease of 6.29%—while the female suicide rate fell from 11.7 to 11—a decrease of 5.98%. The overall suicide rate fell from 23.2 to 21.8 per 100,000 inhabitants, a decrease of 6.03%. But while the male suicide rate continued to decrease over the course of the war, the female rate actually increased beginning in 1916, when it reached its peak, and ended at

¹⁵ Susanne Hahn, “‘Minderwertige, widerstandslose Individuen...’ Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Selbstmordproblem in Deutschland,” in *Die Medizin und der Erste Weltkrieg*, eds. Wolfgang U. Eckart and Christoph Gradmann (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1996): 273-274.

¹⁶ Hahn summarizes the main point: “The significance of the suicide problem in the First World War is—apart from the fact that every suicide is linked to a tragic fate and end—not justified quantitatively.... Neither the movement of the numbers alone, nor primarily individual cases, but rather the reflection of the suicide phenomenon in the contemporary and subsequent society, as well as in medical science and practice are the object of the following considerations. [Die Bedeutung des Selbstmord Problems im Ersten Weltkrieg ist--abgesehen davon, dass mit jedem Selbstmord ein tragisches Schicksal verknüpft ist und endet—nicht mit Quantitäten begründbar.... Nicht allein also statistische Zahlenbewegungen, nicht primär Einzelschicksale, sondern die Reflexion des Selbstmordphänomens in der zeitgenössischen und nachfolgenden Gesellschaft sowie in der medizinischen Wissenschaft und Praxis sind Gegenstand der nachfolgenden Überlegungen.]” *Ibid.*, 273. My approach does differ from Hahn’s in that the history of medicine is at most a minor concern of mine, in part because I am able to build on the prior work of medical historians in addressing those aspects of my inquiry as they become relevant.

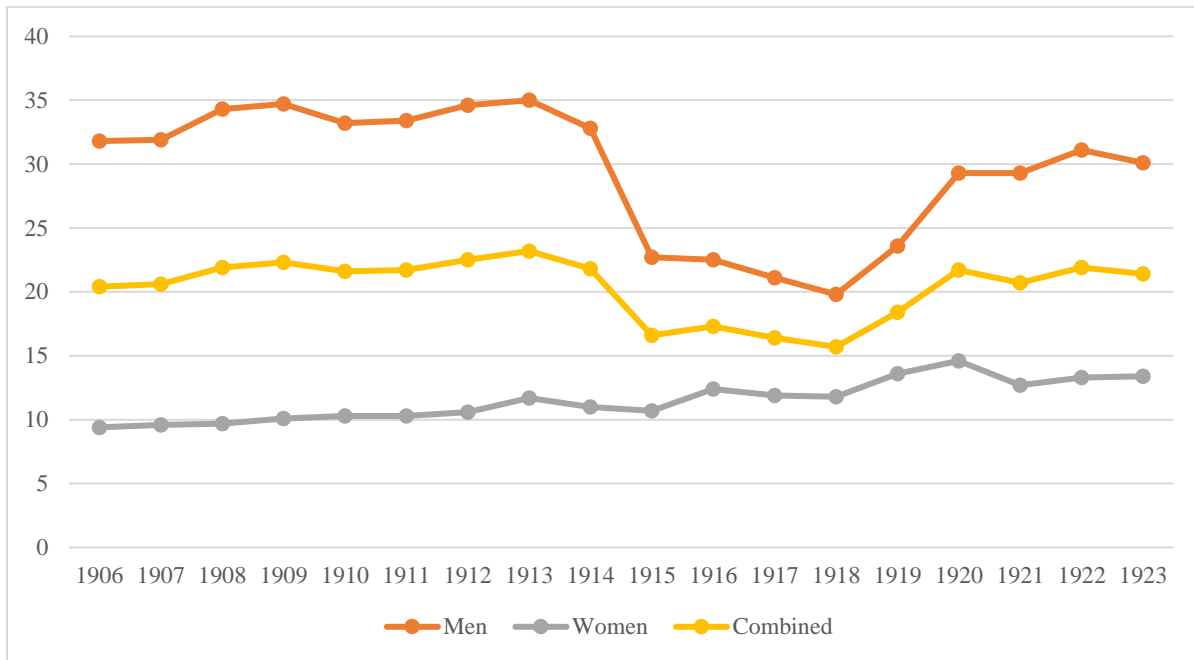


Figure 1: Suicide Rates in Germany per 100,000 Inhabitants (Statistisches Reichsamt, *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 276 (1922): 393; *Statistisches Reichsamt, Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 316 (1926): 34*)

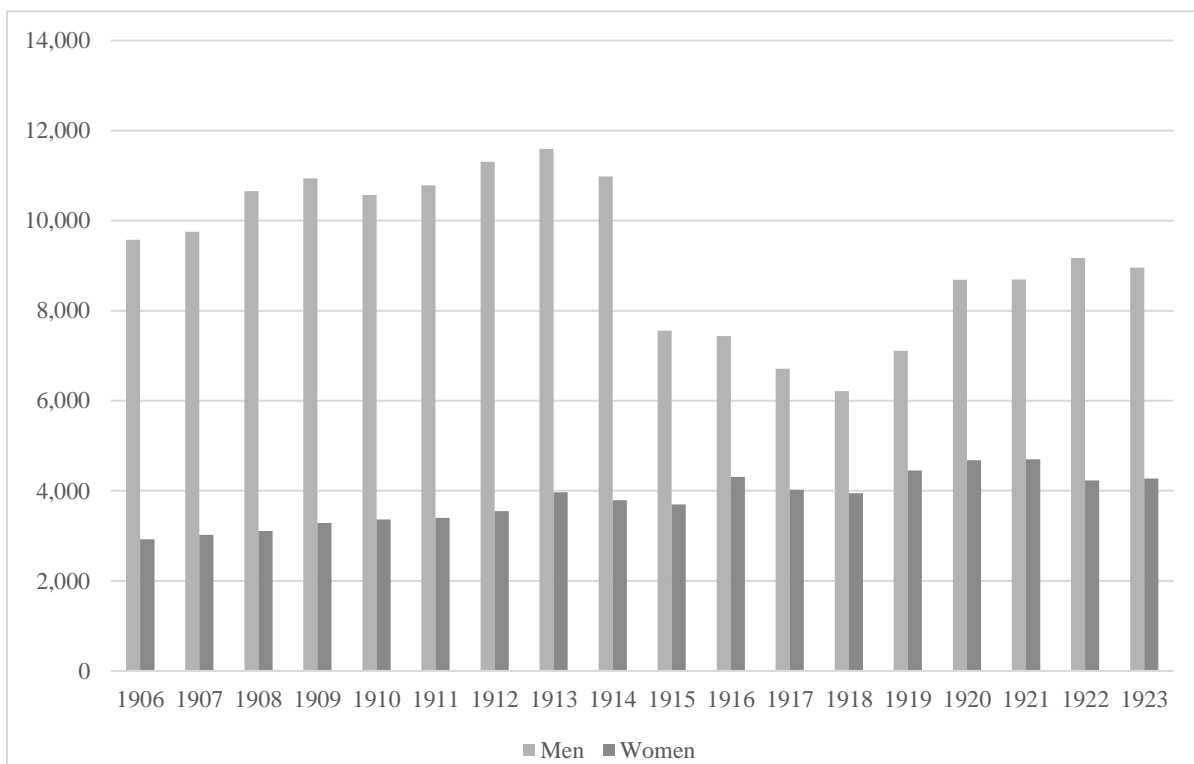


Figure 2: Suicides in Germany, 1906-1923 (Statistisches Reichsamt, *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 276 (1922): 393; *Statistisches Reichsamt, Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 316 (1926): 34*)

11.8 per 100,000 in 1918, a slight increase of 0.86% from 1913. The male suicide rate, by contrast, was at its highest in 1914 and fell by 39.6% to its low point of 19.8 per 100,000 in 1918. Further, if one looks at the ratio of female to male suicides (Figure 3), one sees a prominent increase over the course of the war. Between 1914 and 1918, the ratio increased from 34.5 to 63.4 per 100, an increase of 83.8%.

These numbers suggest that while the war was undoubtedly traumatic for both men and women, the chronological distribution of that collective suffering differed greatly, correlating (however loosely) with different moments and dynamics in the war. Women's suffering, at least as indexed by these surviving suicide figures, appeared to increase with each passing war year. It is striking that women's wartime suicide rate reached its zenith in 1916 and penultimate height in 1917—the years bridged by the turnip winter, the key turning point in the collapse of home front support for the war—and that the highest ratio of female to male suicides came in 1918—the year the home front saw its greatest wartime strike activity in protest against the conduct of the war and their continued deprivation, as well as the ultimate collapse and downfall of the Imperial regime, both of which women played major roles in.¹⁷ These were also the years when the German Army saw its greatest spikes in the absolute number of combat deaths, the result

¹⁷ Alice Weinreb provides a concise overview of these home front developments: Alice Weinreb, *Modern Hungers: Food and Power in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 23-27. For a more detailed tracing of this wartime arc, see: Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000). This same general arc also played out on the Habsburg home front: Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

primarily of the battle of the Somme in 1916 and the spring offensive in 1918, which accounted for the largest single spike (Figure 4).¹⁸

German men, by contrast, followed almost the exact opposite arc according to the *Reichsamt* figures: their wartime suicide rate began at its highest in 1914 and fell every year through 1918. Indeed, the male rate dropped by over 30% between 1914 and 1915 alone. This

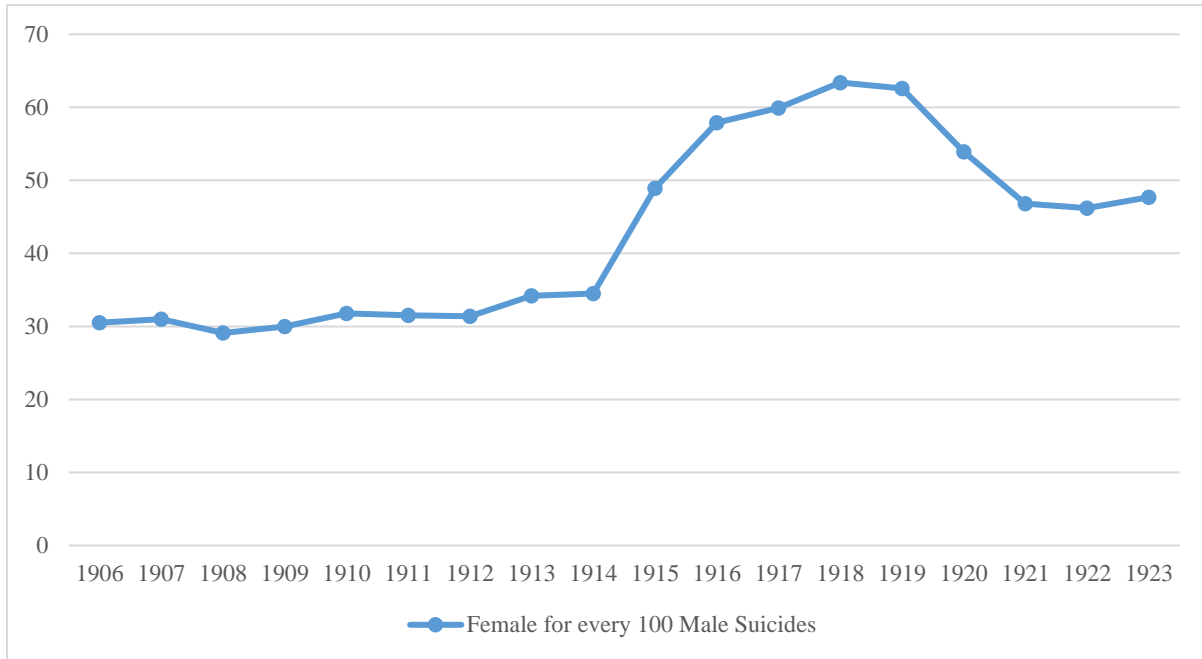


Figure 3: Ratio of Female to Male Suicides, 1906-1923 (Statistisches Reichsamt, *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 276 (1922): 393; Statistisches Reichsamt, *Statistik des Deutschen Reichs*, Bd. 316 (1926): 34*)

suggests that at the far end of the suicidal spectrum, enduring the *continuing* war proved most difficult for women, while men found the *outset* of the war the most arduous and unendurable. Approached with the geometric metaphor of the inclination toward death, the male angle of incline appears to have increased precipitously and immediately with the outbreak of war. The female angle, by contrast, while increasing considerably over the course of the war, did so more gradually, as civilian life grew ever more difficult with each passing year. It appears from these

¹⁸ Figures taken from: Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 140*-143*

figures, then, that women responded to the *compounding* lethality of the war more intensely than men did, as the numbers of dead and wounded continued to grow year after year.

This is not to minimize women’s suffering at this end of the spectrum in 1914, nor to imply that their agony was negligible at the start of the war. For some, the very fact of a husband, son, or other loved one heading to the front proved too much to bear. The neurologist Emil Redlich recounted an anecdote in a 1917 article wherein a 43-year old man who enlisted at the beginning of August 1914 witnessed, on the day of his presentation, “the suicide of an enlisted

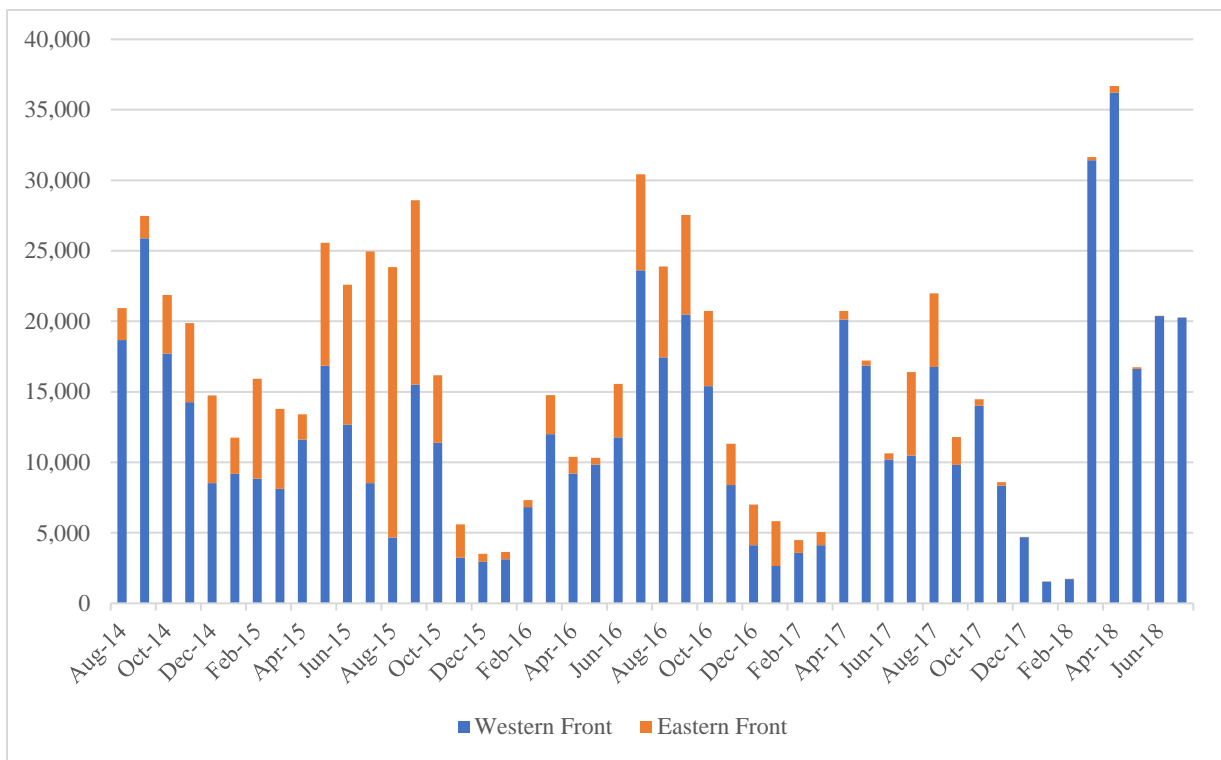


Figure 4: German Army Combat Deaths by War Month (Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 140*-143*)

reservist’s wife, who, after bidding farewell to her husband, threw herself under the wheels of the departing train.” Witnessing this suicide, combined with his own emotionally difficult farewell to his family, was spark for this soldier’s psychosomatic trauma symptoms, leading to his

examination by Redlich to determine whether these symptoms were genuine.¹⁹ Clearly, suicidal anguish at the outbreak of the war was not limited solely to men.

Even the minimal details provided in Redlich's second-hand account point to the social contours of the shadow side of the depth of emotion so many Germans experienced during the summer of 1914. It is noteworthy, first, that the woman said goodbye to her husband *before* leaping under the train—a sequence suggesting it was the intensity of that first moment of separation that was the likely proximate cause of her suicide—and, second, that she killed herself by jumping under the very train carrying her husband off to face possible (and perhaps probable, depending on where specifically he was heading) death at the front. Both elements point toward the woman's decision being an impulsive one: she appears to have been overwhelmed and suddenly pulled down by the August undercurrent of the collective patriotic feelings and their behavioral manifestations, right at a moment when those feelings would, understandably, be exceptionally acute. Further, the symbolic importance of the thanatological connection between the couple—a connection bridging the lines between soldier and civilian, man and woman, departee and departed, war and peace—appears to have had an intense impact on the soldier who

¹⁹ Emil Redlich, "Über Encephalitis pontis et cerebelli," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie and Psychiatrie* Vol. 37, No. 1-2 (1917): 23. "Er rückte anfangs August 1914 ein; am Tage seiner Präsentation soll er sich sehr aufgereggt haben. Am Morgen dieses Tages war er nämlich Augenzeuge des Selbstmordes der Frau eines eingerückten Reservisten, die sich, nachdem sie von ihrem Manne sich verabschiedet hatte, unter die Räder des davonfahrenden Zuges warf. Dazu kam der schwere Abschied von seiner Familie. Er bekam plötzlich einen Schwindelanfall, begann zu taumeln und zu wanken; Sehen und Sprechen von diesem Augenblick an schlecht." A translated excerpt recounting this soldier's witnessing of the suicide appears in: Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 33. It is worth noting here, however, that Redlich was Austrian and worked at a mental hospital in Vienna, so it is possible that this anecdote came from a soldier in the Habsburg Army, not the German one; the text itself does not specify and is mostly concerned with etiology. Its inclusion in the Ulrich and Ziemann volume focused on German soldiers nonetheless suggests its relevance here: there does not appear to be anything nationally specific about the incident itself. Its inclusion here is meant primarily to illustrate the human element sitting underneath the abstract suicide numbers and the types of macro-narratives they point towards. Austria had a higher average suicide rate than Germany for the period 1910-1914, but both Austria and Germany had considerably higher average suicide rates than England between 1881 and 1914, suggesting if anything that the relevant geographic unit here would be central or German-speaking Europe more generally, rather than Germany or Austria specifically, at least in quantitative terms. On the comparative average suicides rates in Germany, Austria, and England, see Figure 2 in Goeschel's statistical appendix: Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 208.

witnessed it. It seems to have provided an enduring, deep, and negative emotional coloring to the saying of his own goodbyes, its depth and endurance attested to by the fact that it was these two events—witnessing the suicide and taking leave of his own family—with which Redlich began his case history. Finally, when one considers that this was an act committed in public at precisely the time and place most often home to “war enthusiasm” as it manifested that August, one can infer that the soldier Redlich examined was unlikely to be the only one affected by the incident.²⁰ However statistically exceptional, such an act was bound to have a disproportionate impact and make a lasting impression on those who witnessed or heard about it. Such incidents brought together all three elements in Resch’s triad—suicide, (potential) combat death, and mental distress—and appear to be the kinds of events he seemingly had in mind when acknowledging the need for “enlightening” and “partly calming” articles in the daily newspapers.

When one recalls that the focus of Redlich’s inquiry was not the woman’s suicide, but the psychosomatic trauma of the soldier who witnessed it, however, the broader contours of this piece of the wartime thanatological configuration come back into view. The fact that the quantitative peak of explicit male suicidal suffering apparently correlated with the shift from peace to war—and therefore also with a mass influx of men into the army, and soldiers to the front, during the precise period when ‘war enthusiasm’ climaxed—suggests that this gendered

²⁰ For an analysis of the crowds seeing off departing troops in August 1914, see: Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 102-105.

dimension dovetailed with the soldier-civilian distinction in such a way as to put military men at the forefront of this end of the continuum.

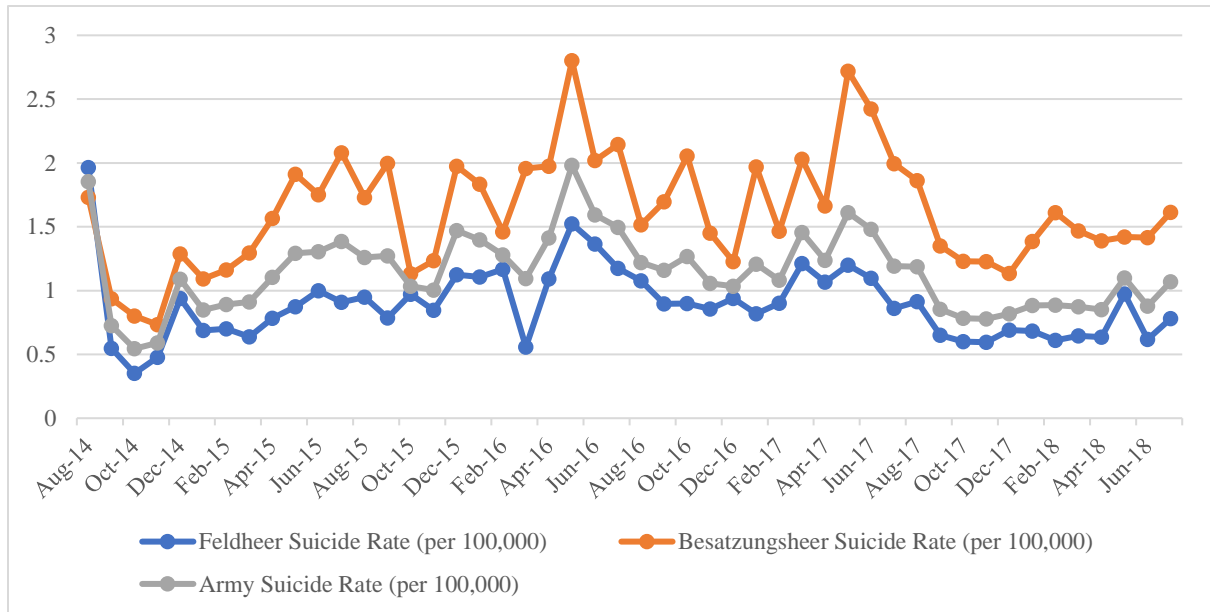


Figure 5: Suicide Rates in the German Army (Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): Denominator: 5*-8*; Numerator: 133*-137*)

This reading is strengthened—though also complicated—by an examination of the surviving suicide statistics for the German Army. Most notably, calculated using the data from the official *Medical Report on the German Army (Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer)*, widely considered the most reliable source for German casualty figures by historians, the wartime suicide rate in the German Army actually *began* at its penultimate height in August 1914, being surpassed only once, in May 1916 (Figure 5).²¹ Further, this is the only war month

²¹ I calculated the monthly suicide rate using the number of suicides listed in the statistical tables in the second half of Volume III and the average *Iststärke* of the Army, both of which are broken down by war month from August 1914 through July 1918. See: *Sanitätsbericht III*, 5*-8* for the monthly size of the army; 133*-137* for the monthly suicide numbers. The text portion of the *Sanitätsbericht* also states this fact explicitly, although the chart it cites in support of the claim breaks down the figures chronologically only by year, not by month: *Ibid.*, 26. On the *Sanitätsbericht* as a data set, see: James McRandle and James Quirk, “The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I,” *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 70, No. 3 (2006): 667-701. Certainly since the publication of McRandle and Quirk’s article, the *Sanitätsbericht* has become the go-to source for statistical data on German war losses. To take only two recent examples: in his centennial history of the war, Jörn

where the suicide rate was higher for the field army (*Feldheer*)—the part of the army which engaged in combat operations—than the replacement army (*Besatzungsheer*).²² This is also the only month during the first year of the war when this was true in terms of the absolute number of suicides (Figure 6).

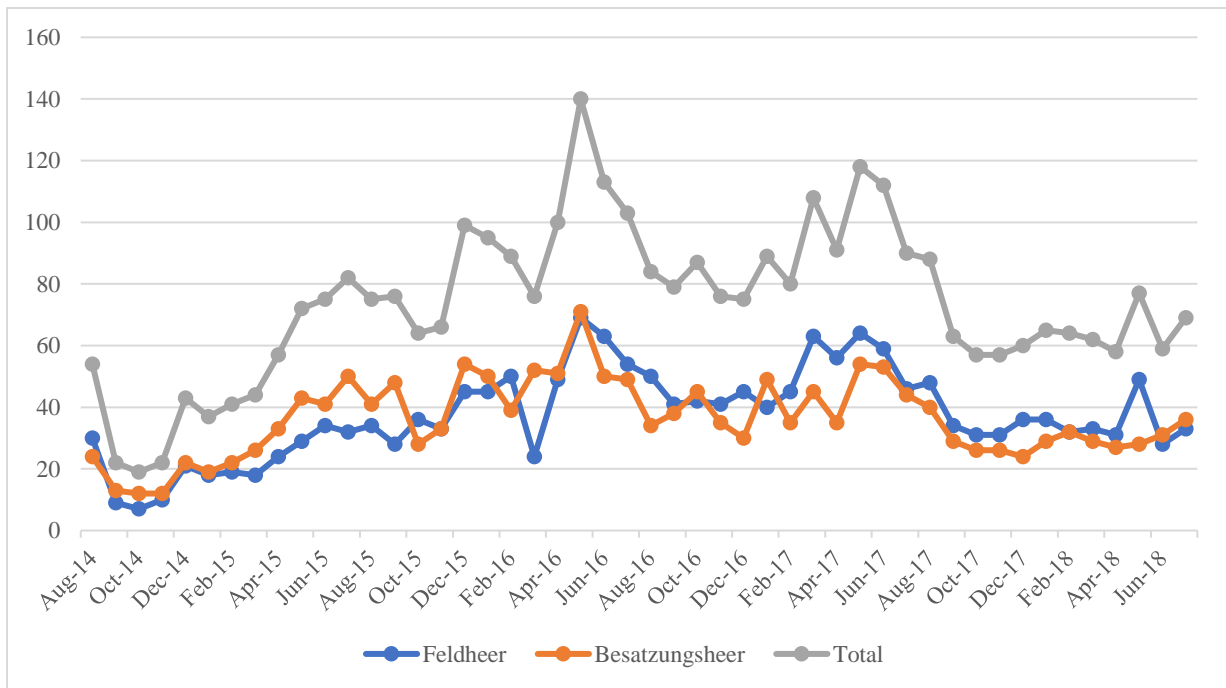


Figure 6: Suicides in the German Army (Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkrieg 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkrieg 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 133*-137*)

An examination of the figures for the Bavarian Army, which made up roughly 10% of the total German Army and is the only one for which figures have survived for the entirety of 1914,

Leonhard uses the tables from McRandle and Quirk, compiled from the *Sanitätsbericht* data, in his statistical appendix on war losses: Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2018 [2014]): 913-914; similarly, Benjamin Ziemann relied on the *Sanitätsbericht* data for his quantitative discussion of German casualties in his recent book: Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, trans. Andrew Evans (New York: Bloomsbury 2017 [2013]): 20-23. This is not to suggest, however, that the *Sanitätsbericht* is a perfect source, nor that it is 100% accurate. Calculating deaths and losses was a massive challenge in all the belligerent armies. See: Antoine Prost, "The Dead," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 561-91.

²² The *Besatzungsheer* consisted of "[a]ll military units on German territory, particularly those that trained military personnel that were sent as replacements for corresponding active units in the field." Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 185.

reinforces this quantitative picture of the shift from peace to war being particularly traumatic for men in uniform.²³ According to the 1914 statistical index for suicides in the Bavarian Army, which recorded both completed suicides and suicide attempts, August was the definitive peak for that year with sixteen suicides and one attempt (Figure 7).²⁴ These figures point more definitively toward the war’s outbreak itself being the main proximate cause for male suicides and suggest that the initial combat engagements—or fear of them—were something of an ‘original’ moment of anguish for men in the rapidly expanding German Army.

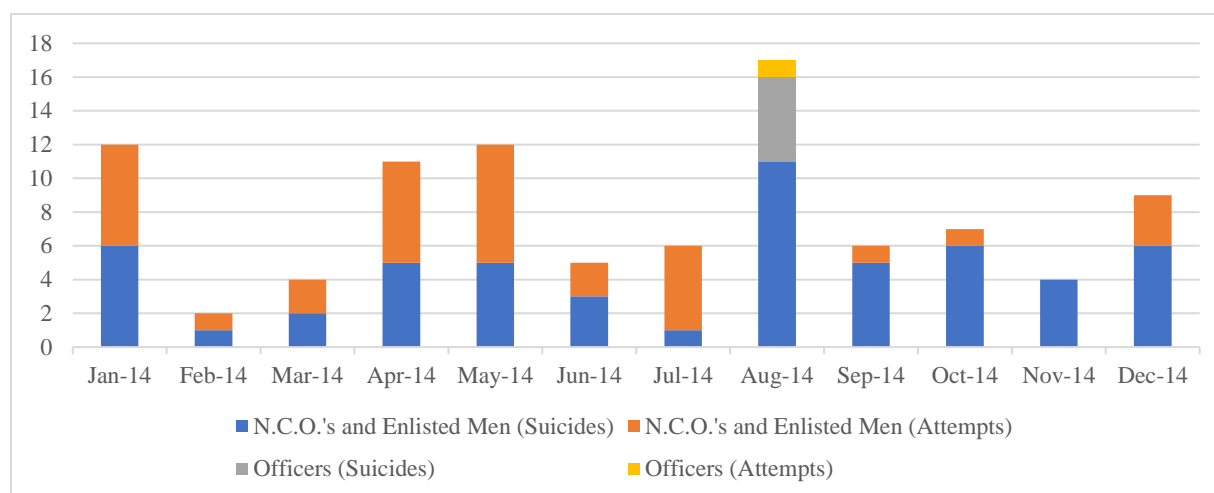


Figure 7: Suicides and Attempts in the Bavarian Army, 1914 (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10916 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K.B. Heere für das Jahr 1914.”)

²³ The numbers for the size of the Bavarian Army throughout the war are, unfortunately, far from comprehensive. This makes it functionally impossible to calculate even an annual suicide rate for the Bavarian Army. Nonetheless, the official Bavarian history of their participation in the war does provide some figures on the size of the *Feldheer*, used for this estimate of the Bavarians’ proportion of the total German Army: Bayerisches Kriegsarchiv, *Die Bayern im Großen Kriege 1914-1918, Bd.II* (Munich: Druckerei des Landesfinanzamts, 1923): 46 (Beiheft I, Tafel 3). Ziemann has helpfully collated this data into a more easily digestible table: Ziemann, *War Experiences*, 31 (Table 2.1). The figures for the total German Army come, once again, from the *Sanitätsbericht: Sanitätsbericht III*, 5*-8*. It is perhaps also worth noting that this proportion of the Bavarian to the total German Army was nearly identical to that for Bavarian population to the population of the *Kaiserreich* as a whole. The pertinent population statistics for all the German states can be found in: Kaiserlichen Statistischen Amte, *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, Vol. 34 (Berlin: Verlag von Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, 1913): 1, which gives the population of all the German states and regions for 1910. This was the last year for which such population data was published. The same chart cited above appears again in the *Jahrbuch* for 1918, for instance: Kaiserlichen Statistischen Amte, *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, Vol. 39 (Berlin: Verlag von Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, 1918): 1.

²⁴ BHStA IV M Kr 10916 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K.B. Heere für das Jahr 1914.” It is perhaps worth noting in passing here that technically, all these were all suicides attempts: sixteen were ‘successful,’ one was not.

A qualitative analysis of the information provided in the Bavarian statistical index, particularly in the “reason” (*Grund*) column, further reinforces this reading. While most entries in the ‘reason’ column are too vague to clarify much about the suicides of 1914, especially the numerous cases listed simply as “mental disturbance” (*Geistesstörung*), some entries were more specific and therefore elucidating. For example, a 28-year-old military cook shot himself on 5 August 1914, apparently due to “overstrain in service” and “overwrought nerves.”²⁵ That same evening, the night of 5-6 August, a 27-year-old reserve infantryman hanged himself in Regensburg, purportedly a result of his “fear of the war.”²⁶ Similarly, five days later, on 10 August, a 36-year-old reserve artilleryman hanged himself, allegedly because he “did not want to be moved to the front.”²⁷ In cases such as these, it seems the Bavarian War Ministry considered the specific causes of these soldiers’ suicides to be clear enough to record their explicit connections with fears and concerns relating to the newly-begun war, creating an at least implicit portrait of the anxiety and suffering the start of the conflagration engendered.

These kinds of anxieties were apparently not unique to the lower ranks. In fact, the surviving numbers illustrate another broad contour of the explicit end of the suicidal spectrum: the greater inclination toward suicide amongst officers. Ironically, it appears to have been among officers—who disproportionately came from the social groups and classes most enthusiastic about the war’s outbreak—that an explicit and enduring suicidal substrate emerged most prominently right at the start of the war.²⁸ Indeed, in the *Handbook of Medical Experiences in the World War* (*Handbuch der Ärztlichen Erfahrungen im Weltkreige*), German military doctors

²⁵ Ibid., Section I.a., Lf. Nr. 25. “Überanstreng. im Dienst; überreizte Nerven.”

²⁶ Ibid., Lf. Nr. 34. “Angst vor d. Kriege.”

²⁷ Ibid., Lf. Nr. 29. “Wollte nicht mit ins Feld abrücken.”

²⁸ On the social demographics of the ‘enthusiastic’ crowds, see: Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 12-57. For a concise overview of the social composition of the German officer class, see: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 115-117.

reported a linkage between suicide, self-injury, and a sense of duty (*Pflichtgefühl*). According to Prof. Dr. Gustav Aschaffenburg's entry on 'constitutional depressives' (*die konstitutionell Depressiven*), a "strongly developed sense of duty [*stark entwickelte Pflichtgefühl*]" helped soldiers to overcome their depression and potential for suicide. However, he considered suicidal thoughts "understandable," especially among those "at the head of a unit" who were under enormous pressure. In his view, the less duty-conscious (*Pflichtbewußte*) were more likely to seek escape from the front though "a harmless wound" or "mild illness," not through suicide.²⁹ Notably, the *Handbuch* never cites any specific evidence—statistical or otherwise—in support of any of these claims.³⁰ The authors of the *Sanitätsbericht* reached a similar conclusion, stating that "one can see a greater inclination toward suicide [*Selbstmordneigung*] among these ranks [officers, medical officers, officials, and especially veterinary officers] compared with N.C.O.s and common soldiers [*Mannschaften*]." But, as was the case with the *Handbuch*, they did not provide any data to substantiate the point.³¹

Further examination of the Bavarian data points towards the accuracy of that conclusion. The official history *Bavaria in the Great War* provides figures for the numbers of both officers and enlisted men in the Bavarian Field Army at three points during the war—20 August 1914, 1 October 1915, and 1 September 1917—where officers represented 2.86%, 2.52%, and 3.19% of the total, respectively, resulting in an average proportion of 2.9%.³² As a proportion of total

²⁹ Prof. Dr. Karl Bonhoeffer, ed. *Handbuch der Ärztlichen Erfahrungen im Weltkreige 1914/1918, Vol. IV: Geistes- und Nervenkrankheiten* (Leipzig: Verlag von Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1934): 125-126. "Der weniger Gewissenhafte und Pflichtbewußte wird nach anderen Ausweg aus der für ihn unerträglichen Lage suchen, und als solche bieten sich Ausnutzung einer harmlosen Verletzung, einer leichten Erkrankung, um von der Front wegzugehen."

³⁰ Susanne Hahn also notes this lack of evidence in the *Handbuch*: Hahn, "'Minderwertige, widerstandslose Individuen,'" 279.

³¹ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 26-28: "man [kann] eine größere Selbstmordneigung bei diesen Dienstgraden [Offizieren, Sanitätsoffizieren, Beamten, und besonders bei den Veterinäroffizieren] gegenüber den Unteroffizieren und Mannschaften ersehen."

³² *Die Bayern im Größten Kriege, Bd. II*, 46.

suicide attempts, however—that is, both completed suicides and ‘unsuccessful’ attempts combined—officers accounted for 6.26% of the total. Looking solely at completed suicides, the figures are even starker: officers accounted for 8.94% of wartime deaths by suicide in the Bavarian Army.³³ Despite how necessarily imprecise such estimates must be (especially given the lack of numbers on the Bavarian *Besatzungsheer*), it nonetheless seems reasonably clear from the surviving data that officers both attempted and completed suicide in disproportionate numbers. And that greater inclination toward suicide appears to have begun right at the start of the war: *all* of the recorded suicides and attempts of Bavarian officers in 1914—five suicides, one attempt—occurred between 4 and 20 August.³⁴ Officers thus accounted for over 35% of suicide attempts and over 31% of completed suicides in the Bavarian Army during the war’s opening month. As was the case with N.C.O.s and enlisted men, these officer suicides appear to be a more-or-less direct result of the conflagration’s outbreak itself. The very first—that of a 32-year-old First Lieutenant (*Oberleutnant*) who shot himself on 4 August 1914—may be the most telling. The statistical index lists the “reason” (*Grund*) for his suicide as “mental overstrain due to the mobilization and preparation for the War Academy.”³⁵

Similar dynamics were at play beyond Bavaria, as an examination of suicides in the Württemberger Army illustrates.³⁶ Arguably the most striking case is that of a 42-year-old

³³ Suicide statistics for the Bavarian Army between 1914 and 1920 are found in the file series: BHStA IV M Kr 10915 through 10919.

³⁴ BHStA IV M Kr 10916, Section II.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Laufende Nr. 3: “geistige Überanstrengung infolge d. Mobilmachung u. Vorbereitung zur Kriegsakademie.”

³⁶ The Württembergers technically did not constitute their own army, but rather consisted of the XIII Royal Württemberg Army Corps, which was part of the Prussian Army. However, it was administered separately and thus its records were kept by the Württemberger War Ministry, which is the reason those records have survived. Because it functioned analogously to the Bavarian and Saxon Armies in this regard—that is, it kept its own active lists and had its own war ministry and internal chain of command, but was ultimately subsumed under the authority of the Prussian high command in wartime—I have chosen to refer to it as the ‘Württemberg Army’ for the sake of in-text simplicity. For an overview of these organizational features of the German Army, see: Hermann Cron, *Imperial German Army 1914-1918: Organisation, Structure, Orders-of-Battle*, trans. Duncan Rogers (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2002 [1937]): 13-16.

Captain in the field artillery who shot himself on 7 August 1914. According to the compendium of wartime suicides in the Württemberger Army, the Captain killed himself due to “nervous overexcitement and fear of not being able to manage his mobilization,” a reason, it is worth noting, considered to be “unrelated to service” (*nicht dienstlicher Art*) by the Württemberger War Ministry.³⁷ An earlier report on the Captain’s suicide, dated 22 August 1914, provides more detail:

The Captain of the Ersatz Munition Column of the 13th Field Artillery Regiment in Ulm committed suicide by shooting himself through the heart with a Mauser pistol in his room in the Münster Hotel in Ulm. From the letter he left behind, it emerges that he freely took his own life because he was no longer capable of mobilizing his detachment. He also had spent his life on the border [*Auch hat er sich zu Lebzeiten gränzort*] and his current assignment was completely foreign to him, as he had hitherto been with the Field Artillery, not the Munition Column.... In accordance with these facts, it appears the act was committed in a state of nervous agitation.³⁸

As was the case with the Bavarian *Oberleutnant*, the Württemberger Captain’s suicide appears to have resulted from his experience of the mobilization, and more specifically from his concerns at being able to personally navigate the new wartime context and the demands it placed on him. But this case also illustrates how more mundane, quotidian elements could produce explicitly suicidal behavior in soldiers as the world went to war in 1914. The most obvious element is the fact that all of the Captain’s concerns with the mobilization were firstly the result of his having

³⁷ Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (hereafter LBW-HS) M 1/7 Bü 470 ‘Namensliste zu Selbstmorden und Selbstmordversuchen aus den Kriegsjahren 1914-1918 und Nachkriegsjahr 1919 des württembergischen Heeres sowie Kriegsgefangener,’ Section I, Lf. Nr. 29. “Nervöse Überreizung u. Furcht mit seiner Mobilmachung nicht fertig zu werden.”

³⁸ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 217 “Kriegs-Ministerium. Versorgungs- und Justiz=Abteilung. Akta betreff: Verunglückte, Selbstmörder u. Todesfälle im Einzelnen vom 31. Mai 1911 – 19. Juli 1915.” Reported labelled “Zu No. 82/ K. 14. C. Betreff: Selbstmord des Hauptmanns d. L. I [H], Ers. Mun. Kol. Felda. 13. | Professor in Reutlingen,” dated 22 August 1914. “Hauptmann d. L. I der Ersatz-Munitionskolonie des F.A.R. 13 in Ulm [H.] hat sich am 7. 8. 14 in seinem Zimmer im Münsterhotel in Ulm mit einer Mauserpistole durch einen Schuß ins Herz entleibt. Aus den hinterlassenen Brief geht hervor, daß er freiwillig aus dem Leben schied, weil er die Mobilmachung seiner Abteilung nicht mehr zu stande bringe. Auch hat er sich zu Lebzeiten [sic] gränzort [sic], seine jetzige Tätigkeit sei ihm ganz fremd, er sei bisher bei der Feldartl., nicht bei der Ers. Mun. Kolonne gewesen.... Hiernach scheint die Tat in einem Zustand nervöser Nerverregung verübt zu sein.” The report is handwritten and thus contains a small handful of only semi-legible words as well as some misspellings, marked here in the German. I have also omitted the soldier’s surname in the interest of privacy.

been called back to service in the first place. According to the report, he was a “professor in Reutlingen” and thus a reservist, not a career soldier.³⁹ Moreover, his apparently explicit stated concerns with his military work once he was called up suggest that it may not have been his being recalled to service *per se* that led to his feelings of inadequacy and ultimately suicide, but the *specific* work he was now being asked to perform, work which was “completely foreign to him.”⁴⁰ It therefore appears that it was likely the broader sense of social dislocation and uncertainty that produced his suicide, a dislocation manifested and experienced not through profound concerns about the war itself, but in everyday apprehensions with his own assignments and responsibilities.

Seen in this light, even soldiers’ suicides that were categorized as purely personal show their probable connections with and roots in the outbreak of war. For instance, on 5 August 1914, a 28-year-old Lance Corporal (*Gefreiter*) in the Württemberger 123rd Reserve Infantry Regiment hanged himself “in his bride’s house.”⁴¹ According to the compendium—the only place where record of this suicide survives—the reason for the suicide was the “cancellation of the engagement by his bride.”⁴² These two elements point toward personal revenge as the clearest motive for the Lance Corporal’s suicide; the fact that he was a soldier appears incidental, as it may well have been. The timing, however, is an essential indicator of the context for this suicide and suggests a deeper and more complicated reading. A moment of personal crisis (the cancelled engagement) occurred simultaneously with a moment of national crisis (the outbreak of, and mobilization for, war). This national crisis was one that would have had immediate personal

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ The caveat “apparently” is important here, since the suicide note itself does not appear in the file; only a summary of it appears within the report. That section of the report reads like a more-or-less direct paraphrase, but without the original note, one is still only going on a second-hand account.

⁴¹ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470, Lf. Nr. 27. “Erhängen im Hause ds. Brauts.”

⁴² Ibid., “Aufhebung der Verlobung durch seine Braut.”

consequences for the soldier: given his age, the Lance Corporal likely would have already done his mandatory two years of military service and recently become a *Landwehrmann* Class I, which comprised reservists between the ages of 28 and 32.⁴³ That means his suicide occurred less than a week after he likely received his mobilization order, which in turn would have meant a rapid and total social dislocation regardless of what happened with his engagement. In some cases, German reservists had only 24 hours to set their home affairs in order after being called up; at most they had a few days.⁴⁴ Indeed, as Hew Strachan notes, “[w]hen the Landwehr went off to war in 1914 it still wore the old blue uniforms and not the field grey adopted by the active army in 1910.”⁴⁵ Thus, while it seems incontestable from the surviving information about this suicide that the immediate catalyst was personal, the simultaneity of intersecting crises points toward the onset of war as an inextricable contextual element creating a deeper backdrop of uncertainty and social displacement sitting behind that catalyst. In many ways, the Lance Corporal’s suicide appears as something of an equal and opposite case to that recounted by Redlich: both were suicidal thanatological intersections within a single couple of the personal and the national, the military and the civilian, right as the war began to rage. Here, however, there was a civilian catalyst for a military suicide as opposed to a military catalyst for a civilian suicide.

In some cases, the connections appeared much more direct. In another example from the Württemberger Army, the body of a drowned soldier was pulled from the Danube on 28 August 1914, after having been in the river for roughly three weeks. The military court of the 54th

⁴³ See the concise overview of the German reserve system in: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 241. For a more detailed analysis of the conscription system in the *Kaiserreich*, see: Ute Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks: Modern Germany, Military Conscription and Civil Society*, trans. Andrew Boreham with Daniel Brückenhaus (New York: Berg, 2004): 149-235.

⁴⁴ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 73.

⁴⁵ Strachan, *First World War*, 173.

Infantry Brigade conducted a series of investigations over the course of the next month and concluded that the deceased had most likely been a member of the 13th Field Artillery Regiment. Further investigation, however, pointed toward the dead soldier actually being a cavalryman, an Uhlán, who had been prosecuted for desertion (*Fahnenflucht*) by the court of the 27th Infantry Division on 22 August, and had somehow or other gotten a hold of pants marked with “A.R. 13,” which caused the initial confusion.⁴⁶ A follow-up report from February 1915 confirmed the body as that of the Uhlán and provided more details about the case. He had been assigned to the 1st Infantry Munition Column, but never reported for duty, prompting the Division court to begin an investigation into his desertion. The report concluded that the soldier in question was “reported to be a strange person, one who sought death in the Danube because he absolutely did not want to be a soldier.”⁴⁷ A final, handwritten sentence added to the end of the otherwise typed report did admit, however, that the case “could also be treated as an accident, given that there is no evidence of any third person being involved in the death.”⁴⁸ Despite that, it was the earlier conclusion that was recorded as the “reason” (*Beweggrund*) for the suicide by the Württemberger War Ministry in their compendium of wartime suicides, using nearly identical language to the 1915 report: “A strange person in civilian life who absolutely did not want to be a soldier.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 217. Report labelled “Zu nr. 4183 14. CJ. | Betr. Tod einer unbekanntenen Militärperson des württ. Kontingents. | D. X. 14.” It is perhaps also worth noting that desertion (*Fahnenflucht*) was understood to be a “permanent” and intentional offense, in a way ‘absence without leave’ was not. See the concise summary in: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 105.

⁴⁷ Ibid., Report labelled “Zu Nr. 1073.15.K.C.J. | Betreff: Selbstmord des ehem. Ulanen [JD] aus Waldstätten, In Gmünd.” “Nach den Erhebungen scheint Dunkenberger der ein einenartiger [sic] Mensch gewesen sein soll, den Tod in der Donau deshalb gesucht zu haben, weil er absolut nicht Soldat sein wollte.” I have omitted the soldier’s name in the interest of privacy.

⁴⁸ Ibid., “Es kann sich aber auch um einen Unglücksfall handeln, daß bei dem Tode irgend eine dritte Person beteiligt wäre ist nicht zu erweisen.” The fact that the final sentence was handwritten seems to indicate that it was either 1) something of an afterthought or 2) a formality that the author had meant to include in the typed portion of the report but forgot. Regardless, it seems clear from that fact that it was a handwritten addition that it was not a matter considered central to the case.

⁴⁹ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470, Section II, Lf. Nr. 4: “Im Zivilleben eigenartiger Mensch, der absolute nicht soldat sein wollte.” The compendium also gives the soldier’s age: 33.

First, it is worth noting, even if just in passing, the degree of uncertainty surrounding the case. Ultimately, the Württemberger War Ministry did conclude this death was a suicide, but it took months of investigation to reach this conclusion. And while it seemed improbable and unlikely, those investigations could not completely rule out the possibility that the death was an accident, even if the desertion was not. Second, it is noteworthy that the suicide itself likely occurred sometime in the first week of August, given the estimate of how long the body had been in the river. Thus, at least as represented by the surviving documents, it appears this man found the *prospect* of being a soldier so overwhelmingly negative that he opted to take his own life rather than ever report for duty. This is perhaps less surprising when one considers that the Uhlan was in a field army unit—he was, in fact, the only member of the Württemberger *Feldheer* to commit suicide in August 1914—and thus was likely to be sent into combat more-or-less immediately. Given that, one could read his desertion and probable suicide as resulting from an implicit recognition and fear of what he would likely have faced at the front. Once again however, this is only suggested, not definite. It is unclear what exactly was considered “strange” about the man, as well as why the authors’ of these various reports were so sure the reason for his suicide was that “he absolutely did not want to be a soldier.” The surviving documents do not specify whether the Württemberger War Ministry ultimately reached this conclusion on the reason for the suicide because of the known circumstances surrounding the Uhlan’s death, from which they were extrapolating, or whether they were privy to other information which led them to that conclusion but which are not in the surviving reports. The similarity of the language between the 1915 report and the compendium suggest the former possibility is more likely, however. Read together with the repeated comments about the soldier’s idiosyncrasy, it seems this desertion and death can also be read as an early case of the conceptual and moral

pathologizing of an ‘unwillingness to sacrifice’ which came to play a dominant role in German psychiatry during the course of the war.⁵⁰ What could a man who would prefer to die in the Danube rather than face possible death and mutilation at the front be other than ‘strange?’

Finally, it is worth noting that the suicides of 1914 were not limited solely to August and to fears and concerns with the coming war. While both the rate and number of soldiers’ suicides dropped off sharply after the initial high point in August—the rate fell by over 60% between August and September according to the *Sanitätsbericht* figures—those suicides that occurred during the war’s opening months show how quickly disillusionment could set in at the far end of the spectrum. For instance, on 7 November 1914, a 20-year-old war volunteer (*Kriegsfreiwilliger*) in the Saxon Army, who had joined on 28 August, attempted suicide by shooting himself in the chest. The report, which was sent to the Deputy General Command of the XIX Army Corps and the Saxon War Ministry the next day, stated simply that the soldier “is not yet fit to be questioned. Appears to be a suicide attempt. Reason: probably fear of punishment. Nothing of this case is yet known to the public.”⁵¹

As with the Württemberger Uhlán, there was a degree of uncertainty surrounding the case, especially given that this was only an initial report on the incident (though it is the only record of the suicide that survived), sent before the soldier could be questioned and before an investigation had been conducted. Nonetheless, given the surviving information, it appears that

⁵⁰ On the pathologizing of an unwillingness to sacrifice, see the argument in: Wolfgang U. Eckart, “‘The Most Extensive Experiment the Imagination Can Conceive’: War, Emotional Stress, and German Medicine” in in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 133-149.

⁵¹ Sächsisches Staatsarchiv-Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (hereafter: SStA-HD) 11352 Stellvertretendes Generalkommando des XIX. Armeekorps, Nr. 1289 ‘Selbstmorde, Unglücksfälle, Krankheiten, Beerdigungen und Entlassung Genesener aus dem Lazarett,’ report labelled “Leipzig, 8. 11. 14. Ers-Batil. Inf.-Regt. 107 An stellv. Generalkommando:” “[Er] ist noch nicht vernehmungsfähig. Selbstmordversuch liegt vor. Grund: Vermutlich Furcht vor Strafe. In der Oeffentlichkeit ist von dem Fall noch nichts bekannt geworden.” The report also included an excerpt from the soldier’s *Kriegsstammrolle*, which provides additional biographical information, including the soldier’s birthdate and date of entry into the army.

in just over two months, this young man went from volunteering for the army to (probably) attempting suicide. Indeed, the fact that this was a likely suicide attempt by a war volunteer is itself noteworthy. It indicates that this was a young man who *chose* to volunteer for the infantry and thus was someone who opted to live with a higher personal inclination toward death, a degree of agency much less present for conscripts. It is unclear what he may have been facing punishment for or if he was actually facing punishment at all. Neither the report on his suicide attempt, nor the muster roll included with it, mention anything about him having committed a crime or infraction. As Andrew Bonnell points out, ‘fear of punishment’ was listed so often as a reason for military suicides prior to the war that many critics, especially among the Social Democrats, believed it to be a cover for abuses within the army that resulted in soldiers killing themselves.⁵² Moreover, war volunteers were treated so badly by their superiors at the start of the war that the Prussian War Ministry actually issued a decree on 22 August 1914 reprimanding officers for it, with the Bavarian War Ministry following suit on 2 September.⁵³ Regardless of the reason, the arc of rapid disillusionment seems clear: this soldier joined up during the height of the ‘August euphoria’ of Germany’s early victories, and his experiences within the army were so negative that he attempted suicide after possibly falling afoul of military discipline, all in less than three months.⁵⁴ Finally, it is noteworthy that the report explicitly mentions that there was, as of its sending, no public knowledge of the case, an indication that 1) the Saxon War Ministry was concerned to at least some degree about public awareness of soldiers’ suicides and 2) that there were likely other cases that the public *did* eventually become aware of. Indeed, at least one similar case apparently did make it into the press early in 1915. On 12 January 1915, a war

⁵² Bonnell, “Explaining Suicide,” 280-284.

⁵³ Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 33.

⁵⁴ For a summary of the helpful distinction between the ‘July enthusiasm’ and ‘August euphoria,’ see Hirschfeld’s historiographical essay: Hirschfeld, “Spirit of 1914,” 30-31.

volunteer was found hanged in a probable suicide. The report on the death specified that the case “should already be mentioned in the press this evening.”⁵⁵

Similar cases abounded. On 4 October 1914, another infantryman in the Saxon Army attempted suicide. While the “reason for the act” was “not yet known” when the surviving report was sent on 7 October, “[t]he man’s physical health [did] not appear to have had any detrimental influence on the suicide attempt.” The report also noted, however, that “[a]ccording to the attending doctor, it is not impossible that [the soldier] is malingering.” Once again, the report explicitly stated that the public was not yet aware of the incident.⁵⁶ Two weeks later on 21 October, a soldier in a Saxon Worker Battalion (*Arbeiter-Abteilung*) went AWOL with the same infantryman suspected of malingering, who had subsequently been transferred to that unit. After being caught on 9 November, he cut his wrists, later dying in a military hospital.⁵⁷ Nor were these cases limited to Saxony. A 39-year-old Württemberger *Landwehrmann* shot himself on 7 October allegedly because of his “fear of punishment due to absence without leave.”⁵⁸ A 21-year-old infantryman in the Bavarian Army shot himself on 6 December purportedly as the result of “mental disturbance and fear of the war.”⁵⁹ While the specifics differ, comparable arcs of swift disillusionment appeared to be at play. For these soldiers at least, it was only a matter of months before a suicidal disenchantment with military service set in.

⁵⁵ SStA-HD 11352, report labelled “Döbeln, 12.1.15. | Ersatzbataillon 1. Inf.-Regt. Nr.139. | Br.B.Nr. 441 Ziffer 167 der D.V.” “Der Fall dürfte in der Presse bereits heute Abend Erwähnung finden.”

⁵⁶ SStA-HD 11352, Report labelled “Garnison-Commando [sic] Chemnitz [nr. 2848 den 7. 10. 14. An stellv. Generalkommando XIX.” “Die Gründe zu dieser Tat sind noch nicht bekannt. | Der Selbstmordversuch hat auf den Gesundheitszustand des Mannes keinen nachteiligen Einfluss gehabt. | Nach Angabe des behandelnden Arztes ist es nicht unmöglich dass [der Soldat] simuliert. | In der Oeffentlichkeit ist dieser Vorfall nicht bekannt geworden.”

⁵⁷ SStA-HD 11352, Report labelled “Chemnitz, den 10. November 1914 | Ers. Batl. I. R. ‘Kronprinz’ Nr. 104 | Arbeiter-Abteilung | an Das Königliche Stellv. Generalkommando XIX Leipzig.”

⁵⁸ LBW-HS M Bü 470, Section I, Lf. Nr. 3. “Furcht vor Strafe wegen unerl. Entfernung.”

⁵⁹ BHStA IV M Kr 10916, Section 1, Lf. Nr. 45. “Geistesstörung und Angst vor dem Kriege.”

The explicit end of the self-destructive behavioral spectrum which emerged in 1914, then, was far from monolithic and broke down along the lines of particular “communities of experience,” to borrow Roger Chickering’s phrase.⁶⁰ The central line of macro-level division was gender, which, in the newly arisen wartime context, meant an inherent dovetailing and overlapping with the division between civilians and military personnel. While the pattern of men killing themselves at two-to-three times higher rates and numbers than women held throughout the war period, the chronological dynamics differed notably. Men experienced their greatest trauma (as indexed by suicide numbers) at the start of the war, while women’s anguish appeared to accumulate over the course of it. For men in the military, the moment of the war’s outbreak was even more decisive as a suicide *Wendepunkt*, particularly for officers. This in turn implies a class dimension to this end of the thanatological constellation as well, given that virtually all officers came from the (upper) middle class and aristocracy.⁶¹ On the micro-level, however, one sees that it was often the interactions across and between these communities of experience that led to suicides, whether it was the anguish of separation as a husband departed for the front, the collapse of a romantic relationship during the time of mobilization, or more generally the anxieties and fears of what life in a state of and at war might bring.

⁶⁰ He explains the concept thusly: “Class, gender, generation, and confession all combined to structure basic communities of experience in wartime Germany. These communities provided the frames of collective identity, as well as several different cultural vocabularies for making sense of the war. The common experience of combat defined one such community at the front, while the homefront played host to several others. These were nurtured in routine encounters among people who faced common problems, shared common lifestyles, lived in the same neighborhoods, and knew one another personally.” Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 130.

⁶¹ Watson estimates that roughly 30% of officers and 52% of high-ranking officers—those between the ranks of Colonel (*Oberst*) and Field Marshall (*Generalfeldmarshall*)—in the prewar ranks came from the nobility, despite a large influx from the upper middle classes in the years before the war: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 115. Further, as Ziemann explains, the continued emphasis during the war on the need for higher education certificates to become an officer preserved the elite class character of the officer cast and made it exceptionally difficult for even highly competent N.C.O.’s to advance. Most often, they were capped at the rank of ‘Sergeant-Lieutenant’ (*Feldwebelleutnant*), which meant they were second-class officers who performed the duties of full officers while still ranking below the lowest reserve-officers. See Ziemann’s introduction in: Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 13.

Taken together, these explicit suicides of 1914 point toward the far end of the self-destructive spectrum as a kind of pessimist counter-vanguard, with officers at the head—a behavioral ‘canary in the coalmine’ heralding both the multilevel existential stakes of the conflict Germany had entered into and the specific kinds of socio-emotional and moral tensions which would ultimately collapse support for the war, long before most were willing or able to hear it. In this sense, the cheering crowds so famously immortalized in the photographs from that summer found their inverted corollary in the now-fragmented reports of soldiers dead by their own hands.

1.2 Implicit Self-Destruction: Combat Death Rates and War Volunteers

Right from the beginning, however, those suicides were dwarfed and quantitatively swallowed up by the mass of combat deaths of the war’s opening months. While the *Sanitätsbericht* officially recorded 54 suicides in the German Army during August 1914, that same month saw 18,662 men killed on the Western Front alone.⁶² Indeed, as multiple historians have noted, the Germany Army recorded its highest death rates during the first three months of the war (Figure 8). Not even during the ‘great battles’ of 1916, nor during the final offensives in 1918, did the death rates match those at the start.⁶³

⁶² *Sanitätsbericht III*, 133*, 136*, 140*. 2,281 men were killed on the Eastern Front in August 1914..

⁶³ Alan Kramer provides a fairly detailed breakdown of the German casualty figures focused on the war’s early months: Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 34-35. Benjamin Ziemann also goes through the quantitative data on killing, wounding, and dying in the German Army: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 20-28. Both rely principally on the *Sanitätsbericht* data.

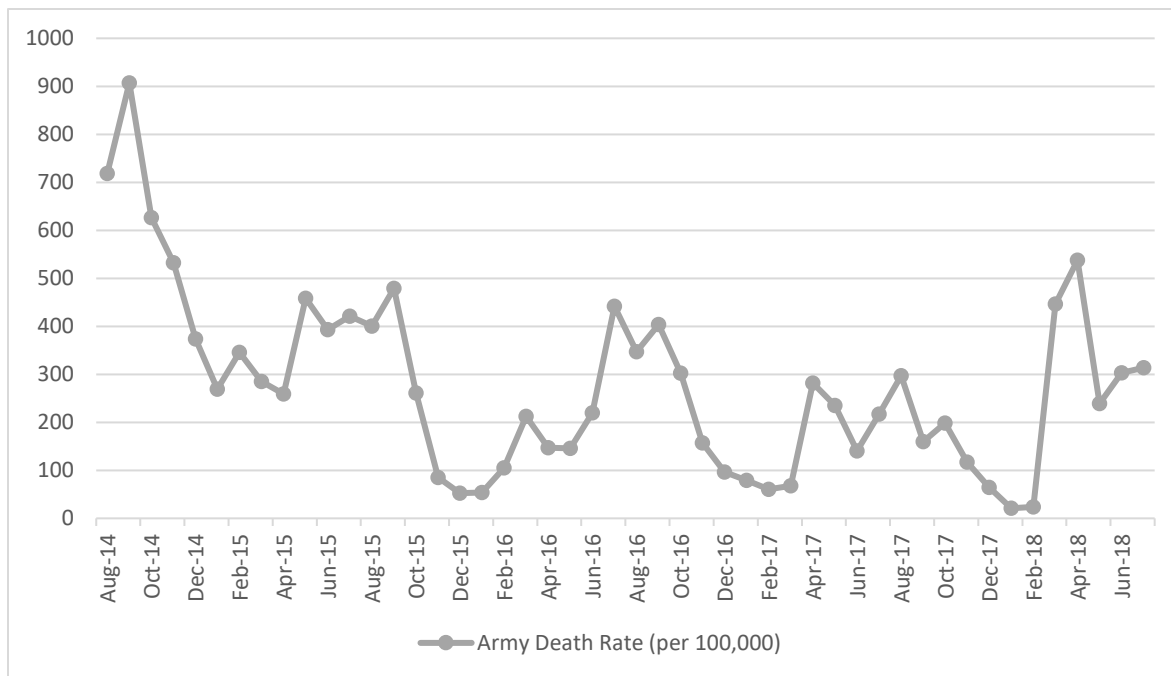


Figure 8: German Army Combat Death Rate by War Month (Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): denominator: 5*-8*; numerator: 140*-143*)

It is therefore all the more striking that August 1914 was also the quantitative high point for war volunteers. Between 185,000 and 250,000 Germans volunteered for the army that month alone, with more recent estimates falling at the higher end of that range.⁶⁴ While far less than the “1,200,000 young Germans” the *Berliner Tageblatt* claimed had volunteered in an article from 12 August, this was still a considerable number, especially in a country which, like all other nations in Europe save Britain, had universal conscription and a standing army counted in the millions.⁶⁵ For comparison, the British accepted 298,923 volunteers in August 1914, despite having a standing army of only 733,514 and thus a much larger pool of potential volunteers at

⁶⁴ The lower estimate comes from Verhey: Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 98-99; the higher, from Watson: Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 47-48. It is Watson’s higher figure that Ian Kershaw cites in his 2015 textbook: Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015): 42.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 45. The *Sanitätsbericht* recorded an actual strength of 2,913,873 men for August 1914, the vast majority of whom were clearly conscripts even if one were to accept the widely inflated *Berliner Tageblatt* numbers. See: *Sanitätsbericht III*, 5*-8*. I’ve reached this total by simply adding the numbers given for the *Feldheer* and *Besatzungsheer*.

the start of the war.⁶⁶ When compared with the French, the contrast is even greater. Prussian units alone accepted 143,922 volunteers during just the first ten days of August; the French received only 40,000 volunteers in the war's first five months.⁶⁷ When one then considers that the British began actively appealing for volunteers on 7 August, while the Germans only began general advertising for volunteers in the final ten days of the month, it seems reasonably clear that the early rush to the colors was essentially spontaneous and self-directed.⁶⁸ As Alexander Watson summarizes, “[n]ot only was the German volunteering movement’s speed and size remarkable but so too was its spontaneity. These men acted on their own initiative; the government issued no appeal, and the army was unprepared for the queues that suddenly appeared outside its barracks.”⁶⁹ Indeed, following Watson’s estimates, fully half of the roughly 500,000 Germans who volunteered for military service from 1914-1918 did so in the war’s opening month.⁷⁰

Further, the German war volunteers of 1914 were far more sociologically diverse than had long been assumed in the historiography. Using a sample of the 2,576 volunteers named in the surviving regimental muster rolls from southern Germany, Watson finds that “tradesmen and craftsmen,” “skilled urban manual laborers,” and “businessmen and property owners” comprised the largest shares of the volunteers, together accounting for over 46% of the total. University students and “unskilled urban manual workers” comprised roughly equal shares at 12.46% and 12.81%, respectively. School-age boys—that is, both pupils and those who had left school—comprised 7.34%. The smallest shares came from farmers and agricultural workers, making up

⁶⁶ Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 48-49; for the British volunteer figure: 49, footnote 18.

⁶⁷ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 84.

⁶⁸ The first posters advertising for volunteers in Berlin did appear earlier on 13 August, but they asked only for those with specific skills, not volunteers for more generally: pilots, skilled mechanics, and fitters. The first official advertisement asking more generally for volunteers only appeared in the *Berliner Tageblatt* on 22 August, and a central recruiting station for volunteers was only set up in Berlin on 25 August. See: Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 49, especially footnote 20.

⁶⁹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 84.

⁷⁰ Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 47-50, especially footnotes 17 and 21.

2.29% and 1.36% of the sample, respectively.⁷¹ The majority of volunteers thus came from what could be considered the “urban middle class,” with the educated and the elite being massively overrepresented compared with their share of the German population as a whole. Students and pupils were both overrepresented as well, although, as Watson notes, this was at least partially due to the fact that they were ineligible for the draft at the start of the war and therefore had more opportunities to volunteer.⁷² Though they ultimately accounted for less than one-fifth of the volunteers prior to 1915, when one looks at the figures compiled by the official Imperial Statistical Office (*Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt*), the numbers are remarkable: about 40% of German university students and over 50% of high-school pupils (*Gymnasiasten*) voluntarily enlisted in 1914.⁷³ It is also worth noting that Jewish Germans volunteered in disproportionate numbers: despite making up less than 1% of the population, Jews made up 2% of the war volunteers.⁷⁴ Thus, while not a representative sample of German (male) society as a whole, the volunteers were nonetheless comprised of much more than simply elite ‘enthusiastic’ students, even if members of the educated upper classes were overrepresented.

Nor did they volunteer in ignorance of what this particular war meant for their chances of survival. The German government published the first casualty lists on 9 August and would continue to do so roughly every three days for the duration of the war. In August 1914, the full lists were published in the newspapers. But they were so long that the German government forbid their full publication in newspapers that September. The state still allowed lists of the

⁷¹ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 86, Table 2.

⁷² Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 51-56. Watson revised his initial breakdown of the data between its first publication in 2004 and his subsequent re-use of it in 2014. His general conclusions on over- and under-representation have held despite that revision, however, hence why I have used the revised 2014 table for specific data from the sample, but the more detailed 2004 description and analysis.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 51. The original figures can be found in: Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt, *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, Vol. 36 (Berlin: Verlag von Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, 1915): 312-316.

⁷⁴ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 86.

local dead, wounded, and missing to be published in the newspapers of smaller cities and towns, however, and the full lists continued to be posted outside the War Academy in Berlin throughout the war.⁷⁵ Thus, as Verhey notes, “the War Academy, one of those ‘national’ sites which the patriotic parades visited in the last week of July, slowly but surely became in the popular mind the symbol of horror of the war’s reality, a place where one might find the name of a loved one or friend.”⁷⁶ That is, the War Academy essentially because a multivalent metonym for the meeting of current and undercurrent—a symbol not only of the new quotidian thanatological reality generally, but also of the specific linkage between that reality and the “spirit of 1914.”

What these figures and chronological dynamics demonstrate is that when the war was at its deadliest, and—most importantly—when knowledge about that lethality was widely and readily available, German men from a variety of backgrounds volunteered to serve in their greatest numbers. It appears that well over half of all war volunteers joined *after* the publication of the first casualty lists. Although complete figures for volunteering in the German Army have not survived, a monthly breakdown for volunteering in Württemberg—a state which accounted for roughly 3.75% of the total German population and about 4.66% of volunteers in the war’s opening month—has.⁷⁷ Württemberg recorded a total of 18,194 volunteers throughout the war, with 8,619 joining in August 1914 and 2,204 joining the following month. Only in February 1915 did the monthly number of volunteers fall below 500, and only in December 1915 did it fall below 100, with the final volunteers joining in February 1918.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Verhey summarizes all of these developments: Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 111-112.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷⁷ See the population figures in *Statistisches Jahrbuch* 34: 1. For the estimate of Württembergers as a percentage of total August 1914 volunteers, see: Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 97-98. Watson accepts Verhey’s percentage estimate as a basis for calculating his own estimate of total war volunteers, based on additional archival research: Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 50, footnote 21.

⁷⁸ Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 49-50. The total number of volunteers in Württemberg is listed in footnote 21.

When contextualized in terms of the German Army's combat death rate, one sees that over 12% of the total volunteers in Württemberg joined during September 1914—the month with the highest combat death rate of the entire war and a point at which the comprehensive casualty figures had been published in newspapers throughout the country for over three weeks.⁷⁹ And all of this in a state where, as Strachan notes, “[t]he response was most sluggish.”⁸⁰ Viewed in this light, it becomes clear that many of those combat deaths were also self-destructive, though implicitly so. When approached with a Durkheimian definition of suicide as self-aware self-death—i.e. as a set of *behaviors* defined not by intention, but by the probability of one's death via a given action and one's degree of awareness of that probability—it becomes clear that soldiers' deaths by suicide and soldiers' deaths in combat were part of a common spectrum of self-destruction, conditioned generally by the German state and more particularly and immediately by the army.⁸¹

One can see these dynamics and the qualified agency of common soldiers at play on the micro level in the experiences of an anonymous war volunteer in the Prussian Army whose diary entries from the first six months of the war have survived.⁸² His very first diary entry, from 4 August 1914, is short, but nonetheless revealing of some of the major socio-emotional elements at play in the rush to volunteer: “Today I received permission to volunteer for the war. It is my

⁷⁹ For some additional context: if the volunteers were evenly distributed between August 1914 and February 1918, one would expect there to be just over 423 volunteers each month, meaning a monthly volunteering rate of roughly 2.33%.

⁸⁰ Strachan, *First World War*, 152.

⁸¹ Durkheim defined suicide as “all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive [e.g. shooting oneself] or negative [e.g. starving oneself] act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.” Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951 [1897]): 44.

⁸² Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter: BA-MA) MSG 2/65 Tagebuchaufzeichnungen eines unbekanntenen Kriegsfreiwilligen beim Ersatzbataillon des Inf.-Rgt. Nr 31 in Altona . - Maschinenschriftliche Abschrift. Since this is a typescript, it does contain page numbers in addition to the dates of entries, which are cited throughout.

birthday. I am 18 years old.”⁸³ First, like so many others, he sought to join the war effort when the war itself was less than a week old. His initial impulse to volunteer, then, came with the outbreak of the war, prior to the first publication of the casualty lists, but also weeks before the German government began advertising for recruits. Second, his age reveals that he was likely one of the roughly 18,000 high-school pupils who volunteered in August 1914, which in turn highlights the generational contour of the implicit inclination toward death more sharply.⁸⁴ The average age of the volunteers in Watson’s sample was just under 21; over 55% of volunteers were under 20-years-old (the age at which men became eligible for the draft in peacetime); and 88% were under age 25.⁸⁵ In this sense, then, it appears the author of the diary was quite typical in many ways, especially given he came from a wider pool of potential volunteers that would have remained untouched by conscription until at least 1916.

Finally, and most important, he sought *and received* permission to volunteer—presumably from his parents, given his age—despite the fact that this was not an official requirement. Indeed, receiving permission from one’s loved ones appears to have been an essential social component of volunteering, and one which was not tightly circumscribed by generation.⁸⁶ In 1931, for instance, a war widow recounted her difficult emotional experiences with granting her husband permission to volunteer. He was a *Landsturmmann II*, a reserve class comprised of men between the ages of 39 and 45 who had already done their required military

⁸³ Ibid., 1. “Heute Erlaubnis bekommen, mich kriegsfreiwillig zu stellen. Es ist mein Geburtstag. Ich bin 18 Jahre alt.”

⁸⁴ Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 51.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁸⁶ Nor, it is worth noting, was this necessarily unique to Germany. Edward Brittain, the younger brother of Vera Brittain, was initially forbidden by their father to volunteer for the British Army, as he was under military age when the war began; an intergenerational clash which caused numerous explosive arguments in their house, according to Vera’s memoir. His father did eventually consent to Edward’s volunteering, however, and he joined in November 1914. He was killed in the summer of 1918. See: Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (New York: Penguin, 2005 [1933]), especially 99-100.

service and were not called up right away when the war began.⁸⁷ According to her testimony, however, her husband felt compelled to serve, but would not do so without her permission:

One fine day, it was a week after the declaration of war, my husband asked me to allow him to volunteer for the army. I begged, pleaded and cried hysterically which was such a shock for him, for he had never seen me crying before, so that he promised not to volunteer. He went on with business as usual. But soon I noticed that he didn't like his food anymore and that he could not sleep at night. When I realized one night that he was awake, I took his hand and said to him: L., I do allow you to volunteer, I want to be as strong as all the other wives. But you have to come back home. With a cheer, he embraced me and my heart sank.⁸⁸

This widow encapsulated the complex of competing social, emotional, and moral pressures and tensions at play in the decision to volunteer, as well as once again illustrating the interconnections between the elements of Resch's triad. First, it is worth noting the implied timeline in the widow's recollections. Her husband apparently asked to volunteer on 8 August, a week after the German declaration of war and a day before the first casualty lists were published. Yet even at this early date, the reaction it provoked in her was 'hysterical crying,' suggesting an implicit emotional recognition of the inclination toward death even before the publication of the casualty lists would remove all doubt about its severity. While the chronology is imprecise afterwards, it is nonetheless clear that her assent and his actual volunteering came well *after* the scale of death was public knowledge. Strikingly, this prompted two opposite emotional reactions, divided along the overlapping lines of front and home, man and woman, and military and civilian: a positive cheer from the husband, presumably of gratitude and excitement (though

⁸⁷ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 241.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 31. The original source citation, according to their bibliography, is: Helene Hurwitz-Stranz, ed. *Kriegerwitwen gestalten ihr Schicksal. Lebenskämpfe deutscher Kriegerwitwen nach eigenen Darstellungen* (Berlin: Heymann, 1931): 22.

excitement understood more in terms of a release and resolving of tension than as ‘enthusiasm’⁸⁹), and the sinking heart of the wife.

But as with the young Prussian, arguably the most significant aspect is that the husband sought her permission at all, an act which seemed to implicitly recognize the foundational tensions inherent in the act of volunteering as well as their relation to the new thanatological reality of wartime. At bottom was the pull between a personal duty to one’s family and a national duty to not only the state, but the state *at war*. That is, it was a tension between a behavioral path that would mean one would likely survive for longer and be able to personally care for of one’s family, and an alternative path which would greatly increase the probability that one would die in the service of the state and permanently leave one’s loved ones—a tension between life and death. And while the affective dynamics are perhaps the most overt, this widow’s recollections also highlight the inherent moral element at play, namely, the question of which community—personal or national—held the greatest weight of ethical obligation. Although he eventually volunteered, it appears that it was actually the man’s *personal* community which won out, evidenced in the fact that when he did not volunteer until he received his wife’s permission; the two moral vectors could not be reconciled without his wife’s blessing. However, the moral and emotional dissonance in not being able to satisfy both ethical obligations appears to have taken a recognizable psychosomatic toll on him, and it was this which eventually led his wife to give her assent despite the immense emotional pain it caused her. In allowing him to volunteer, his wife essentially subsumed herself and their family within the national community, displaying her own

⁸⁹ This is an essential distinction, well summarized by Hirschfeld: “Very different perceptions of the beginning of the war came together in this ‘volcano of feelings’: fear at the coming uncertainty, concern for one’s professional and familial future, but also the discharge of an immense mental tension.... The constantly described seesaw of feelings, the enormous nervousness and the extreme excitement of the last weeks before the war, now gave way...to a ‘phase of order and clarity’ (Geinitz).” Hirschfeld, “Spirit of 1914,” 33.

sense of national moral obligation—"to be as strong as all the other wives"—which proved an essential condition for her husband's military service. Thus, while it was clearly the volunteers themselves who were going off to risk possible—and perhaps probable—death in combat, it is also clear that right from the beginning, the German state was setting itself on its own inclination toward (metaphorical) death, given the social changes inherent in the raising of a mass army; it was the unspoken institution undergirding Resch's triad. The act of volunteering was one embedded in complex and overlapping webs of social, emotional, and moral ties, and thus innately involved a disproportionate share of German society, even if the number of volunteers was limited when compared with the German population as a whole. The fears and pains of separation the widow described, moreover, were not unique to the cases of volunteers, but applied to all who entered the military. The stakes of Germany's wager on war were therefore much higher than a purely quantitative calculation might indicate. While this did not make revolution and regime collapse inevitable, it did mean an implicit degree of "totality" was present from the war's earliest days, even if, taken in the more literal sense, the German mobilization was still quite limited in the late summer of 1914.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ As Roger Chickering points out, 'mobilization' actually denotes the 'making mobile' of previously immobile things, thus serving as something of a metaphorical metric for the 'totalization' of the war, especially the linkages across front and home and the increasingly central role the home front played in the war effort: "The metaphor of 'mobilization'—'making mobile' (*Mobilmachung*) in German—provided the basic semantic link between battlefield and homefront. In its military usage, the metaphor had Clausewitzian overtones. It signified the making mobile of troops and supplies—their assembly, transport, and massed deployment at critical points on the battlefield. IN the thinking of Clausewitz's disciples in Germany and other belligerent lands, however, the pertinence of the metaphor was supposed to be fleeting, confined to the dramatic initial moments of the war, when victory awaited the side that had better managed the assembly, transport, and mass deployment of its forces for the war's decisive first battles. With the general collapse of this scenario in the fall of 1914, mobilization became instead a cynosure of the homefront. Here the idea of 'making mobile' was geared to the human and material resources that were required by enormous field armies now locked in a long war. In both its civilian and military contexts, mobilization implied the making mobile of things that had been sedentary or otherwise innocent of war, the conscious intervention of the state to conduct objects—whether munitions boxes, iron ore, or pretzels—according to the war's vast designs." Chickering, *Great War and Urban Life*, 159.

Even once one had secured the assent of one's loved ones, however, that did not mean one was able to volunteer right away, as the case of the anonymous *Kriegsfreiwilliger* illustrates. For while this young man received *permission* to volunteer on 4 August, he wasn't actually *accepted* into the army until ten days later—notably, after the publication of the first casualty lists—when the Ersatz-Battalion of the 31st Infantry Regiment in Altona declared him fit and took him on his third attempt to join them.⁹¹ He was initially rejected by the 31st on 5 August, after which he attempted to register with the 9th Jäger Battalion later the same day, but was also rejected.⁹² Indeed, it seems he was one of many potential volunteers chasing rumors of which units might be recruiting in the first weeks of the war. As he wrote on 8 August: “Left at 12:35. Many war volunteers on the train who had also heard that the 85th was still recruiting. Rejected. Went back to Hamburg at 2:25.”⁹³ Indeed, according to his diary, it took six attempts with four different units until he was able to join the army.⁹⁴ This was not atypical. In an unpublished war memoir, the *Kriegsfreiwilliger* Paul Wittenburg similarly recounted deciding to join on the first day of the mobilization, but being unable to find a unit to take him until two weeks later, when he was admitted into a Field Artillery Regiment.⁹⁵ Most units filled their manpower needs through conscription, and thus many volunteers had to exert considerable effort to join up, often visiting six or seven depots before they found a unit willing to take them.⁹⁶ Behaviorally, then, the war volunteers of August 1914 appear even more strongly inclined toward death than their

⁹¹ BA-MA MSG 2/65, 2.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 1

⁹³ *Ibid.* “12.35 Uhr Abfahrt. Viele Kriegsfreiw. im Zug, die auch gehoert hatten, dass die 85er noch einstellen. Abgewiesen. 2.25 Uhr nachts nach Hamburg zurueck.“

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* His entries from 5-14 August recount his three attempts to join the 31st, his attempts to join the 85th and the 9th Jäger Battalion, as well as an unspecified unit at a barracks in Bahrenfeld.

⁹⁵ BA-MA MSG 2/2640 “Wittenburg, Paul (Kriegsfreiwilliger im Reserve-Feld-Artillerie-Regimenter 60 und 66).- Erinnerungen an seinen Einsatz an der Ost- und Westfront, Bd. 1: Maschinenschriftlicher Erinnerungsbericht,” 2-7. A short, translated excerpt from this memoir appears in: Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 29.

⁹⁶ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 84-85.

numbers alone would suggest: many had to expend substantial energy to be accepted into a unit and conduct the deadly work of the state.

Further, since all *Kriegsfreiwilliger* had to apply to *specific* units, volunteering could, ironically, provide an opportunity to shield oneself somewhat from the risks of combat depending on which unit one joined. As Ziemann notes, the sociologist Norbert Elias, who was eighteen years old when he joined the army in 1915 after finishing his *Abitur*, “owed his survival in the First World War to his family’s (correct) advice that volunteering for a radio unit would spare him from dangerous operations on the front line.”⁹⁷ What is most striking, however, is that it appears many volunteers went in the opposite direction. In Watson’s sample, only 3.83% volunteered for the pioneers, who chiefly performed engineering and construction tasks, while 41.33% volunteered for the infantry.⁹⁸ Of course, this was far from a full-proof survival strategy, especially when one conceives of ‘survival’ in a broader sense and takes mental and emotional health into account. Elias himself suffered a nervous breakdown in 1917, after which he was declared unfit for service and transferred to Breslau, where he became a medical orderly.⁹⁹ Elias’s experience was not atypical in this regard, as war volunteers appear to have suffered above-average psychiatric casualty rates, often linked to a variety of military experiences.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, what is most notable is that even on the individual level, war volunteers seemed to incline their behavior toward death not just in a general sense through joining the army, but by specifically joining units that would soon face combat.

⁹⁷ Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 30.

⁹⁸ Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 73, table 2. The rest of the sample was made up of 33.05% in the artillery, 21.79% in the cavalry. Of course, these figures give only a rough indication, given the variety of unit types that made up each part of the army.

⁹⁹ See Elias’s autobiography: Norbert Elias, *Reflections on a Life*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Malden: Polity Press, 1994 [1990]).

¹⁰⁰ On the psychological wounds of war volunteers, see: Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 62-70.

This micro-level behavioral inclination often continued after a *Kriegsfreiwilliger*—or indeed, any soldier—had been recruited, as the new soldier faced myriad quotidian choices which could increase or decrease the likelihood of his death. The choices some made are all the more striking given the fact that there was often a substantial delay between when one joined and when one was actually sent to the front, which meant weeks or, more often, months for these new recruits to learn even more about the deadly war they’d entered into. The anonymous war volunteer was accepted into the 31st Infantry Regiment on 14 August, but did not receive a field uniform until 24 September and did not depart for the front until 6 October.¹⁰¹ Ernst Jünger joined the 73rd Hanoverian Fusilier Regiment in August 1914, but did not arrive at the front until late December.¹⁰² Paul Wittenburg did not arrive at the front until February 1915, despite joining the field artillery the same day as the anonymous volunteer.¹⁰³ Further, even getting to the front could prove arduous and provided myriad opportunities to avoid the dangers of combat, at least temporarily. After a march of 24 kilometers on 8 October, the anonymous volunteer developed blisters on his feet severe enough that he had to report sick to the military hospital. The nurse then sent him on to a private doctor, who recommended he spend three days in the hospital recovering, advice which he refused.¹⁰⁴ The issues with his feet continued to plague him as his unit marched further into France, yet he repeatedly avoided opportunities to convalesce, opting instead to try and reach the front as soon as possible with his unit. After being sent to the staff doctor by his Captain, he wrote in his diary on 14 October:

The Lance Corporal [*Gefreiter*] told me that I should of course stay behind. It didn’t make sense for me to stay on the march. But I wanted to keep going with the rest of my

¹⁰¹ BA-MA MSG 2/65, 2.

¹⁰² The first entry in Jünger’s diary is from 30 December 1914: Ernst Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch, 1914-1918*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010): 7. His famous war memoir *Storm of Steel* also begins with his arrival at the front in December 1914: Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (New York: Penguin, 2004 [1961]): 5.

¹⁰³ BA-MA MSG 2/2640, 16.

¹⁰⁴ BA-MA MSG 2/65, 2.

unit, even though I could have stayed in the rear area [*Revier*] for two days because the wound looked so dangerous. For the first half of the march, I was repeatedly told that I should go back as it was still a long way. But I stayed with my comrades.¹⁰⁵

Even in this short anecdote, the mundane manifestations of the implicitly self-destructive behavioral constellation are clearly visible. After volunteering for an infantry unit, this soldier had multiple opportunities to delay his arrival at the front, all of which he refused. More than that, arriving at the front with the type of foot blisters he had developed would further decrease his effectiveness in combat and therefore also his ability to survive. His desire to stay with his unit, regardless of the personal physical cost to himself, led this soldier to *behave* in such a way that it increased the likelihood that he would be killed, even when given explicit opportunities to do the exact opposite.

This behavioral pattern continued with even higher existential stakes once he arrived at the front. His foot issues continued, which exerted a powerful negative emotional influence on him. On 20 October, he wrote in his diary:

Everyone wishes that the war with France will end by Christmas, as they all would like to be home again at Christmas. Today the news came that Ghent and Ostende had been occupied by our troops. Thank god; now the war will soon be over. Everyone thinks so. If I didn't have my injured feet, I would be in a completely different mood. But it makes me depressed the entire day, and sometimes I dream of home, of Christmas.¹⁰⁶

A complex of personal concerns, most immediately linked with his physiological state, drove his thoughts about the war, and seemed to temper his earlier eagerness to participate actively in it. But once he did finally arrive in the main area at the front, stayed off his feet for several days,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 4. "Der Gefreiter sagte mir, ich solle auf jeden Fall zurueckbleiben, es ginge nicht, wenn ich unterwegs liegenbleibe. Ich wollte aber mit, trotzdem ich zwei Tage im Revier haette bleiben koennen, weil die Wunde so gefaehrlich aussah. Auf der ersten Haelfte des Weges wurde mir jeden Augenblick gesagt, ich solle umkehren, es waere noch weit. Aber ich bleib bei meinen Kameraden."

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 6. "Alle wuenschen, dass der Krieg mit Frankreich bis Weihnachten beendet sein moege, den jeder moechte Weihnachten wieder zu Huase sein. Heute kam die Nachricht, dass Gent und Ostende von unsern Truppen besetzt worden seien. Gott sei Dank, jetzt wird der Krieg bald zu Ende sein. So denkt jeder. Wenn ich nur den kranken Fuss nicht haette, wuerde ich ganz anderer Stimmung sein. Aber das macht mich den ganzen Tag niedergedrueckt, und mitunter traem [sic] ich von Zuhause, von Weihnachten."

and finally allowed his blisters to heal, that behavioral zeal returned almost immediately. He wrote on 24 October that “[m]y foot is healed! A completely different lust for activity has come over me, I’m no longer depressed at all. On watch today, of course voluntarily.”¹⁰⁷ Once in the trenches, he then volunteered to participate in active patrol missions, as he recorded in his diary on 7 November: “This afternoon I voluntarily went on patrol with Pflüger and Bertelsen.... It was my first patrol that was really dangerous. On watch this evening from 10 to 12. But nothing special.”¹⁰⁸ Taken together then, it seems that while this soldier’s personal surface current was quite dynamic and subject to relatively intense emotional fluctuations linked most immediately with his own physiological state, his undercurrent remained much more static, displaying a consistent behavioral inclination toward death and self-destruction.

This same pattern continues until the end of the diary. He developed a stomach flu in late November, which led to him running a fever of 37.8° C (105° F).¹⁰⁹ But once again, he refused to go the medical hospital, instead opting for lighter duty in the rear area, writing in his entry for 26/27 November that “[I was] prescribed to stay in the rear area for a few more days due to my miserable appearance. But I want to go back to my company.”¹¹⁰ In December, he volunteered once again for dangerous patrol duty, exploring a largely-unmapped portion of the French trench system in his sector with a comrade over the course of several days.¹¹¹ Once his unit was moved to Hartmannsweilerkopf in late January 1915, he again volunteered for scouting duty, although

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 7. “Mein Fuss ist geheilt! Es Kommt eine ganz andere Schaffenslust ueber mich, ich bin gar nicht mehr bedrueckt. Huete auf Wache gewesen, natuerlich freiwillig.”

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 9. “Heute nachm. bin ich mit Pflüger und Bertelsen freiwillig auf Patrouille gewesen. Wir haben die Franzosen aus dem Apfelbaum verjagt und herausgefunden, dass 150 Meter vor uns ein Doppelposten stand, waehrend er nachts etwa 100 Meter weiter vorgegangen war. Es war meine erste Patrouille, bei der wirklich Gefahr war. Abends von 10 bis 12 Wache. Doch nichts Besonderes.”

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 10-11.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 11. “Mich hat er sehr lange untersucht, fuer gesund befunden, jedoch verordnet, dass ich wegen des elenden Aussehens noch einige Tageim [sic] Revier beliben soll. Doch will ich wieder zur Kompanie gehen.”

¹¹¹ This is recounted in detail in his entries from 14-19 December 1914: Ibid., 12-13.

this time under even more dangerous conditions. He described the scouting mission in his diary on 25 January:

I voluntarily went forward with Pflüger and searched about 30 meters further forward for a good place to lay. Pflüger held a hatchet in order to clear a path, because in an emergency we should go back without shooting. Suddenly I heard suppressed voices and coughing. I cautiously moved another 20 to 30 meters forward, going from tree to tree. Pflüger followed about 3 meters behind me with the hatchet. Suddenly, 10-15 meters in front of me, I saw a jet of fire flash; I was right in front of the French position. We threw ourselves down. The next moment we received a frightening volley of fire, but it didn't hit us. We brought back what we could and came happily into our trenches. N.C.O. Broers made the report. The 5th, 6th, and 7th groups no longer had to undertake a scouting mission. The night was cold. I was in the dugout with Pflüger but couldn't sleep. Comrade Penner fell during the relief. Neck shot, killed instantly. A good guy [Kerl].¹¹²

Once again, the volunteer's diary explicitly mentions that he "voluntarily" undertook patrol duty, although here the dangers involved are more clearly laid out: the massively increased risk of death and mutilation from artillery fire—especially given that he apparently took point position—or, as the death of one of the soldier's coming to relieve him illustrates, snipers.

What is most significant, however, is what such anecdotes illustrate about the quotidian manifestations of an implicit behavioral inclination toward death more broadly. It was not just that this young man sharply inclined his behavior towards death in a general sense through volunteering, but that he did so *specifically*, in a minimum of four distinct ways: 1) he volunteered for an infantry unit; 2) he consistently disregarded his own physical and emotional well-being in order to stay with his unit as it approached the front, contradicting both military

¹¹² Ibid., 17. "In jedem Graben zwei Mann. 20 Mann auf einem Lauscherposten. Ich ging mit Pflüger freiwillig vor, suchte etwa 30 Meter weiter vorn einen guten Platz zum Hinlegen, Pflueger holte ein Beil, um uns den Weg freizumachen, denn wir sollten im Gefahrsfall ohne zu Schiessen zurueckgehen. Ploetzlich hoerte ich unterdrueckte Stimmen und Husten. Ging vorsichtrig noch 20 bis 30 Meter vor von Baum zu Baum. Pflüger kam mir mit dem Beil nach, drei Meter hinter mir. Ploetzlich, 10-15 Meter vor mir, sah ich einen Feuerstrahl aufblitzen, ich war dicht vor dem französischer Posten. Wir warfen uns nieder. Im naechsten Augenblick bekamen wire in fuerchterliches Salvenfeuer, das uns aber nicht traf. Wir liefern zurueck, was wir konnten und kamen gluecklich in unsern Graben. Uffz. Broers machte Meldung. Die 5., 6. Und 7. Gruppe brauchten darauf keinen Lauschersezten [sic] mehr zu stellen. Die Nacht kalt, mit Pfluenger im Unterstand gewesen, nicht geschlafen. Bei der Abloesung ist Kamerad Penner gefallen, Halsschuss, sofort tot. Ein gutter Kerl."

and medical advice multiple times; 3) he volunteered repeatedly to undertake dangerous duties and missions while at the front; and 4) while undertaking those patrols, he took on the lead role, quite literally placing himself closer to enemy fire. Notably, only the first was unique to him as a *Kriegsfreiwilliger*; the rest were options available to all soldiers to varying degrees. It is unclear what exactly became of this particular soldier from the surviving archival record, but a short note at the beginning of the file states that “the author asked to remain anonymous,” implying that he did survive the war.¹¹³ Even with a strong personal inclination toward death, one could still survive. Jünger, famously, reveled in the experiences of combat and was wounded no less than fourteen times throughout his military service, yet lived to be 102.¹¹⁴ Indeed, even front-line units spent only a small fraction of their time in the firing line, and there were myriad opportunities to increase one’s likelihood of survival in both mundane and profound ways throughout the war.¹¹⁵ As Ziemann notes, “soldiers’ willingness to continue participating in the killing depended in no small measure on their own chances of living to tell the tale.”¹¹⁶ It is thus all the more striking to see instances where, at least behaviorally, the exact opposite appears to be the case: soldiers often took on unnecessary risks, without compulsion, and therefore willfully decreased their chances of ‘living to tell the tale.’

As with explicit suicides, then, looking at this much larger implicit region of the self-destructive behavioral spectrum, one sees that it was also highly circumscribed by both gender and age, as it was military-age men whose behavior was most steeply and immediately inclined toward death by the decision for war. Within this region, the least inclined as a collective were

¹¹³ BA-MA, MSG 2/65, 1. “Der Verfasser bat darum, ungenannt zu bleiben.”

¹¹⁴ Ziemann provides the best concise overview of Jünger’s war experience available in English: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 63-90. For a more detailed analysis of Jünger, see Helmuth Kiesel’s biography, which is now the new standard: Helmuth Kiesel, *Ernst Jünger. Die Biographie* (Munich: Siedler, 2009).

¹¹⁵ See the discussion in: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 28-35.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

conscripts, who had been roped into the lethal struggle by state mandate, not personal choice. It is worth noting, however, that even obeying that call was a choice of a certain kind, though one highly circumscribed by the power of the state and Germany's by then century-long history with universal military service.¹¹⁷ There were opportunities for desertion throughout the war, based largely on geography and location. And as the case of the Württemberger Uhlán illustrates, one could disobey the state's call to arms without much apparent thought for the probability of successfully avoiding the army (although that could clearly end up being even more deadly).¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, it is significant that it was only in the Polish areas in the east that men tried to avoid the draft to any notable degree, a direct contrast with 1813 and 1870, when, as Verhey notes, "many draftees in Germany had to be forced to go."¹¹⁹ Still, taken collectively, conscripts' behavior was primarily inclined toward death by the state and its decision for war, as the overwhelming majority of those conscripted obeyed the call regardless of their personal feelings about the conflict. War volunteers displayed a much greater personal inclination toward death, especially the majority who joined after 9 August and thus can be reasonably assumed to have had at least some concrete knowledge that such an action would profoundly increase the likelihood of their premature demise. But even here the angles of inclination varied widely. Not only the choice to volunteer, but also when and to which unit, and ultimately the particular decisions one made once actually at the front made massive differences in the likelihood of one's

¹¹⁷ See: Frevert, *Nation in Barracks*.

¹¹⁸ See the overview in: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 93-103. For a more detailed comparative examination of desertion in the German and British armies, see: Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten. Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

¹¹⁹ Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 96.

survival and illustrate the ways soldiers had at least some degree of control over their personal fates.¹²⁰

Ultimately, then, this spectrum of implicit self-destruction ranged from those who reluctantly obeyed the call to arms and then did their best to ensure their survival when given quotidian opportunities to do so, to those who actively volunteered not only for military service, but for service in the most dangerous combat units and for the most dangerous missions and tasks undertaken by those units. Taken together, one sees that a specific set of self-destructive behaviors unique to wartime crystallized rapidly in 1914, a constellation which overshadowed, enveloped, and functionally buried the shadow vanguard of explicit suicides. It was not that masses of Germans suddenly developed a death wish in August 1914. Rather, what is most striking is that so many of them—in varying ways and to varying degrees—*acted* as though they did.

1.3 Personal Self-Destruction as National Sacrifice

Contemporaries did not view their actions in those terms, however, especially when it came to volunteering and death in combat. Indeed, what is most essential for understanding the crystallization of this thanatological constellation in the late summer of 1914 is that its self-destructive elements remained a *subsurface* current, an undercurrent; they were buried and

¹²⁰ Ziemann concisely summarizes the point: “[T]he soldiers of the First World War did not take part in kamikaze missions designed to end in inevitable self-destruction. Instead they based their participation on expectations as to whether and when their involvement in the struggle would further their own survival. In the First World War, as in every war, there were those who either participated only reluctantly in the killing, or who took advantage of opportunities, when these arose, to avoid combat. At the other end of the spectrum were the young men who felt driven, particularly in summer and autumn 1914, to volunteer themselves for military service.” Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 12.

flowing beneath the surface current of the “spirit of 1914,” though both were part of the same oceanic system. Aside from those at the explicit end of the self-destructive behavioral continuum, contemporaries in 1914 did not conceive of their actions as suicidal, but rather as *sacrificial*: as a necessary ‘giving something up’—most pertinently here, one’s life or the life of a loved one—for a ‘higher good.’¹²¹ As Robert Whalen notes, “[i]mages of sacrificial, redemptive death filled soldiers’ letters, especially those written in the first years of the war.”¹²² And while historians continue to debate the precise scale, reception, and meaning of this rhetoric and imagery, its ubiquity has long been beyond question.¹²³

One can see this configuration at play in the short war experience of Franz Blumenfeld, a twenty-three year-old law student who volunteered at the beginning of August 1914 and was killed that December. On 24 September, on the train heading to the front, he wrote a farewell letter (*Abschiedsbrief*) to his mother:

I want to write to you about something else, which, judging from bits in your letters, you haven’t quite understood: why I should have volunteered for the war? Of course it was not from any enthusiasm for war in general, nor because I thought it would be a fine thing to kill a great many people or otherwise distinguish myself. On the contrary, I find that war is a very, very evil thing, and I also believe that if diplomacy had been more skillful, it could have been avoided this time too. But, now that it has been declared, I find it self-evident [*selbstverständlich*] that one should feel oneself so much a member of the nation that one must bind one’s fate as closely as possible with that of the whole. And even if I were convinced that I could do more for my Fatherland and its people in peace than in war, I should think it just as perverse and impossible to let such deliberate, almost calculating considerations weigh with me now as it would be for a man going to help somebody who was drowning, to stop to consider who the drowning man was and

¹²¹ This is the essence of the Oxford English Dictionary’s third, transitive definition for ‘sacrifice’ as a verb, and one which accords closely with the German verb ‘opfern’: *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “sacrifice,” <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/169572?rskey=gmZDpU&result=2#eid> (accessed 27 March 2020). On the main meaning of ‘opfern’ as ‘sacrifice,’ see: *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, s.v. “opfern,” http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=DWB&lemid=GO01922 (accessed 27 March 2020).

¹²² Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984): 28.

¹²³ See the concise historiographical overview in: Alexander Watson and Patrick Porter, “Bereaved and Aggrieved: Combat Motivation and the Ideology of Sacrifice in the First World War,” *Historical Research* Vol. 83, No. 219 (February 2010): 146-147.

whether his own life was not perhaps the more valuable of the two. For what is decisive is always the readiness to make a sacrifice [*Opferbereitschaft*], not the object for which the sacrifice is made.

From all that I have heard, I find this war to be something awful, inhuman, mad, obsolete, and in every way depraving, that I have firmly resolved, if I do come back, to do everything in my power to prevent such a thing from ever happening again in the future.¹²⁴

Although *oriented* towards pacifism and life, through volunteering, Blumenfeld nonetheless *inclined* himself toward war and death. His letter makes the moral element linking orientation and inclination—and thus current and undercurrent—explicit: “the readiness to make a sacrifice.” What is most striking, however, is not just that sacrifice provided the socio-moral, emotional, and conceptual link between the two, but the specific way in which he conceived of that linkage. First, Blumenfeld almost completely divorced *jus ad bellum* (‘justice of the war’) from *jus in bello* (‘justice in the war’).¹²⁵ The divorce was so complete, in fact, that the letter

¹²⁴ Philipp Witkop, ed., *Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten* (Leipzig: B. G. Teuber, 1918): 1-2. “Nun möchte ich Dir noch über eines schreiben, das Du Dir nach einigen Stellen in Deinen letzten Briefen vielleicht anders denkst: Warum ich mich als Kriegsfreiwilliger gemeldet habe? Natürlich nicht aus allgemeiner Begeisterung für den Krieg, auch nicht weil ich es für eine besonders große Tat halte, sehr viele Menschen tot zu schießen oder sich sonst im Kriege auszuzeichnen. Im Gegenteil, ich finde den Krieg etwas sehr, sehr Schlimmes und glaube auch, daß es bei einer geschickteren Diplomatie auch diesmal hätte gelingen müssen, ihn zu vermeiden. — Aber jetzt, wo er einmal erklärt ist, finde ich es einfach selbstverständlich, daß man sich so weit als Glied des Volksganzen fühlt, um sein Schicksal möglichst eng mit dem des Ganzen zu verbinden. Und auch, wenn ich überzeugt bin, daß ich im Frieden für das Vaterland. und das Volk mehr tun kann als im Krieg, so finde ich es ebenso verkehrt und unmöglich, solche abwägenden, fast rechnenden Betrachtungen jetzt anzustellen, wie etwa für einen Mann, der, bevor er einem Ertrinkenden hilft, sich selbst überlegen wollte, wer der Ertrinkende wäre und ob er nicht vielleicht wertvoller sei als dieser. — Denn das Entscheidende ist doch immer die Opferbereitschaft, nicht das, wofür das Opfer gebracht wird. — — Ich finde den Krieg nach allem, was ich davon gehört habe, als etwas so Fürchterliches, Menschen-Unwürdiges, Törichtes, Überlebtes, in jeder Weise Verderbliches, daß ich mir fest vorgenommen habe, wenn ich aus dem Kriege heimkehre, mit aller Kraft alles zu tun, was ich kann, damit es in Zukunft so etwas nicht mehr geben kann.” I am also not the first historian who has been struck by this letter; it is also quoted in: Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Franz Coetzee, eds., *Empires, Soldiers, and Citizens: A World War I Sourcebook* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 63.

¹²⁵ Michael Walzer summarizes the distinction between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, as well as its centrality for understanding the morality of war and its meta-historical contours: “The moral reality of war is divided into two parts. War is always judged twice, first with reference to the reasons states have for fighting, secondly with reference to the means they adopt. The first kind of judgement is adjectival in character: we say that a particular war is just or unjust. The second is adverbial: we say that the war is being fought justly or unjustly. Medieval writers made the difference a matter of prepositions, distinguishing *jus ad bellum*, the justice of war, from *jus in bello*, justice in war. These grammatical distinctions point to deep issues. *Jus ad bellum* requires us to make judgements about aggression and self-defense; *jus in bello* about the observance or violation of the customary and positive rules of engagement. The two sorts of judgement are logically independent. It is perfectly possible for a just war to be

suggests he actually considered the war unjust to at least some degree, given that war generally was “a very, very evil thing” and the particular war he now found himself in was “something horrible, inhuman, mad, obsolete, and in every way depraving” which “might have been averted by a more skilful diplomacy.” That is: the war appeared both unjust and (at least largely) unnecessary in Blumenfeld’s analysis. Nonetheless, he clearly saw acting justly as requiring his military service in spite of his pacifism; a sacrifice not only of his life—as it played out in the event—but of his ideals as well, at least in a behavioral sense. Second, in volunteering for the army, he explicitly subsumed himself within the larger national collective. As with the eventual widow of the *Landsturmmann II*, Blumenfeld saw the national community as that which held the greatest moral weight, and thus his obligation to that community superseded whatever other ethical ties and concerns he presumably felt. Through reconceiving of his own personal sacrifice in national terms, he was able to resolve the ideational contradiction and dissonance between his action and not only his ideals, but his moral analysis of the war itself. The nation was worth sacrificing for regardless of the circumstances under which it called for that sacrifice.

Further, on a deeper level, Blumenfeld’s letter indicates the way the sacrificial “spirit of 1914” was, in fact, experienced in a more literal sense. The types of mental gymnastics displayed in the *Abschiedsbrief* point towards the fact that sacrifice, in this context, was first and foremost experienced as a *moral feeling*: an emotion which implied the need for and pointed toward a behavior inherently imbued with moral content.¹²⁶ “Feeling” appears as the lynchpin of

fought unjustly and for an unjust war to be fought in strict accordance with the rules. But this independence, though our views of particular wars often conform to its terms, is nevertheless puzzling. It is a crime to commit aggression, but aggressive war is a rule-governed activity. It is right to resist aggression, but the resistance is subject to moral (and legal) restraint. The dualism of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* is at the heart of all that is problematic in the moral reality of war.” Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, Fifth Edition (New York: Basic Books, 2015 [1977]): 21.

¹²⁶ As the psychologist Nick Chater discusses, emotions are in fact improvised interpretations of bodily states, but interpretations that inherently take place in a social context which in turn imbues them with more specific content,

Blumenfeld's letter, a point he made explicitly: "one should *feel* [*fühlt*] oneself so much a member of the nation that one must unite one's fate as closely as possible with that of the whole." Blumenfeld appears to have experienced a *Pflichtgefühl* in a literal sense: the feeling of obligation and (national) duty was strong enough that it transcended his actual reasoning about the war; a specific historical manifestation of Jonathan Haidt's meta-historical point that people "have strong gut feelings about what is right and wrong, and they struggle to construct post hoc justifications for those feelings."¹²⁷ The "ideology of sacrifice"—that "diffuse body of values, concepts and themes extolling the righteousness of laying down one's life for a greater cause," as Watson and Patrick Porter have defined it—was thus the conscious gloss on an unconscious process whose behavioral vector was socially directed and strongly conditioned by the state.¹²⁸

This sacrificial emotional-moral matrix was not unique to Blumenfeld, although he was exceptionally articulate in his expression of it. During the first year of the war, the Institute for Applied Psychology (*Institut für angewandte Psychologie*) in Potsdam circulated a wide-ranging questionnaire amongst front soldiers, which formed the basis for Paul Plaut's "Psychography of the Warrior," published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 1920.¹²⁹ Although the survey was shut down by the military censors after about a year, and none of the research was able to be published until after the war, it nonetheless provides a more comprehensive glimpse into

often—though not always—moral: "Emotions, then, have their meaning, not through some elementary properties of 'raw experience', but through their role in our thoughts, our social interactions and our culture. To be ashamed, proud, angry or jealous is not to experience the welling up of some primitive feeling—we are ashamed of specific actions, proud of particular achievements, angry at individual people for concrete reasons, and so on. Of course, such feelings are associated with a bodily state (just as words have physical form, as acoustic waves or patterns of ink; and just as money is embodied in paper and metal), but the bodily state—the rushes of adrenaline, the pounding of the heart—should not be confused with the emotion itself." Nick Chater, *The Mind is Flat: The Remarkable Shallowness of the Improvising Brain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018): 107.

¹²⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012): 58-59.

¹²⁸ Watson and Porter, "Bereaved and Aggrieved," 147-148.

¹²⁹ Paul Plaut, "Psychographie des Kriegers," in eds. William Stern and Otto Wiegmann, *Behefte zur Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie*, Vol. 21, *Beiträge zur Psychologie des Kriegers* (1920): 1-123. The full text of the questionnaire is included in the piece as an appendix: 111-118.

soldiers' motivations in the war's opening months than analysis of individual soldiers can do on its own.¹³⁰ Right in the introduction, Plaut laid out the centrality of unconscious moral feelings to Germans' responses to the outbreak of war: "No one had a conscious understanding of [the war], of what it really meant, surely no one; it was a suggestibility that everyone integrated together into a uniform mass of feelings [*einer einheitlichen Gefühlsmasse*], into a symphony, whose constant, recurring, and dominant theme was enthusiasm."¹³¹ Thus, while this complex of feelings may have been rhetorically coded as 'war enthusiasm,' that term was largely a misnomer—merely the name given for the complicated and varied 'depth of emotion' and 'intensity of feeling' so characteristic of the war's opening weeks. Further, that emotional mass—that 'enthusiasm'—was centered on the need for sacrifice, which was, in Plaut's analysis, the true essence of the war. And while it was an essence all experienced, soldiers sat at the forefront:

Because it cannot be said enough: this war was more than a movement of weapons. The experience of it was not only anchored in soldiers who defended or attacked with rifles and hand grenades. *It was a path to general sacrifice* [*ein allgemeiner Opfergang*] which the entire people, indeed the entire cultural world had to line up for. All had to experience the war itself, which—some more, some less—left none untouched. And yet the soldier and his experiences still stand at the foreground of interest, because he has experienced the war in its most elemental and most distinctly original [*ureigensten*] sense.¹³²

¹³⁰ It is for this reason that numerous historians have drawn on this source. Strachan, for example, notably deployed it in his analysis of 'war enthusiasm', as did Watson: Strachan, *First World War*, 153; Watson, "For Kaiser and Reich," 57. Translated excerpts from this source appear in: Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 31-32.

¹³¹ Plaut, "Psychographie," 1. "Ein bewusstes Verstehen für das, was in Wirklichkeit geschah, hatte man nicht, sicherlich keiner; es war eine Suggestibilität, die alle zusammenfasste zu einer einheitlichen Gefühlsmasse, zu einer Symphonie, deren ständig wiederkehrendes und beherrschendes Thema die Begeisterung war."

¹³² Ibid., 5. Emphasis added. "Denn es kann nicht genug betont werden: dieser Krieg war mehr als ein Waffengang, sein Erleben ist nicht nur verankert in dem Soldaten, der mit Gewehr und Handgranate sich verteidigt oder angreift. Es war ein allgemeiner Opfergang, den das gesamte Volk, ja die ganze Kulturwelt hat antreten müssen. Alle haben den Krieg an sich erfahren müssen, der eine mehr oder weniger, keiner blieb unberührt. Und doch steht der Soldat mit seinem Erlebnis im Vordergrund des Interesses, weil er den Krieg in seiner elementarsten und ureigensten Art an sich erlebt hat." It is also worth noting that 'Opfergang' more literally means 'the path to a sacrificial altar'. See: *Wörterbuch der deutsch-lothringischen Mundarten*, c.v. "Opfergang," http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/cgi-bin/WBNetz/wbgui_py?sigle=LothWB&lemid=CO00168 (accessed 20 April 2020).

In Plaut's analysis, volunteers like Blumenfeld made up a sacrificial vanguard as those who experienced the war in its primal sense. But as such, they were merely at the front of a mass sacrificial movement: everyone would have to walk to the alter and make an offering, even if some would ultimately have to give more than others. The unity of the war was thus the unity of communal sacrifice, but one with mass death at its foundation: that "most elemental" and "distinctly original" meaning of war.

Explicit invocations of sacrifice were present in the public sphere from the war's earliest days. Plaut quoted a particularly bellicose example from 9 August—notably, the day the first casualty lists were published—that appeared in the *Deutsche Kriegszeitung*, a paper edited by the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*:

Today the German sword is out of its sheath. Today one recognizes the nameless suffering of our Fatherland through all the centuries of shame and misery, when Germany was again and again defenselessly abandoned to the ideas of envious and greedy [*beutegieriger*] enemies. That will never happen again. The unanimity of the uplift of our people, the unity of high and low, rich and poor; *the self-abnegation and courage to sacrifice* [*die Entsagung und der Opfermut*] of every individual who leaves everything, his entire future and that of his own loved ones and sees them sink into nothing, and without a word of complaint goes to the flag, rushes to the defense of the Fatherland, holds the rifle for it in its unprecedented magnificence, guarantees that we must win. Because we all know it, all of our senses call us to it: we will win, we will become the most powerful people on the globe, and a long period of peace and welfare will make rich compensation *for everything that we bear today with joyful sacrificial courage* [*mit freudigem Opfermute*] in the name of the Fatherland!¹³³

¹³³ Plaut, "Psychographie," 7. Emphasis added. "Heute ist das deutsche Schwert aus der Scheide. Man begreift heute die namenlosen Leiden unseres Vaterlandes durch all die Jahrhunderte der Schmach und des Elends, als Deutschland wieder und wieder wehrlos den Einfällen envious and beutegieriger Feinde preisgegeben war. Das wird niemals wieder geschehen. Die Einmütigkeit der Erhebung unseres Volkes, die Eintracht von hoch und niedrig, arm und reich, die Entsagung und der Opfermut jedes einzelnen, der sein Alles verlässt, seine ganze Zukunft und die der Seinigen in nichts versinken sieht und ohne Wort der Klage zur Fahne, zur Verteidigung des Vaterlandes eilt, birgt in ihrer nie dagewesenen Grossartigkeit die Gewähr dafür, dass wir siegen müssen. Denn wir wissen es, alle unsere Sinne rufen es uns zu: Wir werden siegen, wir werden das mächtigste Volk werden auf dem Erdenrund, und eine lange Zeit des Friedens und der Wohlfahrt wird uns reichlich entschädigen für alles, was wir heute mit freudigem Opfermute tragen im Namen des Vaterlandes!"

‘Sacrifice’ was evoked explicitly, as was, ironically, its direct connection with self-destruction in wartime and that self-destruction’s socio-emotional consequences; that is, with all the elements of Resch’s triad. The editorial makes clear that “self-abnegation” (*Entsagung*) and “sacrificial courage” (*Opfermut*) were inherently linked: in practice they meant renouncing not only that individual’s future, but also that of their loved ones for the “defense of the Fatherland.” That is to say, in its aggressive assessment that Germans’ unity in self-sacrifice would ensure their victory—one which, ironically for a supposedly defensive war, would make Germans “the most powerful people on the globe”—the editorial writer appeared to inadvertently recognize the scale of that which had been put at hazard: the German state would have to somehow ‘make good’ on the sacrifice of the many futures given up for its defense, futures extinguished through mass death at the front. Without that restitution, those self-sacrifices would merely be suicides.

The truly exceptional aspect of the editorial was its bellicosity and jingoism, however, not its sense of a Germany united in its willingness to sacrifice in a time of war. The volunteers who responded to the survey recorded no ‘war enthusiasm’ as such motivating their decisions; rather, as Strachan succinctly summarizes, “[t]he most common thread was a sense of duty.”¹³⁴ For instance, one interviewee reported that he had “little to no war enthusiasm, even though I fully approve of the war. I joined as a war volunteer out of a feeling of duty [*Pflichtgefühl*]. It was self-evident to me that I had to immediately join on the first day. This is partially caused by the nationalist attitude which was cultivated in my student association.”¹³⁵ Another reported the same motivation, though more succinctly: “Never felt war enthusiasm. Joined out of a

¹³⁴ Strachan, *First World War*, 153.

¹³⁵ Plaut, “Psychographie,” 11. “Kriegsbegeisterung wenig oder gar nicht vorhanden, wenn ich auch den Krieg vollkommen billige. Als Kriegsfreiwilliger eingetreten aus Pflichtgefühl. Es war mir selbstverständlich, dass ich mich gleich am ersten Tage meldete. Dies ist zum Teil auch auf die nationale Gesinnung, die in meiner Korporation gepflegt wurde, zurückzuführen.”

consciousness of duty [*Pflichtbewusstsein*].”¹³⁶ And at least one recorded a near identical motivational matrix to Blumenfeld, complete with an expressly negative appraisal of the war and a multifaceted complex of moral feelings undergirding and ultimately directing his behavior:

Joined as a war volunteer on the first day. It was clear to me from the beginning that a modern war is an incomparable tragedy and a crime against humanity. Therefore, I cannot say I felt an actual war enthusiasm. But the mood [*Stimmung*] of the first days self-evidently directed me toward what I had to do. My love of the Fatherland had not been unrestricted until then, but now I perceived myself as a good patriot. Not only because Germany is my Fatherland and I must defend it, but rather because its culture is higher, despite some things, and because I know justice is on its side. Lust for adventure definitely made a strong impact within this mood of the first days. It awakened imprecise [*unbestimmte*] feelings of joy and honor of a romantic life at war, which, given the ideas in the cultured descriptions of war, had to appear attractive in the *Sturm und Drang* of youth. In the first place, my feeling of duty [*Pflichtgefühl*] was decisive. After that came a second motive: shame. Should I, as a young man, stay at home when not only older comrades but also *Landwehr* and *Landsturm* men were going into the field? I registered as a war volunteer on day one so that I would no longer have to wear civilian clothes. Courage had nothing to do with it.¹³⁷

Like Blumenfeld, this volunteer was explicit in his ethical condemnation of war. In some ways, his condemnation was even stronger, given that he expressly considered modern war to be “a crime against humanity” and not simply an ‘evil thing.’ But he nevertheless joined on the first day, driven by the “mood” of those days, which made the proper action to take “self-evident” (*selbstverständlich*). A number of more specific ideas and tropes guided and directed this mood, most notably a “lust for adventure” rooted in literary representations of war, evidenced most

¹³⁶ Ibid., 12. “Kriegsbegeisterung nie verspürt, Beteiligung aus Pflichtbewusstsein.”

¹³⁷ Ibid., 11-12. “Trat am 1. Mobilmachungstage als Kriegsfreiwilliger ein. Ich war mir von Anfang darüber klar, das sein moderner Krieg ein Trauerspiel ohnegleichen und ein Verbrechen an der Menschheit ist. Deshalb konnte ein eigentliche Kriegsbegeisterung in mir nicht aufkommen. Aber die Stimmung der ersten Tage schrieb mir mit Selbstverständlichkeit vor, was ich zu tun hätte. Meine Vaterlandsliebe war bis dahin nicht uneingeschränkt; nunmehr erkannte ich mich als guten Patrioten. Nicht nur, weil Deutschland mein Vaterland ist, muss ich es verteidigen, sondern auch, weil ich seine Kultur trotz mancher Dinge für höher halte und weil ich das Recht auf seiner Seite weiss. Ein starker Einschlag von Abenteuerlust war in dieser Stimmung der ersten Tage ganz gewiss vorhanden. Es erwachten unbestimmte Gefühle der Freuden und Ehren eines romantischen Kriegslebens, das, nach den an Kriegsschilderungen gebildeten Vorstellungen dem jugendlichen Sturm und Drang reizvoll erscheinen muss. In erster Linie war bei mir Pflichtgefühl massgebend. Dazu als zweites Motiv: ‘Scham:’ soll ich als junger Mann zu Hause bleiben, wenn nicht nur die Altergenossen, sondern auch Landwehr und Landstrum ins Feld ziehen? Ich meldete mich am 1. Tage als Kriegsfreiwilliger, um ja nicht länger Zivilkleider tragen zu müssen. Mut gehört nicht dazu.”

clearly in his use of “Sturm und Drang.” However, as the volunteer went on to explain, what that ‘lust for adventure’ meant in practice was “imprecise feelings of joy and honor,” with ‘imprecise’ being the operative word. In that sense, ‘lust for adventure’ was similar to ‘war enthusiasm’ in that it was a term that, in practice, encompassed a wide range of behaviors, motivations, and feelings that were coded with a single term. Ultimately, as he went on to state, it was his *feeling* of duty—a feeling with a clearer direction—that he considered decisive.

Moreover, his testimonial makes clear that the sacrificial matrix of moral feelings was not comprised entirely of ethically positive elements, but contained powerful negative motivators as well. In his description, shame appears as essentially the shadow of a feeling of duty, but one which still pointed towards the same behavior: a push toward volunteering where the *Pflichtgefühl* pulled, as it were; a carrot and a stick. It also highlights some of the particular social elements of the sacrificial moral complex that emerged in the summer of 1914. It wasn’t just that this volunteer felt that joining the army was the right thing to do—although, according to his testimonial, that was the first reason that he volunteered—but that he felt *not joining*, especially when so many other, older men were going off to fight, would not only be the wrong thing to do, but would be *recognized* by others in German society as an immoral action. Wearing civilian clothes as a young man in a time of war was akin to announcing oneself as an unethical person, which was a recognition this volunteer—and many other German men—clearly could not abide.¹³⁸ The subtext of his final statement that “courage had nothing to do with it” thus appears to suggest that the opposite was in fact the case: fear of being viewed as cowardly acted as stick to his *Pflichtgefühl*’s carrot.

¹³⁸ See: Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 32-33.

Finally, as with Blumenfeld, it seems clear from the testimonial that moral *feelings* came first, justifications second. The interviewee's response is riddled with contradictions—war is a crime against humanity, yet 'justice is on Germany's side;' war is an "incomparable tragedy," yet the Fatherland must be militarily defended due to the heights of its culture (though even that culture has some unspecified negative characteristics). Nonetheless, the depth of emotion and its behavioral direction are clear throughout and provide a unifying thread. It appears that, as with Blumenfeld, this young man *felt* a very clear sense of what he had to do once war was declared—namely, volunteer for the army—but only constructed and improvised the ideational justifications for that action *post hoc*, once asked by the Institute's researchers.¹³⁹ The fact that he made explicit reference to his education (via literary allusions), as did the other volunteer who mentioned the cultivation of his nationalist views in his student fraternity, in turn points to these institutions as providers of the "raw material" out of which he—and others—improvised that justification. Just as the "enthusiastic" crowds of late July and early August "drew upon the repertoire of conventions associated with patriotic display, with student marching, or with the public festival," so these new soldiers drew on the types of moral and ideational justifications their education had cultivated prior to the war to explain, in ethical terms, their more spontaneous *emotional* decision(s) to volunteer.¹⁴⁰ In the event, however, these constituent

¹³⁹ This is precisely in keeping not only with Jonathan Haidt's point, mentioned above, but also Nick Chater's meta-historical thesis about the improvising mind more generally: "An improvising mind, unmoored from stable beliefs and desires, might seem to be a recipe for mental chaos. I shall argue that the opposite is true: the very task of our improvising mind is to make our thoughts and behaviour as coherent as possible—to stay 'in character' as well as we are able. To do so, our brains must strive continually to think and act in the current moment in a way that aligns as well as possible to our prior thoughts and actions. We are like judges deciding each new legal case by referring to, and reinterpreting, an ever-growing body of previous cases. So the secret of our minds lies not in some supposed hidden depths, but in our remarkable ability to creatively improvise our present, on the theme of our past." Chater, *Mind is Flat*, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 24.

elements—moral feelings, *post hoc* rationalizations, and actual behaviors—were inextricable from one another; all were part of a common thanatological constellation.

Strikingly, this configuration transcended gender lines to a notable degree as well, a testament to the veracity of Plaut’s postwar claim that the war provided “a path to general sacrifice.” One can see this at play in the surviving letters and diary entries of Hilda Galles.¹⁴¹ Against the wishes of her parents, she began her training as a nurse in April 1911 at the age of twenty-one, before going on to work at a hospital in Charlottenburg, Berlin.¹⁴² When the war broke out four years later, she, like so many others, felt a pull of patriotic duty alongside personal concerns for her family. She wrote to her mother on 4 August 1914 that “I am saddened that I am not with you and cannot help you. But it will also be your wish that I now use all of my strength for the Fatherland.”¹⁴³ Less than a month later, on 1 September, her resignation from the hospital was accepted and she registered as a nurse with the Red Cross, a duty which began six weeks later on 15 October.¹⁴⁴ She was not alone in volunteering to serve in this capacity. One of the first courses offered in first-aid training in August 1914 received 40,000 applications, despite being intended for only 3,000 participants.¹⁴⁵ Further, like so many of the young men volunteering for the army at the same moment, Galles explained and justified her decision to volunteer as a nurse

¹⁴¹ An introductory note at the beginning of the file explains its origins. It appears Galles found her wartime letters, along with some diary entries, at some point in the 1960s. She then contacted Prof. Dr. Friedrich Baethgen, a historian and the brother of her friend and fellow wartime nurse Maria Baethgen, who suggested Galles type up her letters and add a name registry to the beginning, which she did sometime during 1971. That typescript—complete with a name registry which provides basic biographical information about many of the major personalities referenced throughout her letters—is now held by the Federal Military Archive in Freiburg: BA-MA MSG 2/1718 “Kriegsbriefe der Lazarettswester Hilda Galles von ihrem Einsatz an der Ostfront . - Auszugsweise, maschinenschriftliche Abschrift.”

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, ii.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2. “Ich bin betrübt, nicht bei Euch zu sein und Euch nicht helfen zu können, aber es wird auch Euer Wunsch sein, daß ich jetzt meine ganze Kraft für unser Vaterland einsetze.”

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 88. Nor was this unique to Germany. Vera Brittain famously recounted her experiences as a field nurse with the British Army in her memoir, while Mary Borden, an American expat living in France prior to the war, did the same for her time as a nurse with the French army: Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 94-463; Mary Borden, *The Forbidden Zone* (London: Hesperus, 2008 [1929]).

with explicit reference to her feeling of duty. She wrote in a letter to her parents on 7 September: “My dear mother and father, you will not put anything in my way, but rather will give me your blessing. *I cannot do other than what my feeling of duty [Pflichtgefühl] prescribes.*”¹⁴⁶ As with the *Landsturmmann II*’s widow, Blumenfeld, and so many others, the national community appeared to carry the greater weight of moral obligation for Galles; her feeling of duty towards the nation transcended personal filial concerns. But Galles was even more explicit about the literal emotionality of her feeling of duty. In a letter of 14 September, she attempted to address her sister’s apparent incomprehension at her decision, writing “I cannot give you motives for my actions, because I do not know them myself. I let myself drift and do what my conscience [Gewissen] demands of me, what I recognize as duty.”¹⁴⁷ For Galles at least, she could not even find an ideational justification for her actions: the moral feelings of 1914 merely swept her in the direction she felt was right.

The opening of her 7 September letter also sub-textually highlights another element of the socio-emotional and moral tensions arising from the divergent pulls of the personal and national: the incomprehension of at least some of those at home at the rush to sacrifice. Galles’s letter makes clear that her parents were wary and uncomfortable with the idea of her joining the Red Cross, if not outright opposed. At a minimum, they were struggling to understand their daughter’s decision, as appears to have also been the case with Blumenfeld’s mother. Indeed, the fact that he opened his discussion of why he joined the war effort with the admission that she did not appear to understand his decision is a subtle indication of the degree to which at least some on the home front recognized the inclination toward death inherent in the behavioral

¹⁴⁶ BA-MA MSG 2/1718, 4. Emphasis added. “Mein liebes Mutter und Vater, Ihr werdet mir nichts in den Weg legen, sondern mir Euren Segen geben. Ich kann nicht anders handeln als mir mein Pflichtgefühl vorschreibt.”

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 8. “Motive meines Handelns kann ich nicht angeben, da ich sie selbst nicht kenne. Ich lasse mich treiben und tue, was im Moment mein Gewissen von mir verlangt, was ich als Pflicht erkenne.”

manifestations of the “spirit of 1914.” This thanatological link is expressed even more clearly in the subtext of Galles’s letter of 14 September: “My dear mother, I’m so sorry that I’ve caused you to worry, but you do it unnecessarily. The only thing awaiting me is work, so much work, but no danger to my life [*Lebensgefahr*]. I work in a protected spot.”¹⁴⁸ While her parents at least functionally gave their blessing to her decision to serve as a Red Cross nurse, Galles’s mother clearly recognized the new risks innate in that decision, even if unconsciously, as Galles’s letter makes clear that the source of her mother’s worry was that her life was now endangered by the decision.

Given the timing of the letter, her mother’s concern is unsurprising. As with volunteers for the army, there was a delay between when Galles joined the Red Cross and when she was ultimately deployed: she was sent to the Eastern Front in early 1915, nearly three months after the start of her service as a war nurse. The crucial emotional turning point and the definitive end of the ‘August euphoria’ came much earlier, however, with the First Battle of the Marne (6-12 September 1914), the point at which the Schlieffen Plan definitively failed and the German offensive in the West was halted.¹⁴⁹ As Plaut observed, with “the first stalemate after the Battle of the Marne came the first anxious questions: what now? That was a turning point of more than just world-historical meaning.” In his analysis, the Marne marked the onset of pessimism and doubt in Germany, an emotional cocktail which was reinforced by the casualty lists: “The casualty lists [*Verlustlisten*] appeared to strengthen and heighten all of these feelings [of brooding, doubt, and pessimism]; in the course of four years of war, this [initial optimistic] mood

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 8. “Mein Mutting, es tut mir ja so leid, daß ich Dir Sorge mache, aber Du tust es grundlos. Das Einzige, was mich erwartet, ist Arbeit, sehr viel Arbeit, aber kein Lebensgefahr.”

¹⁴⁹ For an excellent and detailed military history of the battle, see: Strachan, *First World War*, 242-262. For a more concise overview, see Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box*, 156-161.

was never seen again.”¹⁵⁰ Indeed, by the end of September, public victory demonstrations in the streets had almost entirely ceased.¹⁵¹ While the initial optimism of August may have disappeared on the Marne, however, the matrix of moral feelings generated in the course of the war’s opening month clearly did not, as Galles’s case indicates. Not only did the “spirit of 1914” persist as an essential public myth both during and after the war, but men and women continued to volunteer and sacrifice for the war effort in various ways until 1918. On the day of its opening in September 1915, for instance, 20,000 Germans hammered nails in the “Iron Hindenburg” under the *Siegessäule* in Berlin.¹⁵²

The incomprehension at her decision to join the Red Cross and her mother’s worry for her safety is a running thread throughout Galles’s surviving letters. She wrote again to her mother on 28 September to reiterate what she had earlier told her sister: “I myself feel completely free and only do what my duty demands of me and what I can do without hurting you. My love for you is not so small, my dear mother, as you often fear. But also try a little to understand that I would like to bring my full potential to bear. There will soon be much to do here.”¹⁵³ Three days later, she once again felt the need to tell her mother “don’t worry about me. There is no reason for it.”¹⁵⁴ Indeed, her mother’s worry was so intense that Galles’s friend and

¹⁵⁰ Plaut, “Psychographie,” 8. The full relevant paragraph in the original German states: “Ein Bild voll bunter Lebendigkeit, dass das Auge tätiger war als der Verstand, bis die erste grosse Atempause kam, der erste Stillstand nach der Marneschlacht, ja die erste bange Frage: was jetzt? Das war ein Wendepunkt von mehr als nur weltgeschichtlicher Bedeutung: der Krieg der Masse wandelte sich zum Kampf des Einzelindividuums, das sich jetzt regte und seine Sinne natürlichen Bahnen folgen liess. Zugleich wich der anfänglich scheinbar emphatisch, unmittelbar ausgelöste Jubel dem Extrem: wie viele wurde zu Grüblern, Zweiflern, Pessimisten. Die Verlustlisten schienen all diese Gefühle zu bekräftigen und zu erhöhen; im Verlauf von vier Kriegsjahren ist diese Stimmung niemals mehr, auch nicht an siegreichen Tagen untergegangen.”

¹⁵¹ Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 11-112.

¹⁵² The latter half of Verhey’s book is dedicated to tracing the dynamic and various uses of the myth of the ‘spirit of 1914’: *Ibid.*, 115-238. On the opening of the Iron Hindenburg, see: Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 222.

¹⁵³ BA-MA MSG 2/1718, 14-15. “Ich selbst fühle mich gänzlich frei und tue nur, was meine Pflicht von mir fordert und was ich tun kann, ohne Euch weh zu tun, den meine Liebe zu Euch ist nicht so klein, mein Mutting, wie Du oft fürchtest. Aber versucht doch auch ein wenig zu verstehen, daß ich mal meine volle Leistungskraft zur Geltung bringen möchte. Hier wird es jetzt bald viel zu tun geben.”

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17. “Mein liebes, liebes Muttchen, Sorge Dich nicht um mich. Es ist kein Grund dazu da.”

fellow nurse, Maria B athgen, actually wrote to her on 22 October to try and soothe her, as apparently her daughter’s reassurances were not enough on their own.¹⁵⁵

This worry and incomprehension may have been compounded by Galles’s own view of herself as analogous to a soldier, along with the steeper inclination toward death it implied. Writing to her parents on 25 February 1915 as she was about to be transferred to the war hospital in Alexandrovo, she described how “I now feel just like a German soldier and am very proud of it.”¹⁵⁶ Her mother apparently struggled to view her daughter in a military light however. Writing from Brest Litovsk on 7 Oct 1915—nearly a year into her Red Cross service—she chastised her parents: “You write that you thought all of the apartments that haven’t been destroyed in Brest were reserved for the military. Are we not perhaps military?”¹⁵⁷ Nor was this military self-conception unique to Galles, even if most women—including Galles herself—most often served the state in ‘feminine’ capacities.¹⁵⁸ One Berlin girl wrote to the Kaiser on 6 August 1914 to beseech him to let her join the army, an entreaty which was refused.¹⁵⁹ But what is most significant is that the generational dialectic between Galles and her mother is indicative of not only the larger dynamic of concealment present from the start of the war and the emergence of the “spirit of 1914,” but also of its limits. Her mother’s persistent worry that her daughter would lose her life is a subtle illustration of a contemporary glimpsing the self-destructive thanatological substrate and the core of Resch’s triad. The young nurse may have conceived of her actions as a morally-righteous sacrifice necessitated by her feelings of duty, but her mother

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 30. A transcript of the letter is included in the typescript. One can imply from this, along with the fact that only Galles’s letter to her parents—and not their replies—have survived, that the typescript is of the letters her parents saved during the war.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 58. “Jetzt f uhle ich mich ganz als deutscher Soldat und bin sehr stolz darauf.”

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 135. “Du schreibst, da  Du dachtest, da  in Brest alle nicht zerst orten Wohnungen von Milit ar belegt sein. Hast mich sehr beleidigt. Sind wir vielleicht nicht Milit ar?”

¹⁵⁸ As Watson notes, many German women and girls, especially from the middle classes, heeded the Kaiserin’s call to undertake “a holy work of love” in various ways at the start of the war. Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 87.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

seemingly saw only—or at least primarily—the massively increased likelihood of her daughter’s premature death.

Amanda Galles was not the only parent to catch an emotional glimpse of the newly emerged thanatological reality of wartime. Arguably the most famous was the artist Käthe Kollwitz. As Ute Frevert discusses, Kollwitz had a highly dynamic social and emotional experience of the *Augusterlebnis*. While she was not a member of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD), she had long run in socialist circles, working for left-wing publishers and movements prior to the war, and supporting socialist women’s efforts to support poor families whose breadwinner had been conscripted once the war broke out; she was neither a nationalist nor a militarist. Yet Kollwitz nonetheless found the onset of war to be an exciting moment and was proud that her two sons, Hans and Peter, both volunteered.¹⁶⁰ Once again, in the pulls between the personal and the national, the former was subsumed within the latter and it was the latter which won out. Kollwitz herself interceded on her younger son Peter’s behalf to convince her husband Karl to allow him to volunteer, a scene she recounted in her diary on 10 August:

It was also on that day, in the evening, that Peter asks [sic] Karl to let him volunteer before the *Landsturm* is called up. Karl speaks against the idea with everything he can. I feel thankful that he fights for him like this, but I know it doesn’t change anything. Karl: ‘The Fatherland doesn’t need you yet, otherwise they would have called you up already.’ Peter, quieter, but firm: ‘The Fatherland doesn’t need my year of service yet, but *I* need it.’ He always turns silently to me with a pleading look, begging me to speak for him. Finally, he says: ‘Mother, when you hugged me, you said: ‘Don’t believe me to be a coward. We are ready.’ I stand up, Peter follows me. We stand at the door and give each

¹⁶⁰ Ute Frevert, “Wartime Emotions: Honour, Shame, and the Ecstasy of Sacrifice,” in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin: 10 August 2014; last updated 8 January 2017): 2.

other a hug and a kiss and I ask Karl on Peter's behalf. —This single hour. This sacrifice which he has carried me to, and to which we have carried Karl.¹⁶¹

As with the volunteer in Plaut's study, a complex mix of positive and negative emotions combined in both Peter's decision to volunteer and in the conversations through which he ultimately gained the permission to do so, but all which a clear ethical vector. Both Käthe and her son appeared to have felt a sense of duty pulling and a sense of (potential) shame pushing them; it is striking, for instance, that Peter explicitly invoked the calling up of the older reserves just like the volunteer in Plaut's study did. Kollwitz telling her son that she was not a "coward" further illustrates the way a social sense of shame extended beyond just the young volunteers themselves and served as an essential element in the socio-emotional constellation of the 'spirit of 1914.' In that sense, it directly echoes the statement of the *Landsturmmann II's* widow that she wanted to be "as strong as all the other wives." The readiness to sacrifice either oneself or one's loved ones was a show of moral and emotional strength now that the state was at war, independent of one's personal politics. Finally, it is worth noting that the entire conversation Kollwitz recounted occurred the day after the first casualty lists were published. Small wonder,

¹⁶¹ Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1989): 152. Emphasis original. "An diesem Tage war es wohl auch, an dem Peter abends Karl bittet, ihn vor Aufgebot des Landsturms mitgehen zu lassen. Karl spricht mit allem dagegen was er kann. Ich habe das Gefühl des Dankes, daß er so um ihn kämpft, aber ich weiß es ändert nichts mehr. Karl: 'Das Vaterland braucht dich noch nicht, sonst hätte es dich schon gerufen.' Peter leiser aber fest: 'Das Vaterland braucht meinen Jahrgang noch nicht, aber *mich* braucht es.' Immer wendet er sich stumm mit flehenden Blicken zu mir, daß ich für ihn spreche. Endlich sagt er: 'Mutter, als du mich umarmtest, sagtest du: glaube nicht daß ich feige bin, wir sind bereit.' Ich stehe auf, Peter folgt mir, wir stehen an der Türe und umarmen uns und küssen uns und ich bitte den Karl für Peter.—Diese einzige Stunde. Dieses Opfer zu dem er mich hinriß und zu dem wir Karl hinrissen." The 'year of service' Peter mentioned in his reply to his father refers to volunteering as a 'one-year volunteer' (*Einjährig-Freiwilliger*). Ulrich and Ziemann concisely explain their social and institutional position within the military: "Young men with a high-school diploma could sign up for military service as a one-year volunteer. This would cut the period of service to a half and allowed them to lodge privately. The 'one-yearers' had to pay for their own subsistence and also their equipment, indicating that this was a privilege not only based on formal education but also on affluence. After their one year of service, one-yearers could advance to the rank of reserve lieutenant. Due to the heavy losses of the active officer corps in the first months of the war, one-yearers who had been promoted to reserve officers were the immediate superiors of many soldiers in the German army. Their lack of accomplishment due to the reduced period of training and their lack of empathy due to their middle-class background was the subject of intensive criticism from private soldiers." Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 185.

then, that Karl pushed back on Peter's desire to volunteer as much as possible. Both Kollwitz parents appeared to recognize early on what Peter was really asking them, and what sacrifice meant in practice: the highly increased likelihood of self-aware self-death. Käthe herself articulated the connection more directly in her diary entry of 27 August:

Gabriele Reuter wrote in the *Tag* on the tasks of women today. She spoke of the ecstasy of sacrificing [*Wollust des Opfern*]¹⁶²—a phrase that struck me hard. Where do all the women who have watched so carefully over the lives of their loved ones get the heroism to send them to face the cannon? I am afraid that this soaring of the spirit will be followed by the blackest despair and dejection. The task is to bear it not only during these few weeks, but for a long time—in dreary November as well, and also when spring comes again, in March, *the month of young men who wanted to live and are dead*. That will be much harder.¹⁶²

First, it is notable that the idea of the 'joy of sacrifice' is yet another illustration of sacrifice manifesting chiefly as a moral feeling—an emotional drive toward what one intuited as ethical. Most pertinent here, however, is that Kollwitz understood what enduring and 'holding out' meant in practice with a rare conscious clarity: bearing the full emotional, moral, social, and ultimately political weight of the self-destructive thanatological slide of those ironically oriented toward life.

That weight could compound quickly, but, ironically, it was sacrifice—that same concept which drove all those young men to their (at least potential) premature deaths in the first place—that simultaneously served as the cathartic element which made that weight endurable at all. On 30 September, she wrote in her diary:

Nothing is real but the frightfulness of this state, which we almost grow used to. In such times it seems so stupid that the boys must go to war. The whole thing is so ghastly and insane. Occasionally there comes the foolish thought: how can they possibly take part in

¹⁶² Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 158. "Die Gabriele Reuter schrieb im 'Tag' über die Aufgabe der Frauen jetzt. Sie sprach von der Wollust des Opfern—ein Ausdruck der mich sehr traf. Wo nehmen alle die Frauen, die aufs Sorgfältigste über das Leben ihrer Lieben gewacht haben den Heroismus her, sie vor die Kanonen zu schicken? Ich fürchte nach diesem Seelenaufschwung kommt eine desto schwärzere Verzeilung und Verzagtheit nach. Die Aufgabe ist es, nicht nur in diesen Wochen sondern lange zu tragen, auch im trostlosen Novemberwetter—auch wenn von neuem das Frühjahr kommt, der März der Monat der jungen Menschen, die leben wollten und dann tot sind. Das wird noch viel schwerer sein."

such madness? And at once the cold shower: they *must, must!* All is leveled by death; down with all the youth! Then one is ready to despair.

Only one state of mind makes it at all bearable: to receive the sacrifice into one's will. But how can one maintain such a state?¹⁶³

Simultaneously, Kollwitz saw the lethal irony—the “madness” of young men volunteering to go off to face death at the front, and particularly the way it inverted the usual generational thanatology—but also continued to console herself with the same ideational apparatus which held that deathly configuration in place: the sense of the necessity of sacrifice.¹⁶⁴ This continued even after Peter was killed on 22 October 1914.¹⁶⁵ Her diary entry of 1 December pithily captures the cathartic element of sacrifice, as she first began trying to conceive of a memorial for her dead son: “The monument would have Peter's form, lying stretched out, the father at the head, the mother at the feet. It would be to commemorate the sacrifice of all the young volunteers.”¹⁶⁶ Her entry from 9 December expounded on a similar theme, and drove home sacrifice's moral and emotional centrality to the new quotidian reality of mass death: “My boy! On your memorial I want to have your figure on top, *above* the parents. You will lie outstretched, holding out your hands in answer to the call for sacrifice: ‘Here I am.’”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Kollwitz, *Diary and Letters*, 63. Emphasis original. Original German: Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 165-166. “Nur das Furchtbare des Zustandes, an den man sich fast gewohnt, ist gegenwärtig. In solchen Zeiten kommt es einem so blödsinnig vor, daß die Jungen in den Krieg gehn [sic]. Das ganze nur so wüst und hirnverbrannt. Mitunter den dummen Gedanken: sie warden in einem solchen Tollwerden doch nicht mittun und sofort ein kalter Strahl: *sie müssen müssen* [sic]. Alles ist gleich vor dem Tod, runter mit all der Jugend. Dann könnte man verzweifeln. | Nur ein Zustand macht alles erträglich: die Aufnahme des Opfers in den Willen. Aber wie kann man diesen Zustand sich erhalten?”

¹⁶⁴ On the inversion of generational death during the war, see: Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 212-213.

¹⁶⁵ She retroactively added a diary entry for that date, which reads simply “On this night, Peter died [*In dieser Nacht stirbt Peter*]”. She did actually learn of his death until 30 October, where he diary records only a short quotation: “‘Your son has fallen’ [*Ihr Sohn ist gefallen*]”. Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 172, 174.

¹⁶⁶ Kollwitz, *Diary and Letters*, 63. Original German: Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 177. “Das Denkmal soll Peters Gestalt haben, ausgestreckt liegend, den Vater zu Häupten, die Mutter zu Füßen, es soll dem Opfertod der jungen Kriegskreiwilligen gelten.”

¹⁶⁷ Kollwitz, *Diary and Letters*, 63. Emphasis original. Original German: Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 178. “Mein Junge! Auf Deinem Denkmal will ich Deine Gestalt oben *über* den Eltern halten. Du sollst langausgestreckt liegen, die Hände antwortend auf den Ruf zur Hingabe: ‘Hier bin ich.’”

Thus, whether dealing with potential death or actual death, sacrifice sat at the center of “a moral economy of feelings and attitudes” present before the war but radicalized by it, wherein “national honour was transformed into an overarching and integrating concept calling for, and giving meaning to, every citizen’s personal sacrifice,” as Frevert has recently put it.¹⁶⁸ That is to say, sacrifice and its related concepts—e.g. *Pflichtgefühl* (‘feeling/sense of duty’), *Heldentod* (‘hero’s death’), *durchhalten* (‘holding out’)—were emotionally-resonant moral ideas which “transformed” acts of (at least potential, though too often actual) *personal* self-destruction into acts of *national* sacrifice. As Whalen summarizes:

Anyone could act like a hero, abandoning his or her narrow interests, pledging loyalty to the people, and defending the nation.... War, then, became mysterious, rationally inexplicable; it was not the result of political calculation or miscalculation, but was a defense of the community from the dragon.... The self-sacrifice required of the hero might involve the sacrifice of his own life. This, however, was nothing to be feared, for it was proof of heroism. Self-immolation was the highest form of self-affirmation.¹⁶⁹

In essence, sacrifice was the name given to morally- and socio-emotionally-acceptable—and, more often, laudable—suicidal behaviors, which then served to paper over those behaviors’ very self-destructiveness.

1.4 The Suicide of Major General von Bülow: A Thanatological Microcosm

Perhaps no single example distills this multifaceted thanatological constellation and the moment of its emergence more fully than the August 1914 suicide of Major General Carl-Ulrich von Bülow, a younger brother of the former Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, and its immediate

¹⁶⁸ Frevert, “Wartime Emotions,” 4, 14.

¹⁶⁹ Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, 25-26.

aftermath.¹⁷⁰ A career soldier, Bülow was fifty-one years old when the war broke out and he assumed command of the 9th Cavalry Division in Münster on 1 August 1914.¹⁷¹ The day before, he wrote to Bernhard to inform him of his new posting in what would prove to be the brothers' last documented contact. The letter is a quotidian *Abschiedsbrief* of the kind which would become increasingly common throughout the war. Like Blumenfeld two months later, von Bülow did not know whether he would survive long enough to write again now that war was declared and he was headed to the front:

My dear Bernhard! Only two words to say to you: that today I am heading to Münster/Werth to assume command of a cavalry division. Martin and Meineke are informed about my financial affairs. If we do not see each other in life again, a thousand thanks for all the good and love you and Maria [Bernhard's wife] brought into my life.¹⁷²

Already on 31 July, at least some military commanders (at a minimum) recognized the new thanatological reality the coming conflict heralded, right at the moment when the “July enthusiasm” peaked and several weeks before the onset of the “August euphoria.” In practical behavioral terms, this meant ensuring one's personal and financial circumstances were in order and saying one's goodbyes, itself an implicit acknowledgement that it might be the last opportunity to do so. In Major-General von Bülow's case, it proved to be: he was dead less than a week later.

¹⁷⁰ Not to be confused with General Karl von Bülow, the Commander of the German Second Army, who, while part of the larger von Bülow family, had no relation to either Carl-Ulrich or Bernhard and died in 1921.

¹⁷¹ A bullet-point summary of his military career, as well as birth and death dates, can be found in: BA-MA MSG 109/6516 “Generalmajor Karl Wilhelm von Bülow (28.10.1862 - 06.08.1914).”

¹⁷² Bundesarchiv (Hauptdienststelle), Koblenz (hereafter: BA-K) N 1016/15 Bernhard von Bülow Nachlass, ‘Schriftwechsel mit dem Bruder Karl-Ulrich von Bülow,’ Letter dated “Berlin 31./7.14.,” 118-119. “Lieber Bernhard! | Nur zwei Worte, um dir zu sagen, daß ich heute nach Münster/Werth fahre, um dar [sic] das Kommander eines Kav. Div. zu übernehmen. Über meine pekuniären Angelegenheiten weiß Martin und Meineke bescheid. | Wenn mir uns im Leben nicht wiedersehen sollten, tausend dank für alles Gute und Liebe das Maria und dir mir im Leben erreichen.” The page numbers listed for documents in this file refer to the handwritten numbers found in the upper-right corner throughout.

The only surviving record of the events of that intervening week comes from a one-page report from the Division's First General Staff Officer, Fritz von Herwarth.¹⁷³ In the report, he recounts that after the division staff convened in Münster on 1 August, the full division assembled at Elsenborn and crossed the border into Belgium during the night and early morning of 3-4 August. "There was no fighting initially," according to Herwarth, and things appeared normal: "As First General Staff Officer, I was continually riding with von Bülow and did not notice anything unusual about him at first."¹⁷⁴ The division participated in the initial attack on Liège, which began the night of 5-6 August. The first assault was a failure however, and the Germans suffered heavy losses.¹⁷⁵ According to Herwarth, it was in the immediate aftermath of that failed attack that von Bülow committed suicide:

On the evening of 5 August, the division's three brigades were in their bivouacs when Division Staff Lincé was attacked by francs-tireurs, which resulted in quite unpleasant fighting and, especially on the morning of 6 August, to reprisals, wherein a considerable number of death sentences had to be pronounced. I mention this because I believe that von Bülow was also affected by this. In the course of the day, the division advanced against Liège, often disturbed by francs-tireurs, and then bivouacked near the town of Louveigné. I had ridden with von Bülow the entire day and we had exchanged our thoughts. In the evening we received several reports that the attack on Liège had failed, which made von Bülow very depressed. At 8:00 p.m., the brigade and regimental commanders were called to a meeting in which von Bülow reported on the situation and, especially at my instigation, announced the firm decision that he was determined to continue to carry out the ordered task with the division. Around 9:00 pm, after the meeting was over and it was already quite dark, an artillery post came to me and reported that a dead officer lay not far from their bivouac. Since I knew von Bülow was already missing, I sensed something balefully amiss [*ahnte ich Böses*] and went immediately to the location concerned. I found von Bülow lying on his cloak in a shallow ditch with a pistol in his hand and could have no doubt that it was a suicide. The shot went in through the right temple and out under the left ear. My adjutants and orderlies came to the same

¹⁷³ BA-MA MSG 2/11419 "Bülow, Carl Ulrich v., Generalmajor.- Bericht über den Selbstmord des Generalmajors v. Bülow (Abschrift aus "Bülow'sches Familienblatt" Nr. 17/1937) (Kopie)." All the details in the following recounting come from this report.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. "Zu kämpfen kam es zunächst nicht. Als erster Generalstabsoffizier bin ich dauernd mit v. Bülow geritten und habe zunächst nichts Aussergewöhnliches an ihm bemerkt."

¹⁷⁵ Herwarth specified that his division "was ordered to secure the rear of the stormtroopers on the right bank of the Meuse to the south against expected French help. [hatte den Auftrag, auf dem rechten Maasufer gegen Süden den Rücken der Sturmtruppen zu sichern, und zwar gegen erwartete französische Hilfe.]" Ibid. For the military history of the siege more generally, see: Strachan, *First World War*, 211-212.

conclusion and carried out the provisional burial [*vorläufige Beerdigung*] with me. Other people, enlisted men [*Mannschaften*] or the like, did not see the dead man. At 4:00 am the next morning I made it known through a divisional order that Major General von Bülow had been found shot the previous evening. That is as far as my direct [*unmittelbaren*] memories go.¹⁷⁶

Like so many other soldiers who killed themselves in 1914, von Bülow appears to have gone through a rapid process of disillusionment with the war that culminated in his suicide. In this case however, the details provided in Herwarth's report construct a fuller picture than many of the other surviving records from the war's opening months.

First, in Herwarth's recounting, von Bülow appears as an archetypal example of the kind of inclination toward suicide amongst officers noted in the *Sanitätsbericht* and explained by *Handbook of Medical Experiences*. Von Moltke's war plan required that Liège be attacked no later than the third day of the mobilization, lest it delay the German advance.¹⁷⁷ According to that plan, Liège then needed to be taken within forty-eight hours.¹⁷⁸ Famously, however, the Belgians proved to be a much more difficult foe to conquer than the German war planners had reckoned:

¹⁷⁶ BA-MA MSG 2/11419. "Am 5. August abends wurde die drei Brigaden der Division in ihren Ortsbiwaks, Divisionstab Lincé, von Franktireurs überfallen, und es kam zu recht unangenehmen Kämpfen, und besonders am Morgen des 6. August zu Repressalien, wobei eine erhebliche Anzahl von Todesurteilen ausgesprochen werden mußte. Ich erwähne dies, weil ich glaube, daß v. Bülow auch hierdurch beeinflußt worden ist. Im Laufe des Tages ging die Division, oft von Franktireurs gestört, gegen Lüttich vor und biwakierte dann in der Nähe des Ortes Louveigné. Ich war den ganzen Tag über mit v. Bülow geritten und wir hatten unsere Gedanken ausgetauscht. Gegen Abend erhielten wir mehrere Meldungen, daß der Sturm auf Lüttich mißglückt sei, wobei v. Bülow sehr niedergeschlagen wurde. Um 8 Uhr abends waren die Brigade- und Regimentskommandeure zu einer Besprechung berufen, in welcher v. Bülow über die Lage berichtete und, namentlich auf meine Veranlassung, den festen Entschluß kundgab, mit der Division weiterhin die befohlene Aufgabe durchzuführen. Als es nach der Besprechung etwa um 9 Uhr abendschon ziemlich dunkel war, kam ein Artillerieposten zu mir und meldete, nicht weit von deren Biwak läge ein toter Offizier. Da ich v. Bülow schon vermißt hatte, ahnte ich Böses und ging gleich an die betreffende Stelle. Ich fand v. Bülow auf seinem Umhang in einem flachen Graben liegend mit der Pistole in der Hand und konnte keinen Zweifel darüber haben, daß ein Selbstmord vorlag. Der Schuß ging von der rechten Schläfe hinein und unter dem linken Ohr hinaus. Denselben Befund stellen meine Adjutanten und Ordonanzoffizier fest, welche dann die vorläufige Beerdigung mit mir ausführten. Andere Leute, Mannschaften oder dergleichen, haben den Toten nicht gesehen. Am nächsten Morgen um 4 Uhr machte ich durch Divisionsbefehl bekannt, daß Generalmajor v. Bülow am Abend vorher erschossen aufgefunden worden sei. Soweit gehen meine unmittelbaren Erinnerungen."

¹⁷⁷ Strachan, *First World War*, 179

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

Liège did not fall until 16 August, after being besieged for eleven days.¹⁷⁹ The failure of the initial attack in which the 9th Cavalry Division participated, therefore, was not a minor setback, but one which threatened to derail the entire German war plan, a fact of which the Major General would undoubtedly have been aware. He thus appears to be one of the unit commanders for whom the *Handbuch*'s authors considered suicide 'understandable:' "We can only guess, not measure, how much heroic courage [*Heldenmut*] it takes to remain at the head of a unit under such conditions. But one can understand that occasionally suicide appears as the only way out, the only way to put an end to the ordeal."¹⁸⁰ Given that Herwarth explicitly mentions that the reports of the attack's failure "made von Bülow very depressed," it seems likely that the pressure of the situation was one of the proximate factors leading to his suicide.

When one considers that von Moltke himself suffered a nervous breakdown after the Germans were stopped at the Marne, one gets a clearer sense of the kinds of intense mental pressure the German commanders were under more generally.¹⁸¹ Much of this was of course self-imposed, given the tight timetable they'd set themselves on in keeping with the German military's understanding and practice of the 'cult of the offensive' and the institutional preference for "victories of annihilation" (*Vernichtungssiege*).¹⁸² Nonetheless, what was most

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁸⁰ *Handbuch der Ärztlichen Erfahrungen IV*, 125. "Wieviel Heldenmut dazu gehört, unter solchen Verhältnissen an der Spitze eines Truppenteils zu verharren, können wir nur vermuten, nicht bemessen; aber man kann es verstehen, daß gelegentlich der Selbstmord als der einzige Ausweg erscheint, um den Quälerei ein ende zu machen."

¹⁸¹ On the first battle of the Marne and Moltke's breakdown, see: Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 250-271.

¹⁸² On the military culture and (self-)destructive practices and doctrines of the German military, see: Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005):91-196. As Alan Kramer points out however, these broader elements within the military were not necessarily unique to Germany, although there were "real differences in military and political culture between the main belligerent nations," including, importantly, the degree of control civilians exerted over the military. Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 342; for his review/critique of *Absolute Destruction*: 341-343; on the question of the 'singularity' of German violence during the war:114-158. For a detailed military history of the various war plans at play in 1914, see: Strachan, *First World War*, 163-207, 281-315

significant was the way many German commanders experienced defeat not only as a military failure, but a personal one as well. Moltke, somewhat uniquely at the time, emphasized independent leadership and individual initiative on the part of his commanders.¹⁸³ Besides having the potential to complicate and confuse the operational situation—which it did quite decisively in 1914—it also meant that individual commanders’ decisions could turn the tide one way or the other, increasing the pressure on decision makers down the chain of command. Thirty-three generals were dismissed after the German failure on the Marne, a failure which the army explained as the result of the “shortcomings of individuals” so as to avoid its collective responsibility for the defeat, or indeed, admit and recognize that it had been defeated at all.¹⁸⁴ In this sense, Major General von Bülow represented an even more extreme end of the shadow vanguard: here, at least potentially, was a most extreme instance of shame as the emotional correlate of military defeat.¹⁸⁵

Second, Herwarth’s repeated mentions of attacks by *francs-tireurs* highlight a specific moral tension at work as well, one which was intimately linked with the self-imposed pressure on the military leadership for rapid victory in 1914. As John Horne and Alan Kramer note, “Liège was the most important zone of contact between German soldiers and enemy civilians in the days before the German invasion.”¹⁸⁶ As the most easterly Belgian province, it was

¹⁸³ As Strachan notes, “Moltke conveyed his wishes by directives rather than by orders. Victory would be the fruit of a series of independent actions which would ultimately give the result.” Strachan, *First World War*, 236.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 261-262.

¹⁸⁵ It is also worth noting here that while the above-mentioned structural factors could increase the personal pressure experienced by German military commanders, this was not a uniquely German phenomenon. Arguably the most famous example of an officer’s suicide in 1914 was that of the Russian General Alexander Samsonov, who committed suicide after the defeat of his army at the battle of Tannenberg. However coincidental, it is also striking that some of the particulars align quite closely with those of Major General von Bülow’s suicide: namely, that both wandered off into the woods and shot themselves in the head with their revolvers following a military defeat. Samsonov’s suicide is well-recounted in Barbara Tuchman’s classic account of the start of the war: Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994 [1962]): 305-306.

¹⁸⁶ John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 19.

strategically key to the German invasion; before the full invasion could begin, Liège, with its series of modern forts, had to fall in order to “force the gate to Belgium.”¹⁸⁷ When the Germans encountered unexpectedly strong resistance once the invasion began, they immediately blamed the setback on civilian irregular fighters—*francs-tireurs*—primed by inculcated historical memories of 1870.¹⁸⁸ The rapidity with which the German resorted to ‘reprisal’ killings of civilians and the speed with which they accused the Belgians and, later, the French, of fomenting a full popular uprising and ‘people’s war’ against the Germans “shows that the soldiers’ mentalities and expectations were shared, even endorsed, by the most senior levels of army and government,” and were not “spontaneous,” but cultivated within the military prior to the invasion itself.¹⁸⁹ In a massive case of autosuggestion, the invading German army murdered 6,457 Belgian and French civilians in the course of the 1914 invasion, driven by a collective delusion that they faced a franc-tireur war.¹⁹⁰

While he did not live to see the full extent of these atrocities, Major General von Bülow was there at the very beginning of this murderous rampage. As Horne and Kramer note, when the fighting in Liège began on 4 August, though initially limited, it consisted of street fighting with Belgian soldiers in Visé, where some of them fired from inside houses and eventually blew up a bridge, and a friendly fire incident in Berneau later that evening which killed eleven German soldiers but was blamed on Belgian civilian fighters. This was, however, “merely a prelude. The first mass execution of civilians took place on 5 August, and by 8 August nearly 850 civilians had been killed and about 1,300 buildings deliberately burned down.”¹⁹¹ It thus appears Herwarth

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 53. This is what Horne and Kramer refer to as the ‘Franc-tireur myth complex.’ For their full analysis of the myth and its effects on the invitation, see: Ibid., 87-174.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 74-77.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 13.

was likely referring to these types of skirmishes and killings when he mentioned the “quite unpleasant fighting” on 5 August and the “reprisals” which allegedly necessitated a “considerable number of death sentences” on 6 August, which, he believed, also “affected” Major General von Bülow. In their reconstruction of the German atrocities during the siege of Liège, however, Horne and Kramer only mention killings and reprisals by infantry units, and it is unclear from Herwarth’s report whether the 9th Cavalry Division participated in this first wave of killings or was merely present as they were carried out.¹⁹² Herwarth was ambiguous when he stated that during the meeting with the brigade and regimental commanders on 6 August, von Bülow “announced the firm decision that he was determined to continue to carry out the ordered task with the division,” but only at Herwarth’s “instigation” (*Veranlassung*). The only assignment explicitly referred to in the report was “to secure the rear of the stormtroopers on the right bank of the Meuse to the south against expected French help,” though the implication of Herwarth’s statement appears to be that they now had a new task which in some way involved them in the atrocities. Regardless, the fact that Herwarth apparently had to convince his commander to make such a statement is itself an indication of von Bülow’s discomfort with the way the war was playing out on the ground.

In the final section of the report, Herwarth speculated on the reasons for von Bülow’s suicide. In so doing, he charted a shift in his thinking from first seeing the suicide as the result of the kind of nervousness that led to von Moltke’s (non-suicidal) breakdown to later viewing it as being linked to what von Bülow apparently considered an unethical start to the war:

About the possible reason for the suicide, I can only speculate. This has changed over the years. At first, I believed that general nervousness was to blame. I do not want to claim that this, particularly, was expressed. The relationship of the division commander to his staff was very good in every way. But on the other hand, the whole situation was extremely difficult: it was as though one was cut off from all the world and one was in

¹⁹² See: *Ibid.*, 10-22.

continual danger in the face of the enemy population. So that was how, in the first instance, I explained the reason for the suicide. When I thought about it later, it always struck me that when von Bülow was with me, especially in the course of 6 August, he continually spoke about the war in general and expressed his regret [*Bedauern*], if not disgust [*Abscheu*], that the war, which was to be welcomed by a soldier, had now begun with an invasion of a neutral and peaceful land. I would like to believe, that this thought, in connection with the difficult francs-tireur battles at the time, heavily depressed the mind of Herr von Bülow and led him to this step.¹⁹³

In Herwarth's estimation, then, von Bülow was like many other German soldiers who, suddenly cut off from their long-standing ties and networks, found themselves adrift not just socially, but also ethically. As Marc Bloch noted in 1921: "The German soldier who...marches into Belgium has just been brusquely removed from his fields, his workshop, his family.... From this sudden dislocation, this unexpected severing of essential social ties, there arises a great moral confusion."¹⁹⁴ The old peacetime frame of reference had rapidly fallen away, and the exact contours of the new wartime framework were not yet in place, making it difficult to determine the correct course of action.¹⁹⁵ And while von Bülow was a career soldier, he was in many ways

¹⁹³ BA-MA MSG 2/11419. "Über die möglichen Beweggründe zu dem Selbstmord kann ich nur Vermutungen aussprechen. Diese haben sich im Laufe der Jahre geändert. Zunächst glaubte, daß die allgemeine Nervosität die Schuld trage. Ich will nicht behaupten, daß sich diese besonders geäußert hat. Das Verhältnis des Divisionskommandeurs zu seinem Stab war in jeder Weise sehr gut, andererseits aber auch wieder waren die ganzen Verhältnisse außerordentlich schwierig, man war wie von aller Welt abgeschnitten und gegenüber der feindlichen Bevölkerung dauernd in Gefahr. So habe ich mir in der ersten Zeit den Grund für den Selbstmord zurechtgelegt. Bei späterem Nachdenken ist mir immer wieder eingefallen, daß v. Bülow mit mir, namentlich im Laufe des 6. August, dauernd über diesen Krieg im allgemein gesprochen und dabei seinem Bedauern, um nicht zu sagen Abscheu dagegen Ausdruck gegeben hat, daß der von einem Soldaten an sich zu begrüßende Krieg nun mit einem Einbruch in ein neutrales und friedliches Land begonnen habe. Ich möchte glauben, daß in Verbindung mit den schweren Franktireuskämpfen gerade dieser Gedanke das Gemüt des Herrn v. Bülow schwer bedrückt und ihn zu diesem Schritt geführt hat."

¹⁹⁴ He continued: "The marching, the uncomfortable quarters, the sleepless nights completely exhaust the body.... Add to this that the mind is filled with a host of old literary motifs that come in the form of unconscious memories...tales of betrayals, poisonings, mutilations and women gouging out the eyes of wounded warriors." Quoted in Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 50-1.

¹⁹⁵ As Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer note, frames of reference are constellations of assumptions which allow individuals to orient themselves to a situation, interpret their experiences (along with new information and knowledge) in that situation, and subsequently determine their course(s) of action. They are principally behavioral, unlike mentalities, which they argue are rooted in "social, cultural, hierarchical, and biological or anthropological circumstances," along with ideology, and are focused on how one perceives the world internally in terms of attitudes and beliefs. Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: On Fighting, Killing and Dying: The Secret Second World War Tapes of German POWs*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012 [2011]): 8-10.

just as cut off from these foundational relationships as enlisted men. It is worth recalling here that von Bülow only took command of the 9th Cavalry Division on 1 August, five days before his suicide; he did not have a long-standing relationship with his unit, even if relations with his staff were “very good in every way.” In addition, while the franc-tireur war many German soldiers imagined they were facing was not real, the existential danger of the situation very much was, and for von Bülow as a unit commander, this applied not only to himself, but also to his men.

Further, one can imply a degree of moral isolation for von Bülow as well. Indeed, in Herwarth’s ultimate estimation, it was the disconnect and dissonance between von Bülow’s vision of what war was supposed to be with the way it actually played out that was the primary cause of the Major General’s suicide: von Bülow’s own matrix of moral feelings came into direct conflict with the *jus in bello* occurring during the invasion, where the very thing he had apparently looked forward to at least to some degree—war being something “which was to be welcomed by a soldier”—had been bastardized and conducted in a way unbecoming of a military professional like himself. Ironically, it appears that von Bülow viewed the Germans themselves as the “reverse of an honest military opponent,” not the imaginary francs-tireurs.¹⁹⁶ Given that it was Herwarth who apparently had to push him to carry on with the tasks at hand, with its implicit involvement in the murder of civilians, whether as direct participations or bystanders, von Bülow’s suicide thus appears as an implicit indictment of the immorality of Germany’s conduct in 1914. The great moral confusion arose not from suddenly having gone from civilian to soldier and thus having to square a new wartime morality with a previously long-held peacetime one, but from having to conduct the war in a way that did not accord with von Bülow’s sense of ethics as a soldier. What could the invasion of “a neutral and peaceful land,”

¹⁹⁶ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 113.

especially when it involved the massacre of civilians, elicit in the true soldier besides “disgust?” Given the centrality of the debate over the German atrocities of 1914 to not only the larger meaning(s) of the war while it was raging, but also to the shape of the peace settlements and the memories of the war that solidified in the first postwar period, von Bülow’s suicide is perhaps the clearest harbinger of the ultimate stakes of the conflict; the self-immolation of both lives and morals in the fires of war.¹⁹⁷

Third, as with explicit suicides more generally, von Bülow’s death—with all of the socio-emotional and moral dissonances and issues it embodied—appears to have been immediately and, in this case literally, buried. Though in some ways a minor detail within the report itself, it is highly significant that 1) it was Herwarth and his “adjutants and orderlies”—that is, other officers—who buried the Major General; 2) that no one besides them saw the body (except for the artillerymen who initially found it, who, in any case, were from a different unit); and 3) that Herwarth’s announcement of von Bülow’s death apparently *did not* mention that he had killed himself, but merely that he “had been found shot the previous evening.” While the surviving record on this point is somewhat thin—the only document attesting to the Major General’s death as a suicide is Herwarth’s report, itself from 1926 and found in a copy of the 1937 Bülow *Familienblatt* held by the Federal Military Archive¹⁹⁸—it appears that his death was simply reported as another war loss at the time, with von Bülow as one of ‘the fallen.’ Von Moltke sent a telegram to Bernhard von Bülow on 10 August, four days after Carl-Ulrich’s suicide, which simply stated: “General von Bülow fell near Liège. Further news is missing. My heartfelt

¹⁹⁷ Horne and Kramer trace these complex trajectories in the latter half of their monograph: *Ibid.*, 227-450.

¹⁹⁸ It is worth noting, however, that the chronological details in the report do accord with the list of commanders and the dates of their commands, as well as the battle list for the 9th Cavalry Division. See: BA-MA RH 18/2608 Bd. 119, ‘9. Kavallerie-Division.’

condolences.”¹⁹⁹ Similarly, the bullet-point summary of his military career, compiled in the early 1950’s as part of a larger project collecting biographical information on German generals and admirals, states that he “fell on 6 August 1914.”²⁰⁰ Significantly, the designation “fallen” referred only to those killed in combat, not suicides. The *Sanitätsbericht*, for instance, distinguishes between “the fallen, dead and missing,” with suicides being listed among the ‘dead,’ alongside those killed in accidents or by disease.²⁰¹ In burying von Bülow in this way, Herwarth appears to have enacted literally what was taking place metaphorically on a much larger scale: the suicides of 1914 being covered over by the mass of combat losses.

Finally, as with Peter Kollwitz, Franz Blumenfeld, and so many others, Carl-Ulrich von Bülow’s death was framed in explicitly sacrificial terms, evidenced in the numerous condolence letters and telegrams sent to his brother, Bernhard, after his death.²⁰² The very first came from Bernhard’s successor as Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, who sent a brief telegram on 9 August: “As soon as I learned that your highness’s brother died in front of Liège as one of the first glorious deaths for the Fatherland, your highness, I clenched my hands in faith.”²⁰³ Helene Leber, a friend of former Chancellor, wrote him a letter that same day, wherein she expressed her hope that “God will comfort you and help you bear his sacrifice.”²⁰⁴ Both the King

¹⁹⁹ BA-K N 1016/15, 139. “general v. buelow ist bei luettich gefallen. naechere nachrichten fehlen. herzliches beileid.”

²⁰⁰ BA-MA MSG 109/6516. “gefallen am 6.8.1914.”

²⁰¹ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 24. “die gefallenen, gestorbenen und vermißten.” This is also true in the state level reports. Both the Saxon and Württemberger records have suicide reports filed alongside those for accidents, while the Bavarian War Ministry’s 1912 Ordinance on the “Reporting of Extra-Ordinary Incidents” (*Berichterstattung bei außergewöhnlichen Vorkommnissen*), republished in 1915 and used as the basis for suicide reporting in the Bavarian Army throughout the war years, placed suicides and suicide attempts conceptually alongside accidents, abuse of power (*Mißbrauch der Dienstgewalt*), and outbreaks of mass illness. Multiple copies of the ordinance can be found in: BHStA IV M Kr 10912 ‘Selbstmörder vom Jahre 1914 mit 1917. (30.8),’ “No 24200. Kriegsministerium. München, 9. November 1912. Neudruck 1915. An die sämtlichen mobile Truppenteile usw.”

²⁰² All of these condolence messages are found in the same file as the brothers’ correspondence: BA-K N 1016/15, 129-365.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 134. “soeben erfahre ich dass der bruder euerer durchlaucht vor Luettich als einer der ersten ruhmvollen tod fuer das vaterland gestorben ist euerer durchlaucht druecke ich in treuer gesinnung die hand.”

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 154. “Wolle Gott Sie trösten, seiner Opfer Ihnen tragen helfen.”

of Bavaria and the Nobel Prize-winning author Gerhart Hauptmann sent telegrams on 12 August which explicitly referred to the Major General's "hero's death" (*Heldentod*), with the former describing him as "the first German General to find a hero's death before the enemy."²⁰⁵ And Friedrich, the youngest of the von Bülow siblings, wrote to his eldest brother on 6 September: "I don't need to tell you the feelings which our good brother's hero's death sparked in me. I lament that the Fatherland is robbed of him, but I envy him and point to him happily."²⁰⁶ The most explicit, however, came from Walter Rathenau, who would soon found the War Raw Materials Department. On 9 August, he wrote in a telegram to Bernhard that his pain could be "mitigated by the knowledge that your highly esteemed brother sacrificed his life for the protection of the country."²⁰⁷

When the war was less than a month old and when, therefore, most would have had little to no time to process its meaning or consequences, sacrifice was a readily-available moral concept many reached for to impose a positive meaning on those consequences and give order to the chaotic and conflicting feelings of that August. And this was a meaning that largely endured. Rathenau was not only one of the earliest and most explicit to frame the deaths from the new war sacrificially, but was also one of the loudest public voices calling for an *Endkampf*—a suicidal

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 183, 185. The full text of King Ludwig of Bavaria's telegram (in the original German) reads: "wie ich hoere, hat euerer durchlaucht herr bruder als erster deutscher general den heldentod vor dem feinde gefunden, es liegt mir am Herzen, euerer durchlaucht zu dem schmerzlichen verluste, den sie persönlich erleiden, meine aufrichtige teilnahme auszusprechen."

²⁰⁶ BA-K N 1016/16 Bernhard von Bülow Nachlass, 'Schriftwechsel mit dem Bruder Friedrich von Bülow,' 10. "Welche Gefühle der Heldentod unserer guten Bruder in mir ausgelöst hat, branche ich Dir nicht zu sagen. Ich beklage, dass das Vaterland seiner beraubt ist, aber ihn beneide ich und weise ihn glücklich." As with the rest of the files in Bernhard von Bülow's *Nachlass*, the page number cited refers to the handwritten pagination found throughout the file.

²⁰⁷ BA-K N 1016/15, 135. The full German text of the Rathenau's telegram reads: "euer durchlaucht bitte ich der teilnahme an ihrem tiefen schmerze ausdruck geben zu duerfen, der gemildert wird durch das bewusstsein dass ihr hochverehrter bruder sein leben dem schutze des landes geopfert hat meiner gnaedigsten fuerstin bitte ich den ausdruck tiefster empfindung zu fuessen legen zu duerfen."

‘final battle’ which, in its sacrifice of the nation, would serve as an example to future generations—in October 1918, well past the point when the war was definitively lost.²⁰⁸

Contained in this single case then, are all of the elements of the enduring self-destructive constellation which emerged at the onset of the war: a thanatological microcosm. Carl-Ulrich’s suicide itself illustrated the intensity of the social, emotional, and moral distress present from the war’s earliest days, here specifically in regard to the German army’s atrocious—in the literal sense—conduct in Belgium at the start of the invasion. But that suicide was buried—once again, literally—by all indications being recorded as simply one of the thousands of combat deaths of the war’s opening month. Buried along with it, therefore, was the Major General’s implicit condemnation of army’s conduct in August, as well as the more capacious sense of socio-emotional dislocation, isolation, and confusion his suicide embodied. The potential signal of the full stakes of the war—moral, social, emotional, mortal—went with Carl-Ulrich himself into his provisional grave. Finally, his death was immediately coded as sacrificial, which imbued it with a positive moral and emotional meaning and created a cathartic narrative for those left behind, one which, ironically, pointed in the exact opposite direction as his suicide itself.

1.5 The Suicidal “Spirit of 1914”

In a 1915 essay titled “On the Experience of War,” Siegfried Kracauer argued that it was “impossible to check the actual position of each individual person” as the “kinds of true love of the Fatherland in others, now triggered by the war, are infinitely diverse and individual.” There

²⁰⁸ On Rathenau in the October 1918 debate over *Endkampf*, see: Michael Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée En Masse* in October 1918," *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 73, No. 3 (2001): 459-460.

was a struggle for emotional supremacy between “the feeling of duty, the joy of being in harmony with the community, being dully pulled along by the mood of the masses, the appetite for adventure, the desire to strike, the ambition, the curiosity.” Ultimately, in Kracauer’s estimation, “the feeling for the Fatherland mostly serves as an unconscious disguise.”²⁰⁹ He was more correct than he knew. Not only did the ‘feeling for the Fatherland’ serve as an unconscious mask for an entire complex of often contradictory emotions sparked by the war’s outbreak, but that complex itself was concealing something much larger and more profound: a self-destructive thanatological constellation; a new inclination toward death.

This constellation had three principal layers. The first and base layer consisted of suicides themselves: acts and instances of explicit self-destruction recorded as such by contemporaries. While the circumstances and motives varied, these suicides formed a collective shadow vanguard and counterpoint to the marching crowds of August: a definite minority, to be sure, and one which undertook an extreme and exceptional act, but one which portended not only the ultimate consequences of the war—the self-immolation of the *Kaiserreich*—but many of the tensions, contradictions, and vectors which led to it: namely, the mass shattering of socio-emotional ties and moral certainties. The second layer consisted of the continuum of implicitly self-destructive behaviors, oriented toward life but inclined toward death. The quantitative scale of this implicit range was so great that it functionally enveloped and buried explicit suicides, creating the noise which masked the signals from the shadow vanguard. Together, these two layers formed the self-destructive undercurrent which was, in practice, what so many millions of people endured

²⁰⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, “Vom Erleben des Kriegs,” *Preußische Jahrbücher*, Vol. 161 (1915): 414. “Unmöglich, in jedem einzelnen Menschen den wirklichen Lagerungsverhältnissen nachzuprüfen! Die Uebergänge von der wahrhaften Vaterlandsliebe in andere, nun durch den Krieg ausgelöste Gefühle sind unendlich sein und mannigfacher, individuellster Art. Es straiten hier um die Vorherrschaft das Pflichtgefühl, die Freude an der Uebereinstimmung mit der Gemeinschaft, das dumpfe hingerissensein von der Stimmung der Masse, der Abenteuertrieb, die Lust am Dreinschlagen, der Ehrgeiz, die Neugierde; das Vaterlandsgefühl dient ihnen meistens zur unbewußten Verkleidung.”

through four-and-a-half years of war. The third and final layer—the surface current—papered over the self-destructiveness of the entire enterprise by encoding it within the “feeling for the Fatherland,” the “spirit of 1914,” and its call—indeed demand—for sacrifice. But this “spirit” was one which must be understood more literally: something intangible, yet powerful, equally “sacred” and imprecise, which was less about “ideology” or even ideas at all—at least primarily—and more the name for a set of moral feelings that were acceptable (or at least tolerable) to, and accepted by, a broad swath of the German public.²¹⁰ That “spirit” thus had both a clear behavioral direction and an ethical valence which “smuggled in” and disguised the self-destructive undercurrent. This did not render that undercurrent completely invisible however. Some experienced a form of unconscious recognition in the intensity of their fears and anxieties about the war and for their loved ones, while others manifested a more explicit understanding in their expressions of confusion, incomprehension, or, ultimately, intense mourning of the larger willingness to sacrifice and its human costs. At the start of the war, however, only a few seemingly caught a glimpse of the undercurrent’s translucent shimmer; most were swept along by the emotional surface current of the “spirit of 1914.”

It thus appears that Resch spoke prematurely when he concluded his lecture on a positive note by telling his fellow military doctors that they “need not look too blackly at the number of mental illnesses in the current war,” since, after all, the psychiatric clinic in Strasbourg only had a third of its 280 beds reserved for the “nervous” occupied at that moment.²¹¹ The scale of those

²¹⁰ I would argue that this is equally true of the contemporary German term for the “Spirit of 1914”, the *Augusterlebnis*, given the embodied connotations of *Erlebnis* as distinct from *Erfahrung*. This same distinction within ‘experience’ as a concept also exists in English. See: Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society, New Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015 [1983]): 83-86.

²¹¹ Resch, “Geisteskrankheiten,” 132. “Zum Schluß möchte ich nicht versäumen, darauf hinweisen, daß wir nicht zu schwarz zu sehen brauchen bezüglich der Zahl der Geisteskranken im jetzigen Kriege. So schreibt *Wollenberg* in Nr. 13 der Feldärztlichen Beilage zur M.M.W., daß bis dahin die psychiatrische Klinik in Straßburg zur Aufnahme für die Geisteskranken genügt habe, und daß von dem Lazarett für ‘Nervöse’ mit 280 Betten nie mehr als 1/3 belegt war.”

affected by the triad of suicides, combat deaths, and the broader emotional distress at the war's mortal consequences was much greater than a quantitative analysis of wartime mental illnesses could show. For while this configuration solidified in 1914 during the spontaneous mobilization, it did not dissipate after the German advance was halted at the Marne; nor when the war of movement became a war of position and attrition; nor, indeed, when the absolute death numbers reached new astronomical heights with the "great battles" of 1916. Rather, it endured until the war's final year, when broad consensus of the "August days" finally broke down: the suicidal substrate within the "spirit of 1914."

Chapter 2

Moral Exculpation Along the Archival Grain: The Wartime Reporting of German Soldiers' Suicides

The more an actor is seen as the agent of his actions, the less outside influences are seen as affecting his actions. In cases where moral responsibility is strongly attributed to an actor, it follows that outside influences are unlikely to be taken seriously as a cause of his actions—and, therefore, it is not necessary to censor these ‘outside influences’ (such as media reports).
—Sarah Perry, *Every Cradle is a Grave: Rethinking the Ethics of Birth and Suicide* (2014)

From the moment the war began, the German state was concerned with its own moral exoneration. On 3 August 1914—the day Germany declared war on France and the day before Britain entered the conflict—the Foreign Office published *The German White Book: How Russia Deceived Germany and Unleashed the European War*.¹ Consisting of memoranda, telegrams, and other documents from the Foreign Office archives, the *White Book* asserted Germany’s innocence for the start of this new war between the major powers and, as the title implied, placed responsibility squarely at Russia’s feet.² It was also, as Holger H. Herwig notes, the end result of a first “hasty sifting” of the Foreign Office archives. Already sensing the immense importance of what would later become known as the ‘war guilt question,’ on 31 July, Foreign Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow instructed his Under Secretary, Arthur Zimmermann, to compile and publish a series of documents organized around the leitmotif of Germany’s encirclement by the Entente powers; that is, a set of documents which would “confirm” in an objective fashion the German

¹ Auswärtiges Amt, *Das Deutsche Weissbuch: Wie Russland Deutschland hinterging und den Europäischen Krieg entfesselte* (Berlin: Leibheit & Thiesen. 1914).

² *Ibid.*, 1-13.

state's assertion of the necessity and righteousness of its entry into the war, its *jus ad bellum* ('justice of the war').³

Less than a year later, in May 1915, the Foreign Office published another white book, this time focused on the central issue for Germany's claims of *jus in bello* ('justice in the war'): the atrocities committed by the German Army during the invasion of Belgium the previous year. Titled *The Human-Rights-Breaching Conduct of the Belgian People's War*, this white book vigorously justified the Army's conduct during the invasion.⁴ Because the Belgians had launched an illegal and immoral 'people's war' (*Volkskrieg*) against the Germans, the 5,521 civilian deaths they ultimately suffered at the hands of the German Army were morally- and legally-warranted 'reprisals,' not barbarous atrocities, as the Allies claimed.⁵ This thesis was subsequently 'illustrated' in over 300 pages of primary documents, chiefly excerpts of witness statements from German soldiers who were present, mostly taken under oath. But as was the case with its 1914 predecessor, these documents, too, had first been 'sifted' by agents of the German state. In the report on the destruction of Louvain—where German soldiers killed 248 Belgian civilians, deported another 1,500, and burned the famous university library to the ground between 25 and 28 August 1914—half of the witness statements contained in the report from 15 January were

³ Holger H. Herwig, "Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War," *International Security* Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall 1987): 8.

⁴ Auswärtiges Amt, *Die völkerrechtswidrige Führung des belgischen Volkskriegs* (Berlin, no publisher listed, 1915).

⁵ The opening sentence of the volume's introductory essay laid out the argument: "Immediately after the outbreak of the present war, a wild people's war [Volkskampf] against the German troops broke out, one which constitutes a flagrant violation of international law and which has had the most severe consequences for the Belgian country and people. [Gleich nach Ausbruch des gegenwärtigen Krieges ist in Belgien ein wilder Volkskamps gegen die deutschen Truppen entbrannt, der eine flagrante Verletzung des Völkerrechts bildet und für das belgische Land und Volk die schweren Folgen gehabt hat.]" Ibid., 1. On the total Belgian death toll from the 1914 atrocities, see: John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): 74; Part 1 of their monograph assiduously reconstructs the events on the ground during the invasion: 9-86. On international law and the Belgian atrocities, see: Isabel V. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014): 51-94.

not present in the final report of 10 April, which appeared in the published white book.⁶ Excised from that final report were all five Belgian civilians' statements, along with all testimony from German soldiers which pointed to their own panic as the cause of the violence rather a Belgian uprising. All of this in order to demonstrate—again in an ostensibly objective fashion—the truth of the German government's thesis.⁷

Both white books are the products of what Herwig calls the “organizing” of documents, part of a “campaign of official and semi-official obfuscation and perversion of facts” by “patriotic self-censors” in Berlin which began in inchoate form with the August 1914 *White Book*, peaked during the revolutionary turmoil of 1918-1919, and continued throughout the Weimar and Nazi periods.⁸ “By selectively editing documentary collections, suppressing honest scholarship, subsidizing pseudo-scholarship, underwriting mass propaganda, and overseeing export of this propaganda,” agents of the Imperial German state—who became some of its most ardent defenders and apologists after the war—attempted to produce, popularize, and preserve their particular “national-conservative version of history.”⁹ But as John Horne and Alan Kramer point out, while there certainly was “a conspiracy of silence and misinformation” to some degree, this was not always an entirely conscious phenomenon. In the case of the 1915 white book at least, many German soldiers and government officials *really did* believe in the existence of a Belgian guerilla war, essentially “a case of unconscious denial” which “was fixed in more

⁶ For a detailed comparison of the two reports, see: Peter Schöller, *Der Fall Löwen und Das Weissbuch: Eine kritische Untersuchung der deutschen Dokumentation über die Vorgänge in Löwen vom 25. bis 28. August 1914* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1958): 23-26. Schöller's findings on the Louvain reports are summarized in English in: Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 240-241. On the extent of the destruction of Louvain, including the death toll, see: *Ibid.*, 38-42; Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 6-30.

⁷ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 241.

⁸ Herwig, “Clio Deceived,” 6-7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

permanent ideological form by the broader justification of the war as one of defence against encirclement by a hostile and uncomprehending world.”¹⁰

This same complex of epistemological processes and moral valences characterized the reporting of German soldiers’ suicides. Though they were not subject to any ‘official’ censorship, the records of these self-inflicted deaths were similarly ‘sifted’ and ‘organized’ around a leitmotif of moral exculpation. Indeed, while they addressed different events and politico-moral issues, built from—and, in the case of the white books, publicized—different source bases, and were compiled by different people in different branches of the German military and government across multiple regimes, *all* were pieces of a broader project of wartime self-justification and, later, postwar moral exoneration on the part of the Imperial German state: the arrangement of a largely implicit but nonetheless coherent moral narrative about the war and Germany’s participation in it, one which an ‘objective’ analysis of the relevant source material would affirm.

That the primary tools for constructing that narrative were archival, particularly after the war, comes as little surprise in light of the major historiographical ‘turns’ of the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹ Beginning with the reflections and examinations of scholars like Arlette Farge and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, historians have increasingly come to reflect critically on archives not only as repositories of sources from which historical knowledge is produced, but as historical products themselves, ones which play an active role in any subsequent knowledge production.¹²

¹⁰ Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 246.

¹¹ For a simultaneous overview and critical evaluation of these various turns, see the essays in: Judith Surkis et al, “AHR Forum: Historiographic ‘Turns’ in Critical Perspective,” *American Historical Review* Vol. 117, No. 3 (June 2012): 698-813. For an overview with a greater focus on modern German historiography, see: Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005): 115-181.

¹² Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013 [1989]); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

As Antoinette Burton notes, “[t]hrough their own origins are often occluded and the exclusions on which they are premised often dimly understood, all archives come into being in and as history as a result of specific political, cultural, and socioeconomic pressures—pressures which leave traces and which render archives themselves artifacts of history.”¹³ In the German case, those were primarily the pressures of war, first from 1914-1918 and then again from 1939-1945, the Second being in no small part the result of the unresolved conflicts over the consequences and meaning of the First.¹⁴ Indeed, as Peter Fritzsche summarizes, “the onerous requirements for fighting war in the modern era necessitated upholstering a common past, while the sheer violence of war worked to jeopardize that unity, with both motion and countermotion adding to the paperwork of history.”¹⁵

Since the 1960s, numerous scholars have picked through this paperwork and largely deconstructed the conservative-national narrative in its various forms and guises. Begun most prominently in the work of Fritz Fischer and his students, as well as in the numerous analyses dismantling the “stab-in-the-back” myth (*Dolchstoßlegende*) promulgated by major military and political figures—most famously by Erich Ludendorff—after the war, these scholars investigated the specific historical claims made in publications like the white books and by the late 1980s had established a new historiographical consensus which repudiated them.¹⁶ By the early 2000s,

¹³ Antoinette Burton, “Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories” in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 6.

¹⁴ Michael Geyer has arguably been the most prominent voice promoting this argument on the centrality of war to twentieth-century German history. See, *inter alia*: Michael Geyer, “The Stigma of Violence, Nationalism and War in Twentieth-Century Germany.” *German Studies Review* (Winter 1992): 75-110; Konrad H. Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ Peter Fritzsche, “The Archive and the Case of the German Nation,” *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 187.

¹⁶ Fischer’s two most prominent works, which began that deconstruction, appeared in 1961 and 1964, respectively, sparking what has subsequently become known as ‘the Fischer debate’: Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War*, trans. Hajo Holborn and James Joll (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967 [1961]); Fritz Fischer, *War of Illusions: German Policies from 1911 to 1914*, trans. Marian Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975 [1964]). Major

however, a number of scholars had turned their attention not only to the specific claims of the national-conservative narrative about the war, but also to the epistemological processes and structures out of which those claims were generated, what Keith Wilson calls “historical engineering.”¹⁷ While immensely valuable, most of these analyses have focused on the elite level—on the creation of official histories and document collections—and are temporally centered on the first postwar period, not the war itself.¹⁸ Thus, while they offer an important avenue for understanding and unpacking the immense tensions and conflicts of the Weimar years, what Markus Pöhlmann has dubbed “a virtual war of historiographies,” the more

works on both sides of the debate appear in abbreviated form in: Holger H. Herwig, ed., *The Outbreak of World War I: Causes and Responsibilities*, Sixth Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). The debate is well summarized in: Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 46-48. Works deconstructing and debunking the *Dolchstoßlegende* are similarly vast. From a military-historical perspective, the major work is: Wilhelm Deist, "Der militärische Zusammenbruch des Kaiserreiches. Zur Realität der Dolchstoßlegende," in *Das Unrechtsregime. Internationale Forschung über den Nationalsozialismus, vol. 1, Ideologie, Herrschaftssystem, Wirkung in Europa*, ed. Ursula Büttner (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1986): 101-129, first published in English as "The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth," trans. E.J. Feuchtwanger, *War in History* 3:2 (1996): 186-207. Other prominent works include: Richard Bessel, "The Great War in German Memory: The Soldiers of the First World War, Demobilization, and Weimar Political Culture" *German History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1988): 20-34; Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée En Masse* in October 1918," *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 73, No. 3 (2001): 459-527. On Ludendorff and his postwar myth-making, see: Jay Lockenour, *Dragonslayer: The Legend of Erich Ludendorff in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021). The German atrocities of 1914 were not the subject of major scholarly scrutiny until the publication of Horne and Kramer's monograph, cited above, which deals with both the history of the atrocities themselves, as well as the historiography, memory, and narratives about them during and after the war.

¹⁷ Keith Wilson, "Introduction: Governments, Historians, and 'Historical Engineering,'" in *Forging the Collective Memory: Governments and International Historians through Two World Wars*, ed. Keith Wilson (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996): 1-23. The volume is indicative in many ways as both a culmination and compilation of the first wave of these investigations: seven of the ten essays deal explicitly with the First World War, including analyses of Russia, Austria, and Britain, and a reprinting of Herwig's 1987 essay.

¹⁸ In addition to the work of Herwig and Fritzsche, cited above, Markus Pöhlmann's analysis of the production and publication of the official German military history of the war is exemplary, in both senses of the term: Markus Pöhlmann, "Yesterday's Battles and Future War: The German Official Military History, 1918-1939," in *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919-1939*, eds. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 223-238. I use the phrase 'first postwar period' deliberately, in place of the more common—and anachronistic—term 'interwar years.' As Jörg Echternkamp states in his analysis of the 'Second Thirty Years War' as an analytic category, "[t]he concept of the 'interwar years' came from the Second World War: for contemporaries, in contrast, it was simply a postwar period, in spite of revisionist rhetoric which predicted future world wars." Jörg Echternkamp, "1914-1945: A Second Thirty Years War? Advantages and Disadvantages of an Interpretive Category" in *Imperial Germany Revisited: Continuing Debates and New Perspectives*, ed. Sven Oliver Müller and Cornelius Torp (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011): 194.

mundane modes and quotidian practices of *wartime* ‘sifting,’ ‘organization,’ and arrangement have remained understudied.¹⁹ In essence, many have studied the history *behind* the postwar historiographical battles, and some have studied the history *of* that postwar literature, but few have centered their analyses on the processes of historiographical construction *during the war itself*: the messy complex of conscious and unconscious factors in the creation of the very documents which made up the archives Herwig’s ‘patriotic self-censors’ eventually ‘organized’ into their exculpatory publications.²⁰

My examination of the reporting of German soldiers’ suicides, then, shifts the primary analytic register from the realm of the elite, the official, and the central to that of the commonplace, the informal, and the peripheral—to the micro-level on which the individual materials of the organized archive were forged at the margins of the state’s wartime concerns.²¹ Especially in contrast to the questions of war guilt and the 1914 atrocities, both of which were the subjects of not only domestic but also massive international propaganda campaigns,²² suicide

¹⁹ Pöhlmann, “Yesterday’s Battles,” 225.

²⁰ Horne and Kramer’s monograph, cited above, is a rare exception. A further exception from the same historiographical moment is: Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Verhey spends the first half of the book examining the reality of ‘war enthusiasm’ in Germany, the second analyzing the myth of the “spirit of 1914.” Both stand out within the literature as monographs which simultaneously examine the historical reality of the wartime events alongside the processes of historical engineering and myth-making, analyzing both the war years and the postwar period, the micro and the macro, the conscious and the unconscious, in a single holistic analysis.

²¹ This in keeping with the now relatively long-running attempt at writing a German “counter history from below” which starts from a premise of tension, rather than harmony: Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, and Mark Roseman, “Introduction” in *German History from the Margins*, eds. Neil Gregor, Nils Roemer, and Mark Roseman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006): 1.

²² An English translation of the 1914 *White Book* was published in 1914, shortly after the appearance of its German-language counterpart: Foreign Office, *Germany’s Reasons for War with Russia: How Russia and her Ruler Betrayed Germany’s Confidence and thereby made the European War* (Berlin: Liebherr & Thiesen, 1914). Strikingly, a copy is contained in the German Federal Archive as part of a file of ‘mood portraits’ (*Stimmungsbilder*) from 1914, alongside, *inter alia*, various newspapers clippings in both German and English and a number of English-language apologist essays from the war’s opening month, including one by the Harvard historian Kuno Francke titled “Germany’s Defensive Aggression:” Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter: BArch) R 9350/293 ‘Stimmungsbilder aus der Kriegszeit: Zeitungsausschnitte, Ansichtskarten. - Ein Jahr im Kriege, mit Karten und Bildern.’ The 1915 white book was also translated into English and French, though in an abbreviated version, both of which appeared in 1915. The full text was translated into English and published in 1921. For an overview of the 1915 white book’s translation history, see: Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 511, footnote 58.

during the war was at most a minor concern for the German state and military, and indeed, for German society as a whole. This was principally a matter of numbers. In 1923, the Imperial Statistical Office (*Statistisches Reichsamt*) publication *Economy and Statistics (Wirtschaft und Statistik)* reported an estimate of 5,106 German soldiers' suicides for the entire war period, hardly a statistically significant figure in relation to the 2,037,000 German soldiers who died during the war.²³ It is thus all the more striking that these surviving reports bear the *same* epistemological and narrative hallmarks as the white books. Something which was apparently never an acute threat to the Germany Army's manpower, nor, seemingly, to either its international or domestic standing—which only ever posed an implicit and unspoken threat to the state's legitimacy and its claims of righteous conduct—was still subject to the same processes and pressures as the foundational moral and socio-political questions of war guilt and the invasion of Belgium; of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*.

The reporting of soldiers' suicides therefore serves as a limit case which illustrates the extent, nature, and form of these wartime anxieties; a case which allows one to sketch the epistemological construction of the state's self-justificatory narrative from the margins, and from the bottom up. Indeed, it is precisely *because* suicide was so peripheral that the reporting of it so

²³ Statistisches Reichsamt, *Wirtschaft und Statistik* Jahrg. 3, Nr. 18 (26 September 1923): 583. The Reichsamt estimate of "German Losses in the World War by Cause of Death [*Die Deutschen Verluste im Weltkrieg nach Todesursachen*]" covers "[t]he total number of German military personnel who died from the war's outbreak until 1919 [*Die Gesamtzahl der von Kriegsausbruch bis zum Jahre 1919 gestorbenen deutschen Militärpersonen*]." Ibid., 582. It is this estimate that the Soviet demographer Boris Uralis cited in his own comparative analysis of the losses in both World Wars, and it is Uralis's numbers that Robert Whalen later utilized: Boris Uralis, *Wars and Population*, trans. Leo Lempert (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971 [1960]): 67, 177.; Robert Weldon Whalen, *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984): 42. The figure for total German military deaths during the war comes from Antoine Prost and his transnational discussion of death calculations: Antoine Prost, "The Dead," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 561-91, especially 588 (Table 22.1). For further context, it is worth noting that during the first war year alone, the German Army suffered over one-and-a-half times as many combat deaths on the Western Front every month as it lost to suicide in the entire war: James McRandle and James Quirk, "The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I," *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 70, No. 3 (2006): 682, Table 6. The lowest combat death figure recorded for the first war year on the Western Front was 8,110 dead in March 1915; the highest was 25,894 in September 1914.

uniquely indexes the social, emotional, and moral concerns at play in Great War Germany and the ways the state sought to mitigate them. These documents are the products of a multi-layered process of self-censorship, a compounding series of specifically-inflected partial silences which combined to produce what Ann Laura Stoler terms an ‘archival grain’—an epistemological arsenal which generates its own current of “common sense” of things which could “go without saying” that in turn serves the dynamic governing needs of the state.²⁴ But while this is a story of self-censorship, silencing, and the forging of narrative, the protagonists are decidedly not Herwig’s ‘patriotic self-censors’—those high-level officials and political archivists of the ‘Special Bureau von Bülow’ who attempted to direct and control the narrative from the top down.²⁵ They are instead the largely-conscripted multitudes of soldiers and bureaucrats who conducted the mundane war work of the German state and instantiated—but did not direct—its self-legitimizing moral narrative through prosaic decisions about reporting; the now faceless men whose illegible signatures adorn largely-forgotten documents implicitly attesting to the quotidian endurance of wartime self-destruction.

At work here was a distinct grain of ethical epistemology—knowledge production with a clear moral bent and goal. First, the mandated form of these reports established the broad contours of the interpretive current by clarifying which particular pieces of information were deemed relevant to explain soldiers’ suicides and which were not. Such mandates came from the top and established the general direction and orientation of the archival grain: away from the

²⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009): 3. What she writes of the Netherlands Indies in the nineteenth century is equally true of Germany during the First World War: “archives were an arsenal of sorts that were [sic] reactivated to suit new governing strategies. Documents honed in the pursuit of prior issues could be requisitioned to write new histories, could be reclassified for new initiatives, could be renewed to fortify security measures against what were perceived as new assaults on imperial sovereignty and its moralizing claims.”

²⁵ Unofficially named for Legation Secretary Bernhard Wilhelm von Bülow, a nephew of the former Chancellor and future state secretary of the Foreign Office archive, which was the “general staff” of the historiographical “war” over war guilt in the first postwar period. See: Herwig, “Clio Deceived,” 10.

state and the collective, towards the individual. Second, in following that grain, the reports' specific contents implicitly absolved the state of any form of responsibility for these deaths. In nearly every instance, the reports recorded no 'service-related reasons' (*dienstliche Gründe*) for any of soldiers' suicides, instead explaining each case via the individual soldier's psychological make-up, maladies, and personal circumstances, papering over the socio-emotional traumas wrought by the war Germany had undertaken in the process. For it was precisely in the questions surrounding *dienstliche Gründe* that the personal and national inclinations toward death met most explicitly—where the state's decisions for and in war, and the individual's decisions about his own life and death within that constrained agentive milieu, intersected. But these were not primarily deliberate acts of intentional and exonerary censorship by those producing and filing these reports. Rather, they were largely unconscious acts which, in many ways inadvertently, forged a knowledge base for a morally-exculpatory narrative of wartime suicide within the larger morally-resonant narrative of sacrificial wartime death. The specific ways in which soldiers and bureaucrats self-censored these documents points towards a grain characterized primarily by what I call *institutional anticipation*: a process of intuiting what conclusions would be in the best interest of the German state and military and reporting accordingly.²⁶

As records of explicit soldiers' suicides, then, these reports are the records of the state reception and (in)comprehension of the shadow vanguard—testaments to the specific ways the self-destructive thanatological constellation which first emerged in August 1914 endured within the realm of the state. By separating explicit from implicit suicide throughout the official documentation and following an interpretative grain geared towards personal explanations for

²⁶ This process is largely analogous to Ian Kershaw's concept of 'working towards the *Führer*,' although, obviously enough, abstracted from the specific historical context of the NS-Zeit. See: Ian Kershaw, "'Working Towards the Führer:' Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship," *Contemporary European History* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1993): 103-18.

suicide that downplayed or ignored the socio-emotional and state-conditioned context of the war itself, these acts of unspoken moral arbitration not only created the archival conditions for the construction and preservation of the state's self-exculpatory narrative during and after the war. In the most prosaic form, they also worked to uphold the state's wartime legitimacy, as the reiterative pain of separation, loss, material deprivation, and socio-moral alienation reverberating throughout German society grew increasingly collective as the conflict dragged on, and with it, the threat to that legitimacy and the continuation of the regime itself.

2.1 The Outlines of an Interpretive Infrastructure

Prior to the war, the German military was concerned with suicides in its ranks. By the 1860s, activists and bureaucrats across the political spectrum had come to view suicide statistics as an index of the moral health of a society, and those in the military were no exception.²⁷ Indeed, Émile Durkheim's famous 1897 analysis of suicide claimed that in every European country except Denmark, the suicide rate was notably higher among soldiers than among civilians.²⁸ And although Durkheim's study was not published in German translation until 1973, the *Kaiserreich* military authorities were clearly aware of the implications of his assertion.²⁹ On top of the fact

²⁷ Andrew G. Bonnell, "Explaining Suicide in the Imperial German Army," *German Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2014): 275-277. This was part of a broader transnational trajectory within the discipline of 'moral statistics,' within which suicide figures held a privileged place, well-summarized in: Lisa Lieberman, *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003): 30-36.

²⁸ Durkheim considered soldiers' suicides to be "altruistic," the result of "too rudimentary individuation" where "society holds him [the suicide] in too strict tutelage." Émile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951 [1897]): 221; for the full discussion of soldiers' suicides: 228-239. Bonnell concisely summarizes the relevant findings regarding military suicides: *Ibid.*, 276.

²⁹ Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod. Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 2001): 251-252.

that most German political and military elites could read French (and thus Durkheim's monograph), Social Democratic and Catholic activists publicly deployed the kinds of suicide statistics Durkheim utilized as evidence of widespread mistreatment and abuse in the German army in the years prior to the war's outbreak.³⁰ Given the increasingly privileged epistemological status of statistics as prime representatives of social reality more generally by the *fin-de-siècle*, a reality ostensibly distinct from and untainted by the political sphere, such deployments were all the more threatening.³¹ This, of course, was in addition to the implicit threat to any state's claimed monopoly on legitimate violence such suicides inherently posed.³² Over the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, then, the German military increasingly attempted to take control of the interpretation of soldiers' suicides, beginning in 1869 when they took over the compiling of military suicide statistics from the civilian authorities.³³ This constituted a prewar grain of at least quasi-censorship from above, since, as Andrew Bonnell describes, the "result of such policy was that the data used by analysts...had already passed through the filter of official military interpretation of the evidence."³⁴

That official filter was both dynamic and subtle, and established the macro-level contours of the archival grain which persisted into the war years, most clearly visible in the surviving

³⁰ On the education of German elites prior to the war, see the comparative study by Thomas Weber: Thomas Weber, *Our Friend "The enemy:" Elite Education in Britain and Germany before World War I* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). On the SPD and Catholic use of military suicide statistics: Bonnell, "Explaining Suicide," 282-289.

³¹ Joshua Cole traces the *longue durée* development of these trajectories stretching back to the seventeenth century. While focused on France, he places the specific French developments in transnational context, including, importantly, the German tradition of 'state statistics' (*Statistik*): Joshua Cole, *The Power of Large Numbers: Population, Politics, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000): 1-116.

³² This was a particular concern of the first wave of historical scholarship on suicide in the modern period, well-reviewed and summarized in: Róisín Healy, "Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe," *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Sept 2006): 916-918. Since the publication of Healy's article, two monographs attendant to these issues have appeared for Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, respectively: Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kenneth M. Pinnow, *Lost to the Collective: Suicide and the Promise of Soviet Socialism, 1921-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

³³ Bonnell, "Explaining Suicide," 279.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 287.

records of the Bavarian Army.³⁵ Beginning in July 1909, the Bavarian War Ministry required all future reports on soldiers' suicides to include details about the soldier's financial circumstances and whether there was any family history of suicide or mental illness. The effect was immediate, as Bonnell summarizes: "even where there seemed to be a logical proximate causal factor leading to a suicide (such as a soldier facing a serious disciplinary charge or punishment), company officers dutifully set about enquiring about family histories and money problems."³⁶ Prior to the war, then, this first inflection established a precedent with direct material consequences, as time, effort, and resources were deployed in accordance with the state's mandated interpretive trajectory. That 1909 directive was expanded and updated three years later in Bavarian War Ministry Ordinance Number 24200 on the "Reporting of Extra-Ordinary Incidents" (*Berichterstattung bei außergewöhnlichen Vorkommnissen*). This 1912 ordinance was republished and redistributed throughout the Bavarian Army in 1915 and served as the basis for suicide reporting throughout the war.³⁷ Consequently, it functions as a useful synecdoche from which to sketch the outlines of the interpretive infrastructure for soldiers' suicides during the war—the reporting conditions set by state mandate before the content and details of any incident came in for consideration.

At the outset, it is significant that the category of 'extra-ordinary incident' was only vaguely defined in the ordinance itself, with its practical meaning left largely implicit. The

³⁵ As Heinrich Hartmann notes, unlike the Saxony and Württemberg, Bavaria did not join Prussia in its attempts to collect standardized data for the German armies, which began in the late 1870s. Heinrich Hartmann, *The Body Populace: Military Statistics and Demography in Europe before the First World War*, trans. Ellen Yutzy Glebe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018 [2011]): 32. Ironically, this means a much greater number of documents have been preserved for the Bavarian army from this period, since their records were not housed in the Army archive in Potsdam, which burned down in the course of the bombing of Berlin in April 1945.

³⁶ Bonnell, "Explaining Suicide," 287.

³⁷ Multiple copies of the ordinance can be found in: Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv (hereafter: BHStA IV), Kriegsministerium (hereafter: M Kr) 10912 'Selbstmörder vom Jahre 1914 mit 1917. (30.8),' "No 24200. Kriegsministerium. München, 9. November 1912. Neudruck 1915. An die sämtlichen mobile Truppenteile usw."

opening section of the ordinance merely stated that “[e]xtra-ordinary incidents of general importance and discussions of such incidents in the daily press are to be brought to the attention of all superior departments by the units or offices initially involved.”³⁸ Instead of describing what counted as ‘extra-ordinary’ and what did not, the ordinance simply described the general reporting procedures for all such incidents, before proceeding to list the specific requirements for each kind of occurrence. In addition to suicides and suicide attempts, these included, *inter alia*, accidents, natural disasters, “abuse of power” (*Mißbrauch der Dienstgewalt*), and outbreaks of mass illness.³⁹ Thus, a wide range of events with highly varying causes were housed under a single conceptual heading, some distinctly human in their origins and internal to the military (e.g. abuse of power), some extra-human and external (e.g. natural disasters).

Practically, what united all these disparate types of occurrences was the general set of reporting mandates. An ‘extra-ordinary incident’ was an event which required that, first, a preliminary report be sent to both the Bavarian War Ministry and the relevant superiors of that particular unit. This was to be followed by a more detailed report along the same channels “as soon as the causes and consequences of the incident are fully clarified, or further inquiry appears futile [*aussichtslos*].”⁴⁰ In keeping with earlier practices, then, reporting was to be kept within the military. All writers of such reports would therefore be aware that their audience consisted of higher-level military officers. Here, the first definitive inflection point in the archival grain comes into sharper focus, as those writing these reports were undoubtedly aware of the poor light in which they and their units could appear when such an incident occurred, whether suicide or

³⁸ Ibid. “Außergewöhnliche Vorkommnisse vom allgemeiner Bedeutung und Erörterungen von solchen in der Tagespresse sind von den zunächst beteiligten Truppenteilen oder Behörden zur Kenntnis aller vorgesetzten Dienststellen zu bringen.”

³⁹ Ibid. The ordinance includes thirty-six individual numbered paragraphs detailing specific reporting requirements for each type of incident.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: “sobald die Ursachen und Folgen des Vorkommnisses völlig geklärt sind oder weitere Erhebungen aussichtslos erscheinen.”

otherwise, creating an incentive for selective reporting. Ernst Jünger, for example, alluded to this quotidian form of self-censorship in his war memoir *Storm of Steel*. After a disastrous failed night raid in which he gave the artillery improper coordinates and Schultz, his “companion in misfortune,” gave the machine gunners an incorrect range which resulted in both accidentally firing on their own troops, the two had a fierce argument. Afterwards, however, they “discussed the most important aspect of the affair: the report. We [Jünger and Schultz] wrote it in such a way that we were both satisfied,” a clear allusion to the fact that they crafted the report in such a way that both would come in for the least rebuke.⁴¹

Conceptually, however, what united these various types of incidents was that they were apparently beyond the purview of the militarily ‘ordinary,’ and therefore could *not* ‘go without saying.’ Quite literally: they had to be reported. A certain inchoate moral connotation and potential threat is thus subtly indexed in the meeting of these practical and conceptual definitions of ‘extra-ordinary.’ These were all events in some way understood to be at least potentially unacceptable: disruptions of and ruptures in the ‘normal’ conduct of military affairs— which did not need to be questioned—by events which had the potential to undermine those very procedures and the assumptions undergirding them. Further, this conception of ‘ordinary’ and ‘extra-ordinary’ was decidedly thanatological, an element which only intensified as the war went on and mass death became an increasingly ‘normal’ and omnipresent part of daily life.⁴²

⁴¹ Ernst Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (New York: Penguin, 2004 [1961]): 154-155. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that Jünger’s diary entries from the time make no mention of writing the report: Ernst Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch, 1914-1918*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010): 272-273.

⁴² To say that mass death became a “normal” part of life is in no way to imply that it was considered or experienced as “easy” or “good.” Rather, it is only to say that it became stitched into the quotidian fabric of life during the war. See, for example, the essays on “Private Life” in: Jay Winter, ed., *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 5-70. Monica Black has also explored these issues in Berlin from c.1930-c.1960, where the thanatological aftermath of the First World War looms large until the outbreak of the Second: Monica Black, *Death in Berlin: From Weimar to Divided Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

One can see this bureaucratic element of quotidian thanatology in a series of internal communications from the Bavarian Second Army Corps regarding the 1912 ordinance, now housed in the files of the Bavarian Army's Medical Office (*Sanitätsamt*). First, on 30 March 1917, the Deputy General Command of the Corps sent a memo under the subject heading "Reporting of Extra-Ordinary Incidents" to all the reserve hospitals under its purview.⁴³ The memo stated: "There is a need to pay the most exact attention to War Ministry Ordinance Nr. 24200/12 in regard to instances of suicide, suicide attempts and accidents; this is especially so for all unnatural deaths [*bei allen nicht natürlichen Todesfällen*], that is, deaths attributable to the suicide or accident of military personnel, including when the death occurred sometime after the incident."⁴⁴ The corps's medical personnel apparently continued to have difficulty adhering to the regulations, however, prompting a second memo on 2 October: "After the Deputy General Command's message, there have recently been more cases of suicides and accidents with a deadly outcome [*mit tödlichem Ausgang*] in which the existing instructions were not followed. In particular, the immediate notification of the judges [*Gerichtsherren*] has been omitted and military doctors have performed coroner's inquests and even autopsies without waiting for a court order. Also, reports have failed to be submitted in accordance with War Ministry

⁴³ The Deputy General Command (*Stellvertretendes Generalkommando*) of a unit was essentially responsible for the its administrative tasks: "With the declaration of the state of war on 31 July 1914, the deputy commanding generals in the 21 army corps took over the tasks—mainly recruitment and supplies—of the army commanders who left for the front. Together with the fortress commanders, the deputy general commanders as military commanders also took over the domestic executive authority, with wide-ranging powers with regard to the war economy, censorship, etc." Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds. *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010): 187.

⁴⁴ BHStA IV Sanitätsamt II. Armeekorps 51 "Kriegsministeriums Erlasse, Generalkommando Verfügnisse, Sanitätsamts Verfügnisse," memo dated "Würzburg, 30.3.17. No. 81868." "Es besteht Veranlassung auf die genaueste Beachtung des K.M.E. No. 24200/12 bei vorkommenden Selbstentleibungen, Selbstentleibungsversuchen und Unglücksfällen hinzuweisen; insbesondere ist bei allen nicht natürlichen Todesfällen, also auf Selbstmord oder Unglücksfall zurückzuführenden Todesfällen von Militärpersonen, auch wenn der Tod erst einige Zeit nach dem Vorkommnis eingetreten ist."

Ordinance Nr. 24200/12.”⁴⁵ But despite these repeated messages, it seems these same problems persisted into the war’s final year. On 16 February 1918, the Deputy General Command issued another memo to all of its various sub-units, once again under the heading “Reporting of Extra-Ordinary Incidents.” This final missive made explicit reference to their message from the previous March and reiterated its main points: “The memo of 30 March 1917, Nr. 81868, must be observed precisely in all unnatural deaths of military personnel and prisoners of war [*allen nicht natürlichen Todesfällen von Militärpersonen und Kriegsgefangenen*].”⁴⁶ The archival record of these communications ends here.

In these memoranda, the concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ had essentially been collapsed into the category of ‘war.’ Unspoken but implied in the first 1917 memo and reiterated almost verbatim in the final message of February 1918 was the idea that combat deaths were ‘natural’—and therefore also ‘ordinary’—while soldiers’ deaths by suicide or accident were not.⁴⁷ This followed directly from the Military Criminal Code (*Militärstrafgerichtsordnung*). Section 154, which obliged civilian police and administrators to report any suspected “unnatural death” of an active military member to the nearest military authority, stated explicitly that “‘suicide’ also falls under the concept of ‘unnatural death.’ Evidence that the death was the result of a criminal act is

⁴⁵ Ibid., memo dated “Würzburg, 2. 10. 1917. Nr. 52340.” “Nach Mitteilung des stellv. Generalkommandos mehren sich in letzter Zeit die Fälle, daß bei Selbstentleibungen und Unfällen mit tödlichem Ausgang die bestehenden Vorschriften nicht beachtet werden, insbesondere wird die sofortige Benachrichtigung des höheren Gerichtsherrn unterlassen und die Militärärzte nehmen ohne eine Anordnung des Gerichts abzuwarten Leichenschauen und sogar Leichenöffnungen vor, auch Berichterstattung noch KME.Nr.29200/12. [sic] wird unterlassen.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., memo labelled “Würzburg 16.II.1918,” “Betreff: Berichterstattung bei außergewöhnlichen Vorkommnissen.” “30.III.1917 No 81868 ist bei allen nicht natürlichen Todesfälle von Militärpersonen und Kriegsgefangenen genau zu beachten; insbesondere sind alle dienstgrade und Mannschaften, die mit Führung eines Kommandos beauftragt sind, eingehend zu belehren, daß die alle derartigen Todesfälle sofort ihrer vorgesetzten dienstesstelle drahtlich oder telefonisch zu melden haben.”

⁴⁷ In a meta-historical vein, it is striking the degree to which these memos find their echo in Cormac McCarthy’s 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men*, including the intra-authority relations. Investigating the aftermath of a drug deal gone violently wrong in the Texas desert, Sheriff Bell and his deputy remark to one another: “We got another execution here Sheriff? | No, I believe this one’s died of natural causes. | Natural causes? | Natural to the line of work he’s in.” Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York: Vintage, 2005): 76.

not required.”⁴⁸ Nonetheless, section 223 further specified that “if the death of a military person did not occur naturally,” it was only military *juridical* authorities—or, in special circumstances, a military commander—who could authorize an autopsy, a mandate the medical personnel of the Bavarian Second Corps apparently flouted.⁴⁹

As an implicit appeal to nature argument backed by the full disciplinary authority of the German military, this had a clear, if somewhat subtle, moral implication and state-preserving function.⁵⁰ At least as far as the high command was concerned, because combat deaths were a ‘natural’ and ‘ordinary’ component and consequence of war—defined negatively by their contrast with ‘unnatural’ deaths by suicide or accident—they were, at a minimum, morally tolerable: no war could be fought without incurring them, and therefore they did not pose an innate moral threat. Thus while combat deaths were assiduously logged and recorded in all the German armies, and those compiling that information took great pains to break those figures down not just by time and place, but also by the proximate cause of the lethal wound (e.g. bullet, shrapnel, bayonet, etc.),⁵¹ the *moral* cause of such deaths was ostensibly so clear as to literally go without saying: they were killed by the enemy, and it was with the enemy that moral

⁴⁸ *Militärstrafgerichtsordnung nebst Einführungsgesetz und gesetz, betreffend die dienstvergehen der richterlichen militärjustizbeamten und die unfreiwillige versetzung derselben in eine andere stelle oder in den ruhestand*, Vierte, vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage (Berlin: Verlag von Franz Wahlen, 1907): 123. “Unter den Begriff ‘nicht natürlichen Tod’ fällt auch ‘Selbstmord’. Anhaltspunkte dafür, daß der Tod infolge einer strafbaren Handlung erfolgt sei, sind nicht erforderlich.”

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 191-192. In the original German, the full paragraph reads: “Ist der Tod einer Militärperson nicht auf natürlichen Wege erfolgt, so hat der Gerichtsherr, in dringenden Fällen jeder militärische Befehlshaber, welcher die Anzeige oder Meldung von dem Todesfall erhält, die Leichenschau durch einen Kriegsgerichtsrath oder Ermangelung eines solchen durch den zunächst erreichbaren Amtsrichter zu veranlassen.”

⁵⁰ The argument was mostly famously and clearly summarized by George Edward Moore: “a thing is good *because* it is ‘natural’, or bad *because* it is ‘unnatural’.” George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922): 45. Emphasis original.

⁵¹ Illnesses, too, received a detailed accounting, but once again in a decidedly amoral vein focused solely on the proximate, with discrete tables for influenza, typhus, tuberculosis, measles, and a host of other maladies. The official charts were all published in Volume III of the *Medical Report for the German Army in the World War: Der Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums*, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 3*-145*.

responsibility for such deaths lay.⁵² By contrast, not only did the Military Criminal Code actively maintain the military's epistemological hold over the reporting and initial interpretation of soldiers' suicides, the final sentence of section 223 made clear that such moral clarity was not present here, which was why "[i]n all cases of suicide, the reasons [*Beweggründe*] must be clarified as much as possible."⁵³

This pattern of conceptual separation held in reporting throughout the German military both during and after the war. In the loss lists (*Verlustlisten*) of the German Navy, the main compendia gave the name, rank, unit, and date of death for all the sailors lost, in alphabetical order.⁵⁴ But "Losses through Suicide" were always presented in a separate list, part of an addendum of losses "[n]ot contained in the alphabetical loss lists [*Nicht in den alphabetischen Verlustlisten enthalten*]."⁵⁵ Similarly, the official *Medical Report on the German Army in the World War* (*Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkrieg*) listed only four categories of death causes in its final compilation tables: "Wounding," "Accident," "Illness," and "Suicide."⁵⁶ Notably, however, in the compilation tables on "Losses and Shortfalls" (*Verluste und Ausfall*), where the figures were broken down into the categories of "Fallen," "Missing," "Wounded," and

⁵² As Roger Chickering highlights, the "vast human and material sacrifices, which began to accumulate in the first weeks of the conflict, were...debited morally, in Germany and elsewhere, to the malevolence of the enemy." Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918*, 2nd Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 169.

⁵³ *Militärstrafgerichtsordnung*, 192. "In allen Fällen des Selbstmordes sind die Beweggründe thunlicht [sic] aufzuklären."

⁵⁴ The three surviving volumes of compiled loss lists from the Imperial German Navy during the war cover April 1915- September 1918 and are housed in the Federal Military Archive in Freiburg: Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter: BA-MA) RM 3/30390 Verlustlisten der Kaiserlichen Marine, Bd. 1, Laufzeit : (20. Apr. 1915 - 9. Mai 1916); RM 3/30391 Verlustlisten der Kaiserlichen Marine, Bd. 2 (Laufzeit : 10. Apr. 1916 - 4. Mai 1917); RM 3/30392 Verlustlisten der Kaiserlichen Marine, Bd. 3 (Laufzeit : 28. Jan. - 7. Sept. 1918).

⁵⁵ While this pattern holds throughout all three volumes, the loss list completed on 26 June 1915 serves as a representative example. The main list is "Lost List Nr. 36a." and spans almost thirty pages, while the three suicides which occurred during that period are listed separately as part of "Lost List Nr. 26b.," a one-page addendum: BA-MA RM 3/30390, 151-180.

⁵⁶ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 131*: "Verwundung," "Unglücksfall," "Krankheit," "Selbstmord." These are also the same four categories used in the breakdowns of death by war month: 133*-134*, 136*-137*.

“Sick,” the numbers for the “fallen”—the euphemistic designation for those killed in combat—correspond *exactly* to the numbers dead by “wounding” in the earlier tables.⁵⁷

Consequently, suicides were doubly-separated from combat deaths: first, by constituting their own category, distinct from deaths caused by wounds, accident, and illness (and thus also from the two other main categories of ‘extra-ordinary’ deaths); then again by the conceptual collapse which made ‘death from wounds’ synonymous with ‘death in combat,’ with having become one of ‘the fallen.’ This second step strengthened the unspoken moral distinction even further, as for both the high command and major swaths of German society more generally, combat deaths were not just tolerable, but morally *laudable* heroic sacrifices in defense of the nation. Thus, even on the most capacious categorical level, suicides were an ‘unnatural’ and ‘extra-ordinary’ aberration from the ‘ordinary’ deaths of soldiers, conceptually of-a-piece with training accidents or an officer abusing an underling, not a soldier volunteering for a dangerous night patrol or leading a storm trooper unit.

But as the *Sanitätsbericht*’s cause of death categories intimated, suicides were distinct within this broader category of thanatological aberration. The Bavarian War Ministry specified the point more directly in the two paragraphs on the reporting requirements for “Suicides, Suicide Attempts and Accidents” in the 1912 Ordinance:

8. After the completion of the inquiry about suicides or suicide attempts, the report must be accompanied by the judicial findings [as specified in section 223 of the Military Criminal Code]. It must identify whether service-related reasons [*dienstliche Gründe*] were decisive for the suicide or attempt. It should also mention whether there were

⁵⁷ For the tables on “Losses and Shortfalls,” see: *Ibid.*, 138*-143*; “Gefallen,” “Vermißt,” “Verwundet,” “Erkrankt,” While I am focused here on the moral implications and connotations of these categories, it is worth noting that the practical purpose of the ‘Losses and Shortfalls’ list was to give an accurate count of the available manpower. As such, in functional terms, the ‘fallen’ and ‘missing’ represented permanent losses—the former more definitively than the latter—while the ‘wounded’ and ‘sick’ represented temporary losses; men who could at least potentially be put back into service after their recovery. See the discussion in: Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, trans. Andrew Evans (New York: Bloomsbury 2017 [2013]): 20-28.

already cases of mental disturbance [*Geistesstörung*] or suicide in the family of the suicide and how the financial circumstances of the suicide had been arranged.

9. Only serious accidents [*schwere Unfälle*] and the like which are public knowledge and have stirred up the public [*die in der Öffentlichkeit Aufsehen erregt haben*] are to be reported. The troop doctor is to concisely report to the Medical Office, which will only present the report to the General Staff Doctor of the Army if it involves a member of the medical corps or if the case excites special medical interest.⁵⁸

A footnote at the end of paragraph eight, seemingly added for the 1915 reissue of the ordinance, further specified that “[f]or suicides and suicide attempts outside the borders of the Kingdom of Bavaria, investigations into biological inheritance [*Vererbung*] and financial circumstances can be dispensed with during the war.”⁵⁹

Two main elements stand out in these regulations. First, is the way in which the changed material circumstances of wartime had a practical impact on the implementation of these regulations which further constrained the potential interpretive trajectories. By 1915, it appears that the Bavarian War Ministry no longer considered investigations into a soldier’s personal circumstances worth the necessary expenditure in resources if the suicide or attempt occurred beyond Bavaria’s borders, an unsurprising decision given the massive costs—in the full sense of the word—of fighting the war and Germany’s limited resources. In its practical effects, this

⁵⁸ BHStA IV M Kr 10912, K.M.E. No 24200 v. 9.11.12, subsection “Selbstentleibungen, Selbstentleibungsversuche und Unglücksfälle,” paragraphs 8 and 9: “8. Dem nach Abschluß der Erhebungen über Selbstentleibungen und Selbstentleibungsversuche zu erstattenden Bericht sind die gerichtlichen Feststellungen (§ 223 M.St.G.O. und Ausf. Best. Hiezu – D.V.25 S. 74/75) beizunehmen. Er muß erkennen lassen, ob dienstliche Gründe für die Selbstentleibung oder den Versuch hierzu mitbestimmend waren. Außerdem ist anzuführen, ob in der Familie des Selbstmörders usw. schon Fälle von Geistesstörung oder Selbstentleibung vorgekommen und wie die Vermögensverhältnisse des Selbstmörders usw. beschaffen gewesen sind. | 9. Es sind nur schwere Unfälle und solche zu melden, die in der Öffentlichkeit Aussehen erregt haben. Vom Truppenarzt ist auf dem Sanitätsdienstweg kurz an das Sanitätsamt zu berichten, das die Meldungen nur dann u. R. dem Generalstabsarzt der Armee vorlegt, wenn sie Angehörige des Sanitätskorps betreffen oder nach ihrer Art ein besonders ärztliches Interesse erwecken.” The section of the Military Criminal Code (*Militärstrafgerichtsordnung*, M.St.G.O.) mentioned in the opening sentence details the reporting and autopsy procedures and requirements for “unnatural” deaths of military personnel, including the provision that only military judicial officers could order autopsies, as described above: *Militärstrafgerichtsordnung*, 191-193.

⁵⁹ BHStA IV M Kr 10912, K.M.E. No 24200 v. 9.11.12., footnote 1: “Bei Selbstentleibungen und Selbstentleibungsversuchen außerhalb der Grenzen des Königreichs Bayern kann während des Kriegs von Nachforschungen über Vererbung und Vermögensverhältnisse abgesehen werden.”

addendum produced a contextual negation and an inherent sampling bias, one consistent with the *jus in bello* exoneration of the state. Because of the footnoted addendum, suicides and attempts in the Field Army (*Feldheer*)—the part of the army which engaged in combat operations—were considerably less likely to be recorded, since the duties of those soldiers placed them at or near the front and therefore outside of Bavaria. By contrast, those in the Replacement Army (*Besatzungsheer*), which consisted of “[a]ll military units on German territory, particularly those that trained military personnel that were sent as replacements for corresponding active units in the field,”⁶⁰ were much more likely to not only be recorded, but recorded in full compliance with the ordinance. Indeed, as the memos from the Second Army Corps make clear, there *was* concern with compliance all the way into 1918. But by limiting that concern only to soldiers’ suicides inside Bavaria itself—and thus disproportionately to the Replacement Army—the War Ministry minimized any potential reading of combat as producing negative effects on the level of reporting *procedure*, before any given case was even recorded or any interpretation of the data offered.

Second, the order in which the elements in the ordinance were listed implies a priority hierarchy which further indexes the army’s concerns with the potential implications of suicides in its ranks. This hierarchy had three principal tiers. First, looking at the ordinance as a whole, material concerns and events which threatened military manpower or resources in a quantitatively significant way took precedent. After two paragraphs covering general reporting provisions, the ordinance listed the specific reporting requirements for “Natural disasters, Construction Accidents, [and] Cash Point Defects” (paragraphs three and four), “Military Salvage” (paragraph five), and “Outbreaks of Mass Illness” (paragraph six and seven)—all of

⁶⁰ Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 185.

which either substantially threatened manpower or would have a clear material or financial impact on the fighting of war—before proceeding to those for suicides and accidents.⁶¹ Practical logistical threats apparently took precedent over moral(e) ones. Notably, the paragraphs on abuse of power (ten, eleven, and twelve) came directly *after* the section on suicide and accidents. It is possible that, when combined, suicides and accidents may simply have posed a greater quantitative threat than acknowledged incidents of abuse, and hence warrant being covered first. But even if this was the case, it still seems likely that suicides constituted a greater concern in the eyes of the military authorities. Perhaps as a result of persistent activist accusations, it appears that by 1912, the Bavarian War Ministry recognized suicide and abuse as falling within a similar, if not the same, conceptual sub-category. Neither posed much in the way of a quantitative danger, but both presented a qualitative moral threat to the army's standing and legitimacy. However, the state had a clear line of counterattack in the case of abuse allegations, which may account for why suicides seemed more perilous. Direct accusations of soldiers' mistreatment could—and did—result in press editors being charged and prosecuted for insulting the military, while the avenue of reactionary rebuttal was less clear-cut in the case of suicides.⁶² As Bonnell notes, the “high suicide rate in the Imperial German army was self-evident for any reader of official statistics, even if these represented a selective and arguably sanitized picture of reality by the way in which they classified (or omitted) the presumed causes of suicide.”⁶³ One could not simply prosecute those statistics away.

⁶¹ BHStA IV M Kr 10912, K.M.E. No 24200 v. 9.11.12. “Naturereignisse, Bauunfälle, Kassendefekte;” “Militärische Hilfeleistung;” “Massenerkrankungen.”

⁶² Bonnell, “Explaining Suicide,” 287-289. Only the Social Democratic press levelled such accusations as part of their broader socialist critique of *Kaiserreich* militarism. On the prosecution of the Social Democrats more generally in the period of the Anti-Socialist Laws, see the classic account by Vernon Lidtke: Vernon Lidtke, *The Outlawed Party: Social Democracy in Germany, 1878-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

⁶³ Bonnell, “Explaining Suicide,” 290.

On the second tier, the two paragraph sub-section under the heading “Suicides, Suicide Attempts and Accidents,” it also seems clear that the Bavarian War Ministry was more concerned with suicides than accidents. Not only were suicides listed first, but *all* suicides and attempts had to be reported, while only “serious” accidents which caused a public outcry were worthy of note. This appears as an implicit and perhaps unconscious recognition on the part of the military authorities of the *inherent* threat suicides posed. Ostensibly, accidents only represented a danger when they led to significant public agitation which could, if serious enough, impede the army’s practical material functioning and perhaps call its general competence into question. Only as potential catalysts for antimilitary collective action did they become ‘extraordinary.’ Suicides, by contrast, *always* sat not only outside the domain of the ‘ordinary,’ but also constituted a hazardous aberration within its own sub-category of the ‘extra-ordinary.’ As with the categorical differentiation from combat deaths, suicides sat at multiple removes from the ‘normal’ baseline, a baseline which, in this case, was already ‘abnormal.’

The precise nature of the moral threat these self-inflicted deaths posed was then implicitly specified within paragraph eight, listing the reporting mandates for suicides and attempts—the third and final tier of the priority hierarchy. As with the earlier version of 1909, the 1912 ordinance maintained a grain geared towards explanations rooted in the individual and his particular circumstances. By continuing to explicitly stipulate that reports address whether there was any family history of suicide or mental illness and the soldier’s financial circumstances, the mandate primed report writers to frame these deaths in such a way as to functionally negate the institutional social context—i.e. that the suicide in question was a soldier

in the Bavarian Army.⁶⁴ But this came at the very end of the paragraph. More important, it seems, was that all reports be “accompanied by the judicial findings,” the very first requirement and the subject of the chiding within the Second Army Corps later in the war.

This provision had a specific valence, especially since suicide not been a crime in the German states for well-over a century by the time the war broke out. Indeed, Fredrick II had decriminalized suicide in Prussia with two edicts in 1747 and 1751, Baden followed suit in 1803, and Bavaria in 1813.⁶⁵ *Assisting* someone with suicide, however, remained a crime and suicide remained largely unacceptable. For instance, starting in 1775, Prussian subjects were not only forbidden from assisting a suicide, but were actually obliged to help prevent suicides, lest they risk imprisonment.⁶⁶ Similarly, while the Military Criminal Code did explicitly state that soldiers’ suicides fell under the purview of the military judiciary, within military law, neither completing nor attempting suicide was itself actually a crime. In certain circumstances, attempting suicide could be considered a form of absence-without-leave, and thus be illegal. But even here, the Military Penal Code (*Militärstrafgesetzbuch*) specified that such suicide attempts *did not* constitute desertion (*Fahnenflucht*), which was understood to be a both permanent and intentional crime and therefore a much more serious offense.⁶⁷ Soldiers who attempted suicide, it seems, were at least potentially redeemable in the eyes of the military judiciary. In both cases,

⁶⁴ I use the verb ‘prime’ here in the psychological sense. See the useful and concise overviews in: Laura A. King, *The Science of Psychology: An Appreciative View* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008): 295; David G. Myers, *Social Psychology*, 11th Ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2013): 78-79.

⁶⁵ Marzio Barbagli, *Farewell to the World: A History of Suicide*, trans. Lucinda Byatt (Malden: Polity Press, 2015 [2009]): 99.

⁶⁶ See: Baumann, *Vom Recht*, 85.

⁶⁷ *Militärstrafgesetzbuch, ausführlich erläutert von Dr. A. Romen and Dr. Carl Rissom*, Dritte, vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage, Guttentagische Sammlung Deutscher Reichsgesetze, Nr. 67 (Berlin: J. Guttentag Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1918): 292. In the original German, the full relevant paragraph reads: “Selbstmordversuch ist kein Sichentfernen. Fortgehen in selbstmördlicher Absicht kann zwar unerlaubte Entfernung sein, nicht aber Fahnenflucht, weil heir nicht durch das Mittel der Entfernung eine dauernde Dienstentziehung angestrebt, sondern lediglich eine die Dienstpflicht beendigende Handlung vorbereitet wird.” For a concise summary on the legal distinction between ‘desertion’ and ‘absence-without-leave’ in the German Army, see: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 105.

then, the law was concerned first with *social* effects—that is, with how a suicide, whether military or civilian, could reverberate down the overlapping webs of interaction and connection. But as with accidents, from a legal perspective, the most noteworthy threat appeared to be the one capable of engendering collective action, and thus of possibly compromising military manpower.

Nonetheless, the *catalyst* for that potential social threat remained distinctly *moral*, deriving from the implications such an event had for the perceived righteousness and competence of the state and the army, which military suicides could call into question. Thus paragraph eight makes clear that the first and most important question to be addressed in reports on soldiers' suicides, even before family history and finances, was “whether service-related reasons [*dienstliche Gründe*] were decisive for the suicide or attempt”—although, as with so much else in the ordinance, what precisely constituted ‘service-related reasons’ remained undefined. Presumably, the presence of service-related reasons for a soldier’s suicide would directly implicate the army in that death, a disturbing prospect for the state which carried even greater weight in wartime. Thus, in contrast to the stipulations in section 223 of the Military Criminal Code, discerning the actual ‘decisive’ reason(s) for a soldier’s suicide was actually the *secondary* task of all report writers, though one integral to the primary task, which remained moral exculpation. Since report writers were primed by the very framing of the mandate to find explanations for soldiers’ suicides in personal idiosyncrasies—that is, beyond the effects of military service—in the process, they were simultaneously primed to displace any responsibility the state may have otherwise had to bear.

This implicit interpretive trajectory was not instantiated solely in ordinances, however. The outlines of the state’s assumptive architecture and the basis for its self-justificatory

epistemology were actualized in a more concrete form in the structure of the resultant reports, most notably in the column headings of the statistical indices (*statistische Verzeichnisse*) of soldiers' suicides compiled by the Bavarian War Ministry. It was in these headings that the interpretive constraints of the 1912 ordinance found their literal manifestation in columns and rows of uniform size, creating limited space which only allowed for the recording of what the state considered the most pertinent information. First came identifying information: name, rank, unit, home (*Heimat*) and civilian occupation, age, family status (*Familienstand*), religion (*Konfession*), and military service year (*Dienstjahr*). After this came a column titled "Conduct [*Führung*], how often punished?" followed by the specific information deemed relevant for soldiers' suicides: the time, location, manner (*Art*), and "reason" (*Grund*) for the suicide, whether "cases of mental disturbance (*Geistesstörung*) or suicide have occurred in the family," and a final column on the state of the soldier's financial circumstances.⁶⁸ Here again, the interpretive trajectory was geared toward personal explanations that functionally negated and excised the wartime context. Conspicuous by its absence, for example, was any column related to the number of combat engagements a given soldier had participated in—something the narrative reports often mentioned—or when he had last had home leave. Further, the reporting

⁶⁸ BHStA IV M Kr 10916 'Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1914.' Statistical indices exist for the Bavarian Army for the years 1913-1920, which are in the series of files BHStA IV M Kr 10912 through 10919. All have the same column headings in the same order: "Laufende Nr.," "Name," "Dienstgrad u. Dienstverhältnis," "Truppenteil, Standort," "Heimat, dann bei Nichtsberufssoldaten: bürgerlicher Beruf," "Lebensalter," "Familienstand," "Konfession," "Im ? Dienstjahr. ob aufgehoben freiwillig; Kapitulant," "Führung; wie oft bestraft?" "Zeit |: Tag, Stunde:| der Selbstentleibung," "Ort der Selbstentleibung," "Art der Selbstentleibung," "Gründ der Selbstentleibung," "Sind in der Familien Fälle von Geistesstörung oder Selbstentleibung vorgekommen?" and "Vermögensverhältnisse." It is unclear when exactly the indices were compiled and written. The handwriting is uniform throughout, and given that they extend into 1920, it is possible they were written up by a single bureaucrat after the war. However, the individual cases listed throughout are not in a strict chronological order, but rather give the impression of being recorded as the final reports were received by the War Ministry. Further, some entries are crossed out, which further lends to the impression of the indices being compiled by a designated person as the reports came in during the war and in its immediate aftermath. Neither the Bavarian War Archive catalogue listings nor the actual file itself state when they were compiled. In addition to the title of the file, the only other marking gives the section responsible for putting it together: "War Ministry, Department for Legal Affairs [*Kriegsministerium, Abteilung für Rechtsangelegenheiten*]."

mandates and third tier of the 1912 ordinance's implicit priority hierarchy were concretized directly in the final three column headings. Notably, however, the explicit question about 'service-related reasons' did not appear here. Instead, the 'reason' column presented an ostensibly 'objective' finding as to the cause, one which excised any indication of the earlier priming. Further, the now-laundered information was presented in a more quantitatively digestible form, one much more likely to be used by any moral statisticians.

Thus, in the structure of the statistical tables, one finds the 'official' interpretive filter in its most condensed and blatant form. Indeed, by the time a suicide or attempt was recorded in such a table, the incident would already have been refracted through at least three self-censoring lenses. First was the self-interest and awareness of audience on the part of the soldier making the report, perhaps most pertinent in the short initial notifications. Second was the mandated information to be addressed, which determined where the time, effort, and resources of those undertaking the investigations into these suicides would direct their energies in creating the more detailed follow-up reports, the point at which they could reasonably assume further inquiry would be 'futile,' and which cases were fully investigated and which were not. Finally, condensing that information into a statistical table meant further reducing whatever complexities may have survived the first two inflections along the grain so as to fit the pertinent information into a single box, where, for instance, the 'Reason for Suicide' was often reduced to a single word, or at most, a sentence fragment (e.g. '*Geistesstörung*' or '*Furcht vor Strafe*'), and the question as to whether there was a family history of mental illness could only be answered with a 'yes' or 'no.'

While these outlines are the clearest for the Bavarian Army, and it is the only German Army for which a specific ordinance listing regulations for suicide reporting appears to have

survived, it is nevertheless clear that this broadly exculpatory analytic architecture was not unique to the Bavarians. The other German Armies for which comparable records survive appear to have followed a near-identical grain. The Württemberg War Ministry, for example, appears to have similarly seen suicides and accidents as belonging to the same conceptual category. Individual reports of suicides and accidents were filed together, implicitly indicating their categorical distinction from other types of military deaths and archivally instantiating the Military Criminal Code's concept of 'unnatural soldiers' deaths.'⁶⁹

Even more striking, the column titles for the statistical compendium of suicides and attempts in the Württemberger Army—the only other German army for which such a statistical breakdown has survived—are quite similar to those of the Bavarians, and concretized a near-identical set of interpretive constraints. The Württemberger compendium was broken down into three sections. A first set of columns listed the soldier's identifying information: the name and designation (*Bezeichnung*), unit, and age "of the perpetrator" (*des Täters*). As with the Bavarian tables, a second set of columns under the heading "Reasons (Causes)," briefly stated the final conclusions as to the explanation for the suicide, often in a single word or sentence fragment. A final column, simply titled "Notes" (*Bemerkungen*), gave the date and method of the suicide or attempt. Unlike the Bavarians, however, the Württemberger War Ministry subdivided their 'Reason for Suicide' column into three sub-pieces: "Service-related," "Non-service related," and "Unknown," and thus made their concern with *dienstliche Gründe* explicit within the quantitative breakdown.⁷⁰ Notably, however, this concern appears to be a product of the war

⁶⁹ Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (hereafter LBW-HS) M 1/7 Bü 217 through 221, all of which are titled "Verletzungen, Unglücksfälle, Todesermittlungsverfahren sowie Beurkundung von Sterbefällen von Militärpersonen" and span from 1911 to 1919.

⁷⁰ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470 'Namensliste zu Selbstmorden und Selbstmordversuchen aus den Kriegsjahren 1914-1918 und Nachkriegsjahr 1919 des württembergischen Heeres sowie Kriegsgefangener.' In German, the broader column is "Beweggründe" and the sub-columns are "dienstlicher Art," "*nicht* dienstlicher Art" (emphasis original) and "unbekannt," respectively.

itself. The column headings in the statistical tables for Württemberger soldiers' suicides from 1912 and 1913 are almost identical to those from the war years in every way save one: there is no mention of 'service-related' reasons. Instead, the sub-section on 'reasons' was broken down by certainty, under the headings "Unquestionable Cases" (*Unzweifelhafte Fälle*), "Questionable Cases" (*Zweifelhafte Fälle*) and "Attempts."⁷¹ The tables thus seem to indicate a wartime shift in the Württemberger War Ministry's priorities vis-à-vis soldiers' suicides. If prior to the war, acknowledging the relative certainty of a case being a suicide was important enough to warrant its own discrete columns, once the conflict began, the preeminent issue became whether responsibility could in some way be laid at the feet of the state. The certainty of the case was, at most, of secondary concern.

Finally, while their suicide records are the most fragmentary and, consequently, their interpretive infrastructure is visible in the least articulate silhouette, a similar architectural current also appears in the surviving records of suicides in the Saxon Army, most notably in a standard notification form used in cases of accidents and suicides (*Anzeige über nachbemerkten Unglücksfall beziehentlich Selbstmord*). The Saxon form consisted of twenty-four discrete questions, some with as many as four follow-ups. These questions first covered the same biographical and identifying information as the statistical indices, but went into greater detail about the soldier's personal circumstances, including questions about, *inter alia*, marital status, children, and parents. Following this were questions about the details of the death, including the time, location, and manner of the suicide (or accident), as well as specific questions addressing the "alleged or suspected motive for the suicide" and whether the death was "undoubtedly"

⁷¹ LBW-HS M 1/8 Bü 212 'Behandlung von Selbstmordversuchen und Selbstmordfällen in Lazaretten.'

(*unzweifelhaft*) self-inflicted.⁷² But for all its questions, this form was arguably the most constraining in its structure, simply by virtue of the fact that it left the least physical room for writing in response to its queries. Indeed, many of its questions only required the reporter to circle the applicable response; hardly any actual writing was required at all. Moreover, as with the Bavarians and Württembergers, and while once again unstated, the Saxon War Ministry appears to have followed the moral categorization of Military Criminal Code section 223. In the Saxon Army, too, suicides and accidents were conceptually of-a-piece with one another as deaths which fell outside the ‘ordinary,’ and thus warranted separate reporting and archival filing.

Ultimately, the exact extent to which these commonalities were the result of higher-level, top-down directives—now lost—emanating from the Prussian Army or whether each of these state armies decided on their similar courses independently is unclear from the surviving

⁷² See, for example, the case files in: Sächsisches Staatsarchiv-Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (hereafter: SStA-HD), 11327 Kriegsgerichte der Infanterieformationen nach 1867, Nr. 1370 ‘Anzeigen über Unglücksfälle und Selbstmorde’, which contain many of these forms. The full listing of questions, in the original German, is as follows: “1. Ort der Auffindung (mit Angabe des Gemeindebezirks oder Gutsbezirks),” “2. Jahr, Tag und Stunde der Auffindung | (diese Zahlen sind mit Buchstaben zu schreiben),” “3. Ort (mit Hinzufügung des Gemeindebezirks oder Gutsbezirks), wo sich der Unglücksfall oder die Entleibung zugetragen hat,” “4. Jahr, Tag und Stunde des Unglücksfall oder der Entleibungshandlung | (diese Zahlen sind mit Buchstaben zu schreiben),” “5. Ort des Ablebens des Verstorbenen,” “6. Jahr, Tag und Stunde der Ablebens,” “7. Vor- und Familienname des Verunglückten oder Selbstmörders,” “8. Geburtsjahr und Geburtstag | (Ist weder Tag noch Jahre der Geburt bekannt, so ist das ungefähre Alter anzugeben.),” “9. Stand, Beruf, Gewerbe, Arbeits- oder Dienstverhältnis,” “10. Religion,” “11. Wohnort,” “12. Geburtsort,” “13. Ob ledig? verheiratet? verwitwet? geschieden?” “14. Vor- und Familienname des Ehegatten,” “15. Ob Kinder und wieviel,” “16. Der Eltern des Verunglückten oder Selbstmörders a) Vor- und Familiennamen | b) Stand, Beruf, Gewerbe, Arbeits- und Dienstverhältnis | c). Wohnort,” “17. a) Art und Weise der Verunglückung oder des Selbstmordes (ob ertrunken, erhängt, erschossen, ersticht, verbrannt usw.) | b) Gelegenheit, bei der der Unfall sich ereignete (ob bei Ausübung des eigenen Berufes, beim Spiel oder Sport, beim gehen in verkehrsreichen Straßen; erwiesenermaßen in der Trunkenheit; vermutlich in der Trunkenheit usw.): | (nur bei Unglücksfällen beantworten.),” “18. a) Angebliche oder mutmaßliche Ursache der Verunglückung: | b) Angeblicher oder mutmaßlicher Beweggrund des Selbstmordes,” “19. a) Ist der Selbstmord unzweifelhaft? b) Oder liegt die Möglichkeit einer Verunglückung vor? | c) Oder liegt der Verdacht einer fahrlässigen Tötung durch fremde Hand vor? | d) Oder liegt der Verdacht einer absichtlichen Tötung durch fremde Hand vor?” “20. Ob der Lechnam an die Anatomie abgeliefert worden, oder aus welchem Grunde dies nicht geschehen,” “21. Zeit der amtlichen Aufhebung nach Jahr, Tag und Stunde : | (Die Zahlen sind in Buchstaben zu schreiben),” “22. Ist um Gewährung der in § 8 des Mandats vom 18. Mai 1831 bezeichneten Vergütung nachgesucht worden, bez. Von wem? a) Vor- und Zuname | b) Stand oder Gewerbe | c) Wohnort,” “23. Hat der Nachsuchende a) den toten menschlichen Körper zuerst aufgefunden? | b) der zuständigen Obrigkeit die erste Anzeige gemacht? | c) sofort bei der Anzeige um die Vergütung nachgesucht? | d) War derselbe zur Anzeige durch dienstliche Verhältnisse verbunden?” “24. Gutachten zu dem Antrag auf Gewährung der Vergütung.”

records.⁷³ The conceptual marriage of suicides and accidents as ‘unnatural’ thanatological aberrations, for instance, clearly had its basis in Imperial-level regulations, while there is no comparable mandate or military law explaining the explicit concerns with service-related reasons for soldiers’ suicides across the various state armies in their extant archival holdings. In many ways, however, the answer to the question is largely inconsequential. Either way the thread of common concern is clear, as is the particular slant and epistemological goal of the archival grain: to implicitly nudge interpretations of German soldiers’ suicides *away* from any view that might lay the responsibility for these deaths at the feet of the German state(s) by instead piling it on the individual soldier himself, before any individual even began composing a report.

It was not that individual soldiers writing these documents thought explicitly in terms of abstractions like the state’s priority hierarchy or made conscious decisions to report in ways that morally exonerated the political and military authorities. Rather, what these reporting mandates, bureaucratic chidings, column headings, and standard forms added up to was an unconscious push—or perhaps rather, an overlapping *series* of unidirectional *pushes*, plural—in a direction which would provide an epistemological basis for the exoneration of Germany’s conduct of the war, implicitly backed by both the violent disciplinary power of the state and the larger socio-moral assumptive frameworks about wartime duty, obligation, and sacrifice. It was, in essence, a series of artificial tributaries flowing into a common interpretive river, one which would wash the state’s hands clean of responsibility for the deaths of its citizens.

⁷³ The Prussian Army Command doubled as the supreme command of all German forces during wartime. For a detailed breakdown of the organization of the Imperial German Armies, see: Hermann Cron, *Imperial German Army 1914-1918: Organisation, Structure, Orders-of-Battle*, trans. Duncan Rogers (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2002 [1937]).

2.2 Moral Exculpation Along the Archival Grain

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that those writing and circulating these reports seem to have followed this implicit interpretative current quite precisely, generating a corpus of documents which concretely instantiated a morally exculpatory narrative within the reports' explicit *contents* and conclusions. In the process, these soldiers and bureaucrats ostensibly attempted to establish that narrative as an 'objective' fact, one which would be borne out by any investigation of the relevant documentation. But in so doing, the state clouded its own understanding as much as that of those who later examined the documents. As Stoler notes, a deep investigation along the archival grain belies the assumption that "statecraft was always intent on accumulating more knowledge rather than on a selective winnowing and reduction of it."⁷⁴ Indeed, it was precisely due to the nature of this selective winnowing—the specific angles of epistemological refraction—that the wartime German state failed to comprehend suicide's potential collective mobilizing power as a moral concept and its indexing function at a nexus of socio-emotional concerns and tensions, as it tried to keep the trauma of self-inflicted soldiers' deaths atomized and reiterative.

One can see this refractory process at work in a particularly rich example from the Bavarian Army. According to the report initially submitted to the Deputy (*Stellvertretung*) of the 7th Bavarian Infantry Brigade by the Garrison Elder of Bamberg (*Garnison-Ältester-Bamberg*), around 3:30 AM on 30 October 1917, a forty-year-old Officer Deputy (*Offizier Stellvertreter*), K, in the 22nd Reserve Bavarian Infantry Regiment was found dead in his parents' apartment, the

⁷⁴ Stoler, *Archival Grain*, 50. For her full summary of this process in regard to the Dutch Colonial Archives: 46-51.

result of self-inflicted gunshot wound to the heart with a Browning pistol.⁷⁵ K had originally done his required service as an N.C.O. in the 5th Bavarian Infantry Regiment from 1896-1897, but was remobilized in late August 1914 as a Sergeant (*Feldwebel*) in the Bamberg *Landsturm* Infantry Battalion before becoming an Officer Deputy a year later. In early 1917, he was transferred to the 22nd Reserve Bavarian Infantry Regiment and sent to the eastern front, where he participated in five separate battles between 19 March and 29 July 1917. He was then severely wounded in the right thigh and left hand while fighting to repel the Kerensky Offensive. Following his wounding, he cycled through two different hospitals before being transferred to a military hospital in his hometown of Bamberg in September, eventually being released into his parents' home to continue recovery.

It was during this period that, according to a friend questioned by the military investigators, B, he fell into a depression. B noticed around three weeks prior to his death that K was frequently depressed and, significantly, had said that “the bodily exertion and mental agitation of the recent campaign had severely impacted his [K’s] emotional disposition.”⁷⁶ This accorded with testimony—produced second-hand in the report—from two other Officer Deputies who were in the Bamberg military hospital and who further attested to the intensity of K’s depression. This same sub-section of the report, however, noted that K’s father was “profoundly nervous” (*hochgradig nervös*), that his mother had temporarily been housed in a sanatorium, and that K had been forced to see a specialist doctor around 1905 due to his “states of emotional agitation” (*seelischen Erregungszuständen*). All of this psychological background followed an

⁷⁵ All the following details come from that report: BHStA IV M Kr 10913 ‘Selbstmorde, Selbstmordversuche vom Jahre 1917 (1.9.) mit 1919. (30.4),’ Report dated and labelled “Bamberg, 20. 3. 1918. Garnison-Ältester-Bamberg. An die K. st. 7. Infanterie-Brigade.” I have omitted all names in the interest of privacy.

⁷⁶ Ibid., “die körperl. Anstrengungen und seelischen Erregungen des eben mitgemachten Feldzuges seine Gemütsstimmungen stark beeinträchtigten.”

earlier section meticulously describing the state of K's body and the room it was found in. That earlier section contains what is perhaps the most striking detail contained in the report: "The body was clothed in grey field uniform [the standard uniform for German front soldiers]," including his rank insignia, with the shirt and jacket left open to expose his chest.⁷⁷ Ultimately, the report concluded that this soldier had "committed suicide in a state of mental derangement [*geistiger Umnachtung*]."⁷⁸ He was buried in Bamberg on 31 October 1917 "with military honors."⁷⁹

This was not the end of the reporting on this case, however. The Bavarian War Ministry received the report on 20 March 1918, but was apparently unsatisfied with it. Since this report had failed to explicitly address whether there were any possible service-related reasons for this soldier's suicide, it was sent back down the pipeline. The Deputy General Command of the Second Bavarian Army Corps requested clarification from the Brigade, which it received in the form of a short addendum on 25 March 1918: "It can be assumed that service-related reasons for the suicide do not come into play, but rather the act was carried out in a state of mental derangement."⁸⁰ They gave no further explanation as to why they made that assumption. This addendum was added to the earlier report and all can now be found together in the Bavarian War Ministry files. The case was also recorded in the Bavarian War Ministry's Statistical Index of soldiers' suicides for 1917. The 'reason' was recorded simply as "mental disturbance" (*Geistesstörung*).⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid. "Die Leiche ist mit grauer Felduniform bekleidet, der Rock trägt das Abzeichen des Offiz. Stellvertreters."

⁷⁸ Ibid. "in geistiger Umnachtung den Selbstmord begangen hat."

⁷⁹ Ibid. "unter milit. Ehren beerdigt."

⁸⁰ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, 'Stellvertretende 7. Infanterie-Brigade zum stellv. General-Kommando II. A.K': "Es ist anzunehmen, daß dienstliche Gründe für die Selbstentleibung nicht in Beibracht [sic] kommen, daß vielmehr [sic] die Tat in einem Zustande geistiger Umnachtung ausgeführt worden ist."

⁸¹ BHStA IV M Kr 10919 'Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1917,' 'I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibung,' Laufende Nr. 120.

Two main elements stand out which highlight the essential facets of this archival grain in its production, practice, and effects. First are the particulars of the report's circulation and amendment, which illustrate the three primary refractory layers of this grain and the process of institution anticipation. The report to the Brigade is one of the longest in this collection of documents—over 1,200 words in length—and presents a detailed, multi-faceted, at times meandering, and ultimately ambiguous and ambivalent psychological and sociological picture. Moreover, the investigation was taking place against the backdrop of preparations for Operation Michael, “Germany’s last gamble,” where the Second Bavarian Army Corps participated in the main thrust of the attack south of Arras on the opening day of the offensive.⁸² It thus seems clear from the level of detail, along with the fact that the investigation lasted nearly five months while the army was preparing for the last major offensive of the war, that the Bamberg Garrison wanted to provide a comprehensive report which would put the case definitively to rest. In so doing, the Garrison attempted to select for the pieces of information it assumed the Brigade would consider most relevant to the case (including summaries of witness statements), and ultimately come to a conclusion that the Brigade would find acceptable and thus end the investigation—the first self-censoring inflection of the grain.

For all its detail and despite the circumstances, however, the report lacked what was apparently the one key piece of information the military higher-ups required, and thus it had to recirculate through the various relevant units until they had that information: an unequivocal statement of whether the soldier's military service played a role in his suicide—an explicit

⁸² The 2nd Bavarian Corps was part of the newly-formed 17th Army, itself part of Army Group Rupprecht. On the 17th Army's role in the battle plans and conduct in the battle itself, see: Bayerisches Kriegsarchiv, *Die Bayern im GröÙen Kriege 1914-1918, Bd.I* (Munich: Druckerei des Landesfinanzamts, 1923): 459-480; Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Penguin, 2003): 290-300, esp. 293 and 296-297. The characterization of the 1918 Spring Offensive as ‘Germany’s Last Gamble’ comes from the section of Strachan, cited above. On the 17th Army's place within the shifting German orders-of-battle, see: John Ellis and Michael Cox, *The World War I Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for all the Combatants* (London: Aurum Press, 2001): 186-187.

manifestation in practice of what the War Ministry Ordinance of 1912 had strongly implied in abstract. And this, of course, despite the fact that the ultimate conclusion remained unchanged. Here the second point of refraction in this archival grain takes clearer shape. When prompted with the *question* of whether there were any service-related reasons for K's suicide, and without giving any explanation, the Brigade Deputy simply asserted what the higher-ups presumably wanted to hear, in this sense anticipating the institutionally-desirable response both narratively—in terms of where responsibility for the suicide laid—and practically—in terms of resource allocation. Once they had this response, further investigation appeared to have become 'futile' and the case was closed. In the process, it rendered much of the detail in the earlier report superfluous, if not outright irrelevant, or, worse, potentially dangerous, given some of its implications. It seemingly went without saying that mental collapse and service-related trauma were mutually exclusive explanations. In effect, the addendum of 25 March functionally excised the most dangerous potential reading of K's suicide—the link K himself had expressed between his combat experience, wounding, and subsequent (suicidal) depression—from this record. But given that the Bavarian War Ministry received the detailed report the day before Operation Michael began and the addendum was added four days into the offensive itself, it seems that the silencing may have been as much about freeing up time, attention, and resources as it was about concealing a potentially dangerous interpretation of the suicide.

Whatever the primary motivation, that silence was made official and 'objective' by its solidification in the War Ministry's statistical index for that year: the third inflection point. This veneer of objectivity was all the stronger because it was suicide *statistics*, not anecdotes, which had so long served as a moral index and continued to do so. By distilling all the information in the relatively exhaustive report into the pre-arranged boxes of the table, virtually *all* detail and

context was eliminated, and the official state interpretation was instantiated as a verifiable ‘fact.’ In a quasi-Orwellian turn, by this point, there was no longer any basis to contest the official interpretation. The entire history of K’s experiences in combat, wounding, depression, and death were encapsulated in a single word in the ‘reason’ column of the source most likely to be marshalled in any discussions of soldiers’ suicides either during or after the war, while any sign of the report’s circulation and amendment disappeared altogether.

The second element, then, is the effect of this concealment on the gaze of the state and what it was *prevented* from seeing by its own archival grain—namely, the self-inflicted death of an ostensibly good soldier as the result of combat trauma and its socio-emotional implications. The fact that K shot himself wearing his full military uniform is so noteworthy precisely *because* it reflected a (seemingly conscious) choice to highlight his identity as a soldier when he took his own life. The uniform and rank insignia were the material instantiation of that identity and, in a literal sense, essential physical objects which made any German soldier precisely that: a German *soldier*; an agent tasked with fighting for the state by the state.⁸³ As a conscript, K was one of the millions of “civilians in uniform” across the globe whose garb was the material sign of his change in status, a sign whose significance the German Army itself at least implicitly recognized.⁸⁴ Indeed, one of the main pieces of evidence the Army cited for the existence of a *franc-tireur* uprising in 1914, which it argued justified its atrocities in Belgium, was the Belgians

⁸³ I here build from the insights of the anthropologist Alfred Gell and his discussion of landmines and agency: “The soldier’s weapons are *parts* of him which make him what he is. . . . Their [Pol Pot’s soldiers’] kind of agency would be unthinkable except in conjunction with the spatio-temporally expanded capacity for violence which the possession of mines makes possible.” Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998): 20-21. Emphasis original.

⁸⁴ On the idea of ‘civilians in uniform,’ see: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 71.

lack of uniforms to identify them as legitimate combatants.⁸⁵ Thus, whatever his prior history of ‘mental agitation,’ K’s suicide was clearly marked out as that of a *soldier*, identifying his military service not as an incidental socio-emotional milieu, but an essential one. This was, of course, in direct accordance with the testimony which stated that K felt his depression to be the result of his wounding and subsequent struggles with recovery. Hence, while ‘mental disturbance’ may well describe the proximate cause of the suicide, the state’s interpretive architecture prevented it from asking an obvious follow-up question: *Woher kommt die Geistesstörung?* Whence the mental disturbance? Why was it that a soldier whose conduct the Bavarian Army itself listed as being “very good”—good enough, in fact, to warrant his burial with military honors—came to be in such a condition of mental disturbance while serving in the first place?⁸⁶

Moreover, the uniform on the body was a sign that was immediately visible to K’s family and circle(s) of social relations. The opening sentence of the report notes without any subsequent elaboration that K “was found shot on 30 October 1917 at 3:30 am by his relatives [*Angehörigen*],” presumably his parents.⁸⁷ It says nothing about what those relatives who found his body thought about his suicide, however, or even whether K had discussed his depression or his thoughts on its source with his family at all. But even the minimal information provided on his social relations indexes the potential scale of emotional devastation even a single death could wreak and the ways the military could potentially be implicated in it. Perhaps only those who

⁸⁵ Indeed, on 5 August 1914, the Belgian Minister of the Interior reminded the *Garde Civique* that it “must be organized in military units, carry distinctive signs of identification, and observe the laws of war; otherwise it would expose the whole population to reprisals.” However, the rush of volunteers created “shortages of tunics, armbands, and national cockades, which were the identifying garb of the non-active *Garde Civique*.” Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*, 19, 126.

⁸⁶ BHStA IV M Kr 10919, Laufende Nr. 120.

⁸⁷ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, ‘Stellvertretende 7. Infanterie-Brigade zum stellv. General-Kommando II. A.K.’ “[k] wurde am 30.10.17 morgens 3 Uhr 30 von seinen Angehörigen in seiner Wohnung hier, Friedrichstr. 8 erschossen gefunden.”

found his body and the interviewed friend knew the death was a suicide, but given the burial with military honors, any who attended or learned of the funeral would know it was yet another soldier dead in the war. Indeed, according to the report, K “was described as ‘friendly and loving to everyone’” by those who knew him in his school days, a subtle indication that 1) investigators likely probed his larger social circle in Bamberg as part of their inquiry, even if every specific individual wasn’t named in the report, and 2) K’s death had at least the potential to resonate beyond his present immediate circle in Bamberg.⁸⁸ Here was a signal from the shadow vanguard which the state’s interpretive infrastructure was unable to register; a sign of the traumas of the war and its potential social radiation vectors which directly implicated the military and its conduct of the war in the ongoing suffering of the populace—both those in military service and those outside of it—rendered illegible by the state’s own self-justificatory interpretive lens.

This pattern of obfuscating epistemological refraction endured into the war’s final days. For instance, on 6 July 1918, a 47-year-old *Landsturmmann* “was found hanged in his brother’s house in Gambach by his relatives” according to a report once again to the Deputy General Command of the 7th Infantry Brigade, dated 10 October 1918.⁸⁹ He was drafted into the Army as part of the build up to the Spring Offensive, entering a Landsturm Replacement Infantry Conscript Battalion on 22 February 1918, where he immediately struggled with military life. “During his training, he sometimes made the impression of being a nervous person, one who was totally confused and often found it difficult to speak if he’d had to be addressed somewhat harshly” according to the report, and was hospitalized with facial erysipelas in June 1918, only a

⁸⁸ Ibid. “Er wird als ‘freundlich und liebevoll gegen jedermann’ bezeichnet.”

⁸⁹ BHStA IV M Kr 10914 “Selbstmorde, Selbstmordversuche. vom Jahre 1918 (1.5.) mit 1919 (14.3.)” Report labeled and dated “Lager Hammelburg, 10.10.18. | Landst. Jnf. Ers. Batl. Ufr. II | (II B 16) | An | die K.stellv. 7. Jnf. Brigade.” All subsequent details come from that report, although once again all names have been omitted in the interest of privacy. The opening paragraph reads: “Am 6.7.18 vormittags 6 Uhr wurde der ledige, 47jährige Landsturmmann [W] der 3. Kompagnie Landst. Jnf. Ers. Batls. Ufr. II von dessen Angehörigen im Hause seines Bruders [...] in Gambach am Balken des Hausbodens erhängt aufgefunden.”

week after being sent to his company. After returning to his unit, “his condition had clearly worsened,” especially his issues with comprehension and memory, so he was sent to Gambach on home leave from 14 June until 3 July.⁹⁰ There, upon taking leave of his family, “he used the words ‘now it must go to the iron,’ by which he meant military life in Hammelburg,” where his unit was located.⁹¹ The next day, 4 July, he apparently told a supply officer that he had lost his hat and belt after sitting down in a field. The supply officer sent him to get replacements, but “remarked that someone had been imprisoned for three days for losing such items.”⁹² The *Landsturmmann* then apparently went AWOL, hanging himself two days later. There was no family history of suicide or mental illness and his finances were “in order” (*geordnet*).

But the report’s author reached a somewhat unusual conclusion. In an exceedingly rare occurrence, he explicitly admitted the possibility that service-related reasons may have played a role in the suicide, though he did not consider them decisive:

Service-related reasons may have contributed to the suicide [of the *Landsturmmann*] insofar as he showed great aversion [*Unlust*] to his military conscription and the nature of army service, to which he was unaccustomed [*ungewohnte Heeresdienst*], increased and strengthened his preexisting weariness with life [*Lebensüberdruß*]. Thus, while at home he said that he would no longer march in, but rather would have to be fetched [*er nicht mehr einrücke, sich vielmehr holen ließe*]. As mentioned above, the training itself was difficult for him. There is no evidence that he experienced improper military treatment

⁹⁰ Ibid. “Während seiner Ausbildung machte er zeitweise den Eindruck eines nervösen menschen, der völlig verwirrt war und oft schwer noch ein Wort aus sich herausbringen konnte, wenn er etwas scharf angesprochen werden mußte. Einige Wochen nach seinem Einrücken erkrankte er an der Gesichtsrose. Nach seiner Lazarettentlassung hatte sich sein Zustand bedeutend verschlimmert. Insbesondere wurde festgestellt, daß sein Auffassungsvermögen sehr gelitten hatte. Er selbst klagte auch, daß sein Gedächtnis sehr nachgelassen habe und er nichts mehr behalten könne.... Am 14. 6. 1918 wurde er sodann zur 3. Kompagnie versetzt und vom 22.6.18 bis 3.7.18 nachts 11 Uhr in seine Heimatgemeinde Gambach beurlaubt.”

⁹¹ Ibid. “Er gebrauchte die Worte: ‘Jetzt geht es zum eisernen Muß’, womit er das Militärleben in Hammelburg meinte.”

⁹² Ibid., “Am 4. 7. 18 kam [er] zu dem stellv. Kammerunteroffizier [...] und sagte ihm, daß es ihm gestern abend auf dem Wege zum Lager unwohl geworden sei, daß er sich in einen Acker gesetzt und dabei Mütze und Koppel verloren habe. [Der Kammerunteroffizier] schickte ihn an die betreffende Stelle, die verlorenen Sachen zu holen, wobei er bemerkte, daß erst kürzlich einer wegen Verlierens von Gegenständen drei Tage Mittelarrest bekommen habe.”

[*unmilitärische Behandlung*] in the recruit depot or in his company. For the act itself, therefore, exclusively service-related reasons cannot have been decisive.⁹³

The Brigade Deputy essentially disregarded that aspect of the analysis, however, writing to the Deputy General Command of the Second Army Corps the next day that “there is no evidence of any instances of treatment contrary to regulations [*vorschriftswidrigen Behandlung*] or such reasons which would indicate the guilt of a military person for the suicide.”⁹⁴ The following day, 12 October, the Corps wrote to the Bavarian War Ministry with their final conclusion: “On 6 July 1918 *Landsturmmann* [W] of the 3rd Company, Landsturmmann Infantry Replacement Conscript Battalion II, hanged himself in his brother’s house in Gambach. Reason for the act: melancholy [*Schwermut*]. Service-related reasons were not decisive. The regulations in sections 154 and 223 of the Military Criminal Code were observed.”⁹⁵ The entire report, including the two addenda, was received by the Bavarian War Ministry on 23 October 1918 and the case was closed. The *Landsturmmann* was entered into the 1918 statistical index, where once again the entry in the ‘reason’ column was a single word: “Melancholy” (*Schwermut*).⁹⁶

Here was the archival grain ostensibly working as intended. Unlike in the case of Officer Deputy K, this report did not require any amendment. The addenda merely summarized the main

⁹³ Ibid. “Dienstliche Gründe dürften insofern für die Selbstentlebung des [Landsturmmannes] mitbestimmend gewesen sein, als er gegen seine militärische Einberufung große Unlust zeigte und daß der ungewohnte Heeresdienst den in ihm vorhandenen Lebensüberdruß noch erhöhte und verstärkte. So hat er sich zu Hause geäußert, daß er nicht mehr einrücke, sich vielmehr holen ließe. Die Ausbildung selbst ist ihm, wie oben schon angegeben, schwer gefallen. Daß [er] beim Rekr. Depot sowohl, als auch bei der Kompagnie, eine unmilitärische Behandlung erfahren habe, ist nicht festgestellt. Für die Tat selbst können ausschließlich dienstliche Gründe demnach nicht bestimmend gewesen sein.”

⁹⁴ Ibid., Report addendum: “Stellvertreter 7. Infanterie-brigade | empf. 11. 10. 18 No 11290 | Zum St. G. Kdo II.A.K.” dated “Würzburg, 11. 10. 18.” “Fälle vorschriftswidrigen Behandlung oder sonstige Gründe, die ein Verschulden von Militärpersonen an dem Selbstmord erkennen ließen, liegen nicht vor.”

⁹⁵ Ibid. Addendum labelled “München, 12.10.18 | Kr. M. | A 2a.” “Am 6.7.18 hat sich der Ldstmm. [W] 3.Kp.L.I. Ers.Btl. Ufr. II im Hause seines Bruders zu Gambach erhängt. Grund der Tat: Schwermut. Dienstliche Gründe waren nicht maßgebend. | Die Bestimmungen der §§ 154, 223 M.St.G.O. sind beachtet.”

⁹⁶ BHStA IV M Kr 10915, “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1918,” “I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibung,” Laufende Nr. 136. The 1918 statistical index is a separate document tucked inside the larger file.

conclusions as the report made its way up the chain of command. This is all the more striking and ironic given that the report directly acknowledged that *dienstliche Gründe* may have played a role in the suicide, while that potential was entirely implicit in the report on K's suicide. This report, however, *did* state explicitly that those service-related reasons were *not decisive*, and thus fulfilled all the requirements of both the 1912 ordinance and the Military Criminal Code.

The case thus followed the same tri-part process of self-censoring refraction, excision, and moral exculpation along the archival grain. First, institutional anticipation once again shaped the contents of the 10 October report, as well as its fast track to the War Ministry for final approval and filing. The Brigade Deputy received the report only three days after Walter Rathenau had issued his call for a popular insurrection (*Volkserhebung*) and the war cabinet of Prince Max von Baden was subsequently in throes of debating the merits of a *levée en masse*—in context, a functional *Endkampf*—and a conversation of which the Bavarian War Ministry was a part.⁹⁷ Thus an analogous complex of moral-narrative and practical-material pressures were at work on the reporting bureaucracy as Germany's final defeat drew ever nearer, and the inevitability of that defeat became clearer and clearer in the eyes of most Germans, both civilian and soldier.⁹⁸ Second, the most dangerous potential element of the 10 October report—the explicit statement that the *Landsturmmann's* military service may have played a role in his suicide—along with nearly all the other biographical, contextual, and narrative details were functionally excised in the addenda by the Brigade and Corps Deputies which emphasized the two elements seemingly most important to the state: 1) that service-related reasons were not

⁹⁷ Michael Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée En Masse* in October 1918," *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 73, No. 3 (2001).

⁹⁸ The main historiographical debates over a "hidden military strike" in the German Army in the summer of 1918 and the broader collapse of morale in 1918 is well-covered in: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 121-155. See also: Richard Bessel, "The Great War in German Memory: The Soldiers of the First World War, Demobilization, and Weimar Political Culture," *German History* Vol. 6, No. 1 (1988).

decisive for the suicide; 2) that what was decisive was a purely personal affair, namely the onset of an intense melancholy. Third and finally, all of those details were literally excised as the case was entered into the constrained space of the 1918 statistical index, once again instantiating the state's interpretation as a verifiable and quantitatively analyzable 'fact.' The state's self-justificatory interpretive infrastructure seemingly endured as long as the war itself, and with it, the incomprehension of the shadow vanguard. Near-identical details—family members finding the suicide's body; a soldier voicing his discontent with military life to loved ones shortly before taking his own life; fellow soldiers speaking to the depressed mental condition of the suicide in the days leading up to his demise—indexing the same broader socio-emotional trauma vectors appeared to be as illegible in the war's final weeks as they'd been in its earliest days.

The same self-exonerating grain appears in the contents of reports beyond Bavaria. One of the most detailed files on a soldier's suicide in the Saxon Army, for instance, concerns a 31-year-old artilleryman who gassed himself to death in his apartment on 15 January 1918. Located in the records of the Saxon Military Courts (*Kriegsgerichte*) and consisting of nine discrete reports from the week directly after the suicide—essentially the raw materials out of which a final report would be compiled—the file tells a messy story of marital infidelity culminating in the husband's suicide through a series of witness statements, police reports, and other memos.⁹⁹ The earliest document in the file, a police report dated from the day of the suicide itself, summarized the main thrust of the case, stating that “[a]ccording to the statement of the wife, the reason for the act was simply a marital dispute, because her husband had maintained romantic

⁹⁹ SStA-HD 11331 Kriegsgerichte der Artillerie-Formationen nach 1867, Nr. 115 ‘Untersuchung des Selbstmords des Kanoniers [...], 5. Batterie.’ Once again, names have been omitted in the interest of privacy.

relationships with other women.”¹⁰⁰ A subsequent report from the following day addressed to the military court reiterated the same conclusion, but complicated the story, as it included a brief declaration from a corporal in the artilleryman’s battery and a more detailed statement from his wife.¹⁰¹

First, the corporal’s statement clarified that the deceased had been a cook in the battalion officers’ mess (*Offizierskino*) who had only joined the battery ten days prior, on 5 January. It concluded by explicitly addressing the question of service-related reasons for the suicide, which the corporal denied the having any knowledge of.¹⁰² Second, his wife’s statement included a recounting of her finding the body, turning off the gas, and alerting the fire department, as well as more specifics about the affair itself. It appears her husband entered into a relationship with a waitress in 1917 and had unsuccessfully attempted to gas himself six to eight weeks prior to his death ,when she broke off the relationship upon learning that he was already married. But most importantly, she too explicitly addressed the question of *dienstliche Gründe*: “My husband never complained about his service. But for the past two years already, he sometimes appeared to me as not quite sane [*manchmal nicht recht zurechnungsfähig*]. He sometimes said incomprehensible things and was very anxious, agitated, depressed, and irritable.”¹⁰³ Finally, the report concluded

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Report labelled “Abschrift! | Dresden, am 15.1.18 | IV. Revier, | 15. Bezirk. | An die | Königliche Polizei.Direktion | heir. | Eilt! | Militärperson..” “Nach Angabe der Ehefrau soll der Grund der tat ehrlich Streit gewesen sein, weil ihr Ehemann liebes verhältnisse mit anderen Frauenspersonen unterhalten habe.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Report labelled “Dresden, 16.1.18. | Kriegsgerichtsrat vom Wochendienst. | (Anlage=Militärpass) | An den Gerichtsherrn der Landwehr-Inspektion Dresden.” That report also included a short statement from a military doctor providing the medical details of the death, but did not address the possible motivations.

¹⁰² Ibid. The full text of the corporal’s statement reads: “[Er] ist seit dem 5.1.18 bei der Batterie. Er hat vorher dem 2.Rekr.Dep. angehört. Er war, seitdem er zum Ers.Batl. versetzt war, Koch im Offizierskasino. Dass dienstlich etwas bei ihm vorgekommen wäre, habe ich nicht gehört.”

¹⁰³ Ibid. “Ueber den Dienst hat mein Mann nie geklagt. Schon seit 2 Jahren erschien er mir manchmal nicht recht zurechnungsfähig. Er redete manchmal unverständliches Zeug, war sehr ängtlich, unruhig, bedrückt und gereizt.”

that “the reason for the act after the recent suicide attempt is apparently to be found in weariness with life [*Lebensüberdruss*].”¹⁰⁴

The last report within the file is a statement from another of the deceased comrades made before the military court on 21 January 1918, six days after the suicide.¹⁰⁵ While primarily reiterating the narrative of infidelity found in the earlier reports, this last document added a number of wrinkles to the case. First, it described a scene occurring only hours before the suicide, where four men and one woman appeared at the officers’ mess to pick up groceries, which they claimed to have paid the deceased for, but were turned away. The cook was not held responsible, however. Second, this soldier claimed that while he considered the deceased “a liar and a swindler” who was often “very nervous,” he did not “find him to be mentally ill.”¹⁰⁶ Third, this soldier stated, apparently unprompted, that “I would like to add that [the deceased] was a very heavy drinker.”¹⁰⁷ Finally, this soldier made the strongest statement in the file against the deceased’s military service playing any role in his suicide: “During his time under command in the officers’ mess, he was treated very well. There is absolutely no evidence that a service-related reason could have caused his suicide.”¹⁰⁸ A transcript of his prewar arrest record was included with the report.¹⁰⁹

While the surviving documents for this case do not permit one to reconstruct the layers of refraction and the processes of excision up the chain of command, and there is no surviving

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. “[D]er Beweggrund der Tat nach dem vor kurzem bereits erfolgten Selbstmordversuche offenbar in Lebensüberdruss zu suchen ist.”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. Report labeled “Dresden, den 21. Januar 1918. | G.O. | Gegenwärtig: | 1. Oberleutnant d.R. [C] | als Gerichtsoffizier, | 2. Unteroffizier [Kr] | (gem. § 110 MStGO.verpfl.) | als Militärgerichtsschreiber.”

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. “Für geisteskrank habe ich [ihn] nicht gehalten, wohl aber für sehr nervös. Ich persönlich habe [ihn] nicht viel Vertrauen geschenkt ich ihn für einen Lügner und Schwindler hielt.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. “Hinzufügen will ich noch, dass [er] ein sehr starker Trinker war.”

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. “Während seiner Kommandierung in der Offiziers-Speiseanstalt, wurde er dienstlich gut behandelt. Ein dienstlicher Grund, der ihn zu dem Selbstmord veranlasst haben könnte, lag keinesfalls vor.”

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. Report labelled “Abschrift! | Dresden, am 15.1.18 | IV. Revier, | 15. Bezirk. | An die | Königliche Polizei.Direktion | heir. | Eilt! | Militärperson.”

regulation from the Saxon War Ministry comparable to the 1912 Bavarian War Ministry Ordinance, it nonetheless seems clear that both the Saxon military investigators *and* the myriad people they interviewed followed a near-identical grain to the Bavarians. Once again, the concern with potential service-related reasons for a soldier's suicide is explicit throughout the documents, as is the consistent disavowal of their presence in the statements of both civilians and soldiers. The orientation towards personal explanations is similarly overt, most directly in the artilleryman's suicide being framed as the climax to a story of martial infidelity—and thus individual moral failure—across multiple reports, as well as in the fact that the investigators felt it necessary to include a transcript of his prewar arrest record. Here was a man who seemingly had a long history of behaving contrary to both the law and socio-moral norms; the fact that he was a soldier in the Saxon artillery was, ostensibly, incidental and irrelevant to explaining his decision to lay hands on himself.

Yet as with the Bavarian records, here, too, a series of potentially valuable signals were obscured by both the trajectory of the interpretive grain and the larger assumptive architecture at work in wartime Germany. None of the investigators in either the police or the army, for instance, appeared to notice or care that it was only starting in 1916 that the artilleryman's wife began seeing signs of 'insanity' in her husband. Unfortunately, none of the documents in the file include details about the artilleryman's prior service history, so it is unclear exactly how long he had been in the army before his death. But given that civilians in Germany (and beyond) began experiencing food shortages in the first year of the conflict which were exacerbated by state mismanagement, on top of the myriad disruptions and dislocations brought about by mass conscription and the mass requisitioning of material resources, even if the artilleryman was only drafted late, the war remained *the* critical context for his quotidian reality—even if it was so

mundane as to go without saying—at the moment when his depression and anxiety apparently began.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the anecdote about the men and women attempting to buy groceries from the ostensibly disreputable cook in the officer’s mess is itself an implicit indicator of how desperate both the dietary and socio-moral situations had become. Further, it may have been an alternative catalyst for the suicide tied more directly to the conditions of the war—since it is unclear whether the artilleryman was aware he wouldn’t be facing any punishment—which none of the reports appeared to recognize. Finally, regardless of whether his posting to the battery was his first of the war or only the most recent transfer, he was only with his unit for ten days prior to his suicide, leaving little time to establish much in the way of a socio-emotional support network within his new immediate circle. Thus, even if one accepts the reports’ conclusion that the artilleryman’s military service played no *proximate* role in his suicide, the underemphasized details in these documents highlight multiple ways in which the *underlying* context was primarily conditioned by the German state, a conditioning they were apparently blind to.

This same grain and complex of concerns characterized the contents of the Württemberger Army reports as well. Here, too, service-related reasons for soldiers’ suicides constituted an almost unthinkable possibility, most concisely captured in a case from late 1916.

¹¹⁰ On German food (mis)management and its socio-political effects, see: Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) and Alice Weinreb, *Modern Hungers: Food and Power in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 13-48. Roger Chickering’s ‘total history’ of wartime Freiburg is particularly attendant to these dislocations and their numerous effects: Roger Chickering, *The Great War and Urban Life in Germany: Freiburg, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a transnational history of civilians during the war, see: Tammy M. Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918*. (New York: New York University Press, 2010). See also: Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Roberts, eds., *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); idem., *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin, 1914-1919, Volume II: A Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Finally, Maureen Healy and Robert Blobaum’s *Alltagsgeschichten* of wartime Vienna and Warsaw, respectively, further flesh out the picture for east-central Europe: Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire: Total War and Everyday Life in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Robert Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse: Warsaw during the First World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

On the day after Christmas, and the penultimate day of his five-day home leave, a 41-year-old *Landsturmmann* shot himself in Nierdernhall, a small town on the Kocher river. The initial notification of the suicide, received by the Württemberg War Ministry the following day, first provided those details, then turned to the question of cause: “Reasons unknown, but probably not military in nature [*Gründe unbekannt, jedoch vermutlich nicht militärischer Art*]. According to the Künzelsau District Court, he was embroiled in many lawsuits.”¹¹¹ And it appears that the reason was never clarified. The only other documentation of this suicide is found in the statistical compendium of Württemberg soldiers’ suicides, where the ‘reason’ is listed as “unknown” (*Unbekannt*).¹¹²

Here was a case where even in a one-paragraph initial notification, the report’s author 1) felt the need to clarify whether the reason may have been “military” and 2) to expressly disregard that possibly, despite not providing—and, apparently, never acquiring—any evidence as to the cause of the suicide. Indeed, the idea that a soldier’s suicide had nothing to do with his *being a soldier* appears here as such a deeply-ingrained element of the assumptive architecture that it went without saying even when no alternative explanation was provided. Hence even with the minimal information provided in this case, one can see at least a two-step refractory process at work. First, the report’s author evidently anticipated that the question of cause, and more specifically whether the cause was ‘military’ or ‘service-related,’ was one the War Ministry would want (or demand) an answer to. Second, the few details the notification did provide—the

¹¹¹ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 219 ‘Verletzungen, Unglücksfälle, Todesermittlungsverfahren, Leichenschau sowie Beurkundung von Sterbefällen von Militärpersonen (u. a. Selbstmord); Laufzeit: 1916-1918.’ Report labelled “Zu Gen.Kdo.Abt.IIc Nr.2000 vom 28.2.1914. | Betr. Selbstmord des Landstpfl. [C.R.]. Dem Königl. Württ. Kriegsministerium Stuttgart.” “Gründe unbekannt, jedoch vermutlich nicht militärischer Art. Noch Aussage des Amtsgerichts Künzelsau soll er in mehrere Zivilprozesse verwickelt sein.”

¹¹² LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470. Besatzungsheer, Lf. Nr. 99.

soldier was about to return from Christmas home leave; he was involved in lawsuits—were excised when the case was entered into the statistical index as a suicide of ‘unknown’ cause.

That excision once again obscured the shadow vanguard’s potential signal. Indeed, the timing of the death and the fact the soldier was about to return from leave point to specific ways in which the immediate context for this suicide, too, was conditioned by the state. It was the army which granted the leave and determined its length in the first place. Further, *this* leave came in the heart of the turnip winter of 1916-1917, meaning the emotional charge of being able to return home—itself always a significant event for soldiers—for the holiday intersected with one of the worst points of home front material deprivation during the war.¹¹³ Given that this *Landsturmmann* shot himself on the penultimate day of his leave after the main Christmas festivities were likely over, it is at least possible that his imminent return to service was a factor in his suicide. The mention of the lawsuits, however, hinted at a personal motivation from the suicide, one which would leave the state free of responsibility for the death. Indeed, the mention of leave in the notification comes as a final sentence, and thus appears as more of an afterthought than as a piece of information potentially essential to explaining this self-inflicted death. It seems mostly likely that it was only included to explain why the soldier was at home when he shot himself, as opposed to being with his unit, therefore foreclosing the possibility that he had gone AWOL or, worse, deserted. The report, after all, is found in the files of the Württemberger Military Justice Department (*Justiz-Abteilung*), in keeping with the mandates in of the Military Criminal Code. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that this was yet another suicide whose cause was deemed unrelated to military service, even if the ‘decisive’ reason for it remained unknown.

¹¹³ For a concise overview of the turnip winter and the collapse of home front morale, see: Weinreb, *Modern Hungers*, 23-27.

Indeed, the statistical index for the Württemberger Army gives some indication of the rarity of such findings, since its table contains separate columns for ‘service-related,’ ‘non-service-related,’ and ‘unknown’ reasons for soldiers’ suicides. That statistical compendium lists a total of 254 suicides in the Württemberger Army between August 1914 and February 1919, 190 in the Replacement Army and 64 in the Field Army. Of those, only eight (3.1% of the total) had entries in the ‘service-related’ column. Further, of those eight, only one was recorded for the Field Army. In that case, the report specifically mentions that “Improper treatment...could not be determined.”¹¹⁴ Finally, of those eight, two appear to be mistakes. In those two cases, the reason given is “fear of punishment” (*Furcht vor Strafe*), which is consistently listed throughout the rest of the statistical index as non-service related, bringing the total down to only six cases of service-related suicides, or 2.3% of the total.

These numbers, while of course far from all-encompassing, are nonetheless at least a partial testament to the success of this interpretive grain and the morally exculpatory narrative that following it produced.¹¹⁵ But as such, they simultaneously demonstrate the ways the state’s own self-justificatory interpretative infrastructure prevented it from fully appreciating these soldiers’ suicides as indices of the deep and irradiated wounds being wrought by the conflict, and thus their status as harbingers of national self-destruction. Germans were willing to sacrifice, but not unconditionally.¹¹⁶ How many would be willing to risk or give up life and limb (too often literally), endure hunger, cold, separation, and mass death, for a war unjust in either its *raison d’être* or conduct?

¹¹⁴ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470; Field Army Suicide, Laufende Nr. 10. “Unrichtige Behandlung...konnte nicht festgestellt werden.”

¹¹⁵ It is perhaps also worth noting that while I have examined records from the Bavarian, Württemberger, and Saxon Armies—the three armies for which such records have survived—I have yet to find a *single* instance in an investigation report that recorded any service-related reasons for a soldier’s suicide or suicide attempt.

¹¹⁶ I hear echo a point made by Alan Kramer: Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 272.

2.3 The Moral Arbiters of Wartime Death

When the official *Medical Report on the German Army in the World War (Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkriege)* was published in the 1930s, it spanned three volumes and ran to over 1,400 pages, including 142 pages of charts and tables.¹¹⁷ The third volume, which contained those charts and tables, was actually the first to be published, appearing in 1934. It was published out-of-sequence because it brought together “the already much sought after numerical data about the wounds and illnesses of the German Army in the war.”¹¹⁸ It was also one of the only public documents which discussed wartime military suicides between 1914 and 1939.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ The first volume was published in 1935 and the second in 1938: Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. I: Gliederung des Heeressanitätswesens* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1935); Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. II: Die Sanitätsdienst im Gefechts- und Schlachtenverlauf im Weltkriege 1914/1918 und Stichtwortverzeichnis für I., II. und III. Band* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1938); Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934). The editions consulted are those housed in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg (hereafter: BA-MA) in the file series PH 2/1995 through 1998.

¹¹⁸ *Sanitätsbericht III*, “Der III. Band erscheint vorweg, weil er die bereits viel gefragten Zahlenunterlagen für die Verwundungen und Erkrankungen des Deutschen Heeres im Kriege bringt....” The quote is from on a small, typed note inside the front cover of the volume.

¹¹⁹ As Christian Goeschel notes, there was discussion of military suicides during the Weimar period, but they were chiefly concerned with suicides in the contemporary Reichswehr, not those that occurred in the former Imperial armies during the First World War itself. More generally, Germany saw a noted increase in suicides after the war, which the Nazis and the Communists both deployed as evidence of the failure of the Weimar Republic, though the former were more successful in their campaign. And while there is debate about the absolute reliability of the suicide statistics for this general period, the *perception* of suicide as an omnipresent fact of life in Weimar Germany is well established. See: Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 11-55. On Weimar beyond the above-cited chapter from Goeschel, see, for example: Ursula Baumann, *Vom Recht auf den eigenen Tod. Geschichte des Suizids vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert* (Weimar: Verlag Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 2001): 323-347, which covers the entire period of 1914-1945; Darcy C. Buerkle, *Nothing Happened: Charlotte Salomon and an Archive of Suicide* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013): 139-227; Moritz Föllmer, “Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin,” *Central European History* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2009): 195-221. Between 1933 and 1939, the approach to and discussion of suicide varied immensely depending on whether one was discussing the suicides of ‘Germans’ or ‘Jews.’ Given that the Nazis framed Weimar suicides as evidence of that regime’s failure, a failure which their own ‘seizure of power’ had supposedly remedied, numerous high-ranking Nazis were concerned with suicides among ‘Germans.’ See Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 56-95. On Jewish

Across Volume III's 182 pages of text, 165 statistical "overviews" (*Übersichten*), and 152 numerical tables, however, only three paragraphs discussed suicide, with one overview dedicated to "Suicides in the German Field- and Replacement Army during the Four War Years," which broke the suicide numbers down annually by type of rank.¹²⁰

According to the *Sanitätsbericht*, during the First World War, suicides in the German Army were "spread evenly across the theaters of war. In proportion to the average actual strength of the army [*Durchschnitts-Iststärke*], twice as many members of the army took their own lives at home [*in der Heimat*] as in the field. Neither the time of year nor the battles and engagements exerted a noteworthy influence on the suicide rate: it was highest in August 1914 (in the first war month) and in May 1916." The surviving data were too imprecise to allow for a comparison of individual ranks, but nonetheless one could "see a greater inclination toward suicide [*Selbstmordneigung*]" amongst the officer classes as compared with enlisted men and N.C.O.'s. Finally, the *Medical Report* claimed that the suicide rate amongst soldiers had decreased notably during the war: "the suicide figure [*Selbstmordziffer*] in the Royal Prussian Army (incl. the Saxon and Württemberger Army Corps) was, on average, 0.43 % of actual strength for the years 1908-1913, while during the war the yearly average was only 0.14 % of actual strength."¹²¹

Suicides under Nazism, see: Marion A. Kaplan *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life In Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 179-185; Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 96-118.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 26-28. "Selbstmorde im Deutsche Feld- und Besatzungsheer während der vier Kriegsjahre." The rank breakdown is as follows: "Officers, Medical Officers, Junior Doctors and Field Junior Doctors, Veterinary Officers, Junior Veterinarians, Senior Officials, Non-commissioned Officers, Entlisted Men, Junior Officials [Offiziere, Sanitätsoffiziere, Unterärzte und Feldunterärzte, Veterinäroffiziere, Unterveterinäre, Obere Beamte, Unteroffiziere, Mannschaften, Unterbeamte]."

¹²¹ Ibid. "Die Selbstmorde verteilen sich auf die Kriegsschauplätze gleichmäßig. Im Verhältnis zur Durchschnitts-Iststärke nahmen sich in der Heimat über doppelt so viele Heeresangehörige das Leben als im Felde. Weder die Jahreszeiten noch die Schlachten und Gefechte übten einen nennenswerten Einfluß auf die Selbstmordhäufigkeit aus; sie war im August 1914 (im 1. Kriegsmonat) und im Mai 1916 am höchsten (übersicht 20).

Für einen Vergleich der einzelnen Dienstgrade sind die Zahlen der Selbstmorde an und für sich bei den Offizieren, Sanitätsoffizieren, Beamten, und besonders bei den Veterinäroffizieren wegen ihrer Kleinheit nicht geeignet, trotzdem kann man eine größere Selbstmordneigung bei diesen Dienstgraden gegenüber den Unteroffizieren und Mannschaften ersehen.

Ultimately, the *Sanitätsbericht* officially recorded 3,828 suicides in the German Army between 1 August 1914 and 31 July 1918.¹²²

Equally noteworthy, however, is what it *did not* say. As James McRandle and James Quirk note, conspicuously absent from the *Sanitätsbericht* is any discussion of the provenance of its data.¹²³ There is no chart breaking down the suicide numbers by war theater, for example; one has to take the *Report's* claims on the matter *sola fide*. Indeed, there are no citations in the *Report* at all, whether related to wartime suicide or anything else. Further, its authors made no mention of the sampling bias inherent in the Bavarian's wartime reporting procedures, which made Replacement Army suicides much more likely to be recorded than those in Field Army and could thus produce a highly skewed statistical portrait.¹²⁴ Absent, too, were any case histories which may have given some human meaning to the figures; suicide was discussed in an exclusively quantitative manner. Finally, within these particular and explicit statistical claims was a larger, implicit, and unspoken *moral* claim about the self-destruction of Germany's military men between 1914 and 1918: namely, that the conflict itself was not responsible for it. If there was no difference in the suicide figures across war theatres (which implied there was no link between specific combat conditions and suicides); if half as many soldiers killed themselves in the field as behind the lines (which suggested that it was *not* circumstances at the front that most often resulted in most soldiers killing themselves); if suicides in the army decreased by

Vor dem Kriege betrug die Selbstmordziffer in der Kgl. Preußischen Armee (einschl. der Sächsischen und Württembergischen Armeekorps) im Durchschnitt der Jahre 1908/1913 0,43 % K. und im Kriege jährlich durchschnittlich nur 0,14% K. und 0,15% K. einschließlich der in militärärztlicher Behandlung gestorbenen Selbstmörder, deren Aufteilung nach Dienstgraden sich nicht ermöglichen ließ. Im Feldheer betrug die Selbstmordziffer 0,11% K. und im Besatzungsheer 0,20 % K und einschließlich der 296 Selbstmordversuche mit tödlichem Ausgang 0,23% K."

¹²² Ibid., 27.

¹²³ McRandle and Quirk, "Blood Test Revisited," 673-674..

¹²⁴ While, again, no comparable ordinance from the Württemberger War Ministry has survived, it is noteworthy that nearly 75% of wartime suicides and attempts listed in the Württemberger statistical compendium occurred in the *Besatzungsheer*, a circumstantial indication that this kind of bias may have been present beyond the Bavarian Army.

more than 67% during the war years (which seemingly indicated that it was the tribulations of peace, not war, which drove men in uniform to lay hands on themselves in the greatest numbers); and if neither the time of year nor battles themselves exerted a “noteworthy influence” on the suicide rate, then how could the German military be in any way responsible for those self-inflicted deaths? Indeed, how could external conditions of any kind explain the wartime suicides of Germany’s soldiers?

The *Sanitätsbericht*, then, encapsulates not only the archival grain’s general contours, interpretive trajectory, and effects in its specific series of unsourced claims, but also acts as the fourth and final layer of refraction and point of excision—the layer linking the historical presence of wartime suicide with its subsequent historiographical absence. Whatever details managed to survive the first three infections along the grain—e.g. a soldier’s age, date of death, and the state’s conclusion on the reason for the suicide—were lost entirely by the time the case entered into the *Medical Report*, where it was quite literally reduced to a decontextualized number. And as the note on publication order suggested, *this* was the source in greatest demand and seemingly considered the most definitive word on the matter of wartime death, both at the time and presently. Indeed, since its publication, Volume III has been an integral resource for the quantitative study of German war losses and, especially since the appearance of McRandle and Quirk’s 2006 article on the value of the *Medical Report* as a data set, has become the principal source for statistical information on German war losses within the literature.¹²⁵ Thus what the

¹²⁵ McRandle and Quirk, “Blood Test Revisited.” Both Alan Kramer and Benjamin Ziemann rely on the *Sanitätsbericht* data in their discussions of Germans casualties and casualty rates, while in his centennial history of the war, Jörn Leonhard uses the tables from McRandle and Quirk, compiled from the *Sanitätsbericht* data, in his statistical appendix on war losses: Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, 34-35; Ziemann, *Violence and the German*, 20-28; Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora’s Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2018 [2014]): 913-914. Antoine Prost also relies heavily on the *Sanitätsbericht* in his transnational analysis of death figures: Antoine Prost, “The Dead,” in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 561-91.

French historians Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have described as a dialectic of simultaneous revelation and concealment in those rare contemporary sources where one can find some reference or allusion to soldiers' suicides during the First World War—where the acknowledgement is only ever partial and obfuscates as much as it elucidates—has applied as much to the present historiography as it has to the primary sources themselves.¹²⁶

Probing deeper, however, the very presence of such an exculpatory narrative and the interpretive framework(s) in place to produce it indexes a particular set of anxieties on the part of the German state and military. As Isabel Hull notes, there is an innate paradox in the state's use of violence, one which was particularly acute in Imperial Germany during the war: because violence inherently undercuts social stability, "in wielding violence the state at once demonstrates its sovereignty and threatens to undermine it fundamentally," especially if it destroys too much or lasts too long.¹²⁷ This particular concern appears at the heart of the particular grain of unspoken concealment regarding German soldiers' suicides, one of the clearest places where one could find evidence of the war's negative consequences (to put it mildly). Indeed, these surviving records, and the morally exculpatory archival grain that characterizes both their form and content, illustrate the particular methods through which the German state established itself as the moral arbiter of wartime death: the entity which judged which men were "fallen" and which were merely "dead;" which determined who had made the ultimate sacrifice in a hero's death (*Heldentod*) for his country, and who was a thanatological aberration.

¹²⁶ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 42-43.

¹²⁷ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005): 99.

It is therefore highly significant that the *only* places where records of explicit soldiers' suicides have survived are in the documents of the military justice system and in military medical files. Indeed, though as an abstraction 'law' is notoriously difficult to define, in this context, it clearly delineated a set of rules and regulations for behavior, with punishments for those who did not follow them; a codification of 'right' and 'wrong,' 'normative' and 'non-normative,' backed by violent force.¹²⁸ As such, the fact that any reporting about soldiers' suicides *required* a judicial inquiry implicitly placed those deaths squarely within the realm of moral concern from the very beginning, at the nexus of law, ethics, and violence. And while it may be less overt in the case of military medicine, doctors, too, played an important role as ethical arbiters during the conflict, particularly psychiatrists. Not only did they increasingly pathologize an 'unwillingness to sacrifice' throughout the conflagration—medicalizing the moral distinction between the 'fallen' and the 'dead'—but also nearly unanimously concluded that soldiers suffering from debilitating psychological disorders had not suffered any trauma—whose cause was, by definition, external—but rather were hysterics, whose breakdowns and symptoms could only be explained by their personal constitution.¹²⁹ The archival grain of moral exoneration and its vectors of concealment permeated the records from top to bottom.

But peaking through this grain of concealment remains a degree of revelation. For in tracing the contours of this obfuscating archival current, one simultaneously comes to glimpse the myriad ways in which these documents are unintentional and inadvertent records of intense

¹²⁸ Walter Benjamin extrapolated on this set of relations in a 1921 essay: Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume I, 1913-1926*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996): 236-252.

¹²⁹ On the pathologizing of an unwillingness to sacrifice, see the argument in: Wolfgang U. Eckart, "'The Most Extensive Experiment the Imagination Can Conceive': War, Emotional Stress, and German Medicine" in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 133-149. On soldiers' "hysteria" and the psychiatric debates around it, see: Paul Lerner, *Hysterical Men: War, Psychiatry, and the Politics of Trauma in Germany, 1890-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

social, emotional, and moral trauma produced by the German state itself. It was the German state that, first, created the conditions of possibility for these deaths by deciding to participate in the war in the first place; a fraught and complicated decision to be sure, but a decision nonetheless.¹³⁰ Second, the ways that the German military chose to conduct the war then established specific series of catalysts for these soldiers' suicides: where and when to campaign, what weapons and units to use, who received home leave and when, etc. Of course, the contingencies that produced each suicide are by definition *sui generis* and, in many ways, overdetermined; the point is not argue the opposite of these reports and lay responsibility solely at the feet of the state.¹³¹ Indeed, even the idea that the two explanations are mutually exclusive is itself part of the state's interpretive architecture. Rather, the principal point is that these aspects of state responsibility for its soldiers' suicides were not only concealed from those who would later examine the records, but also *from the state itself*, not as an abstraction, but as a collective of millions of individuals engaged in a global war. The general trajectory may have been set at the highest levels, but it was implemented by thousands of soldiers throughout Germany (and beyond) all the way down the chain of command as they filled out forms, filed reports and notices, answered investigators questions, and generally tried to do their service to the wartime state competently.

Thus, in mobilizing the prewar archival grain of moral exculpation during the conflict itself, the Imperial German state attempted to continue its emotional and moral mobilization of the populace. But that same interpretive infrastructure rendered the broader self-destructive

¹³⁰ The literature on this topic is vast and dates from the very first days of the war itself. The most-discussed recent contribution to this historiography, however, focuses intensely on the intricacies and contingencies of these decision-making processes: Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012).

¹³¹ This framework of conditions, catalysts, and contingencies comes from Leonhard, although he uses the term "determinants" rather than "conditions:" Leonhard, *Pandora's Box*, 63.

thanatological undercurrent largely illegible and the signals from the shadow vanguard incomprehensible to the political and military authorities. With that incomprehension came an inability for the state to see its own role in the mass shattering of socio-emotional ties and moral certainties millions of Germans were enduring along with the physical destruction of both life and land; an obfuscation of the true scale and nature of the threat to its legitimacy—and thus continued existence as a governmental regime—its wager on war had engendered. Nonetheless, this mobilization in many ways proved remarkably successful. Report writers at various levels throughout the German armies continued to follow this grain all the way into the conflagration's final days, even in the face of ever-mounting losses and Germany's ultimate defeat. By separating explicit from implicit self-destruction and displacing moral responsibility, this current of ethical epistemology played a crucial role in enabling millions of Germans to endure. On the ground, soldiers and civilians alike shared a common assumptive architecture that kept wartime suicide categorically separate from sacrifice—at least for a time. They continued to say their goodbyes—too often final—all the way into the fall of 1918.

Chapter 3
Enduring Valedictions:
Suicide Notes, Farewell Letters, and the Emotional Weight of “Taking One’s Leave,”
1914-1918

What conceptually unites all plans for voluntary death, those that succeed in the end as well as those that result in recalling the departure, is not the cry for help but the *message*. This message, which does not have to be written down, cried out, defined by any kind of sign, but is instead given along the way in the silent act, means that we ourselves at the moment of stepping over the line, when we have already issued our refusal to the logic of life and the demands of being, still have in a part of our person something to do with the *other*, right up to the last flicker of consciousness.

—Jean Améry, *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death* (1976)

On the afternoon of 4 April 1918, a 25-year-old Infantryman in his fourth year of service in the Bavarian Army attempted suicide by gassing himself in his sister’s apartment in Augsburg.¹ The initial notification sent to the Bavarian War Ministry described how his sister found him unconscious in her kitchen and turned off the gas, after which he was taken to the garrison hospital. The soldier had home leave from 27 March until 7 April, and while he survived, it appears the prospect of a self-inflicted death was preferable to that of returning to the front in the midst of Germany’s final major offensive of the war. The statistical index of suicides and attempts in the Bavarian Army for 1918 listed the “reason” (*Grund*) for his suicide attempt as “agitation over transfer to the field.”² In its immediate aftermath, however, the cause was much

¹ Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv (hereafter: BHStA IV) Kriegsministerium (hereafter: M Kr) 10915 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1918,” “II. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, B. Selbstentleibungsversuche,” Laufende Nr. 17. The 1918 statistical index is a separate document tucked inside the larger file.

² Ibid. “Aus Erregung über Abstellung ins Feld.”

less clear. The initial report states that “[t]he letters found with him to his wife, mother, and siblings do not reveal the motive [*Beweggrund*] for the act. According to his mother and sister he had already been showing signs of melancholy [*Schwermut*] for many years.”³ In many ways, the case was typical. It not only epitomized many of the common socio-emotional elements found throughout these inadvertent records of trauma, but the state’s morally-exculpatory interpretive infrastructure as well. As a result, it could be easy to miss what was unusual about the case: the soldier left multiple *suicide notes*. Indeed, what was truly exceptional was that the Infantryman left any explicit final communication at all.

While, as Marc Etkind notes, “[i]n the Hollywood view of the world, it’s hard to imagine a suicide without a note,” suicide notes are actually quite rare.⁴ Numerous studies have shown that, on average, only about one-fifth of suicides left a note throughout the twentieth century.⁵ Further, recent psychological work has indicated that the kinds of explanatory weight given to these sources may well be misplaced. Indeed, a 2015 study concludes that “the presence or

³ BHStA IV M Kr 10913 “Selbstmorde, Selbstmordversuche vom Jahre 1917 (1.9.) mit 1918. (30.4).” Report labelled “München, den 11.4.18. E./2. I.R. An das K.B. Kriegsministerium.” “Die bei ihm vorgefunden Briefe an Frau, Mutter und Geschwister lassen den Beweggrund zur Tat nicht erkennen. Nach den Angaben seiner Mutter und seiner Schwester zeigten sich bei ihm schon seit mehreren Jahren Spuren von Schwermut.”

⁴ Marc Etkind, ...*Or Not to Be: A Collection of Suicide Notes* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997): 1.

⁵ A 1993 study of suicides on the London Underground between 1985 and 1989, for instance, found that only 15% of their 409 cases left notes. Further, their analysis includes a summary table of nine earlier studies of suicide notes in, *inter alia*, the US, UK, Australia, Sweden, and West Germany, collectively covering the period from 1944-1985, where the incidence of note-leaving ranged from 15-42% and averaged only 23.6%: Ian O’Donnell, Richard Farmer, and Jose Catalan, “Suicide Notes,” *British Journal of Psychiatry* Vol. 163, No. 1 (July 1993): 45-48, see especially Table 1. A 2005 Japanese study which examined 5,161 suicides in Kobe City between 1981 and 2001 similarly found that the note leave-rate “remained almost constant” between 23.4 and 36.2%: Toshiki Shioiri et al “Incidence of note-leaving remains constant despite increasing suicide rates,” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* Vol. 59, No. 2 (April 2005): 226–228. More recent findings follow the same pattern. A 2016 study of 3,856 suicides in Quebec from 1892-1960, for instance, found a note-leaving rate of only 12%: Isabelle Perrault, Patrice Corriveau, and Jean-François Cauchie, “While of Unsound Mind?: Narratives of Responsibility in Suicide Notes from the Twentieth-Century,” *Histoire sociale/Social History* Vol. 49, No. 98 (May 2016): 155-170. Finally, this general pattern appears to be continuing into the twenty-first century. A 2018 study of 36,190 suicides in 17 US states between 2011 and 2013 found that 31% left suicide notes: Ian R. H. Rockett et al, “Discerning suicide in drug intoxication deaths: Paucity and primacy of suicides notes and psychiatric history,” *PLoS ONE* Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 2018). While, unfortunately, none of these studies cover Germany in the precise period under study, the consistency of their findings across time and space makes it reasonable to assume that suicide notes were similarly rare during the war years, even if one is unable to put an exact figure on it.

absence of a note, in itself, is not indicative of anything systematic or particularly meaningful about the decedent, the suicide, or the relationship [of the deceased with the bereaved].”⁶ Given the *longue durée* history of the suicide note, such a conclusion is unsurprising. Suicide notes are a modern invention,⁷ emerging in their now-recognizable form only in the eighteenth century as decidedly *public* documents: they were routinely sent to the press and published in newspapers in Europe and the United States until at least the 1870s.⁸ Over the course of the nineteenth century,

⁶ Julie Cerel et al, “Who Leaves Suicide Notes? A Six-Year Population-Based Study,” *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* Vol. 45, No. 3 (June 2015): 333. It is noteworthy, as well, that this analysis of 2,936 suicides between 2005 and 2011 in Kentucky found a note-leaving rate of 18.25%, in keeping with the general trend sketched above.

⁷ I use the adjective “modern” here specifically in the sense of “Neuzeit” (new time) as described by Reinhart Koselleck. See: Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 [1979]), esp. 9-25, 222-254. Crucial for this analysis, Koselleck’s conception foregrounds the shift in the experience and understanding of time as the definitive—in the sense of ‘definition’—aspect and essential undergirding condition of “modernity,” not progress towards a particular socio-political telos or a specific configuration of political economy. The efficacy of the modifier itself is, of course, a fraught and long-standing matter of debate, well exemplified in the now decade-old roundtable on the subject published in the *American Historical Review*: “AHR Roundtable: Historians and the Question of ‘Modernity,’” *The American Historical Review* Vol. 116, No. 3 (June 2011): 631-751.

⁸ This development is concisely overviewed with primary source examples in: Etkind, *...Or Not to Be*, 1-6. The philosopher Simon Critchley pithily summarizes the point as well as the resulting irony: “The modern suicide note is in origin, then, a publication, an intensely public act, a perverse piece of publicity. The historical evidence might give us pause when we shroud the suicide note in secrecy, as we now tend to do, and consider it the sacrosanct domain of the spouse or family. Sometimes it is, but often it is not.” Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015): 46. Diane Miller Sommerville illustrates the persistence of this publicity into the later nineteenth century in her analysis of Confederate veterans’ suicide notes after the American Civil War: Diane Miller Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind: Suicide and Suffering in the Civil War-Era South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018): 173-177. It is perhaps also worth noting the set of conditions necessary for the emergence of the suicide note, most notably the increases in literacy and the greater secularization and decriminalization of suicide that came with the Enlightenment. This is not meant to imply that ‘secularization’ or ‘decriminalization’ were unidirectional or simple processes, but merely to highlight that the nexus of literacy, secularization, and decriminalization—however complex and multifaceted the relations between those elements—formed the crucial context for the emergence of the suicide note. Indeed, the secularization thesis, put forward most prominently in Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy’s 1990 book *Sleepless Souls*, has now been subjected to a long-standing critique that has complicated the narrative and largely replaced it with one of “hybridization.” See: Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); on ‘hybridization:’ Susan K. Morrissey, *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). These broader historiographical developments are well-summarized in: Róisín Healy, “Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe,” *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Sept 2006): 904-912. See also: Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999 [1995]), a survey of the history of suicide built on this earlier literature. More broadly, the emergence of print capitalism forms the key backdrop for all of these developments, as, of course, their can be no ‘public documents’ without a public capable of reading them, or without the means of getting those documents out to that public, as Benedict Anderson famously detailed: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (New York: Verso, 2006 [1983]). Notably, Anderson’s analysis is also based on a temporal conception of

they often took on an especially generic quality with the rise of romantic literature. Many drew particular inspiration from Goethe's 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. As Lisa Lieberman summarizes, romantic texts like *Werther* "provided people with a language in which to express their unhappiness, a set of symbols and associations that would be understood by other members of their society."⁹ In both their genesis and long-term development, then, suicide notes were principally marked by their publicity and conventionality, not their *sui generis* qualities.

Read in this light, it becomes clear that the case of the Bavarian Infantryman was also typical in three, more particular, respects. First, the existence of the soldier's suicide notes was *mentioned* in the initial report, but this is the only surviving record of them: neither the letters nor any transcript of their contents are in the file itself. Given that the notes were 'unrevealing' as far as the military investigators were concerned, this too is unsurprising. Indeed, even in cases where a report explicitly lists a suicide note as an attachment (*Beilage*) to the file, none of the originals are present any longer, as they were presumably returned to their addressees after the investigation into the suicide was completed.¹⁰ Suicide notes thus only entered the archival record if the report's author chose to transcribe them, either in whole or in part, or paraphrase their contents. As sources, then, German soldiers' suicides notes are both extremely rare and at least twice mediated by self-censorship: once by the author, then again by the transcriber (and

'modernity' and new imaginaries it engendered, though one based, in that aspect, on the writings of Walter Benjamin, not Koselleck.

⁹ Lisa Lieberman, *Leaving You: The Cultural Meaning of Suicide* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003): 104-105; for her full discussion of romanticism and suicide, including the role of Goethe's novel: 95-129.

¹⁰ The case of a light cavalryman (*Chevauleuger*) who hanged himself in June 1917 is typical in this regard. The report's subject line reads "Subject: Reporting of Suicide. | Enclosed: 1 File." The report itself then specifies that the soldier "wrote a letter to his parents shortly before his death on 22 June 1917 in which he expressed his intention to commit suicide. The letter is in the file." All that now exists of the letter, however, is a one sentence summary with a single sentence fragment quoted within the report: "He described his life as worthless, because, since childhood, he 'had had nothing good' [Er bezeichnet das Leben als wertlos, weil er von Kindheit an 'nichts gutes gehabt habe']." BHStA IV M Kr 10912 "Selbstmörder. vom Jahre 1914 mit 1917. (30.8)." Report labelled "Augsburg, den 7. August 1917. Ex. No. 15286 Ersatz-depot 4. Chev.Regts. An die Inspektion d.Ers.Esk.1.b.A.K. München."

perhaps a third time in the case of paraphrased notes).¹¹ It is striking, for instance, that in his 1919 study of “Suicide at the Front,” the psychiatrist Max Sichel mentioned the presence of a suicide note in only three of the fifteen cases he examined, and only two case histories included transcribed excerpts.¹² Given that his study was based on the wartime suicides in a Bavarian *Landwehr* division, it seems as likely that this was a result of his source base as it was his own authorial choice.¹³

Second, the report’s author deemed the existence of the notes worthy of mention in the initial notification report because, as he implicitly acknowledged, there was an expectation that they would provide some essential insight into the motivation for the suicide attempt.¹⁴ He therefore embodied a broader assumption that suicide notes are primarily a type of ego-document, “a source or ‘document’—understood in the widest sense—providing an account of, or revealing privileged information about, the ‘self’ who produced it.”¹⁵ This assumption was not unique, and has persisted within the scholarly literature on suicide well into the twenty-first century. There is perhaps no better example than the work of the psychologist and suicide researcher David Lester, who has spent decades analyzing suicide notes, diaries, and poems, most recently using text-mining software, in an attempt to “understand” the “suicidal mind.”¹⁶

¹¹ The self-censorship on the part of soldier authors themselves is well-summarized in: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 37-44.

¹² Max Sichel, “Der Selbstmord im Felde,” *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychologie* Vol. 29 (1919), 385-392. Note, too, that the note-leaving rate within the study is 20%, according exactly with the general findings from later studies of suicide notes. Of course, given the minute size of the sample, this can hardly be taken as statistically significant. But it is nonetheless suggestive of the general rarity of soldiers’ suicide notes.

¹³ Sichel described this source base on: *Ibid.*, 386.

¹⁴ In keeping with the grain of institutional anticipation, it is difficult to discern whether this was an expectation of the author himself, or one he assumed the readers of his report—i.e. his military superiors—held. Regardless of its proximate source, however, the expectation itself remains clear.

¹⁵ Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, “In Relation: The ‘Social Self’ and Ego-Documents,” *German History* Vol. 28, No. 3 (2010): 263.

¹⁶ The title of his 2014 book summarizing the main threads of this long-running research—both his own, and that of many other suicide researchers, primarily in psychology—makes the point explicit: David Lester, *The “I” of the*

Historians of suicide, for their part, have generally taken a more complex methodological tack, though they, too, often analyze suicide notes chiefly for motive and thus for the types of insights ego-documents seem uniquely equipped to provide.¹⁷ Suicide notes, then, have continually been treated as translucent windows into personal psychology both by contemporaries and later analysts, in direct contrast to their deep history as generic, public documents.

Finally, the soldier left his final missives as *letters*, an indication of the particular ways in which wartime suicide notes were embedded in a larger—and ultimately much more revealing—epistolary and communicative context. While suicide notes were (and are) exceedingly rare, written correspondence reached a new astronomical scale from 1914 to 1918, when soldiers' letters became a mass phenomenon for the first time.¹⁸ Germans alone sent an estimated 28 *billion* letters during the conflict.¹⁹ Indeed, letters were the single most important communication medium throughout the war, maintaining crucial socio-emotional links across home and front,

Storm: Understanding the Suicidal Mind (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014). He further specifies in the preface that he attempts to take a “phenomenological approach” to suicides in the hope that “[i]f we obtain some insights into the mind of one suicidal individual...the technique may illustrate one pathway to understanding,” though not explanation, which he considers impossible. *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁷ Opening a discussion of suicide notes during the Weimar Republic, for example, Christian Goeschel writes that “[t]he ways in which people represented their suicides can be put into a historical context, which illuminates the circumstances of a suicide, alongside the main motive the suicide wanted to emphasize.” Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 49-50. More recently, Diane Miller Sommerville has made essentially the same methodological point as Goeschel, though framed more cautiously: “While such letters [i.e. suicide notes] do offer a potential vehicle through which to gain insights into motives, they raise as many questions as they answer. Such notes should be read carefully, recognizing the author’s desire to construct and dictate the meaning of their self-inflicted deaths for particular audiences. Still, notes that allow suicide victims to address their reasons for preferring death over life suggest that motives for suicide were complicated and rarely attributable to just one cause.” Sommerville, *Aberration of Mind*, 173. This is of course not to suggest that suicide notes offer *no* insights into motive. Rather, the point here is to emphasize the on-going historiographical treatment of suicide notes *principally* as ego-documents, in ironic contrast to their deeper history, with the generic elements being consistently underemphasized.

¹⁸ Gerd Krumeich, “Publishing Ego Documents as War Propaganda,” in *Inside World War One? The First World War and its Witnesses*, eds. Richard Bessel and Dorothee Wierling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 234.

¹⁹ Bernd Ulrich, *Die Augenzeugen: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1997): 22.

internal and external borders, and various filial and social circles.²⁰ Yet this did not mean that these letters, any more than suicide notes, were free from generic qualities.²¹ In Paul Fussell's famous—if overly sweeping—words, “the trick was to fill the page by saying nothing and to offer the maximum number of clichés.”²² And as with suicide notes, these generic qualities were intimately linked with letters' primary function and use, which was decidedly social. Letters from the front served as easily-intelligible signs that a soldier was still alive and well, and “almost always had a wide range of addressees not mentioned in the texts themselves, since it was understood that parents or wives would share the letters with other family members,

²⁰ In Germany, a deep and abiding historiographical interest in and use of First World War soldiers' letters began with the push in the late 1980s and early 1990s for a ‘military history from below,’ most prominently in two edited volumes: Peter Knoch, ed. *Kriegsalltag: Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als Aufgabe der historischen Forschung und der Friedenserziehung* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1989); Wolfram Wette, ed., *Der Krieg des Kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten* (Munich: Piper, 1992). Those volumes contained early essays by a number of scholars—including Bernd Ulrich, whose 1997 book remains the go-to work on First World War *Feldpostbriefe*—who would go on to publish monographs in late 1990s which made significant and increasingly methodologically complex use of German soldiers' letters. Ulrich also subjected that literature to a thoughtful and self-reflexive critique prior to the publication of his book: Bernd Ulrich, “‘Militärgeschichte von Unten.’ Anmerkungen zu ihren Ursprüngen, Quellen und Perspektiven im 20. Jahrhundert,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Oct-Dec 1996): 473-503. All these developments from the late 1990s and early 2000s are well summarized in English in: Robert L. Nelson, “‘Ordinary Men’ in the First World War? German Soldiers as Victims and Participants,” *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 2004): 425-435. More recently, Dorothee Wierling has done a rich and complex reconstruction of these wartime socio-emotional networks using the correspondence within a single family: Dorothee Wierling, *Eine Familie im Krieg: Leben, Sterben und Schreiben 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2013); Dorothee Wierling, “Imagining and Communicating Violence: The Correspondence of a Berlin Family, 1914-1918,” in *Gender and the First World War*, eds. Christa Hämmerle, Oswald Überegger, Birgitta Bader Zaar (London: Palgrave MacMillian, 2014): 36-51. Beyond Germany, Martha Hanna has been arguably the most noteworthy historian focusing on wartime correspondence per se, most prominently in her micro-historical reconstruction of the wartime experiences of a single French couple, but also in her most recent book on Canadian war wives: Martha Hanna, *Your Death Would Be Mine: Paul and Marie Pireaud in the Great War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Martha Hanna, *Anxious Days and Tearful Nights: Canadian War Wives During the Great War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

²¹ Perhaps the most prominent scholar of war narratives (in their various media, including letters) as a distinct genre was Samuel Hynes, most famously in *The Soldiers' Tale*, whose particular use of the singular definite article and the plural possessive in the title makes the larger transnational and *longue durée* point explicit: Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New York: Penguin, 2001). See also Hynes more recent essay collection: Samuel Hynes, *On War and Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

²² Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013 [1975]): 198. While Fussell's book focused solely on England, German historians have noted the transnational parallels. Ulrich approvingly quotes the full line from Fussell in his discussion of self-censorship of German soldiers' letters, while more recently, Mark Hewitson paraphrases the line in his discussion of the methodological complexities of reading German combatants' testimonies: Ulrich, *Augenzeugen*, 17-19, Fussell quote: 18; Mark Hewitson, “‘I Witnesses’: Soldiers, Selfhood and Testimony in Modern Wars,” *German History* Vol. 28, No. 3 (2010): 319.

neighbors, and friends.”²³ Further, from the war’s earliest days, soldiers’ letters not only took on an almost mythic quality as ‘authentic’ representatives of ‘the’ war experience, but were published in both newspapers and collected volumes throughout the conflict, giving these ostensibly private documents a decidedly public—and often propagandistic—face.²⁴ Published letters were frequently quoted in Reichstag discussions, and read aloud and discussed in classrooms throughout the war.²⁵ They thus served as a crucial link between the private and the public, personal and political, and state and nation as well.

Small wonder, then, that 1) the Infantryman’s suicide notes took epistolary form, 2) the investigator was disappointed in his assumption about the notes’ ostensible utility and found that none of letters ‘revealed the motive for the act,’ and 3) that investigators were then forced to go to other sources—namely, interviews with the soldier’s family members—to try and discern the cause of the suicide attempt.²⁶ All three elements followed directly from the deep histories and wartime functions of these sources, and what, on the surface at least, might be called a double-

²³ Richard Bessel and Dorothee Wierling, “Inside World War One? Ego Documents and the First World War,” in *Inside World War One? The First World War and its Witnesses*, eds. Richard Bessel and Dorothee Wierling (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 11.

²⁴ The tensions and valences of soldiers’ letters dual status—as both private ego- and social documents, but also publicly-utilized political and propaganda sources, especially useful for those latter purposes due to their “authenticity”—is at the heart of Ulrich’s seminal monograph. See: Ulrich, *Die Augenzeugen*, especially 106-301, which covers these public and political uses both during the war and the Weimar years. In English, Wolfgang Natter dedicates a chapter to “The Use and Abuse of *Feldpostbriefe* for Cultural Life” in his study of war literature, while more recently, Gerd Krumeich has focused specifically on the propaganda uses of published collections of First World War Soldiers’ letters: Wolfgang G. Natter, *Literature at War, 1914-1940: Representing the “Time of Greatness” in Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999): 78-121; Krumeich, “Publishing Ego Documents as War Propaganda,” 231-248.

²⁵ Natter, *Literature at War*, 79. For an analysis of wartime pedagogy more broadly, including discussion of the uses of war narratives in classrooms throughout Germany, see: Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), especially 59-107.

²⁶ It is worth noting here that not all suicide notes are written as letters, as the case of Édouard Levé and his short novel *Suicide* illustrates. In the novel, an unnamed 25-year-old man opens a comic book to a specific page before committing suicide by shooting himself in the head with a shotgun. His wife, however, accidentally closes the comic book, losing the page and her husband’s final missive in the process. Levé himself then committed suicide only ten days after handing the novel’s manuscript in to his publisher, making the novel itself a kind suicide note. See the succinct and insightful analysis in: Critchley, *Notes on Suicide*, 64-67.

genericism: the overlapping of conventional qualities from both suicide notes and soldiers' letters that produced a particular form of opacity, at least as far as questions of motive and ego were concerned. Yet even that apparent doubling was itself deceptive, as it embodies both the unspoken categorical distinction keeping suicidal and sacrificial self-destruction morally and emotionally separate *and* the analytic assumption that explanations for soldiers' suicides were to be found in a soldier's personal psychology and circumstances, masking the more profound suicidal substrate running through the war in the process.

When read together with soldiers' letters, suicide notes appear less as a separate category of rare, highly-mediated ego-document, but rather as one manifestation of a profoundly ubiquitous epistolary sub-genre, defined by its proximity and relation to death: *Abschiedsbriefe*, literally "farewell letters." Strikingly, the German language itself implies this generic fraternity.²⁷ While in the context of wartime the term most often applied to letters written by soldiers to loved ones before facing potential death in battle, the term for 'suicide note' was (and is) also *Abschiedsbrief*, a clear if unintentional indication that what was conceptually definitive about these missives was not the motivation for or even cause of death, but rather the recognized degree of *inclination* towards it—that is, the greatly increased probability of the author in question being killed and the message being his final one.²⁸ Building from this linguistic cue, I approach German soldiers' *Abschiedsbriefe* as historical *genre*-documents: written sources employing and embodying a set of conventions, forms, contents, and purposes indicative of a

²⁷ Methodologically speaking, this, too, is unsurprising. As Reinhart Koselleck famously noted in 1972, "moments of duration, change, and futurity contained in a concrete political situation are registered through their linguistic traces;" here, the duration and durability of a particular socio-emotional relation to death. Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 79.

²⁸ It is for this reason that I use the German term '*Abschiedsbrief*' or '*Abschiedsbriefe*' (plural) throughout the following to refer to the larger genre, while using the English 'farewell letter' to refer to the sub-type within the genre.

distinct historical context *before* they reveal anything about a particular ego.²⁹ Methodologically, such an approach avoids two major pitfalls, particularly prevalent in analyses of suicide notes.

First, it sidesteps the assumptive trap of the Bavarian military investigators, which takes personal psychology for granted as the *primum movens* of soldiers' suicides, thus dismissing the conventional qualities of any final words as 'unrevealing' and irrelevant, as well as assuming an essential categorical distinction between suicides and other—especially combat—deaths.

Second, it avoids the ahistoricity of many psychological researchers who, like Lester, often view the common elements of suicide notes as evidence of a meta-historical 'suicidal mind,' divorced from the historical context of the conventions' use.³⁰

Moreover, reading these sources as *genre-documents* adds a further contextual and analytic layer by emphasizing the socio-historical significance of their physical materiality.³¹ As Leora Auslander notes, the valences of a given source's use and function are not reducible solely

²⁹ It is worth underscoring that reading these sources as genre-documents in no way precludes reading them as ego-documents, and I do not mean to imply that the two approaches are mutually exclusive. Such sources, including suicide notes, do indeed shed light on the historical selves that produced them. Rather, what I aim to highlight is a shift in analytic emphasis. If approaching a source as an ego-document means treating it as a complex and translucent window into a given ego, with the aim of trying to see through the warped and darkened panes as well as one can to then sketch what one can glimpse inside, then approaching the same source as a genre-document means tracing the angles of warping and the modes of translucence of the window itself for what they can elucidate about the house the ego is inside of. In this sense, I build heavily from Hewitson's methodological recommendations, though less as necessary prerequisites for gaining insights into individual historical experience than as an alternate mode of enquiry to gain different types of insights from those same sources. See: Hewitson, "I Witnessed," 324-325. A second methodological cue comes from Christa Hämmerle's concise discussion of First World War love letters in the Habsburg Empire: Christa Hämmerle, "'Waiting longingly...': Love Letters in World War I—A Plea for a Broader Genre Concept," in: *History of Emotions—Insights into Research* (March 2014).

³⁰ It is perhaps also worth noting here that taking a source as a genre document is not synonymous with the kind of discourse analysis popularized during the linguistic turn, firstly because I use the word "document" here in a material and physical sense, which is itself also a part of the source, not just the content written on it (as described in more detail below). Secondly, I take my main cue on this point from the methodological reflections of Kathleen Canning on the complex interplays between discourse, experience, agency, and subjectivity without positing a hierarchical relation between them. See: Kathleen Canning, *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspectives on Bodies, Class, and Citizenship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006): 63-100.

³¹ A document being defined as "something written, inscribed, etc., which furnishes evidence or inform upon any subject," that is, a *material* epistemological medium. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "document," <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/56328?rskey=RnBef9&result=1#eid> (accessed 25 March 2021).

to their written contents, and texts themselves can at times obscure the deeper meanings indexed through their materiality, especially in violent contexts.³² Indeed, as pervasive as wartime farewell letters were, they were only a single, material—and thus archivally-preserved—mode of *Abschied nehmen*, ‘taking one’s leave:’ a set of *behaviors* wherein people ‘said’—though not always in (written) words—what too often were their final goodbyes. Examining the ways these written texts physically circulated across complex affect-laden social webs and interrogating how and why they have been preserved at all is thus essential to unpacking this larger behavioral context and its ultimate consequences.

Approached thusly, these missives not only illuminate abiding forms of valediction attesting to the war’s on-going self-destructiveness, but simultaneously index the ever-growing emotional weight which that self-destruction wrought throughout German society as the war dragged on month after month and year after year. First, the common elements of soldiers’ suicide notes highlight a specific set of social, emotional, and moral pressures simmering underneath and within the increasingly fraught rhetoric of on-going unity. These written signals from the shadow vanguard therefore indicated the particular ways the sacrificial surface current

³² As she evocatively writes, “[a] symphony cannot be rendered visually; the aroma of roasting coffee cannot be put into words; the feeling of cashmere or burlap cannot be expressed in music...people’s relation to language is not the same as their relation to things; all that they express through their creation and use of material objects [...] is not reducible to words.” Leora Auslander, “Beyond Words,” *American Historical Review* Vol. 110 No. 4 (October 2005): 1017. Jochen Hellbeck demonstrates a comparable point in his analysis of the material change in diaries across the revolutionary divide of 1917 in Russia and the subsequent paper shortages during the 1930s. As he writes, “[t]he paper shortages with which diarists of the 1930s had to contend only underscore the urge they felt to take pen to paper,” even before one analyzes the texts of the diaries themselves: Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006): 54. More recently, Auslander and Tara Zahra have focused more specifically on the material culture of warfare: Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra, eds., *Objects of War: The Material Culture of Conflict and Displacement* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018). In regard to the First World War, arguably the most persistent proponent of a material-cultural approach has been the anthropologist and archaeologist Nicholas Saunders, who has published copiously on various material aspects of the war in a variety of theaters. See, *inter alia*: Nicholas J. Saunders, *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War* (New York: Routledge, reprint, 2020 [2003]); Nicholas J. Saunders, ed., *Matters of Conflict: Material Culture, Memory and the First World War* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Nicholas J. Saunders, *Killing Time: Archaeology and the First World War* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007); Nicholas J. Saunders and Paul Cornish, eds., *Contested Objects: Material Memories of the Great War* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Nicholas J. Saunders, *Desert Insurgency: Archaeology, T.E. Lawrence, and the Arab Revolt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

and suicidal undercurrent remained linked all the way into 1918. Second, non-suicidal farewell letters drew on and utilized near-identical generic conventions as suicide notes, illustrating the durability of the larger suicidal substrate which emerged in August 1914 beyond the direct realm of the state. The larger spectrum of self-destruction thus appeared in microcosm all the way into the war's final months within the genre of wartime *Abschiedsbriefe*. Finally, placing those letters in their broader material and behavioral context and tracing their creation, circulation, and preservation sketches the increasing scale and omnipresence of that enduring inclination toward death. For over four years, millions of Germans repeatedly said their goodbyes to sons, husbands, brothers, fathers, friends, and comrades, plunging ever-greater swathes of German society into mourning as more and more of those goodbyes became final. In the process, the entries on the debit side of the ledger which would have to be paid in some form to validate that suffering and death as worthwhile sacrifices multiplied exponentially, as each death repeatedly decimated Germans' social and emotional worlds. The self-destructive thanatological configuration which emerged in 1914 not only *endured* into the war's final year, but also continued to *be endured* by millions of Germans with the hope and—increasingly—demand that the debt would somehow be paid back in full.

3.1 Written Signals from the Shadow Vanguard

Given the rare incidence and even rarer preservation of soldiers' wartime suicide notes, one cannot take the few surviving examples as representative in any quantitative or statistical sense, even of the far end of the self-destructive spectrum. But they are nonetheless *emblematic* of a number of enduring qualitative elements of the suicidal substrate, even when most of the details

of the case are missing.³³ Deep reading these suicides' final missives at the outset, then, brings these largely unheard signals from the shadow vanguard to the fore and elucidates the multivalent forms of thanatological sociality reaching across the war's various physical and immaterial barriers and their emotional effects on the micro-level. In a word, they highlight the quotidian struggles with self-destruction at the heart of the broader wartime genre most sharply.

One of the clearest examples comes from an Infantryman in the Prussian Army who, on 2 May 1917, hanged himself in a Bamberg military hospital where he was being treated. According to the initial notification sent to the Bavarian War Ministry, he left behind a note (*Zettel*), which was transcribed in full in the report: "Matters which I may not name forced me to take this unhappy step. I have something on my conscience from leave which I fear will come to light, and for which I would face punishment. My honor will not suffer this [*Dies leidet meine Ehre nicht*]. Many greetings to my dear parents. I could not do otherwise [*Ich konnte nicht anders*], I wanted it this way."³⁴ All further details of the case are now lost.³⁵ The report specifies that the infantryman was in the 1st Company of the 60th Prussian Infantry Regiment

³³ This is true both of suicide notes in particular and First World War-era ego-documents more generally. As Christian Goeschel notes of a rich collection of chiefly Weimar-era suicide notes spanning 1887-1934, "the uncertainties about their statistical repetitiveness" make it more fruitful "to use them as qualitative evidence" rather than examining them "in a quantitative-systematic way." Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 49. I have also examined the collection, held in the Landesarchiv-Berlin (hereafter: LAB), although, unfortunately, it does not contain any suicide notes from during the war itself, and thus has played a minimal role in my analysis: there is a single note from 1887, two from 1925, and the rest are from the period 1926-1934. LAB, A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-03, # 1939. On the sheer amount of First World War ego-documents (broadly defined) and the subsequent impossibility of examining a statistically 'representative' sample of them, see: Bessel and Wierling, "Ego Documents and the First World War," especially 9-13.

³⁴ BHStA IV M Kr 10912, report labelled "Bamberg, 2. 5. 17. No 869. K.bayr. 5. Infant. Regiment, 1. Ersatz-bataillon. An das K.bayr. Kriegsministerium." "Sachen, die ich nicht nennen darf, zwingen mich zu diesem unglücklichen Schritt. Habe was auf dem Gewissen vom Urlaub her, ich befürchte dieses käme ans Tageslicht. Und sähe einer Straf entgegen. Dies leidet meine Ehre nicht. Viele Grüsse an meine l. Eltern. Ich konnte nicht anders, ich habe es so gewollt."

³⁵ The case does not appear in the 1917 statistical index of suicides in the Bavarian Army, for instance, since the soldier was not, in fact, a Bavarian soldier, but just happened to receive treatment in a Bavarian military hospital. Thus, this rare—if highly incomplete—record of the suicide of a Prussian soldier has been preserved by an accident of archival filing.

(*1.Komps.60.pr.Inf.Regt*), meaning any other records of the case were likely destroyed when the Imperial Archive (*Reichsarchiv*) in Potsdam burned down on 14 April 1945.³⁶

Looking at the structure of the note, it is clear that, despite its brevity, the soldier was simultaneously speaking to two different audiences in two different registers. The first half implicitly addressed his most *immediate* readers (at least primarily), namely, the hospital staff which would most likely find his body and the note—in the event, a nurse.³⁷ Here, while the Infantryman explicitly described his suicide affectively as an “unhappy step” and expressed his “fear” of possible punishment for his actions should they come to light, the emotional elements were clearly secondary. Rather, the chief concern was with explaining his death in self-justificatory *moral* terms which could be readily comprehended by those beyond his personal social circle and working on behalf of the Imperial German state. Indeed, the note begins with an implicit invocation of propriety and an attempted demonstration of the soldier’s upstanding moral comportment by leaving whatever untoward matters he feared coming to light unsaid. It is notable in this regard that the Infantryman used the verb “may” (*dürfen*) rather than “can” (*können*) in his opening statement, emphasizing a sense of permission rather than possibility, and therefore his *decision* to leave those matters unspoken.³⁸ Yet ironically, this subtle index of rectitude is one of the only acknowledgements of the soldier’s agency in the entire note, as the

³⁶ On the history of the First World War and German military archives, including the destruction of most Prussian Army files in the Allied bombing of April 1945, see: Matthias Herrmann, “Das Reichsarchiv 1919–1945” (PhD diss, Humboldt-Universität, 1994); Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (Munich: Paderborn, 2002).

³⁷ The report describes how, upon finding the body, the nurse (*Abteilungsschwester*) tried unsuccessfully to resuscitate the soldier: “Er wurde heute vorm.7 Uhr von der Abteilungsschwester [...] am Wasserleitungsrohr des Abortes hängend aufgefunden. Trotzdem der Körper noch etwas Wärme aufweis, blieben Wiederbelegungsversuche erfolglos.” BHSStA IV M Kr 10912, report labelled “Bamberg, 2. 5. 17. No 869. K.bayr. 5. Infant. Regiment, 1. Ersatz-bataillon. An das K.bayr. Kriegsministerium.”

³⁸ It is because I view this word choice as significant that I have translated the opening clause literally, as “Matters which I may not name” as opposed to either 1) “Matters which I cannot name,” which is perhaps more natural-sounding (since in German as in English, there is a common slippage between ‘can’ and ‘may,’ with the former often being used where the latter is more appropriate or accurate); or 2) “Matters which I dare not name,” which perhaps fits best with the general tenor and purpose of the note, but strays further from the precise language used.

very sentence which contains it sets up the primary topic for the rest of the text: explaining how external forces and factors “forced” him to take his own life.

In this soldier’s framing, the primary causal force was an ostensibly well-functioning set of moral faculties: the weight of his “conscience” (*Gewissen*) in the face of a threat to his “honor” that any revelation of, or military punishment for, his actions would represent. Strikingly, the soldier presented his “honor” as its own independent agentive force, one which acted on, not through, him. As written, it was his *honor*, not the soldier himself, which could not suffer the prospect of punishment and therefore caused his suicide. He explained his death, then, by personifying a widely-intelligible, highly-gendered set of moral feelings—the twined-emotions of honor and shame—which had long been inculcated not only in Germany, but throughout Europe; integral motivating forces on both the mundane and high-political levels.³⁹ As Ute Frevert notes, along with sacrifice, honor and shame were “powerful leitmotifs of national imagination and sensibility” which “gave orientation in a war that strained people’s endurance to a degree unknown prior to 1914.”⁴⁰ In a case such as this, where an overt sacrificial framing was seemingly an ill fit, the soldier apparently fell back explicitly on honor and implicitly on shame as readily-available masculine moral concepts with which to explain his self-inflicted death—the same twined moral emotions that motivated so many of the volunteers

³⁹ Ute Frevert, “Emotions in Times of War: Private and Public, Individual and Collective,” in *Total War: An Emotional History*, eds. Claire Langhamer, Lucy Noakes, and Claudia Siebrecht (London: Oxford University Press, 2020), especially 26-34. That essay is a slight update of an earlier piece which presents a similar argument, though one focused more on the war’s outbreak: Ute Frevert, “Wartime Emotions: Honour, Shame, and the Ecstasy of Sacrifice,” in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson (issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin: 10 August 2014; last updated 8 January 2017). Both pieces are part of Frevert’s longstanding engagement with the history of emotions, particularly since assuming the role of Director of the Max Planck Institute’s Center for the History of Emotions in 2008. Most noteworthy here are two collectively-authored publications which help place these gendered emotions in their *longue durée* historical contexts: Ute Frevert et al, *Learning How to Feel: Children’s Literature and Emotional Socialization, 1870-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and: Ute Frevert et al, *Emotional Lexicons: Continuity and Change in the Vocabulary of Feeling, 1700-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁰ Frevert, “Emotions in Times of War,” 39.

the psychologist Paul Plaut had interviewed almost three years earlier.⁴¹ Further, such an invocation apparently did not require excessive explanation, or indeed, any explanation at all, as the ethical importance and causal force of those moral feelings could be readily assumed as part of his audiences' interpretive infrastructure and hence go without saying. The first section of his suicide note thus reads principally as an effort to preempt any interpretation of his suicide as an act of cowardice, desertion, or weakness, instead framing it as the ultimate example of his moral fortitude. Here was a man who chose death before dishonor, or, as he framed it, had the choice made *for him* by an ethical precept which superseded concern for his own survival.

At this point, the primary register shifts from the explanatory to the affective, as the second half of the note explicitly addressed the Prussian Infantryman's most *intimate* readers: his parents and, by social implication, larger filial circle. Indeed, the Infantryman signaled this shift overtly, as he offered "[m]any greetings to my dear parents [*meine lieben Eltern*]"—a more informal salutation used with those to whom one was, at a minimum, personally acquainted—in the note's penultimate sentence. The intertwining set of social, emotional, and moral concerns in the final sentence is thus rendered all the more significant, as it is the one part of the note directed solely to this intimate audience: "I could not do otherwise, I wanted it this way." Here, the continued abdication of agency—and, with it, the denial of personal moral culpability for his death—appears less as self-justification than as an attempt at consoling those he was about to leave behind, particularly as the soldier presented himself as embracing his 'fate' in the note's

⁴¹ Paul Plaut, "Psychographie des Kriegers," in eds. William Stern and Otto Wiegmann, *Behefte zur Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie*, Vol. 21, *Beiträge zur Psychologie des Kriegers* (1920): 11-12.

final clause.⁴² If he could not have done otherwise, clearly his parents bore no more responsibility for his demise than he himself did.

Further, the echo of Martin Luther's famous (if apocryphal) words—"here I stand, I can do no other [*Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders*]"—reframed the Infantryman's earlier moral self-justification for this intimate audience in terms with at least the potential for a dual cathartic resonance: religious and nationalist. Nearly two-thirds of Germans were Protestant according to the 1910 census, and given that this soldier was an infantryman in the *Prussian Army*, it is likely he and his family were members of some Protestant denomination.⁴³ And while of course there was confessional diversity amongst German Protestants, Lutheranism had long been predominant, particularly in Prussia.⁴⁴ Moreover, regardless of their actual religious affiliation,

⁴² In a meta-historical vein, it thus appears as an affective parallel to the ending of Albert Camus's 1942 novel *The Stranger*, where the protagonist, facing imminent execution, states that "I opened myself to the gentle indifference of the world. Finding it so much like myself—so like a brother, really—I felt that I had been and that I was happy again." The primary difference, however, is that in the soldier's suicide note, the positive emotional framing is aimed at an external audience—his parents—and not at himself. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage, 1988 [1942]): 122-123.

⁴³ In 1910, 61.6% of Germans were members of a Protestant Church, 36.7% were Roman Catholic, and 1% were Jewish: Dietmar Petzina, Werner Abelshausen, and Anselm Faust, eds., *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch, Volume III, Materialien zur Statistik des Deutschen Reiches 1914-1945* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1978): 31. Some areas of Germany, especially rural regions of Bavaria and Württemberg, were majority Catholic. However, since Bavaria and Württemberg had their own Army and Army Corps, respectively, it seems reasonable to assume this soldier was most likely Protestant. On Catholicism's multivalent importance in southern Germany during the war, see: Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (New York: Berg, 2007 [1997]), especially 124-137. See also: Patrick J. Houlihan, *Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁴⁴ This is one of the *longue durée* threads traced by Christopher Clark: Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006). There now is a vast historiography on religion and religious life in 'long nineteenth-century' Germany, which began to pick up steam in the 1980s and enjoyed a particular boom during the early 2000s. Helmut Walser Smith has been one of the most prominent figures in this literature, writing and editing multiple volumes which detail and explore these historical and historiographical issues, particularly the relations between religion and German nationalism. See, *inter alia*: Helmut Walser Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict: Culture, Ideology, Politics, 1970-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Helmut Walser Smith, ed. *Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Germany, 1800-1914* (New York: Berg, 2001); Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002); Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). A solid historical and historiographical introduction to the topic remains: Christopher Clark, "Religion and confessional conflict," in *The Oxford Short History of German: Imperial Germany 1871-1918*, ed. James Retallack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 83-105.

by the time of the war's outbreak, the idea of Luther, Bismarck, and the Hohenzollern dynasty as a national troika wedding 'Germanness' and Protestantism was long-standing, pointing (at least potentially) towards a secular, nationalist resonance as well.⁴⁵ Thus, whether intentional or not, the echo of Luther reverberated in the same moral and emotional key as more direct invocations of sacrifice, duty, and, most pertinently in this case, honor. However imprecisely defined and understood, by highlighting a commitment to principles beyond the self, even to the point of death, the Infantryman displaced responsibility for his suicide from the realm of human agency entirely, absolving—at least rhetorically—both himself and those he left behind in the process.

Ultimately, then, the same framework of vague but powerful socio-emotional and moral forces that emerged so potently in the late summer of 1914 remained palpable enough nearly three years later—that is, after both the 'great battles' at the front and the turnip winter at home—that this Infantryman drew on them to both 1) explain his suicide to an impersonal audience in terms he seemingly assumed they would comprehend with little to no elaboration; and 2) to try and frame the meaning of his death to his most intimate audience in such a way that their grief, anguish, and potential feelings of guilt might be at least somewhat assuaged. But what remained unspoken under that moral and emotional matrix was wartime self-destruction itself: here, an explicit suicide. Indeed, what is most remarkable about the note is how much is left *unsaid* in what this soldier presumably intended to be his final communication. Most notably, the only indication in the text itself that this was a *soldier's* suicide note—or that the Infantryman wrote while a global war *he participated in* was entering its third year—is the single mention of

⁴⁵ Rebekka Habermas, "Piety, Power, and Powerlessness: Religion and Religious Groups in Germany, 1870-1945," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, ed. Helmut Walser Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 459.

leave.⁴⁶ The almost total lack of biographical and contextual specifics both in the report and the suicide note itself renders this generic text as an archetypal example of the on-going endurance of the broader framework of emotional and moral assumptions at work in Great War Germany and its unspoken thanatological underpinnings. Here was a soldier who seemingly assumed that the invocation of an honorable conscience spoke for itself as a cause for suicide. Yet as in 1914, in speaking with—and within—that assumptive architecture, he (likely inadvertently) highlighted the shadow side of that very same complex of moral feelings undergirding the larger war effort, as, in this infantryman’s case, they culminated in the ‘unhappy’ outcome of his suicide.

This inadvertent signaling of the war’s on-going self-destructiveness and its reverberations appeared in less-archetypal suicide notes as well. On 4 March 1918, a 21-year-old Lance Corporal (*Gefreiter*) in a machine gun company of the Bavarian Third Army Corps shot himself in Hof while returning from leave in Straubing.⁴⁷ Included once again in the initial notification was a full transcript of the Lance Corporal’s suicide note, which he had mailed to his company’s Sergeant-Major (*Feldwebel*): “Investigate no further [*Forschen Sie weiter nicht nach*], because I have sought death in the place of my erstwhile happiness. How can I do otherwise, without home and love [*Heimat und Liebe*]? Please send my things to Mrs. Marie [G], Straubing Albrechtgasse. Your most devoted, deeply unhappy, [E].”⁴⁸ The 1918 statistical index

⁴⁶ Even this is highly contextual, however, as the German word for “leave”—*Urlaub*—also means “vacation” in a non-military context. It is perhaps worth noting here, too, that the note also makes no mention of death or suicide, which is euphemized as “this unhappy step.”

⁴⁷ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, Report labelled “Nürnberg, 8. März 18. Ers.M.G.K.5/III.A.K. An das Kgl. Bayr. Kriegs-Ministerium, München. In Abschrift an: das stellv. III.bayr. Armee-Korps. den Herrn Kdeur.d.E.M.G.Kp.III.A.K.” The case also appears in the statistical index of suicides in the Bavarian Army for 1918, although the suicide is erroneously listed as having occurred in February, not March: BHStA IV M Kr 10915, “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen,” “I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibungen,” Laufende Nr. 11.

⁴⁸ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, “Ers.Masch.Gew.Komp.5.III.bayr.A.K. | Abschrift! | Hof, den 4.3.18.” “Forschen Sie weiter nicht nach, denn ich habe an dem Ort meines einstigen Glückes den Tod gesucht. Wie kann ich anders, ohne

of suicides in the Bavarian Army listed the “reason” for his suicide as “unhappy love” (*Unglückliche Liebe*).⁴⁹ It therefore appears that the Bavarian War Ministry ultimately accepted the explanation for the suicide given in the Lance Corporal’s note: an either unrequited or soured love affair appeared as the impetus for suicide, an impetus which, notably, did not appear to implicate the state in any way.

Unlike the Prussian note, the Lance Corporal had a single, explicit audience for his final words, and one quite different from either of those the Prussian addressed: his company’s N.C.O., and thus a likely social conduit to his immediate unit. Given this expressly military—and therefore masculine—addressee, perhaps the most striking aspect of the Lance Corporal’s letter is the mixture of formal, explanatory elements and intimate, emotional ones. First, it is highly significant that he wrote a suicide note for this audience at all. This was, after all, an intentionally *final message*—a last attempt at framing the meaning of his death to a select audience moments before he himself inflicted it, and the only written message mentioned in the surviving records.⁵⁰ The fact that he addressed *this* letter to his N.C.O. therefore implies 1) at least some degree of trust and connection between himself and his Sergeant Major, himself and his company, or both, which was more common amongst the lower ranks and within smaller military units;⁵¹ and 2) a desire on the part of the Lance Corporal for his unit to understand his suicide.

Heimat und Liebe? Senden Sie bitte meine Sachen an Frau Marie [G], Straubing Albrechtsgasse. | Jhr Ergebnester tiefunglücklicher [E].” I have omitted all names in the interest of privacy.

⁴⁹ BHStA IV M Kr 10915 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen,” “I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibungen,” Laufende Nr. 11.

⁵⁰ It is of course possible that the soldier wrote and sent multiple suicide notes to different audiences, and this letter to his Company *Feldwebel* is the only one whose existence is recorded because it served the bureaucratic needs of the Bavarian Army so well. Nonetheless, other reports often mentioned if multiple notes were present, and thus it is probable this was the Lance Corporal’s only suicide note.

⁵¹ The widely documented *Offizierhaß* (“hatred of officers”) present throughout the German Army, and particularly prominent amongst rural Bavarian soldiers, was typically reserved for those above the rank of First Lieutenant

Yet despite the degree of emotional connection the very existence of this note strongly implied, he addressed his Sergeant Major using the formal “you” (*Sie*), an indication of respect for his higher rank and authority, but also a marker of a definite limit and boundary to the degree of intimacy present. This is all the more conspicuous given the deep emotional expressions that appear throughout the brief text. On a narrative level, the explanation for this juxtaposition is quite clear. Unlike the Prussian Infantryman’s note, where the explanatory elements were largely separate from the affective ones and aimed at a different audience, here, emotions *were* the explanation: the Bavarian explicitly described his unhappiness as the cause of his self-inflicted death, not simply its characterization. But as the Prussian note makes clear, including any particulars as to the cause of that unhappiness was an authorial choice, one laden with social, moral, and emotional weight. Thus, on a contextual level, this qualified intimate revelation—a laconic cry of suicidal despair *to a superior officer*—was a manifestation of the depth of connection possible between soldiers, even when the barriers of linguistic formality and military authority remained firmly intact. Indeed, his final valediction—“your most devoted, deeply unhappy, [E]”—takes on this same affective quality: a further simultaneous expression of restrained formality and intimacy, with both the devotion and unhappiness presented as equally genuine and important.

In direct line with this particular mix of the affective and the explanatory, the opening command to “investigate no further” suggests, second, that the Lance Corporal may have been aware of the Bavarian Army’s reporting mandates for soldiers’ suicides and who would likely be

(*Oberleutnant*), who generally spent little to no time in the lines and often had little direct social or emotional connection with their men: Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 124-133. Bavarian soldiers’ discontent is a recurring theme through Ziemann’s first monograph: Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (New York: Berg, 2007 [1997]), most concisely summarized on: 80.

involved in the investigation into his death.⁵² While perhaps unintentional, the opening sentence quite directly addresses the Bavarian War Ministry's directive that investigations into such events must continue until "the causes and consequences of the incident are fully clarified, or further inquiry appears futile [*aussichtslos*]," a directive which was reissued to all Bavarian Army units in 1915.⁵³ It is possible, then, that the *Gefreiter* attempted to ease the burden on the soldiers he left behind by making an explicit statement explaining his suicide to his immediate superior right at the outset—and one which either intentionally or coincidentally accorded well with the slant of the state's archival grain.

Here, perhaps the most salient contrast between the two notes emerges: their authors' presentations of their own agency. While the Prussian Infantryman rhetorically abdicated it by making himself the object and the unspecified 'matters' the subject of the relevant sentence—a syntactic construction implying his being at the mercy of larger impersonal forces—the Bavarian *Gefreiter* wrote entirely in the first-person, with himself as the subject and the one who 'sought death.' In so doing, he functionally acknowledged his responsibility for his death, framing it as the product of his own inability to deal with the collapse of his romantic relationship. But, more importantly, he also assured his audience, different as it was, that they were not to blame for his suicide, as the Prussian Infantryman had also done the year before.

⁵² It is also noteworthy that this is one of the few cases where one has some indication of who the military investigators were. The note itself implies that the company Sergeant Major would be involved, and the transcript of the note was signed by the company commander, who attested to its accuracy, further implying that it was the company commander who actually filed the notification. The company commander signed off on the report on 8 March 1918, four days after the suicide and the day before it reached the Bavarian War Ministry: "The accuracy of the transcript of the note received by Sergeant Major [B] of the 5th Replacement Machine Gun Company of the Bavarian Third Army Corps on the morning of 8 March 1918 is confirmed. | Nürnberg, 8 March 1918. | [illegible signature] | First Lieutenant and Company Commander. [Die Richtigkeit der Abschrift des Briefes, den Feldwebel [B] der Ers.M.G.K.5/III.A.K. am 8.3.18. Vorm. erhalten hat, bestätigt. | Nürnberg, 8.3.18. | [illegible signature] | Oberlt.u. Komp. Führer.]"

⁵³ BHStA IV M Kr 10912 'Selbstmörder vom Jahre 1914 mit 1917. (30.8),' "No 24200. Kriegsministerium. München, 9. November 1912. Neudruck 1915. An die sämtlichen mobile Truppenteile usw.": "sobald die Ursachen und Folgen des Vorkommnisses völlig geklärt sind oder weitere Erhebungen aussichtslos erscheinen."

In absolving his unit in this way, specifying the romantic causes of his suicide, and providing clear directions as to precisely what should be done with his things (thus erasing any remaining practical uncertainties that might arise in the aftermath of his death), the very existence of the Lance Corporal's suicide note became an implicit testament to his military 'devotion,' both practically and emotionally, regardless of whether he was consciously thinking of the Bavarian War Ministry Ordinance and the duties it would impose on his company or not. Indeed, the fact that he chose to shoot himself in a location of great personal emotional significance ("the place of my erstwhile happiness"), as well as the fact that his suicide note was actually *mailed* to his Sergeant Major, suggests that a great deal of forethought went into not only the symbolism—and thus intended meaning—of his suicide, but also the particular material and emotional consequences his death would engender across the various social webs in which he was embedded, especially his immediate military circle.

In this respect, the Lance Corporal's case does not appear to be an isolated incident. On the afternoon of 16 December 1917, for instance, the 33-year-old Sergeant (*Feldwebel*) of the First Machine Gun Company of the Fifth Bavarian Infantry Regiment was runover by a train in Thiaucourt-Regniéville in an apparent suicide attempt, dying of his wounds later that night. According to the final report on the case, received by the Bavarian War Ministry nearly two months later, this Sergeant also sent a letter to his immediate superior—here, the Lieutenant in command of the company—apparently expressing his intention to commit suicide after he had come under investigation for embezzlement.⁵⁴ In this case, too, the Bavarian War Ministry apparently took this soldier at his word: the 1917 statistical index listed the reason for his suicide

⁵⁴ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, Report labelled "27. 1. 1918. | 5. Infanterie-Regiment Grossherzog | Ernst Ludwig von Hessen | An | die K. 7. Infanterie-Brigade." According to the stamp on the report, it was received by the Bavarian War Ministry on 14 February 1918.

as “fear of punishment” (*Furcht vor Strafe*).⁵⁵ Although the report only summarizes the letter’s contents and contains no direct quotations from it, as with the Lance Corporal’s note, its very existence further indexes the socio-emotional centrality of these intra-military relations. In both instances, the suicides themselves decided to provide a framing and a meaning for their deaths to their immediate superiors, explaining their motives in such a way that assured their surviving comrades that they were not responsible for their self-inflicted deaths.⁵⁶

But what is most telling about soldiers’ suicide notes as a sub-genre, and their place at the vanguard of the larger genre of *Abschiedsbriefe* more broadly, is not just this common *concern* with absolving—and thus to at least some extent consoling—those left behind, but the *specific uses of language* deployed to do so and the moral and emotional relations to death they index. When read together, the most striking aspect of the Prussian and Bavarian notes is their near-identical expressions of fatalism, with each author asserting that they ‘could not do otherwise,’ the former with a direct statement, the latter with a rhetorical question. This is particularly notable given that 1) the two notes were addressed to audiences with different gender and generational makeups, and fundamentally different relations to and experiences of the war; and 2) the fact that the Bavarian *Gefreiter* was Catholic, and thus much less likely to be intentionally echoing Luther, at least in a religious vein.⁵⁷ This common rhetorical expression points instead

⁵⁵ BHStA IV M Kr 10919 ‘Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1917,’ ‘I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibung,’ Laufende Nr. 119.

⁵⁶ I use the noun “comrades” here simply to denote the immediate military audience for these suicide notes, that is, the men in the suicides’ companies as distinct from other, non-military relations they also left behind. It is not meant to in any way denote a general stance on homosocial bonding within the German military, its relation(s) to violence, nor to posit any *a priori* assumption about the relationships of these suicides with the other men in their units. Thomas Kühne has been perhaps the most prominent historical analyst of these issues, focusing chiefly on the *Wehrmacht*, but also exploring the valences of ‘comradeship’ over the course of the ‘short twentieth century,’ most recently in: Thomas Kühne, *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler’s Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

⁵⁷At least according to the Bavarian War Ministry’s statistical index. The entry in the “Confession” column is a “k” for “katholisch.” BHStA IV M Kr 10915 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen,” Section 1.A., Laufende Nr. 11.”

towards a more capacious aspect of the suicidal substrate that, at a minimum, had the capacity to transcend and unite the various wartime experiential communities in a common mode of cathartic understanding, one rooted in the war's particular complex of thanatological concatenations: a general acceptance of wartime death as a fate divorced from any one person's individual agency.⁵⁸

For soldiers in all armies, but especially for combatants on the Western Front, an intensely shrunken agentive milieu was one of the defining experiences of the war, particularly when it came to the threat of death in battle.⁵⁹ Ernst Jünger pithily captured the quotidian omnipresence of this condition in his chronicle of the 1918 trench battles, *Copse 125*. Describing how he sat down to have breakfast in a patch of grass in the line one morning in July 1918 “[b]ecause it was not shooting at all [*Da es gar nicht schoß*],” he went on to explain that “this expression, incidentally, is a nice sign of how impersonally we experienced the enemy, almost like a natural event [*Naturereignis*].”⁶⁰ Indeed, on a deeper thanatological level, Jünger's passive

⁵⁸ Once again, I here draw on the analytic concept of ‘communities of experience’ as described and deployed by Roger Chickering: Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918*, 2nd Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004 [1998]): 130.

⁵⁹ I here build on the idea of the ‘shrunken milieu’ as described by Nancy Rose Hunt, which emphasizes “structural issues, even the catastrophic, inhibiting a world and its inhabitants,” but without falling into a narrative solely of passive “suffering,” devoid of any counter-motion, breach, or dissent. Further, as a term, ‘milieu’ denotes both spatial and social surroundings, and emphasizes their relations: Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 16-18. By utilizing this concept, though, I do not mean to read German soldiers as ‘subalterns’ analogous to those at the center of Hunt's study, nor imply that the intra-military hierarchy was akin to a colonial structure like that found in the Congo.

⁶⁰ Ernst Jünger, *Das Wäldchen 125: Eine Chronik aus den Grabenkämpfen 1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1925): 49. The full sentence in the original German reads: “Da es gar nicht schoß—dieser Ausdruck ist übrigens ein schönes Zeichen dafür, wie unpersönlich wir den feind erleben, fast wie ein Naturereignis—und es mir auch an Zeit nicht fehlte, setzte ich mich mitterwegs auf einen großen, in den Graben gerutschten Grasplacken, frühstückte und sah den Tieren zu.” The opening line was mistranslated in the English edition as “As it ‘was shooting’,” though it still captures the passive voice construction and the behavioral passivity it linguistically encapsulates. No translator is listed for the English edition: Ernst Jünger, *Copse 125: A Chronicle from the Trench Warfare of 1918* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1930): 55. That English edition, with the mistranslation, is also the one excerpted in Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Franz Coetzee's edited primary source collection: Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Franz Coetzee, eds., *Empires, Soldiers, and Citizens: A World War I Sourcebook* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 67. While the expression still serves as a fitting encapsulation for this particular experience of combat, it is perhaps also worth noting here that Jünger's diary makes no mention of this on the date—6 July 1918—given in *Copse 125*,

voice expression ‘it was not shooting’ indicates the degree to which it was not ‘the enemy’ as such had which become impersonal and experientially analogous to the weather, but rather the prospect of death itself. The enemy was quite literally nowhere to be seen, and whether it was shells or water that rained down, within this shrunken milieu, often all one could do was seek shelter and hope to survive.⁶¹ In this sense, the idea of being ‘unable to do otherwise’ in regard to one’s death had deep roots in the specific modes of combat and encounters with violence First World War soldiers experienced—a particular emotional consequence which the wartime inclination toward death continuously engendered so long as hostilities continued.

Moreover, the very structures of military discipline and authority added a further background layer of agentive constraint, though one which was occasionally spotlighted by the shadow vanguard in exceedingly stark terms. Arguably the most austere example comes from the Saxon Army, where a Cavalryman (*Ulan*) shot himself with his service rifle behind his barracks on 26 November 1914, apparently due to a fear that he would *not* be sent into combat. The report on the case from the Saxon Army Medical Service (*Sanitätsdienst*) stated that “[a]ccording to a letter (Postcard) he left behind, he committed the act because he believed he wouldn’t be going back to the front now.”⁶² While the rest of the surviving documentation does not shed any light on why the Cavalryman believed this or why he reacted so strongly and lethally, this suicide, too, appears to have understood himself as being out of alternatives due to forces beyond his

indicating that it may have come from his later postwar reflections: Ernst Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch, 1914-1918*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010): 407.

⁶¹ Alexander Watson discusses the feelings of impotence and disempowerment that came with these ‘rains’ of artillery fire for German troops: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 28-32.

⁶² Sächsisches Staatsarchiv-Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (hereafter: SStA-HD) 11352 Stellvertretendes Generalkommando des XIX. Armeekorps, Nr. 1289 ‘Selbstmorde, Unglücksfälle, Krankheiten, Beerdigungen und Entlassung Genesener aus dem Lazarett,’ report labelled “Chemnitz, den 28.11.14. | Ersatz-Esk.3.Ul.Rgt.Nr.21. B. B. Nr. | Sanitätsdienst | Br. B. Nr. 313 | An | das Königliche Sanitätsamt des XIX. (2.K.S.) Armeekorps Leipzig.” “Aus einem hinterlassenen Schreiben (Postkarte) hat er die Tat deswegen begangen, weil er glaubte, jetzt nicht wieder mit ins Feld zu kommen.”

control.⁶³ Indeed, once one became a soldier, the army command decided the size, shape, and makeup of one's milieu, both social and spatial. On the level of conditions and catalysts, whether one would have to face the enemy or not was therefore decided impersonally by forces both literally and metaphorically distant from the vast majority of soldiers.⁶⁴ Of course, resorting to suicide as the Saxon *Ulan* did was an extreme and exceptional response. Yet its very extremity puts this circumscribed condition into its sharpest relief, highlighting the degree to which soldiers could experience the power of these thanatological forces as fundamentally non-intelligible *even outside of any experience in combat*.⁶⁵

Viewed in this context, one could read the assertions that these suicides 'could not do otherwise' as an extrapolation from the fatalism inculcated throughout multiple, overlapping facets of wartime military life. This is particularly true of the Bavarian Lance Corporal. First, the *Gefreiter* was in his third year of military service at the time of his death.⁶⁶ He had thus been

⁶³ The more detailed report, cited above, came from the Deputy Medical Director of the Landwehr II (*Oberarzt der Landwehr II*), and is essentially an autopsy report. The majority of the text concerns the state of the Cavalryman's body and a medical description of the cause of death; it contains no biographical details. The other surviving document is the initial report sent by the Company Officer (*Rittmeister der Ersatz-Eskadron*) to the Deputy General Command of the 19th Army Corps and the Saxon War Ministry, which states only that the *Ulan* was found shot behind the barracks: Ibid., report labelled "Chemnitz, den 26.11.14. | Eskadron Ul.21 | An das Kgl. Stellvertr. Generalkommando | XIX. A.K."

⁶⁴ At least some contemporaries noticed this during the war itself, particularly after the ascension of Hindenburg and Ludendorff. Hermann Hesse, for example, published a short story titled "If the War Goes on Another Two Years" in late 1917 under his pseudonym Emil Sinclair (which he would also use for his 1919 novel *Demian*), wherein his protagonist is forced to navigate a fictionalized hyperbole of Germany's wartime bureaucracy, which now requires a "demise card" for one to be allowed to die and an "existence card" to be allowed to continue living: Hermann Hesse, *If the War Goes On...: Reflections on War and Politics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971 [1946]): 20-29. The framework of conditions, catalysts, and contingencies comes from Leonhard, although he uses the term 'determinants' rather than 'conditions.' Jörn Leonhard, *Pandora's Box: A History of the First World War*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2018 [2014]): 63.

⁶⁵ Here, I build from Geoff Eley's concept of "the non-intelligibility of power," defined as "the belief that power is exercised in a distant place, behind closed doors and opaque glass, by conspiracies of elites who are beholden to no one and *simply do not care*." Geoff Eley, "Liberalism in Crisis: What is fascism and where does it come from?" in *Fascism in America: Past and Present*, eds. Gavriel Rosenfeld and Janet Ward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023): 62. Emphasis original. While here Eley is writing about the threat of fascist politics in twenty-first century America and the conditions of possibility undergirding it, the broader point about the importance and effects of a nexus of distance, opacity, unintelligibility, and indifference still aptly describes this earlier proto-fascist moment, even though the analogy is of course not one-to-one, and I in no way mean to imply any kind of teleological narrative.

⁶⁶ BHStA IV M Kr 10915 "Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen," Section 1.A., Laufende Nr. 11.

living under direct military discipline for almost the full duration of the war, on top of the general and on-going physical, social, emotional, and moral displacement this protracted service period inherently entailed.⁶⁷ Second, he was likely a veteran of multiple major combat engagements. The Bavarian Third Army Corps of which he was a part had helped repel the French attack on Lorraine in 1914, participated in the Second Battle of Champagne in 1915, the Battle of the Somme in 1916, and the Battle of Caporetto in 1917: they had been involved in at least one major battle every year by the time of the Lance Corporal's suicide in 1918.⁶⁸ Hence, in his case at least, both sets of constraining pressures appear to have been at work for a prolonged period. But in both cases, the soldiers applied this resignation to the realm of the ostensibly 'personal' as *both* a form of moral self-justification and an attempt at emotional consolation for those left behind—that is, as part of a common assumptive framework uniting home and front.

Indeed, the socio-emotional connections *across* home and front and the catalytic intersections between these superficially discrete spheres were implicitly central to both suicide notes. In the Prussian Infantryman's case, his suicide note clearly states that it was an event *at home*, while he was on leave, that was the spur for his eventual suicide in the Bamberg military hospital. Similarly, the Bavarian *Gefreiter* not only asked for his things to be sent to a married woman in Straubing—likely his erstwhile love interest⁶⁹—but further specified that what he felt

⁶⁷ While it is unclear from the surviving documentation whether the *Gefreiter* was a volunteer or a conscript, the statistical index does specify that he was not a professional soldier, but was some kind of servant (*Diener*) in Kelheim in civilian life: Ibid. He was thus subject to all the various forms of displacement such 'civilians in uniform' experienced.

⁶⁸ The Corps's specific roles throughout the war are recounted in the official military history of the Bavarian: Bayerisches Kriegsarchiv, *Die Bayern im GröÙen Kriege 1914-1918, Bd.I* (Munich: Druckerei des Landesfinanzamts, 1923); all the mentions of the Third Army Corps, specifically, are listed in the index: 598.

⁶⁹ The surviving documentation does not make it clear who precisely "Mrs. Marie [G.]" was, although given her address in Straubing, it seems likely she may have been his love interest. Given this likelihood, the echoes of *Werther* appear much more blatant and direct, since the Bavarian War Ministry statistical index specifies that the *Gefreiter* was unmarried (*ledig*). Regardless, the strength and importance of the connections between home and front, particularly as they related to death, remain clear independent of the exact relationship between the Lance Corporal and the woman in Straubing.

he had lost, along with “love,” was his “home” (*Heimat*)—a term with strong provincial socio-cultural, political and emotional connotations, and which explicitly denoted the home front during the war.⁷⁰ In both their causes and consequences, then, each of these suicides revealed how deeply socio-emotionally intertwined the two spheres remained even as the war entered its final phase: both spheres were part of a common shrunken milieu created by the conflict itself, defined in its particulars by the decisions of the German state and military. And while both inadvertently highlighted the self-destructive underside of this unity through their self-inflicted deaths, even more noteworthy is the fact that *neither* mentioned either the war or the fact of being a soldier in their final missives. The conflagration itself became a form of thanatological background noise that could, as such, go without saying, even as those tasked by the state with continuing to fight it took their own lives—an integral element in the unconscious concealment of the shadow vanguard’s signals.

In at least one case, however, a soldier communicated the point about the war’s enduring suicidal undercurrent explicitly, not just through his actions, but directly through his final words. In the early morning hours of 18 May 1918, a 24-year-old Medical Staff Sergeant (*Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel*) in the Bavarian Army jumped to his death from the fourth-story window of a military hospital in Munich.⁷¹ In civilian life, he had been a barber in Dorfen, but in May 1918, he was in his fifth year of military service and stationed at a military hospital in Neuulm.⁷² While he was in a psychiatric clinic at the time, and had been transferred to the Neurotic Department (*Neurotiker-Abteilung*) only two days before his suicide, his death came as a surprise to his

⁷⁰ The pioneering work on *Heimat* remains: Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁷¹ BHStA IV, Sanitätsamt I. Armeekorps 474 ‘Ärztliche Berichterstattung’ (hereafter: I. AK SanA, 474), report labelled “München, den 18. Mai 1918. Reservelazarett München K. Behandlungsabt.für Kriegsneurotiker. Stat. B 3. An den Kgl. Chefarzt.”

⁷² BHStA IV M Kr 10915 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen,” Section 1.A., Laufende Nr. 25. He had therefore been drafted prior to the war.

medical handlers. According to the report sent to the Royal Head Physician (*Königlicher Cherarzt*) on the day of his death, the soldier had no history of suicide or serious mental illness in his family. He had previously been treated psychiatrically for “psychopathy,” a state of “nervous exhaustion,” but only “made a slightly depressed, very calm impression.”⁷³ Both the report from 18 May and the follow-up report sent a week later attested that “[h]e had made no statements of a self-threatening nature to anyone.”⁷⁴ Indeed, his case was considered so mild that he was housed in a wing of the ward which did not have a night watch.⁷⁵

On the day of his suicide “an unaddressed envelope was found among his things [*bei seinem Nachlass*], which was opened by the head physician” and contained four separate letters. Two were addressed to non-family members—one to a woman named Lina and one to “the Burger family,” both of whom resided in Munich—and “were mailed to the addressees at the instigation of the Court Commission [*Veranlassung der Gerichtskommission*],” presumably unopened. The reports make no mention of what relationships the N.C.O. might have had with the addressees, nor about the contents of those letters. The other two letters, however, were addressed to the soldier’s parents and siblings, respectively, and were not only opened by the investigating doctor before being handed over to the family, but were transcribed in their entirety.⁷⁶ “To my dear parents!” the first began,

with a heavy heart I beg your forgiveness for this act. Fate has conferred this upon me [*Das Schicksal war mir so beschieden*]. Divide my savings amongst my siblings. Have Neuulm send you my things. Please also let me bring the point home as much as possible: I, too, sacrificed my health for the Fatherland [*Auch ich habe meine Gesundheit fürs Vaterland geopfert*]. Don’t cry for me, but only pray and do not forget your unhappy Otto.

⁷³ BHStA IV I. AK SanA, 474, report from 18 May 1918.

⁷⁴ Ibid., report labelled “K.Res.Laz.München K. Stat.B 3. Empf.25.5.18.” “Er hatte zu niemandem irgend welche Aeusserung selbstgefährlicher Art gemacht.”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ BHStA IV I. AK SanA, 474, report from 18 May 1918.

Farewell until we see each other again!

A final greeting from your thankful, Otto.⁷⁷

The second letter was similar, though not identical:

To my siblings! I beg your forgiveness for my action. The fate of God has conferred this upon me [*Das Schicksal Gottes war mir so beschieden*]. Please comfort my dear parents, especially my dear mother. A typical nervous affliction [*Nervenleiden*] which would have been a burden on my dear parents for the foreseeable future was the reason for this act. Please remember me in your prayers and preserve a memory of me.

Farewell until we see each other again!

A final greeting from your unhappy brother, Otto.⁷⁸

The report concludes with a statement attesting to the accuracy of the transcription, which was signed by the hospital's head doctor (*Chefarzt*).⁷⁹

Reading the two letters together, the first noteworthy aspect is that the Staff Sergeant began both with a plea for forgiveness, and thus an implicit acknowledgement of transgression. Given that this soldier was catholic—as, presumably, were his addressees—it is possible this implicit admission of sin was meant as an act of contrition.⁸⁰ Indeed, in the years immediately after the war, the Catholic chaplaincy explicitly reaffirmed that “suicide is contrary to God,” even in cases where soldiers took their own lives, and thus any hope for salvation would be

⁷⁷ Ibid., report from 25 May 1918. “An meine Lieben Eltern! | Schweren Herzens bitte ich Euch um Verzeihung für diese Tat. Das Schicksal war mir so beschieden. Teilt mein Erspartes an meine Geschwisterte auf. Laßt Euch meine Sachen von Neuulm hereinschicken. Lasset mich bitten auch Möglichkeit nach Hause bringen. Auch ich habe meine Gesundheit fürs Vaterland geopfert. Weinet nicht für mich, sondern betet nur und vergesst Eueren unglücklichen Otto nicht. | Lebt wohl auf Wiedersehen! | Letzter Gruß | Euer dankbarer | Otto.”

⁷⁸ Ibid. “An meine Geschwisterte! | Bitte Euch um Verzeihung für meine Tat. Das Schicksal Gottes war mir so beschieden. Tröstet bittet meine lieben Eltern, besonders meine liebe Mutter. Ein typisches Nervenleiden, in dem ich meinen lieben Eltern in absehbarer Zeit zur Last gefallen wäre, war der Grund zu dieser Tat. Gedenkt meiner bitte im Gebet und bewahrt mir ein Andenken. | Lebt wohl auf Wiedersehen. | Letzter Gruß euer unglücklicher Bruder | Otto.”

⁷⁹ Ibid. “Für die Richtigkeit der Abschrift. München, den 18.Mai 1918. Res.Laz.München.K. Der Chefarzt: gez.”

⁸⁰ BHStA IV M Kr 10915 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen,” Section 1.A., Laufende Nr. 25.

inherently tied to confession and repentance.⁸¹ There is some evidence, however, that asking forgiveness was actually a general convention of First World War suicide notes, one which transcended national and denominational lines. A Russian prisoner of war who committed suicide on 2 April 1916 while part of an agricultural labor battalion (*Arbeitskommando*) in Landstuhl, for instance, left a suicide note stating that “no one is to blame for my death, forgive me, we’ll see each other again.”⁸² More important than any specific religious resonances of such pleas, it seems, was their role in the attempted consolation of those left behind, though of course the two were not mutually exclusive. By asking for forgiveness in their suicide notes, the deceased simultaneously acknowledged both the moral *and* emotional consequences of their action, as the appeal itself indexed a recognition of the pain and grief their deaths would cause while also, ironically, reaffirming the importance of the very ties which their suicides would sever. It is also noteworthy in this regard that both the Medical Staff Sergeant and the Russian POW concluded their notes with express statements that they would ‘see’ their addressees again, implying that that severing was only temporary—that death itself could not permanently break their social and emotional bonds. In this sense, their final valedictions prefigured the striking postwar increase in spiritualism, “one of the most disturbing and powerful means by which the living ‘saw’ the dead of the Great War, and used their ‘return’ to help survivors cope with their loss and their trauma,” as Jay Winter argues.⁸³

⁸¹ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter: BA-MA) PH 32/394 ‘Akten betreffend Selbstmörder,’ “Selbstmord im Reichsheere,” 6. “Der Selbstmord ist gottwidrig.” While the report is undated, based on the references within it to data from December 1922 through November 1923, as well as its place within the larger file, which is organized chronologically, the report is likely from sometime in 1924.

⁸² BHStA IV M Kr 10912, Report labelled “Germersheim, 2. 4. 16. No 7152 Kommandantur des Kr.Gef.Lagers An K.Kriegsministerium, München. im Abdruck K.Inspektion der Gef.Lager II.A.K.” “an meinem Tod ist niemand schuld, verzeiht mir, wir sehen uns wieder.” The note was in Russian, but was translated in both the initial report and a later follow up report from 15 September 1916.

⁸³ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 54. For the full discussion of spiritualism: 54-77.

Second, as the Prussian Infantryman and the Bavarian *Gefreiter* had done, the *Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel*, too, presented his suicide fatalistically, as a destiny divorced from his own shrunken sphere of agency. The Staff Sergeant, however, gave explicit voice to both this fatalistic thanatological sentiment *and* its consoling function, which the others had only (strongly) implied. First, he explicitly used the term ‘fate’ (*Schicksal*) in both of his letters, tying it to his earlier appeal for absolution and directly continuing the consoling thread. Indeed, the explicit reference to a God-given destiny in the latter note to his siblings, in particular, appears in a decidedly cathartic vein as an acknowledgement of an unpredictable but ultimately benevolent divine will, one which the faithful would not and should not question, as well as the possibility of forgiveness for his sin—a linkage of theological and emotional elements.⁸⁴ Second, as the Prussian Infantryman had done with his ‘honor,’ this soldier personified ‘fate’ as the subject of the sentences in which it appears, reinforcing the idea of it as an independent force within the syntax of the sentence itself. His specific diction, however, made the comforting intention of these fatalistic expressions explicit. His use of the German verb ‘bescheiden’—meaning ‘to grant/give’ something in its transitive form, but also ‘to content oneself’ in its reflexive form—in those same sentences indicated not just *acceptance* of his ‘fate’ as something determined beyond him, but finding a *contentment* in it, a contentment which he then communicated to the immediate family circle he was about to leave behind.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ This catholic understanding of predestination is theologically distinct from the notion of ‘double-predestination’ most famously found in Calvinism. The theologian Matthew Levering discusses these issues at length in: Matthew Levering, *Predestination: Biblical and Theological Paths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). On the theology of predestination within Catholicism at the time of the war, see: Joseph Pohle, “Predestination,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia: An International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church Vol. XII*, eds. Charles G. Herberman et al (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911): 378-384.

⁸⁵ See the first two definitions of ‘bescheiden’ in the Cambridge German-English dictionary: *Cambridge Dictionary, German-English Dictionary*, s.v. “bescheiden,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/bescheiden> (accessed 27 April 2021).

Yet those communications were not uniform, as the Staff Sergeant attempted consolation in different modes with different mandates to each audience, despite both being part of what was presumably his most intimate circle. First, it is highly significant that he tasked his parents and siblings with distinct emotional and behavioral work. The practical matters that would arise in the immediate aftermath of his death he left to his parents: dividing his financial assets and seeing that his belongings were returned home from his last military post in Neuulm. He explicitly charged his siblings, however, with the ongoing *affective* work of comforting their parents in the wake of his death. He thus appears to have at least implicitly recognized the particular form of emotional devastation his death would create by inverting the usual generational thanatology, a manifestation of a broader enduring trend wherein the war itself forced millions of parents to bury their progeny.⁸⁶ Yet this division of emotional labor also meant that it was now his *siblings* who bore the weight of providing solace to their parents on top of the weight of their brother's suicide. Thus, second, the soldier assumed that need for that solace was not equally distributed amongst the family members, nor even between the two parents. Instead, he was concerned most of all with his mother. Despite the imprecision of each letter's salutation—neither the transcripts nor the reports specify the age or gender of his siblings, for example, nor even how many of them there were—the second note, especially, makes clear that the figure of the mother as the primary mourner sat at the center of the Staff Sergeant's concerns, which added an essential gendered contour to these final missives on top of the clear generational one.

This proved most consequential in the differing explanation for his suicide he gave to each group. As with the Prussian Infantryman and the Bavarian Lance Corporal, the Staff

⁸⁶ On the inversion of generational death during the war, see: Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 212-213.

Sergeant's letter to his siblings makes no mention of the war at all, and there are no indications in it that the author was a soldier, nor that the suicide occurred after almost four years of global conflict that he participated in. Even the explanation itself—a “nervous affliction which would have been a burden”—effaced the wartime context and presented what would presumably be a morally comprehensible reason for his self-inflicted death whether it occurred during peace or war.⁸⁷ Further, such an explanation added a gloss of selflessness to what was otherwise, as the opening appeals for forgiveness indicated, a transgressive act: a presentation of his suicide as an implicit sacrifice which would ‘unburden’ his parents and especially his “dear mother.” At least as far as the siblings were concerned, it seems, the fact of the war could quite literally go without saying.

Yet this was not so for his parents. To them, he made no mention of being a “burden” and said nothing about his “typical nervous affliction.” Instead, he wrapped the twinned—though in this case implicit—moral feelings of honor and shame in the explicit language of national sacrifice: “I, too, sacrificed my health for the Fatherland.” In this single sentence, the *Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel* encapsulated the enduring core of the suicidal substrate. First, the use of “too”

⁸⁷ A comparable example occurred in Weimar Berlin, which highlights the degree to which such an explanation could be ostensibly detached from the war. A former bank director shot himself in the head with a pistol on 19 February 1926, two days shy of his 58th birthday. According to the police report, he “had to be supported because of his wounds [*von seinen Verwundten unterstützt werden mußte*]” and “was sick and unable to work [*Er war krank und arbeitsunfähig geworden*].” His suicide note stated that “I can’t endure it anymore because of the discomfort and pain [*Da ich es vor Beschwerden und Schmerzen nicht mehr aushalten kann*]:” “My condition is so awful, eternal throbbing in my body, so that I can no longer live [*Mein Zustand ist zu schrecklich, ewiges Klopfen im Körper, so dass ich nicht länger leben kann*].” It is unclear from the surviving report whether or not he was a veteran and if he sustained his wounds during the First World War, but both seem likely, given his age. Most significant here, however, is the report’s implication that while his on-going physical pain and ailments constituted the most immediate *emotional* cause of his suicide, the *social* cause was in his need for support, and thus an unspoken concern with burdening his loved ones may also have played a role in his death. Finally, it is worth noting that this man, too, was primarily concerned with consoling those left behind, and as the *Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel* had done eight years prior, implicitly acknowledged the immediate affective consequences his death would likely engender, writing in his suicide note: “You won’t be angry with me [*Du wirst mir nicht böse sein*].” LAB A Pr. Br. Rep. 030-03, # 1939, # 181-4. On the broader context of suicides in Weimar Germany, see: Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany*, 11-55; Moritz Föllmer, “Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin,” *Central European History* Vol. 42, No. 2 (2009): 195-221. On disabled veterans in Weimar: Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001): 61-97, 149-187.

(*auch*) indicates an awareness on the part of the author that the truth of his claim of moral rectitude—of having sacrificed for the nation—would likely be in doubt. Indeed, he made the concern explicit, as a point he unambiguously wanted to ‘bring home as much as possible’ to his parents, which itself indicates he felt a need to convince them of it: *this* was not something which could go without saying. That simple adverb, therefore, indexes a specific set of quotidian socio-emotional consequences of the unspoken categorical distinction between ‘suicide’ and ‘sacrifice’—the assumption that the two were mutually exclusive categories—on the micro-level, beyond the direct realm of the state. In his final words to a deeply intimate audience, this soldier decided to pre-emptively address those potential doubts by attempting to reframe a source of possible shame as its opposite by rhetorically coding his suicide in the same sacrificial language used for morally acceptable—and often laudable—implicitly self-destructive deaths. To his parents, then, he expressly tied his suicide to the on-going war, and placed the moral justification for the conflagration at the heart of the explanation for his own suicide, directly undermining the assumption of mutual exclusivity in the process: he, too, had walked the path to general sacrifice.

But whether the explanation given to his siblings or his parents (or some other explanation altogether) was the ‘true’ one—a proposition which is impossible to adjudicate in any case—is much less important than the what the presence of *these* explanations in *these* missives illustrates about the war more broadly. That is to say, second, the very fact that he, too, used the sacrificial framing which had been sitting at the core of the emotional mobilization for war since August 1914 is a testament to its enduring socio-emotional resonance *at the far end of the self-destructive spectrum* all the way into 1918, notably right at the point when the first two operations of the Spring Offensive had already ground to a halt and Germany’s defeat was

definitively on the horizon.⁸⁸ This soldier pointed directly to the worm at that core by overtly explaining his personal suicide as a result of his national sacrifice. Here, no inference was necessary to see the self-destructive consequences of four years of total war: he sacrificed his health—both mental and physical—for the Fatherland, a sacrifice which culminated in him leaping from a fourth-story window. In this rare case, ‘sacrifice’ did not paper over ‘suicide.’ Instead, this soldier’s death and final message illustrated the intimate and inseparable linkage between the two elements. As the conflagration neared its twilight hours, this one soldier, at least, brought the suicidal substrate present since the war’s earliest days to the surface for a brief moment.

Taken together, then, these rare written signals from the shadow vanguard elucidate an abiding set of social, emotional, and moral linkages between the core of the suicidal undercurrent and sacrificial surface current, present long after the August euphoria had faded. Whether the audience was military or civilian, impersonal or intimate, immediate or distant, all these missives displayed a common concern with absolution—both of the authors themselves and of those they left behind—inextricably bound up with attempts at consolation. That concern took a particular conventional form: rhetorical invocations of fatalism. These accorded directly with both the larger assumptive architectures at work in Germany throughout the war—particularly the religious and the patriotic—and the multilayered pressures which inherently constrained soldiers’ agentive milieu, even when the war itself remained unspoken. That shrunken milieu encompassed both front and home, uniting the superficially discrete spheres in a shared web of thanatological catalysis and consequence, structured above all by the army itself—a web which only became more tightly knit as the war grew increasingly total and the army’s leaders

⁸⁸ For a concise narrative overview of the military history of the Spring Offensive, see: Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003): 290-300

established a functional dictatorship. In their explanations for and framings of their suicides, these decedents drew directly on the same matrix of moral feelings which had been undergirding the emotional mobilization for the war effort since the conflagration's outbreak: honor, shame, and, above all, sacrifice. Thus, as their deaths reverberated across the strands of this common web, they not only continued to signal the mortal costs of the ongoing shattering and severing of socio-emotional ties which were the direct consequence of Germany's continuing participation in the war, but also the ways in which that shattering was intimately linked with the meanings and justifications for the conflagration itself.

3.2 The Enduring Inclination: *Abschiedsbriefe* as Wartime Genre

Yet these suicide notes were only written representations of the *explicit* end of the self-destructive continuum. The overwhelming majority of self-destruction remained *implicit* throughout the conflagration—oriented towards life but inclined toward death—along with its primary written representation: farewell letters. Unlike suicide notes, these epistles were integral to the private and public utilities of wartime correspondence and the attempts to continue the emotional mobilization of the German populace. Indeed, farewell letters were an essential component of Philipp Witkop's *Fallen Students' War Letters*, arguably the most famous and significant published collection of soldiers' missives.⁸⁹ As he noted in the foreword to the 1918 edition:

⁸⁹ There is a small literature focusing specifically on Witkop's collections of soldiers' letters and their role and use during and after the war: Manfred Hettling and Michael Jeismann, "Der Weltkrieg als Epos: Philipp Witkops 'Kriegsbriefe gefallener Studenten'," in "*Keiner fühlt sich heir mehr als Mensch...*": *Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkriegs*, eds. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 1993): 205-234; Natter, *Literature at War*, 90-121; Jay Winter, "Foreword: Philipp Witkop and the German 'Soldiers' Tale',"

Over half of all letter writers not only place themselves at the disposal of their Fatherland in a consciousness of duty and enthusiasm—who could forget the days of mobilization in 1914!—but also, in harrowing farewell letters to their parents when marching into the field or on the eve of a battle, yield their lives to the Fatherland in holy consciousness as a sacrifice, foreseeing their deaths and taking it freely into their will.⁹⁰

What Witkop unintentionally pointed towards, however, was the inherent self-destructiveness of the entire enterprise. The farewell letters he had collated and published were, in fact, part of a larger genre of *Abschiedsbriefe*, which encompassed much more than the final communications of these dutiful student volunteers and was defined by its inclination toward death. Not only in their thanatological inclination, but in their specific concerns, conventions, and contents, these farewell letters show conspicuous similarities with suicide notes, which illustrate both the abiding self-destructiveness at the heart of the conflict, as well as its sacrificial rhetorical coding, emotional significance, and reverberations. While these farewell letters quantitatively engulfed the shadow vanguard's rare written signals, their qualitative parallels illustrate the durability of both the broader suicidal substrate and the larger thanatological complex of which it was a part all the way into 1918: personal self-destruction understood as national sacrifice.

The farewell letters from the first week of August 1914 communicated the onset of this new self-destructiveness straight away, as the first German soldiers boarded trains to the front well before most of the students Witkop later immortalized were even able to volunteer. One of them was 19-year-old Joseph Uhrmacher, a doctor's son from Bonn, who had joined Grenadier Regiment 110 of the Prussian Army on 1 April 1914 as a one-year volunteer (*Einjährig-*

in *German Students' War Letters*, ed. Philipp Witkop, trans. A. F. Wedd (Philadelphia: Pine Street Books, 2002): v-xxiv; Krumeich, "Ego Documents as War Propaganda," 240-248. Witkop's collection is also discussed at various points throughout Ulrich's *Die Augenzeugen*, although, as Krumeich notes, Ulrich relies entirely on the earlier article by Hettling and Jeismann: *Ibid.*, 241, footnote 41.

⁹⁰ Philipp Witkop, "Vorwort" in *Kriegesbriefe Gefallener Studenten*, ed. Philipp Witkop (Berlin: B. G. Teubner, 1918): iii-iv. "Über die Hälfte aller Brieffschreiber stellt sich nicht nur in Pflichtbewußtsein und Begeisterung ihrem Vaterland zur Verfügung—wer könnte die Mobilmachungstage 1914 vergessen!—, sondern bringt auch in erschütternden Abschiedsbriefen an die Eltern beim Abmarsch ins Feld oder am Vorabend einer Schlacht ihr Leben dem Vaterlande in heiliger Bewußtheit als Opfer dar, sieht ihren Tod voraus und nimmt ihn frei in ihren Willen auf."

Freiwilliger).⁹¹ According to his diary, his unit mobilized almost immediately after Germany entered the war on 1 August.⁹² Five days later, he wrote to his parents from Heidelberg:

My dear parents! Today is probably the last day that we'll be here. Now we're going into the field and definitely going forward to face the enemy. With that, I feel the time has come for me, my dearly beloved parents, to take my leave [*Abschied zu nehmen*]. We all feel that only a few of us will return, because this is a time which has seen one last Bulgarian War, where the entire young cohort will be annihilated. But none are gripped by fear, all face death bravely, a sublime seriousness like I had amongst the rough soldiers comes over them, paired with holy enthusiasm [*gepaart mit heiliger Begeisterung*]. This morning we Catholics had confession and communion; we are right with heaven [...]. As we must thus willingly say goodbye forever, my dear parents, I would like to thank you for everything good which has happened during my life. I cannot thank you completely, for what you have done for me is too immeasurably much. If I have caused you any pain, I beg your forgiveness from the bottom of my heart.⁹³

⁹¹ These biographical details come from his *Soldbuch*, contained in: BA-MA MSG 2/10341 'Einzelne Personalunterlagen der Gebrüder Uhrmacher (1914-1916). As Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann explain, "[y]oung men with a high-school diploma could sign up for military service as a one-year volunteer. This would cut the period of service to a half and allowed them to lodge privately. The 'one-yearers' had to pay for their own subsistence and also their equipment, indicating that this was a privilege not only based on formal education but also on affluence. After their one year of service, one-yearers could advance to the rank of reserve lieutenant. Due to the heavy losses of the active officer corps in the first months of the war, one-yearers who had been promoted to reserve officers were the immediate superiors of many soldiers in the German army. Their lack of accomplishment due to the reduced period of training and their lack of empathy due to their middle-class background was the subject of intensive criticism from private soldiers." Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds. *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010): 185.

⁹² BA-MA MSG 2/10336, 'Kriegs-Tagebuch des Einjährig-Freiwilligen im 2. Bad. Gren.-Reg. Kaiser Wilhelm I No. 110 (II. Bat. Heidelberg) Josef Uhrmacher, stud. germ. aus Godesberg. Weltkrieg 1914/15 (31. Juli – 2. September 1914),' 1. Both a typescript and a handwritten transcript of his diary are included in the file. The page numbers given here refer to the typescript.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, letter dated "Heidelberg, 6. VIII. 1914." "Meine lieber Eltern! | Heute ist wahrscheinlich der letzte Tag, wo wir hier sind. Jetzt geht's ins Feld und endgültig vorn an der Feind. Da fühle ich dann, daß die Zeit gekommen ist, von Euch, meine innig geliebte Eltern, Abschied zu nehmen. Wir alle fühlen, daß nur wenige wiederkommen, denn was ein anderes Timing ist, das haben wir noch ein letzten Bulgarenkriege [sic] gesehen, wo die ganze junge Mannschaft vernichtet [sic] werde ist. Aber keinen ergreift Angst, mutig gehen alle in der Tod, ein erhabenes Ernst wie ich ihr mir bei den rohen Soldaten gefahren habe, kommt über sie, gepaart mit heiliger Begeisterung. Heute Morgen waren wir Kirchlichen beichten und kommunizieren; mit dem Himmel sind wir ausgesichert.... Wie wir ein also willige für immer Abschied nehmen müssen, meine liebe Eltern, möchte ich Euch für alles des Danken, was Ihr mir während* meines Lebens Gutes getan habt. Voll und ganz kann ich Euch nicht danken, dafür ist es zu unermesslich viel, was Ihr mir getan. Wenn ich Euch iftwas [sic] Schmerzen gemacht habe, so bitte ich Euch von ganzen Herzen um Verzeihung." Unfortunately, Joseph Uhrmacher's handwriting is highly illegible, making reading most of his correspondence difficult, if not impossible. Perhaps in part because of the time he was able to spend on this letter however, it is a rare exception.

Strikingly, his diary entry for 6 August stated only: “Confession and communion this morning.”⁹⁴ On that day, at least, he saved his thoughts and feelings about war and death for his parents.

Joseph Uhrmacher’s letter in many ways represents the opposite end of the epistolary microcosm from explicit suicide notes. First, both his syntax and diction emphasize his own agency, as well as that of his parents, and are free from the characteristic fatalism of soldiers’ suicide notes. He not only wrote entirely in the first person, but when beginning the most emotionally effusive portion of his farewell, used the first-person plural: “*we* must thus willingly say goodbye forever.” He thus rhetorically encapsulated his parents within his same agentive sphere in the face of what he expressly acknowledged could be impending death.⁹⁵ Second, the war itself dominates the text, not as an unspoken background context, but as both the express catalyst for the letter itself and the primary topic of discussion within it. Here, in the first week of the war, Uhrmacher said explicitly what would almost immediately become implicit: should he meet his premature demise, it would be because Germany had embarked on a war which, even at this early date, he recognized would likely have massively lethal consequences: the “annihilation” of masses of Germany’s young men. The presentation of the conflict as “one last Bulgarian war”—a reference to the medieval Byzantine-Bulgarian Wars which lasted over 600 years—further added an implicit sacrificial element, particularly through its implicit framing of

⁹⁴ Ibid., ‘Kriegs-Tagebuch,’ 1. “Morgens beichten und kommunizieren.”

⁹⁵ As in most collections of this kind, the parents’ letters have not survived. While those at home could—and often did—preserve the letters loved ones sent home from the front, soldiers usually had no such means, creating a generally one-sided source base. Yet the fact that his parents also allowed their younger son, Karl, to volunteer after the war broke out is an implicit testament to their support. On the unequal preservation of First World War correspondence, see: Bessel and Wierling, “Ego Documents and the First World War,” 11; on Karl Uhrmacher’s volunteerism and his parents’ sanction for it, see his 1914 letters in: BA-MA MSG 2/10343.

the war as another Crusade.⁹⁶ As Allen Frantzen argues, many Christian soldiers during the First World War drew heavily on the emotional and moral antecedents from medieval wars—especially the Crusades—to forge meaning throughout the conflict, particularly the notion of self-sacrifice, which “conflated prowess and piety and blurred the lines between sacrifice and antisacrifice,” that is, the lines between two divergent responses to Christ’s death: a desire for vengeance and a willingness to forgive.⁹⁷ While the term itself did not appear, the medieval allusion and larger framing nonetheless served to refashion his potential self-destruction as a sacrifice analogous to that of a chivalrous medieval knight, providing justification for his and his comrades potential annihilation in the process.

But while they represented opposite ends of the self-destructive continuum, Uhrmacher’s main *concerns* were essentially identical to those undergirding wartime suicide notes: absolution and consolation. He was explicit about both the religious and secular elements of those concerns, making sure his parents knew that he was “right with heaven” through his taking of the sacraments, while simultaneously seeking to ensure he was ‘right’ with them as well by asking their forgiveness for any suffering he may have caused them. But while that appeal did not contain the implicit admission of transgression found in the suicide notes, it nonetheless manifested the same *connection* between the moral and emotional spheres and their inextricable linkage with wartime death, as the young soldier’s attempts at consolation were at least in part contingent on and linked with the desire for absolution and the social expression of that desire.

⁹⁶ For the relevant medieval history, see the succinct narrative overview in: R. J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, Second Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 9-28. On contemporaries’ understandings of World War I as a ‘crusade’ and its effects more broadly, see: Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 91-171.

⁹⁷ Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 3.

Indeed, the preceding effusions of gratitude seemingly served as a form of emotional priming for the subsequent moral appeal for forgiveness, making its consolatory purpose unambiguous.

Notably, this affective rhetorical configuration accords *precisely* with the Medical Staff Sergeant's final valediction in the letter to *his* parents, though not that to his siblings. While the latter emphasized his despair—"A final greeting from your unhappy brother"—the former concluded with gratitude, just as Uhrmacher had done four years prior: "A final greeting from your thankful Otto." The primary contextual difference between the two, however, was the degree of thanatological inclination and the relative permanence of separation that would result. In the case of the *Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel*, death was functionally guaranteed and presumably intended, and he appears to have written his suicide notes with this certainty. Like the authors of all such notes, he seemingly assumed they would be read after his death was a *fait accompli*. In Uhrmacher's case, however, death was at most probable, but by all indications not intended, and absolutely not an irreversible fact. His farewell letter subsequently reflected that thanatological uncertainty. According to his diary, he did not even arrive at the front until three days later, although at that point death found his unit quickly, with forty men killed in his regiment alone on 9 August.⁹⁸ For all their differences, then, what remained most significant in each was the fact of wartime death itself, which prompted the writing of all of these *Abschiedsbriefe* in the first place. All were epistolary manifestations of the suicidal substrate, as their authors recognized the probability of their own demise inherent in their chosen course of action, but forged ahead despite that knowledge.

Indeed, within this epistolary microcosm, the larger thanatological spectrum was principally defined by the relative certainty of death, not any given soldier's intentions,

⁹⁸ BA-MA MSG 2/10336, 'Kriegs-Tagebuch,' 2.

evidenced above all in the farewell missives from those facing immanent execution. One of the most telling examples comes from a German sentenced to death in London in October 1915 for, in his words, “attempts to confer with the enemy,” Georg Breckow.⁹⁹ Breckow wrote two farewell letters that month: one of over 1,100 words to his “dear, dear mother” and “dear, only sister,” and a second, much shorter note of only 120 words addressed solely to his mother.¹⁰⁰ “Now I face the last, most difficult duty in my life,” he began the first, “to have to tell you, my loved ones at home, that after months of imprisonment (4 June) I have been sentenced to suffer death for the Fatherland in a few days.”¹⁰¹ He continued: “Now it doesn’t matter that a years-long prison sentence would be worse and harder for me than this soldier’s death [*Soldaten-Tod*]. It should have been so, and I probably would have suffered the same fate if I had stayed with the cuirassiers [a type of cavalryman].”¹⁰² He implored them: “I beg you all—you, my dear, old, hard-tested [*hartgeprüfte*] Mother, and also you, my only sister—do not grieve over my early death too much. Since I left Hannover, I have only been rewarded with failures, and the biggest mistake was that I came home to this unfortunate war and could not return to America. ‘Fate’ [*Schicksal*]¹⁰³—it appears that our entire once-reputable family is so severely persecuted by destiny that it is better for the old good name to die out with me.”¹⁰³ His effusions continued:

⁹⁹ BA-MA MSG 200/587 Abschiedsbrief des Georg Traugott Breckow aus britischer Kriegsgefangenschaft an seine Mutter und Schwester. “Versuches, mit dem Feinde zu conferieren [sic].” In English, his name has usually been rendered as “George Traugott Breeckow,” see e.g.: “The Tower at War”, Historic Royal Palaces: Tower of London, accessed 10 May 2021, <https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/the-tower-at-war/#gs.122vtt>. However, since I am drawing on German-language documents, I use the spelling found therein throughout my analysis.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. “Meine liebe, liebe Mutter, | meine liebe, einzige Schwester!”

¹⁰¹ Ibid. “Jetzt stehe ich vor der letzten, der schwersten Pflicht in meinem Leben, Euch meinen Lieben in der Heimat mitteilen zu müssen, dass ich nach monatelanger Haft (4.Juni) verurteilt bin, den Tod für das Vaterland in wenigen Tagen zu erleiden!”

¹⁰² Ibid. “Nun ist es ja auch gleich, dass eine langjährige Gefängnisstrafe wäre schlimmer und härter für mich, wie dieser Soldaten-Tod. Es hat wohl so sein sollen und vermutlich wäre ich dem gleichen Schicksal verfallen, wenn ich bei den Kürassierern geblieben wäre.”

¹⁰³ Ibid. “Ich bitte Euch, Du meine liebe, alte hartgeprüfte Mutter und auch Du, meine einzige Schwester, nicht zu sehr ob meines frühen Todes zu trauern. Seit ich von Hannover ging, war ich ja doch nur mit Misserfolgen belohnt

My poor old mother, my dear, dear Lisbeth, now I must take my leave of you forever and always. O God in heaven, why have I ever followed temptation? Why couldn't I stay at home and be a support to you both in this arduous time of war? Now I atone for my unwanted mistakes and can never make good on what I have committed. [...] I have made some mistakes and caused you heartbreak, but still do not deserve such a cruel end to my life!

I beg you, dear Lisbeth, to give my final greetings to the Havemanns, Gieses, and not least, the Schumanns. I ask them all to help you and my poor mother in this exceedingly painful time. I also ask you to give my greetings to my remaining friends, should they ask you about me. Please publish my death for the Fatherland in the Foreign Service of the Navy [*Auslandsdienst der Marine*] and answer all correspondence from Germany or America in the same way later. [...] So many hundreds of thousands have fallen for the German Fatherland on the battlefield; why should I not also face the bullets? The next generation will hopefully find a greater, more powerful Fatherland to which we all, we, the dead, have contributed. [...]

Perhaps I will meet my dear, good Father in another world and when you make a pilgrimage to the cemetery now, then think: I lay nearer to him, and say an 'our father' for your little brother in the foreign soil! When you bring the news to my dear, good mother, do so as gently as possible! God give you both power and strength to carry this message of mine in the midst of all the misery and hardship of war. I beg my dear, dear mother and also you, my dear little sister [*Schwesterchen*] to forgive all the sins I have committed, all the mistakes I have made, all the troubles I have caused. Forgive me everything, everything [...].

Goodbye little mother [*Mütterchen*], I kiss you in my thoughts the way I embraced you for the last time on the steps of the house! And now you, my dearly beloved little sister [...] goodbye, dear, dear Lisbeth, God be with you, now and for eternity! If only I could see you just one more time, just embrace you one more time, and cry on your shoulder [*ausweinen*] for all the agony of my heart and soul which I had to endure! But it is all over now and when my words reach you and mama [*Mutter*], my suffering will have ended [*ausgelitten*] and I hope to see you all again, dear ones, in a better world.¹⁰⁴

und der grösste Fehler war, dass ich zu diesem unglückseligen Kriege nach Hause kam, und nicht wieder nach Amerika zurück könnte. 'Schicksal' und es scheint, dass unsere gesamte einst so angesehene Familie vom Schicksal so hart verfolgt ist, dass es besser ist für den alten guten Namen mit mir auszusterben."

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. "Mein armes, altes Mutterchen, meine liebe, liebe Lisbeth, nun muss ich ja Abschied nehmen von Euch für immer und ewig. O Gott im Himmel, warum bin ich jemals der Versuchung gefolgt, warum konnte ich nicht zu Hause bleiben und Euch beiden in dieser harten Zeit des Kreiges eine Stütze sein. Jetzt büsse ich für meine ungewollten Fehler und kann niemals das gut machen, was ich begangen habe !- [...] Ich habe manchen Fehler begangen un Euch Herzeleid geschaffen, aber ein so grausames Lebensende habe ich doch nicht verdient! -

Ich bitte Dich, liebe Lisbeth, meine letzten Grüsse an Familie Havemann, Familie Giese und nicht zuletzt an Familie Schumann auszurichten. Ich darf sie Alle bitten, Dir u. meiner armen Mutter beizustehen in der schmerzreichen Zeit. Auch meine übrigen Bekannten bitte ich alle zu grüsse wenn man Dich ob meiner fragen wird. Ich bitte Dich meinen Tod für das Vaterland im Auslandsdienst der Marine zu veröffentlichen und auch später alle Correspondance [sic] aus Deutschland od [sic] Amerika in gleicher Weise zu beantworten. [...] Es fallen ja so viele hunderttausende auf der Wahlstatt [sic] für das deutsche Vaterland, warum sollte auch mich nicht die Kugel treffen. [sic] Die nächste Generation wird hoffentlich ein grösseres, mächtigeres Vaterland finden, zu dem wir Alle, wir, die Toten, beigetragen haben. [...]

The profuse letter concluded: “Also to my dear brother Franz and his wife: best wishes for the future and my final greetings. Farewell, farewell, farewell to you all!”¹⁰⁵

His second letter served as a pithier summary of the first, bringing home its core socio-emotional and moral messages only hours before his death:

My dear, dear little mother [*Mütterchen*]! After having taken holy communion, I feel fully prepared for eternity. A few more hours and I hope to be where I hope to meet you all, dear ones, one day. I am so sure and composed and will face the arrival of the final hour like a good German. [...] Thank you again for all the great love, care, and unending help which you showed me in my youth. One more time, farewell, god protect you all: you, and my poor little sister [*Schwesterchen*] and my Fatherland, for which I die.¹⁰⁶

The letter was dated “Tower of London, October 25, 1915.”¹⁰⁷ He was executed there by firing squad the next morning.¹⁰⁸

It is worth noting at the outset that these two surviving documents do not make clear whether Breckow was actually a soldier or not, especially since Britain interned almost all

Vielleicht treffe ich meinen lieben, guten Vater in der anderen Welt und wenn Du nun auf den Friedhof pilgerst, dann denke, ich läge nahe ihm und bete ein ‘Vaterunser’ für Deinen kleinen Bruder in der fremden Erde! – Wenn Du nun die Nachricht meiner lieben, guten Mutter bringst, dann so schonend wie möglich! Gott gebe Euch Beiden Kraft und Stärke, diese meine Nachricht zu tragen inmitten all des Elends u.der [sic] Not des Krieges. Ich bitte meine liebe, liebe Mutter u. auch Dich, mein Schwesterchen, um Vergebung ob aller Sünde, aller Fehler, aller Sorgen, die ich begangen habe. Verzieht mir Alles, Alles, [...]

Lebe wohl, Mütterchen, ich küsse Dich in Gedanken so wie ich Dich zum letzten Mal auf der Haustreppe umarmte! Un nun Du [sic], mein inniggeliebtes Schwesterchen, mein armes, armes ‘Itachen’, mein immer williger Schutzengel u.Helfer in der Not,- leb’ wohl, liebe, liebe Lisbeth, Gott sei mit Dir, jetzt u.in [sic] Ewigkeit! Könnte ich Dich nur noch ein einziges Mal sehen, Dich noch ein ein [sic] einziges Mal umfassen, u.mich [sic] ausweinen ob all der Herzens- u.Seelenqual, welche ich durchleben musste! Doch das ist nun Alles vorbei u.wenn meine Zeilen Dich u.Mutte [sic] erreichen, habe ich ausgelitten u.hoffe auf ein Wiedersehen mit Euch, Ihr Lieben, in einer besseren Welt.”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. “Auch meinen lieben Bruder Franz u.seiner Frau meine besten Wünsche für die Zukunft u.meine letzten Grüsse. | Lebt wohl, lebt wohl, lebt Alle wohl!”

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., “Mein liebes, liebes Mütterchen! Nachdem ich das heilige [sic] Abendmahl genommen habe, fühle ich mich wohl vorbereitet für die Ewigkeit. Noch einige Stunden u.ich hoffe dort zu sein, wo ich Euch, Ihr Lieben dereinst zu treffen hoffe. Ich bin so sicher u.gefasst u.werde, wie es einem guten Deutschen zukommt, der letzten Stunde entgegen sehen. [...] Hab nochmals Dank für alle die grosse Liebe und die Sorgfalt und die nimmer endende Hilfe, welche Ihr mir in der Jugend entgegengebracht habt. Nochmals, lebt wohl, Gott schütze Euch, Dich un [sic] mein armes Schwesterchen u.mein Vaterland, für das ich sterbe.”

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ “The Tower at War”, Historic Royal Palaces: Tower of London, accessed 10 May 2021, <https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/the-tower-at-war/#gs.122vtt>.

German men of military age regardless of their status after the sinking of the *Lusitania* and subsequent anti-German riots in May 1915.¹⁰⁹ His request that his sister “publish my death for the Fatherland in the Foreign Service of the Navy [*Auslandsdienst der Marine*]” suggests that he either was or had been a sailor. He was born in 1882, and thus had likely completed his mandatory military service several years before the war’s outbreak. More importantly, the fact that he was one of the eleven men executed for espionage in the Tower of London during the war meant that he had functionally *become* a combatant by 1915, at least in the eyes of the British court, regardless of whether he was ‘officially’ a member of the German military at the time or not.¹¹⁰ In any case, what is clear—and most important—is that he *presented* his impending death as that of a soldier to this deeply intimate audience.

In so doing, Breckow deployed the same set of conventions and circled around the same core complex of concerns found throughout the other final missives from across the self-destructive spectrum. First, while a rhetorical formality, his repeated use of the modifier “dear” and the diminutive (*-chen*) in reference to both his mother and sister emphasized the degree of intimacy he felt with them, indexing an intensity of emotion sitting directly behind that conventional diction. Notably, the Bavarian Lance Corporal’s suicide note to his company sergeant *does not* contain that conventional modifier either in its salutation or anywhere else, a further indication of its deceptive degree of emotional importance and, within this epistolary

¹⁰⁹ Panikos Panayi, “Minorities,” in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 224. For a more detailed discussion, see: Panikos Panayi, *Prisoners of Britain: German Civilian and Combatant Internees during the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012): 39-77.

¹¹⁰ “The Tower at War”, Historic Royal Palaces: Tower of London, accessed 10 May 2021, <https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/the-tower-at-war/#gs.122vtt>. See also: Leonard Sellers, *Shot in the Tower: The Stories of the Spies Executed in the Tower of London During the First World War* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), 118-139.

context, its being reserved solely for audiences with a certain degree of affective affinity.¹¹¹ Second, the intertwined emotional and moral concerns with absolution and consolation recur explicitly throughout Breckow's longer letter, as he repeatedly begged for forgiveness from both his mother and sister for all his "sins" and "mistakes." Indeed, the first letter's length and repetitiveness are themselves indications of just how central this particular concatenation of social, moral, and emotional elements was with death looming over one's shoulder. While more implicit, the mention of taking holy communion in the final note makes clear that, like Joseph Uhrmacher, Breckow wanted to ensure he was both right with god and right his family, that is, that he had set his moral affairs in order in both the sacred and profane spheres. As with the *Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel* and Uhrmacher, he concluded his second letter with an expression of thanks and gratitude, bringing the concern with consolation back to the fore and driving home the primary cathartic purpose of both missives. Finally, like so many others, Breckow, too, expressed this concern through fatalistic rhetoric, personifying destiny as a persecuting force leading him to his death within a shrunken milieu. And while here it was the British state which was the primary force inclining him sharply towards an undesired death, he nonetheless took pains to emphasize to his loved ones that things could not have been otherwise: even if he had taken a radically different path, he would "suffered the same fate."

Further, Breckow made clear that he wanted his family to view his death as a sacrifice analogous to those of the fallen front soldiers. Throughout both his farewell letters, Breckow referred repeatedly to his "death for the Fatherland," described his impending demise as a "soldier's death," and ended his final letter by stating explicitly it was "my Fatherland, for which I die." He made the point most explicitly, however, with a rhetoric question: "So many hundreds

¹¹¹ The Lance Corporal addressed him simply as "Herrn Feldwebel:" BHSStA IV M Kr 10913, "Ers.Masch.Gew.Komp.5.III.bayr.A.K. | Abschrift! | Hof, den 4.3.18."

of thousands have fallen for the German Fatherland on the battlefield; why should I not also face the bullets?” Two aspects of this sentence are particularly striking. First is the more obvious point: he was explicit in directly framing his death as that of a combatant. Indeed, as he presented it to his mother and sister, he was part of a thanatological front community united by having to “face the bullets.” Second, however, is the way his reference to the fact that ‘hundreds of thousands have fallen’ illustrates a very concrete awareness of the true lethality of the conflict, even after the German state forbid the publication of full causality lists in national newspapers in September 1914.¹¹² Indeed, according to the official *Medical Report on the German Army in the World War (Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkrieg)*, at least 301,437 German soldiers had been killed in combat by the time of his execution (Figure 9). Not only was Breckow aware of the true scale of on-going lethal destruction, but he 1) discussed it openly with two civilians at home, meaning that if they had not been aware of the war’s thanatological magnitude beforehand, they now would be; 2) framed his own demise in a very different context as conceptually of-a-piece with those combat deaths; and 3) implicitly coded the entire enterprise as a sacrifice which justified both his personal destruction and that of his fellow countryman. Thus, as with the Prussian Infantryman’s suicide note, Breckow unintentionally shined a light on the shadow side of the very complex of moral feelings he used for simultaneous moral

¹¹² Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 111-112.

justification and emotional consolation to both himself and the loved ones he was about to leave behind.

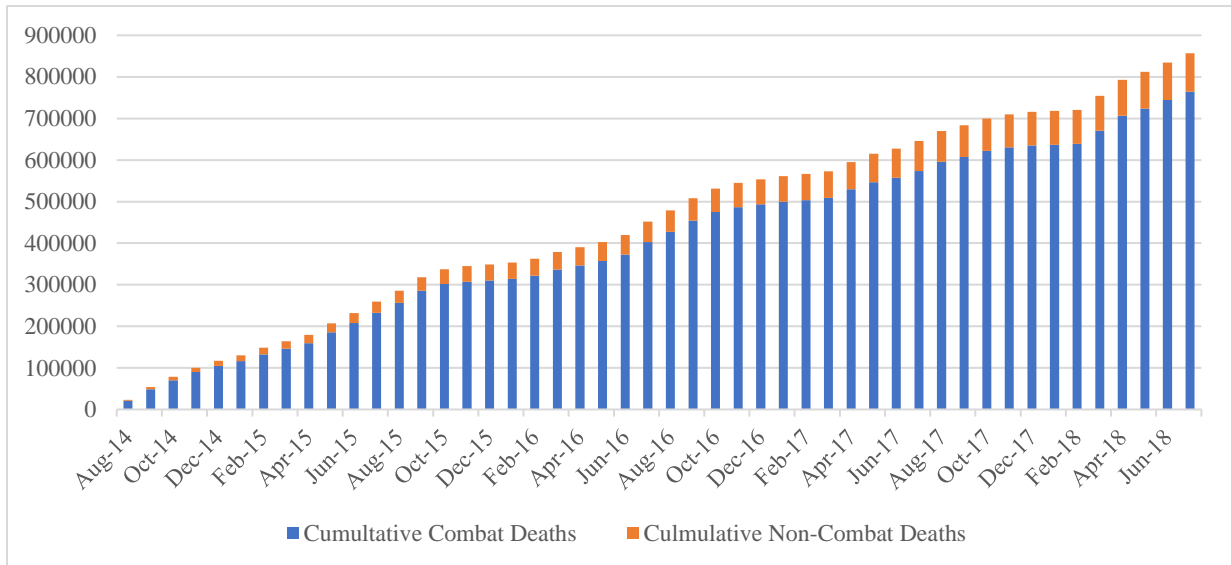


Figure 9: Cumulative Deaths in the German Army by War Month (Der Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 140*-143*)

Finally, Breckow’s farewell letters put the gendered configuration at work within the larger *Abschiedsbrief* genre in an especially stark light. He clearly saw the women in his direct family circle as his main mourners, a point most baldly illustrated by the fact that he made no mention of his brother’s existence until the penultimate line of his nearly 1,200-word letter, offering him and his wife “best wishes” and “final greetings,” but only via his mother and sister. Further, like the Medical Staff Sergeant, he singled out his mother above all as his principal mourner and his primary audience, evidenced most directly by the fact that he wrote her a second letter. It is also notable in this regard that it was his sister whom he tasked with passing on his final greetings to the Havemann, Giese, and Schumann families, publishing the details of his death, and answering his correspondence. In their *Abschiedesbriefe* at least, both the Staff Sergeant and Breckow attempted to place the weighty emotional task of acting as a postmortem comforter solely on their siblings, with their mothers as the main persons in need of consolation.

Moreover, both men placed restrictions on the degree and display of mourning, the former telling his parents “don’t cry for me, but only pray and do not forget your unhappy Otto,” the latter ‘begging’ his mother and sister to “not grieve over my early death too much.” As Claudia Siebrecht argues, this was a generic aspect of soldiers’ farewell letters more broadly, and one found throughout the missives published by Witkop.¹¹³ “The moral economy of grief during the First World War,” she notes, “placed an expectation on women to bear the weight of their [soldiers’] sacrifices with strength and to proudly endure emotional pain.”¹¹⁴

Indeed, one can see the broader genericism of this configuration of concerns, conventions, and contents most succinctly in the short farewell letter of Peter Schlömer. A 24-year-old sailor convicted of desertion and robbery in February 1918, Schlömer shot and killed an N.C.O. in a later robbery attempt and was subsequently found guilty and sentenced to death on 17 June 1918.¹¹⁵ On 20 June, he penned a final letter. “My dear [*Liebe*] mother, sister, and brother,” he wrote:

I had written you all a letter a month ago. I was sentenced to death on Monday 17 June. I had shot an N.C.O.

Now an hour ago I was told that I would be shot today. I now stand only a few minutes away from my death. Dear mother [*Liebe Mutter*], pay me no mind and do not worry about me at all. I will confess and take communion beforehand. You will be informed by the court that I have been shot. Dear mother, hopefully I can see my father and my fallen friends again soon. Dear mother, do not cry when you receive this letter, there is nothing else to do. Dear mother, I am not sorry at all that I must die. I am only sorry that I cannot see you anymore. I would have so loved to see you all one more time, but it is too late for all of that now. I want to close now with many greetings and kisses. I

¹¹³ Claudia Siebrecht, “The Female Mourner: Gender and the Moral Economy of Grief During the First World War,” in *Gender and the First World War*, eds. Christa Hämmerle, Oswald Überegger, Birgitta Bader Zaar (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014): 144-162.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹⁵ BA-MA RM 121-I/905 Gericht der 1, Marineteilung. – Verfahren wegen Raubmord und Fahnenflucht. His earlier convictions are listed in a short, unpaginated note labelled “Vormerk” at the start of the file. The rest of the documents are paginated with handwritten numbers, which all subsequent page number mentions for this file refer to. For the full verdict, see: 165-178.

remain your son, Peter [*verbleibt Euer Sohn Peter*]. Many greetings to my sister and brother. I'll see you again on Judgement Day. Farewell.¹¹⁶

He was executed by firing squad the following morning.¹¹⁷

Despite being composed almost three years later and his being twelve years younger than Breckow, Schlömer's letter reads as a much pithier version of the convicted spy's last missives. With each anaphoric use of 'dear mother,' Schlömer functionally went through each of the core generic elements of wartime *Abschiedsbriefe*, all centering on comfort and consolation. First came the simultaneous settling of sacred and profane accounts, as he told his mother not to worry because he would confess and receive communion before his execution. In so-doing, he simultaneously introduced the moral concern with absolution and tied it to the recurring focus on consolation throughout the rest of the letter. It is worth noting here as well that, as was the case with the Medical Staff Sergeant, he admitted to his transgression in the opening of the letter. This is one of the sharpest contrasts between the two death row missives, as Breckow expressly denied that he deserved his fate, while Schlömer admitted outright that he was guilty of the crime he was executed for. Second came the consolatory thought of a reunion with dead loved ones, found in both Breckow and the Staff Sergeant's letters as well, and an idea he returned to and reemphasized in the letter's final sentence: "I'll see you again on Judgement Day." Third came the admonition for his mother to shed no tears when she received his final written words, paired

¹¹⁶ Ibid., "Abschrift des letzten Briefes des Schlömer an seine Mutter," 186. "Liebe Mutter, Schwester und Bruder. Ich hatte Euch von 1 Monat ein Brief geschrieben. Ich bin nun am Montag den 17. Juni zum Tode verurteilt. Ich hatte ein Unteroffizier erschossen. | Nun wurde mir jetzt vor einer Stunde gesagt, das [sic] ich heute noch erschossen würde. Ich stehe nun also nur noch ein paar Minuten vor meinem Tode. Lieber Mutter, mache Dir gar keine Gedanken oder Kummer um mich. Ich werde vorher noch beichten und Komunizieren. Ihr werdet auch davon vom Gericht mitgeteilt werden, das [sic] ich erschossen bin, Liebe [sic] Mutter hoffentlich kann ich bald mein Vater und meine gefallenen Freunde wiedersehen. Liebe Mutter nun weine nicht darum, wenn Du den Brief erhältst, es ist nun einmal nicht anders zu machen. Liebe Mutter es tut mir garnicht leid das [sic] ich sterben muß. Es tutmir [sic] nur leid das [sic] ich euch nicht mehr sehen kann. Ich hätte Euch noch mal so gerne gesehen aber es ist jetzt für alles zu spat. Ich will nun schließen mit vielen Grüßen und Küssen verbleibt Euer Sohn Peter. viele [sic] Grüße an Schwester und Bruder. Auf Widersehen [sic] am Jüngstentage | Leb wohl | Peter."

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 183. This short memo from 21 June 1918 confirmed his execution had been carried out.

with an express fatalism: “there is nothing else to do.” Finally, as the anaphora makes clear, Schlömer’s letter also centers around his mother as his chief mourner. Like Breckow, his explicit addressees encompassed his entire immediate family circle—here, his mother, sister, and brother—but his mentions of them serve essentially as bookends, with the text itself explicitly addressed to his mother throughout, establishing her as the socio-emotional conduit to the rest of the bereaved after his demise.

Despite these myriad commonalities, however, there was one major contrast between the two death row missives beyond an admission of guilt (or lack thereof): discussion of the war. As with most of the recorded suicide notes, Schlömer made no mention of the fact that he was himself a soldier, nor that his death came at the tail-end of a years-long global war. Indeed, the only indication of the wartime context was his sole mention of hoping to see his “fallen friends” again, since that descriptor applied only to those who had died in combat. Even the admission that he “shot an N.C.O.” and was about to be executed for that crime did not inherently indicate that a war was happening or that he was a soldier, only that he’d murdered one. As was the case with both the Prussian and Bavarian Lance Corporals’ suicide notes, the war itself appeared only as thanatological background noise within the text itself: a context which went without saying. Breckow, however, discussed the war explicitly in both his farewell letters, repeatedly emphasizing its inherent hardships and lethality in his first letter, and concluding his second note by reminding his mother that he was dying for Germany, pointing directly back to the on-going sacrifices—including that of his own life—that participation in the war demanded.

Because he was facing execution at the hands of the *British* state, however, a sacrificial framing tied explicitly to the war did not raise the kinds of uncomfortable moral questions about the conflict inherent in the case of Schlömer or the Bavarian *Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel*. In fact, it

accorded directly with the more capacious assumptive architecture at work in wartime Germany. As Roger Chickering notes, the “vast human and material sacrifices, which began to accumulate in the first weeks of the conflict, were [...] debited morally, in Germany and elsewhere, to the malevolence of the enemy.”¹¹⁸ Regardless of whether he was ‘officially’ a soldier at the time or not, and independent of any actual espionage he participated in or not, the fact that Breckow was facing *British* bullets meant that he, too, was a victim of enemy malevolence.

But in each of these cases, self-destruction remained implicit: all were oriented toward life—and especially when an early exit was assured, actively lamented their premature departure—but inclined toward death. Indeed, none of these farewell letters acknowledged the fundamental *institutional* truth about these thanatological inclinations: that it was the German state itself that had created the essential conditions of possibility for their deaths through both its decision to participate in the war and the specific choices on how to conduct it. Whatever their *sui generis* personal inclinations, all were situated on top of a more capacious national one conditioned generally by the state and specifically by the military. This was true even in Breckow’s case, for while of course there was also espionage in peacetime, the intense spy fear in Britain, the increased existential stakes of espionage, and Breckow’s own time as an alleged spy only came about with the onset of the conflict itself.¹¹⁹ The very need to say farewell *was itself* a result of the on-going war.

Distilled within this epistolary microcosm, then, was the entire spectrum of wartime self-destruction, from the conscript simply obeying the call to arms and facing potential—though not

¹¹⁸ Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918*, 2nd Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 169.

¹¹⁹ On the ‘spy fear’ in Britain, see: Panikos Panayi, “‘The Hidden Hand’: British Myths about German Control of Britain During the First World War,” *Immigrants and Minorities*, vol. 7 (1988), 253–72. On Breckow: Sellers, *Shot in the Tower*, 118-139.

guaranteed or intended—death in battle, to the soldier dead by his own hand. Whether it was a suicide note left in a hospital room, a farewell letter from a soldier heading to the front, or a final message written hours before an execution, what united these missives was the fact of the inclination toward death itself, which necessitated their goodbyes. Throughout these superficially disparate writings, that thanatological inclination manifested in a common set of generic conventions. Above all, these soldiers conveyed an explicit desire for both sacred and profane absolution, linked with an emotional concern with consolation for themselves and their loved ones. Most commonly, they expressed these interlinked concerns through rhetorical invocations of destiny, which in turn indexed the shrunken agentive milieu of these men. And whether directly or indirectly, all pulled from the common wartime matrix of moral feelings centered on sacrifice to give meaning to their deaths. Thus, while the *fact* of this genericism illustrates the endurance of the suicidal substrate which emerged in 1914, the specific *contents* of the genre illustrate the durability of the entire thanatological complex: self-destruction of various types masked through its affectively-comforting moral justification as sacrifice. Although the core elements of the larger sub-genre of *Abschiedsbriefe* implicitly centered on the fact of self-destruction, the quantitative rarity of the shadow vanguard’s written signals, coupled with the widespread publication and dissemination of non-suicidal farewell letters presented as paragons of national sacrifice, meant that few caught a direct glimpse of the worm at the core. The sacrificial surface current at the center of the ‘spirit of 1914’ continued to envelope and mask the suicidal undercurrent all the way into the war’s final year.

3.3 Enduring the Inclination: “Taking One’s Leave” and Expanding Circles of Mourning

As revealing as these missives' textual contents, however, was the larger material and behavioral context in which they were embedded. Whether they were first used in an internal investigation or were immediately sent to their addressees, each missive circulated across a series of overlapping social networks both at the front and at home. As war losses compounded month after month and year after year, an ever-growing number of Germans received *Abschiedsbriefe* from sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, and friends, bereaving greater and greater swaths of German society. But as ubiquitous as those final missives became, they remained only a single form of an even more omnipresent *act*: 'taking one's leave' (*Abschied nehmen*). Indeed, the numerous photographs from August 1914 of marching men receiving *Liebesgaben* and waving farewell from the aboard the 'trains to Paris' are only the most famous non-textual documentation of this larger set of behaviors.¹²⁰ And the written texts themselves were inherent testaments to this larger reality. What Alan Bray noted of early-modern English "familiar letters" was equally true of Great War *Abschiedsbriefe*: these texts "have survived because of the use that was made of them, and it is arguably their survival that now tells us most about the role they once played."¹²¹ In their material creation, circulation, and preservation, then, these farewells sketch the social vectors of an ever-accumulating grief *during the war itself* and serve as an index of the depth, breadth, and diachronic development of the accruing affective costs of Germans' abiding endurance.

Perhaps no single source illustrates the immediate and immense importance to soldiers of saying their final goodbyes, the myriad material and behavioral ways in which they took their leave, and the exponential emotional devastation caused by each loss on the micro-level better

¹²⁰ See, for example, the photographs in: Laurence Stallings, ed., *The First World War: A Photographic History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1933): 7-12.

¹²¹ Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003): 54.

than the letter Wilhelm Spengler wrote home from the Vosges on 30 August 1914 about the “worst day of [his] life.” “I have been in continuous combat for about twelve days, but the 28th was truly dreadful,” he wrote, before proceeding to describe that day’s battle in harrowing detail.¹²² After six hours of digging in without even the chance to eat, the first shells began to fall in their vicinity around 4:30 am, immediately killing eight men. “I squatted down with the group which the captain was also in. With our knees drawn up and our faces to the wall, we awaited death.”¹²³ Facing intense artillery fire from three sides, they received word that the sergeant of the second column had been severely wounded, but they could do nothing but remain hunkered down in their newly-dug trenches. “We could count exactly how many cannons the French had and knew precisely: now it has been reloaded; watch out! Four are incoming! It was nerve-shattering [*nervenzerrüttend*]. I forfeited my life [*Ich gab mein Leben auf*], thought about you all once more, my dear ones, and wrote in my diary.”¹²⁴ The bombardment continued for thirty minutes.¹²⁵

Around 5:00 am, the captain of a neighboring company called out that he and his unit were retreating; their losses were too great. His own captain, however, “was too dutiful” and continued to hold the line with his men.¹²⁶ With soldiers praying aloud all around him, Spengler himself “prayed silently for help.”¹²⁷ As the French closed in and began firing on them with their

¹²² Philipp Witkop, ed., *Kriegsbriefe deutscher Studenten* (Gotha: Verlag Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1916): 7. “Am 28. war der schreckliste Tag meines Lebens. Ich mache seit etwa zwölf Tagen ununterbrochen Gefechte mit. Am 28. war es aber fürchterlich.”

¹²³ Ibid., 8. “Ich kauerte in der Gruppe, in der auch der Hauptmann war. Die Knie angezogen, das Gesicht an die Wand, erwarteten wir den Tod.”

¹²⁴ Ibid., “Wir konnten genau zöhlen, wieviel Kanonen die Franzosen hatten, und wußten genau: jetzt ist wieder geladen; obacht, jetzt kommen wieder vier! Es war nervenzerrüttend. Ich gab mein Leben auf, dachte nochmals an Euch, meine Lieben, und schreib mein Tagebuch.”

¹²⁵ Ibid., 8-9.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 10. “Unser guter Hauptmann war zu pflichtgetreu.”

¹²⁷ Ibid. “Ich betete still um Hilfe.”

rifles, “someone shouted: ‘The captain is dead.’”¹²⁸ Spengler crawled to the captain’s shell hole and looked in: “Dear god! Seven to eight men lay there dying and pleading. The poor good captain pale and dead, shot through the temple. He had wanted to sacrifice the company to save the regiment. Above his body was the lieutenant, shot through the foot. He took the captain’s papers with him. I grabbed the pistol and map from his belt.”¹²⁹ As he prepared to leave, “the poor men begged: ‘One-yearer, help! Give this one and that one my final greeting, etc.’ I took leave of the lieutenant and the men and crawled back.”¹³⁰

Under increasingly heavy fire, Spengler and the other survivors looked for an opportunity to retreat. “Then suddenly my dear friend Jennrich [a medic who had been attending to the wounded company sergeant] screamed horribly.” He had been shot through the stomach and spine.¹³¹ “I gave him pain-relieving drops and quickly bandaged him. ‘Spengler, take the ring and bring it to my fiancé, the letter in my pocket too!’ The most unfortunate man had gotten engaged before leaving for the front. ‘Greetings to my dear parents too!’ I took both and used the coats and tents from the satchels of the dead to cover him and the sergeant. They kissed my hand.”¹³² But his ordeal was not over. “I looked around and saw the French. Two, three shots and the foremost one fell.”¹³³ As he made his way back, Spengler found “his best, dearest comrade,” Fink, shot through the mouth and chest:

¹²⁸ Ibid., “Da rief jemand: ‘Der Hauptmann ist tot.’”

¹²⁹ Ibid. “Lieber Gott! Da lagen 7–8 Leute sterbend und bittend. Der arme gute Hauptmann bleich und tot. Durch die Schläfe geschossen. Er hatte die Kompagnie opfern wollen, um das Regiment zu retten. Über seinem Körper der Leutnant mit zerschossenem Fuß. Er nahm die Papiere des Hauptmanns zu sich. Ich schnitt die Pistole vom Gürtel und die Karte.”

¹³⁰ Ibid., 10-11. “Die armen Kerle bettelten: ‘Einjähriger hilf! Sag’ dem und dem meinen letzten Gruß u. s. f.’ Ich nahm Abschied vom Leutnant und den Leuten und kroch zurück.”

¹³¹ Ibid., 11. “Da schreit plötzlich mein Lieber Freund Jennrich schrecklich auf.”

¹³² Ibid. “Ich gab ihm schmerzstillende Tropfen und verband ihn rasch. ‘Spengler, nimm den Ring und bring ihn meiner Braut, in der Tasche den Brief auch!’ Der Ärmste hatte sich vor dem Ausmarsch verlobt. ‘Auch Grüße an meine lieben Eltern!’ Ich nahm beides und machte Mäntel und Zelte von den Tornisten der Toten los und deckte ihn und den Feldwebel zu. | Sie küßten mir die Hand.”

¹³³ Ibid. “Ich schaute um und sah schon die Franzosen. Zwei, drei Schuß, und ide vordersten fielen.”

I called: 'Fink, best, dearest Fink, do you understand me?' 'Yes,' he wheezed, blood overflowing from his misshapen face.

'Mother,' he whimpered. 'Where?' I called. 'In the satchel?' 'No.' 'In the haversack?' 'Yes.' 'The wallet?' 'Yes.' I took them and promised him I would take care of everything.

He fell on his side. Then I saw the hole in his back. Oh! I took his hand. A cold sweat was on it.

Now I was alone. With the pistol in my hand, I ran back. Jennrich took my hand again and kissed the ring which I now wore. 'A kiss for my bride. Farewell!'¹³⁴

Running back through the forest, Spengler came across two men from another company dragging a wounded comrade and joined up with them. When they reached the nearest village, they met up with three more soldiers and, along with a farmer from the village, bound up the man's wounds. The French were closing in, but another regiment was ultimately able to repel them. By 9:30 that morning, the battle was over.¹³⁵ The next day, he took stock of the damage: "We set out with 270 men, and now are only 114. No officer, no sergeant; only three N.C.O.s remain. Awful. I cried like a child, handed over [the captain's] pistol and laid down."¹³⁶ Concluding the letter, he told those at home: "I cannot be excited about anything anymore. Why I came through it, I do not understand. It is a miracle. Did my dear mother pray for it? Or my dear grandmother?"¹³⁷

In the course of this single day, then, Spengler recorded a minimum of three explicit instances of final leave-taking (Jennrich, the sergeant, and Fink), 'said' through two different types of material tokens (Jennrich's wedding ring; Jennrich and Fink's farewell letters), to at least four separate audiences (Jennrich's fiancé, Jennrich's parents, Fink's mother, and Spengler

¹³⁴ Ibid., 12. "Ich rief: 'Fink, bester, liebster Fink, verstehst Du mich?'" 'Ja', hauchte er aus blutüberströmtem, unförmlichem Gesicht. | 'Mutter', wimmerte er. 'Wo?' rief ich. 'Im Tornister?' 'Nein.' 'Im Brotbeutel?' 'Ja.' 'Die Briefftasche?' 'Ja.' Ich nahm sie und versprach ihm, alles zu besorgen. | Er fiel auf die Seite. Da sah ich das Loch im Rücken. Ach! Ich ergriff seine Hand. Kalter Schweiß stand darauf. | Jetzt war ich allein. Die Pistole in der Hand rannte ich zurück. Jennrich ergriff noch meine Hand und küßte den Ring, den nun ich trug. 'Einen Kuß meiner Braut!' 'Leb' wohl!'"

¹³⁵ Ibid., 12-13.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 13. "270 Mann zogen wir aus, 114 sind wir noch. Kein Offizier, kein Feldwebel, nur noch drei Unteroffiziere. Schrecklich. Ich weinte wie ein Kind, gab die Pistole ab und legte mich hin."

¹³⁷ Ibid. "Ich kann mich über nichts mehr freuen. Warum ich davon kam, verstehe ich nicht. Es ist ein Wunder. | Hat die liebe Mama das erbetet? oder die geliebte Großmutter?"

himself). All this, of course, on top of 1) the requests from the dying men in his captain's shell hole to give their final regards to myriad loved ones, which Spengler only recorded in general terms; 2) Spengler's own material and behavioral modes of saying goodbye under fire, most notably retrieving his captain's pistol, and his turning what he expressly understood to be his potential final thoughts to his own loved ones while waiting out the first French bombardment and writing in his diary; and 3) the fact that, through trying to fulfil their final requests and pass on both their tangible and intangible last greetings, the one-year volunteer took his own leave of his two dying friends. Even under intense fire that constantly threatened to end one's own life, then, 'taking one's leave' appeared as an omnipresent battlefield behavior, one whose devastating emotional effects Spengler made clear. When he was finally free of direct existential danger and his survival was at least temporarily assured, he broke down, "cried like a child," and experienced a near-immediate survivor's guilt, marveling—quite literally—at his own survival when so many others had just died. Not only that, but he then *communicated* the entire ordeal to his loved ones back home, expanding the circle of bereavement to them as well, even if only indirectly.

Further, Spengler's letter makes clear the multiple valences even a single form of non-verbal *Abschied nehmen* could take, exemplified most directly in the two types of 'farewell kiss' he recorded. The first instance, where Jennrich and the wounded sergeant each kissed Spengler's hand as he took his leave of them, was a direct final goodbye between soldiers: an expression of a deep non-sexual emotional intimacy seemingly born of—or, at a minimum, heightened by—the threat of imminent death, as well as of gratitude by the wounded men for Spengler having done what he could to make them comfortable, including agreeing to pass on Jennrich's final goodbyes to his loved ones at home. As described in his letter, Spengler acted as a paradigmatic

embodiment of what Jason Crouthamel calls the “good comrade:” a wartime fusion of “‘feminine’ characteristics of nurturing with the ‘masculine’ comradely ideal.”¹³⁸ Indeed, it is notable that the next thing Spengler described doing *immediately after* this farewell kiss was his own shooting of a French soldier, and thus his fulfillment of his lethal ‘masculine’ duty as a soldier. This was a rare admission for any combatant: many described the anguish of their friends and comrades dying, but very few admitted to participating in the killing themselves.¹³⁹ Spengler himself implicitly indexed the taboo nature of this admission in his syntax, as this was one of the only sentences in the letter he constructed passively: “Two, three shots, and the foremost one fell.” Moreover, the fact that Spengler was a one-year volunteer already engaged in combat in August 1914 meant 1) he was not a career soldier and 2) he joined the army in peacetime. There are thus not even any indirect indications that Spengler had a desire to kill or to experience combat, in direct contrast to someone like Ernst Jünger, who volunteered during the “August days” and discussed both desires throughout his war diary.¹⁴⁰ Seen in this fuller context, then, the intra-military goodbye carried the emotional weight of a double loss, at least by the time Spengler recorded it in his letter: the loss of his comrades, as well as the moral and emotional loss that came with breaching the killing-taboo.

The second farewell kiss was very different, but no less emotionally powerful: Jennrich kissing the ring he had given to Spengler as a last ‘kiss for his bride.’ This was a double farewell, both an indirect goodbye between Jennrich and his fiancé mediated through Spengler and the

¹³⁸ Jason Crouthamel, “Love in the Trenches: German Soldiers’ Conceptions of Sexual Deviance and Hegemonic Masculinity in the First World War,” in *Gender and the First World War*, eds. Christa Hämmerle, Oswald Überegger, Birgitta Bader Zaar (London: Palgrave MacMillian, 2014): 53.

¹³⁹ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 37-42.

¹⁴⁰ Benjamin Ziemann’s review of Jünger’s published diary succinctly summarizes these core points: Benjamin Ziemann, review of *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, edited by Helmuth Kiesel, *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 294, No. 2 (April 2012): 557-558. See also his discussion in: Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, trans. Andrew Evans (New York: Bloomsbury 2017 [2013]): 63-90.

ring itself, but also a second goodbye between Spengler and Jennrich. The very physicality of the two kisses indexed the essential difference. In the first case, Jennrich and the segreant both kissed Spengler's hand. The direct physical contact between their bodies thus indicated an affective significance to the connection between the soldiers in the moments before that connection was permanently severed, one which did not require words, at least under those circumstances. In the second case, however, Jennrich kissed his own ring, indicating the *object itself* as the locus of social and emotional connections. As Auslander describes, material objects "provide a sensory experience of continued contact," often literally.¹⁴¹ And it is precisely because of that kind of tactile connection that such objects often become indispensable repositories of memory: "Experiences come to be lodged in things; loss of the object-companion of an experience, therefore, can bring the loss of the memory itself."¹⁴²

Especially after he kissed it, then, Jennrich's ring took on at least a threefold significance, with a distinct but related meaning for each of the three audiences of this final farewell gesture. The first and most obvious was the meaning of the ring to Jennrich's fiancé. While the surviving record gives no indication of the specific ways she experienced contact with it in the aftermath of Jennrich's death—or indeed, if she ever received it at all—the ring nonetheless stood as a simultaneous material testament to both their love and its loss in war: an objective—in a literal sense—preserver of that dual memory.¹⁴³ Indeed, the only reason she would receive Jennrich's in the first place was because her beloved was no longer alive to wear it. Second was the ring's

¹⁴¹ Auslander, "Beyond Words," 1020. She evocatively illustrates this broader point in a personal vein, writing that "[t]he rings I never take off that belonged to my dead grandmothers provide a daily connection to them, as if our fingers could still touch."

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Since this letter came from the published Witkop volume, there is not enough biographical information to even begin trying to track down other sources to flesh out the story. While it contains the first and last name of the letters' authors, it does not give their units, let alone any potential identifying information about the people mentioned within the letters themselves.

significance to Jennrich, where it became a material surrogate for and emotional conduit to his absent fiancé as he kissed it. This was an early instance of a deep and abiding socio-emotional problem which outlived the war itself: the inability for most to say goodbye to their loved ones in person, or even find out where their remains had been buried to take leave of them after they'd died.¹⁴⁴ Many at home expended considerable energy to try and make their way to the bedsides of their loved ones—if there was in fact a bedside to make it to—but most were unable to do so, which only further intensified their grief and bereavement.¹⁴⁵ Jennrich's second kiss, however, illustrates the equally weighty inverse side of that difficulty: the inability for most wounded soldiers to directly say their last goodbye to the person it was intended for, whether in a word, a gesture, or by some other means. Though it served as a stand-in and symbolic conduit to his fiancé, then, the ring simultaneously highlighted the fact of her physical absence in Jennrich's final moments.¹⁴⁶ His lips could not meet hers in the moments before his ultimate end. Instead, they found only cold metal in the midst of a violent and bloody battlefield.

Third and finally was the ring's significance to Spengler. The text of his letter implies that Spengler understood the object's two other meanings to at least some extent, firstly through the fact that he recorded the events surrounding it in such detail, as well as in his description of Jennrich as 'the most unfortunate man' for having gotten engaged so soon before his death in battle. But for the time being, at least, it was Spengler who would be able to literally feel an on-going connection to his lost friend through the ring he now wore. With that abiding connection

¹⁴⁴ And this of course only held in cases where there were remains to bury. In far too many cases, there were no remains at all, or they were unidentifiable, which only made the grief that much more agonizing and mourning that much more difficult for the loved ones they left behind: Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 215-217.

¹⁴⁵ Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 29-53.

¹⁴⁶ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker summarize the broader point: "[I]n the great majority of cases, no relatives were present to attend to the dying men in their final moments. So the soldiers often died alone, and if not alone, almost always without the support of close family members. All the stages that prepare a person for bereavement were thereby eliminated, as were all the rituals that ordinarily accompany the first moments of loss." Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 215.

came the added responsibility of actually delivering the ring and the final letter to Jennrich's fiancé, along with providing her and Jennrich's parents with what would undoubtedly be highly sought-after details of his friend's final moments: a further emotionally-harrowing experience for the young soldier sitting just over the temporal horizon, even if it 'only' meant writing each of them a letter.¹⁴⁷ His final conclusion that he "cannot be excited about anything anymore" thus takes on a much more specific valence when seen in this light. His 'childlike' tears were not just the result of all the losses—human, emotional, moral—during the battle itself, but were also tied to a distinctly tragic future those losses now engendered, independent of the course of the battle or the ultimate outcome of the war. Whether Germany won or lost, Jennrich was still dead, his fiancé was without her betrothed, and his parents without their son; and it fell to Spengler to deliver this horrific and devastating news, along with the material reminders of that now permanent separation.

That duty itself thus served as its own form of leave-taking between Spengler and his fallen comrades: a final act of saying goodbye by seeing that his friends' last words made it to those for whom they were intended. In that sense, the second farewell kiss was an even stronger indication of the connection between Spengler and Jennrich for the trust it indexed between them which quite literally transcended death. Ironically, however, it also meant integrating Spengler into the social networks of the dead, creating new relationships which crossed home and front and, emotionally, knit the two together in an ever-tightening thanatological web. In Jennrich's case, Spengler had to become the conveyor of the material romantic surrogate—the ring—as well as the preserver of the memory of Jennrich's 'kiss for his bride' and the one who would pass

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 206-207; Winter, *Sites of Memory*, 31, 35-36. Vera Brittain famously recounted her own desperate search for the details of her fiancé Roland's death in her memoir, highlighting the transnational nature of these specific forms of wartime bereavement: Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900-1925* (New York: Penguin, 2005 [1933]): 239-289.

it on to the bereaved woman. But even in a case like Fink's, where the deceased's final words were by all accounts conveyed in writing, the letter itself served as the same kind of doubly-valent material and emotional token: a final instantiation of the filial love between the young man and his mother which simultaneously served as testament to that love's loss in the fires of war. No death was emotionally singular. Each not only reverberated across a dense network of social and affective connections, but actually created new ones in the aftermath of a soldier's demise through each instance of leave-taking, whatever material or behavioral form it took.

If one takes the methodological cue from Bray, however, and expressly considers what use was made of the letters, specifically, and why they have survived, an additional layer of significance comes to fore. First, beyond their direct and intended function as farewells to Jennrich and Fink's loved ones, Spengler made use of them in his own letter, where they became symbols of the war's emotional costs to both his family and Spengler himself. Second and perhaps even more important, Spengler's own letter has survived because Witkop included it as the opening missive 'from the West' in his first collection of students' war letters, published in 1916.¹⁴⁸ Spengler's story and the numerous tragic stories within it thus reached an audience far beyond the social and filial circles of the one-yearer and his dead comrades. While this first Witkop edition appeared at the tail end of the boom in the wartime publication of letters from the front, which had quantitatively peaked the year before, and it was the later 1928 edition that became famous, the initial 1916 publication was nonetheless popular, and was actually translated into Swedish and Dutch by the end of that year.¹⁴⁹ All of the farewells thus took on a series of

¹⁴⁸ It is functionally the second letter in the collection, as the book begins with a letter sent from Poland in November 1914 which functions as the volume's epigraph: Witkop, *Kriegsbriefe deutsche Studenten*, 1-4.

¹⁴⁹ As Krumeich describes, the official 'Directory of German Books' (*Deutsches Bücherverzeichnis*) lists 24 collections of front letters published during the war: 2 in 1914, 13 in 1915, 6 in 1916, none in 1917, and 3 in 1918. Krumeich, "Publishing Ego Documents as War Propaganda," 233, 236. On the history of the various Witkop editions, see: Hettling and Jeismann, "Der Weltkrieg als Epos," 207-214; on the 1916 edition, its translations, and use in Germany's international propaganda efforts: 208.

afterlives, first by being recorded by Spengler, whose own letter was then published by Witkop, which in turn circulated not only throughout Germany, but throughout a number of neutral countries as well. Well after its protagonists had met their bloody ends, their farewells lived on as “abiding testimony” of the “struggle and heroism of the German spirit in all its tragedy and beauty,” as Witkop described it in the foreword.¹⁵⁰ Thus these goodbyes took on new meanings through the various uses those left behind made of them and, as Witkop’s volume highlights, even in cases where there may have been no explicit sacrificial framing within the texts themselves, a great many took on such a *post hoc* meaning through their afterlives as publications.

But these sacrificial afterlives remained inextricably tied to the fact of wartime death and the emotional costs of and needs imposed by it, not only in wide-reaching publications like Witkop’s collections, but in much more private documents as well. A small collection of Catholic soldiers’ funeral cards from North-Rhine Westphalia provides a poignant example.¹⁵¹ These funeral cards were even more overtly generic than most *Abschiedsbriefe*, as they all followed a common format built from a shared stock of images and texts. Each began with a picture of the deceased, which covered the entire front-left side of the card. The front-right side began with one or two bible quotes at the top, followed by a tagline which summarized the soldier’s death and framed its intended meaning. The tagline on the funeral card for Fritz Nühren, for example, an N.C.O. who was conscripted in 1913 and killed by artillery fire on 20 September 1916 in Volhynia, in what is now Ukraine, simply stated that “[f]rom two years of the

¹⁵⁰ Witkop, *Kriegsbriefe deutsche Studenten*, v. “Und je ergriffener wir den Kampf und Heroismus des deutschen Geistes in all seiner Tragik und Schönheit miterleben, desto mehr sehnen wir uns, nicht in der Tat allein, auch im Wort von ihm dauernd Zeugnis zu haben.”

¹⁵¹ BA-MA MSG 2/2164 ‘Totenzettel für gefallene Soldaten.’ The collection consists of five funeral cards, four from the First World War, one from the Second. Thus, as with all the qualitative sources discussed throughout this chapter, I take them to be emblematic, not quantitatively representative.

dangers and labors of war, the metalworker [*Schlosser*] went to rest through a hero's death [*Heldentod*]."¹⁵² The cards then gave the decedent's name and unit, and provided a short biographical summary of the soldier's life, centering on his war experience and the circumstances of his death. The longer summaries carried over to the back of the card. All concluded with a religious image and the text of a prayer.

Further, the texts' contents themselves were as conventional as the common layout of the cards. Most notably, they consistently either quoted from or paraphrased soldiers' letters to those at home, giving those earlier communications a distinctly consolatory afterlife through their (re)use in the materials of mourning. The funeral card for Hermann Bremmekamp, for instance, who "died a hero's death [*Heldentod*] in valiant battle for the Fatherland on 6 September 1914" reassured mourners: "He died well-prepared through receiving the holy sacraments shortly before the battle and through serious contemplation of the possibility of his imminent death, as his last letter to his mother demonstrated. He went bravely and joyfully to his death. When, in the event, an enemy shell hit him, he called out a last adieu to his comrades in order to bring a final end to his earthly struggle."¹⁵³ The card for Hermann Poot, who was killed by artillery fire on 12 September 1916, was completely dominated by excerpts from his letters:

'Many a comrade has already fallen by my side, but that doesn't matter; we musn't hang our heads,' he wrote on New Year's Day 1915, after he had received holy communion in the morning and participated in the consecration of the holy heart of Jesus. 'For five months, we were always in the forwardmost line, not one day outside of the artillery zone. But so far, there has yet to be a bullet or shell ordained for me. When it will come, nobody knows. It is god's will [*Es ist Gottes Fügung*], and one must be prepared for death every second. All those who did not like praying before have learned to like it here.' As a recruit from 1913, he was on active duty when the war broke out, which

¹⁵² Ibid. "Aus zweijährigen Gefahren und Mühen des Krieges ging durch den Heldentod zur Ruhe der Schlosser."

¹⁵³ Ibid. "Er starb den Heldentod in tapferem Kampfe fürs Vaterland am 6. September 1914 [...]. Er starb recht gut vorbereitet durch den Empfang der hl. Sakramente kurz vor der Schlacht und durch ernste Erwägung der Möglichkeit seines nahen Todes, wie sein letzter Brief an seine Mutter beweist. Er ging mutig und freudig in den Tod, als eine feindliche Granate ihn traf, und rief im Falle seinen Kameraden ein letztes Adieu zu, um in der nächsten Minute den irdischen Kampf zu vollenden."

caught him by surprise. He participated in the battles of the Marne and Arras. [...] ‘That is why we are nonetheless still always full of humor and always singing, no matter how bad it went.’ He then came to Galicia; in October 1915 he fought in the second battle of Artois. In August 1916, he found himself in the battle of the Somme. ‘If I am fatally wounded, you must all try to reduce this pain for each other; that is how it should be [...]. This morning we went to church and received holy communion. Now it can go until the last ember smolders.’ So he wrote on 22 August, and on 12 September an artillery projectile hit him in the chest while he was faithfully fulfilling his duty. He was killed instantly and was buried on the spot.¹⁵⁴

Nühren was similarly commemorated with a funeral card full of quotes from his letters. Unlike Poot’s card, however, the quotes from Nühren’s letters were much more mundane, describing the food in the field kitchens on the eastern front and recounting the fighting in general terms:

“Today we are here, tomorrow there; always marches and battles.”¹⁵⁵

Although it is notable that Poot’s excerpted letters contain all the major generic conventions found throughout *Abschiedsbriefe* more generally, particularly an ostensibly comforting invocation of fatalism and an abiding concern with consolation and absolution, in each of these cases, what was more significant than the actual contents of the quoted letters themselves was the fact of their use and recontextualization as part of a mourning ritual: a funeral. Even letters that came well before the soldiers’ actual deaths or were by all indications

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. “‘Es ist schon mancher Kamerad an meiner Seite gefallen; aber das macht nichts; wir dürfen den Kopf nicht hängen lassen’, schreib er auf Neujahr 1915, nachdem er morgens bei hl. Kommunion empfangen und die Weihe an das hl. Herz Jesu mitgemacht hatte. ‘Wir waren in den 5 Monaten immer in der vordersten Linie, keinen Tag außer Bereich der Artillerie. Aber für mich war bis jetzt noch keine Kugel oder Granate bestimmt. Wann es kommen wird, weiß keiner. Es ist Gottes Fügung, und man muß jede Sekunde auf den Tod vorbereitet sein. Jeder, der früher nicht gerne gebetet hat, hat es hier gelernt.’ So hatte er, als Rekrut vom Jahre 1913 in der aktiven Dienstzeit vom Ausbrüche des Weltkriegs überrascht, die Marneschlacht und die Kämpfe bei Ypern und Arras mitgemacht. ... ‘Wir sind deshalb doch noch immer voll Humor und singen immer, mag es noch so schlimm gegangen haben.’ Er kam, dann nach Galizien; im Oktober 1915 kämpfte er auf der Lorettohöhe. Im August 1916 befand er sich in der Sommeschlacht. ‘Wenn ich tödlich getroffen werde, so müßt Ihr Euch gegenseitig diesen Schmerz zu verringern suchen; dann hat es eben so sollen sein.... Heute morgen waren wir zur Kirche und haben die hl. Kommunion empfangen. Jetzt kann es losgehen bis der letzte Tropfen glüht.’ So schreib er den 22. August, und am 12. September traf ihn ein Artilleriegeschöß in die Brust bei treuer Pflichterfüllung. Er war sofort tot und wurde an Ort und Stelle begraben.”

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. “Heute sind wir hier, morgen dort, immer Märsche und Gefechte.”

never meant as a final goodbye functionally *became* farewell letters through their quotation or paraphrase in the funeral cards.

But not all these unwitting farewells occurred in writing. Joseph Uhrmacher, for instance, wrote his farewell letter on 6 August 1914, but outlived it by over three years. He was killed on 9 September 1917 while repelling the French attack on Verdun.¹⁵⁶ Thus his farewell letter did not, in fact, contain his final words, but only a single iteration of them. As his younger brother Karl, who voluntarily joined an artillery regiment during the ‘August days,’ recalled, his own final farewell to Joseph was inadvertent, as he described to his parents in a letter from 19 May 1918: “Whit Monday a year ago, but before the festival fell eight days later, I think, I saw Joey [Juppie] for the final time. At the time when we shook hands for the last time and he rode off on his little fox [a nickname for Joseph’s horse], neither of us had suspected that it would be a farewell for life.”¹⁵⁷ Even the simplest, common farewell gesture—a handshake between brothers—could take on a *postmortem* afterlife that transcended the boundaries between home and front and the initial meaning of the gesture itself.

Strikingly, as with Witkop’s published letter collections, the framing of these afterlives was often expressly sacrificial. The sole funeral card from 1918 was the most explicit. Sergeant Heinrich Janseen had volunteered on 3 August 1914 at the age of twenty-three. He “followed the call of the Fatherland to defend its borders against the enemy,” was wounded three times while

¹⁵⁶ His letters from this time are found in BA-MA MSG 2/10339, although, as with his letters more generally, legibility issues make them extremely difficult to read. His younger brother Karl, however, whose letters are much more legible, mentions having received reports from both his mother and brother about that battle: BA-MA MSG 2/10346, letter from 30 Aug 1917. Further, a file of photographs contains an image of Joseph’s grave, with both his birth and death dates clearly visible: BA-MA MSG 2/10348. For a military historical analysis of the 1917 French attack on Verdun, see: Robert A. Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005): 380-383.

¹⁵⁷ BA-MA MSG 2/10347, letter from 19 May 1918. “Pfingstmontag vor einem Jahr, vor Fest fiel jedoch 8 Tage später, glaube ich, habe ich Juppie zum letzten Male gesehen. Damals, als wir uns zum letzten Male die Hand geben und er auf seinen Füchschen davon ritt, da hatten wir beide auch nicht geahnt, daß es ein Abschied fürs Leben werden sollte.”

in France, and received the Iron Cross. “For three-and-a-half years he bore the hardships of the campaign with courage and perseverance, until he died a hero’s death [*Heldentod*] for the Fatherland at the beginning of the great offensive on 21 March 1918.”¹⁵⁸ In case the description of the young man’s death as a *Heldentod* was not enough, the card itself was literally framed by sacrificial rhetoric. It opened with two quotes from the First Book of Maccabees: “He sacrificed himself to save his people and earn an eternal name (1 Macc. 6, 4),” followed by “It is better that we die in battle than see the calamity of our people and sanctuaries (1 Macc. 3, 59).”¹⁵⁹ The final image on the card showed a dying soldier being held by an angel, adorned with the words “They were prepared to die for law and Fatherland.”¹⁶⁰ Similarly, both Nühren and Poot’s cards concluded with an identical stock image of Mary as the Mater Dolorosa, ‘the mother of sorrows,’ while Bremmekamp’s showed Christ on the cross and Mary clutching its base, both of which directly implied that all these young men had directly followed Christ’s example by martyring themselves for a greater cause. And as Karl Uhrmacher made clear in the conclusion of his letter, these were sacrifices that transcended the boundaries of home and front, as it was the entire family which had given for that cause: “So the Uhrmacher family, too, has made quite great sacrifices for the Fatherland. May it be the last!”¹⁶¹

Indeed, Uhrmacher’s statement on his family’s sacrifices points back to the most important aspect of these funeral cards: that they *were themselves* yet another form of leave-taking, which served the same moral and emotional purposes as the farewell letters they so often

¹⁵⁸ BA-MA MSG 2/2164. “Am 3. August 1914 folgte er dem Rufe des Vaterlandes Zur Verteidigung der Grenzen gegen die Feinde. In Frankreich wurde er dreimal verwundet und erhielt die Auszeichnung des Eisernen Kreuzes. 3 ½ Jahr trug er mit Mut und Ausdauer die Strapazen des Feldzuges, bis er bei Beginn der grossen Offensive am 21. März 1918, den Heldentod fürs Vaterland starb.”

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. “Er opferte sich auf, um sein Volk zu retten und sich einen ewigen**Namen* [sic] zu erwerben.” “Besser ist’s, daß wir sterben im Kampfe, als das Unglück unseres Volkes und Heiligtums zu sehen.”

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. “Sie waren bereit für Gesetz und Vaterland zu sterben.”

¹⁶¹ BA-MA MSG 2/10347, letter from 19 May 1918. “So hat die Familie Uhrmacher dem Vaterlande auch recht große Opfer beracht. Mögen es die letzten sein!”

quoted from, namely, comfort and absolution for the bereaved in a world at war. The texts of the funeral cards often concluded by driving home this intertwined moral and emotional purpose. Poot's funeral card, for example, closed by reassuring his mourners that his sacrificial death was simply God's will, but that those left behind could still help his soul with their prayers: "May it be for him that he so readily and devotedly, with the will of god [*Gottes Fügung*], sacrificed his earthly life in his prime years that he is destined for an eternal life of heavenly joy [*das ewige Leben in Himmelsfreude beschieden sein*]! Should earthly flaws keep him away from that, then we will assist him through Christian intercession."¹⁶² Like the Medical Staff Sergeant's suicide note, Poot's funeral card drew on the fatalistic idea that his death, however tragic, was fated by god and there was contentment in that destiny, even deploying common diction—most notably the verb 'bescheiden'—to drive home the consolatory message at the heart of the text. And there is evidence that these kinds of consoling messages were read and received as such by those in mourning. While Joseph Uhrmacher's funeral card has not survived, Karl's letters make clear that it both followed the same tenor and tone, and served as an on-going source of comfort to him as he continued his service at the front. As he wrote to his parents on 18 July 1918: "How wonderful and comforting the saying that stands at the head of our good Joseph's funeral card: 'I fought the good fight, completed the course...!'"¹⁶³

But however comforting they may have been, it remained the fact of a loved one's death in war that necessitated the existence of these mourning materials in the first place. As with all such farewell materials, then, they first and foremost indexed the scale of emotional devastation

¹⁶² BA-MA MSG 2/2164. "Möge ihm dafür, daß er so bereitwillig und ergeben mit Gottes Fügung das irdische Leben in der Blüte der Jahre geopfert hat, das ewige Leben in Himmelsfreude bescheiden sein! Sollte ihn noch Erdenmakel davon fernhalten, so verhelfen wir ihm dazu durch christliche Fürbitte."

¹⁶³ BA-MA MSG 2/10347, letter from 18 July 1918. "Wie herrlich und tröstvoll der Spruch, der unseres guten Josefs Totenzettel voransteht: 'Ich habe den guten Kampf gekämpft, den Lauf vollendet...!'"

that came in the wake of the deaths they memorialized, often explicitly. Nühren's card, for instance, made clear the desolate emotional state that not only his death, but the war more generally had left his father in: "The news of his [Fritz's] death hit his father, the farmer Gerhard Nühren, hard, as his oldest son had already been missing for a year and his third son had been in French captivity since 15 September 1916. The fallen was born to him and his now-deceased wife Anna, née Dewey on 12 April 1893 in Rhineberg."¹⁶⁴ Bremmekamp's funeral card was equally overt: "Mourning for him after learning of this bitter loss three weeks later is his hard-tested mother, who only a few months before suddenly lost her faithful husband and soon had to send five sons and one son-in-law to arms, as well as his siblings and brother-in-law, who have lost in the fallen a beloved brother and brother-in-law. All their acquaintances and the entire parish mourns with them."¹⁶⁵

Further, as material objects, such funeral cards physically circulated far beyond these overt home-front grief networks. Five weeks after his brother's death, Karl Uhrmacher's unit was moving to a new section of the front. Before he left, he went to say farewell to two soldiers in another unit who knew his dead brother, as he described in a letter to his parents on 16 October 1917: "On Saturday afternoon I quickly stopped by B. [an unspecified place name] one more time to take my leave of Captain Hasdenteufel and Doncht. Doncht was very nice once again. Among other things, I showed them photographs from home and of Joe's [*Jupps*] grave

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. "Hart traf die Todesnachricht seinen Vater, den Landwirt Gerhard Nühren, da sein ältester Sohn schon seit Jahresfrist vermißt war und der dritte Sohn seit 15. 9. 16 sich in französischer Gefangenschaft befindet. Der Gefallene war ihm und seiner inzwischen verstorbenen Frau Anna geb. Dewey am 12. April 1893 zu Rheinberg geoboren."

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. "Es trauern um ihn, nachdem sie 3 Wochen später von dem herben Verluste erfuhren, seine vielgeprüfte Mutter, die vor wengen Monaten durch einen plötzlichen Tod ihren treuen Gatten verlor und bald darauf 5 Söhne und einen Schwiegersohn zu den Waffen senden mußte, und Geschwister und Schwäger, die in dem Gefallen einen liebenden Bruder und Schwager verloren haben; es fühlen Mitlied mit ihnen alle Bekannten und die ganze Pfarrgemeinde."

and gave them a funeral card [*Totenzettel*].”¹⁶⁶ The funeral card itself, then, not only forged a socio-emotional link across front and home between family members who had been both physically separated and bereaved as a result of Germany’s participation in the war. It also served as a material link between the filial and comradely mourning networks, bringing the two together in a common social web of grief even if the people within them had never met.

And as Karl Uhrmacher’s letter intimated, funeral cards were only one such material means of forging these thanatological socio-emotional bonds. Photographs of soldiers’ graves and cemeteries, for instance, circulated across Europe for the entire duration of the war, and it was often siblings and friends who secured those photos and sent them home. According to his surviving letters, Karl Uhrmacher was able to visit his brother’s grave at least twice in the month after his death and had sent his parents at least one photo of the grave by early October 1917—presumably the image he mentioned showing to Hasdenteufel and Doncht.¹⁶⁷ Similarly, after his younger brother Gustav was killed in January 1917, Ernst Maier, a forty-seven year-old N.C.O. who re-entered the army in 1915 after having done his mandatory service as a one-year volunteer in 1890, was able to secure a photograph of Gustav’s grave and send it home.¹⁶⁸ The medic Johannes Bauscher’s collection of photographs from his time in France contains thirteen photographs of soldier’s graves and cemeteries, twelve of which were specifically for men in his unit. For all those whose names were not legible in the photographs of their graves, he handwrote them next to the images on the paper they were later mounted on.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, such photographs

¹⁶⁶ BA-MA MSG 2/10347, letter from 16 October 1917. “Samstag Nachmittag führ ich rasch noch einmal nach B. zu Hptm. Hasdenteufel und Doncht, um mich zu verabschieden. Doncht waren wieder sehr net. Ich zeigte ihnen u.a. auch die Photographien von zu Hause und von Jupps Grab und gab ihnen einen Totenzettel.”

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., field postcard dated 2 October 1917; letter dated 5 October 1917. As previously noted, the photo itself is found in: BA-MA MSG 2/10348.

¹⁶⁸ BA-MA MSG 2/19326 Bd. 1. The details of Ernst Maier’s service history come from his military passport, which is included in the file, along with a photograph of his brother’s grave.

¹⁶⁹ BA-MA MSG 2/17329 ‘Sammlung Fotografien Frankreich Erster Weltkrieg von Johannes (Jean) Bauscher, Sanitätssoldat, Sanitäts-Kompanie 3, 15. Infanterie-Regiment.’

were so sought after that there were entire publications dedicated exclusively to them. For example, issue 21 of *The Little War Album*, a series of short patriotic photobooks published throughout the war covering a diverse range of topics from “Imprisoned Enemies” to the “Red Cross” to “Austria-Hungary in the World War,” was devoted entirely to “Hero’s Graves.” Not only did it include photographs of German soldiers’ graves and cemeteries from the western, eastern, and alpine fronts, but also included images of, *inter alia*, soldiers decorating those cemeteries, praying by individual graves, and conducting a funeral procession. Even in overtly propagandist publications, visual testaments to the depth and breadth of wartime bereavement appeared well after the year of ‘great battles:’ one more reminder of the on-going lethal costs of sacrifice.¹⁷⁰

The material creation, circulation, and eventual preservation of these myriad farewell documents brings one face-to-face with the micro-level socio-emotional realities of what Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker call “circles of mourning:” a heuristic which helps “clarify how each death devastated emotional worlds, in a wide-ranging gradation of aftershocks” without asserting a hierarchy of suffering or bereavement.¹⁷¹ As they note, and as these myriad modes of leave-taking repeatedly demonstrate, grief was not borne alone either during or after the war, but was “recognized and alleviated by the creation of social structures aiming, implicitly or explicitly, at helping survivors.”¹⁷² These structures essentially formed a series of concentric circles radiating out from the dead within two distinct milieux: military and civilian. The two milieux had different temporalities, quantitative scales, and spatial loci, but

¹⁷⁰ MSG 2/16783 ‘Das kleine Kriegsalbum, Heft 21: Heldengräber (Druck).’ The full list of 35 titles in the series is printed on the back cover. While there is no publication date listed, there is a legible death date of “2. 9. 16.” on one of the graves, indicating that the publication must have appeared sometime during the second half of the war.

¹⁷¹ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 209.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 204.

were nonetheless linked together through the circulation of various material documents—both farewell and otherwise—across these overlapping circles.¹⁷³ Tracing the quantitative contours of those aftershocks, then, allows one to glimpse not only the macro-level scale of this emotional devastation within both milieux, but also its diachronic development.

The first set of circles was military. As Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker write, it was “undoubtedly composed of the soldiers themselves” who, despite the quotidian omnipresence of death at the front, “often took great risks and expended considerable energy to honour, under horrific circumstances, their own dead”—a reality to which the photos in *The Little War Album*, perhaps more than any other single source, cogently attest.¹⁷⁴ This circle had the most fleeting temporality, as “rapid troop rotations between 1914 and 1918 regularly broke up primary groups and the demobilisation dispersed them completely.”¹⁷⁵ Indeed, it is noteworthy in this regard that the impetus for Karl Uhrmacher giving Hasdenteufel and Doncht a funeral card was the fact that Karl himself was about to move to a different section of the battlefield. The demands of the war meant that moments of collective mourning and remembrance between such men could only be brief and transitory.

While this makes it functionally impossible to reconstruct its spatial distribution or approximate the scale of any of its specific concentric rings, the qualitative evidence from micro-level sources does provide a basis from which to reasonably estimate the *overall* extent of military mourning. These documents indicate that each soldier’s death likely bereaved a minimum of five other soldiers. Hermann Bremmekamp’s funeral card explicitly mentioned six, for instance—his four brothers, his brother-in-law, and his captain—though this excluded any

¹⁷³ While Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker do not make this point about the linkages across the military and civilian circles explicitly, it is an implicit thread throughout their discussion and elaboration of the concept: *Ibid.*, 203-212.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

friends or acquaintances he had amongst his fellow soldiers.¹⁷⁶ Joseph Uhrmacher had three named military mourners—his brother, Hasdenteufel, and Doncht—but those were only the soldiers who were able to meet and whose meeting was both recorded and archivally preserved, rendering it a definite underestimate. Further, as the photographs in *The Little War Album* make clear, these military circles of mourning could take on a much greater scope than that indexed solely through named mourners, particularly in the case of unit commanders.¹⁷⁷ When combined

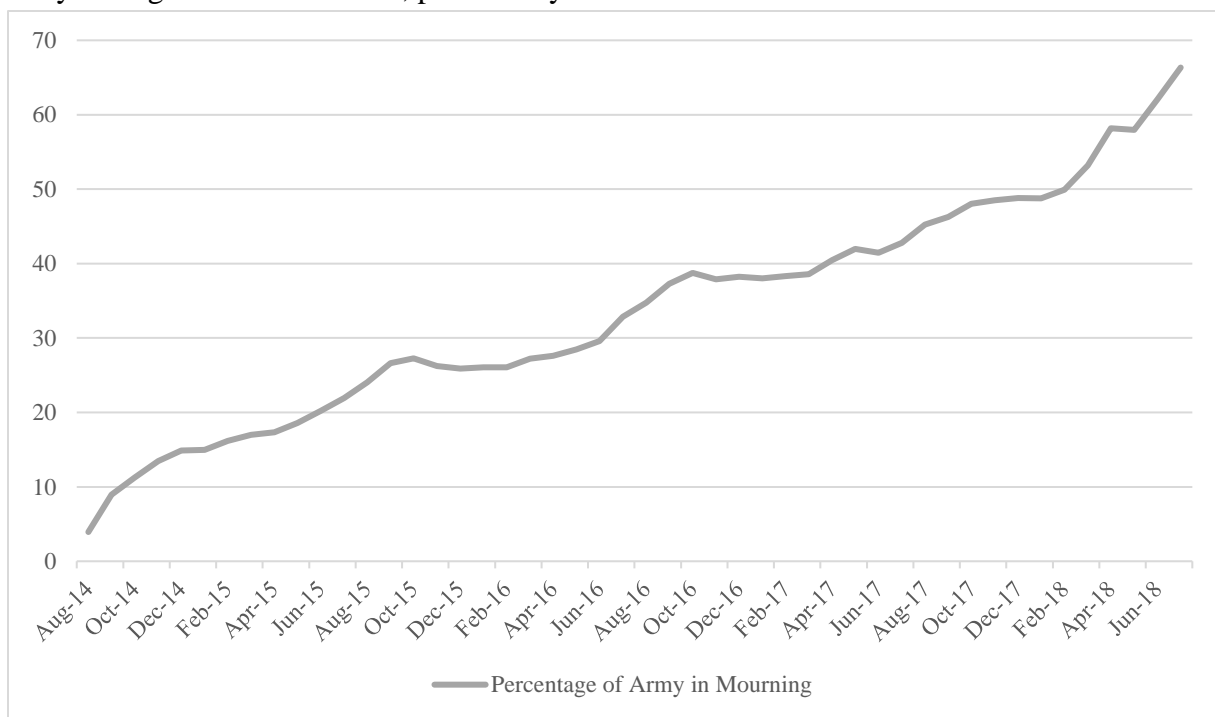


Figure 10: Estimated Percentage of Bereavement in the German Army (Der Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkrieg 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkrieg 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): denominator: 5*-8*; numerator: 140*-143*

with the statistical breakdown of deaths in the army and the army’s actual size (*Iststärke*) found

¹⁷⁶ BA-MA MSG 2/2164. According to Bremmekamp’s funeral card, his captain was in contact with the family and referred to Hermann as “the first sacrifice from his company [*erstes Opfer seiner Kompanie*].”

¹⁷⁷ For instance, the photograph of a military funeral procession shows at least 22 soldiers participating, likely with more out of frame. The image “Ehren-Salut für ihren Leutnant” shows the dead officer’s entire unit gathered, with at least eleven visible within the honor guard itself. Of the six other photographs in the *Album* that show people, four show individual mourners, one shows three soldiers praying by a grave, and one shows two soldiers ornamenting a grave. If one averages the visible mourners within the album, using only visible honor guard from the honor salute photo (which thus lowers the average considerably, but may accord more closely with to the number of those ‘deeply affected’ by a given death) it gives an average of 5.25 bereaved.

in the *Sanitätsbericht*, then, one obtains a reasonable but ultimately quite conservative estimate of the percentage of the German Army in mourning each month between August 1914 and July 1918, and thus the expanding breadth of military bereavement over the course of the war (Figure 10).¹⁷⁸

These figures reveal that by June 1915, fully 20% of the German army was already grieving the loss of a comrade. By the end of the war's first year, it was nearly 25%, and climbed to over a third of the army with the massive increase in combat deaths that came with the battle of the Somme in the summer of 1916. The war's final year saw military mourning cross the 50% threshold after Germany commenced the Spring Offensive in March 1918. By July 1918—the final month for which a chronological breakdown of the relevant figures is available—just over two-thirds of soldiers in the German army were bereaved. And this remains a decided underestimate, as it only accounts for soldiers whose deaths could be definitively dated and tallied to a specific month: a total of 857,137 dead. As Antoine Prost points out, however, the *Sanitätsbericht* ultimately estimated that a total of 1,973,701 German soldiers died between August 1914 and July 1918, meaning that less than half of the total dead were included in the *Medical Report's* chronological breakdown.¹⁷⁹ Further, the *Sanitätsbericht* numbers excluded sailors, and are more than 63,000 deaths below the current consensus figure of 2,037,000 total German war dead.¹⁸⁰ It is thus all the more striking that even by this hyper-conservative estimate, by March 1918 at the absolute latest, the majority of men in the German army were mourning at

¹⁷⁸ To generate this estimate, I took the cumulative deaths found in Figure 9, multiplied it by five—the minimum estimate of military mourners for each death, as discussed above—and then divided the result by the actual strength of the army. These figures thus account for the expansions and contractions in the size of the army, however imperfectly, and reflect the total percentage of bereavement within the army for any given month.

¹⁷⁹ Antoine Prost, "The Dead," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 589.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 588-589.

least one dead comrade. Well before the guns fell silent, the German army had become a grieving collective.

But it was not the only such collective, nor did it exist in isolation, as an even greater proportion of civilians was affected by these compounding war deaths. The civilian circles of mourning were much more stable and long-lasting than those at the front, which makes their concentric rings much easier to sketch, at least in abstract. A first familial circle of mourning consisted of a dead soldier's immediate family: those who were mentioned explicitly in the text of a funeral card, for instance, or addressed in an *Abschiedsbrief*. Following the contours of the larger family group—aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.—one then finds a second circle, and even beyond this a third circle of 'distant' relations: those who may have attended a funeral or received such a card. Finally, on top of this filial set existed another set of home front circles encompassing a soldier's friends and 'chosen relationships' in their varying degrees of intimacy, from best friends to co-workers and colleagues.¹⁸¹

In terms of concrete numerical estimates, the qualitative evidence found throughout soldiers' various farewell missives indicates that, in most cases, a minimum of three households made up the first civilian circle of mourning—including both family and chosen relations—for each dead soldier. Breckow, for instance, explicitly offered a farewell to five: the Havemann, Giese, and Schumann families, as well as his own and that of his brother. Though secondhand, Jennrich mentioned two explicitly—his fiancé and his parents—and, by passing on those farewell's through Sprengler, implicitly added a third. And while only two were transcribed, the Bavarian *Sanitäts-Vizefeldwebel* addressed suicide notes to at least three different households. If one then assumes that each household in the first circle communicated their bereavement to three

¹⁸¹ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 207-208.

more households—by passing on a funeral card, say, or simply writing to inform them second hand of a loved one’s demise—one can approximate the size of the second circle as well.

Applying these ‘mourning multipliers’ to the death numbers in the *Sanitätsbericht* and comparing the resultant figures with the total number of households in Germany, one gets an estimate of the scale of home front bereavement and its development over time (Figure 11).¹⁸²

As with the military mourning estimates, the figures are staggering. By the end of 1917, the first circle of mourning alone encompassed over 15% of German households. By May 1916, over a third were grieving the loss of a loved one to at least some degree, a figure which passed 50% less than a year later, in April 1917, and 66% a year after that. By July 1918, an estimated 72% of German households were grieving a dead soldier. Of course, these estimates are necessarily rough, as they, too, are built on the *Medical Report* data, cannot account for households losing multiple loved ones or simultaneously being part of both circles (e.g. a family mourning a dead son and a dead nephew), and ignore the ‘distant’ third circles, which, as Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker note, are essentially “impossible to reconstitute.”¹⁸³ Nonetheless, they, too, illustrate the collective effects of each individual soldier’s death—whether by suicide, accident, in combat, or any other means—and the macro-level cumulative bereavement weighing down more and more Germans as the war continued.

¹⁸² I once again built from the cumulative death numbers from the *Sanitätsbericht* given in Figure 9, although here with “mourning multipliers” of three for the first circle and nine for the second, respectively, as sketched above. The resulting products I then divided by the number of households in Germany in the most recent census (from 1910) published in the *Statistical Yearbook* produced by the Imperial Statistical Offices, which listed a total of 14, 283, 380: Kaiserliches Statistisches Amte, *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, Vol. 34 (Berlin: Verlag von Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, 1913): 6.

¹⁸³ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 208.

By the spring of 1918 at the latest, Germany was a country in mourning. Indeed, from the conflagration's earliest days, Germans endured the valedictions of their loved ones, valedictions which too often proved final. These farewells took a variety of textual, material, and behavioral forms. Together, they made 'taking one's leave' a near-omnipresent facet of wartime life, despite the inherent and on-going separations and dislocations precipitated by Germany's participation

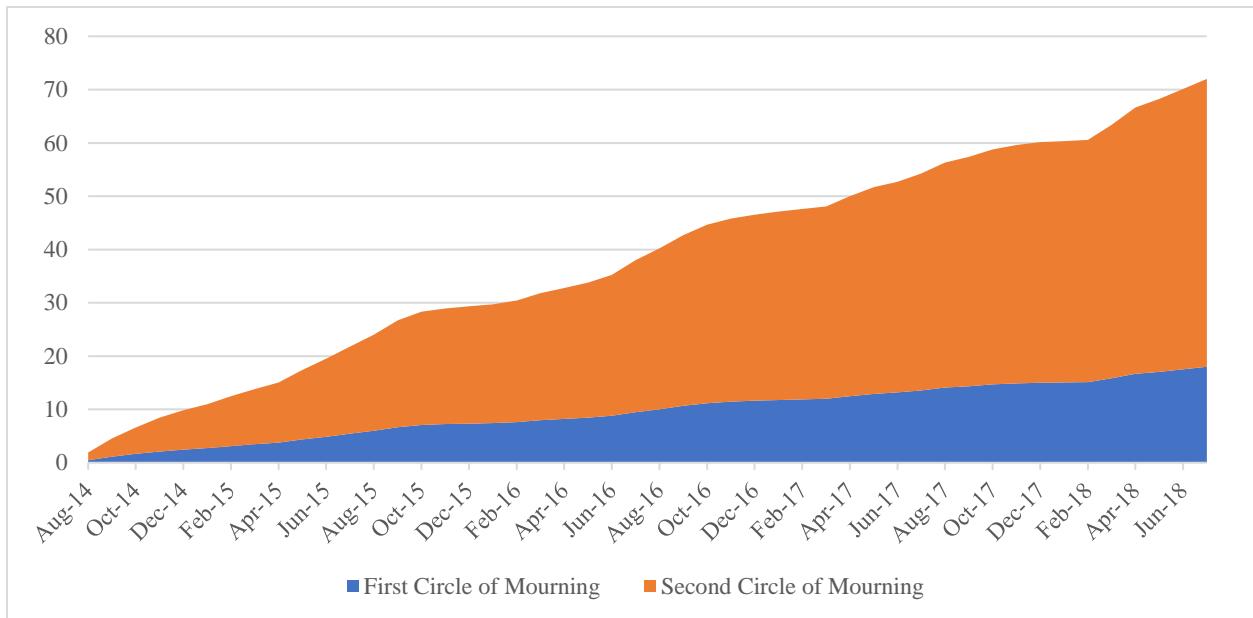


Figure 11: Estimated Percentage of Bereaved German Households (Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 140*-143*; Kaiserliches Statistisches Amt, *Statistisches Jahrbuch für das Deutsche Reich*, Vol. 34 (Berlin: Verlag von Puttkammer & Mühlbrecht, 1913): 6.)

in the conflict. The ubiquity of *Abschied nehmen*, however, inherently pointed back to the colossal scale of wartime death itself, which had prompted and necessitated those goodbyes in the first place. As letters, photographs, mementos, and people circulated within and across the various spatial and social wartime milieux, so too did the deep and abiding emotional devastation those accumulating deaths engendered. What Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker write of the French thus appears equally true for the Germans, as least in general terms: “if we add up immediate

family, distant relatives and wider entourage, it seems that by the end of the Great War, the various circles of mourning included, in France, the quasi-totality of the population.”¹⁸⁴

3.4 The Weight of Valedictions

By the war’s final year, then, nearly every German had not only been touched by the war in a general sense, but had been affected *specifically by a soldier’s death*, and thus by the suicidal substrate that had been running through the heart of the conflict from the moment it began. In suicide notes and farewell letters, funeral cards and photographs, millions of Germans said their goodbyes repeatedly with a generic set of rhetorical conventions and recurring concerns which belied the assumption of a categorical separation between suicide and sacrifice—between ‘laying hands on oneself’ and dying at the hands of the enemy. But while such a sacrificial framing and understanding of the self-destructive undercurrent continued to make wartime death endurable through the consolation and multivalent absolution it offered survivors, it also continued to mask and bury the signals from the shadow vanguard about the intense and accruing social, moral, and emotional costs of the on-going war. As the grief from each of death radiated across expanding—and increasingly expansive—circles of mourning both at the front and at home, the weight placed on sacrifice as a unifying concept to vindicate and validate those deaths in a morally and emotionally palatable way increased exponentially, and with it, the strain placed on the fragile consensus and unity of purpose that matrix of moral feelings was helping hold in place.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 212.

The crucial ‘moment of truth’ for that sacrificial consensus, however, came not with the Hundred Days Offensive, the Kiel Mutiny, or the German Revolution: it came in the spring of 1918. For German bereavement had reached the point of ‘quasi-totality’—with the majority of the army and nearly two-thirds of civilians in mourning—not in 1920 or with the armistice, but in March 1918, on the eve of Germany’s final gamble to win the war. As the previously reiterative pain of individual bereavement became definitively collective, the army itself had not only become an armed, grieving body. After the signing of the treaty of Brest Litovsk and subsequent build up for the spring offensive, it was also, for the first time, a spatially concentrated one. To vindicate all the deaths accrued in the military service of the Germany state as worthwhile sacrifices—to pay off the full expense of that which had been put at hazard—the offensive would have to succeed.

Part II: Collapse

When a 25-year-old N.C.O. in the Württemberger Reserve Artillery shot himself in the head with his service revolver on 20 February 1918, it came, ironically, during the last period of high morale in the German Army. On the warfront, the prospect of a German victory was the most promising it had been since August 1914. The Central Powers were victorious in the east, where the Bolshevik Revolution had functionally taken Russia out of the war even before the signing of the Treaty of Brest Litvosk on 3 March 1918.¹ In the south, Serbia had been conquered two years earlier, the Macedonian front had been stable since the Monastir Offensive in November 1916, and the Italians had been pushed to the brink of collapse at the Battle of Caporetto the previous fall.² And in the West, the French were still recovering from the Nivelle Offensive and consequent mutinies, the British were reeling from the staggering losses of the Battle of Passchendaele, and the Americans, who had entered the war on the Allied side in April 1917, had yet to make their presence felt militarily.³ Domestically, things were rockier, but still holding. Food shortages, caused in part by the Allied blockade but lethally exacerbated by state

¹ For a narrative overview, see: Robert Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 37-52. The classic account, though by a subsequently—and rightly—controversial historian, remains: Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914-1917* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975): 282-301.

² For a concise overview of the conquest of Serbia and its implications for the Balkan theater, see: Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003): 156-160; on the Monastir Offensive: Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (New York: Owl Books, 1994): 297, 310. For a detailed military-historical analysis of the Battle of Caporetto, see: John Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 226-246.

³ The essential study of the French Mutiny remains: Leonard V. Smith, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). On the broader Allied situation in early 1918, see the useful overview in: David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011): 20-29.

mismanagement, had led to thousands of deaths and persistent, vocal street protests in Berlin, which plateaued during the “Turnip Winter” of 1916-1917.⁴ This deprivation prompted a first major wave of strikes against the war in April 1917 and a second, even larger strike wave in January 1918.⁵ But as Roger Chickering notes, despite the mortal and material hardships, growing social unrest and political radicalization, and an increasingly widespread loss of faith in the state, the prospect of victory in 1918 “elevated spirits on the homefront and dampened the domestic discord,” as Germany’s success in the east “promised to relieve agricultural shortages at home [and] liberated German troops for service on other fronts.”⁶

And yet this was the same moment when, by his own account, a vague but powerful hopelessness overcame the Württemberger N.C.O. while he and his unit were stationed on the home front, in the fortress of Ulm. Shortly after shooting himself, he was found by a seventeen-year-old boy who brought him to the fortress hospital, which initially managed to save his life. The next day, 21 February 1918, he was questioned by an officer from his battery, who found him “to be of sound mind [*bei klarem Verstande ist*]” and indicated that the N.C.O. was aware of and acknowledged that he had attempted suicide the day before. The officer then asked why the young man had tried to kill himself, to which the N.C.O. replied: “out of despair [*aus Verzweiflung*]!” Despite repeated enquires however, the N.C.O. did not name a specific source of that despair, but only repeated his original answer each time he was asked. The report sent to the

⁴ On German food (mis)management and its socio-political effects, see: Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), especially 190-236; and Alice Weinreb, *Modern Hungers: Food and Power in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 13-48.

⁵ See the summary in: Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014): 477-82, 494.

⁶ Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918*, 2nd Edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 166. Securing greater food supplies was one of the reasons the delegation of the Central Powers concluded a separate peace agreement with the Ukrainian Central Rada before the signing of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk; Jeffrey Veidlinger, *In the Midst of Civilized Europe: The Pogroms of 1918-1921 and the Onset of the Holocaust* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021): 69-72.

Württemberg War Ministry by the N.C.O.'s section head (*Abteilungsführer*) the following day stated that “neither an incident in his military life nor an incident in his private relations induced him to commit the act.” It further specified that because he was slated to continue duty at the recruit depot in Ulm, “[i]t can therefore be assumed that the reasons for the act were not [the N.C.O.'s] fears of being deployed in the field.”⁷ Two weeks later, on 8 March, he died of his wounds.⁸ His case was then entered into the Württemberger compendium of soldiers' suicides, where it was classified as “not related to service” (*nicht dienstlicher Art*) and, in direct contrast to the claim in the 22 February report, the “reason” for the suicide was listed as “family relations [*Fam. Verh.*],” without any further elaboration.⁹

Viewed in this broader context, the N.C.O.'s suicide and its bureaucratic aftermath were a distillation of the emotional knife edge Germany sat upon in the weeks immediately before the 1918 spring offensive. On the one hand, the sacrificial socio-emotional consensus continued to hold, even at this late point in the war. As in 1914, on the eve of Operation Michael, Germans remained broadly united in their purpose—namely, not to lose the war. It was thus a decidedly tenuous and deeply precarious unity, but a unity nonetheless. Indeed, even the highly divisive

⁷ Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (hereafter LBW-HS) M 1/7 Bü 220 Verletzungen, Unglücksfälle, Todesermittlungsverfahren, Leichenschau sowie Beurkundung von Sterbefällen von Militärpersonen, report labelled “Ulm a. D., den 22. Februar 1918. | 2. Erstazabteilung Württemb. Feldart. Rgt. No. 49 I J. No 1764 | Dem K. Württ. Kriegsministerium Stuttgart.” The relevant sections in the original German read: “Auf Befragen nach dem Motiv der Tat erklärte er immer wieder: ‘aus Verzweiflung!’ Was ihn zur Verzweiflung getrieben hat, gab er trotz wiederholter Ausforschung nicht an. Es habe ihn weder ein Vorkommnis seines Soldatenlebens noch ein solches in seinen Privatverhältnissen zu der Tat bewogen.

Utfz. [Z.] war für das gem. Verfg. Kgl. württ. Kriegsministerium No 1420 K. 18 A. 1 geh. Aufzustellende Württ. Feldart.-Rekrutendeopt bestimmt. Da in der Zusammensetzung des Rekr. Dep. Aenderungen eintraten, wurde ein anderer Unteroffizier antelle des p. [Z.] bestimmt, welche letzterer seinen Dienst beim Rekrutendepot der 2. Ersatzbatterie wieder antrat.

Es ist deshalb anzunehmen, daß die Gründe zur Tat nicht darin zu suchen sind, daß Z. etwa vor der Feldverwendung Furcht gehabt hätte.”

⁸ Ibid., report labelled “Ulm a.D., den 9 März 1918. | Ersatzabteilung Württemb. Feldart. Rgt. No 49 | Dem Kgl. württ. Kriegsministerium Stuttgart.”

⁹ Ibid., M 1/7 Bü 470 ‘Namensliste zu Selbstmorden und Selbstmordversuchen aus den Kriegsjahren 1914-1918 und Nachkriegsjahr 1919 des württembergischen Heeres sowie Kriegsgefangener.’ Section I. Besatzungsheer, Lf. Nr. 143. “Fam. Verh.”

Reichstag Peace Resolution of 19 July 1917, the passage of which marked the high point of wartime parliamentary defiance and sparked the formation of the far-right German Fatherland Party, publicly affirmed the need to vindicate the massive sacrifices of the German people—both soldier and civilian—by bringing the war to a palatable end.¹⁰ Opening with an invocation of the unifying ‘spirit’ of the ‘August Days,’ the Resolution stated explicitly that while “[t]he Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding, for durable reconciliation among the peoples of the world,” it also “stands as one with the men who are protecting the Fatherland in heroic combat:” “as long as enemy governments do not agree to such a peace [of understanding], as long as they threaten Germany and its allies with territorial conquests and violations, the German people will stand together as one man, persevere unshakably, and fight on until its right and the right of its allies to life and development is secured.”¹¹

On the other hand, that fragile unity was floating atop an increasingly turbulent sea of desperation and despair which was deepening and expanding with each passing day. By the time the Württemberger N.C.O. died of his self-inflicted wounds, at least 720,000 German soldiers were dead, nearly half of the army was grieving at least one dead comrade, and just over 60% of German households were grieving at least one dead soldier.¹² Indeed, according to the official

¹⁰ On the Peace Resolution, the foundation of the Fatherland Party, and their relations to the sacrificial ‘spirit of 1914,’ see: Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 178-184.

¹¹ “Die Friedensresolution des Reichstags vom 19. Juli 1917,” German Historical Institute (Washington D.C.), ‘German History in Documents and Images,’ accessed 12 October 2021, https://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=987&language=german. “Der Reichstag erstrebt einen Frieden der Verständigung und der dauernden Versöhnung der Völker [...]. Solange jedoch die feindlichen Regierungen auf einen solchen Frieden nicht eingehen, solange sie Deutschland und seine Verbündeten mit Eroberungen und Vergewaltigungen bedrohen, wird das deutsche Volk wie ein Mann zusammenstehen, unerschütterlich ausharren und kämpfen, bis sein und seiner Verbündeten Recht auf Leben und Entwicklung gesichert ist [...]. Der Reichstag weiß sich darin eins mit den Männern, die in heldenhaftem Kampf das Vaterland schützen.”

¹² These are all decided underestimates, as they are derived from official *Medical Report on the German Army in the World War (Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkriege)*, which, despite being the best quantitative data set available, remains limited. The *Sanitätsbericht* ultimately estimated that a total of 1,973,701 German soldiers died between August 1914 and July 1918, and therefore less than half of the total dead were included in the *Report’s*

Medical Report on the German Army in the World War (Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkriege), at least 3,200 other German soldiers had committed suicide by the end of February 1918.¹³ Thus while the young man's *Abteilungsführer* and the Württemberger War Ministry may have been content to record his self-inflicted death as yet another instance of thanatological aberration, causally- and morally-divorced from the war and its effects, the N.C.O. articulated the critical *emotional truth* of that spring. However atomized and reiterative it had been before, by March 1918 despair had become collective to the point of being atmospheric *before the offensive began*: an ambient desperation which could prove lethal, even without a clear proximate cause. In this respect, the artilleryman's suicide was decidedly prescient. Before the year was out, that despair would engulf what remained of the German war effort in a sea of hopelessness, drowning the *Kaiserreich* beneath its waves and ensuring its permanent disappearance from the political map in the process.

The country did not submerge all at once, however. Indeed, the chronology of 1918 is essential to understanding not only the end of the war and the destruction of the Imperial German regime, but also the specific conditions of possibility for Weimar democracy left in the wake of that destruction. And there are high stakes to this chronology, as its deliberate distortion and misrepresentation formed an integral piece of the stab-in-the-back myth (*Dolchstoßlegende*) that conservative political and military elites cultivated in the dying days of the war—a mythos which subsequently exerted a deeply corrosive influence on German politics during the first postwar

chronological breakdown. Further, the *Sanitätsbericht* numbers excluded sailors, and are more than 63,000 deaths below the current consensus figure of 2,037,000 total German war dead. See the discussion in: Antoine Prost, "The Dead," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War Volume 3: Civil Society*, ed. Jay Winter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 588-589.

¹³ Der Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 133*-137*.

period.¹⁴ But as Michael Geyer notes, “the stab-in-the-back argument is not just specious—it is plain wrong. It garbles the sequence of events, reverses cause and effect, and slanders with impunity all those in Germany who were desperate about German defeat but who were clearly not on the political Right and, in fact, held the Right responsible for the disaster that had befallen Germany.”¹⁵ Further, while the *Dolchstoßlegende* and its ideology have long been rejected by historians, and myriad works since the 1960s have analyzed and definitively repudiated its narrative of the ‘undefeated’ German Army’s betrayal by civilian leaders—above all socialists and Jews—much of this earlier literature unwittingly accepted the structure of the stab-in-the-back narrative and simply reversed the moral poles.¹⁶ Instead of an underhanded betrayal, the domestic unrest and collapse of morale were “presented as a righteous and progressive upheaval and as the inevitable outcome of past injustice.”¹⁷

More recent analyses, including Geyer’s, have complicated this story and rejected not only the claims and ideology of the stab-in-the-back, but its narrative structure as well. As the twenty-first century historiography of the German Revolution has emphasized, the events of 1918 took place within a larger transnational revolutionary conjuncture, one which grew directly out of the experiences and consequences of war and, above all, defeat.¹⁸ In this context, where

¹⁴ See the concise overview in: Gerd Krumeich, “‘Stab-in-the-Back’ Legend (*Dolchstoßlegende*),” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of the First World War, Volume II*, eds. Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irina Renz (Leiden: Brill, 2012 [2009]): 925-926. Two biographical studies, which analyze the rise to mythic status of the leaders of the third Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) and the cultivation and perpetuation of those legends throughout the first postwar period, are particularly enlightening here: Anna von der Goltz, *Hindenburg: Power, Myth, and the Rise of the Nazis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jay Lockenour, *Dragonslayer: The Legend of Erich Ludendorff in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

¹⁵ Michael Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée En Masse* in October 1918,” *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 73, No. 3 (2001): 462-463.

¹⁶ This was especially pronounced in East German historiography, e.g. Fritz Klein, Willibald Gutsche, and Joachim Petzold, eds. *Deutschland im ersten Weltkrieg*, 3 Vols (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1968-1970).

¹⁷ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 462.

¹⁸ On the transnational revolutionary conjuncture of 1917-1923, see, *inter alia*: Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, eds. *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 21-103; Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar,

military defeat *did not* inherently mean an end to armed conflict—as Russia’s devolution into civil war so brutally demonstrated—the German Revolution can best be understood as “a revolution to end the war” (*eine Revolution der Kriegsbeendigung*), as Geyer suggests.¹⁹ While the disillusionment which culminated in that Revolution may have first reached a crisis point for certain civilians on the home front, it was the failures of the Hindenburg Program and the Auxiliary Service Law—i.e. state policy and its enforcement—which fundamentally undermined civilian morale and fueled “a growing desire for an end to the conflict whether or not Germany might emerge victorious” during the war’s final year, not some failure of civilian will.²⁰

Further, Germany was, in fact, defeated on the war front, and this military defeat was first and foremost a result of the strategic decisions made by the third Supreme Army Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung*, OHL) in 1917 and 1918. Ludendorff and Hindenburg never seriously considered any alternative to their offensive strategy, which in military terms meant a high risk of expending irreplaceable resources—above all, experienced and competent soldiers—in a final attempt at winning a decisive victory in March 1918.²¹ That is to say, it was the decisions of the third OHL itself, who by that point had largely established a functional, if “silent,” military

Straus and Giroux, 2016); and most recently: Eliza Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe: The Deluge of 1919* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021). On the immediate social-historical consequences and effects of war and defeat in Germany, the essential study remains: Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). More recent works include: Klaus Weinbauer, Anthony McElligott, and Kirsten Heinsohn, eds. *Germany 1916-1923: A Revolution in Context* (Bielefeld: Transit Verlag, 2015); and Gerd Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage: Das Trauma des Ersten Weltkriegs und die Weimarer Republik* (Freiburg: Herder, 2018). See also the useful article by Conan Fischer, which provides an excellent overview and review of the earlier historiography of the Revolution, as well as being an early example of the revisionist historiography which gathered pace around the centennial: Conan Fischer, “‘A Very German Revolution’? The Post-1918 Settlement Re-Evaluated,” *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (November 2006): 6-32.

¹⁹ Michael Geyer, “Zwischen Krieg und Nachkrieg—die deutsche Revolution 1918/19 im Zeichen blockierter Transnationalität,” in *Die vergessene Revolution von 1918/19*, ed. Alexander Gallus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010): 194-195.

²⁰ Richard Bessel, “Mobilization and Demobilization in Germany, 1916-1919,” in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 214-215.

²¹ Wilhelm Deist, “The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth,” trans. E.J. Feuchtwanger, *War in History* 3:2 (1996): 188-190.

dictatorship, which foundationally conditioned Germany's defeat and the collapse of the *Kaiserreich*.²² And though he would radically change his story after-the-fact, by Autumn, Ludendorff himself had recognized the reality of Germany's defeat on the battlefield. On 29 September 1918, he informed a War Council meeting of the German high command and civilian government, that the army faced not only imminent defeat, but outright *annihilation*, if the civilian leaders did not immediately sue for peace.²³

For soldiers on the ground, this made 1918 an especially dynamic and emotionally-volatile year. As Benjamin Ziemann and Bernd Ulrich note, three key events influenced soldiers' perceptions and expectations in 1918. The first was the January strike wave, which most soldiers opposed out of fear that it would jeopardize the coming offensive, the success of which many saw as the best opportunity for ending the war. Second was the spring offensive itself, whose vast and swift initial advances pushed morale to a last high point at the end of March, when the decisive victory which had so long eluded the Army appeared tantalizingly close. Third and finally, the start of the Allied counterattack on 18 July marked the moment when the majority of soldiers "understood that the German war effort was bound to fail and defeat [was] only a matter of time." Most importantly, the soldiers' recognition of Germany's inevitable defeat led to "the widespread refusal to sacrifice one's life in the dying months of the war."²⁴

This refusal took myriad forms, but manifested most pertinently in hundreds of thousands of soldiers shirking their duties and deserting—first to the rear areas, then eventually back to Germany—in what Wilhelm Deist famously characterized as a "covert military strike"

²² The classic study of third OHL's political power remains: Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 1916-1918* (New York: Routledge, 1976).

²³ Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 464-465.

²⁴ Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds. *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010): 158.

(*Verdeckter Militärstreik*): a “mass movement among the soldiers [which] aimed in the first place for an end to the war, but [which] was also a decisive precondition for the revolution and determined its form and content.”²⁵ That ‘strike’ marked the onset of the final phase of Germany’s war, when men in uniform began behaviorally prioritizing their own survival in such numbers that it fundamentally impeded the military’s capacity to continue fighting.²⁶ This reached its apogee after the naval high command gave their famous order for an *Endkampf* against the British navy—a suicidal ‘final battle,’ fought past the point of defeat—on 29 October, and the sailors at Kiel consequently mutinied, providing the crucial spark for the German Revolution, the end of the war and, ultimately, the end of the *Kaiserreich* in the process.²⁷ To those tasked with risking the loss of their own lives to kill for the state, continued military

²⁵ Deist, “Military Collapse,” 207. That essay was originally published in German as: Wilhelm Deist, “Der militärische Zusammenbruch des Kaiserreiches. Zur Realität der Dolchstoßlegende,” in *Das Unrechtsregime. Internationale Forschung über den Nationalsozialismus, vol. 1, Ideologie, Herrschaftssystem, Wirkung in Europa*, ed. Ursula Büttner (Hamburg: Hans Christians Verlag, 1986): 101-129. Deist expanded on this thesis and incorporated additional sources in a later essay on the same subject: Wilhelm Deist, “Verdeckter Militärstreik im Kriegsjahr 1918?” in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Munich: Piper, 1992): 146-167.

²⁶ While Deist’s argument continues to hold great purchase in the current historiography, it has not gone undisputed. In his comparative study of the Bavarian and British Armies, Christoph Jahr dates the onset of mass desertions to the beginning of October 1918—and thus several months later than Deist—based on the surviving court martial records: Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998): 161-167. Alexander Watson has also pushed back on Deist’s covert military strike thesis, arguing instead that German soldiers undertook an ‘ordered surrender’ led by lower-level officers in the latter half of 1918: Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 207-231. As Benjamin Ziemann notes however, Watson’s ‘ordered surrender’ argument rests entirely on the account of a single Canadian Captain, found in his diary. It is thus a woefully thin source base on which to make such an argument, especially compared with the evidence provided by Deist. Further, while Jahr’s study is well-done and immensely valuable, the inherent limitations of court martial records as sources mean that, without putting them in conversation with other types of records, they create a skewed portrait of what was happening on the ground in the war’s final year. See the excellent analyses of both the history and historiography of these questions in: Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, trans. Andrew Evans (New York: Bloomsbury 2017 [2013]): 93-155.

²⁷ These events and their connections with soldiers’ and sailors’ concerns with survival are well-narrated in: Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 37-39; and: Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 77-89. On the naval high command’s political concerns undergirding the decision to order an *Endkampf*, see: Wilhelm Deist, “Die Politik der Seekriegsleitung und die Rebellion der Flotte Ende Oktober 1918,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* Vol. 14, No. 4 (October 1966). On *Endkampf* in twentieth-century German history: Michael Geyer, “Endkampf 1918 and 1945: German Nationalism, Annihilation, and Self-Destruction,” in *No Man’s Land of Violence: Extreme Wars in the 20th Century*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Bernd Weisbrod (Wallenstein Verlag, 2006).

service in the absence of a realistic possibility of victory was no longer an act of sacrifice. Once the spring offensives failed, further national sacrifice meant only personal self-destruction, behaviorally synonymous with suicide.

The story of 1918, then, is a story of literal disillusionment: the unmasking of the phantasmagorical figure of the sacrificer in the course of Germany's military defeat. This process had no single *Wendepunkt*, but instead came in three distinct phases. First, the preparations for and initial successes of the spring offensive marked the final period of optimism both at the front and at home, during which 'suicide' and 'sacrifice' remained categorically distinct beyond the writings of the wartime bureaucracy. That optimism, however, was decidedly tenuous, as it was tied entirely to the prospective success of the offensive and an express understanding of it as the *last* great effort necessary to finally end the conflagration. When Operation Georgette ground to a halt in late April 1918, the two concepts began to functionally collapse into one another and military morale began an irreversible downward slide from which the Army could not recover.

The start and severity of that downturn was marked by a spike in Field Army suicides in May, which heralded the onset of a new pessimism that intensified throughout the summer—the second phase. Between May and August, but especially after the Allied victory in the Second Battle of the Marne, German soldiers reached new heights of despair, refused—through a variety of behaviors—to continue risking life and limb in a now-futile struggle, and made personal survival their abiding concern. Simultaneously, the soldiers' suicides of 1918 were chronologically concentrated during this same period and constituted the death throes of Germany's collective optimism—the inverted corollary of the survivalist resignation rapidly becoming dominant throughout the rank and file.

This disillusionment finally reached a critical mass of the political and military elites during the third and final phase from September to November, when the forces governing wartime Germany debated the efficacy of ‘going French’ and calling for a *levée en masse* to continue the war in the face of now-inevitable defeat. Faced with this prospect of ultimate self-destruction, however, Imperial Germany’s final leaders rejected the idea. But, crucially, this elite-level rejection occurred only *after* the mass of combatants on the ground had already functionally repudiated the possibility of an *Endkampf*. When the Naval High Command then issued their infamous order on 29 October, it drove the final nail into the coffin of the Imperial regime’s legitimacy by illustrating the deep, lethal disconnect between the military and political elite and soldiers and sailors on the ground. Its primary effect, therefore, was to imbue those combatants’ refusal of further sacrifice with a new anti-state political content which definitively shifted their concerns with *personal* survival into the realm of *collective* politics—the critical spark for the sailors’ mutiny, the subsequent revolution, and the collapse of the *Kaiserreich*. The simultaneous and intentional cultivation of the *Dolchstoßlegende* by Ludendorff and other high-ranking officers, however, almost immediately buried not only this self-inflicted state collapse in its shift to the mythic, but also the very fact of Germany’s defeat itself.

The cabinet’s decision to “make a lost war lost,” as Vice Chancellor Friedrich von Payer put it on 20 October,²⁸ thus marked the culmination of a truly national rejection of national suicide. As the prospect of victory—and thus a larger object emotionally ‘worth’ one’s own self-destruction or the self-destruction of one’s loved ones—disappeared, so too did the consensus around the necessity and righteousness of sacrifice for the nation, which then left its suicidal core exposed to the German nation. When this latent suicidality of the war became overt, German soldiers on the

²⁸ Quoted in Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 504. The full quote is found in footnote 193.

ground rejected it almost immediately, while their leaders only followed suit months—and thousands of additional deaths—later. The thanatological configuration which emerged so powerfully in the summer of 1914 finally collapsed under the weight of its own consequences four-and-a half years later, taking the *Kaiserreich* with it.

Chapter 4
The “March Euphoria” and the Last Gasps of Optimism:
Emotion, Expectation, and Operation Michael,
December 1917-April 1918

And yet, somehow concealed in the shadows of what you can see is something that is not yet visible, something that is beating like a thunderous pulse and promises still greater visions. All else is merely its membrane enclosing the ultimate thing waiting to be born, preparing for the cataclysm which will be both the beginning and the end. To behold the prelude to this event is an experience of unbearable anticipation, so that ecstasy and dread merge into a new emotion, one corresponding perfectly to the exposure of the ultimate source of all manifestation.

— Thomas Ligotti, “The Spectacles in the Drawer” (1991)

4.1 The “Last” Offensive

“Since the beginning of February, two things play a large role in the correspondence of soldiers” the 24 February 1918 postal surveillance report for the 5th Army noted: “The strikes at home and ‘the’ impending offensive in the west.”¹ The former met with “unconditional rejection and condemnation by the overwhelming majority of letter-writers,” including from members of the Majority Social Democrats, which the report’s author considered particularly noteworthy.² “The

¹ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (hereafter: BA-MA) RH 61/1035 Feldpostüberwachung.- Aktenauszüge. Report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 44. “Seit Anfang Februar ds. Js. spielen zwei Dinge eine große Rolle in der Korrespondenz der Heeresangehörigen: Die Streiks im Inland und ‘die’ bevorstehende Offensive im Westen.”

² BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 44. “Die Streiks finden bei der überwiegenden Mehrheit der Briefschreiber unbedingte Ablehnung und Verurteilung [...]. Erwähnung verdient es wohl, wenn sogar ein Angehöriger der sozialdemokratischen Partei in einem Briefe nach der Heimat die Verurteilung des Abgeordnet Dittmann [then-secretary of the Central Committee of the USPD] als durchaus angebracht bezeichnet.” On the split of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD) into the Majority (MSPD) and Independent (USPD) Social Democratic parties in its transnational context, see the overview in: Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 135-138.

main motive for the repudiation of the strikes,” the report concluded, “is the view that they will unnecessarily prolong the war and only further strengthen the enemy’s tenacity.”³

In light of the findings in previous postal surveillance reports, this was a predictable reaction. First established by a directive from the then-head of the general staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, on 29 April 1916, the postal surveillance offices (*Feldpostüberwachungsstellen*) employed designated mid-level officers to personally read samples of soldiers’ correspondence and report their findings to the high command.⁴ While the stated main assignment (*Hauptaufgabe*) of the surveillance offices was to prevent the dissemination of sensitive military information like troop positions and movements, as well as “news that could elicit considerable discord or disquiet at home,” surveillance officers also attempted to provide an accurate summary of the troops’ main concerns and gauge their overall morale.⁵ Each report included what the author considered a representative sample of excerpts from the soldiers’ letters themselves, enabling the upper echelons of the high command to get a more direct look into what the rank-and-file were communicating to their loved ones in Germany.⁶ And the first report for

³ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 44. “Hauptmotiv für die Ablehnung der Streiks ist bei den Briefschreibern die Ansicht, daß hierdurch der Krieg unnütz in die Länge gezogen und der Feind in seiner Hartnäckigkeit nur noch bestärkt werde.”

⁴ Crown Prince Wilhem, the commander of the 5th Army until November 1916, established the postal surveillance office for the unit (*5. Armee Überwachungsstelle*) on 31 May 1916, with four individual surveillance offices located at Montmedy, Longuyon, Dun, and Arlon, respectively. A separate “helping office” (*Postüberwachungshilfsstelle*) was set up in March 1917 to specifically monitor letters from Alsations and Lorrainers. The history and organization of the 5th Army postal surveillance offices is summarized in a brief report from 22 March 1918 at the start of the file, which also includes a copy of Falkenhayn’s order from 29 April 1916 and the Crown Prince Wilhelm’s order establishing its surveillance office: BA-MA RH 61/1035, 1-9. On the 5th Army’s orders-of-battle throughout the war, see: John Ellis and Michael Cox, *The World War I Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for all the Combatants* (London: Aurum Press, 1993): 171, 176-177, 180, 182-183, 187.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3. “Es muß daher mit allem Mitteln verhindert werden, daß Nachrichten aus der Armee hinausgelangen über militärische Maßnahmen, Truppenverschiebungen, Transporte, Verluste, Einsatz schwerer Artillerie, Gefechts-Stellung oder Standort der Truppe, ebenso Nachrichten, die erhebliche Mißstimmung oder Beunruhigung im Inlande hervorrufen könnten. Dies zu verhindern ist Hauptaufgabe der M. Ü.’s. [Militärische Überwachungsstellen].”

⁶ While these *Feldpostüberwachungs-stellen* were largely ineffective as a censorship apparatus, especially given the massive scale of correspondence, the surviving reports remain one of the best available sources for gauging soldiers’ morale. As Benjamin Ziemann summarizes: “These surveillance offices examined samples of the accumulating post and prepared summaries of the soldiers’ views, citing numerous letters in the process. Their task was to provide a

the 5th Army—the only German military formation for which the full set of reports has survived⁷—from 12 July 1917, made clear that soldiers from across the political spectrum, and both on the frontline and in the rear-area (*Etappe*), had long been united by two interlinked desires: to see the war end *and* see their sacrifices vindicated. “The longing for peace [*Friedenssehnsucht*] finds vivid expression in every letter,” the author noted: “Everyone wishes for an end to the war as soon as possible. The majority of letter writers want to hear nothing of a ‘peace at any price’ however. People who openly profess to be Social Democrats have repeatedly expressed *that they do not want to have sacrificed in vain* [*nicht umsonst die Opfer gebracht haben wollten*], that Germany must demand compensation, etc.”⁸

Three things were new in early 1918, however. First, while it may have come as good news to the report’s author and his superiors in the OHL that the majority of the men opposed the strikes, the fact that they were a major topic of discussion in soldiers’ correspondence at all marked a conspicuous increase in politicization. As the report from 28 September 1917 noted, up to that point “[t]he mood of the troops is dependent on three major factors: food, position (including rest quarters and service), [and] weather;” that is, mundane practical concerns that had

representative picture of opinion and inform the upper echelons of the military command of the troops’ morale. The field post surveillance reports give us at least a rudimentary view of the prevalence of certain views within the army, to the extent that soldiers aired them openly. The consistency of the reports themselves and comparisons with letters from the front held in major [archival] collections support the view that the reports’ authors generally sought to give an objective portrayal.” Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 122. Ziemann also briefly summarizes the history of the postal surveillance offices: *Ibid.*, 102-103. For a detailed analysis of the German military’s wartime censorship practices, including the establishment and use of postal surveillance offices, see: Bernd Ulrich, “Feldpostbriefe im Ersten Weltkrieg—Bedeutung und Zensur,” in *Kriegsalltag: Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als Aufgabe der historischen Forschung und der Friedenserziehung*, ed. Peter Knoch (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1989): 40-83; Bernd Ulrich, *Die Augenzeugen: Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914-1933* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 1997): 78-105.

⁷ On the archival availability of the surviving reports, see: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 262, note 5.

⁸ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 12. 7. 1917,” 14. “Die Friedenssehnsucht findet in jedem Brief lebhaften Ausdruck. Jedermann wünscht möglichst bald eine Beendigung des Krieges. Von einem Frieden um jeden Preis will aber der größte Teil der Breifschreiber nichts wissen. Leute, die sich als Sozialdemokraten offen bekennen, haben wiederholt geäußert, daß sie nicht umsonst die Opfer gebracht haben wollen, daß Deutschland Entschädigung fordern müsse u. s. f.”

an immediate impact on a soldier's day-to-day—and corporeal—well-being.⁹ Neither the strikes of April 1917, which saw over 200,000 metal and munitions workers walk off the shop floor, nor the Reichstag Peace Resolution and its political fallout, registered in the correspondence of the 5th Army's soldiers, who had been deployed on the Western Front since August 1914.¹⁰ That the latter was not discussed is particularly striking, since the call for a “peace of understanding” was broadly supported by frontline troops, including those from rural backgrounds.¹¹ Indeed, the report's author was surprised by the decidedly apolitical nature of the soldiers' letters, which appeared to be part of a broader trend: “With both things, service and care for home, the soldier finds his plate full. He wants to know nothing of other things, strangely including politics. In all the correspondence there is not a single letter in which the author concerns himself with the political questions which are so highly controversial at home. The observations of the other military surveillance offices have also shown that the soldier has no great inclination to occupy himself with the political questions of the day.”¹²

⁹ Ibid., report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 17,” 24. “Die Stimmung der Truppen ist abhängig von drei großen Faktoren: Verpflegung, Stellung (einschließlich Ruhequartier und Dienst), Wetter.”

¹⁰ Neither event is mentioned in either the summaries or the excerpted letters of the two reports from 1917. Of course, the Peace Resolution was not passed until a week after the first postal surveillance report was filed, but it remains notable that the debate leading up to it found no discussion in the 12 July report, and that the resolution itself was not mentioned in the 28 September report. On the April strikes and their relations to the on-going urban food protests and decreasing state legitimacy, see: Davis, *Home Fires Burning*, 201-204. For a political-historical overview of the Reichstag Peace Resolution and its aftermath, see: David Blackbourn, *History of Germany 1780-1918, The Long Nineteenth Century*, Second Edition (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003):366-368.

¹¹ On soldiers' general support for a ‘peace of understanding’ in 1917, see: Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (New York: Berg, 2007 [1997]): 149-152.

¹² BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 17,” 28. “Mit beiden Dingen, Dienst und Fürsorge für Daheim, hat aber der Soldat sein volles Pensum erfüllt. Von anderen Dingen will er nichts wissen, eigenartigerweise auch nichts von Politik. In der ganzen Korrespondenz ist auch nicht ein einziger Brief gefunden worden, in dem sich Schreiber mit den im Inland jetzt so heiß umstrittenen politischen Fragen beschäftigt. Auch die sonstigen Beobachtungen der militärischen Ueberwachungsstellen haben ergeben, daß der Soldat zur Beschäftigung mit politischen Tagesfragen keine große Neigung besitzt.” All of the postal surveillance reports for the 5th Army appear to have been compiled by the same Captain (*Hauptmann*), as the same set of illegible initials appear at the conclusion of each report's summary. However, given that the handwritten initials and typed rank in the signature are the only indications of authorship, it is unclear who, specifically, the author of these reports was.

Second, the onset of that politization coincided with a noted improvement of morale. As the postal surveillance report from 10 January 1918 observed, “[a] general uptick in the mood occurred when the Russian armistice offer [of December 1917] became known. The news was received with extraordinary joy, to some extent with the strongest optimism, as one can [now] honestly believe in predictions of the war ending in a few months.”¹³ That optimism remained volatile at the start of 1918, however, as it was initially tied to the on-going peace negotiations.¹⁴ While in early January they remained a minority, numerous soldiers openly communicated both the quotidian emotional effects following the negotiations had amongst the soldiery on the ground and the thanatological underpinning of their newfound political interest to their loved ones at home.¹⁵ When negotiations began to stall, one soldier wrote that “now we read again in the newspaper that there will not be peace with Russia and that it will start all over again. The English have gotten to the Russians again. Who would have thought that? Now we are once again quite sad.”¹⁶ Another was even more even more despairing: “Allegedly it will start with Russia again, there will be no peace. I only want to see how long the human murder [*Menschenmorderei*] can still continue, since it will go on until there is no one left.”¹⁷ And a

¹³ Ibid., “A. H. Qu., den 10. January 1918,” 35. “Eine allgemeine Belebung der Stimmung trat ein, als das Waffenstillstands – Angebot Rußlands bekannt wurde. Die Nachricht wurde außerordentlich freudig aufgenommen, z. T. mit stärkstem Optimismus, indem so mancher [sich] das Kriegsende in wenigen Monaten voraussagen zu können glaubte.”

¹⁴ For narrative overviews of the peace negotiations, see: Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 45-52; Veidlinger, *Civilized Europe*, 65-72.

¹⁵ According to the report’s author, only 17 of the roughly 700 letters examined by the postal surveillance office discussed the “latest events in Brest-Litvosk,” although he suspected this relative dearth was the result of a lack of time to write about it, rather than a lack of interest: BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 17,” 36. All but two of the letter excerpts included in the report discussed the negotiations and the soldiers’ reactions to them, however, suggesting that soldiers’ interest was more widespread, even if most did not or—more likely, could not—stay up-to-date with the on-going proceedings: Ibid., 37-43.

¹⁶ Ibid., 40. “.....und nun lesen wir wieder in der Zeitung [sich], daß es nicht zum Frieden kommt mit Rußland, und daß es wieder von vorne losgeht, der Engländer hat die Russen wieder rum gekriegt, wer hätte das gedacht, nun sind wir wieder ganz Traurig.”

¹⁷ Ibid., 37. “Mit Rußland soll es wieder losgehen, da giebt’s [sich] keinen Frieden. Jch will nur sehen, wie lange die Menschenmorderei noch dauert, da wird fortgemacht bis halt niemand mehr da ist.”

third laid bare the relationship between soldiers' practical and political concerns, as well as highlighting the on-going centrality of the food shortages which had so deeply affected both front and *Heimat*, and united them in their shared deprivation: "I definitely thought that the New Year would bring peace, but the way people are talking here again now, the hope with Russia is already gone again. If [the war] should start once more with Russia, then it could well continue for two more years, and then everyone will have to die of hunger."¹⁸

Crucially, however, while the soldiers' improved morale was initially *sparked* by the positive—though still decidedly turbulent—developments in the east, it was "the" coming offensive in the west which drove the boost above all else. This was the third new development in early 1918. Despite the gloom and frustration over the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, "the overwhelming majority of letter writers are convinced that the final peace will still have to be bought with a 'great' blow in the west," the 10 January report observed: "This optimism [that began with the Russian armistice offer] was strengthened by the arrival of troops from the east on the western front."¹⁹ Indeed, the January report concluded that "the troops will-to-victory [*Siegeswille*] is still unbroken, and they look towards the coming events filled with confidence."²⁰ That sense of confidence and optimism only increased as preparations for the offensive gathered pace the following month, further pushing the negotiations in the east into the background.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 38. "Ich dachte ganz bestimmt, daß es nach Neujahr würde Frieden geben, aber so wie jetzt wieder hier gesprochen wird, soll mit Rußland die Hoffnung schon wieder vorbei sein, sollte es noch mal da mit Rußland losgehen, dann wird es wohl noch zwei Jahre dauern und muß ja dann alles tot hungern."

¹⁹ Ibid., 35. "[W]ohl der überwiegende Teil der Brieffschreiber [ist] überzeugt, daß der endgiltige Friede [sic] erst noch durch 'großen' Schlag im Westen erkaufte werden müsse." "Verstärkt wurde dieser Optimismus durch das Eintreffen der Truppen aus dem Osten an der Westfront."

²⁰ Ibid., 36. "Der Siegeswille der Truppen ist noch ungebrochen, die Allgemeinheit sieht den kommenden Ereignissen vertrauensvoll entgegen."

²¹ Ibid., "A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918," 44-45.

But the soldiers' 'will-to-victory' was premised entirely on the prospect of this being the *final* offensive, and thus the *last* great effort necessary to definitively bring the war to an end. And influential elements of the German state were well aware of the mobilizing power of this idea both at the front and at home. Perhaps most revealingly, the slogan for the 8th War Loan of March 1918—the penultimate and most highly-subscribed loan of the entire war—drew directly on this sentiment: “The last blow is the 8th War Loan” (*Der letzte Hieb ist die 8. Kriegsanleihe*).²² As the 24 February post surveillance report summarized, “[t]o be sure, one wishes to spare the people further bloodshed. But one also wants to resign oneself to the necessity of confronting the enemy in the last great blow and to stand one’s ground in battle *if the longed-for peace will be reached thereby*. That is roughly the letter-writers’ train of thought.”²³ But that was also the crucial fact in the report which the author chose to downplay and underemphasize. Instead, he reported to his superiors in the very next sentence that “the majority looks forward to the high command’s coming military operation fearlessly and with truly unshakable confidence.”²⁴

In direct contrast to this sunny, institutionally-anticipatory conclusion however, the rest of the report repeatedly illustrated that the troops newfound optimism was, in fact, laden with both fear and a decidedly shakable confidence—a confidence which, as the fallout from the negotiations in Brest-Litvosk illustrated, could fluctuate intensely as the concrete prospect for peace approached or receded over the horizon of possibilities. First, the surveillance officer’s

²² Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 75-77. Indeed, the success of the 8th War Loan is a powerful testament in-and-of-itself to the breadth of belief throughout German society in the necessity of the Spring Offensive and the possibility of a positive outcome to the war in early 1918.

²³ *Ibid.*, 45. Emphasis added. “Man wünscht wohl, daß dem Volke weiteres Blutvergießen erspart bleiben solle, will sich aber in die Notwendigkeit schicken, dem Feinde zum letzten großen Schlage entgegenzutreten und im Kampfe seinen Mann zu stehen, *wenn dadurch der ersehnte Frieden erreicht wird*. Das ist ungefähr der Gedankengang der Briefschreiber.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45. “Und so sieht die Mehrheit den kommenden militärischen Operationen der Heeresleitung furchtlos und in tatsächlich unerschütterlichem Vertrauen entgegen.”

summary made clear that there were a significant number of soldiers whom that optimism and sense of purpose never touched. “Unfortunately there are still individuals,” he noted, “who, despite the length of the war and all the instruction [*Aufklärung*] still do not know what the war is all about for Germany.”²⁵ Indeed, he considered these voices important enough that he included their “most striking remarks” throughout the letter excerpts included in the report.²⁶ Second, even the most enthusiastic excerpted letters emphasized the same basic truth of February 1918 which he had downplayed. What united the troops was their desire to see the war end—and end palatably—not some deeper agreement about the war’s *raison d’être*, let alone the German state’s political goals and war aims. “Hopefully the war will soon come to end, and not before a proper meeting with the English,” one soldier wrote: “this opinion is so common amongst everyone that one is almost tempted to speak of the old war enthusiasm of 1914.”²⁷ He was more correct than he knew. As in July and early-August 1914, the ‘enthusiasm,’ confidence, and optimism pervading the troops existed alongside trepidation, anxiety, and despondency, sometimes all within the same individual.²⁸ One soldier subtly captured the precarity and novelty

²⁵ Ibid., 45. “Leider gibt es noch immer einzelne Leute, die trotz der Länge des Krieges und aller Aufklärung noch immer nicht wissen, um was es sich in diesem Kriege für Deutschland handelt.” It is worth noting here as well that the author implicitly highlighted the limits of the ‘Patriotic Education’ (*vaterländischer Unterricht*) initiative’s effectiveness—a political propaganda program which the third OHL established after passage of the Peace Resolution to try and bring opinion in the ranks into line with the political goals of war aims movement. For brief summaries of the establishment and aims of ‘Patriotic Education,’ see: Deist, “Military Collapse,” 189-190; and Robert L. Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers in the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 38-39. Nelson also provides a concise overview of the historiographical debate over the effectiveness of the program: Ibid., 39, footnote 76. For a more detailed, though older, analysis of German wartime propaganda which emphasizes the role of the High Command, see: Anne Lipp, *Meinunglenkung im Krieg: Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

²⁶ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 45. “Die markantesten Aeußerungen hierüber sind ebenfalls in der Anlage beigelegt.”

²⁷ Ibid., 63. “Dafür geht hoffentlich der Krieg seinem baldigen Ende entgegen und nicht ohne die Engländer noch vorher ordentlich zu treffen. Diese Meinung ist so allgemein bei allen Leuten vertreten, daß man fast versucht ist von einer alten Kriegsbegeisterung des Jahres 14 zu sprechen.”

²⁸ It is crucial to note that the parallel here is with the ‘July enthusiasm,’ not the ‘August Euphoria;’ that is, the broader socio-emotional sensibilities that predominated *before* the war itself properly commenced. See: Gerhard Hirschfeld, “‘The Spirit of 1914:’ A Critical Examination of War Enthusiasm in German Society” in *The Legacies of Two World Wars: European Societies in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Lothar Kettenacker, and Torsten Rott

of this confidence, writing home that “[e]verything will go well, *for once*. Hopefully this is the last time that we must move the gang off their hides so that it comes to an end.”²⁹

Further, the coming offensive promised a return to the war of movement, which, while much deadlier than trench warfare, gave soldiers a far greater sense of agency and control over their fates, and was therefore a prospect many welcomed.³⁰ “A portion of the letter-writers are of the opinion that the war of movement, which they view as fast-approaching and as the norm going forward, will clearly be more pleasant than the hitherto-existing war of position,” the 24 February report noted.³¹ But this was not an excitement for a specific mode of combat *per se* any more than the troops belief in the coming offensive’s necessity signaled support for all offensive operations generally. Rather, the prospect was exciting primarily because it represented an opportunity to actively participate in the final ending of the war. That is, this *Bewegungskriegsbegeisterung*, too, was chiefly tied to the prospect of it coming with the *last* offensive, not simply the next one. “Soon the great final scrum [*die große Endrammelei*] will commence,” an enthusiastic soldier wrote: “And because of that, there will be fun once again. Such an advance is better than trench warfare after all, because we want to rage and smash so that the Frenchman *will finally have had enough*.”³² The war-of-movement, like the coming

(New York: Berghahn, 2011): 30-31. For detailed analyses, see: Wolfgang Kruse, *Krieg und nationale Integration: eine Neuinterpretation des sozialdemokratischen Burgfriedensschlusses 1914/1915* (Essen: Kartext Verlag, 1993); and Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, especially 12-135.

²⁹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 64. Emphasis added. “Alles wird gut gehen, den einmal, hoffentlich das letzte Mal müssen wir die Bande auf’s Fell rücken, damit es zum Schluß kommt.”

³⁰ On the comparative lethality of the war-of-movement and the war-of-position, see: Alan Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 34-35; and Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 20-28. On combat conditions and soldiers’ feelings of agency (or lack thereof), see: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, especially 28-32.

³¹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 45. “Einem Teil der Briefschreiber scheint der nunmehr nach ihrer Ansicht bald einsetzende Bewegungskrieg bedeutend angenehmer als der bisherige Stellungskrieg zu sein.”

³² *Ibid.*, 62. “Bald geht die große Endrammelei los. Da gibt es wieder Spaß. So ein Vormarsch ist doch schöner als der Stellungskrieg. Da wollen wir aber wüten und zerschlagen, damit der Franzmann endlich mal die Nase vollbekommt.” Emphasis added.

offensive more generally, induced excitement because it appeared as an active means through which to end the war. As Hew Strachan summarizes: “the enthusiasm was conditional: it assumed that the offensive would end the war. Going forward seemed to be the shortest and quickest way home.”³³

All three novel elements on the eve of the spring offensive—an increased interest in politics, improved morale, and a belief in the necessity of the offensive and its probability of success—were therefore undergirded by that same, increasingly concrete prospect: ending the war in 1918.³⁴ And it was this prospect that defined the relations between soldiers’ politics, morale, and the impending military operations, and set the stage for their broader disillusionment later in the year. At this point, the soldiers’ politicization was one of form more than content: a newfound attention to the political, rather than a hardening of specific political opinions and leanings. It was thus a sign of the growing, if still largely implicit, recognition of the role domestic political decision-making—and decision-makers—had in structuring soldiers’ quotidian realities. But as the numerous allusions to Allied perfidy indicated, many soldiers still held foreign political entities responsible for the war’s continuation prior to the launch of Operation Michael.³⁵ Indeed, in July 1917, the postal surveillance officer could confidently report that “no reproach of the State and Supreme Army Command, as well as criticism of the

³³ Strachan, *First World War*, 295.

³⁴ This was yet-another parallel with 1914, as the ‘short-war illusion’ returned in a new form: soldiers and commanders alike once again believed in a realistic prospect of ‘ending the war by Christmas,’ but now at the tail-end of a years long conflict. The classic analysis of the short-war illusion in Germany remains: L. L. Farrar, Jr., *The Short-war Illusion: German Policy, Strategy & Domestic affairs, August-December 1914* (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 1973).

³⁵ This was in keeping with a long-running transnational trend wherein the “vast human and material sacrifices, which began to accumulate in the first weeks of the conflict, were...debited morally, in Germany and elsewhere, to the malevolence of the enemy.” Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 169.

people or actions of the supreme warlords [*Obersten Kriegsherren*], have been found” amongst the monitored correspondence.³⁶

But in direct contrast to the earlier strikes, those of January 1918 highlighted the connections between soldiers’ immediate material and corporeal concerns, which had so long been the dominant topics of discussion in their correspondence, and the domestic political developments occurring well behind the front lines. And this was precisely *because* most soldiers knew a final major offensive was impending, especially after home leaves were frozen.³⁷ With this came a profound sense of hope, since a successful offensive which brought about a German victory was the one sure means of both ending the war as soon as possible *and* ensuring that Germans’ sacrifices were not in vain—the two aspirations shared by nearly all combatants. As one 5th Army soldier wrote that February, “Germany is striking out soundly. It will be a titanic battle, but a victorious one. And I can be there, see everything with my own eyes. All of the organization instills a limitless confidence, an undoubted certainty of success. Already we are all trembling with sanguine anticipation.”³⁸

But precisely for this reason, that same hope harbored the potential for an equally intense dejection, since it was centered on a single object: the final offensive itself. Indeed, what went

³⁶ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 12. 7. 1917,” 13-14. “Vorweg sei erwähnt, daß Vorwürfe gegen die Staats- und Oberste Heeresleitung, ebenso Kritiken an Personen und Handlungen des Obersten Kriegsherrn nicht gefunden worden sind.”

³⁷ At a minimum, both soldiers and civilians would be aware that a major action was on the horizon once home leaves were frozen in the lead up the offensive’s launch. As the young artillery officer Karl Uhrmacher wrote home to his parents on 15 February, the freeze on home leave “will probably continue until the spring battle begins:” BA-MA MSG 2/10347, letter dated “Im Felde,” 15 February 1918. “Die Urlaubssperre [...] wird wohl solange dauern, bis die Frühjahrsschlacht anfängt.” Viewed in context, this single line is an illustration that 1) soldiers’ were familiar with this pattern, especially those who, like Uhrmacher, had been in the Army since the start of the war; 2) that soldiers openly communicated the fact of the impending offensive to their loved ones at home; and 3) the fact that a major operation was impending was not considered worthy of censorship—only the details of it were, in keeping with Falkenhayn’s original April 1916 directive, discussed above.

³⁸ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 63. “Deutschland holt tüchtig aus. Es wird ein Titanenkampf werden, aber siegreich. Und ich darf mit dabei sein, alles mit eigenen Augen sehen. All’ das Organisatorische [sic] flößt einem ein grenzloses Vertrauen ein, eine zweifellose Gewißheit des Gelingens. Wir zittern schon alle vor hoffnungsfreudiger Erwartung.”

unsaid in such confident, optimistic statements is what an *unsuccessful* operation would mean on this aspirational level, namely, being unable to satisfy both desires and thus having to choose between the two priorities. And as the events of 1917 in Russia illustrated, that potential dejection cut in two mutually-exclusive political directions, depending on which of the two one prioritized: towards an end to the war as soon as possible, regardless of the costs (the Bolshevik position), or towards a continuation of the war until the previous sacrifices were vindicated (the position, in one form or another, of most non-Bolsheviks).³⁹ Further, the Russian example demonstrated the ways this division of priorities intersected and overlapped with pre-existing and long-standing hierarchical divisions—chiefly, those between officers and men, which themselves laid on top of even deeper pre-war divisions of social class⁴⁰—and the particular ways this then inflected the political order. As Ron Suny summarizes, especially after July 1917, “both parts of Russian society [the ‘lower’ (*nizy*) and ‘higher’ (*verkhi*) classes] found their interests to be incompatible, and those parties that tried to stand ‘above class’ or to unite ‘all the vital forces of the nation’ were either compelled to take sides with one major force or abandoned by their former supporters.”⁴¹

4.2 Latent Vectors of Despair

³⁹ This is not meant to portray the Russian Revolutions in binary terms, and especially not to collapse the essential distinctions between the many non-Bolshevik parties and political factions. Rather, the point here is simply to highlight the fundamental incompatibility of the two positions and the ways it translated and manifested in the political sphere. For excellent narrative overviews of the Russian Revolutions of 1917, see: Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 3-67; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, Fourth Edition (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017): 16-68.

⁴⁰ See: Ronald Grigor Suny, *Red Flag Unfurled: History, Historians, and the Russian Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2017): 183-213, especially 209-213.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

As they had done throughout the war, the suicides of German soldiers in the months prior to the offensive highlighted the specific social, emotional, and moral vectors of that potential dejection—and thus the implicit stakes of the impending battle *and* their links with German military policy and priorities. And perhaps no case distilled those particular vectors more than that of a Bavarian Infantryman who shot himself in his Munich barracks on 1 February 1918. The *Infanterist* was 27-years-old at the time of his death, married, and in his second year of military service.⁴² According to the final report on the case, sent to the Deputy (*Stellvertreter*) of the 1st Infantry Brigade on 23 March 1918 and received by the Bavarian War Ministry four days later, the Infantryman had been drafted on 5 August 1916, when he joined the army as an *ungedienter Landsturmann*—a reservist who, despite his age, had not previously served in the army.⁴³ After completing basic training, he was declared “fit-for-duty” (*kriegsverwendungsfähig*) on 19 February 1917 and transferred to a field company, but soon ran into disciplinary problems. His company commander sentenced him to three days in the stockade on 9 June because the Infantryman had “shirked his duties for three days.”⁴⁴ On 2 July he was ordered to the front, but failed to report for duty three days later. In the interim, the Infantryman had gone AWOL and returned home to his family in Landshut. An N.C.O. from his company then went to his home to retrieve him, as he had been sentenced to five further days imprisonment for his unauthorized absence. The sentence could not be immediately carried out, however, as the Infantryman once again went AWOL on 8 July and once again returned to his family.

⁴² BHStA IV M Kr 10915 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1918,” “I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibungen,” Laufende Nr. 5. The 1918 statistical index is a separate document tucked inside the larger file.

⁴³ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, report labelled “München, 23 März 1918. | Ersatzbatl.Inf.Leib.Rgt. | A.d.D. | an die stv. 1. Inf. Brigade.” As Ulrich and Ziemann summarize, “[t]he Landsturm comprised reservists above the age of 40 and those who had not been drafted for military service before the war.” Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 486.

⁴⁴ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, report labelled “München, 23 März 1918. | Ersatzbatl.Inf.Leib.Rgt. | A.d.D. | an die stv. 1. Inf. Brigade.” “Am 9. Juni 1917 wurde er durch den Kompagnieführer [...] mit 3 Tagen mittleren Arrests bestraft, weil er sich 3 Tage lang vom Dienst gedrückt hat.”

At this point, the soldier attempted suicide for the first time. He initially tried to cut his wrists, but the knife was too dull. Apparently undeterred, the *Infanterist* then attempted to gas himself with the oven, but was saved when an unspecified person forced open the door.⁴⁵ According to the report, “[the soldier] stated the reason for his suicide attempt, as well as for his having gone AWOL, at the time: ‘I can only perform my duties with great difficulty and did not want to be sent to the front.’”⁴⁶ Following his suicide attempt, the Regimental court ordered a psychiatric evaluation of the Infantryman, which concluded that the soldier was “a somatically-nervous psychopath [*einen körperlich nervösen Psychopathen*] with a melancholic temperament and a pronounced lack of energy.”⁴⁷ As a result, he was only declared fit for garrison duty in Germany (*garnisonsverwendbar Heimat*). On 18 September 1917, however, the Troop Inspection Commission (*Truppenmusterungskommission*) of the Deputy Command of the 1st Army Corps changed this status to “fit for field work” (*arbeitsverwendbar Feld*). Accordingly, on 2 October he was transferred to a new company as a clerk (*Schreiber*), where he was to serve at the front, but in the rear area, in order to free up other troops for combat duties. He was to report to his new company at the end of January 1918.⁴⁸ Further, the army had not forgotten his earlier infractions, and the Deputy Commander of his Battalion sentenced him to ten days further imprisonment for yet another—and, in the event, his last—absence-without-leave on 29

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. “Als Beweggrund für die Selbstmordversuche wie für die unerlaubten Entfernungen gab Preis damals an: ‘Jch kann den Dienst nur mit grösster Mühe leisten und wollte nicht ins Feld abgestellt werden.’”

⁴⁷ Ibid. “Die damals vom Gerichte des I. Ersatzbatls.Jnf.Leib.Rgts. veranlasste fachärztliche Untersuchung des [P] auf seinen Geisteszustand ergab, dass es sich um einen körperlich nervösen Psychopathen mit melancholischem Temperament und ausgesprochener Energielosigkeit handelt.”

⁴⁸ Ibid. “Am 18. September 1917 wurde [P] durch die Truppenmusterungskommission des stv. I. A.K. für ‘arbeitsverwendbar Feld’ erklärt. Demgemäss musste er Ablösung von kriegsverwendungsfähigen Mannschaften hinter der Front ins Feld abgestellt werden. Er wurde am 2. Oktober 1917 zur 4. Kompagnie des I. Ersatzbatls.Jnf.Leib.Rgts. versetzt und Ende Januar 1918 als Schreiber zum 26. Jnf. Rgt. ins Feld eingeteilt.”

September 1917, a sentence he served from 14-24 October.⁴⁹ Finally, “[o]n the night before his departure to the front, [the Infantryman] committed suicide” by using a furnace rabble to reach the trigger on his service rifle and shoot himself in the chest.⁵⁰ After hearing the shot, his bunkmates came to investigate, whereupon they found his body, with his rifle and the rabble laying next to the corpse.⁵¹

The first noteworthy element in this case is perhaps the most subtle: this soldier was only drafted into the army in August 1916. This meant, first, that he would have had few, if any, illusions about the dangers of frontline service. According to the *Sanitätsbericht*, by the end of July 1916, 452,295 German soldiers had already died and, even more importantly, news of these deaths had been widely and publicly available from the war’s earliest days.⁵² Further, July 1916 was the third deadliest month of the entire war in terms of absolute numbers: strikingly, only March and April 1918 surpassed it.⁵³ The infantryman’s intense trepidation about his impending military service thus appears readily comprehensible. Not only was he drafted into the army in the middle of three of the war’s biggest battles—Verdun, the Somme, and the Brusilov Offensive—but, as with most other recruits, there was then a delay between when he entered the army and when he was ordered to the front. In this case, the delay was a full 11-months, during

⁴⁹ Ibid. “[P] wurde nun am 29. September 1917 wegen der letzten unerlaubten Entfernung durch den damaligen stellvertr. Bataillonskommandeur, Hauptmann [T], mit 10 Tagen mittleren Arrests bestraft. Diese Strafe verbüßte [P] in der Zeit von 14. Bis 24. Oktober 1917.”

⁵⁰ Ibid. “Am Vorabend des Abstellungstages hat [P] den Selbstmord ausgeführt.”

⁵¹ Ibid. “Die nach dem Schuss herbeigeeilten Zimmerkameraden des [P] fanden diesen am Boden liegend vor; neben ihm lag sein Dienstgewehr sowie ein Feuerhaken, mit welchem Preis das Gewehr abgezogen hatte.”

⁵² As previously discussed, the German government published the first casualty lists on 9 August and would continue to do so roughly every three days for the duration of the war. In August 1914, the full lists were published in the newspapers. But they were so long that the German government forbid their full publication in newspapers that September. The state still allowed lists of the local dead, wounded, and missing to be published in the newspapers of smaller cities and towns, however, and the full lists continued to be posted outside the War Academy in Berlin throughout the war. Verhey summarizes all of these developments: Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, 111-112.

⁵³ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 133*, 136*. At least 32,854 German soldiers died in July 1916 according the *Sanitätsbericht*, with only 138 of those deaths occurring in the Replacement Army. This meant that the 99.5% of army deaths that month occurred in the Field Army—the section of the army which actually engaged in combat.

which an additional 193,836 German soldiers died, a fact which the soldier would undoubtedly have been aware of, at least in general terms.⁵⁴

But being conscripted two full years into the war also meant, second, that his soldier had a protracted experience of the privations and hardships facing those at home before he entered the army. In this particular case, he was called away to training and kept away from his wife during the high-point of home front deprivation—the turnip winter of 1916-1917. This may explain, in part, the intensity of his commitment to return home, even after repeated imprisonments and regardless of authorization. More broadly, it highlights the overlapping and overdetermined ways the German state structured the particular sufferings and hardships of individual citizens. While it may have been a fact so obvious as to go without saying, it is worth emphasizing here once again that it was the German state—and more specifically the leaders of the 1914 German army—which *decided* to enter the war in 1914.⁵⁵ It was thus *the* institution foundationally responsible for creating the conditions of possibility for all of the suffering Germans endured as a result of the conflict, regardless of the official line that Germany was engaged in a ‘defensive war.’⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ This is not meant to imply that this was an easy or uncomplicated decision—it was neither—but rather to emphasize the fact of the decision itself. For a narrative of the July Crisis which emphasizes these complex individual decisions, see: Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), especially 451-554. On the complicated status of executive power and the army’s role in Germany’s entrance to the war, within a narrative of the July Crisis and start of the war that more appropriately emphasizes Germany’s responsibility for the escalation of conflict, see: Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Vintage, 2013): 75-83.

⁵⁶ As Alexander Watson has emphasized, Germany *was* invaded by Russia at the start of war. And while the Germans were able to quickly repel this invasion, before doing so, the Russian Army had overrun 2/3’s of East Prussia, and this was a crucial element in the framing and experience of the war as defensive throughout Germany: Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 160-181. As Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker point out, however, this same framing held in the West throughout the war as well, where the Germans were blatantly the invading army: “Defensive patriotism—defence of the soil and defence of their loved ones—structured the way [the majority of people] thought about the war right to the end. This was true of German soldiers, too, for though they were occupying forces far beyond their national borders, they stubbornly insisted on thinking of their trench positions, especially in France, as a ‘watch of the Rhine’ (the *Wacht am Rhein* becoming the *Wacht an der Somme*).” Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 107.

More immediately, it was the German state which, first, had fundamentally structured the essential features of this man's quotidian reality as a civilian through its improvised intrusions into ever-more aspects of the economy and civil society, even prior to the introduction of the Hindenburg Program in late 1916.⁵⁷ Second, and even more obviously, it was the army which decided that it 'needed' this man in August 1916, and thus was also the institution directly responsible for forcing his change in status from 'civilian' to 'soldier.' This of course was true of all belligerent armies by 1916, when the British introduced conscription.⁵⁸ Indeed, the majority of soldiers in every army consisted of 'civilians in uniform,' even in a country like Germany which had a comparatively large percentage of war volunteers.⁵⁹ Yet however common this may have been, it didn't change the institutional facts: if this soldier struggled with military life, it was only because he was in the army; and he was only in the army because the state decided to draft him in 1916. Third and finally, once he was drafted, the state, via the army, then determined the size, shape, and makeup of both his social and spatial milieux by deciding which unit(s) to place him in and what duties to assign.

This in turn highlights the second noteworthy aspect of the case: the soldier's multiple transfers between different units, their relations to his changes in military status (from *kriegsverwendungsfähig* to *garnisonsverwendbar Heimat* to *arbeitsverwendbar Feld*), and the

⁵⁷ The classic analysis remains: Gerald D. Feldman, *Army, Industry and Labor in Germany, 1914-1918*, Reprint (New York: Berg, 1992 [1966]). On the introduction of the Hindenburg Program: 149-196. On improvisation and the 'totalizing' of warfare, see: Roger Chickering, "World War I and the Theory of Total War: Reflections of the British and German Cases, 1914-1915," in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵⁸ The sole exception was a British Dominion: Australia. For a concise overview of the conscription debate in Australia, see: "Conscription during the First World War, 1914-1918," *Australian War Memorial*, accessed 21 October 2022, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/conscription/ww1>

⁵⁹ Between 185,000 and 250,000 German men volunteered for the army in August 1914 alone, compared to 298,923 for Britain at a time when it's standing army was only a fraction of the size of Germany's, and only 40,000 volunteers in France from August-December 1914: Alexander Watson, "'For Kaiser and Reich': The Identity and Fate of the German Volunteers, 1914-1918," *War in History* Vol. 12, No. 1 (2005): 49, footnote 18; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 84. On the concept of 'civilians in uniform,' see: Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 71.

consequent socio-emotional implications and effects. First, the different transfers meant it was very unlikely this soldier was able to build much in the way of social connections amongst his new comrades. This difficulty was then exacerbated by his multiple imprisonments, which both physically separated this man from his fellow soldiers and likely decreased his social standing amongst them, especially if he struggled with his duties as much as he claimed. And while this kind of social alienation was common and mundane, and most soldiers who struggled with military life in this way did not commit suicide, recent suicide research has demonstrated the intimate connections between feelings of social disconnection and suicide, with some scholars arguing that it is actually the most significant factor.⁶⁰ And this social disconnection within the military came on top of and after his conscription itself had, at a minimum, greatly complicated the social connections with his wife and family by physically removing him from their milieu. His time in the army, consequently, entailed a protracted experience of a double social disconnect—first from his wife and family, and then from his fellow soldiers—both of which had been foundationally structured by the army itself. As so many others had done throughout the war, his suicide thus highlighted the particular ways the army was responsible for creating the circumstances under which soldiers turned to self-destruction—circumstances which the mass of non-suicidal soldiers were also enduring.

Second, his various status changes illustrate that the army itself was aware of these socio-emotional difficulties to at least some degree. Indeed, this Infantryman's first company commander appeared unsurprised that the circumstances of his service led the man to suicide:

[His first Captain] held the firm conviction that [the Infantryman] was not only disqualified for frontline field service [*nicht felddienstfähig*], but could not even be held criminally responsible [*nicht strafverantwortlich gewesen sei*] for his military infractions due to his mental state. As a result, it appears that [the Infantryman] committed suicide

⁶⁰ This is especially pronounced in the work of Thomas Joiner: Thomas Joiner, *Why People Die By Suicide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

due to his psychopathic disposition, out of despair that he might be sent to the front despite him not feeling adequately fit for service [*er sich nicht hinreichend dienstfähig fühlte*]. The investigation by the Landshut police found the same result.⁶¹

The Bavarian War Ministry's statistical index of soldiers' suicides recorded this same conclusion, listing the "reason" (*Grund*) for his suicide as "fear of deployment at the front [*Furcht vor Abstellung ins Feld*]." ⁶² In 1918 as in 1914, organs of the German state *were capable* of recognizing that their policies—down to micro-level decisions about individual soldiers' deployments and duties—had direct *personal* implications for the men serving in its army, which at times proved lethal. Indeed, it is striking that, according to the final case report, agents of the army (the company commander), civilian government (the Bavarian War Ministry), and local police *all* reached the same conclusion about this soldier's suicide. And that conclusion was one which ironically belied the state's long-standing posture towards military suicides, namely, that they were deaths which the state held no responsibility for. Their causes were, inevitably, 'personal,' understood as distinct and separate from the sphere of the state.

But despite recognizing these socio-emotional effects and, at least somewhat in the case of the company commander, acknowledging that they had direct consequences for military effectiveness, the army still prioritized its quantitative manpower needs over all other concerns. Significantly, there are no indications in any of the surviving documentation that it was a change in the *Infanterist* or his behavior which prompted the final status change from *garnisonsverwendbar Heimat* to *arbeitsverwendbar Feld*. Rather, the change in status was part

⁶¹ BHStA IV M Kr 10913, report labelled "München, 23 März 1918. | Ersatzbatl.Inf.Leib.Rgt. | A.d.D. | an die stv. 1. Inf. Brigade." "Hauptmann [F], der während der Zugehörigkeit des [P] zur 2. Kompanie diese Kompanie führte, ist der festen Ueberzeugung, dass [P] nicht nur nicht felddienstfähig, sondern insolge [sic] seines Geisteszustandes auch nicht strafverantwortlich gewesen sei. Daraus scheint sich zu ergeben, dass [P] den Selbstmord infolge seiner psychopathischen Veranlagung aus Verzweiflung darüber begangen hat, dass er ins Feld abgestellt werden sollte, obgleich er sich nicht hinreichend dienstfähig fühlte. Die Erhebungen durch die K. Polizeiinspektion Landshut ergaben das gleiche Resultat."

⁶² BHStA IV M Kr 10915 "Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1918," "I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibungen," Lf Nr. 5.

of a larger attempt to create more combat troops by shuffling existing soldiers around rather than recruiting or conscripting new ones: to make ‘more’ combat soldiers from the same number of men. As with the Hindenburg Program and Auxiliary Service Law at home, it was meant to try and stretch Germany’s limited resources—particularly manpower—as far as they would go. But, as Richard Bessel notes, “[t]he more Germany mobilized for ‘total war’, the more those directing that mobilization became divorced from the economic and political reality around them:”

“German political and economic leaders increasingly took refuge in a fantasy world which allowed them to avoid the narrow constraints within which they had to operate.”⁶³ Ironically, this attempted remobilization in 1916-1917 and the revolution and demobilization in 1918-1919 were causally linked, as the “wartime attempts at mobilization aroused expectations which probably never could have been met, even if Germany won the war, and consequently provoked a massive negative reaction when they came to nothing.”⁶⁴ That is to say, these attempts at remobilization *within* the army contributed directly to the creation of the conditions under which that same army eventually collapsed—and this was at least translucently visible to multiple agents of multiple ranks within multiple organs of the German state *before* Operation Michael was even launched.

Further, the OHL’s prioritizing of its quantitative manpower needs over the social and emotional needs of the men who actually made up that manpower played a critical role in the early (proto-)politicization of the soldiery—the new attention regular *Mannschaften* began directing to the political sphere in the winter of 1917-1918. As Wilhelm Deist notes, Ludendorff had been toying with the idea of a decisive offensive on the Western Front as early as April

⁶³ Bessel, “Mobilization and Demobilization in Germany,” 214. Isabel Hull has argued that this retreat into fantasy was actually a more general component of Imperial German military culture, evidenced, for instance, in the fact that the Schlieffen Plan of 1912 relied in part on non-existent manpower. In her argument, that deluded approach to strategic thinking was one of the factors driving the atrocities committed by the army in both German Southwest Africa from 1904-1907, as well as during the First World War. See: Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴ Bessel, “Mobilization and Demobilization in Germany,” 212.

1917, even before he and Hindenburg ascended to the top of the military and political hierarchy that August, and he “clung to this fundamental concept of the offensive in the often adversarial discussions concerning the most suitable form of operations that took place from October [1917] onwards.” The decision to pursue an offensive strategy against the Western Allies was thus, as Deist argues, “one of the few truly *strategic* choices which the German leadership was able to make in the course of the whole war.”⁶⁵ More than that, it was an exceptionally risky strategy, guided above-all by political, not military, concerns:

Ludendorff was well aware of the advantages of a defensive strategy and adopted it successfully in the first half of 1917, admittedly in the confident expectation that unrestricted submarine warfare would guarantee victory. Until August 1918, Ludendorff clung to the conviction that the war would need to end in outright victory [because the war aims of the OHL] included extensive annexations in East and West [...]. Against this background it is not surprising that the idea of a strategic defensive was never seriously discussed in the officer corps and particularly not in the staffs. OHL could therefore count on the unreserved agreement of the officer corps with their decision to conduct the war offensively. There is thus no doubt that the military leadership was guided by political aims in the decision they imposed.⁶⁶

Soldiers’ newfound attention to the political in early 1918 thus reflected this elite-level orientation. While most soldiers on the ground were either unaware of or unconcerned about these strategic debates (or lack thereof), more and more of them experienced the direct *consequences* of those decisions—whether it was seeing skilled workers recalled from frontline service, hearing word from home of government food mismanagement, or finding the body of a troubled serviceman who shot himself in their barracks. More than that, soldiers understood that the OHL was involved in all these events in some way. Seeing the preparations for the offensive may have instilled a “limitless confidence” in some, but for all involved, there could be no doubt about who was directing those preparations—the ‘silent dictatorship’ of the third OHL—and

⁶⁵ Deist, “Military Collapse,” 188. Emphasis added.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 189-190.

thus, at least latently, who would be primarily responsible if the offensive failed and could not fulfil its implicit promise.

Indeed, those very preparations ironically revealed the depths of Germany's military weakness. Concentrating their forces in West enabled the OHL to match the Allies in numerical strength that March, but at the cost of "denuding the secondary fronts in the East, South-East, and South."⁶⁷ This in turn helped paper over the *Westheer's* numerical inferiority in guns of all calibers, armored fighting vehicles, trucks, and horses, and manpower inferiority in terms of reserves. While in late 1917 "there were still 612,000 men at the disposal of OHL in the home country," and the OHL "could count on approximately 400,000 recruits born in 1900, who could become available only in the autumn," these would not be the kinds of experienced troops, like Ernst Jünger, concentrated in the new "mobile divisions" and on whom the success of the offensive depended.⁶⁸ They were instead those like the *Infanterist*, who either had not yet been conscripted or who had been assigned to duty on the home front, but were now being moved into France and Belgium for "the great final scrum."

This brings one to the final noteworthy element in this case: the fact that this young man was an *ungedienter Landsturmann*. Indeed, while the surviving documentation sheds no light on *why* this man had previously been exempted from military service, the very fact that he had been, only to then be conscripted at the mid-point of the deadliest war the world had seen in generations, underlines *the* essential structural fact about the army on the eve of Operation Michael: it was *literally a different army* than that which had marched into Belgium in August

⁶⁷ Ibid., 190.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 191. As Deist went on to describe, the mobile divisions "were given preferential treatment in weapons and equipment, and in them was concentrated the power of the western army." Jünger discusses the training and preparation for the offensive in his diary beginning in January 1918: Ernst Jünger, *Kriegstagebuch, 1914-1918*, ed. Helmuth Kiesel (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2010): 362-374.

1914. By the end of February 1918, at least 720,689 German soldiers had died—fully 84% of the total deaths the *Sanitätsbericht* could date to a specific month, and almost 38% of the 1,900,876 total army deaths it recorded for the war.⁶⁹ And this was on top of at least 2,845,618 soldiers wounded and over 522,892 captured or missing on the Western Front alone by that point in the war.⁷⁰ Incorporating the casualty figures from the Eastern Front illustrates that out of the total 13,123,011 German soldiers who served during the war, *at least 40%* had been removed from service through either death, injury, or capture before a single soldier began the assault on St. Quentin that March—and over 10% of that total was already permanently lost.⁷¹

But these aggregate numbers mask more particular chronological and thanatological dynamics. The superlative combat death rates during the initial war of movement meant that by the end of the first year of war in August 1915, 285,991 German soldiers had already died, representing nearly 10% of the German army's actual strength at the start of the conflict.⁷² This was the equivalent of losing 100% of the war volunteers (*Kriegsfreiwilliger*) who joined in August 1914, plus an additional 35,000 soldiers. More than that, it was equivalent to losing over 57% of the roughly 500,000 total *Kriegsfreiwilliger* who joined the army over the course of the war.⁷³ Looking specifically at the Field Army—that is, the section of the army that actually

⁶⁹ *Sanitätsbericht III*. The monthly *Iststärke* figures are found on: 5*-8*. The cumulative death figures are collated in Figure 9.

⁷⁰ James McRandle and James Quirk collated the relevant data from the *Sanitätsbericht III* on German casualties into a more easily legible pair of aggregate tables: James McRandle and James Quirk, "The Blood Test Revisited: A New Look at German Casualty Counts in World War I," *The Journal of Military History* Vol. 70, No. 3 (2006): 682-685.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Of course, many soldiers were wounded multiple times and recirculated throughout the army, so it is unclear what percentage of the wounded represented permanent losses: injuries so severe the man could no longer serve. Nonetheless, they still provide a rough indication of scale, and more broadly highlight the dynamism within the army's makeup. Subsequently, the number of permanent losses is derived from adding the death and missing figures together, rendering it a decided underestimate.

⁷² *Ibid.* The monthly *Iststärke* figures are found on: 5*-8*.

⁷³ I have built from Alexander Watson's estimates on the number and chronological distribution of war volunteers: Alexander Watson, "'For Kaiser and Reich': The Identity and Fate of the German Volunteers, 1914-1918," *War in History* Vol. 12, No. 1 (2005): 47-50, especially footnotes 17 and 21.

conducted combat operations—losses were even starker. In August 1914 alone, at least 20,943 soldiers died in combat, meaning the *Feldheer* had permanently lost fully 1.3% of its initial total strength in the first month of the war. A year later, this had risen to 16.8%; by February 1918, it was 41.8%.⁷⁴

Losses on this scale had a significant influence on the ‘character’ of the army. The chronological distribution of those deaths meant that the very first soldiers Germany lost were also, on average, its most experienced. The glut of war volunteers who joined up during the “August euphoria” generally didn’t arrive at the front until October 1914 at the earliest—that is, right at the point when the war of movement began settling into a war of position and combat death rates began to substantially drop. The men dying at superlative rates throughout that late summer and early fall were instead those soldiers who were either in the midst of serving their mandatory two-years or had already done so—that is, men with actual military experience. As Hew Strachan notes, “[o]nly the two youngest (and therefore most recently trained) classes were needed by active units to reach their war strength” when Germany mobilized in 1914, meaning that most of the men dying in those active units in August and September were *precisely* those slightly-older, more experienced soldiers which the army clearer prioritized.⁷⁵ Indeed, it is worth recalling here that when the Berlin artist Käthe Kollwitz interceded on behalf of her younger son Peter on 9 August to convince her husband to let him join the army, it came *both* before the *Landsturm* had been called up *and* weeks before the army ever set up a central recruiting station

⁷⁴ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 5*-8*, 140*-143*.

⁷⁵ Hew Strachan, *The First World War Volume I: To Arms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 206. As he goes on to summarize: “Most reservists were recalled on 29 and 30 July.... The older reserve and some of the younger Landwehr classes were formed into eighty-seven Ersatz battalions. The older Landwehr classes (aged under 39) contributed 314 battalions.... The active corps were in position by 12 August, the reserve by the 14th, and the Ersatz divisions on the 18th.... Germany had incorporated rather more reservists [than France], but the quality and training of Germany’s reservists were at a higher level than those of France.”

for volunteers in Berlin on 25 August—a clear, if subtle, indication of which supplies of manpower the army considered most valuable at the start of the conflict.⁷⁶

At the same time, of course, the army was also expanding. From an initial strength of 2,913,873 in August 1914, the imperial army grew to 7,568,038 soldiers when it reached its apogee in June 1917—an increase of 159.7%.—and only dipped below 6 million men again after the *Kaiserschlacht* began.⁷⁷ On paper at least, this meant that every soldier Germany permanently lost—whether through death, debilitating injury or illness, capture, or desertion—was replaced many times over in the course of just a single year. But this was a continuity in name only.⁷⁸ Indeed, consideration of the quantitative thanatological context underlines the fact that by March 1918, this dynamic had played out three additional times, as the summer offensives of 1915, 1916, and 1917 brought recurrent peaks in combat death rates, killing experienced soldiers and necessitating their replacement with ever-more men like the *ungedienter Landsturmann* (see Figure 1.10).

Thus, while Benjamin Ziemann is correct to emphasize that most soldiers survived the war, this did not mean that most soldiers survived *four years of war*.⁷⁹ Indeed, even if 100% of the men serving in the German Army in August 1914 survived until February 1918, they would still have represented only 40% of the army's total strength, and just over 55% of the *Feldheer*'s strength.⁸⁰ Looking solely at the Field Army—i.e. the pool of men who could have actually experienced mobile warfare—by the same metric, the number is only 29%.⁸¹ This meant that even if every single soldier in the August 1914 *Feldheer* survived until February 1918, *less than*

⁷⁶ Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1989): 152. On the recruiting of volunteers, see: Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 49, especially footnote 20.

⁷⁷ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 5*-8*.

⁷⁸ And that, of course, is on top of the meta-historical fact of every human life being *sui generis*.

⁷⁹ Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 19-35, especially 28-35.

⁸⁰ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 5*-8*.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

a third of the soldiers who undertook Operation Michael even *could have had* any previous combat experience from the war of movement in the West: for the overwhelming majority, it was literally impossible. Of course, in the event, the actual percentages were much lower, though the surviving data does not allow for a more precise reconstruction. But even these cursory quantitative considerations make the essential point clear: the men who stormed St. Quentin that spring *were literally different men* than those who had been stopped on the Marne in September 1914. And in many cases, they were men like the *Infanterist*: conscripted in the second half of the war, unaccustomed to military life and the quotidian necessities of wartime, and terrified of the impending violence, whose lethal scale had been widely publicized since the war's earliest days.

The 5th Army soldiers welcoming the prospective return of the *Bewegungskrieg* that February were thus, ironically, in essentially the same position as their counterparts—including their direct counterparts—in July 1914: waiting for nearly a month in an emotionally-complex state of increasingly nervous ‘excitement,’ with no possible direct experience of the specific violence they were about to face⁸²—though in 1918, the soldiers’ knowledge of the war’s lethality was much deeper and longer-standing. And as in 1914, their enthusiastic vanguard also had its shadow. The suicide rate in the Replacement Army was in sharp decline from May 1917 until it reached a nadir that December (Figure 1.5).⁸³ But over the next two months, it increased by over 42%, while the *Feldheer* suicide rate dropped slightly over the same period. Tellingly,

⁸² This was all the more so because, as previously discussed, the 5th Army spent the entire war on the Western Front. This is one of the biggest limitations to the 5th Army Postal Surveillance Report as a source, as rich and useful as it is: it cannot account for the opinions and experiences of those who fought outside the Western Front—and therefore were much more likely to have experience with mobile warfare, especially if they fought in the east—but were then transferred there for the final offensive. Nonetheless, the broader point still stands: even those transfers from the Eastern Front were highly unlikely to have had any experience of the war of movement in the West, with all its specific contours and dynamics.

⁸³ This is yet another striking parallel: the *Besatzungsheer* suicide rate was at its lowest point in November 1914, and second-lowest in December 1917—both regrouping periods after a series of decidedly incomplete victories.

the *Besatzungsheer* suicide rate dropped again in March and April (while the Offensive was going well), stayed stable throughout the spring, before increasing again in July—the last month for which such data is available, but also the beginning of the Hundred Days Offensive that ultimately secured Allied victory.

As in August 1914, these suicides underlined the perhaps-deceptive intensity of the fear around the *coming* combat operations, particularly when one recalls that the *Besatzungsheer* consisted of “[a]ll military units on German territory, particularly those that trained military personnel that were sent as replacements for corresponding active units in the field.”⁸⁴ Indeed, at least some agents of the German state were able to implicitly recognize the innate linkages between that fear and the offensive itself, which manifested so starkly in these Replacement Army suicides. It is worth recalling here that after the Württemberger N.C.O. attempted suicide in Ulm at the end of February, the report sent to the Württemberger War Ministry explicitly “assumed that the reasons for the act were not [the N.C.O.’s] fears of being deployed in the field,” because he was set to continue home front duties in Germany.⁸⁵ Yet what that assumption implicitly admitted was that there *were* cases—or, at the very least, *could be* cases—where the fear of being imminently transferred to the front resulted in soldiers killing themselves, even if this particular instance was not considered to be one of them. And more than that, the German state was capable of recognizing them. The Bavarian *Infanterist* was a case-in-point: the statistical index of suicides in the Bavarian Army for 1918 explicitly listed “fear of deployment at the front” as the “reason” for his suicide.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 185.

⁸⁵ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 220, report labelled “Ulm a. D., den 22. Februar 1918.” “Es ist deshalb anzunehmen, daß die Gründe zur Tat nicht darin zu suchen sind, daß Z. etwa vor der Feldverwendung Furcht gehabt hätte.”

⁸⁶ BHStA IV M Kr 10915 “Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1918,” Section 1.A., Lf. Nr. 5. “Fürcht vor Abstellung ins Feld.”

4.3 Recurrent Thanatological Cycles and the Anticipation of Battle

The seasonal waves in the Replacement Army's suicide rate highlight the larger point: socio-emotionally, the army's recurrent contractions and expansions meant that for millions of Germans, the war 'began' over and over again, in a predictable seasonal cycle. New offensives—whether initiated by the Central Powers or the Allies—began in the spring, peaked during the summer, and slowed down over the fall, before both sides regrouped during the winter and the cycle began again. And this cycle had particular thanatological consequences beyond the dynamics of combat death rates and numbers, consequences which registered in the War Ministries' own records. The Bavarian Statistical Indices, specifically, recorded both the age and service year (*Dienstjahr*) of the soldiers who attempted or committed suicide during the war, which provide a more detailed demographic portrait of these dynamics and their consequences.

A look at the surviving data on the age of suicides and attempts in the Bavarian Army (Table 1) reveals, first, that beginning in 1915, the age of soldiers attempting suicide 'unsuccessfully' dropped considerably in relation to the age of those who actually killed themselves, and remained so for the duration of the war. In 1918, for instance, the average age of a Bavarian enlisted man who ended his own life was 29.7 years, while the average age of one who attempted suicide but survived was only 25.7—a difference of 14.5%—while in 1914 the figures were nearly identical.⁸⁷ Several factors may explain this difference, though in the absence

⁸⁷ As discussed in Chapter 1, officers appear to have both attempted and completed suicide in disproportionately high numbers, though the fragmentary nature of the surviving data makes this only suggestive, not definitive. Despite this, the absolute numbers of officers committing or attempting suicide in the Bavarian Army was quite low, meaning the data on officers is only really useful here in calculating overall figures. The sample size of officers *per*

of additional data, it is difficult to say anything definitive.⁸⁸ At a minimum, however, such figures show that while suicides were not limited to one age group, most suicidal soldiers⁸⁹—like most soldiers generally—were in their late twenties or early thirties.⁹⁰

	<i>N.C.O.s/ Enlisted Men (Suicides)</i>	<i>N.C.O.s/ Enlisted Men (Attempts)</i>	<i>N.C.O.s/ Enlisted Men (Combined)</i>	<i>Officers (Suicides)</i>	<i>Officers (Attempts)</i>	<i>Officers (Combin- ed)</i>	<i>Overall (Suicides)</i>	<i>Overall (Combin- ed)</i>
<i>1914 (Total)</i>	25.97	23.15	24.89	50.25	32	46.60	27.62	26.05
<i>1914 (Jan- July)</i>	21.70	22.03	21.88	0	0	0	21.70	21.88
<i>1914 (Aug- Dec)</i>	29.05	29.60	29.12	50.25	32	46.60	31.40	31.20
<i>1915</i>	30.44	26.45	29.47	39	0	39	31.07	30.01
<i>1916</i>	30.93	27.87	29.85	46.5	0	46.50	31.55	30.29
<i>1917</i>	32.15	26.47	30.15	32.9	57	35.09	32.21	30.44
<i>1918</i>	29.74	25.7	28.27	37.75	0	37.75	30.97	29.25

Table 1 Average Age of Suicides and Attempts in the Bavarian Army, 1914-1918 (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915 through 10919)

Second, an immediate effect of the start of the war was to significantly raise the age of the soldiers killing themselves. From January to July 1914, the average age of a soldier attempting suicide in the Bavarian Army (whether ‘successfully’ or not) was just under 22. From August to December, that average had increased to 31.2 years old—an increase of 42.6%—where it would stay essentially unchanged for the duration of the war. Indeed, from August 1914

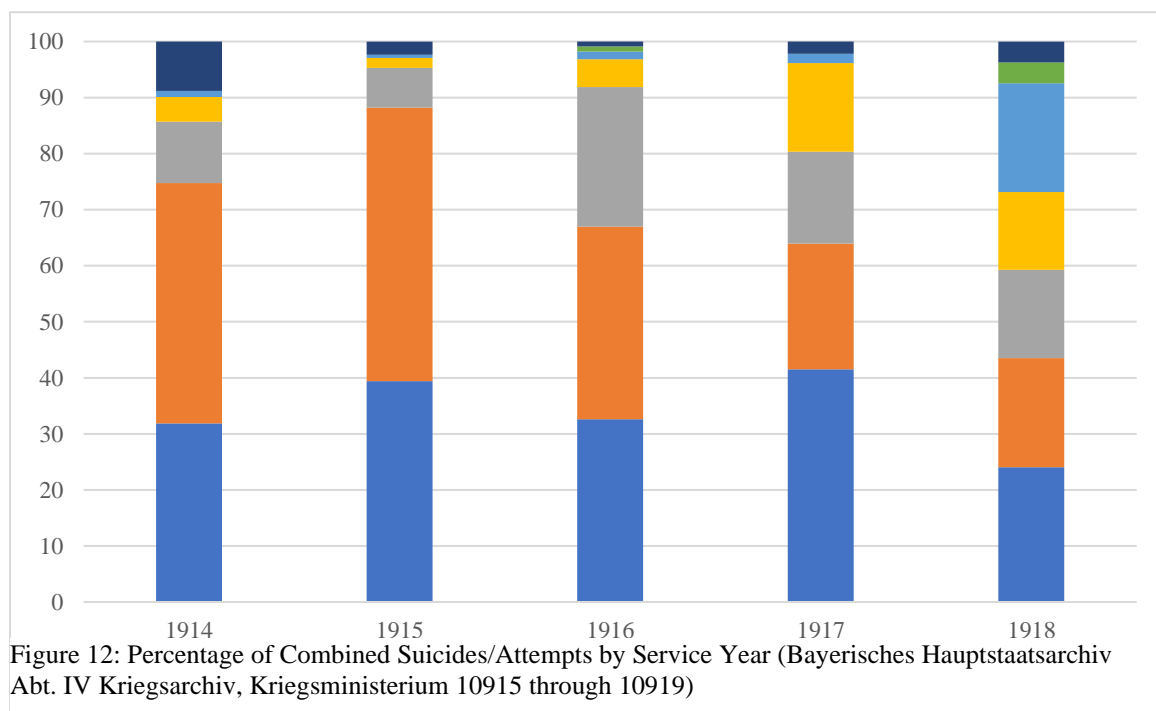
se is too small to allow for any meaningful quantitative analysis, hence the focus on enlisted men throughout this discussion.

⁸⁸ An overreading might see the difference as indicative of degrees of ‘seriousness’ in the suicide attempts of different age groups, e.g. that older soldiers were more ‘serious’ about actually dying, while younger soldiers may have ‘only’ been desperately seeking some reprieve from the strains of wartime life, but did not necessarily have death as the principal goal. Such a reading is, at a minimum, based on a great of ahistorical assumptions, however, and should not be taken seriously in the absence of additional corroborating data. Other factors almost certainly include comparative access to and competence with the various means of self-destruction (especially access to weapons), the number of suicide attempts, and the soldiers’ service year, discussed below.

⁸⁹ For the purposes of this discussion of the age and service year of suicides and attempts in the Bavarian Army, the term ‘suicidal soldiers’ refers to suicides and attempts combined, i.e. the total number of soldiers who attempted suicide, whether ‘successfully’ or not.

⁹⁰ Recall here that one of the significant demographic features of German war volunteers is that they tended to be younger than the average soldier, and that most were only able to volunteer because they were not yet old enough to be conscripted into the army through the regular process. See: Watson, “For Kaiser and Reich,” 55.

to December 1918, the average age of suicides and attempts in the Bavarian Army only fluctuated between 29.3 and 31.2 years. Thus, while the average age for 1914 as a whole was significantly below average—26.1 years—this was actually hiding one of the most significant dynamics present in the data. The young age of the suicidal soldiers from January to July 1914 correlated with what was, prior to the war, the potential traumas of the moment of first encounter with military life, as German men normally began their mandatory service at age 20. Thus, more than some sociological trait of Wilhelmine youth or masculinity, the young peacetime age of suicidal Bavarian soldiers actually reflected social dynamics which were directly politically structured by the military.⁹¹ The sharp increase in age at the start of the war, therefore, shone yet another spotlight on the fact that August 1914 saw an influx of *older* German men who were already trained as reservists into army, and that this (re)entry was often traumatic for those men, even before they were killed at superlatively high rates over the war’s first three months.



⁹¹ Andrew Bonnell has explored these pre-war dynamics in more detail: Andrew G. Bonnell, “Explaining Suicide in the Imperial German Army,” *German Studies Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2014): 276-295.

The service-year figures highlight this recurrent trauma of (re)encounter with military life even more starkly (Figure 12, Table 2).⁹² In 1914, soldiers who had completed one year or less of military service accounted for 74.2% of suicides and attempts in the Bavarian Army. In 1915, they accounted for 88.2%. Only in 1918 did those serving one year or less cease to represent a majority of suicidal soldiers, though even then they still constituted the plurality at 43.5%. These figures once again underline the significance of the early encounters and experiences with military life in a world at war.⁹³ Indeed, if one once again limits the chronological range solely to wartime, the dynamic appears in even sharper relief. From August to December 1914, over 85% of suicidal Bavarian soldiers had completed only one year or less of military service, with nearly 75% of them having newly re-entered the army (Table 3).

Yet these figures also emphasize the extent to which this trauma of (re)entry and (re)encounter was not limited solely to the war's opening months. Indeed, it was yet another aspect of the seasonal thanatological cycle that had already played out four times before March 1918. As the summer offensives of 1915, 1916, and 1917 brought recurrent peaks in combat death rates, killing experienced soldiers and necessitating their replacement with ever-more men

⁹² Under the "Dienstjahr" column, the Bavarian statistical indices usually list a number, but in some instances, the column was marked with a written designation of what "kind" of soldier the man was, e.g. "Reservist [*Res.*]," "Landwehr [*Ldw.*]," "Landsturm [*Ldst.*]," "War Volunteer [*Kfw.*]," etc. Read in conjunction with the surviving case reports, it becomes clear that the numbers listed indicated the year of service the soldier was in the midst of completing at the time of his suicide/attempt, and thus were meant to be read in analogous way to the designation "first-year college student." For instance, as mentioned above, the Bavarian *Infanterist* entered the army on 5 August 1916 and died on 1 February 1918. In the statistical index, his service year was listed as "2." Thus, I coded cases with only a written designation listed under "Dienstjahr" as indicating that the man in question had completed only one-year or less of contiguous service—otherwise, they would have had a number listed, like the majority of other cases. It seems most likely that these written designations were meant to indicate when soldiers were of a unique "type"—e.g. war volunteers (although strikingly, explicit mention of war volunteers' suicides only appears in the 1914 statistical index)—or to indicate that while they may have previously done their mandatory service, at the time of their death, they had only just re-entered the army, and thus were (relatively) newly a *Landsturmmann*, *Landwehrmann*, etc. Throughout this quantitative discussion of service-years, the figures for "1 or less" thus indicate the amount of cases with a written designation as opposed to a number, and therefore the amount of suicidal soldiers who were likely the most recent entrants into the army.

⁹³ The adjective 'early' here refers to the first period when a soldier entered the army, not the progress of the war as a whole. Thus, in a case like the *Ungedienter Landsturmmann*, his 'early experiences' took place in the latter half of 1916.

like the *ungedienter Landsturmann*, more and more Germans both at the front and at home were not only plunged into bereavement by these masses of deaths. Each individual bereavement also necessitated that some other German man and some other German family go through the types of anxious separation trials and rituals Käthe Kollwitz described so vividly in August 1914, as the army refilled its units and readied for the next year's battles.⁹⁴ The emotional fallout from a single dead soldier thus reached even beyond what an analysis of circles of mourning could demonstrate, spreading out across rippling chains of thanatological and emotional consequence that was slowly knitting German society together in a shared experiential web of inter-personal separation and loss. And this was precisely because of the army's role as the single most important social and emotional institution in Germany during the war years: the entity which was the primary 'organizer' and 'establisher' of the conditions of possibility for wartime socio-emotional dynamics.⁹⁵

Percentage of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year							
Year	1 or Less	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6+
1914	31.87	42.85	10.99	4.4	1.1	0	8.79
1915	39.41	48.82	7.06	1.76	0.59	0	2.35
1916	32.58	34.39	24.89	4.98	1.36	0.9	0.9
1917	41.53	22.4	16.39	15.85	1.64	0	2.19
1918	24.07	19.44	15.74	13.89	19.44	3.7	3.7

Table 2 Percentage of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915 through 10919)

⁹⁴ For Kollwitz's August 1914 entries, see: Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 149-159, especially 152-153.

⁹⁵ It is this sense of 'establisher' and 'organizer' that is the primary definition both of 'institution' and 'institute' in the Oxford English Dictionary: *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "institution," <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/97110?redirectedFrom=institution&> (accessed 10 December 2019); *Ibid.*, s.v. "institute," <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/97107?result=4&rskey=PpBHul&> (accessed 10 December 2019). The Germany Army as a formal institution has generally been the realm of more traditional military history. The primary work of this kind consulted here, and the only one of which I am aware which focuses solely and exclusively on the actual organizational structure of the Imperial German Army, is: Hermann Cron, *Imperial German Army 1914-1918: Organisation, Structure, Orders-of-Battle*, trans. Duncan Rogers (Solihull: Helion and Company, 2002 [1937]).

Wartime Percentage of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year							
Year	1 or Less	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6+
1914 (Aug-Dec)	74.36	12.82	2.56	5.13	0	0	5.13
1915	39.41	48.82	7.06	1.76	0.59	0	2.35
1916	32.58	34.39	24.89	4.98	1.36	0.9	0.9
1917	41.53	22.4	16.39	15.85	1.64	0	2.19
1918	24.07	19.44	15.74	13.89	19.44	3.7	3.7

Table 3 Wartime Percentage of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915 through 10919)

Entered:	1908- ⁹⁶	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
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More than this, the service-year figures belied the *Sanitätsbericht*'s confident claim that “[n]either the time of year nor the battles and engagements exerted a noteworthy influence on the suicide rate [in the German army]” as clearly as any piece of quantitative evidence, though the contradiction came in its substance and implications, not its particulars. First, suicide became much more evenly dispersed across the various service years over the course of the war, beginning most prominently in 1916. For example, soldiers in their second service-year represented just under 11% of suicide attempts in 1914 (2.6% if 1914 is limited to wartime) and 7.1% in 1915. In 1916, however, they leaped to nearly 25%, an increase of 252.6% in a single year. In absolute numbers, this meant an increase from twelve second-year suicide attempts in 1915 to fifty-five a year later (Table 4, Table 5). Second, this kind of massive jump was not limited to this one instance, but actually represented another larger trend. From 1916 to 1917, the percentage of soldiers in their third year of service who attempted suicide increased by 218.3%.

⁹⁶ Indicates an entrance year of 1908 or earlier.

Even more starkly, from 1917 to 1918, the percentage of fourth-year servicemen who attempted suicide leaped by *over 1085%*, from 1.6% in 1917 to 19.44% in 1918. Such figures suggest quite strongly that while the moment of ‘first contact’ with (wartime) military life was a consistent source of emotional difficulty for German soldiers, so too was enduring these repeated thanatological cycles. Indeed, the fact that those in later service-years began attempting and committing suicide in greater proportions later in the war was its own subtle indication that those cycles were becoming more predictable and—therefore—more terrifying as the nature of the danger they represented became evermore indisputable not only in a general sense, but in its thanatological particulars.

If one rearranges this same data by entrance year (Table 6, Table 7), similar trends emerge.⁹⁷ First, it is noteworthy that the ‘class of 1914’ had both the highest number and highest percentage of suicidal soldiers, followed in descending order by the classes of 1915, 1916, and

Number of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year								
Year	1 or Less	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6+	Total
1914	29	39	10	4	1	0	8	91
1915	67	83	12	3	1	0	4	170
1916	72	76	55	11	3	2	2	221
1917	76	41	30	29	3	0	4	183
1918	26	21	17	15	21	4	4	108
Total					773			

Table 4 Number of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915 through 10919)

⁹⁷ As explained in detail above, the way the service years were recorded in the Bavarian Statistical Indices implies the year each soldier entered the army. So, for instance, a soldier in their second year of service in 1916 can be assumed to have completed his first year of service from 1914-1915, implying he began his military service in 1914.

Wartime Number of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year								
Year	1 or Less	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6+	Total
1914 (Aug- Dec)	29	5	1	2	0	0	2	39
1915	67	83	12	3	1	0	4	170
1916	72	76	55	11	3	2	2	221
1917	76	41	30	29	3	0	4	183
1918	26	21	17	15	21	4	4	108
Total					721			

Table 5 Wartime Number of Combined Suicides/Attempts by Service Year (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915 through 10919)

1917. Combined, the classes of 1914 and 1915 alone accounted for over 56% of wartime suicides in the Bavarian army. This fact, too, strongly suggests that one of the most important factors pushing soldiers to end their own lives was the protracted experience of the war itself. Those who entered the army in 1914 would, by definition, be exposed to the various and particular experiences, trials, and hardships of fighting the First World War for the entire duration of their military service. Approached in terms of thanatological possibilities, those who entered the army in 1914 would have needed to survive four previous cycles to even be in the position to participate in the Spring Offensive in any form; those who entered in 1915 would have needed to survive three, and so on. That is to say, these service-year figures are also records of the decidedly noteworthy influence of the “battles and engagements” the German Army fought on the self-destruction of its own soldiers. Indeed, the fact that the ‘class of 1918’ accounted for over 3% of suicidal Bavarian soldiers despite only being able to participate in a single campaign is its own testament to the ultimate stakes of the Spring Offensive and the roots of those stakes in the socio-emotional consequences of state’s politicized military policies.

1908-	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
8	0	1	4	10	39	29	67	72	76	26
8	4	0	1	3	12	83	76	41	21	26
	4	2	2	3	11	55	30	17		97
		3	4	0	3	29	15			130
			11	4	4	21				188
				20	69	217				
										3.36
1.03%	0.51%	0.39%	1.42%	2.59%	8.93%	28.07%	24.32%	16.82%	12.55%	%

Table 6 Suicides and Attempts in the Bavarian Army by Entrance-Year, 1914-1918 (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915 through 10919)

1908-	1909	1910	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
2	0	0	2	1	5	29	67	72	76	26
2	4	0	1	3	12	83	76	41	21	26
	4	2	2	3	11	55	30	17		97
		2	4	0	3	29	15			130
			9	4	4	21				188
				11	35	217				
0.28										3.61
%	0.55%	0.28%	1.25%	1.52%	4.85%	30.09%	26.07%	18.03%	13.45%	%

Table 7 Suicides and Attempts in the Bavarian Army by Entrance-Year, August 1914-1918 (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915 through 10919)

What all these considerations of morale, death rates, manpower changes, and the age and service-years of suicidal German soldiers ultimately highlight is an essential misnomer: the very concept of ‘the’ German Army. Indeed, what the definite article hides is the fact of this thanatological and demographic dynamism, a dynamism essential to understanding the course of German—and indeed global—politics over the course of 1918. ‘The’ German Army did not fight the First and Second Battles of the Marne: *a* German Army fought the first, while *a different German army*—different in its supreme leadership, degree of political influence and control, and, most importantly, in the specific men who filled its ranks and quite literally made it up—fought the second. Indeed, one should not think of ‘the’ German Army at all, but rather the series of

armies which conducted the various operations of the war, with different men and leadership at nearly every point, fighting in radically different contexts from front to front and year to year.⁹⁸ The specifics of who made up each of these successive armies and how and from where they were recruited thus constituted some of the most important structural factors inflecting the trajectory of both the course and end of the war.

And the German Army of March 1918 *was* an optimistic one, one which remained united in its purpose not to lose the war. Indeed, the initial successes of the offensive pushed this optimism to a final high point, in yet another parallel with 1914.⁹⁹ As a 20-year-old artilleryman in the 5th Field Artillery Guard Regiment (*5. Garde-Feldartillerie-Regiment*), himself conscripted in 1916, wrote in his diary on 21 March, the deafening artillery bombardment of that first day instilled him with a last gasp of confidence that war could end well both for him and for Germany: “The roar of the great artillery battle almost makes us deaf. A shudder goes through my body at such an experience, and the feeling that there will be a good end to the ‘Great Battle in France’ comes through.”¹⁰⁰ So long as that feeling persisted, German soldiers remained willing to sacrifice when called on by their political and military leaders—and thus conceptually, ‘suicide’ and ‘sacrifice’ remained distinct.

Yet the feeling that a positive end to the war was possible was sitting alongside intense—and increasingly suicidal—trepidation across the 1918 German Army. Indeed, the hope, confidence, and optimism of the German Army at the start of Operation Michael was so irrevocably tied to the outcome of the offensive that it ironically served as one of the most

⁹⁸ I here build from Ziemann’s discussion of death and survival rates: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 20-21.

⁹⁹ The parallel here is with the “August Euphoria” that came with Germany’s early military successes, as distinct from the “July Excitement” which preceded it. See: Hirschfeld, “Spirit of 1914,” 30-31.

¹⁰⁰ Deutsches Tagebucharchiv, Emmendingen (hereafter: DTA) 429-1 (506-1), 23. “Das Getöse der großen Artillerieschlacht macht uns fast taub. Ein Schauer geht durch meinen Körper ob solchen Erlebnes, und das gefühl eines guten Endes der ‘Großen Schlacht in Frankreich’ kommt durch.”

significant factors structuring the disillusionment which its failure ultimately wrought. German soldiers' emotional eggs were placed almost entirely in the 'successful offensive' basket. More than that, both the postal surveillance officers' reports to the OHL and the excerpted letters they included simultaneously revealed how deeply tenuous that optimism actually was *and* attempted to mask it by emphasizing 'positive' news—like most soldiers opposing the 1918 strikes—and downplaying essential, though more pessimistic, signs, such as the repeated references to the coming offensive as the “last” or “final” one. The army's officer classes thus cultivated their own blindness to the true stakes of the gamble they were undertaking by continuing their offensive strategy. Most significantly, this myopia extended to the ways their own policies had sown the seeds for revolutionary trajectories of disillusionment less than a month after this renewed euphoria dissipated. But so long as that euphoria held, so too did German soldiers' willingness to sacrifice.

4.4 The Liminal Weeks of Michael and Georgette, 21 March-29 April 1918

“This is a magnificent war” the *Kriegsfreiwilliger* Karl Uhrmacher wrote in a postcard to his parents on 25 March 1918. He too was serving in an artillery unit engaged in the ‘Great Battle in France,’ and like his fellow in the 5th Field Artillery Guard Regiment, also believed strongly in the prospects of German victory at the start of the *Kaiserschlacht*: “Soon it will be like it was in the East.”¹⁰¹ Writing four days into Operation Michael, his optimism was understandable. On the very day Uhrmacher was writing home, the Germans captured 45,000 British and French

¹⁰¹ BA-MA MSG 2/10347, letter to parents, dated 25 March 1918. “Das ist ein herrliche Krieg. Bald wie im Osten.”

prisoners when they broke through the Allied lines and took Bapaume and Noyon.¹⁰² Only two days prior, the Kaiser himself wrote in his diary that “the English have been utterly defeated” and, in a deeply premature moment of celebration, stated triumphantly: “The battle is won.”¹⁰³ When Ludendorff formally closed down the Michael Offensive on 5 April, the Germans had advanced almost forty miles and threatened the crucial railway junction at Amiens—the most significant advances since 1914.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, the early days of Operation Michael brought the apogee of what might be called the ‘March Euphoria’—an intense elation at the offensive’s initial victories, and the socio-emotional ambiance of the moment when Germany seemed most poised to win an outright victory since the end of August 1914. This was another notable parallel with the first weeks of the war: the tense excitement on the eve of battle transformed into a hopeful jubilation as victory appeared to inch ever-nearer. As Käthe Lehmann, a 41-year-old housewife in Weimer, wrote in her diary on 27 March 1918:

Our troops are advancing victoriously, the breakthrough of the British lines has been successful, the number of prisoners has risen to 40,000, and six-hundred guns have been captured, along with countless other materials: provisions, clothing, munitions. Our advance came as a complete surprise to the enemy. The troops were already unloaded from the trains on the Belgian border and made enormous marches in six nights. The enemy planes didn’t notice anything, because during the day everything was silent and deserted [*menschenleer*]. Marvelous what our Hindenburg has done! One is now so excited [*gespannt*] that one lives in joyous expectation like in the first weeks of the war. In the evening, father studies the map of the war theater zealously, happily plots the further advances of our victorious troops with a pen and now, in turn, makes a plan for the campaign: how one could beautifully skirt around the enemy, where we could perhaps still break through the enemy front. Whether we push the English into a corner to the north or advance on Paris first are all questions that move us greatly.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994): 409.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 520.

¹⁰⁴ Strachan, *First World War*, 296.

¹⁰⁵ Lisbeth Exner and Herbert Kapfer, eds., *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918: Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Tagebucharchiv* (Cologne: Verlag Galiani Berlin, 2017): 525-526. “Unsere Truppen dringen siegreich vorwärts, der Durchbruch durch die englischen Linien ist geglückt, die Gefangenenanzahl steigt auf 40,000, und sechshundert Geschütze sind erbeutet, unzählbares Material an Proviant, Kleidungsstücken, Munition. Unser Anmarsch ist dem

Lehmann was unusually well-informed about the war due to the connections of her husband, who worked for the Head of the Interior and Exterior Department of the Grand Duchy of Saxony-Weimar and Eisenach (*Departmentchef des Inneren und Äußeren des Großherzogtumz von Sachsen-Weimar und Eisenach*).¹⁰⁶ Yet she captured quite precisely how the sense of being on the cusp of victory (re-)permeated German society—and multiple German generations—as the troops advanced, and the way it was explicitly experienced as a repetition of 1914. More than that, she highlighted the extent to which Germans’ attention was focused almost unreservedly on the progress of the Western Campaign that spring. Unlike the war’s opening month, there were no invasions of East Prussia or Alsace-Lorraine to divide society’s attention: all eyes were focused firmly on the west.

And people much-less connected than Lehmann followed news from the front with equal fervor. Anna Steinmetz, a 21-year-old domestic servant working in Cologne, noted in her diary on 31 March that “violent battles have been happening on the Western Front for some time now. The German troops hurry from victory to victory. One is full of courage and hope again. Everyone is tensely excited [*gespannt*] by the latest news from the front. Everyone knows there is much at stake.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, this was truly the final gasp of widespread German optimism, when

Feind völlig überraschend gekommen. Die Truppen wurden schon an der belgischen Grenze aus der Eisenbahnen verladen, haben in sechs Nächten riesige Märsche gemacht. Die feindlichen Flieger haben nichts gemerkt, da am Tage alles still und menschenleer war. Großartig hat das unser Hindenburg gemacht! Man ist jetzt so gespannt, lebt in so freudiger Erwartung wie in den ersten Wochen des Krieges. Abends studiert Vater eifrig die Karte des Kriegsschplatzes, zeichnet freudig jeden Tag das weitere Vordringen unserer siegreichen Truppen mit Blaustift ein und macht nun seinerseits einen Feldzugsplan, wie man die Feinde so schön umgehen könnte, wo wir vielleicht noch die feindliche Front durchbrechen. Ob wir die Engländer nach Norden in die Enge treiben oder erst nach Paris vorstoßen, das alles sind Fragen, die uns sehr bewegen.”

¹⁰⁶ Lisbeth Exner and Herbert Kapfer, eds., *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918: Herausgegeben vom Deutschen Tagebucharchiv* (Cologne: Verlag Galiani Berlin, 2017): 735.

¹⁰⁷ DTA 1059-5 (1020-5), 61. “Seit einiger Zeit sind gewaltige Kämpfe an der Westfront im Gang. Von Sieg zu Sieg eilen die deutschen Truppen. Man ist wieder voll Mut u. Hoffnung. Jeder ist auf die neusten Nachrichten, aus dem Felde, gespannt. Jeder weiß, es geht um viel.” Anna Steinmetz’s diary was one of those consulted and used in the ‘collective diary’ produced by the German Diary Archive, which contains a short biographical summary of her life: *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918*, 743.

both soldiers at the front and multiple generations of civilians at home united in their hope for—and increasing expectation of—victory. As such, it was also the final moment when the sacrificial consensus maintained its hegemonic sway.¹⁰⁸ Steinmetz herself explicitly articulated the connection as she confided her hopes for the 8th War Loan to her diary: “The 8th War Loan has been issued. One can subscribe until 18 April. The victories in the West induce many subscriptions, and one believes the 8th Loan will be brilliant. *Everyone subscribes happily when they know they are helping to bring about peace soon.* Any human material [*Menschenmaterial*] that can be taken is pushed to the front.”¹⁰⁹ Like the 5th Army’s soldiers that February, German civilians continued to sacrifice—both materially and emotionally—when they felt their actions were hastening the end of the war.

This was a point Steinmetz reiterated to herself at the end of the entry. By the conclusion of her reflections that day, however, she also implicitly articulated the fragility and precarity of that hope and optimism, as well as its thanatological and emotional consequences as the *Kaiserschlacht* wore on: “Now one sees little soldiers [*Soldätchen*] on the streets, the purest children. The Fatherland needs them all, even the weak ones. In these great days everyone must deploy their wealth and blood [*Gut u. Blut*] in order to save the Fatherland and achieve victory. *Everyone also does this happily when they know peace is coming soon.* Whether this will happen

¹⁰⁸ I here use the concept of ‘hegemony’ in the Gramscian sense, as explicated by Raymond Williams: “the concept of ‘hegemony’ goes beyond ‘ideology’”. What is decisive is not only the conscious system of ideas and beliefs, but the whole lived social process as practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values.” Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 109. For his full explanation: 108-114.

¹⁰⁹ DTA 1059-5 (1020-5), 61. Emphasis added. “Die 8. Kriegsanleihe ist aufgelegt. Bis 18.4. können die Zeichnungen erfolgen. Die Siege im Westen veranlassen zu großen Zeichnungen, und man glaubt die 8. Anleihe werde brilliant werden. Jeder zeichnet ja freudig wenn er weiß, er hilft mit zum baldigen Frieden. Alles was an Menschenmaterial genommen werden kann wird in die Front gesteckt.”

soon, no one can say. So for now, we hope for the best.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, soldiers at the front had their hopes violently checked even in the course of Michael’s initial successes. “The beaten enemy retreats during the night” wrote the decorated artilleryman Reinhard Lewald in his diary on 26 March. He had fought in nearly every major battle on the Western Front since 1915, yet this victory had come at an immense personal cost both to him and his unit: “When the limbers [two-wheeled artillery carts] were brought back, my regular sergeant [*etatmäßiger Feldwebel*], Rauhut, who had fought the entire war with the battery, was severely wounded. This was an especially painful loss for me, because Rauhut was a pearl of a sergeant. [...] The enemy defends itself with extreme tenacity.”¹¹¹

Indeed, the end of Operation Michael and its failure to achieve the final victory it implicitly promised, above all, to the troops that fought it, brought on what might be thought of as the ‘pre-emergent’ period of despair in Great War Germany: a major, but still incipient, wave of emotional and ideational hopelessness both at the front and at home, which began to foundationally undermine and reconfigure the existing wartime relationship between ‘suicide’ and ‘sacrifice.’¹¹² Gottlieb Frank, for instance, was thirty-three years old when the war began. A married father of two and a jurist, he was conscripted in February 1917 and spent the remainder

¹¹⁰ Ibid. Emphasis added. “Man sieht jetzt Soldäthen auf der Straße, die reinsten Kinder. Das Vaterland braucht sie alle, auch die Schwächlichen. In diesen großen Tagen muß Jeder Gut u. Blut einsetzen, um das Vaterland zu retten u. den Sieg zu erringen. Jeder tut dies auch freudig wenn er weiß der Frieden kommt bald. Ob dies schon bald geschieht kann niemand sagen. Vorläufig hoffen wir das Beste.”

¹¹¹ *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918*, 525. “Beim zurückführen der Protzen wird mein etatmäßiger Feldwebel Rauhut, der als solcher den ganzen Krieg bei der Batterie mitgemacht hat, schwer verwundet, was für mich ein besonders schmerzlicher Verlust ist, denn Rauhut was als Feldwebel eine Perle. [...] Der Feind verteidigt sich äußerst zäh.” His bio is found on: 735.

¹¹² This is following Raymond Williams’s basic tri-part taxonomy of socio-political change—the emergent, dominant, and residual: Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 108-135, especially 121-127. As he described, an emergent phenomenon is distinct from one which is merely novel, as the emergent are “elements of some new phase of the dominant culture [...] and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it” (123). Relatedly, the ‘pre-emergent’ is “active and pressing but not yet fully articulated:” the first inchoate expressions of a new set of socio-cultural meanings, values, and practices, but which have not yet cohered together into an “evident emergence which could be more confidently named.” (126).

of the war fighting on the Western Front, first as an N.C.O., then as a commissioned officer.¹¹³ Sitting in Bois-de-Haye on 29 March 1918, he confided to his diary: “The Offensive appears to want to stay stuck [...]. How it looks next to us or elsewhere on the front, we don’t know [...]. Today is Good Friday. Our fellows at home are dressed festively, and we sit here in the dirt with tattered clothes, tensely [*gespannt*] listening to the shells falling around us.”¹¹⁴ Notably, at this point in the campaign, the setback produced more frustration than despair, even given his ignorance of the state of the battle. While Frank shared none of the bouts of bloodlust of some younger soldiers like Ernst Jünger,¹¹⁵ he and his men still wanted to take the fight to the enemy, which made the stagnation even more discouraging: “We just want to go forward, drive off our opponents, and win.”¹¹⁶

Over the next week, however, that frustration grew and began to transform into a more identifiable despair. The day after Ludendorff officially closed Michael down, 6 April, Frank wrote from Albert, in the Somme: “*If we get stuck now, all the sacrifices are as good as in vain. But the troops can’t endure life in this desert for long either. One often thinks one must collapse. We have the purest dog’s life in our fox holes, where one has his camp in water and scum without any shelter. So we deteriorate completely here, depressed by this life of grief [*gedrückt durch dieses Trauerleben*], depressed by the failure of the attack.*”¹¹⁷ Only one day after the

¹¹³ *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918*, 726.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 526. “Die Offensive scheint stecken bleiben zu wollen. [...] Wie es neben uns oder gar sonst an der Front aussieht, wissen wir nicht [...]. Heute ist Karfreitag. Festlich gekleidet sind die Unsern [*sic*] daheim, und wir sitzen heir im Schmutz mit zerrissenen Kleidern, gespannt lauschend auf die bei uns einschlagenden Granatan.”

¹¹⁵ Benjamin Ziemann’s review of Jünger’s published diary succinctly summarizes these core points: Benjamin Ziemann, review of *Ernst Jünger, Kriegstagebuch*, edited by Helmuth Kiesel, *Historische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 294, No. 2 (April 2012): 557-558. See also his discussion in: Benjamin Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier in the Great War: Killing, Dying, Surviving*, trans. Andrew Evans (New York: Bloomsbury 2017 [2013]): 63-90.

¹¹⁶ *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918*, 526. “Wir wollen nur vorwärts, den Gegner verjagen und siegen.”

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 529. Emphasis added. “Bleiben wir jetzt hängen, dann sind alle Opfer so gut wie umsonst gewesen. Aber die Truppen können auch das Leben in dieser Wüste nicht lange aushalten, Man meint oft, man müsse zusammenbrechen. Wir haben das reinste Hundeleben in unseren Löchern, wo man sein Lager im Wasser und Dreck hat ohne jedes Obdach. So verkommen wir heir vollends, gedrückt durch dieses Trauerleben, gedrückt durch den Misserfolg im Angriff.”

Operation ended, Frank already had a clear-eyed understanding of its interlocking set of consequences, and how they were related. Most importantly, he articulated the crucial conceptual shift that Michael's failure ultimately engendered, even if in early April it was still expressed as a hypothetical: all of the death and loss Germans had suffered during the Operation, like all of the death and loss they had suffered throughout the war, would only be experienced as worthwhile 'sacrifices' *if the Offensive succeeded*. Should the assault devolve once again into the stalemate of trench warfare, one which forced soldiers to continue enduring "the purest dog's life," then "all of the sacrifices are as good as in vain." And the consequence of that thanatological futility was equally clear: "one must collapse."

Many civilians at home had a similar reaction. One of them was eighteen-year-old Ruth Hildebrand, who poured her despondency into her diary on 3 April 1918:

This war, oh this war! If only its end would come already! Four full years we've had war, four long years. Some people will say we've already gotten used to it. I have maybe said as much myself before. But no, it is not true! We will never get used to it, those who once knew peace! We, those who grew up from children to adults during this war, will get used to hunger and poor clothing, but never to the grief of war [*die Trauer des Kriegs*], which annihilates every burgeoning happiness, like the frost on the first, delicate flower on a spring night. This creeping grief is everywhere [*Überall ist sie diese schleichende Trauer*], you [the grief] may go where you want. You laugh and sing and want to be happy that you are still young, then standing next to you: 'War.' 'War' it [the grief] screams in your ear. Then all joy melts away. You hear a quiet groan, the death rattle of a dying man. No, not just one: an entire battlefield suddenly sits before you, death and misery everywhere the eye can see. Oh god in heaven, when will the end come!¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ DTA 1419-2 (1280-2), 13. "Dieser Krieg, o dieser Krieg! Wenn doch schon sein Ende käme! 4 volle Jahre haben wir Krieg, 4 lange Jahre. Es werden manche Leute sagen wir haben uns schon daran gewöhnt, ich habe vielleicht manchmal auch schon so gesprochen. Doch nein, es ist nicht wahr! Nie werden wir uns daran gewöhnen, die einst den Frieden kannten. Wir, die wir im Kriege aus Kindern zu erwachsenen Menschen geworden sind, werden uns an Hunger und schlechte Kleidung gewöhnen nie aber an die Trauer des Kriegs, die jede aufkeimende Fröhlichkeit vernichtet, wie der Frost die ersten, zarten Blumen in einer Frühlingsnacht. Überall ist sie diese schleichende Trauer, Du magst hingehen wo Du willst. Du lachst und singst u. willst Dich freuen, daß Du noch jung bist, da steht sie neben Dir, 'Krieg', 'Krieg' schreit sie Dir ins Ohr, alle Freude zerrinnt. Ein leises Stöhnen horst Du, das Röcheln eines Sterbenden, nein, nicht nur eines, ein weites Schlachtfeld liegt plötzlich vor Dir, Tod und Elend überall wohin das Auge sieht. O Gott im Himmel wann kommt das Ende!"

Though fifteen years Frank's junior and having a fundamentally different experience of both the war in general and the Spring Offensive in particular, Hildebrand, too, identified the interrelated sets of thanatological and socio-emotional consequences of Michael's stalling, the most important of which was the undeniable omnipresence of death and loss—and the resultant grief and bereavement.¹¹⁹ More than that, her characterization of that grief as not only “everywhere,” but “creeping,” demonstrated an understanding of two further important facts. First, as ubiquitous as that grief already was at the start of April, it was still spreading, and thus reaching into ever-more corners of German society and directly affecting increasing numbers of both civilians and soldiers. Second, the experience of both that grief and its spread was sly and insidious. Her use of the German adjective “schleichend,” meaning “creeping,” but also “stealthy,” “sneaking,” “subtle,” and “lingering,” was thus a very precise description of the social state of grief in Germany during the brief transition from Michael to Georgette. On a personal level, it meant enduring the kind of intrusive thoughts and feelings she expressed through her personification of grief: shrieking reminders of the horror and suffering of each wartime death, “the death rattle of a dying man.” But on a broader, social level, it meant that there was, at a minimum, an entire generation—“those who grew up from children to adults during this war”—whose lives were, ironically, defined by their increasing proximity to death and those obstinate reminders of it. But, significantly, Hildebrand recognized that the process of thanatological socialization she personified was precisely that: a *process*. It did not subsume either a person or a generation all at once. Rather, it slithered its black tendrils into their hearts

¹¹⁹ The distinctions, in English, between ‘bereavement,’ ‘grief,’ and ‘mourning’ are significant here: “*bereavement* (the objective observation of loss, dispossession and separation), *grief* (psychological suffering, and the sorrow and pain it causes), and *mourning*, ‘a set of acts and gestures through which survivors express grief and pass through stages of bereavement’.” Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *14-18*, 176. Emphasis original.

and minds most intensely at the very moments they tried hardest to keep it at bay, maintaining subtle hold of the social psyche ‘like frost on a spring flower.’

As intense as these feelings of desperation and despair became in early April however, what was most noteworthy about them was what they *did not* yet do, namely, affect a politically-meaningful change in behavior, either at the front or at home. The superlative success of the 8th War Loan was a case-in-point. As Anna Steinmetz recorded in her diary on 20 April 1918, two days after the subscription period ended, “[t]he result of the 8th War Loan is 14.5 billion [marks].”¹²⁰ This made it the most highly-subscribed loan of the entire war, and marked an increase of nearly 19% over the previous war loan of September 1917.¹²¹ But the broader socio-emotional results were much more contradictory, as Steinmetz went on to describe: “The children are all hoping for a day off from school [due to the success of the war loan], but no one knows anything about that yet. Because of this great monetary victory [*Geldsieg*], all the electric trains were draped in flags. The stalemate in the battle is still ever-continuing. That is not good, because it could allow the enemy to gather their reserves again and prepare for new battles.”¹²² Neither the celebrated nor actual success of the 8th War Loan could not hide the fact that the military stalemate in the West was returning, even if many Germans at home still would not allow their knowledge of that situation to cohere into the definitive portent of a rapidly-approaching defeat which it represented.

By this point in mid-to-late April, however, the situation at the front had become undeniable to the men stationed there, as Gottlieb Frank recorded in a short diary entry on the

¹²⁰ DTA 1059-5 (1020-5), 61. “Das Ergebnis der 8. Kriegsanleihe ist 14 ½ Milliarde.”

¹²¹ Konrad Roesler, *Die Finanzpolitik des Deutschen Reiches im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1967): 79, Table 5.

¹²² DTA 1059-5 (1020-5), 61. “Das Ergebnis der 8. Kriegsanleihe ist 14 ½ Milliarde. Die Kinder hoffen alle auf einen schulfreien Tag. Aber bis jetzt ist noch nichts davon bekannt. Zu dem groshen [sic] Geldsieg hatten die elektrische Bahnen geflaggt. Der Stillstand in den Kämpfen dauert immer noch an. Das ist nicht gut, den dadurch können die Feinde wieder Reserven heranziehen und sich zu neuen Kämpfen vorbereiten.”

13th: “South of Albert. The position is in an open field. We dig a large hole, cover it with corrugated metal. One cannot stand up inside, only sit. It appears that ours is the first position that won’t be advancing. The exasperating [*leidige*] war-of-position begins again.”¹²³ Five days later, for Frank at least, despair was clearly emergent, precisely *because* the resumption of trench warfare created quotidian conditions under which soldiers could introspect and reflect on their current position, both literal and metaphorical: “With nothing to do but contemplate [*In beschaulichem Nichtstun*], we hold the position. The English fire quite a lot, us little. I feel so lonely here. *As long as we were moving forward, it [the loneliness] never came into my consciousness.* There is no one to talk to in the entire battery.”¹²⁴

In these brief reflections, Frank articulated the critical socio-emotional truth of April 1918. First, Frank recognized that the Operations had failed to achieve their strategic goal—namely, a war-ending breakthrough of the Allied lines. More than that, it became increasingly clear to frontline soldiers like Frank that the momentum of the war was definitively with the enemy, evidenced minimally in the fact that 1) the Allies *did stop* the German Offensive, which once again bogged down into the stalemate of trench warfare, as he noted on 13 April; and 2) the English fired their artillery “quite a lot,” while the Germans could muster only a minimal response—as clear a quotidian sign as any of Germany’s prospects of victory as Georgette, too, ground to a halt. Second, and even more importantly, he expressed what those military setbacks meant on the level of individual soldiers’ emotions and sociality. For Frank, personally, this meant the onset of an intense loneliness. This was an unsurprising consequence of the return to

¹²³ *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918*, 539. “Südlich von Albert. Die Stellung liegt auf freiem Feld. Wir graben ein großes Loch, überdecken es mit Wellblech. Stehen kann man darin nicht, nur sitzen. Es scheint, dass es vorerst bei uns nicht vorwärtsgehen soll. Der leidige Stellungskampf beginnt wieder.”

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 540. Emphasis added. “In beschaulichem Nichtstun halten wir die Stellung. Der Engländer schießt ziemlich viel, wir wenig. Ich fühle mich hier so vereinsamt. Solange es vorwärtsging, kam mir das gar nicht zu Bewusstsein. In der ganzen Batterie ist niemand, mit dem man sich aussprechen kann.”

the war-of-movement and the significantly higher-casualty rates it brought, and Frank—like his fellow artilleryman Reinhard Lewald—likely lost multiple comrades in the battles of that month. The percentage of bereaved soldiers in the German armies increased from 49.9% at the end of February 1918 to 58.2% at the end of April, an increase of 16.5%, meaning it was more likely than not that Frank was among them. Indeed, by the end of the March 1918 at the very latest, German soldiers who had not (yet) been bereaved by the death of a comrade represented a statistical exception within the army.

Most significantly, Frank implicitly explained *why* disillusionment and despair emerged within the army at the end of Georgette, not Michael. So long as soldiers' were actually engaged in combat or actively moving forward, the physical and psychological demands of that advance denied most soldiers the time and energy to reflect on their situation. Indeed, it is highly significant here that there were only three intervening days between Michael (which Ludendorff closed down on 5 April) and Georgette (which launched on 9 April). In terms of the structure of the campaign, then, there was minimal time for rumination, all the more so because many units were preparing for the next phase of the offensive during that brief interlude. So long as his unit kept up their forward momentum, Frank's loneliness and negative feelings "never came into [his] consciousness." Once the advance stalled, however, his negative feelings and reflections about the war now caught up with him. Now that they were stuck, as he had predicted on 6 April, "all the sacrifices are as good as in vain."

And Frank was not alone in seeing the consequences of Georgette's failure as the offensive lost steam. The 19-year-old war volunteer Wilhelm Brunner, who had fought in the Battle of Caporetto the previous fall before participating in the 'Great Battle in France,' articulated the *political* consequences of stalemate's return—and the particular liminality of the

period of Michael and Georgette—as clearly as Frank articulated the military-conditioned dynamics structuring the onset of his own loneliness and he and his fellow soldiers’ emergent despair.¹²⁵ Sitting in France on 24 April 1918, he took stock of the situation in his diary: “A terrible war-weariness rings out from every conversation, *and it sometimes happens that Ludendorff is openly described as a war-prolonger [Kriegsverlängerer]*. The hope for a final victory has almost entirely disappeared. Socialist agitation is more and more noticeable. But by and large the work [*Dienst*] is done willingly and gladly.”¹²⁶

First, Brunner registered a subtle but significant negative escalation in soldiers’ emotionality from the ambient ‘despair’ and ‘desperation’ (*Verzweiflung*) described by the Württemberger N.C.O. in the aftermath of his February 1918 suicide attempt to a more undeniably omnipresent ‘war-weariness’ (*Kriegsmüdigkeit*). In a word, soldiers’ negative emotionality now had a *named source*: the war itself. As Reinhart Koselleck noted, “moments of duration, change, and futurity contained in a concrete political situation are registered through their linguistic traces,”¹²⁷ and here was a deceptively important shift in German soldiers’ political consciousness: the very terms of soldiers’ conversations now indicted the war as the source of their continuing unhappiness. Of course, some soldiers had been experiencing and discussing those feelings since the war’s earliest days. But the fact that such war-weariness now ‘rung out from every conversation’ registered an important change: a new mass of soldiers were openly discussing those emotions with one another, right as the ‘great final scrum’ had failed to bring about the end of the war. Indeed, it was not ‘final’ at all. With each passing day, therefore, more

¹²⁵ For Brunner’s bio, see: *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918, 722-723*.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 542. “Aus alle Gesprächen klingt eine arge Kriegsmüdigkeit heraus, und es gescheiht manchmal, dass Ludendorff offen als Kriegsverlängerer bezeichnet wird. Die Hoffnung auf einen endgültigen Sieg ist fast gänzlich verschwunden. Mehr und mehr macht sich eine sozialistische Agitation bemerkbar. Im Großen und Ganzen aber wird der Dienst willig und gern getan.” Emphasis added.

¹²⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004 [1979]): 79.

and more social vectors of disillusionment opened up within the army, allowing hopelessness to spread further and faster as the Allies halted the German advance and increasing numbers of soldiers were left with the time and space to reflect on their positions and discuss their situation, thoughts, and feelings with one another.

Second, Brunner recognized that by the end of April 1918, the hope in a final German victory was almost entirely gone. Worse still, that hope had been the single most important factor motivating German soldiers to continue fighting in 1918 and the critical glue holding the precarious consensus of support for the war together, something which representatives of the German state had recognized as early as February.¹²⁸ The consequences of its loss, therefore, would be profound: the end of the sacrificial consensus and the beginning of ‘sacrifice’s’ conceptual slide into ‘suicide.’ And already in mid-April, some officers of the high command recognized the depth and consequences of this loss of hope. The general staff officer Colonel von Thaer noted in his diary on 18 April 1918 that “[o]fficers and men express great disappointment that the massive, long-expected March offensive has ground to a halt, and that now regardless one attack is to follow another. Their hopes were too high that this great blow would end the war in March. They had gathered up all their courage and energy for this. Now there is disappointment, and it is heavy. That is the main reason why even attacks well-prepared by artillery peter out as soon as our infantry moves beyond the heavily shelled zone.”¹²⁹ Four days

¹²⁸ It is worth recalling here that the 5th Army Postal Surveillance Report of 24 February 1918 stated this directly: “[t]o be sure, one wishes to spare the people further bloodshed. But one also wants to resign oneself to the necessity of confronting the enemy in the last great blow and to stand one’s ground in battle if the longed-for peace will be reached thereby.” BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 45.

¹²⁹ Albrecht von Thaer, *Generalstabdienst an der Front und in der O.H.L. Aus Briefen und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1915-1919* (Göttigen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958): 182. “Es kommt bei Offiziere und Leute die große Enttäuschung zum Ausdruck, daß die große lange erwartete März-Offensive sich festgefahren hat und daß nun egal wohl ein Angriff auf den anderen folgen soll. Sie hatten zu sehr darauf gehofft, daß dieser große Schlag im März den Krieg beenden würde. Man hatte daraufhin noch einmal allen Schneid und alle Energie zusammengerissen. Nun ist die Enttäuschung da, und sie ist groß. Das ist der Hauptgrund, warum auch artillereristisch gut vorbereitete Angriffe sich totlaufen, sobald unsere Infanterie über die stark vertrommelte Zone hinauskommt.”

prior, Colonel von Lenz, Chief of Staff for the German 6th Army, reported similar phenomena to the rest of Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, but with even more disconcerting military consequences: “The troops do not attack, despite orders. The Offensive has bogged down.”¹³⁰ Weeks before Ludendorff closed down Operation Georgette on 29 April, the hopelessness of Germany’s soldiers—itsself structurally conditioned by the decisions of the OHL—had already begun to seriously loosen the wheels on the German war machine.

But, third, at least for the moment, Brunner saw the *behavioral* consensus continue to hold, or, at a minimum, wanted to convince himself that was the case. According to him, after all, “by and large the work is done willingly and gladly.” Indeed, the fact that Operation Blücher-Yorck’s assault on the Chemin des Dames a month later was, like Michael and Georgette before them, initially successful was its own sign of this behavioral truth.¹³¹ Further, the type of outright refusal which Lenz reported to his superiors was still quite rare. As Wilhelm Deist argues, at the end of Georgette, “[t]he soldier reacted not with open refusal to follow orders, but rather with the refusal to take the risks demanded [by their commanders],” such as declining to volunteer for dangerous storm-trooper operations.¹³² But this was already a stark contrast from soldiers’ reactions to Michael’s stalling and failure, let alone the responses to the First Battle of the Marne or the race to the sea.¹³³ While on 29 March, Gottlieb Frank could talk about how he and his

¹³⁰ Quoted in Deist, “Verdeckter Militärstreik,” 153. “Die Truppen greifen nicht an, trotz Befehlen. Die Offensive hat sich festgelaufen.”

¹³¹ See the concise summary in: Deist, “Military Collapse,” 198-199.

¹³² Deist, “Verdeckter Militärstreik,” 154. “Der Soldat reagiere [sic] nicht mit offener Befehlsverweigerung, sondern mit der Verweigerung des geforderten Risikos. Und in den Regimentsgeschichten finden sich Bestätigungen für diesen Sachverhalt: So wenn sich für Stoßtruppunternehmen keine Freiwilligen mehr meldeten oder heifür zunächst der Einsatz der Offiziere verlangt wurde.”

¹³³ It is worth recalling here the case of the anonymous Prussian War Volunteer, discussed in Chapter 1, who not only exerted considerable effort to join the army in August 1914—it took six attempts with four different units—but then continued to volunteer for dangerous missions and duties once he arrived at the front. See: BA-MA MSG 2/65 Tagebuchaufzeichnungen eines unbekanntes Kriegsfreiwilligen beim Ersatzbataillon des Inf.-Rgt. Nr 31 in Altona . - Maschinenschriftliche Abschrift.

comrades “just want to go forward, drive off our opponents, and win,” one month later, Georgette’s stalling put out the last embers of hope and foundationally altered that behavioral calculus. A Lieutenant in the 46th Reserve Infantry Regiment described this emotional situation on the ground, and the sharply decreasing purchase of the sacrificial thinking that had previously been so motivating: “How will it continue? No, this question remains unspoken; it is only carved into the faces [*Mienen*] of the front soldiers. He becomes dulled; the psychological uplift from only a few weeks ago is gone. He therefore forgets the human obligations to the fallen.”¹³⁴ The fallacious sunk-cost thinking sitting directly behind the state’s on-going demands for sacrifice was becoming increasingly overt and was therefore being rejected by evermore soldiers. That is to say, the suicidal substrate began to surface with increasing violence and frequency, and be increasingly rejected by Germany’s soldiers as it did so.

Finally, and most importantly, Brunner registered *the* momentous, if still subtle, shift in soldiers’ politicization that occurred at the end of April: numerous soldiers now openly and explicitly *blamed Ludendorff* for the continuation of the war—and therefore also for their on-going deprivation and suffering. Indeed, as much as a young conservative *Kriegsfreiwilliger* like Brunner might have been more disturbed by the increased ‘socialist agitation’ he observed, that overt political activity was helping cloak the more significant political shift.¹³⁵ The OHL’s latent responsibility for both the offensive’s preparations and—most crucially—*continuation* in the face of a clear strategic defeat had become overt by the end of Georgette. As a result, soldiers’ politicization took a definitive step beyond simply increased attention to (domestic) politics and

¹³⁴ Quoted in Deist, “Verdeckter Militärstreik,” 154. “Wie wirds weitergehen? Nein, diese Frage bleibt unausgesprochen; sie ist nur in den Mienen des Frontsoldaten eingegraben. Er wird Stumpf; der seelische Auftrieb von vor wenigen Wochen ist dahin. Er vergiß daher selbst die menschlichen Pflichten gegenüber den Gefallenen [...]”

¹³⁵ According to his bio, after the war, Brunner studied law, and in 1935 joined the Nazi Party and became mayor of Pirna. He was conscripted in 1939, fought in France and Russia, and was killed in 1944, in what is now Estonia. *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918, 722-723.*

now included a crucial piece of anti-state content: namely, *holding their own leaders*—above all, Ludendorff—responsible for their continuing hardship.

Significantly, however, that anti-state content was, like most other bases of wartime consensus, negative, and in that sense, non-ideological. That is to say, it consisted solely of agreement about the *source* of the problem, not its solution. Just as nearly all Germans agreed that Germany should not lose the war, but could find no consensus on what an adequate victory actually looked like or what Germany's war aims should be, those fighting the *Kaiserschlacht* now found increasing consensus around the cause of their specific misfortunes, but this did not signal any agreement on what should be done about it. This was nonetheless a major political escalation which indicated the degree to which the foundational legitimacy of the *Kaiserreich* was being called into question by a critical mass of its armed, bereaved, and spatially concentrated 'civilians-in-uniform'—the crucial segment of society which, as the events in Russia the previous year had made undeniably clear, would determine the state's ability to contain any revolutionary unrest should it arise, and, in that sense, the segment holding the regime's continued existence in its hands. Prior to Operation Michael, the "vast human and material sacrifices" continued to be "debited morally [...] to the malevolence of the enemy," as Roger Chickering notes.¹³⁶ Four weeks later, those moral debts were no longer piling at the feet of England and France, but were stacking ever-higher in front of 'silent dictatorship' itself.

Here was the distilled liminality of the weeks of Michael and Georgette. On the one hand, Michael's initial success pushed both military and civilian morale to a final high-point, prompting a last wave of major behavioral sacrifices in both spheres and briefly producing a euphoric resurgence of not just hope in, but *expectation of*, German victory at the end of

¹³⁶ Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, 169. As he describes, this was a transnational trend.

March—a final echo of August 1914. On the other hand, as in September 1914, successful Allied military resistance dashed those hopes, the German advance stalled, and by the end of April, critical numbers of soldiers and civilians no longer believed victory was possible. More than that, if victory was no longer possible, then there could be no larger object worth sacrificing for. Indeed, this was the last moment when the sacrificial behavioral consensus could bear the weight of its myriad negative socio-emotional consequences accumulated over the course of the war.

4.5 The Beginning of the End

For the six weeks of Michael and Georgette, Germany was not “betwixt and between” victory and defeat.¹³⁷ That critical crisis point had come much earlier, at the latest with Ludendorff’s decision to pursue an offensive strategy.¹³⁸ Rather, Germans were between the poles of survival and sacrifice, or, more properly by that point, between survival and suicide: between ending the war as soon as possible, even if just for oneself as an individual, and continuing to risk life and limb to kill for the state in an inherently futile continuation of violence which dramatically increased one’s likelihood of meeting a premature end. And as Thaer, Lenz, Frank, Brunner, and others—in their different positions and positionalities—had already begun to recognize, Germany’s soldiers would not commit suicide for their state.

¹³⁷ I here build from Victor Turner’s classic formulation of liminality: Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967): 93-111.

¹³⁸ I use “crisis” here in its earlier, more specific sense, derived from the ancient Greek medical meaning: the moment, condensed in time and space, of existential decision—the point in time when a doctor had to make a life-or-death decision. See the discussion and analysis in: Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” trans. Michael W. Richter, *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2006): 358-400, especially 360-361.

Chapter 5
The Onset of Hopelessness and the Spread of Pessimism:
A Survivalist Structure Test,
May-August 1918

We can endure any truth, however destructive, provided it replaces everything, provided it affords as much vitality as the hope for which it substitutes.

— Emil Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born* (1973)

5.1 The Despair of May 1918

The shadow vanguard of explicit suicides signaled the onset of this new hopelessness and the refusal of further sacrifice which it entailed as much as any single entity. According to the official *Medical Report on the German Army in the World War* (*Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer im Weltkriege*), the six months prior to the launch of Operation Michael saw the most consistent nadir in German soldiers' suicide rate of the entire war, averaging only 0.83 suicides per 100,000 soldiers (Figure 13). While the lowest recorded suicide rates in the German Army came from September to November 1914—ironically, dropping immediately from their second-highest point of the entire war in August 1914—these were a statistical aberration.¹ Indeed, while the German Army averaged 1.14 suicides per 100,000 soldiers for the war as a whole, from September 1917—that is, immediately after the Germans definitively halted the Brusilov Offensive the previous month, and thus the beginning of their final victory in the East—

¹ From September to November 1914, the German Army averaged 0.62 suicides per 100,000 soldiers, 59% less than the average for the war as a whole (see below).

until the end of Operation Georgette, the average suicide rate was only 0.84 per 100,000.² This represented a decrease of over 30% from the previous thirty-seven months of the war.

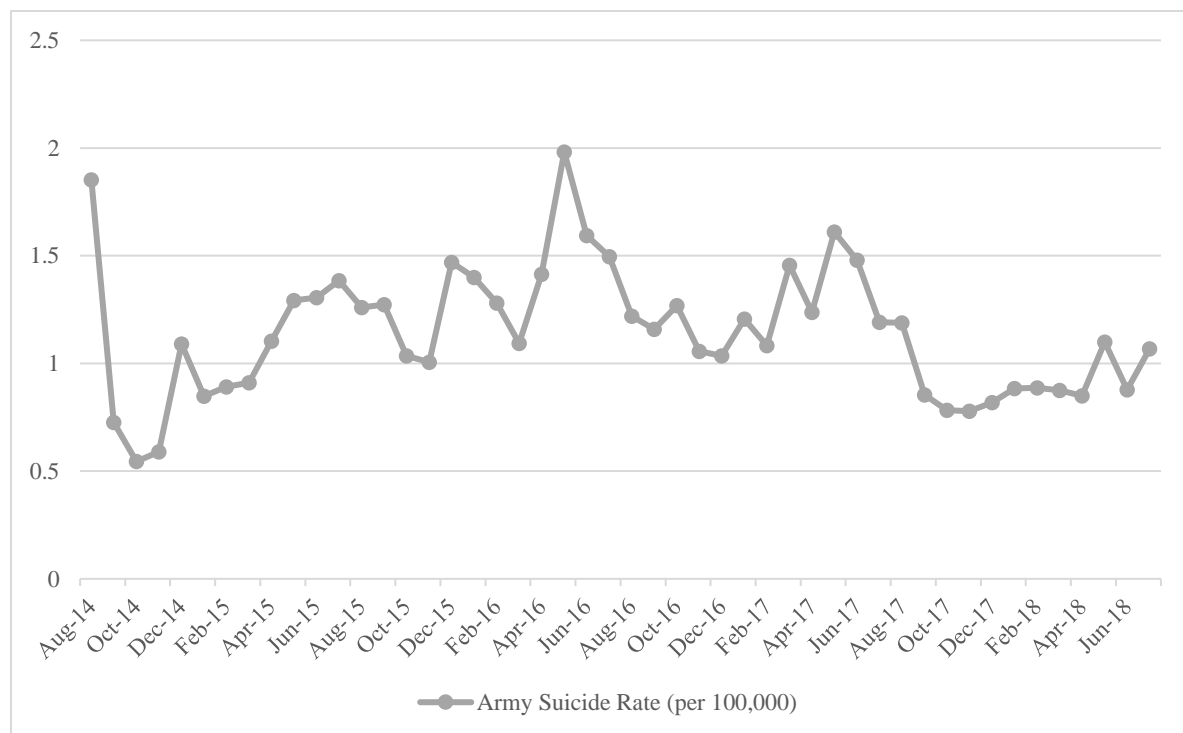


Figure 13: German Army Suicide Rate per 100,000 Soldiers (Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): denominator: 5*-8*; numerator: 133*-137*)

In May 1918, however, the suicide rate spiked, jumping from 0.85 in April to 1.10 per 100,000 the following month, an increase of nearly 30%. It then immediately fell back to 0.88 in June, before climbing back to 1.07 in July. While the May spike was still almost 4% below the average suicide rate for the war as a whole, and, of course, all of the German Army’s acknowledged deaths by suicide were barely a drop in the bucket of German soldiers’ deaths as a whole—the combat death rate for May 1918 was 239.11 per 100,000, down from 527.86 the

² The average suicide rate for the “war as a whole” covers August 1914 through July 1918—the last month for which the *Sanitätsbericht* compiled statistics.

previous month (Figure 8)—the timing and statistical particulars illustrate the unique nature of the May 1918 spike and highlight the significance of that month for Imperial Germany’s ultimate collapse.

For the duration of the war, the average suicide rate in the Field Army was 58.28% lower than that for the Replacement Army (Figure 5). Indeed, the only month when Field Army soldiers killed themselves at a higher rate than their Replacement Army counterparts was August 1914.³ From that point on, the two curves followed essentially the same trajectory, rising and falling together for the rest of the war. Further, prior to May 1918, in those few exceptional months where the Field and Replacement Army trajectories diverged, it was consistently the Replacement Army which had the increasing suicide rate, and thus pushed the overall rate up.⁴ Notably, however, after August 1914, the *only* month where a spike in the overall suicide rate was driven by the *Feldheer* was May 1918. Germany’s combat soldiers killed themselves at a rate of 0.97 per 100,000 that month, up 53.20% from April. The *Besatzungsheer* also saw a slight increase between April and May, from 1.39 to 1.42 per 100,000, a rise of 2.15%. But its suicide rate stayed essentially consistent from the start of Operation Michael until the beginning of the Hundred Days Offensive, only fluctuating between 1.41 and 1.46 suicides per 100,000 soldiers over those four months. All three trajectories then realigned in July, with all rates increasing: the Field Army by 26.20%, the Replacement by 14.01%, leading to an overall increase of 21.63% for the Army as a whole.

³ The significance of this is discussed in detail in Chapter 1, as well as in a recent article: Matthew Hershey, “The Suicidal ‘Spirit of 1914:’ Self-Destruction, National Sacrifice, and the Spontaneous Mobilization in Germany,” *Central European History*, Vol 56, No. 4 (2023): 553–572.

⁴ For example, the overall suicide rate in the German Army in July 1915 was 1.38 per 100,000, up from 1.31 the preceding June. That July, the *Feldheer* rate was ‘only’ 0.91, while the *Besatzungsheer* rate more than doubled it at 2.08. Thus the slight spike in the overall suicide rate in July 1915—up 6% from the previous month, before dropping by 8.98% in August 1915—was driven by the increase in Replacement Army suicides, which actually offset the decrease in Field Army suicides over that same span.

Looking at the absolute suicide numbers similarly highlights the statistical peculiarity of the May 1918 suicide spike (Figure 6). Of the forty-eight months for which the Army compiled data, soldiers in the Field Army killed themselves in greater numbers than their *Besatzungsheer* counterparts in twenty-two of them. Thus, in terms of raw numbers, suicides were split roughly evenly: 48% of war months saw more suicides in the Field Army, while 52% saw more in the Replacement. Chronologically, however, there was much greater dynamism. The *Besatzungsheer* consistently had a higher number of suicides from September 1914 through May 1916, with October 1915 and February 1916 being the only exceptions. From that point on, the dynamic reversed: *Feldheer* soldiers killed themselves in higher numbers each month, with the only exceptions being October 1916, January 1917, and June and July 1918. The numbers were even in February, on the eve of the *Kaiserschlacht*.

Strikingly, however, the beginning of the ‘Great Battle in France’ had a minimal effect on the Replacement Army’s suicide numbers (Figure 6). For the first seven months of 1918—again, the last months for which the Army compiled data—the *Besatzungsheer* lost 29, 32, 29, 27, 28, 31, and 36 soldiers to suicide, respectively: a range of only seven overall, and of only two prior to Germany’s defeat in the Second Battle of the Marne. And while as a percentage change, the increase from June to July was more significant—July’s suicide figure was 16.13% higher than June’s—in general, the acknowledged suicide numbers in the *Besatzungsheer* appear minimally influenced by the course of the first three Operations of the *Kaiserschlacht*. The *Feldheer* numbers, by contrast, mark the intensity of the dejection that came with Georgette’s failure as starkly as their suicide rates. From September 1917 through April 1918, *Feldheer* suicide numbers had a range of only five, with between thirty-one and thirty-six Field Army soldiers killing themselves each month over that span. From April to May, however, the number of Field

Army suicides increased from thirty-one to forty-nine—a jump of just over 58%—before falling back to twenty-eight suicides in June. As with the Replacement Army, the raw number increased again in July, jumping by a comparable 17.86% from twenty-eight to thirty-three.

The *Medical Report's* authors confidently claimed these suicides were “spread evenly across the theaters of war” and, even more importantly, that “[n]either the time of year nor the battles and engagements exerted a noteworthy influence on the suicide rate.”⁵ However, the table cited in support of those claims only breaks the figures down chronologically by war year, and then further by type of rank, not war theater.⁶ Moreover, in those charts and tables where the *Sanitätsbericht* does distinguish between theaters of war, it only acknowledges two: the West and the East, the latter of which was a catch-all encompassing not only the fronts in the war with Russia, but all the combat zones outside of France and Belgium.⁷ Indeed, there is no place anywhere throughout the *Medical Report's* three volumes and over 1,400 pages which actually breaks down the suicide figures by war theater, making it impossible to verify its claims on the matter with the data provided.⁸

Yet even prior to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918, the Eastern Front had essentially gone thanatologically silent (Figure 4). During the Brusilov Offensive, the German Army saw 13,149 soldiers killed in combat on the Eastern Front: 5,922 in July, 5,239 in

⁵ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 26. The relevant paragraph in the original German reads: “Die Selbstmorde verteilen sich auf die Kriegsschauplätze gleichmäßig. Im Verhältnis zur Durchschnitts-Iststärke nahmen sich in der Heimat über doppelt so viele Heeresangehörige das Leben als im Felde. Weder die Jahreszeiten noch die Schlachten und Gefechte übten einen nennenswerten Einfluß auf die Selbstmordhäufigkeit aus; sie war im August 1914 (im 1. Kriegsmonat) und im Mai 1916 am höchsten (übersicht 20).”

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27. The report used war years as opposed to calendar years, e.g. August 1914-July 1915 is denoted as “First War Year” (*1. Kriegsjahr*). By ‘type of rank,’ I mean the general groupings used in the *Medical Report*, e.g. Officers (Offiziere), Medical Officers (Sanitätsoffiziere), Enlisted men (*Mannschaften*), High Officials (*Obere Beamte*), as opposed to individual ranks, e.g. Sergeant (*Feldwebel*), Lieutenant (*Leutnant*), etc.

⁷ *Ibid.*, e.g. 138*-143*.

⁸ As previously discussed, Volume III of the *Sanitätsbericht* does have an incomplete monthly breakdown of soldiers’ suicides which I’ve used throughout this work, but does account for 92% of the German Army’s acknowledged suicides: 3,532 of the 3,828 the *Report* ultimately counted.

August, and 1,988 in September. After Germany's successful counterattack, however, the figures fell dramatically: 445 German soldiers died in combat that October, followed by 241 in November, before dropping to almost zero. Indeed, from December 1917 through February 1918—notably, the last period of collective German optimism on the eve of the Spring Offensive—only fifty-one German soldiers died in combat in the East, compared with 7,947 in the West. And while the combat death figures did increase again from March to May, they paled in comparison with the superlative death numbers the return of the war of movement wrought in the West. For instance, in April 1918, 461 German soldiers died in combat in the East. The Western Front, by contrast, saw the highest combat death numbers of the entire war, with at least 36,218 German soldiers killed in that single month. Finally, from June to July, nine German soldiers died in the East, while over 40,000 perished in the West. This meant that from October 1917 until the end of the war, the Eastern Front was essentially a statistical non-entity. In terms of functional thanatology, there was only one active front for the first half of 1918.

Thus for both the suicide rates and absolute numbers, 1918 is the sole year for which one can actually correlate these statistical dynamics of soldiers' self-destruction with the military outcomes of a specific battle. And in direct contrast to the morally exculpatory claims of the *Sanitätsbericht's* authors, the 1918 figures suggest quite strongly that, at least in the case of the *Kaiserschlacht*, combat's influence on the suicide rate was indeed noteworthy. The surviving figures contain an implicit narrative of the onset of hopelessness within the German Army, an onset heralded, once again, by the shadow vanguard of explicit suicides. The artilleryman Gottlieb Frank was not alone in finding that "so long as we were moving forward," despairing thoughts could not enter his mind. Indeed, what was most significant about May 1918 was that it was the first meaningful break in the 'Great Battle in France,' and therefore the first sustained

period when Germany's combat soldiers, in particular, had the mental space to contemplate their position—both personally and politically.

Such periods of reflection had been crucial proximate factors in the onset of soldiers' despair throughout the war, even in cases that did not result in suicide or any noted change in behavior. As Wilhelm Spengler's letter of 30 August 1914 starkly illustrates, the physical and psychological demands of combat formed a functional wall against such thoughts, which only returned with their full emotional force once the soldier was free from direct existential threat.⁹ Indeed, this structural condition is one of the most significant factors explaining the greater statistical proclivity for suicide amongst Replacement Army soldiers throughout the war.¹⁰ These men, who served in "military units on German territory, particularly those that trained military personnel that were sent as replacements for corresponding active units in the field,"¹¹ occupied a liminal position between civilians and the combat soldiers in the Field Army—no longer the former, not yet the latter—which structurally predisposed them towards anxieties around warfare which even the German state could not deny.

The case of a 24-year-old Württemberger who drowned himself on 4 April 1917 was typical in this regard. The Württemberger War Ministry officially listed the "reason" (*Beweggrund*) for this soldier's suicide as "Fear of going to the Front."¹² Indeed, it was even one of the rare instances where the state acknowledged that the soldier's military service played a role in his suicide, as the reason was listed as "service-related" (*Dienstlicher Art*) in the

⁹ Philipp Witkop, ed., *Kriegsbriefe deutscher Studenten* (Gotha: Verlag Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1916): 7-13.

¹⁰ As discussed throughout Chapter 2 however, the interpretive grain created by the combination of implicit and explicit pressures from the state and military bureaucracy biased the data away from any interpretative which might implicate the state or its conduct of the war in its soldiers' suicides. These reflections thus have to take the statistics "at their word," despite the many factors biasing the data.

¹¹ Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 185.

¹² LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470 'Namensliste zu Selbstmorden und Selbstmordversuchen aus den Kriegsjahren 1914-1918 und Nachkriegsjahr 1919 des württembergischen Heeres sowie Kriegsgefangener,' Section I, LfNr. 114. "Furcht vor dem an die Front kommen [sic]."

Württemberg War Ministry's Statistical Compendium of Soldiers' Suicides. The Bavarian War Ministry recorded a near-identical case from May 1918 in its own statistical index of soldiers' suicides. On the 24 May, a 27-year-old reservist drowned himself in the Danube near the Heining neighborhood in Passau.¹³ He was in his third year of military service and had been serving in a reserve infantry regiment based in Bayreuth at the time of his death. But the prospect of joining the fray for Germany's third offensive operation of the year appeared too much for this young man: according to the Bavarian War Ministry, he drowned himself because of his "Fear of deployment at the front."¹⁴

What was so significant about May 1918, however, was the degree to and intensity with which such anxieties had now begun to shift into active members of the Field Army, who lacked that inherent structural predisposition. Indeed, the very fact that they registered quantitatively at all, despite the myriad ways in which the German Army underreported and biased their suicide data, was its own sign of the intensity with which despair hit the *Feldheer* that spring. But of course, as had been the case throughout the war, that despair only exceptionally resulted in suicides. For most soldiers, their experience was closer to that of the artilleryman Gottlieb Frank, the married father of two who was conscripted in February 1917 and spent the remainder of the war fighting on the Western Front, first as an N.C.O., then as a commissioned officer.¹⁵ As he had done throughout the *Kaiserschlacht*, Frank reflected on the emotional toll the 'great battle' had taken on him and his comrades in his diary on 19 May 1918, shortly after enduring a nighttime artillery bombardment:

At 11:30 the first attack [*Überfall*] came immediately smack, smack dab in the battery. Us in the tunnels [*Wir in den Stollen*]. Again at 2:00 and 2:30 and then at 4:00 came a

¹³ BHStA IV M Kr 10915, Section I. A, Lf. Nr. 27. The following details about the case come from this same entry in the Bavarian Statistical Index.

¹⁴ Ibid. "Furcht vor Abstellung ins Feld."

¹⁵ See the short bio provided in: *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918*, 726.

regular bombardment with about 120 shells. A portion of the artillerymen fled with the first shots. The others were in a state of enormous agitation. We are all just finished now; the battery is worn out from battle [*abgekämpft*] and must absolutely be left in peace. There is not much one can do with the men anymore. I myself am no longer a person [*Ich selbst bin kein Mensch mehr*]. Every shell that comes whistling from afar induces a certain insecurity, a feeling of despondency and need for help [*ein Gefühl der Niedergeschlagenheit und Hilfsbedürftigkeit*], a constant need for rest, a longing for something beautiful, pure, for kindness and love, that is what haunts me the entire day. It cannot go on like this much longer, otherwise I will completely break down.¹⁶

In these reflections, Frank implicitly articulated the novelty of both the depth and breadth German soldiers' despair had reached on the eve of Blücher-Yorck. Already on 6 April, the day after Ludendorff closed down the Michael Offensive, Frank had been prescient about the consequences of the offensive's military failure, writing in his diary that "*If we get stuck now, all the sacrifices are as good as in vain. But the troops can't endure life in this desert for long either. One often thinks one must collapse.*"¹⁷ Indeed, the most important element was the one he expressed first: the unity of purpose which had grown directly out of the "depth of emotion" and "intensity of feeling" at the heart of the 'spirit of 1914'—and thus a central component undergirding German morale—would be functionally transformed into vanity by Michael's failure, hollowing out the emotional experience of sacrificing for the state in the process.¹⁸

Six weeks later, the situation had clearly escalated. Now, Frank and his fellow combat soldiers were not facing the return of military stalemate and an ultimately 'unendurable' physical

¹⁶ Ibid., 554. "Um ½ 12 Uhr kam der erste Überfall, gleich klatsch, klatsch in die Batterie. Wir in den Stollen. Um 2 Uhr wieder, um ½ 3 Uhr und dann um 4 Uhr eine regelrechte Beschießung mit etwa 120 Schuss. Ein Teil der Kanoniere riss gleich bei den ersten Schüssen aus, die anderen waren in riesiger Aufregung. Wir sind jetzt eben alle erledigt, die Batterie ist abgekämpft und muss unbedingt in Ruhe. Viel anzufangen ist mit den Leuten nicht mehr. Ich selbst bin kein Mensch mehr. Jede Granate, die von ferne her pfeift, ruft eine gewisse Unsicherheit hervor, ein Gefühl der Niedergeschlagenheit und Hilfsbedürftigkeit, ein fortwährendes Bedürfnis nach Ruhe, ein Sehnen nach etwas Schönerem, Reinem, nach Güte und Liebe, das geht den ganzen Tag mit mir um. Lang darf es so nicht mehr fortgehen, sonst versage ich vollständig."

¹⁷ Ibid., 529. Emphasis added. "Bleiben wir jetzt hängen, dann sind alle Opfer so gut wie umsonst gewesen. Aber die Truppen können auch das Leben in dieser Wüste nicht lange aushalten, Man meint oft, man müsse zusammenbrechen." The full diary entry is analyzed in more detail in Chapter 4.

¹⁸ On emotionality's centrality to the 'spirit of 1914,' see: Verhey, *Spirit of 1914*, especially 113.

and socio-emotional situation as an abstract potential or probability, but as an undeniable reality. According to Frank, this produced changes in both the affect and behavior of not only himself, but his comrades as well, causing some to flee the bombardment, but inciting omnipresent “enormous agitation” (*riesiger Aufregung*) amongst the entire battery. Indeed, the situation was so widespread, he described it using the first-person plural: “We are all just finished now.” This was a marked contrast with the battery’s reaction to Michael’s initial setbacks, which Frank had previously recorded on 29 March: “We just want to go forward, drive off our opponents, and win.”¹⁹ Now, however, the entire battery was “battle-weary” (*abgekämpft*) to the point that the men had become militarily useless in Frank’s opinion.²⁰ More than that, each falling shell produced an existential anxiety (“a certain insecurity”), paired with an intense depression and feelings of impotence (“a feeling of despondency and need for help”), which culminated in a palpable sense of dehumanization: “I myself am no longer a person.”²¹ Significantly, Frank once again recognized and articulated the specific consequences of that dehumanization should it continue unabated: “I will completely break down.”

¹⁹ *Verborgene Chronik, 1915-1918*, 526. “Wir wollen nur vorwärts, den Gegner verjagen und siegen.”

²⁰ A perhaps more apt but less literal and clunkier-sounding translation of “abgekämpft” which captures this particular sensibility better would be “battle-worn,” in the sense it is often used in boxing: namely, to describe fighters who have crossed the threshold from being experienced and “battle-tested” to a state of immediately discernable decline and massively decreased combat effectiveness compared with an earlier point in their career. That is to say, as with “battle-worn” in modern boxing, “abgekämpft” in this context denotes a weight of experience that is now an albatross, not an asset. A battle-tested fighter has been through physically grueling fights and can draw on those experiences to often remain competitive with and at times upset a younger, physically healthier fighter. A battle-worn fighter’s body has been so broken down by those same experiences, that he is no longer an effective combatant, or at the very least, is a shell of the combatant he once was.

²¹ The German rendering of the phrase—“Ich selbst bin kein Mensch mehr”—immediately calls to mind the title of the highly significant 1993 volume of essays on the experience of the war, its own indication of how widespread and long-standing the recognition of this experience of combatants’ dehumanization has been within the broader historiography of the Great War: Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich, and Irena Renz, eds. “*Keiner fühlt sich heir mehr als Mensch...*” *Erlebnis und Wirkung des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996 [1993]). On the particular emotional experiences of impotence produced by Western Front combat, see: Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 22-43.

5.2 A Transformed Army

This socio-emotional complex is unsurprising when one considers the massive losses the German Army suffered in the course of the Offensive's initial operations. According to the *Medical Report*, at least 31,429 and 36,218 German soldiers died in combat on the Western Front in March and April 1918, respectively (Figure 4). Prior to the launch of the *Kaiserschlacht*, the Army's most lethal month was July 1916, when 30,432 soldiers died in combat across all fronts. Thus, not only did first March and then April 1918 break the Army's own record for deadliest month (in terms of absolute numbers) of the entire war: the number of combat deaths was so high that the Army had already—and permanently—lost the equivalent of *eleven percent* of its pre-Michael reserve strength by the end of Georgette.²²

Looking at the combat death rates tells a similar story (Figure 8). In March 1918, German soldiers died in combat at a rate of 446.52 per 100,000—a staggering figure in its own right, but one which was comparable to the combat death rates during other periods of major battles. In July 1916, during the first month of the Battle of the Somme, for instance, the rate was 442.02 per 100,000.²³ Of course, even these figures paled in comparison to those of the war's first four months, when the Army recorded combat death rates of 718.73, 907.08, 626.69, and 532.50 per

²² As Wilhelm Deist notes, “At the end of 1917 there were still 612,000 men at the disposal of the OHL in the home country” which Germany's military commanders drew on to reach numerical—though not functional—manpower parity with the Allies in March 1918: Deist, “Military Collapse,” 190. Thus, the 67,647 German soldiers who died in combat in March and April 1918 represented a loss of 11.05% of those 612,000 men.

²³ May and September 1915 were similar, with combat death rates of 458.78 and 479.04 per 100,000, respectively. In all these cases prior to 1918, however, it is essential to remember that these are general combat death rates for all fronts, and thus imperfectly reflect the loss rates of individual fronts and battles. Thus, in the case of the Somme in July 1916, the German Army lost 30,432 soldiers: 23,628 in the West, 6,804 in the East. However, the *Sanitätsbericht* only breaks down the size of the Army (*Sollstärke* and *Iststärke*) by Field and Replacement Army membership, not front, making it unclear what the actual loss rate on the Somme itself was that month. In any event, what is clear is that it would be considerably below the March 1918 loss rate, even with the Western Front accounting for over 96% of the combat deaths that July.

100,000, respectively. Notably, however, the only other month when Germany's combat death rate exceeded 500 soldiers per 100,000 was April 1918, when it reached 537.86. And as with the 1918 statistics more generally, the comparable *overall* rate masked the particular thanatological geography at work behind the figures. For while the combat death rates for November 1914 and April 1918 differ by only one percent, the 1918 figure functionally accounted for only a single front, while the actual combat deaths of November 1914 were divided over multiple fronts, with the East accounting for nearly 30% of those losses (Figure 4). For the first time in the war, mass death—and the threat of it—was concentrated in a single geographical location.²⁴

Significantly, the authors of the *Sanitätsbericht* were explicit in their discussion of the Offensive's lethality and its effects on the Army. They devoted three full pages to discussion and breakdown of the losses incurred during Operation Michael alone, one of only seven battles to receive such a detailed statistical analysis:²⁵

The 17th, 2nd, and 18th Armies participated in the Great Battle in France (21 March to 6 April 1918). From 21 March 1918 until the end of the month, the three Armies fought combat engagements daily. Thus the losses due to wounds and death [*Verlust an Verwundeten und Gefallenen*] in these last ten days of March were extraordinarily high (Overview 50 and 51). In the first ten days of the battle (21 March to 31 March 1918) the Armies lost about 1/7 of their strength, individual Corps of the 17th Army over 1/5 and individual divisions of this Army almost 1/3. During this time, only a few soldiers were

²⁴ Notably, this was a direct thanatological consequence of Ludendorff's strategic decision-making and offensive orientation, one which would prove integral to the defeat and ultimate collapse of Imperial Germany. As Deist summarized, the pre-Michael "concentration of military resources on the Western Front meant denuding the secondary fronts in the East, South-East, and South. This weakening enabled the Allies in the late summer to seize the initiative on these fronts as well, so that it was here that the descent into defeat of the Central Powers showed its first conclusive results." Deist, "Military Collapse," 190.

²⁵ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 57-60; for the full run of specific battle-loss breakdowns: 36-61. That same section also includes more detailed breakdowns from specific units for the war's early months, as well as the *Medical Report's* only (limited) data from after 31 July 1918, though both are marked by time and place (e.g. "Verluste bei der 7., 2., 3., 5., und 17. Armee auf dem Westlichen Kriegsschauplatz während der Zeit vom 21. Mai bis 10. Oktober 1918 nach den Truppenkrankenrapporten") not by battle (e.g. "Verluste bei den Armeen auf dem Westlichen Kriegsschauplatz vom 21. März bis 10. April 1918 (Große Schlacht in Frankreich) nach den Truppenkrankenrapporten."

able to return to the troops as ‘fit-for-service’ [*nur wenige Soldaten wieder dienstfähig*] and the losses due to gas were low.²⁶

The authors themselves thus recognized these loss figures as both 1) directly relating to the conduct of the war and the outcome of the battle, hence the significance of the losses from wounds and death; and 2) being “extraordinary” (*außergewöhnlich*) in a literal statistical sense compared with previous combat engagements, even the ‘Great Battles’ of Verdun and the Somme.

The two statistical overviews cited within the text then spelled out those losses in cold quantitative detail. The first covered “Losses in the Armies on the Western Front from 21 March until 10 April 1918 (Great Battle in France)”—Overview 50. From the perspective of the OHL, the losses to the army were truly catastrophic. The 17th Army, for instance, began Operation Michael on 21 March with 478,235 men. Of these, 9,717 fell ill, 52,356 were wounded, and 17,368 were killed and missing (*Gefallen und Vermißte*), for a total manpower loss of 79,441, or 16.6% of the 17th Army’s manpower—all in the first ten days of the battle. Over that same period, however, only 5,243 soldiers returned to the unit “fit for service” (*Dienstfähig geworden bei der Truppe*), meaning the 17th Army was only able to ‘recover’ (if that is even the appropriate word in this context) 6.6% of its lost strength, which amounted to only 1.1% of the unit’s original strength at the start of the battle.²⁷

The second dove deeper into “Losses in the 17th, 2nd, and 18th Armies due to death, missing [sic] and suicide during the Great Battle in France in the first ten days of March from 21

²⁶ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 59. “An der Großen Schlacht in Frankreich (21. März bis 6. April 1918) waren beteiligt die 17., 2. und 18. Armee. Von 21. März 1918 bis zum Monatsende kämpften die drei Armeen täglich. Dadurch sind die Verluste an Verwundeten und Gefallenen in diesem letzten Tagzehnt des März so außerordentlich hoch (Übersicht 50 und 51). Die Armeen verloren im ersten Tagzehnt des Kampfes (21. März bis 31. März 1918) etwa 1/7 ihres Bestandes, einzelne Korps der 17. Armee über 1/5 und einzelne Divisionen dieser Armee fast 1/3. Bei der Truppe wurden in dieser Zeit nur wenige Soldaten wieder dienstfähig, die Verluste durch Gaskrankungen waren gering.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

until 31 March 1918”—Overview 51. Notably, while it is an exceedingly minor point within the sub-section (to say nothing of the *Medical Report* as a whole), the Overview did acknowledge four suicides as occurring in the midst of the battle: one in the 17th, one in the 2nd, and two in the 18th.²⁸ While these are of course exceedingly small numbers, it remains noteworthy that these four suicides amounted to over twelve percent of the thirty-three Field Army suicides the *Medical Report* recorded for March 1918. Particularly with the return to the war of movement during this period, even this is a surprisingly high figure, given the ease with which suicidal soldiers could simply expose themselves to fire during combat and be counted as one of the ‘fallen’ thereby—perhaps the shadow vanguard’s earliest and most subtle pre-emergent sign.²⁹

More importantly from the Army’s perspective, however, were the losses to officers. Over a third were killed during the first ten days of Operation Michael, which was truly exceptional even during a war which had seen disproportionately high losses of officers from its earliest weeks.³⁰ Strikingly, however, this dovetailed with another development, one which was equally worrisome for the Army: the scale of enlisted men going missing. “In Overview 51, one can see the extraordinarily high number of fallen officers, which was over twice as high as for enlisted men,” the authors of the *Sanitätsbericht* noted, “while for the missing the relationship was reversed, to an increasing extent, as only a few officers fell into enemy hands.”³¹ Together, these concurrent developments during the final ten days of March formed their own pre-emergent signal of the growing behavioral chasm between sacrifice and survival, and thus also of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁹ This was a recurrent factor hindering the reliability of military suicide statistics throughout the war: Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 13.

³⁰ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 59. This also pertained to officers’ suicides and attempts: Matthew Hershey, “The Suicidal ‘Spirit of 1914’: Self-Destruction, National Sacrifice, and the Spontaneous Mobilization in Germany,” *Central European History* Vol. 56, No. 4 (2023): 560-561.

³¹ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 59. “In der Übersicht 51 erkennt man die außerordentlich hohe Zahl der gefallenen Offiziere, die über doppelt so als bei der Mannschaften, während bei den Vermißten das Verhältnis umgekehrt in erhöhtem Maße war, indem nur wenige Offiziere in Feindeshand gerieten.”

the shrinking *conceptual* distance between sacrifice and suicide—of the former’s on-going collapse into the latter. More than that, they illustrated the extent to which that fissure laid over pre-existing social and hierarchical divisions within both the military and German society more broadly, and the specific ways the thanatological consequences of the third OHL’s offensive strategy were already reshaping the Army during Germany’s final gasps of optimism.

But perhaps the most striking quantitative sign of the necessarily changed—and still changing—nature and character of the Army came not from any of the specific loss statistics, but simply from the charted fluctuations in the Army’s actual size, or *Iststärke* (Figure 14).³² In February 1918, 7,219,503 men were serving in the German Army: 5,233,915 in the Field Army, 1,985,588 in the Replacement. Immediately in March, the figure dropped by 132,279, followed by a further drop of 267,815 in April. This meant that the Army contracted by over 400,000 men—over five percent of its actual strength that February—during just the first two Operations of the *Kaiserschlacht*. This was unprecedented. The Army had experienced nothing but manpower growth for the first twenty-four months of the war, only shrinking for the first time in July 1916, when the combined effects of the Somme, Verdun, and the Brusilov Offensive made themselves quantitatively felt. But even then, the contraction was ‘only’ 204,900 men, a drop of 2.89 percent. Indeed, of the forty-eight months for which the *Sanitätsbericht* reported *Iststärke* data, only fourteen saw a contraction in the overall actual size of the Army from the preceding month. The other seventy percent of the time, the Army was expanding. Finally, of those fourteen months of manpower diminution, five—fully thirty-five percent—came between

³² The German Army maintained a distinction between “supposed strength” (*Sollstärke*)—which denoted the potential size of the Army at a given moment in terms of eligible service members—and “actual strength” (*Iststärke*), which denoted the number of men serving at that moment, both throughout the *Sanitätsbericht* in particular and the Army’s surviving documents more generally. The numbers themselves are monthly averages of the size of the army. Since, of course, the Army’s actual size was literally fluctuating every day, as men were killed, wounded, captured, went missing, or fell ill, or, conversely, convalesced and returned to service, the monthly average remains the most quantitatively and chronologically precise measure of the German Army as a whole.

January and July 1918. A chronological concentration of manpower loss dovetailed directly with the continued spatial concentration of that remaining manpower on a single front.

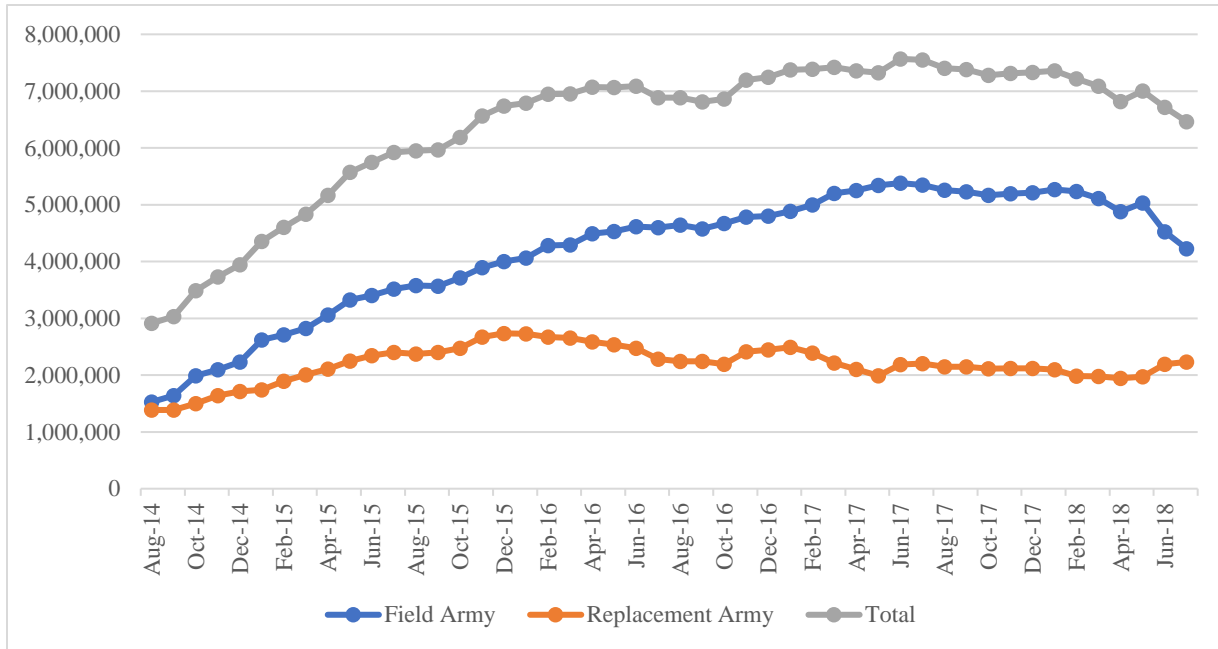


Figure 14: German Army Actual Strength (Iststärke), August 1914-July 1918 (Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. III: Die Krankbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld- und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1934): 5*-8*)

And as with its suicides that May, these manpower losses came disproportionately from the Field Army—from Germany’s combat soldiers. From February to April 1918, the *Besatzungsheer* contracted by 43,391 soldiers—unsurprising, given the incredibly high loss rates at the front and consequent need for replacements. Over that same period, however, the Field Army shrank by 356,703 men, a decrease of 6.82 percent. From that point forward, the Replacement Army continued to grow, expanding by 13.24 percent to 2,232,750 men in July. The Field Army, by contrast, after re-expanding to 5,032,012 soldiers in May, decreasing by 505,554 men in June and 299,257 in July—the two largest contractions in the Field Army’s actual size of the entire war. Ultimately, between February and July 1918, the German Field Army shrank by fully 1,006,714 men. This was nearly forty-two percent higher than the total

manpower losses from all of the Army's contractions prior to 1918 *combined*—and this was only in the *Feldheer*, and all before the German Army's 'black day' at Amiens on 8 August.³³

These considerations return one to the central misnomer of 'the' German Army, and the further massive, if unacknowledged, structural changes resulting from the third OHL's strategic decisions and the military failures they wrought that spring and summer. The staggering losses of March and April fundamentally reshaped the demographics of the army once again, particularly the Field Army, and with it, their socio-political conditions of possibility. The loss of officers was particularly catastrophic from the perspective of the High Command, both politically and militarily. As the staff officer Colonel von Thær noted in his diary on 18 April 1918, the "moral influence on the troops has transitioned to the company and platoon-commanders," that is, to men like Ernst Jünger, who both held command and went into combat with their troops—officers whose duties could not allow them to become socially disconnected from the men under their command to anywhere near the extent of the General Staffs. This was why, in Thær's view, such influence had not rested with the "commanding Generals" since at least 1916: that was the last time any of them "knew" their units "down to the company and battery commanders."³⁴

And it was *precisely* these mid-level, comparatively trusted officers—the group within the officer corps most immune to the *Offizierhaß* ("hatred of officers") rampant throughout the army³⁵—who died in such disproportionate numbers in March and April. Worse still, those losses were concentrated in the best-trained and best-equipped "mobile divisions," on whom the success of both the Operation and the broader Offensive depended. As Deist notes, "in [the

³³ Building from the data in Figure 14, one sees that the months of shrinkage in the Army prior to 1918 amounted to a total contraction of 657,576 men: 276,230 from June to September 1916, 93,615 from March to May 1917, and 287,731 from June to October 1917.

³⁴ Thær, *Generalstabdienst*, 182. "Die Kommandierenden Generale kannten ihre Divisionen, Regimenter [sic], Bataillone vielfach bis zu den Kompanie- und BatterieChefs, selbst noch im Sommer 1916. Das ist alles vorbei. Der moralische Einfluß auf die Truppe ist auf die Kompanie- und Truppführer übergegangen."

³⁵ Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, 124-133.

mobile divisions] OHL had deliberately concentrated the offensive power of the field army,” and thus their decimation that spring simultaneously decimated the Field Army’s remaining offensive power.³⁶ Indeed, this was exactly why Thaer lamented to his diary that same day that “many divisions, which have just participated in the big March Offensive, have once again lost their best officers and men in this battle [Georgette] and now are necessarily refilled with personnel who, unfortunately, are always worth less and less.”³⁷

5.3 An Army Erodes

Perhaps no single case encapsulated the human consequences of these dynamics and their development over the course of that summer more than that of a 47-year-old *Landsturmmann* who hanged himself in a forest near his home in Ueschersdorf on 22 July 1918.³⁸ A married police officer in civilian life, the *Landsturmmann* was conscripted on 22 February 1918, in the immediate lead up to and preparation for Operation Michael. During this time, “[h]e showed no peculiarities [*Auffälligkeiten*] or traces of mental disturbance [*Geistesstörung*] and never gave any cause for complaint or objection” his battalion’s 12 September 1918 report to the Landau Landsturm Inspectorate (*K. Landsturm-Inspektion Landau*) noted.³⁹ Consequently, after completing his training, he served in an unspecified capacity with the First Company of this

³⁶ Deist, “Military Collapse,” 197.

³⁷ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 182. “[V]iele Divisionen, die eben erst die große März-Offensive mitgemacht haben, bei diesem nochmals ihre besten Offiziere und Leute verloren haben und nun notdürftig aufgefüllt sind mit Personal, das leider immer weniger wert wird. Ich muß sagen, daß mir vielfach die Truppe wenig gefällt, die jetzt hier eingesetzt wurde.”

³⁸ BHStA IV M Kr 10914, report labelled “Germersheim, 12.9.1918 | No 11109 | Landst.Jnf.Ers.Batl. Germersheim. (II B 14) | An | die K.Landsturm-Jnspektion Landau.” The following details come from that report, unless otherwise noted.

³⁹ *Ibid.* “Er zeigte keinerlei Auffälligkeiten oder Spuren von Geistesstörung und gab nie Anlass zur Klage oder Beanstandung.”

same regiment until he was sent home to Ueschersdorf on leave from 16 to 23 June. He did not return to his unit on 23 June as instructed, however. Instead, the company received a telegram from the mayor of Ueschersdorf, informing them that the *Landsturmmann* had contracted influenza and that a medical report would follow shortly. A Dr. Beck, the *Landsturmmann*'s attending physician, wrote to the company on 26 June that the soldier "is sick with a feverish influenza and had to return to Königsberg Station in Franken immediately after departing for his garrison. [He] is bedridden and consequently cannot be moved [*transportunfähig*]." ⁴⁰ In response, the company sent a telegram to Beck asking that the *Landsturmmann* "be sent back to the company when he can move again; otherwise, to the nearest military hospital." ⁴¹

Yet even after two weeks, the *Landsturmmann* was still out of military circulation. The company received a letter from Dr. Beck "on 8 or 9 July" explaining the situation, which was quoted in full in the report:

I am sharing with the Bavarian Landsturm Infantry Replacement Battalion, Germersheim, that I transferred [the *Landsturmmann*] to the nearest garrison hospital, namely Bamberg, on 5 July 1918, after he could be moved again [*transportfähig*] on 4 July 1918, because he could not make the journey to Germersheim without danger. Given his weakness, I accompanied him. His son Georg was home on leave. He was not accepted in Bamberg and was issued the enclosed ticket for the express train. But since he was feeling strongly faint, which appeared natural given the entire course of his illness, he returned to his home [*Heimat*] at 4 PM and started my treatment again. [The *Landsturmmann*] is still very miserable. I see him being at the disposal of his unit again, provided he remain in my care until he is fully transferable [*völligen Transportsfähigkeit*] to Germersheim, since, with the current weather, poor traffic conditions, and condition of the patient, the journey would be an adverse influence on [the *Landsturmmann*'s] general state. ⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid. "Der Landsturmmann [R], Ueschersdorf, ist an fieberhafter Jnfluenza erkrankt und musste am 22.6., bereits nach Abfahrt in seine Garnison, in Station Königsberg in Franken zurückkehren. [Er] ist bettlägerig und z.Zt. transportunfähig. Hofheim Ufr. 26.6.18 Dr. Beck, behandelnder Arzt."

⁴¹ Ibid. "[Er], wenn transportfähig hierher, anderenfalls in nächste Militärlazarett."

⁴² Ibid. "Bair.Landst.Jnf.Ers.Batl. Germersheim teilte ich mit, dass ich den Landstm. Johann Rosenberger Ueschersdorf, nachdem am 4.7.18 Transportfähigkeit eingetreten war, am 5.7.18 nach Bamberg d.h. dem nächsten Garnisonslazarett überwiesen habe, da er die Reise nach Germersheim ohne Gefahr nicht antreten konnte. Mit Rücksicht auf seine Schwäche begleitete ihn sein. Sohn Georg Rosenberger, bair.Minenbaon 9.1.Kp.z.Zt. in Urlaub. Jn Bamberg wurde er nicht aufgenommen und wurde ihm der beiliegende Fahrschein für Schnellzugbenutzung ausgestellt. Da sich aber bei ihm stärkeres Ohnmachtsgefühl einstellte, was ja bei dem ganzen Krankheitsverlauf

After another day with no word from either Beck or the *Landsturmmann*, the company sent a further telegram inquiring “if and when” the man would be transportable. They received a reply from Beck on 12 July, stating that the *Landsturmmann* “is not yet able to be moved, but can probably return next week.”⁴³

At this point, the report noted, the soldier’s leave had ended more than three weeks prior, but he still had not returned to his unit.⁴⁴ Worse still, from the army’s perspective, the *Landsturmmann* “was not under any military or military-medical control” during this time.⁴⁵ These circumstances led the soldier’s company to speculate that the man was engaging in a form of quasi-malingering, something, notably, which the author of the 12 September report found to be increasingly common: “There are more and more cases of people with more or less serious illnesses seeking to use them to extend their allowed time at home [*Aufenthalt in der Heimat*]. Here as well, the case gives the impression that [the *Landsturmmann*], despite the attestations of the private doctor, could have returned to the garrison with a bit of effort [*bei etwas gutem Willen*], where he then could have reported sick.”⁴⁶ Indeed, in this particular instance, the report’s author believed the soldier did not so much feign his illness as use it as an excuse to remain out of military circulation for as long as possible:

When he felt ill in Königsberg on 22 June and returned home, he could probably just as easily have gone to the next station, where there was a military hospital, and then

natürlich erscheint, kehrte er Mittags 4 Uhr wieder in seine Heimat zurück und tritt neuerdings in meine Behandlung. Rosenberger ist noch sehr elend. Ich sehe weiterer Verfügung seines Truppenteils bis zu seiner völligen Transportfähigkeit nach Germersheim in meiner weiteren Behandlung, da das Reisen bei dem gegenwärtigen Wetter, den schlechten Verkehrsverhältnissen und dem Zustande des Patienten seinen Allgemeinzustand ungünstig beeinflusst.”

⁴³ Ibid. “[Er] noch nicht transportfähig, kann voraussichtlich im Laufe nächster Woche einrücken.”

⁴⁴ Ibid. “[Er] war nun schon länger als 3 Wochen über seinen Urlaub hinaus von der Kompagnie fern.”

⁴⁵ Ibid. “Er stand unter keinerlei militärischer oder militärärztlicher Kontrolle.”

⁴⁶ Ibid. “Er mehren sich die Fälle, dass Leute bei mehr oder minder ernstlichen Erkrankungen im Urlaub möglichst land den Aufenthalt in der Heimat auszudehnen suchen. Auch hier machte die Sache den Eindruck, als ob Rosenberger trotz der privatärztlichen Zeugnisse bei etwas gutem Willen in die Garnison hätte zurückkehren, wo er sich hätte ja krank melden können.”

reported sick there. On 5 July, he was found to be capable of traveling [*reisefähig*], from a military-medical perspective, by his attending physician, and then also by the military hospital in Bamberg. He therefore had no right to simply return to his home. At a minimum, he would have needed to make an attempt at the journey and report. If that was not possible, then he could have reported sick to the commander of the train station, who then could have arranged for him to be brought to a military hospital.⁴⁷

Despite the evidence being circumstantial, the man's unit considered this possibility of quasi-malingering to be likely enough that they treated it as a certainty. On 16 July, his company sent a telegram to the Gendarmerie Main Station at Hofheim (*Gendarmerie-Hauptstation Hofheim*) instructing them that "[the *Landsturmmann*] is, *when transportable*, to be handed over to the nearest military authorities."⁴⁸ The Gendarmerie replied three days later, informing the company that the soldier "will be transportable on 22 July and will travel with another comrade."⁴⁹ He never completed the journey, however. Instead, "[o]n 23 July [his company] received a telegram stating that [the *Landsturmmann*] had hanged himself." The military-judicial authorities immediately performed an autopsy, in line with military regulations, and concluded that this man "undoubtedly committed suicide by hanging himself with a rope from a small tree in the Ueschersdorf community forest, and that no fault lies with a third party."⁵⁰

The remainder of the report then speculated on the reasons for the *Landsturmmann's* suicide, although the author admitted at the outset that "the motive for the act cannot be precisely

⁴⁷ Ibid. "Als er am 22.6.von Königsberg, weil er sich krank fühlte, nach Hause zurückkehrte, konnte er wahrscheinlich ebenso gut bis zur nächsten Station fahren, wo sich ein Militärlazarett befand, und sich dort krank melden. Am 5.7. war er von seinem behandelnden Arzt und dann auch im Lazarett in Bamberg militärärztlich für reisefähig befunden worden. Er hatte daraufhin kein Recht einfach in seine Heimat zurückzukehren. Zum wenigsten hätte er den Versuch machen müssen die Reise anzutreten. Wäre es ihm nicht möglich gewesen, dann hätte er sich bei der Bahnhofskommandantur krank melden können, welche sodann seine Unterbringung ins Lazarett veranlasst hätte."

⁴⁸ Ibid. Emphasis original. "[Er] ist, wenn transportfähig, an die nächste Militärbehörde abzuliefern."

⁴⁹ Ibid. "[Er] erst am 22. Juli transportfähig, reist mit einem Kameraden dorthin."

⁵⁰ Ibid. "Am 23. Juli kam dann die telegr.Nachricht, dass [er] sich erhängt habe [sic]. Es wurde sofort telegr.gerichtliche Leichenschau angeordnet. Aus dem Protokoll des Amtsgerichtes Hofheim ist ersichtlich, dass [er] zweifellos Selbstmord durch Erhängen mit einem Strick an einem Baumstämmchen in Gemeindewalde Ueschersdorf begangen hat und dass irgend ein Verschulden einer dritten Person nicht vorliegt." The reporting regulations are analyzed in detail in chapter 2.

determined.”⁵¹ The report advanced three main hypotheses. The first was that the man suffered from an “excessive feeling of honor” (*übertriebenes Ehrgefühl*), which had been offended to the point of self-destruction by his experiences in mid-July. He apparently told a “main instructor” (*Hauptlehrer*) that he was going to be imprisoned in Hofheim, despite the fact that “he was always honest and didn’t know why such a humiliation [*Schmach*] had been done to him. He was treated very dishonorably in prison.”⁵² That ‘dishonor’ apparently consisted of a single incident: “The bailiff snapped at him: ‘Who is that guy [*Kerl*]?’ He was so upset about this that he couldn’t reply. He would have actually wanted to say [sic]: ‘The king has soldiers, but no guys [*Kerl*].’”⁵³ The report does not make clear, however, who the main instructor was, who the Bailiff was, where and when this incident took place, or indeed, if it took place at all beyond the realm of psychological fantasy.⁵⁴

The rest of the section then chronicled the events taking place in the week leading up to the *Landsturmann*’s suicide, using details provided by the Gendarmerie’s report to the Gernersheim court. Strikingly, however, this summary immediately confused, and in places outright contradicted, the ‘violation of honor’ hypothesis initially put forward by the battalion. After receiving the company’s telegram on 16 July, the Hofheim Gendarmerie sent its company sergeant (*Gendarmerie-Vizewachtmeister*) to the *Landsturmann*’s home to check on his

⁵¹ Ibid. “Ueber die Motive zur Tat konnte Genaues nicht ermittelt werden.”

⁵² Ibid. “Er hat sich nämlich dem hauptlehrer [G] gegenüber geäußert, er sei ins Gefängnis nach Hofheim transportiert worden. Er sei stets ehrlich gewesen und wise nicht, warum ihm eine solche Schmach angetan worden sei.”

⁵³ Ibid. “Der Gerichtsdienner habe [sic] ihn angefahren: ‘Wer ist der Kerl.’ Hierüber habe [sic] er sich so aufgeregt, dass er kein Antwort gegen konnte. Er hätte eigentlich sagen wollen: ‘Der König hat Soldaten, aber keine Kerl.’”

⁵⁴ In the original German, the man is described as a “Hauptlehrer,” meaning “Main Teacher/Instructor.” It is unclear if this referred to the man’s civilian occupation, however, or whether the report’s author meant to indicate him as the *Landsturmann*’s main military instructor. Second, this “incident” taking place chiefly as psychodrama is implicitly indicated by the use of the subjunctive mood (“Er hätte eigentlich sagen wollen”), indicating that his “reply” was a fantasy, not a historical fact of that particular conversation. These are only two of several ambiguities in this section of the report which make it exceptionally difficult to assess the veracity of these specific claims relating to the *Landsturmann*’s “honor” and its potential violation.

medical status and, if possible, bring him back into military circulation. The sergeant visited the soldier's home on 19 July, where he found him up and out of bed:

He [the sergeant] asked him whether he was already healthy enough and could walk to Hofheim; if he couldn't walk, then he needed to be brought to the nearest military authorities in Schweinfurt. [The *Landsturmmann*] replied: 'I can walk to Hofheim. I already wanted to go on Monday (17 July 1918). I therefore consent, I will go with you.' He then actually did come along. Out of consideration [for the *Landsturmmann*], the Gendarme accompanied him in civilian clothes. [The *Landsturmmann*'s] fourteen-year-old son went along as well and carried his father's pack. [The sergeant] brought [the *Landsturmmann*] to the Hofheim District Office, as per his instructions. Here, he could not immediately continue further, which is why the District Office tried to quarter him in the military hospital in Hofheim until the train left for Schweinfurt at 5:15 PM and, because that was not possible, instructed the gendarme to take him to the district court prison until then. The gendarme carried out the order and made it especially clear to the jailer's wife, who probably took [the *Landsturmmann*] from him, that [the *Landsturmmann*] was not to be treated directly as a prisoner and would go on to Schweinfurt that same afternoon, and drew attention to this in the presence of [the *Landsturmmann*'s] 14-year-old son.

Probably due to the instigation of Dr. Beck, however, the District Office did not arrange for him to be brought to Schweinfurt, but rather released him once again to Ueschersdorf, from whence he was supposed to return to Germersheim with *Landsturmmann* [S] of third company on 22 July 1918.⁵⁵

It was only at this point that the man hanged himself in the forest.

⁵⁵ Ibid. "Nach dem hierüber von Gouvernementsgericht Germersheim eingeforderten Gendarmeriebericht soll sich die Sache folgendermassen zugetragen haben: Auf das diess. Telegramm v. 16.7.18 beauftragte die Gendarmerie-Hauptstation Hofheim den Gendarmerie-Vizewachtmeister [K] in Burgpreppach [R] nach Eintritt der Transportfähigkeit bei der nächsten Militärbehörde einzuliefern. [K] begab sich am 19.7.18 ins die Wohnung des [R] und fand ihn dort aussert Bett. Er fragte ihn, ob er schon gesund sei und nach Hofheim laufen könnte; wenn er laufen könne, müsse er ihn zur nächsten Militärbehörde nach Schweinfurt bringen. [R] erwiderte: 'Jch kann nach Hofheim laufen, ich wollte sogar am Montag (17.7.18) schon einrücken. Jch bin damit einverstanden, ich gehe mit.' Er ging dann auch tatsächlich mit, der Gendarm begleitete ihn aus Rücksicht in Zivilkleidung, auch der 14 jährige Sohn des [R] ging mit und trug seinem Vater den Rucksack. [K] brachte den Rosenberger seiner Instruktion gemäss zum Bezirks-Amt Hofheim. Hier konnte er nicht gleich weiterfahren, weshalb das Bezirks-Amt ihn bis zum Abgang des Zuges nach Schweinfurt Nachm. 5 Uhr 15 im Militärhilslazarett in Hofheim unterzubringen suchte und, weil das nicht möglich war, den Gendarm beauftragte, ihn solange ins Amtsgerichtsgefängnis zu bringen. Der Gendarm führte den Auftrag aus und machte noch besonders die Frau des Gefängniswärters, welche ihm wahrscheinlich den [R] abnahm, im Beisein des 14 jährigen Karl [R., der Sohn des Landsturmanns] darauf aufmerksam, dass R. nicht direkt als Gefangener behandelt werden solle, er käme noch am gleichen Nachm. nach Schweinfurt.

Wahrscheinlich auf Veranlassung des Arztes Dr. Beck hin veranlasste aber das Bezirks-amt nicht seine Verbringung nach Schweinfurt, sondern entliess ihn wieder nach Ueschersdorf, von wo aus er am 22.7.18 mit dem Landstm. [S] der diess. 3. Kompagnie nach Germersheim zurückkehren sollte."

The introduction of these additional facts then led the author to the second of his three hypotheses on the soldier's motive for self-destruction: that the *Landsturmmann* "committed suicide due to fear of punishment for overstaying leave [*Urlaubsüberschreitung*]."⁵⁶ Unlike the confusing and possibly apocryphal anecdote about the affront to the man's honor, the *Landsturmmann* directly "expressed this fear to the gendarme, who tried to convince him it was unfounded."⁵⁷ Despite this being quite literally all the report had to say of this second possible motive however, it was this conclusion which the Bavarian War Ministry eventually entered into its statistical index of suicides and attempts for 1918. The "reason" for the suicide was listed only as "fear of punishment" (*Furcht vor Strafe*), with no further explanation.⁵⁸

Third and finally, the author of the 12 September report hypothesized that a mental collapse brought on by depression may have caused the *Landsturmann*'s suicide: "It is very probable that he acted in a fit of mental disturbance [*er in einem Anfall von Geistesstörung gehandelt hat*]. One of his sons fell at the front. He was said to be very close with him. He was said to already be somewhat melancholy and pensive [*teifsinnig*] during his entire leave. If he received an order from the mayor, he often did not execute it himself, but rather his relatives [*Angehörigen*] or the mayor himself had to carry them out."⁵⁹ Significantly, this is the only hypothesis the author described as "probable." While he noted that it was "possible"

⁵⁶ Ibid. "Es ist auch nicht die Möglichkeit ausgeschlossen, dass R. die Tat aus Furcht vor Strafe wegen Urlaubsüberschreitung begangen hat."

⁵⁷ Ibid. "Er hat dem Gendarm gegenüber diese Furcht ausgesprochen und dieser hat sie ihm als unbegründet auszureden versucht."

⁵⁸ BHStA IV M Kr 10915 "Verzeichnis über Selbstentleibungen im K. B. Heere für das Jahr 1918," "I. Unteroffiziere u. Gemeine, A. Selbstentleibungen," Lf Nr. 45. "Furcht vor Strafe."

⁵⁹ BHStA IV M Kr 10914, report labelled "Germersheim, 12.9.1918 | No 11109 | Landst.Jnf.Ers.Batl. Germersheim. (II B 14) | An | die K.Landsturm-Inspektion Landau." "Sehr wahrscheinlich ist, dass er in einem Anfall von Geistesstörung gehandelt hat. Ein Sohn von ihm ist im Felde gefallen. Dies soll ihm sehr nahe gegangen sein. Er soll während seines ganzen Urlaubes schon etwas tiefsinnig gewesen sein. Wenn er irgend einen Auftrag vom Bürgermeister bekommen habe, habe er ihn sehr oft nicht ausgeführt sondern seine Angehörigen oder den Bürgermeister selbst habe ihn ausführen müssen."

(*möglicherweise*) an exaggerated feeling of honor had been the motive for the *Landsturmmann*'s suicide, and could “not exclude the possibility” (*nicht die Möglichkeit ausgeschlossen*) that fear of punishment played a role in the man's decision to lay hands on himself, it was, by contrast, “very probable” (*sehr wahrscheinlich*) that this soldier “acted in a fit of mental disturbance.”

This subtle shift in diction had two significant implications. First, it was a clear if indirect indication of which of the three stated motives the battalion considered most likely: namely, the third and final one. Second, the explanation for that probability indexed a degree of recognition on the part of the author of the human, socio-emotional costs of the war. Indeed, the report implicitly argued that the multilayered traumas resulting from the participation of the *Landsturmmann* and his family in the conflict were the most likely cause of the man's suicide, though the author did not put the argument in those terms. Instead, he couched this final hypothesis in the stock language of personal “mental disturbance,” *Geistesstörung*, as had been the case with many other suicides both in Bavaria and beyond. Somewhat uniquely, however, the author of this report actually implied the source of that disturbance—namely, the death of one of his sons in combat and his consequent depression—instead of leaving it as an unspoken and thus eternally unanswered—and unanswerable—question.

For all the comparative weight the author gave the mental collapse hypothesis in what was meant to be the final report (*Schlussbericht*) on the case, however, this probability was immediately disregarded by both the Landau Landsturm Inspectorate and the Deputy General Command of the Bavarian Second Army Corps. Having received the battalion's report on 13 September, the Inspectorate wrote to the Deputy General Command two days later summarizing what they considered to be the most significant findings: “[The *Landsturmmann*] undoubtedly committed suicide. There is no criminally responsible third party. The motive for the act cannot

be precisely determined. One can assume that the deceased committed suicide either out of shame about the fact that he was detained [*festgenommen*] by the Gendarmerie and during his short stay in Hofheim was housed in the prison of the Judicial Office, or due to fear of being punished for overstaying his leave.”⁶⁰ The brief made no mention of the mental collapse hypothesis or its relative likelihood at all.

The Deputy General Command received this summary, along with the 12 September report, the next day, but was apparently confused by the findings. They wrote to the battalion on 20 September:

Expand the report in the following directions:

- 1.) Why did the Bamberg Military Hospital refuse to take [the *Landsturmmann*]?
- 2.) It appears a statement from the attending physician Dr. Beck on the matter is warranted; in particular, it may shed light on the mental state of [the *Landsturmmann*].
- 3.) [The *Landsturmmann*] remarked that the jailer apparently asked him when he was admitted to the prison there ‘Who is that guy?’, despite the fact that the gendarme pointed out to him [the jailer] that he [the *Landsturmmann*] was not to be treated as a prisoner.
- 4.) Why did [the *Landsturmmann*] not return to [his unit], but rather back to Üschersdorf [sic]?⁶¹

Given the combined number of both explicit and implicit ambiguities in the 12 September report, such inquiries are unsurprising. Indeed, the battalion’s ‘final report’ proved to be anything but.

Over the course of the next two months, there were no fewer than seven subsequent exchanges

⁶⁰ BHStA IV M Kr 10914, report labelled “Zum K. stv. Gen. Kdo.,” signed “Landau, 15. September 1918.” “Ldst. [R] hat zweifelsohne [sic] Selbstmord begangen. Ein strafbares Verschulden einer dritten Person liegt nicht vor. Die Motive zur Tat lassen sich nicht genau feststellen. Es ist anzunehmen, daß der Verstorbene Selbstmord verübt hat entweder aus Scham darüber daß er von der Gendarmerie festgenommen und während des kurzen Aufenthalts in Hofheim im Amtsgerichtsgefängnis untergebracht wurde, oder aus Furcht wegen Urlaubsüberschreitung bestraft zu werden.”

⁶¹ BHStA IV M Kr 10914, report labelled “G. K. a. d. K. zum Landst. Inf. Ers. Batl. Germersheim,” dated “Würzburg, 20.9.1918.” “Für Ergänzung des Berichtes nach folgenden richtungen: 1.) Warum lehnte das Garnison Lazarett Bamberg die Aufnahme des [R] ab. 2.) Es erscheint eine Äußerung des Stabsarztes Dr. Beck zur Sache veranlaßt; insbesondere dürfte dieser über die geistige Verfassung des R. Aufschluß geben können. 3.) [R] hat sich dahin geäußert, der Gefängniswärter des A.=G. [H] habe [sic] bei seiner Aufnahme ins dortige Gefängnis ihn – und zwar trotzdem er vom Gendarmen darauf aufmerksam gemacht worden war, daß es sich um keinen Gefangenen handle – angescheinen [sic]: ‘Wer ist der Kerl.’ 4.) Warum kam [R] nach seiner Ankunft in Hofheim am 19.7.18 nicht zum II.E/9.I.R., sondern noch Üschersdorf zurück.”

between the relevant units in Germersheim, Hofheim, and Bamberg, the first three in late September, the final four in the first half of November.⁶² But what was most significant was that, as with the Inspectorate's summary, this missive, too, made no mention of *Geistesstörung* or the battalion's opinion that it was the most likely motive for the soldier's suicide. Already by 20 September, then, the probability that a depression sparked by his son's death at the front had been the critical impetus for this soldier to end his own life had already been functionally excised from the historical record.

Ultimately though, the Bavarian War Ministry had the final say, as the concluding stop on any report's journey to the archive and the official state record. They added their final conclusion to the report on 28 December 1918. Notably, it restated, almost word for word, the original summary provided by the Landau Landsturm Inspectorate on 13 September, despite the two months of subsequent inquiries: "On 22 July 1918 [the *Landsturmann*] hanged himself in his hometown. It was suicide and there was no criminally responsible third party. The deceased, who was reportedly deeply melancholy, committed suicide either out of shame because he was detained [*festgenommen*] by the Gendarmerie and, during his brief stay in Hofheim, was housed in the Judicial Office Prison [*amtsger.=Gefängnis*], or out of fear that he would be punished for overstaying his leave."⁶³ Once "fear of punishment" was entered into the 1918 statistical index as the "reason" for his suicide, the epistemological excision was once again complete.

⁶² Like the initial follow-ups by the Landau Landsturm Inspectorate and the Deputy General Command of the Second Bavarian Army Corps, all of these subsequent exchanges are handwritten additions to the original, typed report, added as the literal paper circulated across the different units over the course of that autumn. The dates of the follow-ups are as follows: Germersheim, 23 Sept 1918; Bamberg, 25 Sept 1918; Hofheim, 29 Aug 1918 [sic]; Hofheim, 5 Nov 1918; Bamberg, 7 Nov 1918; Germersheim, 9 Nov 1918, Hofheim, 16 Nov 1918.

⁶³ BHStA IV M Kr 10914, report labelled "u No. 312929 | M. M. | Mchn., 28.12.18. | Betr. Selbstmord." "Am 22.7.18 hat sich der Ldstm. [R] d. Ldstm.Inf.Ers.Btl. Germersheim in seinem Heitmatsorte [sic] erhängt. | Es liegt Selbstmord vor u. kein Strafbares Verschulden eines dritten. | Der Verstorbene, der tiefsinnig gewesen sein soll, hat Selbstmord verübt entweder aus Scham, weil er von der Gendarmerie festgenommen u. während des Kurzen Aufenthalts in Hofheim im Amtsger.=Gefängnis untergebracht wurde, oder aus Furcht, wegen Urlaubsbeschreitung

In the context of 1918, however, what was most significant about the case was not the fact that the *Kaiserreich*'s archival grain continued to function, even after the state it functioned to serve had ceased to exist. Rather, it was what the combined particulars of the suicide itself *and* the course of its subsequent reporting revealed about the changed—and *still changing*—nature of 'the' German Army in the aftermath of Operation Georgette.

First, the *Landsturmmann* put a human face on the decreasing military "worth" of German soldiers noted by Thær. Given the report's length and messy construction, as well as the numerous ambiguous details it contains, it can be easy to overlook what was arguably the most important *military* fact about the case: this man was never able to contribute to the war effort as a soldier. Instead, he was conscripted, trained, and by all indications stationed in Bavaria until he was sent home on leave, at which point he left military circulation—a truancy made permanent and irrevocable by his suicide. He spent less than four months under military command, his time obeying the army lasting only from 22 February until he went home on leave on 16 June. From that point on, while still a soldier on paper, the man had functionally exited the army. At the very least, he was certainly no longer "valuable" in any sense meant by an officer like Thær, if he'd ever had such "value" to begin with.

As was the case with the *ungedienter Landsturmmann* who shot himself in his barracks that February, this soldier's very conscription was part of a larger attempt by the OHL to create 'more' combat soldiers out of Germany's ever-dwindling pool of surviving servicemen and eligible military candidates, in the ultimately futile attempt to match the numerical strength of

[sic] bestraft zu werde." One of the unresolved ambiguities in this case centers around the German word "festnehmen," usually translated as "to arrest" but which can also mean "to detain." While usually this is a difference without much practical distinction, in this case, the 'offended honor' hypothesis hinged primarily on whether the man was actually arrested and then spent the afternoon in the Gendarmerie's prison, or whether he was simply detained and held there because other spaces with access to the necessary medical staff were unavailable. Given that those details were never clarified, despite all the follow up inquires, I have chosen to translate "festgenommen" here as "detained" rather than "arrested."

the Entente forces in 1918. That futility, along with its attendant social and emotional costs, found microcosmic expression in the example of this single family. While the report does not make clear how many children the *Landsturmmann* ultimately had, the author does explicitly mention three sons: Georg, who was apparently home on leave at the same time as his father, and therefore also appears to have been a soldier (mentioned in the letter from Dr. Beck received by the man's company on 8 or 9 July); a fourteen-year-old who carried his father's pack to Hofheim, (and, notably, would be eligible for the draft in four years); and, finally, an unnamed son who died in combat at some unspecified point earlier in the war (though the man's depression during his leave suggests the death may have been recent). It thus appears that at least three men from this family served, with one dying in combat prior to the father's suicide (and possibly even his conscription). But this then begs the question: could the father function as a 'replacement' for his dead son, even in military terms? Would his conscription have compensated for the loss of the younger man at all, in terms of military potential, even if he hadn't hanged himself that July?

In the event, conscripting this *Landsturmmann* was ostensibly a *cost* to the state, not just in training a man who would never use it, but in all the subsequent expenditures of time, energy, and resources—financial, material, human—necessary to, first, try and bring him back under military control; then for conducting the investigations necessary to construct the eventual report on his suicide in line with state and military regulations. Indeed, the *Landsturmmann* was not even able to fulfill the function of freeing up a *Bestatzungsheermann* for frontline service. Instead, his family's service history distilled the intergenerational thanatological chronology through which the army was being hollowed out as a direct result of the OHL's offensive strategic orientation and consequent policies.

The *Landsturmmann*'s fallen son was likely in his early-to-mid twenties, and thus probably came from the critical age cohort most important to the army and the generational group which made up most of the all-important mobile divisions, newly decimated during Michael and Georgette.⁶⁴ After his death, however, it was probable that the man drafted to 'replace' him (at least in terms of *Iststärke*) would either be someone like his father—an older reservist deep(er) into middle age—or younger brother, had the war continued long enough: a new recruit who had only just come of military age, especially if he died in the last two years of the war.

The same was even more true of the *Landsturmmann* himself after his suicide. The pool of men to potentially replace him increasingly came from only one of these two generational extremes—and this was 'only' for a *Besatzungsheermann* in the oldest of the German reserves; the replacement of a support soldier. These were decidedly *not* the soldiers the high command and larger officer corps desperately needed to replace if Germany were to have any chance of delaying—let alone actually preventing—military defeat. Thaeer's lament, after all, was not about the "worth" of aged *Besatzungsheer* troops like the *Landsturmmann*, but the military value of the replacements sent to the frontline divisions who had been carrying on the bulk of the fighting since March. Indeed, after the failure of Georgette, the OHL was only able to refill the army's ranks with paper tigers of a certain literal kind, creating a paper *Iststärke*. Men like the *Landsturmmann* became soldiers quantitatively, but never qualitatively. In fact, in a case like the

⁶⁴ The average age at which German men married prior to the war was around twenty-nine, while for women it was just under twenty-six. Given the number of children explicitly mentioned in the report on his suicide and the one son for whom the report listed an age (fourteen), it seems probable that the *Landsturmmann*'s other two sons were, at the absolute youngest, seventeen and eighteen in 1918, especially given the statistical unlikelihood of them being twins (the minimum age to join the army was seventeen). It thus seems more likely that at least one and possibly both were in their early-to-mid twenties, assuming the *Landsturmmann* married slightly younger than the average and began fathering children in his late twenties or early thirties. See: Ute Daniel, *The War from Within: German Working-Class Women in the First World War*, trans. Margaret Ries (New York: Berg, 1997): 134.

Landsturmmann's, they became active drains on resources rather than supplements to the army's diminishing strength.

This was true in more indirect ways as well. It is not simply coincidental that the Alsatian conscript Dominik Richert, who had begun his mandatory service in the Prussian Army in 1913 and went on to fight on both the western and eastern fronts during the war, deserted to the French on the night on 23-24 July 1918⁶⁵—the day after the *Landsturmmann* hanged himself in the Ueschersdorf community forest, and only five days after Germany permanently lost the offensive initiative with the start of the successful Allied counter-offensive on 18 July.⁶⁶ A week prior to his defection, Richert's platoon received a new commander, who in the event proved integral to his escape from the army:

Now I was curious to get to know the new Platoon Leader and went down the stair which led to the dugout [...]. The new sergeant, *a lad under the age of twenty*, was sitting at a little table. I unhurriedly swung off my knapsack, undid my webbing, and said that I was here to replace NCO Peters. I saw straight away that my relaxed approach did not suit this young lad. He would have preferred me to stand to attention and report to him formally [...]. 'I am not used to this,' replied the sergeant. 'If you are in charge you must always be treated with respect!' 'If you take this approach, you would soon be hated by your subordinates instead of being respected [...]. 'Have you never been at the front before?' I asked. 'No,' he said, 'I am a one-year volunteer and until now I have always been in a garrison. I have to spend six weeks at the Front and then return for officer training. Afterwards I will be a lieutenant.' 'Do you see, sergeant, in my opinion that shows the biggest injustice in the German army, that one year's service is sufficient to become a lieutenant, even if the person concerned almost doesn't have a clue about military things. In other words: if a father has the money to enable his son to study, the way is opened to him to become an officer after only one year's service or less. On the other hand, the door is closed to other soldiers who have served actively and have been in the field for four years. They can't become officers, even though they would be better suited to lead a company than all the one-year volunteers put together.' The young sergeant had to agree with me but I could see that he felt offended.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Dominik Richert, *The Kaiser's Reluctant Conscript: My experiences in the War 1914-1918*, trans. David Carrick Sutherland (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012 [1989]).

⁶⁶ David Stevenson, *With Our Backs to the Wall: Victory and Defeat in 1918* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011): 112-169, especially 113-125.

⁶⁷ Richert, *Reluctant Conscript*, 244-245. Emphasis added.

According to his memoir, penned on his return to Alsace in 1919, he was far from the only soldier to feel this way. He met N.C.O. Peters *en route* to the new platoon leader: ““One more thing, Nicki,’ [Peters] continued. ‘We have got a revolting blighter as a platoon leader. He’s sitting down in the dugout. I have already had a real go at him. Do not let this greenhorn step on your toes!’”⁶⁸

Indeed, this was the very officer Richert fooled to enable the defection of himself and two of his fellows on the night of the 23rd. Feigning a theft of machine gun ammunition by a nearby infantry unit, Richert used his own sergeant’s sense for institutional anticipation against him to provide the excuse for the men to venture out into the trenches, and then on to no-man’s-land and the French lines: “[The Sergeant] flared up. ‘What are we going to do now? It would not be a good idea to report this to the company commander.’ I said: ‘Sergeant, I know a means which does not involve reporting it to the Company Commander. We will just go and steal the missing boxes from the light machine guns.’ ‘Would you manage to do that?’ asked the Sergeant. ‘It should be simple, but I will need some help. I cannot carry four boxes on my own.’ ‘Good, take someone else with you.’”⁶⁹

Here, once again, was an inadequate ‘replacement’ draining the army of resources; in this case, three experienced soldiers. And as with the Bavarian *Landsturmmann*’s conscription and suicide, this drainage of military manpower resulted directly from the decisions and policies of the OHL. Richert’s division was decimated during the Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux from 24-25 April. He recounted: “Sixty-five percent of the overall number [of the Division] had been lost. Of the thirty-two officers of my Regiment who had taken part in the attack, twenty-two had fallen. Of the forty-four men serving in the Mortar Company of my Battalion only four were left,

⁶⁸ Ibid., 244.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 247.

while the rest were killed or wounded. My Company had been relatively lucky, as more than half the contingent returned safely.”⁷⁰ Thus, the very *need* for the replacement platoon commander whose combination of youthful inexperience, arrogance, and incompetence enabled Richert’s desertion was a *direct result* of Ludendorff and the OHL’s unwillingness to abandon the offensive.

And this of course was on top of the fact that the very policies of promotion Richert criticized were a long-standing source of grievance and tension within the army more broadly.⁷¹ One-year volunteers were particularly loathed, especially by older soldiers like Richert, and especially by that point in the war. “Due to the heavy losses of the active officer corps in the first months of the war, one-yearers who had been promoted to reserve officers were the immediate superiors of many soldiers in the Germany army” as Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann note. “Their lack of accomplishment due to the reduced period of training and their lack of empathy due to their middle-class background was the subject of intense criticism from private soldiers.”⁷² The specific injustice Richert identified in the youthful and inexperienced sergeant’s fast-track to a command, therefore, was so significant because it simultaneously illustrated 1) the structural disconnect between enlisted men and commissioned officers; 2) the specific ways that disconnect dovetailed with the political and class hierarchies of the *Kaiserreich* to create the sense and resentment of a separate officer “caste;” and 3) the ultimate *behavioral* effects it had

⁷⁰ Ibid., 215.

⁷¹ For instance, the rank of “Sergeant-lieutenant” (Feldwebelleutnant) specifically designated “NCOs who performed the duties of officers without the certificate” that gave them a commission. “Thus, they still ranked below the lowest rank of reserve officer and were only second-class officers, a fact that contributed to the widespread perception that the officer corps was a separate caste and endowed with unjustified privileges by the monarchical state,” as Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann describe. Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds. *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010): 186. Strikingly, at the time of his defection, Richert was up for a promotion to senior NCO, which would have left him even below Segreant-Lieutenant: Richert, *Reluctant Conscript*, 243-244.

⁷² Ulrich and Ziemann, *German Soldiers*, 185.

on the army that spring and summer. Namely, those overlapping and compounding structural disconnects and the sense of resentment they engendered combined with the on-going mass death and attendant decrease in one's chances for personal survival to produce a politically and militarily significant change in Richert's behavior: his desertion to the French army. Indeed, according to Richert, it was when he was walking through the trenches on the way to meet his new platoon leader that all of these factors came together and he decided to desert: "I looked over to the French position and was overcome with a powerful longing. If I could just get over there then I would be saved, I would be in touch with home, and would certainly be able to see my relatives again soon! At this moment, I resolved that if it were possible, I would desert."⁷³

Whatever the peculiarities of Alsatian soldiers' experiences in general or Richert's in particular, his desertion ironically highlighted many of the same factors in the on-going dissolution of the German army as the suicide of the Bavarian *Landsturmmann*.⁷⁴ Even beyond the facts of his successful desertion and the attendant loss of manpower is what his mode of escape illustrated about the broader condition of the army. Most significantly, his platoon commander *believed his lie* about the stolen machine gun ammunition, the critical factor enabling Richert's desertion attempt. It was apparently perfectly plausible that by late July 1918,

⁷³ Richert, *Reluctant Conscript*, 244. As Ziemann discusses, practical considerations about topography and opportunity—being assigned to a forward trench, say—were the most important determinants of both the timing and scale of desertions: Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 93-94. For his full discussion: 93-120.

⁷⁴ As Alan Kramer details, the German army generally treated soldiers from Alsace-Lorraine as "enemies of the Reich" (*Reichsfeinde*), that is, as (at least potentially) unreliable soldiers who were assumed to harbor loyalties with France. Within this larger exceptional milieu, Richert was a particularly free-thinking and outspokenly critical soldier, as his direct criticisms of one-yearers to his new platoon commander illustrate (in one example amongst many from his memoir). See: Alan Kramer, "Wackes at war: Alsace-Lorraine and the failure of the German national mobilization, 1914-1918," in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 105-121. After Bernd Ulrich's discovery of Richert's memoir in the Federal Military Archive in the late 1980s, a small sub-literature about Richert developed as part of the larger push for a "military history from below" (*Militärsgeschichte von unten*), especially prominent in German military-historical literature from the late 1980s through the 1990s. See, e.g. Wolfram Wette, "Die unheroischen Kriegerinnerungen des Eläßer Bauern Dominik Richert aus den Jahren 1914-1918," in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärsgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Munich: Piper, 1992): 127-135.

the army was so incapable of both adequately supplying its frontline troops and maintaining discipline that those soldiers were actually stealing necessary ammunition *from one another*. New soldiers of decreasing military “worth” were “refilling” an army whose commanders at all levels were increasingly losing control of their remaining troops—all while supplies of all kinds continued to dwindle both at the front and at home.

Against this backdrop, the second significant aspect of the *Landsturmmann*’s suicide comes into sharper focus: the ubiquity of this soldier’s particular form of quasi-malingering and what it indicated about the state of the army’s authority. According to the *Sanitätsbericht*, the first wave of the 1918 flu pandemic hit the western army at the end of June and peaked during the first ten days of July, before case numbers began to decrease at the end of the month, ending the wave.⁷⁵ “The first epidemic,” according to the authors, “was widely described as mild [*leichtverlaufend*]:”

Even though the sudden intrusion of a difficult clinical picture at the beginning of the illness amongst the troops and their leadership caused considerable alarm, when entire units were being seized all at once, the short and mild course of the illness soon restored calm. There was no essential [*wesentlichen*] weakening of fighting strength. For the entire Field Army in the months of June and July 1918, of the 538,052 cases of flu amongst the troops, 80,409 = 14.9% [sic] were admitted to military hospitals.⁷⁶

Ironically, however, it was this very ‘mildness’ which produced such ripe conditions for *Drückebergerei*, the German catch-all term for “shirking,” but which in practice covered

⁷⁵ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 121.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 121-123. “Die erste Epidemie (Ende Juni bis Ende Juli 1918) wird überall als leichtverlaufend beschrieben. Wenn auch das jähe Einbrechen des schweren Krankheitsbildes bei Beginn der Krankheit bei Truppe und ihre Führung zunächst erheblich beunruhigte, als ganze Truppenteile mit einem Male ergriffen wurden, so führte doch der kurze und leichte Verlauf bald wieder Beruhigung herbei [sic]. Zu einer wesentlichen Schwächung der Kampfkraft kam es nicht. Vom ganzen Feldheer sind in den Monaten Juni und Juli 1918 vom 538 052 Grippekranken der Truppe 80 409 = 14,9% in die Lazarette aufgenommen worden.”

“anything from finding oneself a cushy job in the rear to outright desertion,” as Scott Stephenson notes.⁷⁷

Indeed, prior to his suicide, the *Landsturmmann* was a quintessential example of the type of shirking this first influenza wave enabled *en masse*. Having contracted the disease at the very start of this wave while he was home on leave, the illness provided the perfect excuse to remain at home without falling afoul of military discipline—at least for a time.⁷⁸ The combination of novelty, ubiquity, and severity meant that very few were willing or able to question decisions which, at a minimum, appeared medically sound, even if they flouted military regulations. As the *Medical Report* later acknowledged, what was so frightening about the first wave was not that it was especially deadly—it wasn’t, with flu killing ‘only’ 625 German soldiers from June to July⁷⁹—but that it was so *infectious* that entire units were falling sick all at once. Even temporary losses on this scale then quite obviously had the potential to severely undermine the army’s remaining fighting strength, already gutted from the losses of Ludendorff’s repeated offensives.

Whatever positive spin the authors of the *Medical Report* tried to put on it, they nonetheless had to acknowledge that when the influenza first emerged amongst the German ranks, it did so in a swift and terrifying fashion. However quickly “calm” returned to the German soldiery and its medical officers, it was preceded by a weeks-long period of anxiety and uncertainty, as the *Sanitätsbericht* implicitly acknowledged. Consequently, erring on the side of

⁷⁷ Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 47.

⁷⁸ The military-medical authorities soon felt they had the general course of the flu charted: “The illness mostly began with chills and a sudden general feeling of sickness. The fever lasted 2 to 3 days, after another 8 to 10 days the illness was overcome.” This meant that an infected soldier should have been out of circulation for no more than two weeks—the precise point at which the *Landsturmmann*’s company began inquiring after him, as well as the moment when the first influenza wave began subsiding. Quotation: *Sanitätsbericht III*, 123. “Die Krankheit begann meist mit Schüttelfrost und plötzlichem allgemeinen Krankheitsgefühl. Das Fieber dauert 2 bis 3 Tage, nach weiteren 8 bis 10 Tagen war die Krankheit überstanden.”

⁷⁹ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 123.

caution when it came to influenza likely appeared as a sound course of action to not only the head of the *Landsturmann*'s company, but to many frontline commanders during those crucial weeks. Who would want to endanger their entire unit by prematurely bringing a known, or even suspected, infected man back to the front? More than that, what commander would want to endanger himself, his unit, and his army's ultimate chances of success in the forthcoming *Friedensturm*—literally “peace storm,” the optimistic designation for Operation Marneschütz-Reims, the fifth and final of Ludendorff's spring offensives—when German resources of all kinds were already stretched so thin? Would bringing back one potential malingerer be worth the restoration of manpower and the reassertion of military authority to the letter, if the illness he might bring back with him could put the entire unit out of commission for days or weeks?

In this context, Dr. Beck's assertion in his letter from 8-9 July that the *Landsturmann* could be “at the disposal of his unit again, provided he remain in [Beck's] care” until he had recovered adequately likely appeared eminently reasonable. Indeed, the soldier's company implicitly and behaviorally acquiesced, allowing the man to stay at home and in Beck's care: they did not contact the Gendarmes until 16 July—a full week later. Small wonder, then, that similar instances appeared to be proliferating, as the author of the 12 September report explicitly acknowledged: “There are *more and more cases* of people with more or less serious illnesses seeking to use them to extend their allowed time at home.”⁸⁰ Indeed, this accorded directly with the findings in the *Handbook of Medical Experiences in the World War (Handbuch der Ärztlichen Erfahrungen im Weltkreise)* on the empirical relations between suicide and self-injury—between irrevocable bodily self-destruction and thanatologically impermanent self-harm.

⁸⁰ BHStA IV M Kr 10914, report labelled “Germersheim, 12.9.1918 | No 11109 | Landst.Inf.Ers.Batl. Germersheim. (II B 14) | An | die K.Landsturm-Inspektion Landau.” Emphasis added. “Er mehren sich die Fälle, dass Leute bei mehr oder minder ernstlichen Erkrankungen im Urlaub möglichst land den Aufenthalt in der Heimat auszudehnen suchen.”

“The less conscientious and duty-conscious [*Der weniger Gewissenhafte und Pflichtbewusste*],” wrote Prof. Dr. Gustav Aschaffenburg, “will seek other ways [besides suicide] out of what, for him, is an unbearable situation, and as such will offer a harmless wound, *a mild illness*, in order to get away from the front.”⁸¹

Thus, not only was this far from an isolated instance of malingering-qua-shirking, at least in the judgement of the report’s author. It was actually part of an expanding trend that was merely being *accelerated* by the onset of the flu pandemic.⁸² Michael and Georgette had already overwhelmed the military-medical system, as the authors of the *Sanitätsbericht* themselves admitted, noting that “the total number of wounded at the end of March and in April 1918 exceeded all previous experience.”⁸³ Notably, this initial overwhelming of the medical services during Michael also produced a mass disappearance of enlisted men: the inverse relationship noted in the *Sanitätsbericht* between “fallen” officers and “missing” *Mannschaften* in the three main fighting armies during the last ten days of March.⁸⁴ But by July, the combination of the exhaustion of the military-medical system and the new masses of casualties from both Blücher-

⁸¹ Prof. Dr. Karl Bonhoeffer, ed. *Handbuch der Ärztlichen Erfahrungen im Weltkriege 1914/1918*, Vol. IV: Geistes- und Nervenkrankheiten (Leipzig: Verlag von Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1934): 125-126. Emphasis added. “Der weniger Gewissenhafte und Pflichtbewusste wird nach anderen Ausweg aus der für ihn unerträglichen Lage suchen, und als solche bieten sich Ausnutzung einer harmlosen Verletzung, einer leichten Erkrankung, um von der Front wegzugehen.”

⁸² A point also made by Deist. As he summarized, the influenza “materially aggravated the situation,” but did not create it. Deist, “Military Collapse,” 201.

⁸³ Heeres-Sanitätsinspektion des Reichswehrministeriums, ed. *Sanitätsbericht über das Deutsche Heer (Deutsches Feld- und Besatzungsheer) im Weltkriege 1914/1918. Vol. II: Die Sanitätsdienst im Gefechts- und Schlachtenverlauf im Weltkriege 1914/1918 und Stichtwortverzeichnis für I., II. und III. Band* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler & Sohn, 1938): 757. “[D]ie Gesamtverwundetenzahl End März und im April 1918 alle bisherigen Erfahrungen überstieg.”

⁸⁴ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 59. While it is an aside to the main analysis here, the conceptual slippage on the part of the *Sanitätsbericht*’s authors between the missing, deserters, and defectors is especially striking in this context: “for the missing the relationship was reversed, to an increasing extent, *as only a few officers fell into enemy hands*” (Ibid., emphasis added). While of course not meant to suggest that the 16,742 men of the 17th, 2nd, and 18th armies that went missing in the last ten days of March had all deserted, it nonetheless implied a functional equivalence between exiting the army and, at a minimum, capture by the enemy. By 1934 at least, an implicit if unconscious official line appeared to be that while the missing of 1918 were not actually—and therefore not morally equivalent to—defectors, in military terms, they may as well have all “fallen into enemy hands.” That is to say, those losses were also perceived as comparably permanent to those men captured by the Allies, and thus can be read as a muted and belated form of recognition of the erosion of legitimacy and command authority within the army.

Yorck and the flu meant that “the care of the walking wounded and slightly sick, whose numbers cannot be exactly determined but certainly ran into the hundreds of thousands, posed insuperable difficulties.” As Deist noted, “[t]his mass streamed back from the front, took little notice of the procedures laid down for their maintenance, and had only one aim: to secure transport back home.”⁸⁵ Personal survival had become a much more absolute behavioral priority.

By this point at the latest, these *Leichtverwundetendrückebeger*, this mass of walking-wounded and slightly sick “shirkers,” constituted a phenomenon so widespread and at least potentially disruptive that the military medical services had to take on policing duties as a new primary task. The *Medical Report* summarized the situation in its characteristic way:

The medical service stations at the front faithfully fulfilled their duty with the fighting troops to the last. The same is true of the medical service in the east. In the rearward area of the western front, on the other hand, alongside the care for the wounded and sick, it was necessary to manage the urge of the war-weary to go home [*dem Drang der Kriegsmüden zur Heimat zu steuern*].

On 1 August 1918, the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army, through the Field Railway Chief in Liège and Sedan, deployed railway surveillance squads in a search of all the trains running to Germany, as well as the hospital, lightly-wounded, and empty trains, which were often being used by shirkers at the time. For his part, the Chief Medical Officer of the Field Army, apart from the strict supervision of the Ambulance Departments and the Medical Transport Commissars, had already conferred with the War Ministry in order to send the ‘one-way riders’ picked up at home [*die in der Heimat aufgegriffen ‘Einzelreisenden’*], back to specific hospitals in the war theater (Kriegslazarett Brüssel, Festungslazarett Namur, Festungslazarett Metz) as soon as their condition allowed, so that from there they could immediately come back to the front and avoid the desired stay in a home hospital and with the replacement troops.

That the lightly-wounded, who had to be held back at the front, were unsatisfied and brought many complaints about their accommodation, bed, wooden wool bag without linen cover, etc., must be conceded [*mußte in Kauf genommen werden*]. Isolated instances were observed wherein soldiers procured, filled out, and attached unauthorized sick notes themselves. On the Belgian border and in Germany it was observed that wounded men had sold their military clothes and boots.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Deist, “Military Collapse,” 201-202.

⁸⁶ *Sanitätsbericht II*, 758. “Die Sanitätsdienststellen an der Front haben bis zuletzt mit der kämpfenden Truppe treu ihre Pflicht erfüllt. Das gleiche trifft für den Sanitätsdienst an der Ostfront zu. Im rückwärtigen Gebiet an der Westfront war es dagegen nötig, neben der Fürsorge für die Verwundeten und Kranken, dem Drang der Kriegsmüden zur Heimt zu steuern.

While once again attempting the most positive gloss available, the authors of the *Medical Report* nonetheless had to “concede” that there was at least a degree of truth and legitimacy to the complaints of the *Leichtverwundeten*—or at the very least, that is was true that there were a great many complaints from a great many of these genuinely dissatisfied men—and painted a truly bleak portrait of the state of military authority on the eve of the army’s “black day.” When one then recalls that the chief of staff of the German 4th Army, stationed in Flanders, General Fritz von Lossberg, had already recommended to Ludendorff on 21 July that the army needed to construct operational defense zones in the rear areas to cut off front from *Heimat* and attempt to dam the tide of shirkers, the true severity of the situation comes into clearer focus.⁸⁷

Indeed, the implicit urgency behind the comment in the 12 September report that while overstaying his leave, the *Landsturmmann* “was not under any military or military-medical control” comes to the fore when viewed in this context.⁸⁸ It essentially said the quiet part out loud: the commanders of ‘the’ German army were losing control of the very men who made up that army, begging the question of what, exactly, they were left ‘in command’ of, and how much

Am 1. August 1918 setzte der Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres durch den Feldeisenbahnchef in Lüttich und Sedan Eisenbahnüberwachungskommandos ein zur Durchsuchung aller nach Deutschland laufenden Züge, auch der Lazarett-, Leichtkranken- und Leerzüge, da gerade diese häufig von Drückbergern benutzt wurden. Der Feldsanitätschef hatte bereits seinerseits, abgesehen von der strengen Aufsicht durch die Krankentransportabteilungen und die Sanitätstransport-Kommissare, mit dem Kriegsministerium verhandelt, um die in der Heimat aufgegriffen ‘Einzelreisenden’, sobald es deren Zustand gestattete, zu bestimmten Lazaretten des Kriegsschauplatzes (Kriegslazarette Brüssel, Festungslazarett Namur, Festungslazarret Metz) zurückzubefördern, damit sie von dort sofort zur Front kommen sollten und ihrem somit erstrebten Aufenthalt im Heimalazarret und beim Ersatztruppenteil entgingen.

Daß die Leichtverwundeten, die an der Front zurückgehalten werden mußten, unzufrieden waren und vielen Klagen über ihre Unterbringung, Bett, Holzwoollsack ohne Wäschebezug usw. vorbrachten, mußte in Kauf genommen werden. Vereinzelt wurde auch beobachtet, daß Soldaten sich vorschriftsmäßige Krankenzettel unerlaubt selbst beschafft, ausgefüllt und angehängt hatten. An der belgischen Grenze und in Deutschland wurde beobachtet, daß Verwundete ihre Militärkleider und -stiefel verkauften.”

⁸⁷ Deist, “Military Collapsee,” 202.

⁸⁸ BHStA IV M Kr 10914, report labelled “Germersheim, 12.9.1918 | No 11109 | Landst.Inf.Ers.Batl. Germersheim. (II B 14) | An | die K.Landsturm-Jnspektion Landau.” “Er stand unter keinerlei militärischer oder militärärztlicher Kontrolle.”

‘command’ they had of ‘it.’ This loosening of military authority was the most consequential condition undergirding and uniting the superficially disparate behaviors exhibited by Germany’s soldiers during these crucial months—the thread linking, *inter alia*, the *Landsturmmann*’s suicide, Richert’s desertion, and the increasingly widespread and varied instances of “shirking”—and the fact which imbued these soldiers’ various actions with their intense *political* significance.

5.4 The Behavioral Politics of Survivalist Pessimism

In February, soldiers’ politicization consisted primarily in a newfound attention to the political sphere and the various ways in which it set the conditions of possibility for both their day-to-day well-being (or lack thereof) and ultimate chances of survival. By May, that politicization had escalated and evolved beyond simple attention to politics to include a crucial piece of inherently anti-state content: increasing numbers of soldiers openly blaming their own leaders—both military and political—for their continuing hardship, suffering, and deprivation. Crucially, however, a behavioral limit remained. While more and more soldiers explicitly saw Ludendorff and the High Command as “*Kriegsverlängerern*” (‘war prolongers’), and thus grew less and less amenable to sacrificing on their orders in repeated and evermore-obviously futile offensives that could in no way bring an end to the war, most were behaviorally willing to stay within the army’s control and submit to their broader authority.

Indeed, it is striking that in his summary of monitored correspondence in the 5th Army from 23 June 1918, the postal surveillance officer noted only that its soldiers were generally “content” (*zufrieden*) with their rations, and had nothing else to say about the content of the

letters.⁸⁹ Even missives excerpted in the report emphasized the same basic points Gottlieb Frank made in May about the state of the war-weary soldiery and their priorities: “I was in church again today; the pastors themselves no longer know what they should preach. The soldiers want to know nothing, only peace and food. The fourth year of war is coming to a close again and still there is no prospect of peace. Many soldiers are sick due to diet. Those of us in the rear area [*Etappe*] do not get nearly as much as those at the front.”⁹⁰ The widespread looting throughout the enemy lines that spring and summer, however, was its own illustration that those at the front, despite their comparatively superior rations, were not faring much better than their *Besatzungsheer* counterparts in terms of either nutrition or loosening discipline.⁹¹

But by July, the *behavioral politics* had clearly changed, in a further escalation that boded exceptionally ill for the monarchical state. Now, increasing numbers of soldiers—as individuals, or with one or two comrades—began actively taking whatever opportunities presented themselves to attempt to escape from military—and therefore also, state—authority, even temporarily, and increase their chances of personal survival thereby.⁹² Indeed, while the apparent

⁸⁹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 23. Juni 1918,” 69. “Die in den letzten Tagen vorgenommene Sonderprüfung der Heerspost aus der V. Armee heraus auf Äußerungen über die Truppenverpflegung ergibt als Resultat, daß die Allgemeinheit mit der Verpflegung, für die der Soldat nach wie vor großes Interesse bekundet, zufrieden ist.”

⁹⁰ Ibid., 70. “War heute wieder einmal in der Kirche; die Pfarrer wissen selber nicht mehr, was sie predigen sollen. Die Soldaten wollen garnichts mehr wissen, nur Frieden und zu essen. Das 4. Kriegsjahr schließt sich wieder und noch ist lange keine Aussicht auf Frieden. Viele Soldaten sind krank wegen der Ernährung, wir in der Etappe bekommen lange nicht soviel wie die von der Front.”

⁹¹ Deist summarized the core points: “For the men the logistical problems caused by the attacks [in March and April] had serious repercussions, since the provision of munitions and especially food was not always sufficiently secure. The drastic result was that in all the attacks plundering of enemy stores occurred, which in some cases, particularly when alcohol was involved, led to ugly scenes. Colonel-General on Einem, the Commander of the 3rd Army, voiced the opinion in early May that the army had degenerate into a ‘gang of thieves’ and added at the end of June: ‘*One* motive for the bravery of our infantry in this attack in the lust for plunder.’ A guards division put forward the suggestion that every battalion should establish a booty platoon, to prevent arbitrary actions while securing the spoils for the battalion in question. This showed the extent to which discipline had become eroded.” Deist, “Military Collapse,” 200. Emphasis original.

⁹² As Deist notes, even if one was caught and punished for that such shirking, the punishment itself ensured one an additional reprieve from lethal danger: “Deliberate absconding from a unit was one method [of shirking], for it earned the culprit a sentence under martial law of two to four months’ prison [sic].” Deist, “Military Collapse,” 201.

intended implication behind the statement in the 12 September report that “[t]here are more and more cases of people with more or less serious illnesses seeking to use them to extend their allowed time at home” hinged on a specific interpretation of the significance of “seeking” (*suchen*)—namely, that while these soldiers *attempted* to shrink their duties via malingering, they were not always successful (and perhaps only rarely), and thus the author, his unit, and his army were still maintaining military authority appropriately—such a framing glossed over the significance of what that mass seeking indicated about the state of the army more generally.⁹³

As an index of the *Heeresallgemeinezustand*, the increasing attempts at malingering-qua-shirking illustrated in no uncertain terms that increasing numbers of soldiers 1) had a *desire* to escape their military duties; and, most importantly 2) a *behavioral willingness* to attempt such an escape if given the opportunity to do so—to risk its very real and potentially lethal consequences. Indeed, it pointed to the same fact as the *Sanitätsbericht*’s statement that the mass of walking-wounded “had to be held back at the front:” whatever mix of consent and coercion had generally undergirded the behavioral support for the war up to this point was now gone, and the latter had to begin compensating for the on-going collapse of the former evermore starkly. As the futility of further sacrifice became increasing undeniable to more and more soldiers, and the concept became evermore synonymous with suicide, it severely eroded what was left of the socio-emotional consensus of support for continuing participation in the war effort.

⁹³ Strikingly, it served the same ethical-epistemological ends as the *Medical Report*’s statement that “[t]here was no essential weakening of fighting strength” because in “the entire Field Army in the months of June and July 1918, of the 538,052 cases of flu amongst the troops, 80,409 = 14.9% [sic] were admitted to military hospitals” (*Sanitätsbericht III*, 121-123). Whatever its challenges, whether from mass illness or “increasing” attempts at malingering, the army had remained a viable instrument of German military victory (defined in the right-wing political terms of the third OHL), or so this implicit narrative ran: a premise integral to the stab-in-the-back mythos.

No single document summarized both the extent, nature, and profundity of these changes more than the 31 August 1918 Postal Surveillance Report for the 5th Army. Indeed, it began by drawing an explicit contrast with its findings from February:

In the mood report [*Stimmungsbericht*] from 24 February of this year, it could be said: ‘Furthermore, the soldier is completely under the spell of the coming events on the Western Front. Almost every letter is concerned with this topic. To be sure, one wishes to spare the people further bloodshed, but also wants to resign oneself to the necessity of confronting the enemy in the last great blow and to stand one’s ground in battle if the longed-for peace will be reached thereby. And so the majority looks forward to the high command’s coming military operation fearlessly and with truly unshakable confidence.’

Since then, there has been a remarkable reversal in this mood. The picture which currently features in the correspondence of the army is a highly unpleasant one. The previously elevated mood, sure of victory, has given way to a powerfully widespread war-weariness, querulousness, and depression [*einer stark verbreiteten Kriegsmüdigkeit, Verdrossenheit und Niedergeschlagenheit*], sentiments which if not generalizable, still must not be disregarded under any circumstances.⁹⁴

Across the Rubicon of Amiens, the optimism of February was unrecognizable. Instead, it had been replaced by a survivalist pessimism that was not only undeniable, but so potentially corrosive to the most basic cohesion and functioning of the army that it “must not be disregarded under any circumstances,” even if, in true institutionally anticipatory fashion, the author still claimed such sentiments might not be fully “generalizable.”

The latent vectors of personal and political collapse, along with the structural orientations and policies that produced and undergirded them, had now become overt and undeniable. It was

⁹⁴ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 31. August 1918,” 75. “Im Stimmungsbericht vom 24. Februar ds. Js. Konnte gesagt werden: ‘Überdies steht der Soldat ganz im Banne der kommenden Ereignisse an der Westfront. Fast jeder Brief beschäftigt sich mit diesem Thema. Man wünscht wohl, daß dem Volke weiteres Blutvergießen erspart bleiben sollte, will sich aber in die Notwendigkeit schicken, dem Feinde zum letzten großen Schlage entgegenzutreten und im Kampfe seinen Mann zu stehen, wenn dadurch der ersehnte Frieden erreicht wird. Und so sieht die Mehr den kommenden militärischen Operationen der Heeresleitung furchtlos und in tatsächlich unerschütterlichen Vertrauen entgegen.’

In dieser Stimmung hat sich seitdem ein bemerkenswerter Umschwung vollzogen. Das Bild, welches sich gegenwärtig in der Heereskorrespondenz darbietet, ist ein höchst unerfreuliches. Die vorher gehobene, siegeszuversichtliche Stimmung hat einer stark verbreiteten Kriegsmüdigkeit, Verdrossenheit und Niedergeschlagenheit weichen müssen, Stimmungen, die wenn auch nicht verallgemeinert, so doch auf keinen Fall unbeachtet gelassen werden dürfen.”

no longer just the shadow vanguard of explicit suicides which primarily embodied and articulated these multifaceted trajectories of disintegration. Rather, the signs were omnipresent and *legible* to both the officer corps and the mass of non-commissioned troops by the late summer. Indeed, the most important, and, from the officer corps' perspective, most disturbing of these signs was the sheer scale of them. The author of the report expressed this growing anxiety in no uncertain terms: "The especially striking passages from the letters, included in accurate transcription, are not even the entire material that was available for the composition of this report. Thousands of letters have passed through the surveillance offices in which what others write in a rough undisguised form is to be read only between the lines."⁹⁵

Reflecting further on this self-censorship and veiling of (nonetheless translucently legible) grievances brought the true dimensions of the problem further to the fore. "Perhaps this is also stirred by the fact that the troops of the 5th Army, as a result of a *continuous* monitoring of their correspondence, learned to be somewhat reserved in their expressions. If this is the case," the author continued, "then the provided statements, which exceed the usual dimension of expression in letters [*über das übliche Maß hinausgehen Briefäußerungen*], must be evaluated more seriously."⁹⁶ The author was well-aware of how quickly and how far the army's legitimacy had eroded, and of what it meant that so many soldiers were, in fact, being so direct in communicating their unvarnished, negative appraisals of their situation to those at home, despite *knowing* that their letters could (and perhaps likely would) be read by their units' various

⁹⁵ Ibid., 75. "Die in getreuer Abschrift beigefügten, besonders markanten Briefstellen sind nicht einmal das ganze Material, welches zur Abfassung dieses Berichtes zur Verfügung gestanden hat. Es laufen Briefe zu tasudenden durch die Überwachungsstellen in denen dasjenige, was andere in grober, unverhüllter Form schreiben, nur zwischen den Zeilen zu lesen ist."

⁹⁶ Ibid., 75-76. Emphasis original. "Vielleicht rührt dieses auch daher, daß die Truppen der 5. Armee infolge einer dauernden [sic] Überwachung ihrer Korrespondenz zu einiger Zurückhaltung in ihren Äußerungen erzogen wird. Ist dieses der Fall, dann müssen aber auch die vorliegenden, über das übliche Maß hinausgehenden Briefäußerungen ernster bewertet werden."

surveillance officers. Indeed, some were doing so consciously, as the report's author noted:

“Incidentally, it is noteworthy that letter-writers, after they have aired their displeasure in the fiercest form, at the end have often added: ‘I know that my correspondence is being monitored, but just let them read it, then at least this way they’ll learn the truth.’”⁹⁷

Thus, the letter excerpts transcribed in the report were the tip of the iceberg both quantitatively and qualitatively.⁹⁸ They not only indexed a scale of discontent much wider than any superficial gloss of soldiers’ correspondence could indicate. They also implied who the soldiery held responsible: their own military leaders who, as at least some enlisted men took pains to ensure, could not plead ignorance about the state of the troops at the front. “The mood is now very poor amongst the troops, I think it must come to an end” one soldier wrote: “Many regiments refuse to take their positions, even the Bavarian troops. It is also no wonder, dear sister, that the war has continued so long. For me as well, life is already over [*mir ist das Leben auch schon über*].”⁹⁹ Another was equally bleak in his appraisal, but more direct about whom he and his comrades held responsible for their suffering: “I believe that the war also must come to an end soon, because the men have already had enough and don’t want anymore. It’s the same everywhere: only the big ones still don’t want peace [*blos die großen wollen noch keinen*

⁹⁷ Ibid., 76. “Bemerkenswert ist übrigens, daß Briefschreiber, nachdem sie in heftigster Form ihrer Mißstimmung Luft gemacht haben, in letzter Zeit häufig den Zusatz machen: ‘Ich weiß, daß meine Korrespondenz überwacht wird, aber laß sie es nur lesen, dann erfahren sie wenigstens auf diesem Wege die Wahrheit.’”

⁹⁸ As Benjamin Ziemann noted in the foreword to the English translation of his first monograph, “[m]any of the quotations from war letters and dairies, written by ordinary peasants and their wives, are crafted in a peculiar style, very often without any punctuation and in blatant breach of the rules of grammar.” While less extreme than those in Ziemann’s study, many of the letters excerpted in this report have a similar quality, often breathlessly constructed in massive run-on sentences, containing spelling errors, etc.. While such breaches of grammar convey a particular sense of ways in which negativity overwhelmed the soldiery, like Ziemann and his translator, Alex Skinner, “[f]or the convenience of the reader and because the specific flavour of the original is almost impossible to convey, these quotations have been translated into grammatically correct English.” Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (New York: Berg, 2007): xiii.

⁹⁹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 31. August 1918,” 81. “Die Stimmung ist jetzt sehr schlecht bei der Truppe, ich denk es muss zum Schluß kommen, viele Regimente weigern auch in stellung zu gehn [sic], überhaupt die Bairische Truppen, es ist auch kein Wunder liebe Schwester den der Krieg dauert zu lange, mir ist das Leben auch schon über.”

Frieden], but they will also have to clean it all up. And it's been enough with the murder [*auch genung mit dem Morden*]. It's already in the fifth year."¹⁰⁰ And a third captured the same survivalist calculus as Dominik Richert (though without himself deserting) and the degree to which such thinking had spread throughout the army: "In one regiment, an entire battalion was snagged. The men can be happy that they don't have anything more to do with this shit. It would be the same for me, if I could successfully come over. But one still struggles to the last moment, even when one doesn't want to."¹⁰¹

In the view of the report's author, despair and disillusionment on such a scale, with their attendant survivalist changes in soldiers' behavior and consequent erosion of military discipline, was a terrifying and truly novel development. "While previously there was talk in letters of an inclination towards defection and being taken prisoner," he noted, "it remained limited to minor cases from which there was no fear of general repercussion. *Now* these expressions have accumulated to a frightening level."¹⁰² Worse still, this captain, at least, recognized that the *Kaiserreich* bore a significant share of the responsibility for the situation: "The especially active enemy propaganda alone cannot be held responsible for the development of such an attitude recently. Also, this attitude did not develop from yesterday to today. Many factors are at work here together, which stem from the length of the war, the present military situation, and perhaps

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 82. "...und ich glaube daß der Krieg auch bald zu Ende geht, denn die Mannschaften haben es auch schon über und wollen nicht mehr es ist über all schon egall, blos die großen wollen noch keinen Frieden aber Sie werden sich auch reinfigen [sic] müssen und es ist ja auch genung mit dem Morden es geht schon in 5te Jahr."

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 89. "Bei einem Regiment wurde ein ganzes Batl. Geschnappt. Die Leute können froh sein, daß sie nichts mehr mit der Scheiße zu thun [sic] haben, mir wäre es auch egal, wenn ich glücklich hinüber käme, aber man wehrt sich doch bis zum letzten Augenblick und wenn man nicht will."

¹⁰² Ibid., 76-77. Emphasis original. "Wenn früher von Neigung zum Überlaufen und in Gefangenschaft geraten in Briefen die Rede war, so blieb dies auf geringe Fälle beschränkt, aus denen eine Rückwirkung auf die Allgemeinheit nicht zu befürchten war. Jetzt sind diese Äußerungen zu einer erschreckenden Höhe angewachsen."

principally the relations with home.”¹⁰³ While he may not have been willing or able to directly acknowledge it, the unspoken institution behind each of those foundational factors—the length of the war, the then-present military situation, and the state of relations with those at home—and thus the entity principally responsible for creating the conditions under which this new pessimist attitude amongst the soldiery sprouted and spread was also so patently obvious as to go without saying: the OHL itself.

This was an especially disturbing prospect given the thanatologically altered demographics of the army, another essential factor in the on-going disintegration of the war effort which this surveillance officer explicitly identified: “We no longer have the youthful soldiers of 1914. The main contingent of army members is now probably middle-aged or older. Countless married men and family fathers are in the army. These people are more serious and—more sensitive!”¹⁰⁴ As had been the case with Thier four months prior, this officer, too, recognized that the army currently being roundly beaten back on all fronts was *literally a different army* from that which had stormed into Belgium and France four years prior. Further, these newer, older soldiers’ “sensitivity” extended beyond the front and their immediate existential context to include a growing knowledge of the deteriorating circumstances at home, communicated through a variety of media: “Now not only things out here affect them: newspapers and letters impart news about some conditions at home, about which the level-

¹⁰³ Ibid., 78. “Wenn früher von Neigung zum Überlaufen und in Gefangenschaft geraten in Briefen die Rede war, so blieb dies auf geringe Fälle beschränkt, aus denen eine Rückwirkung auf die Allgemeinheit nicht zu befürchten war. Jetzt sind diese Äußerungen zu einer erschreckenden Höhe angewachsen. Am Zustandekommen solcher Gesinnung kann die in letzter Zeit besonders rege Propaganda des Feindes an der Front allein nicht schuld sein. Auch ist diese Gesinnung nicht von gestern auf heute entstanden. Es wirken hier wohl mehrere Faktoren zusammen, die in der Länge des Krieges, in der gegenwärtigen militärischen Lage und wohl hauptsächlich in den heimatlichen Verhältnissen begründet sind.”

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 76. “Wir haben jetzt nicht mehr den jugendfrischen Soldaten von 1914. Das Hauptkontingent an Heeresangehörigen stellen jetzt wohl die mittleren und reiferen Lebensjahre. Zahlreiche Verheiratete und Familienväter sind in der Armee. Diese Leute sind ernster und --- empfindlicher!”

headed, cool observer often must shake his head at.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the final clause was perhaps the most damning, as the surveillance officer made his opinion known to his superiors that *even he* thought there was some legitimacy to at least some complaints coming from the home front, even if he expressed that criticism in abstracted general terms.

Notably, however, complaints were coming from everywhere, even from quarters traditionally considered ‘safe’ by the state’s ruling elite. The author reported with particular shock and horror “[t]hat—apart from the southern-German troops—also Rhinelanders, Hanoverians and newly even a Silesian (!) [sic] rail against ‘the Prussians.’” Worse still, this scale of griping (*schimpfen*), and from these soldiers, was “a new phenomenon.” He did attempt to soften the blow by simultaneously noting the “absolute loyalty of the army members from the Polish-speaking regions of Germany” found throughout the letters written in their native tongue. Indeed, he concluded the report on that ostensibly positive note.¹⁰⁶ But as Benjamin Ziemann observes, the fact that so many of these regional groups were united in common griping against “the Prussians” was the far more significant sign, as it illustrated “that the ‘hatred of Prussia’ common among Bavarian soldiers took on a significance which cannot be explained solely by the reactivation of parochial models of identification or the perception of supposed injustices”

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 76-77. “Nun wirken nicht nur die Dinge hier draußen auf sie ein: Zeitungen und Briefe übermitteln ihnen Nachrichten über manche Zustände in der Heimat, über die der besonnene, kühlere Beobachter oft den Kopf schütteln muß.”

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 79. The complete final paragraph of the report, in the original German: “Daß – abgesehen von süddeutschen Truppen – auch Rheinländer, Hannoveraner und neulich sogar ein Schlesier (!) auf den ‘Preuß’ schimpfen, ist eine neue Erscheinung. Hervorzuhaben ist die absolute Loyalität der Heeresangehörigen aus den Polnischen Sprachgebeiten Deutschlands, die in ihrer Muttersprache nach Hause schreiben. Während der ganzen Zeit der Überwachung hat—abgesehen von einzelnen Geringfügigkeiten—kein einziger Brief in polnischer Sprache Anlaß zur Beanstandung gegeben. Kein Brief konnte als besonders markant, und zwar in abträglichem Sinne, zu den Stimmungsberichten Verwendung finden.”

later in the war. Instead, “the reasons why a war which the troops found increasingly pointless was still being fought could be summed up pithily in one concept:” *der Preuß*, ‘the Prussian.’¹⁰⁷

Like ‘sacrifice,’ the very vagueness of ‘the Prussian’ as a concept was a major source of its power. It could function as a catch-all term for those forces—rapidly decreasing in legitimacy as a result—which structured both the quotidian and extraordinary horrors of German soldiers’ wartime lives, without needing to specify any further what those forces consisted of, where they came from (in the causal, not geographic, sense), or what should necessarily be done about them.¹⁰⁸ And like ‘war-prolonger,’ it was a term with inherent political implications, well beyond the standard or ‘traditional’ spheres of party programs and official ideologies, because of the way it identified a *domestic* source of soldiers’ suffering, separate from the *Frontschweine* both literally and metaphorically.

In identifying ‘the Prussians’ as the cause of the war’s continuation that August—an abstraction one level up from those soldiers explicitly describing Ludendorff, personally, as a ‘war-prolonger’ in May—more and more members of the soldiery pointed their fingers at their own leaders as the cause of their on-going suffering not only with evermore vehemence, but now with clearer systemic implications. If Ludendorff himself was held to be the cause of the war’s continuation, this did not inherently implicate the Imperial state or system as a whole. But ‘the

¹⁰⁷ Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914-1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (New York: Berg, 2007): 143.

¹⁰⁸ Ziemann, too, notes the conceptual vagueness of “the Prussian” in (southern) soldiers’ correspondence, though he ultimately interprets the significance of the concept through the frame of party politics, political programs, and ideology rather than political behavior in its broader sense: “As an explanatory framework within which warmongering political interests could be placed, references to ‘The Prussians’ were not associated with a political programme. The focus tended to be Prussians’ flawed character and therefore generally remained vague. However, during the second half of the war an increasing number of soldiers linked this notion with interpretations which generally presented the war as guided by the interests of socially influential groups. This inspired more and more soldiers to accept the anti-war arguments put forward by the Minority Social Democrats and the radical leftists organized in the Spartacus group. The weakening of traditional political loyalties of many combatants was bound up with this development.” *Ibid.*, 144.

Prussian' was not an individual who could be removed from leadership and replaced with someone a critical mass of Germans' considered 'better,' like a First Quartermaster-General or a Kaiser. 'He' was a collective, an aggerate, the rhetorical personification of the 'separate caste' who was continually deciding to throw these men into the meatgrinder in what more and more of them understood to be an inherently futile prolongation of violence.

Indeed, 'he' was not even formally Prussian, but the *political* identification of the 'big ones' (*die Große*) many soldiers held responsible for the continuing violence that summer with the state: a name for the force behind the system repeatedly immersing them in a world of blood and fire, but without any larger goal or object still discernable to the immersed—that is, the force compelling them to continually risk their own self-destruction to kill for the Imperial state absent of some form of sacrificial consensus. To some, the situation had reached a point of tragic absurdity, a state of affairs one soldier attempted to communicate to a loved one at home:

This is a scandal for you now that you won't believe. Germany's last hope will probably come now. On the 20th we had a big medical inspection [*Musterung*]. Everyone passed [*alles war tauglich*]. Those up to 42 years old should go forward: watch out, I too am going to Loos [in northern France], and at the moment now I am doing tolerably well again, nothing is happening. [...] A few comrades already told me: a few days ago, this medical inspection was in a neighboring location, and there was someone there who had been at the front for two years. This same man had been shot through the foot and the lung, but was simply declared 'fit-for-duty' [*Kriegsverwendungsfähig*]. The man concerned allegedly complained, but unfortunately received 'Out! Out!' as an answer nonetheless. And so it goes for us poor devils. If the German people does not take fright soon, well, there are the big ones [*Wenn da das deutsche Volk nicht bald gescheut wird, Na, da sinds [sic] große*]----- We're losing the war this way, what else is this murder for?¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled "A. H. Qu., den 31. August 1918," 80-81. "Das ist Dir ein Skandal jetzt, das glaubst Du gar nicht. Deutschlands letzte Hoffnung wird wohl jetzt dran kommen. Am 20ten haben wir große Musterung alles war tauglich, bis zu 42 Jahren soll nach vorne paß mal auf mich trifft auch das Loos und gerade jetzt ist mir einigermaßen wieder wohl, ist nichts los. Da bin ich schlecht zurecht und jetzt da geht es wieder und dann, ist es ein Generalarzt der untersucht auch so ein Kerl noch, da brauchst Du gar nicht Ernst was sagen. Einige Kamerraden [sic] erzählten schon. Vor einigen Tagen war diese Musterung an einem Nachbarorte, da ist einer gewesen der schon 2 Jahre in der Front war. Derselbe hatte einen Fuß u. Lungenschuß gehabt ganz einfach k. v. also Kriegsverwendungsfähig, der betreffende hatt sich doch beklagen sollen, aber leider als Antwort Rauß! rauß! [sic] bekommen. Also, so gehts uns armen Teufels [sic]. Wenn da das deutsche Volk nicht bald gescheut wird, Na, da sinds [sic] große----- Den Krieg verlieren wir so wie so zu was noch dieses Morden?"

What else indeed, if the death and destruction was so obviously unable to bring about a German victory, at least in the eyes of the soldiers tasked with trying to concretely win that victory through their wielding of the state's violence? The fact that the second anecdote was literal hearsay was a significant part of the point: *these* were the kinds of rumors circulating amongst the troops as the summer of 1918 drew to a close, and the ones they were passing on to those at home as characteristic of the state of affairs at the front. That is to say, they were narratives specifically about the callous murderousness of Germany's military commanders at virtually all levels of the army, narratives that were at a minimum plausible to a great many soldiers, and which they felt reflected conditions the home front had to be informed about—postal monitoring or not.

These kinds of shifts in soldiers' expressed views and observable behavior were so alarming that the report's author took special pains to ensure that his superiors could not ignore them, or at least less easily. He took the unusual step of quoting directly, and at length, from one of the monitored letters within the body of the report itself:

If then the soldier out here still feels himself to be disadvantaged, treated unjustly, or possibly bullied [*schikaniert*], then statements like the following, which are anticipated in the excerpted letters, are not a rarity. A soldier from Infantry Regiment 171 writes: ".....then the great provisioning, then the idiotic bullying, orders sent down from above. Because they don't know how to 'trickle' the guns. If they are relieved from frontline duty and come into rest, then it's exercises the entire day, and how ground down they become, like in the garrison. Then one hears and reads how the people at home are treated. Then there is still the question of our leave as well. Because there are still people going on 20 months without leave, when we're entitled to one every 6 months. Outrageous are the conditions which now prevail in the army and in Germany. An order is, for example, given to us: Anyone who goes from the front to the baggage field-march-ready [*feldmarschmäßig*] and does not have the carrying straps folded under his armpits receives 14 days in the stockade. Anyone who hangs his rifle around his neck to lighten the load and not in the prescribed way like a carbine over the shoulder, will likewise receive 14 days in the stockade. Well, the mood at the front is first class [*Also die Stimmung an der Front ist Ia* [sic]]. When one then still hears as well, how the Fatherland Party only thinks of a peace by force-of-arms? Then they'll receive no more from us

because they treated us so beautifully. They'll do it as long as and until the Frenchman dictates the peace.”¹¹⁰

Given the sardonic tone and biting sarcasm throughout much of this missive, and especially given the soldier's open contempt for the state's authority in virtually all its spheres—particularly the overtly political manifestation of the ‘silent’ military dictatorship and its goals, orientations, and inclinations, the Fatherland Party—articulated through that derision, it is easy to see why such expressions were so disturbing to the commissioned officer class (and why the author of the report highlighted this particular letter for his superiors). Perhaps most disconcerting of all, the *reason* for this soldier's derision was one which could unite Germans across both pre-war and wartime political lines against their present leadership and the state they stood atop. Namely, he blamed that leadership *for losing the war*—and thus also indicted them for failing to deliver the one thing which virtually all Germans wanted: victory. And especially for the soldiers of the German 5th Army, as was the case for soldiers throughout the *Kaiserheer* and for civilians throughout the country, victory, however nebulously and multitudinously defined, was the one sure means of achieving their two primary goals in 1918: ending the war as soon as possible and vindicating the previous sacrifices of themselves and their loved ones; ending the present suffering and making the past suffering *worth something*.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 77. “Wenn dann noch der Soldat hier draußen sich benachteiligt, ungerecht behandelt oder womöglich schikaniert fühlt, dann sind Äußerungen wie die folgende, die dem Anhang vorweggenommen sein mag, keine Seltenheit. Ein Soldat vom I. R. 171 schreibt: ‘.....dann die großartige Verpflegung, dann die blödsinnigen Schikanen, Befehle von oben herab. Da wissen sie nicht, wie sie den Muskoten ‘rieseln [sic] sollen. Werden sie vorne abgelöst und kommen in Ruhe, so ist Exerzieren den ganzen Tag u. wie, da werden sie geschliffen wie in Garnison. Dann hört man und liest man, wie das Volk in der Heimat behandelt wird. Dann auch noch unsere Urlaubsfrage. Da laufen jetzt noch Leute mit 20 Monate ohne Urlaub, alle 6 Monate steht uns zu. Wird so etwas im Reichstage vorgebracht, dann ist es nicht wahr. Himmelschreiend sind jetzt die Zustände die jetzt in der Armee u. in Deutschland herrschen. Ein Befehl ist z. B. bei uns: Wer von der Front zur Bagage geht feldmarschmäßig u. hat die Tragriemen nicht unter Achselklappen bekommt 14 Tage Arrest. Wer sein Gewehr zur Erleichtung um den Hals hängt u. nicht vorschriftsmäßig wie ein Karabiner auf der Schulter bekommt ebenfalls 14 Tage Arrest. Also die Stimmung an der Front ist Ia [sic]. Wenn man dann auch noch hört, wie die Vaterlandspartei nur an einen Frieden mit Waffengewalt denkt? Den [sic] bekommt sie von uns nicht mehr, dazu haben sie uns zu schön behandelt. Die machen solange bis Franzmann den Frieden diktiert.’”

What was so “outrageous” now—and what was pouring evermore fuel on the anti-state fire—was that even after vindication-through-victory was no longer possible in the eyes of a critical mass of enlisted men and a growing number of officers, to say nothing of civilians at home, Germany’s military and political leaders continued to demand more ‘sacrifices’ from the men, in an experientially pointless continuation of their suffering enforced through evermore draconian disciplinary measures.¹¹¹ Indeed, for all the derision and bitterness, it was this ostensibly earnest description which provided the pithiest distillation of the conditions *experienced* by a critical mass of Germans both at the front and at home by that point in the war: “Outrageous are the conditions which now prevail in the army and in Germany.” Indeed, his choice of adjective in the original German, *Himmelschreiend*—meaning “outrageous,” but also “scandalous,” “appalling,” and “glaring”—was especially evocative, and particularly articulative of the socio-emotional matrix of that moment in Germany’s war. Translated literally, it meant simply: “it screams to heaven.”¹¹²

5.5 Suicide and Structure Tests

By the end of August 1918, the despair and hopelessness whose vectors had been so-long manifested in the shadow vanguard of explicit suicides had engulfed a critical mass of the

¹¹¹ Ironically, however, these same disciplinary measures also provided a means of shirking frontline duties, and were thus another avenue through which the army’s own policies created the conditions of possibility for its own dissolution: Deist, “Military Collapse,” 201.

¹¹² From combining the noun *Himmel* (Heaven, sky) and the verb *schreien* (to cry, scream, shout; to bawl), making the most literal translation of the word “Heaven-screaming” or “Heaven-bawling.” Especially in the context of this letter and the historical moment of its composition, it reads most directly as the adjective form of an agonized existential shriek—equally enraged and despairing—in response to an affront so experientially egregious, it demands, in the eyes of the one who experienced it, the attention of ‘god’ itself. Strikingly, something similar is implied in the English “outrage:” an event is “outrageous” to the extent that it prompts external, outward expressions of rage in response.

German army. Indeed, what proved most significant was that the shadow vanguard merely signaled the *onset* of this new pessimism with the spike in *Feldheer* suicides that May, not its zenith. German soldiers did kill themselves in a final quantitative spike that summer, however; a statistical exclamation point on the now-omnipresent despair reigning throughout the armed forces. The Bavarian War Ministry officially recorded 152 suicide attempts within its army during 1918, seventy-seven of which occurred between May and August (Figure 15). This meant that fully 51.6% of the suicide attempts—both ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’—in the Bavarian Army were concentrated in the fourth month span between the end of Operation Georgette and the Allied victory in the Second Battle of the Somme. More than that, the number of attempts increased steadily across those four months, before collapsing again in September. While an average of 12.5 Bavarian soldiers attempted suicide each month from January to April, from May to August, that mean had risen to 19.25—an increase of 54%.—before dropping down to only 6.25 for the final third of the year.

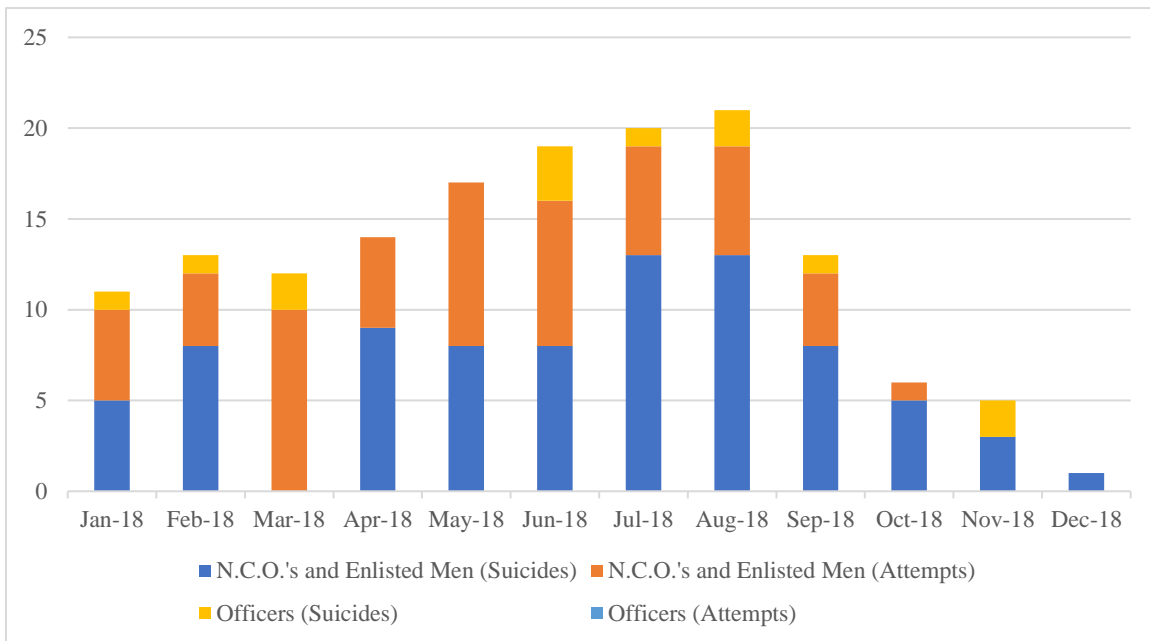


Figure 15: Suicides and Attempts in the Bavarian Army, 1918 (Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Abt. IV Kriegsarchiv, Kriegsministerium 10915)

These suicides not only served as the inverted corollary of the survivalist pessimism increasingly undergirding German soldiers' mass-shirking, a phenomenon which continued to undermine the OHL's command authority throughout the army in various ways over the course of the summer. They also, and somewhat ironically, highlighted the common *political* implication that united these superficially antithetical behaviors: an unwillingness to continue sacrificing on the order of the *Kaiserreich's* leaders and an attendant loss in the state's overall legitimacy in the absence of some larger plausible and socially-agreeable object, however vaguely defined, which that sacrifice was in service of. While the middle-aged *Landsturmmann* ensured his own death by hanging himself in the Ueschersdorf community forest, and Dominik Richert ultimately guaranteed his survival of the war through his successful desertion to the French, both behaviors had this same common denominator. Both chose their behaviors over continued submission to the *Kaiserreich's* authority: death *and* desertion before obedience. How long could any state continued to function, or even exist—especially one *still* engaged in fighting a global war begun over four years prior—when desertion, imprisonment, and in some cases death itself appeared preferable to continued military service for that state?

One limit to this politicization remained, however: all these behaviors were undertaken by individuals or small groups *as individuals or small groups*. They were a mass of *reiterative*, implicitly anti-state actions, plural, not a single *collective* and explicit action against the ruling powers. This is not to diminish their mass scope or importance, which Wilhelm Deist rightly emphasized when he characterized the nature and scale of these behaviors as “the covert strike of soldiers.” Indeed, Deist's summary of the situation in the late summer and early-autumn of 1918 remains apt:

This [hidden strike] movement could express itself only very cautiously and covertly under the condition of command and obedience. [...] [I]t began with the far-reaching loss

of authority by the established powers as a result of glaring ‘abuses’. The movement was furthered by the concentration of large masses in circumstances destructive of ‘existing social, and political ties’. The rules of military discipline kept spontaneous action within narrow bounds. With the army this potential for protest, even more than with the mass movement of workers, showed its strength ‘in immediate criticism, in negative action’ and its weakness ‘in the moment of success’. The hopelessness spreading since April and the horrendous losses provoked an ever more massive refusal, with the negative consequences evident in the ‘spider’s web of fighters’ within an army still comprising millions. The only aim of the refusal, of the covert strike of soldiers, was an end to the war, and it was thus the political answer to the politically motivated actions of Ludendorff and the military leadership.¹¹³

But these remained *individual* political answers to what was ultimately a *collective* political problem.¹¹⁴ Indeed, this is the central shortcoming of Deist’s strike metaphor, as a strike is an inherently *collective* action, conceived and undertaken by individuals acting *together as a collective* towards a common goal, most commonly in literal strikes, an improved labor contract.¹¹⁵ Further, as an assertion and manifestation of collective power, a strike is also necessarily an *explicit* action, and this is what distinguishes it from other kinds of work actions, like slowdowns or sabotages, which often must necessarily remain clandestine if they are to be effective.

German soldiers’ actions over that spring and summer did, however, implicitly bear virtually all the hallmarks of what present-day labor organizers call a pre-strike “structure test,” though even that term is something of a misnomer. As Jane McAlevey notes, “[w]hat sociologists and academics have long labeled *structure* is actually human *agency*. Successful

¹¹³ Deist, “Military Collapse,” 204. In his comparative sketch of aborted self-destruction in 1918 and its realization in 1945, Michael Geyer similarly emphasizes the importance of authority and, especially in the context of the Second World War, terror in explaining German soldiers’ behavior at the end of each war: Michael Geyer, “*Endkampf* 1918 and 1945: German Nationalism, Annihilation, and Self-Destruction,” in *No Man’s Land of Violence: Extreme Wars in the 20th Century*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Bernd Weisbrod (Wallenstein Verlag, 2006): 37-67.

¹¹⁴ Indeed, I would argue that by definition all political problems are collective. The classic political science analysis of collective action problems remains: Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹¹⁵ Anne Lipp has voiced a similar criticism of Deist’s chosen metaphor: Anne Lipp, *Meinunglenkung im Krieg: Kriegserfahrungen deutscher Soldaten und ihre Deutung 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003): 146.

workplace organizers today who still run strikes regularly obsess about the two words *structure test*. But the structure these organizers are testing is simply worker agency: the power of the workers' own organization, built up and developed by [...] organic leaders."¹¹⁶ Significantly, "[w]orkers themselves identify their organic leaders [...]. Rarely, if ever, does a worker accurately announce himself or herself as a leader."¹¹⁷ Indeed, this was the very disconnect in the social understanding of trust and authority between Richert and his soon-to-be deserted platoon leader, and why two other men were willing to desert with Richert—with all the attendant risks—rather than remain subject to their official commander's authority. Most importantly here, however, within this framework, "strikes that cripple production are considered not only possible, but also the highest 'structure test' of whether worker organization in a given facility is at its strongest." They are therefore "the culmination of a series of tests that begin by measuring and assessing *individual* workers' power, and end by testing the power and collective organization of the workers worksite by worksite."¹¹⁸

Applying this metaphorical apparatus to the German Army throughout the spring and summer of 1918 highlights *precisely* the growing awareness of soldiers' own agency vis-à-vis their commanders, and the effects of that awareness on soldiers' behavior in a context where 'sacrifice' and 'suicide' had conceptually collapsed into one another and now amounted to the same outcome in practice, to be avoided as best as possible regardless of the risks: their own deaths following the orders of the OHL in a futile pursuit of an impossible 'victory,' defined in

¹¹⁶ As she goes on to describe, "[g]lobal trade agreements are structure tests: they measure elite and corporate power. When a successful strike shuts down production and leads to a strong contract for the striking workers, academics call that contract a 'structure.' But the real structure involved is the human power, or agency, that won the contract. Good organizers today [...] make sure the workers know that their ability to win a great contract is in direct proportion to their ability—and willingness—to fight the employer: a test of the agency of one against the agency of the other." Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 39. Emphasis original.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 34. Emphasis original.

its specifics by the far-Right of the Imperial political spectrum. And these individual soldiers had already shown through a mass of uncoordinated individual actions *undertaken as individuals* that they could effectively hollow out the offensive capacity of the army. Ludwig Beck's memorable description of the front in late summer, quoted by Deist, as a "spider's web of fighters" was simply an alternative metaphorical apparatus to describe this same phenomenon: a situation where, by early October, one corps of the German Second Army, with a nominal strength of over seven divisions, consisted of only 2,683 men *total*, in an army where *each division* was supposed to consist of around 6,750 men.¹¹⁹

A metaphorical 'strike' as such had clearly not yet begun by the end of August 1918. But these 'workers of war,' to reappropriate and recontextualize an old historiographical metaphor, had already shown the power of their refusal of further sacrifice as individuals now committed, behaviorally, to their own survival above the priorities of the state. But because these actions remained limited to individuals and small groups, the ultimate political potential of the men who actually made up the overwhelming majority of the German army still remained latent, even at this late point in the war, implied in soldiers' increasing understanding of their domestic political *system* as the force structuring the on-going horror of their quotidian conditions, and their desire and willingness to attempt escape from that system when presented with opportunities to do so. Disillusionment was clearly the order of the day for a critical mass of Germany's soldiers as the summer of 1918 turned to autumn. For Germany's highest military and political leaders, however, insulated physically and socially from the human consequences of their decisions, the illusion continued to hold. It was only once the naval high command definitively revealed that

¹¹⁹ On the actual size of the corps, see: Deist, "Military Collapse," 203-204. As Deist notes however, the fragmentary nature of the surviving documentary record from this period makes it difficult to assess how exceptional that degree of hollowness was by that point in the war. On the *Sollstärke* of First World War German Divisions: Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 524.

the state's sacrificial demands equated directly with the demand for the personal self-destruction of its military men in their order for a *collective* suicidal action against the British Navy, understood explicitly as such, that those men began the process of violently and collectively ripping the wool from their elites' eyes, exposing the yawning political void over which those same elites had suspended their state in the process.

Chapter 6
The Rejection of National Suicide:
National Sacrifice as Personal Self-Destruction,
September-November 1918

Only optimists commit suicide, the optimists who can no longer be...optimists. The others, having no reason to live, why should they have any to die?

—Emil Cioran, *All Gall is Divided* (1952)

When Colonel Albrecht von Thaer wrote to his wife on 30 September 1918 that “[t]hese days are suddenly those which will decide the fate of our country and our people [*Volk*] and also our family, perhaps for 100 years, perhaps forever,” he betrayed a deceptively deep understanding of Germany’s condition at that moment in the war, despite, ironically, being stationed at the OHL headquarters in Spa.¹ Only the day before, Ludendorff told a War Council meeting of Germany’s most prominent military and civilian leaders, which included not only himself and Hindenburg, but also Chancellor Georg von Hertling, Foreign Minister (and Admiral) Paul Hintze, and the Kaiser, that the army faced not only imminent defeat, but outright *annihilation*, if civilian leaders did not pursue an immediate armistice.² The War Council accepted the request, setting in motion

¹ Albrecht von Thaer, *Generalstabdienst an der Front und in der O.H.L. aus Briefen und Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1915-1919* (Göttigen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958): 233. “Diese Tage sind augenblicklich solche, die über das Schicksal unseres Landes und unseres Volkes und auch unsere Familie entscheiden werden, vielleicht für 100 Jahre, vielleicht für immer.”

² Michael Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare: The German Debate about a *Levée En Masse* in October 1918,” *Journal of Modern History* Vol. 73, No. 3 (2001): 464-465.

the chain of events which, on the high political level, began the last phase of Germany's war and triggered the proximate collapse of the imperial state.³

Such an admission—indeed, such a *demand*—from the OHL, and from Ludendorff in particular, marked a stark new development in the spread of hopelessness and pessimism up the overlapping chains of military command and socio-political hierarchy, one which was not lost on their fellow officers at the OHL, least of all Thaer. Indeed, Thaer was an uncharacteristically astute observer of Germany's military situation for an officer stationed in Spa, due in large part to his extensive front experience and minimal time with the Supreme Command itself. He was only transferred to the OHL on 24 April 1918.⁴ Already by 1 May, he had given both Hindenburg and Ludendorff his honest appraisal of the military situation, meetings which he recounted in great detail in his diary the next day, as well as in a letter to his wife.⁵ His contrasting interactions with the *großen Kriegsherren* at the beginning of May and the end of September provide as sharp a distillation as any of the delayed disillusionment in the OHL and its most profound consequence: the revelation of the yawning thanatological disconnect between themselves—the most prominent macro-level decision makers in Imperial Germany—and the masses of men under their command, still suffering death and mutilation by the thousands as a result of their orders (not to mention their loved ones at home, suffering their own, often lethal, deprivations and losses).

³ Indeed, while subsequent obfuscations by Ludendorff and other decision-makers have left the precise details of 29 September in dispute, this should not bury the deeper point of “what contemporaries could agree on—that September 29 was the actual beginning of the end,” as Michael Geyer notes: *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴ Isabel V. Hull, “Military Culture, Wilhelm II, and the end of the monarchy in the First World War,” in *The Kaiser: New Research on Wilhelm II's role in Imperial Germany*, eds. Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 256. On his transfer: Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 185-186.

⁵ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 192-198.

6.1 A Tale of Three Meetings

Thaer first reported to Hindenburg on the morning of 1 May, “which I preferred too, because I was also so sure I could convey my thoughts to him.”⁶ Thaer’s impression initially appeared apt, as Hindenburg apparently received him quite warmly. After giving his formal report and exchanging pleasantries, Thaer “went over the situation at the front in our last sector near Armentières and made known my opinion and view, just as I had resolved to do, unprompted and unvarnished, though of course in a humbly proper manner.”⁷ Hindenburg listened “very patiently,” though notably “[t]he matter did *not* appear to be pleasant to him.”⁸ His reply Thaer found both “dignified” (*würdiger*) and “unfounded” (*unzutreffender*):

“Ah, my dear Herr von Thaer, things may have not been entirely pretty for you recently, but now consider what this small sector of the front—twenty kilometers—that you had your eye on means against the full extent of our front, from the channel to the alps. I have daily reports from all over about the tactical situation as well as the mood of the troops [*Stimmung der Truppe*]. The latter is *very* good everywhere, even brilliant almost everywhere; the morale of our enemies, by contrast, is *quite* poor according to our reports. Look, in Russia it also didn’t happen all at once, until the colossus fell over. There we also attacked over and over, now here, now there, and then suddenly that was it. So it will go here in the west too. Look, *we still have, thank god, five months ahead of us before winter comes*, therefore we can still give him a whole slew of offensive thrusts, attacking here, attacking there, attacking here, attacking there” (and at the same time the old Herr made forward thrusting movements with his right and left fists).⁹

⁶ Ibid., 195. “Darum ging ich also nunmehr doch zuerst zum Gen.Feldmarschall, das war mir auch lieber, weil ich so sicher war, daß auch ihm meine Gedanken würde überbreiten können.”

⁷ Ibid. “Er empfing mich sehr gütig, nahm stehend meine Meldung entgegen, und nachdem er mich zum Sitzen aufgefordert und einige persönliche Fragen an mich gerichtet hatte, ging ich über zu der Lage an der Front in unserem letzten Abschnitt bei Armentières und bekannte daraufhin meine Ansicht und Auffassung, so wie ich es mir vorgenommen hatte, ungefragt und ungeschminkt, natürlich in bescheidener richtiger Art.”

⁸ Ibid., 195. Emphasis original. “Der Feldmarschall hörte mir ganz geduldig zu. Angenehm schien ihm die Sache *nicht* zu sein.”

⁹ Ibid., 196. Emphasis original. ““Ach, mein lieber Herr von Thaer, das mag ja gewiß jetzt bei Ihnen da zuletzt nicht so ganz schön gewesen sein, aber bedenken Sie mal, was dieser so kleine Frontabschnitt, zwanzig km, den Sie im Auge hatten, bedeutet gegenüber unserer Frontausdehnung vom Kanal bis zu den Alpen. Ich habe überall täglich Berichte, sowohl über die taktische Lage, wie über Stimmung der Truppe. Die letztere ist allenthalben *sehr* gut, fast überall glänzend sogar; die beim feinde ist dagegen nach unseren Nachrichten *recht* schlecht. Sehn Sie mal, in Rußland ist das auch nicht mit einem Male gegangen, bis der Koloß umfiel. Da haben wir auch immer wieder, bald

This veil of optimistic delusion was precisely what Thaer was determined to penetrate however. Indeed, however “dignified” he told himself Hindenburg’s initial response was, he could not let it go unanswered, even if it meant contradicting a man Thaer spoke of in openly venerative tones:

His powerful personality, the quiet, almost holy quality of his voice is so intensely calming, almost suggestive. I could not let myself be repulsed, however, and tried to object that surely the length of time until the onset of the winter break was *not* an advantage for us. But the old Herr wanted to hear nothing of it and now said something, which he certainly did not mean so viciously, but for myself as a ‘Front-man’ was very severe directly from his mouth: “Ah, my dear Herr von Thaer, your nerves have now certainly become somewhat beleaguered through the recent unpleasant weeks you have behind you. I think the good mood in the General Headquarters will soon straighten you up again.”¹⁰

Hindenburg then concluded the conversation on a positive note, inviting Thaer to breakfast as his guest, as well as to dinner with himself and Ludendorff.¹¹

Thaer, however, left the meeting feeling despondent and broken by the experience:

I was and am quite crestfallen [*geknickt*]. With my description, which was truly not easy for me, I had made no impression at all! And for that I still suffered quite a rebuff from the mouth of this greatest German hero of our time. It is still a bitter pill, when after more than 3 ½ years of service as a Chief of the General Staff, always at the combustion points [*Brennpunkten*] of our western front, it’s said from so high a position that they would like your tattered nerves to quickly improve again *back here*; maybe he’s right in a sense. This then certainly applies to my comrades, officer and enlisted man, who are at the front, and the further forward, the more so. Unfortunately one cannot just send them all for a spell in a nerve-sanitorium. If we could, it would help with a lot, maybe with everything!

hier bald da angegriffen, und auf einmal war’s dann so weit. So wird’s hier im Westen auch gehn. Sehn Sie mal, *wir haben ja, Gott sei Dank, noch fünf Monate vor uns, ehe es Winter wird*, da können wir noch eine ganze Reihe von Offensivstößen ihm geben, hier angreifen, da angreifen, hier angreifen, da angreifen’ (und dabei machte der alte Herr im Takte dazu mit der rechten und linken Faust Stoßbewegungen nach vorne).”

¹⁰ Ibid., 196. Emphasis original. “Seine gewaltige Persönlichkeit, das Ruhige, fast Heilige, seiner Stimme wirkt so stark beruhigend, fast suggerierend. Ich konnte mich aber so nicht abweisen lassen und versuchte, einzuwenden, daß doch wohl die Länge der Zeit bis zum Eintritt der Winterpause für uns *keinen* Vorteil bedeute, aber der alter Herr wollte davon nichts Wissen und sagte nun etwas, was er gewiß nicht so böse meinte, aber für mich als ‘Front-Mann’ gerade aus seinem Munde recht hart war: ‘Na mein lieber Herr von Thaer, Ihre Nerven sind nun gewiß durch die letzten üblen Wochen, die Sie hinter sich haben, etwas mitgenommen worden. Ich denke, an der guten Stimmung im Gr.H.Qu. werden Sie sich nun bald wieder aufrichten.’”

¹¹ Ibid., 196.

Because a confident mood [*zuversichtliche Stimmung*] is still actually the most important thing!¹²

While it may have ultimately been refracted through the cult of *élan*, Thær implicitly understood that ‘the’ army was not ‘an’ abstract instrument: it was a collective of real, still-living, and largely still-suffering, people. More than that, a specific subset of them had been—and continued to be—thrown into combat so often that near-every man in that subset who had managed to survive could apparently benefit from a stint of in-patient mental-health treatment. Further, this was something Hindenburg inadvertently and implicitly acknowledged in his comment on the Colonel’s “nerves,” as Thær noted. But in his attempts to convey this most basic reality to the ostensible head of the Germany Army, Thær ran headlong into the wall of the OHL’s deluded and insular optimism, an optimism he was unable to even scratch, let alone crack, in early May.

He tried again later that day however. This time, he gave his news to Ludendorff:

Now I told him in the meantime that I had already reported to [Hindenburg] this morning and recited what I considered necessary to him. I then presented the same front report again, not too tersely, but rather *in full detail*. He listened to me with complete calm, with eyes closed, his face betraying nothing, but from the increasing animation with which his fingers handled his pen, I noticed increasing inner agitation. When I had finished, he suddenly started up with his quite high voice which he has in such cases and shouted: “What’s all your fuss about? What do you want from me? Should I now make peace à tout prix [sic]?” I answered: “Excellency, I have not said a single word about that. Drawing out all the consequences I must leave to the OHL. It is my duty, and indeed a very painful one, to point out that our troops are not getting better, but always, gradually, worse. The pace varies amongst the different units.”¹³

¹² Ibid., 196. Emphasis original. “Ich war und bin ziemlich geknickt. Mit meiner Schilderung, die mir wahrlich nicht leicht gewesen war, hatte ich gar keinen Eindruck gemacht!! Dafür hatte ich aus dem Munde dieses größten deutschen Helden unserer Zeit doch eine ziemliche Abfuhr erlitten. Es ist doch eine bittere Pille, wenn einem nach über 3 ½ Jahren Dienst als Generalstabschef stets an den Brennpunkten unserer Westfront der Wunsch von so hoher Stelle gesagt wird, daß sich die ramponierten Nerven hier *hinten* bald wieder bessern möchten; vielleicht hat er in gewissem Sinne recht. Das gilt dann freilich für alle meine Kameraden, Offizier und Mann, die vorn sind, und je weiter vorn, desto mehr. Leider Gottes kann man die eben nicht alle für eine Weile in ein Nerven-Sanatorium schaffen. Dann wäre ja viel geholfen, vielleicht alles! Denn zuversichtliche Stimmung ist ja doch eigentlich das Wichtigste!”

¹³ Ibid., 197. Emphasis original. “Nun sage ich ihm, daß ich in der Zwischenzeit heute vormittag mich schon beim Gen.Feldmarschall gemeldet habe und was ich für nötig gehalten habe, ihm vorzutragen. Ich brachte also denselben Frontbericht wieder vor, nicht zu knapp, sonder *ganz eingehend*. Er hörte ihn ganz ruhig an, mit geschlossenen Augen, sein Gesicht verriet nichts, aber an der zunehmenden Lebhaftigkeit, mit der seine Finger seinen Bleistift

Ludendorff's fury did not subside with Thær's rebuttal, however. Instead, he pushed the blame down the chain of command to those soldiers and frontline officers navigating the conditions he himself was primarily responsible for creating:

[Ludendorff] was however still very agitated and said in this bitter state: "If the troops are getting worse, if discipline is weakening, then that is *your* fault, the fault of all the command posts *at the front* which did not *seize control*. How else would it be possible for entire divisions to get themselves jammed up and completely shitfaced [*festgesoffen*] on looted enemy stores and not carry the necessary attack further forward? *That* is in fact the reason that the great March Offensive and now Georgette did not come further!

I answered that one could not generalize such regrettable incidents [*bedauerlichen Vorkommnisse*], quite apart from the fact that in consequence of the frightful condition of the terrain, it was impossible to bring regular provisions to the men at the front, which then made them all the more defenseless against looting enemy provisions, above all liquor. Ludendorff ended this long discussion [*Aussprache*] with the words: "Incidentally, a serious peace offer has not yet been made to us. At most it is a matter of certain probes, feelers, from private individuals, who have absolutely no official legitimation for it. We cannot mess around with such people."¹⁴

Where Hindenburg had replied with a superficially sympathetic condescension, Ludendorff responded with rage and explicit deflection of responsibility. But both preferred to continue making decisions in a world of cultivated delusions, one where any news which contradicted their preferred version of events was either to be compartmentalized and dismissed

bearbeiten, merkte ich zunehmende innere Erregung. Als ich geschlossen hatte, fuhr er plötzlich los mit seiner in solchen Fällen dann ganz hohen Stimme und rief: "Was soll Ihr ganzes Geunke? Was Wollen Sie von mir? Soll ich jetzt Frieden à tout prix machen?" Ich antwortete: "Excellenz, davon habe ich doch wohl kein Wort gesagt. Alle Konsequenzen zu ziehen, muß ich der O.H.L. überlassen. Mir ist es Pflicht, und zwar sehr schmerzliche, darauf hinzuweisen, daß unsere Truppe nicht besser wird, sondern allmählich immer schlechter. Das Tempo mag bei den verschiedenen Truppenteilen verschieden sein."

¹⁴ Ibid., 198. Emphasis original. "Er war aber doch noch sehr erregt und sagte in diesem bitteren Zustande; 'Wenn die Truppe schlechter wird, wenn die Disziplin nachläßt, so ist das *Eure* Schuld, die Schuld aller Kommandostelln *vorn*, die nicht *zufassen*. Wie wäre ich es sonst möglich, daß ganze Divisionen sich *festgefressen* und *festgesoffen* haben bei erbeuten feindlichen Magazinen und nicht den so nötigen Angriff weiter vorwärts trugen. *Das* ist doch der Grund, daß die große März-Offensive und jetzt Georgette nicht weiter gekommen sind!'

Ich antwortete, daß man solche bedauerlichen Vorkommnisse wohl nicht verallgemeinern könne, ganz abgesehen davon, daß infolge fürchterlicher Geländebeziehungen es unmöglich sei, den Leuten rechtzeitig Verpflegung nach vorn zu bringen, was sie dann beim Erbeuten feindlicher Vorräte, vor allem geistiger Getränke, um so wehrloser mache. Diese lange Aussprache beendete Exc. L. dann mit den Worten: 'Übrigens ist uns ein ernsthaftes Friedensangebot bisher noch nie gemacht worden, höchstens handelte es sich um gewisse Sondierungen, Fühler, von Privatpersonen, die gar keine offizielle Legitimation dafür haben. Mit solchen können wir uns nicht einlassen.'"

as exceptional and therefore unimportant (Hindenburg), or violently rejected as the fault of those below them failing to act as the Supreme Command wished (Ludendorff). And Ludendorff, especially, was openly contemptuous of any notion of pursuing a political peace, though his angry question about whether he should “make peace at any price” suggests that even then, he may have feared such a peace could become a necessary consequence of his decisions. Just as the cultivated complex of implicit incentives and explicit directives funneled moral interpretations of German soldiers’ suicides away from the state and those in it whose decisions created the conditions of possibility under which those suicides occurred, these two men atop Germany’s military and political hierarchy in the spring of 1918 fostered their own ignorance of the implosive conditions they themselves bore a principle responsibility in creating—and which had implicitly paved the way for the collapse of the *Kaiserreich* in November. Indeed, they were the specific nodes in the institution ultimately anticipated by all those thousands of report writers down the chain of command, frantically preparing their memos and missives for the perusal of their various superiors in the war’s final years.

But the reactions of all three men were especially telling, for they articulated the precise thanatological disconnect that had opened by the end of Georgette (at the latest), embodied above all in Thaer as both experienced front soldier and OHL officer. Reflecting dejectedly in his diary afterwards, Thaer remained clear-eyed about the situation from his perspective as a conservative military officer:

Result of my step among our greatest men: exactly zero. They are firmly convinced they can make the enemy crumble for peace [*friendsmürbe zu machen*]. Hindenburg believes it, Ludendorff certainly hopes for it. They will therefore place further high demands on the troops.

People in our position will of course be strongly impressed when hearing such judgements from such mouths. Nothing could be more lovely to me than if *they* were right and I was wrong. How happy I would be then! How much I want to abandon my

worries! But unfortunately I have hitherto recognized myself mostly as too great an optimist.

[Hindenburg] is definitely not correct that time is now on our side. I wish it would be winter soon and not first in five months, so that our troops could receive a longer respite.

A much tighter connection between the Chancellor and the Supreme Command would be necessary in my opinion. The best: better dictatorship today than tomorrow! That is the only truth against the wild parliamentarianism at home, but also the timely peace agreement, whose failure the commander [*Feldherr*, i.e. Ludendorff] must have primary responsibility for.¹⁵

Recording these reflections after the conclusion of his duties the following day kept Thaer up until at least midnight, its own implicit sign of how significant he considered the proceedings.¹⁶

These May Day interactions triangulated not only the scale of the thanatological disconnect at the end of Georgette quite precisely, but also the pace and vectors of the disillusionment resulting from it. Thaer himself represented the upward limit of that disillusionment that spring. He was a career officer who, by his own admission, was 1) prone to optimism; 2) an avowed enemy of “parliamentarianism,” just as Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and the officer corps in general were; and 3) *wanted to believe* these men he repeatedly described as “great,” “heroes,” and as possessing “almost holy” qualities. Like nearly every decision-maker atop the political and military hierarchies of Imperial Germany in the latter half of 1918, Thaer was terrified of the prospect of a Bolshevik-style revolution should military discipline

¹⁵ Ibid., 198. Emphasis original. “Ergebnis meines Schrittes bei unseren größten Männern: gleich null. Sie sind fest überzeugt, den Feind friedensmürbe zu machen, H. glaubt es, L. hofft es bestimmt. Sie werden deshalb weiter an die Truppe sehr hohe Ansprüche stellen.

Unsereiner wird natürlich stark beeindruckt, wenn er solche Urteile aus solchem Munde hörte. Nicht könnte mir ja Lieber sein, als wenn *sie* recht hätten und ich Unrecht. Glückselig wäre ich dabei! Wie gern ließe ich meine Sorgen fallen! Aber leider habe ich selber bisher mich meist als einen zu großen Optimisten erkannt.

Ganz sicher hat der Feldmarschall darin nicht recht, daß die Zeit jetzt für uns arbeitet. Ich wünschte, es wäre bald Winter und nicht erst in fünf Monaten, damit dadurch unsere Truppe dann eine längere Atempause bekäme.

Eine viel engere Verbindung zwischen Kanzler und O.H.L. wäre m. E. nötig. Am besten: Diktatur Lieber heut’ als morgen! Das einzig Wahre gegen den wilden Parlamentarismus im Innern, aber auch der rechtzeitige Friedensschluß, für dessen Ausfall der Feldherr die Hauptverantwortung haben muß.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 194.

disintegrate and the armed, undisciplined masses storm back to Germany unimpeded.¹⁷ Yet his experiences on the Western Front had led him to these interrelated fears of impending military and political collapse months ahead of his superiors. He expressly described it as a “duty” (*Pflicht*), “and indeed a very painful one,” to give an honest description of the state of the front to the two most powerful men in Germany—men he clearly held a deep admiration for both personally and professionally—despite repeated rebuffs, insults, and imputations of both professional and personal incompetence from both of them.

More than that, he also understood that it was the OHL itself who bore the primary responsibility for creating these conditions. If there was a need to make “peace at any price” already in May—an implication even Thayer would not let himself explicitly draw either in conversation or in writing—it was because Ludendorff and Hindenburg had exhausted Germany’s soldiers by repeatedly “attacking here, attacking there,” as if it involved no more expenditure than the energy to propel Hindenburg’s fists forward in their symbolic thrusts. The irony, of course, was that the Supreme Command would now “place further high demands on the troops,” increasing the pace and scale of their exhaustion and further preparing the conditions for the very revolution all three men hoped to avoid.

Significantly, however, the main lines of division had nothing to do with explicit politics or ideology. Rather, the primary dividing line was thanatological and, in a sense, epistemological: one’s relation to death and willingness to let that relationship inform one’s behavior. For Thayer, the experienced *Frontmann*, the writing was already on the wall because of the depleted state of the troops who actually constituted the Field Army by May 1918, and this

¹⁷ Michael Geyer argues convincingly that “it was the imminent fear of outright defeat in battle and its consequences, in particular the specter of revolution emerging from the beaten field army, that triggered the events of October 1918.” Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 467.

recognition put him directly at odds with his military superiors, despite sharing their overt politics and goals, antisemitism and all.¹⁸ Instead, it ironically put him on the same side as the Alsatian deserter Dominik Richert, though of course for wildly different reasons. Just as in Russia after the Kerensky Offensive, Germany's behavioral politics were bifurcating along the lines of survival and suicide, and Thaer could see it. One was either functionally in favor of ending the war as soon as possible, which would then mean the physical survival of many more of the men who made up 'the' army—whether this was due to a belief that it was the best (or only) way to save that army and the state that it served, or for any number of other reasons ranging from prospects for personal survival to explicitly Bolshevik political aspirations—or one was in favor of continuing the war, despite the myriad signs of disintegration appearing over the course of the spring and summer which showed such a continuation to be an evermore-obviously self-destructive endeavor. This appears to be why Thaer felt so strongly that Hindenburg's prognosis was entirely wrong-headed: the five months of further campaigning would only accelerate the entropic vectors within the army, not topple the western "colossus."

Thaer's prediction proved quite exact. Five months to the day after his reports were rebuffed by Hindenburg and Ludendorff—1 October 1918—the First Quartermaster-General assembled his staff officers at the OHL to address rumors that been circulating for several days

¹⁸ Thaer wrote to his wife on 2 May 1918, for instance, of the internal danger he felt Ludendorff had introduced by pulling "all people necessary to the war" (*alle kriegsbrauchbaren Menschen*) towards the front without excluding groups he considered "unsuitable for war" (*kriegsuntauglich*), including "Cretons and Arabs" (*Kretern und Arabern*) and "Jewish lawyers with Jewish office chiefs" (*jüdische Rechtsanwälte mit jüdischen Bürochefs*). The presence of such people (*Volk*), he informed her, "is really disgusting and can become *dangerous!*" (*ist wirklich widerlich und kann gefährlich werden!*). Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 193. Emphasis original. "Ludendorff hat seit begin dieses Jahres sehr darauf gedrückt, alle kriegsbrauchbaren Menschen auch aus diesen Formationen möglichst der Front zuzuführen. Sehr wichtig und gut! Ich dachte mir den Ersatz mehr durch Kriegsverletzte. Aber man hat nun *sehr* viel Volk [sic] hergebracht, das bisher als kriegsuntauglich zurückgestellt war. Nun wimmelt es in unsern Büros plötzlich von Kretern und Arabern, resp. man hört das 'Mauscheln' in allen Zimmern, jüdische Rechtsanwälte mit jüdischen Bürochefs führen in den Schreibstuben das große Wort, fungieren als Schreiber und Telefonisten. Das ist wirklich widerlich und kann *gefährlich* werden! Auch die starken Funkerabteilungen sind in dieser Hinsicht 'verseucht', vielfach Personal wohl aus der Intelligenz, aber aus der weit links gerichteten."

on either side of the 29 September War Council meeting. Thaer described the event in near-ethnographic detail in his diary that same day, its own sign of how important he considered the proceedings and their immediate aftermath.¹⁹ The contrast with May was stark, and began visually, before Ludendorff had even opened his mouth: “Horrible and horrendous! It is so! As a matter of fact! When we had gathered, Ludendorff stepped into our midst, his face filled with the deepest grief, pale, but with head held high.” On the verge of delivering momentous news, Germany’s silent dictator cut a tragic figure in Thaer’s estimate, one which was already becoming integral to a corrosive right-wing political mythos: “A truly beautiful Germanic hero-figure! I had to think of Siegfried with the mortal wound from Hagen’s spear in his back.”²⁰ It seems that by the time Thaer recorded the events in his diary that evening, at the latest, this aesthetic seed of the stab-in-the-back legend had already taken root to at least some degree amongst the officer corps. As his Nibelung allusion showed, even an officer as experienced and typically clear-eyed as Thaer, who had seen first-hand how receptive this man was to criticism and been on the receiving end of his deflection tactics, could be more-or-less organically taken in. The seed was planted in fertile ground, and Ludendorff, above all, would tend it for the rest of his life, as Michael Geyer sketched and Jay Lockenour has recently analyzed in great detail.²¹

But most significant, of course, was what Ludendorff had to tell them all: the war was over, and Germany had lost. “He said roughly the following” Thaer recorded in his diary: “He is obliged to tell us that our military situation is frightfully serious [*furchtbar ernst*]. Our Western Front could be broken through any day. He had reported to the senior ministers about the

¹⁹ In the published version, his recounting covers four, full, single-spaced pages: Ibid., 234-237.

²⁰ Ibid., 235. “Furchtbar und entsetzlich! Es ist so! In der Tat! Als wir versammelt waren, trat Ludendorff in unsere Mitte, sein Gesicht von tiefstem Kummer erfüllt, bleich, aber mit erhobenem Haupt. Eine wahrhaft schöne germanische Heldengestalt! Ich mußte an Siegfried denken mit der tödlichen Wunde im Rücken von Hagens Speer.”

²¹ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 508-524; Jay Lockenour, *Dragonslayer: The Legend of Erich Ludendorff in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

situation in recent days,” so the civilian government was aware of the situation as well. Then came the truly extraordinary news, especially given Thaer’s reception five months prior:

For the first time, the question was put to the OHL by the senior ministers and Reich Chancellor, respectively, of what they and the army are still capable of. He replied, in agreement with Hindenburg: “The OHL and the German Army are at the end [*seien am Ende*]; not only is the war no longer winnable, it is rather more that final defeat stands, possibly unavoidably, before us [*stehe die endgültige Niederlage wohl unvermeidbar bevor*]. Bulgaria has dropped out. Austria and Turkey are at the end of their strength, and will probably soon follow. Our own army is unfortunately already heavily contaminated by the poison of Spartacistic-socialist ideas. The troops are *no longer* reliable. Since 8 August things have gone downhill rapidly. Units have continually proved themselves to be so unreliable that they need to be expeditiously pulled away from the front. If they were to be replaced with troops who were still willing to fight, they would be welcomed with the cry of “strikebreaker” and called upon to no longer fight. *He* could not operate with divisions that are no longer reliable.

It is therefore foreseeable that the enemy will succeed in a *great* victory, a *breakthrough on a completely grand scale*, already in the near future, with the help of the Americans, who are eager to fight. Then this Western Army will lose its last foothold and in full disintegration flood back over the Rhein and carry the revolution to Germany.

This catastrophe *must* be avoided at all costs. For the reasons provided, one may not let himself be beaten anymore [*Aus den angeführten Gründen dürfe man sich nun nicht mehr schlagen lassen*]. Therefore the OHL has requested [*gefordert*] of the senior ministers and the Chancellor that *without any delay* an offer for the arrangement of an armistice be made to President Wilson of America in order to arrange a peace on the basis of his 14 points.²²

²² Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 234. Emphasis original. “Er sagte ungefähr folgendes: Er sei verpflichtet, uns zu sagen, daß unsere militärische Lage furchtbar ernst sei. Täglich könne unsere Westfront durchbrochen werden. Er habe darüber in den letzten Tagen Sr.M. zu berichten gehabt. Zum 1. Mal sei der O.H.L. von Sr.M. bzw. vom Reichskanzler die Frage vorgelegt worden, was sie und das Heer noch leisten imstande seien. Er habe im Einvernehmen mit dem Generalfeldmarschall geantwortet: “Die O.H.L. und das deutsche Heer seien am Ende; der Krieg sei nicht nur nicht mehr zu gewinnen, vielmehr stehe die endgültige Niederlage wohl unvermeidbar bevor. Bulgarien sei abgefallen. Österreich und die Türkei am Ende ihrer Kräfte, würden wohl bald folgen. Unsere eigene Armee sei leider schon schwer verseucht durch das Gift spartakistisch-sozialistischer Ideen. Auf die Truppen sei *kein* Verlaß mehr. Seit dem 8. 8. sei es rapide abwärts gegangen. Fortgesetzt erwiesen Truppenteile sich so unzuverlässig, daß sie beschleunigt aus der Front gezogen werden müßten. Würden sie von noch kampfwilligen Truppen abgelöst, so würden diese mit dem Rufe ‘Streikbrecher’ empfangen und aufgefordert, nicht mehr zu kämpfen. *Er* könne nicht mit Divisionen operieren, auf die kein Verlaß mehr sei.

So sei vorauszusehen, daß dem Feinde schon in nächster Zeit mit Hilfe der kampffreudigen Amerikaner ein *großer* Sieg, ein *Durchbruch in ganz großem Stile* gelingen werde, dann werde dieses Westheer den letzten Halt verlieren und in voller Auflösung zurückfluten über den Rhein und werde die Revolution nach Deutschland tragen.

Diese Katastrophe *müsse* unbedingt vermeiden werden. Aus den angeführten Gründen dürfe man sich nun nicht mehr schlagen lassen. Deshalb habe die O.H.L. von Sr.M. und dem Kanzler gefordert, daß *ohne jeden Verzug* der Antrag auf Herbeiführung eines Waffenstillstandes gestellt würde bei dem Präsidenten Wilson von Amerika zwecks Herbeiführung eines Friedens aus der Grundlage seiner 14 Punkte.”

Ludendorff had finally come to see the strategic and operational crises he had backed the German Army into, though, in typical fashion, he deflected responsibility for their creation with the same breath.²³ No longer the shrieking kettle of indignation he'd been at the end of Georgette, even the *Feldherr* could no longer find refuge in the steadfast optimism he'd demanded of Thaer only five months before.

But Ludendorff's revelations went even further. According to Thaer, for this one moment at least, Ludendorff himself saw "sacrifice" the way a critical mass of the army had come to over the course of that spring and summer: as behaviorally synonymous with suicide. "He [Ludendorff] had never shied away from demanding the utmost of the troops," Thaer recorded in his diary: "But after he now clearly recognized that the continuation of the war is useless, he now takes the position that an end must be made *as quickly as possible*, to not unnecessarily sacrifice [*opfern*] the bravest people who are still loyal and able to fight."²⁴ The morbid irony, of course, was that Ludendorff had already done *precisely that* from the minute he launched Georgette, as Thaer had tried to warn him in May.

Equally important, there was a delay between the moment of recognition and the moment when it changed Ludendorff's political behavior; in this case, a delay of nearly two months. As the First Quartermaster-General alluded to in his comments of 1 October, it was the successful Allied attack at Amiens on 8 August that truly shook him and pierced his optimistic veil. *This* was the moment when Ludendorff began to fear imminent defeat, and thus the point at which, as he later claimed in his 1919 memoir, "the war could not be won," an assessment endorsed by a

²³ Geyer concisely summarizes both crises: Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 466-467. See also: Deist, "Military Collapse," 188-201.

²⁴ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235. Emphasis original. "Er habe sich nie gescheut, von der Truppe Äußerstes zu verlangen. Aber nachdem er jetzt klar erkenne, daß die Fortsetzung des Krieges nutzlos sei, stehe er nun auf dem Standpunkte, daß *schnellstens* Schluß gemacht werden müsse, um nicht noch unnötigerweise gerade noch die tapfersten Leute zu opfern, die noch treu und kampffähig seien."

war council in Spa five days later.²⁵ Indeed, Thaer recorded a conversation with the *Feldherr* on 15 August where he found Ludendorff to be “grave and depressed” (*ernst und niedergeschlagen*) and during which the First Quartermaster-General explicitly referred to 8 August as “a ‘black day’ in Germany’s history.”²⁶ By September, his gloom was so omnipresent and so intense that Ludendorff apparently “greeted his operations chief Wilhelm Heye day after day with a desultory ‘Now they are through’” throughout the month.²⁷

But, notably, the aftermath of Amiens was *not* the moment when the OHL decided they were “at the end,” as Ludendorff apparently put it on 1 October. That had only come in the meeting of 29 September. And in that time, masses of German men continued to die, fall ill, and otherwise disappear from military circulation. Indeed, in just the ten days preceding the officers’ meeting of 1 October, the 20th Infantry Division of the Third Army had lost at least 35,453 soldiers—either sick, wounded, missing, or dead—and could only replace 4,999 of them with men once again deemed fit-for-service (*dienstfähig geworden*). The 22nd Division of the 17th Army had similarly lost 32,142 men while only “regaining” 6,633 over this same ten-day period.²⁸ And this, of course, was on top of the massive losses the army had been suffering all year. Indeed, according to the *Sanitätsbericht*, the *Westheer*’s actual strength (*Iststärke*) decreased by over 300,000 men from just July to August 1918.²⁹ Despite these losses and the belated onset of pessimism after Amiens however, it was only the start of the massive Allied assault on the Hindenburg Line on 26 September that actually promoted Ludendorff to *act*.³⁰

²⁵ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 466.

²⁶ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 222. “[Ludendorff] bezeichnete den 8. August als einen dies ater, d.h. als einen ‘schwarzen Tag’, in Deutschlands Geschichte. Er war ernst und niedergeschlagen.”

²⁷ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 468.

²⁸ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 60.

²⁹ *Sanitätsbericht III*, 60. The *Iststärke* was 3,582,203 in July and 3,259,577 in August.

³⁰ Despite differing readings and interpretations of the events from 29 September to 11 November, there is near-universal agreement in the historiography on the significance of the beginning of the Allied offensive.

This was the most significant fact of 29 September 1918: Ludendorff and the OHL *acted*, and those actions began the political process of ending the war. In so-doing, they behaviorally acknowledged 1) the reality of Germany's military defeat, though they preferred to frame it as the army now being "unable to win;" 2) that the nature of that defeat—i.e. the stated perception of the Field Army being on the verge of total dissolution—meant that their military options were, in their own estimation, either limited or nonexistent, now necessitating the political peace Ludendorff had scorned in May; and 3) that, at a minimum, "the bravest people who are still loyal and able to fight" *deserved to survive*, which meant trying to save "the" army, even at the "cost" of a political peace.³¹ In a word, on 29 September 1918, the OHL, the Kaiser, and the sitting Chancellor all rejected the prospect of national suicide—collectively, and for the first time.

Importantly, however, this first rejection of conscious, collective self-destruction was *implicit*, present in the behavior of Germany's leaders at the end of September; the protagonists did not articulate their actions to themselves as the rejection that it functionally and most significantly constituted. But by the OHL requesting and the Kaiser and War Council accepting that the government should immediately make "an offer for the arrangement of an armistice," both the ostensible and actual leaders of Germany at the end of September—Hindenburg, Ludendorff, Wilhelm II, and Hertling—chose a course of action *other* than fighting to the last man. As Geyer aptly summarizes, "[w]hat exactly happened on September 29 is in dispute. Contemporaries could not agree on what transpired in the rush of meetings culminating in a War

³¹ According to Imperial Germany's final Chancellor, Max von Baden, Ludendorff told his liaison officer, Colonel Haefen, on 2 October that "I want to save my army" (*Ich will meine Armee retten*): Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente* (Berlin: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 1927): 340. This is not to imply that Ludendorff wanted to save the army out of some humanitarian concern for the lives of the soldiers however, since, as previously discussed, the main motivation appeared to be a desire to avoid a Russian-style revolution in Germany, perhaps with the related concern of preserving some counter-revolutionary military force.

Council, and historians have forgotten what contemporaries could agree on—that September 29 was the actual beginning of the end.”³² Indeed, whatever these protagonists would say later, they were wedded enough to the avoidance of collective self-destruction at the end of September to *behaviorally commit both themselves and the state they led to a political peace process*, making that War Council the first in the chain of proximate high-political events culminating in both the end of the war and Imperial Germany’s permanent collapse.

Some previously analyses, most notably Isabel Hull’s *Absolute Destruction*, have fundamentally misunderstood the significance of this action, giving much more credence and explanatory weight to what Germany’s military leaders *said* about what they did and the justifications and explanations they offered for it than to the actual *behavior and actions* of those men. In this regard, Hull takes Ludendorff, Hindenburg, and, indeed, OHL officers in general at their (subsequent) word, and thus ironically reproduces their same assumptive framework in her own analysis. She contends that “the admission of 29 September was only partial. Although Ludendorff said from one side of his mouth that Germany was ‘militarily finished,’ apparently it was not entirely defeated. The armistice, he told his staff, was designed to save the army from ‘final defeat.’”³³ Yet the source she cites for her claim that Ludendorff intended the armistice to spare the army “final defeat” is none other than Thayer’s diary entry of 1 October 1918, which in fact says exact opposite. The *very first thing* Thayer quoted Ludendorff as saying in the 1 October meeting was that “[t]he OHL and the German Army are at the end; not only is the war no longer winnable, *it is rather more that final defeat stands, possibly unavoidably, before us.*”³⁴ By 29

³² Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 464.

³³ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005): 314.

³⁴ Thayer, *Generalstabdienst*, 23. Emphasis added. “Die O.H.L. und das deutsche Heer seien am Ende; der Krieg sei nicht nur nicht mehr zu gewinnen, *vielmehr stehe die endgültige Niederlage wohl unvermeidbar bevor.*”

September 1918 at the absolute latest, Imperial Germany's military and political leaders recognized that they had lost, and in the moment of recognition, had chosen a course they hoped would spare Germany fighting to the last man in what all understood to be a futile act of collective self-destruction.

But for anyone interested in the preservation of the army for almost any reason, it was already too late, as the 28 September 1918 postal surveillance report for the 5th Army illustrated in rather stark terms. The primary topic of discussion, as the surveillance officer informed his superiors at the outset of the report, was Austria-Hungary's peace offer of 14 September.³⁵ What those discussions ultimately revealed, however, was the depth of the Imperial regime's broken legitimacy and the military's increasing inability to contain it:

The Austro-Hungarian proposal for peace talks was received with distrust by the troops from the start and has been criticized in a derogatory manner, according to the preponderant majority of the numerous letters which the surveillance offices have available. For one portion of letter writers, the offer awakened new hope that now perhaps there will be peace soon. Another portion, in dull resignation, did not mention the offer at all. But the largest portion were suspicious of it and spoke of it as merely propaganda for the new war loan or a false front to boost morale [*Stimmungsmache*]. Certainly there were also statements therein, in which an entirely splendid attitude was expressed [*eine ganz prächtige Gesinnung zum Ausdruck kam*], statements which in the present time of distrust and querulousness [*Verdrossenheit*] appear positively refreshing. But these were exceptions. In any case, the offer did *not* contribute to a visible *enhancement* of the troops' mood. This is, as the report from 31 August 1918 already expressed, *quite* bad. War-weariness and querulousness have the upper hand, now as before. Numerous statements about this often take forms which let it appear questionable to the censor; such high-grade demoralizing demonstrations are left to pass to the home front without objection.³⁶

³⁵ On the 14 September peace offer and its immediate effects, see: Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 540.

³⁶ RH 61/1035 Feldpostüberwachung.- Aktenauszüge. Report labelled "A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 1918," 92. Emphasis original. "Der österreichisch-ungarische Vorschlag für Besprechungen den Frieden ist nach der überwiegenden Mehrheit der zahlreichen Briefstimmen, welche den Überwachungsstellen vorgelegen haben, von den Truppen von Anfang an mißtrauisch aufgenommen und in abfälligen Sinn kritisiert worden. Einem Teil der Briefschreiber hat das Angebot neue Hoffnung auf nunmehr vielleicht baldigen Frieden erweckt, ein anderer Teil hat in stumpfer Resignation das Angebot überhaupt nicht erwähnt; der größte Teil aber stellte sich demselben mißtrauisch gegenüber und sprach es lediglich als Propaganda für die neue Kreigsanleihe oder Stimmungsmache an. Gewiß waren auch Äußerungen darunter, in denen eine ganz prächtige Gesinnung zum Ausdruck kam, Äußerungen, die in der gegenwärtigen Zeit des Mißmutes und der Verdrossenheit geradezu erfrischend anmuteten; doch das waren

In keeping with Thaer's predictions earlier that spring, the negative trajectory of the troops' morale and the attendant drop in soldiers' "quality" (from the perspective of a career Prussian army officer) had continued unabated, something this report's author explicitly acknowledged. In true institutionally anticipatory fashion however, he attempted to shoehorn whatever ostensible good news he could find into his summary while still trying to make clear just how exceptional those positive signs were. His "refreshing" news of the "splendid attitude" displayed in the occasional letter was sandwiched between news of soldiers' undeniably deepening distrust of their state and the ever-growing war-weariness omnipresent throughout the majority of missives, on the one hand, and the equally disturbing revelation that the postal censor was not doing its job on the other. The surveillance offices themselves were being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of prosaic disillusionment such that, by their own admission, they were largely powerless to stop soldiers' sharing their complaints and despair with those at home.

Numerous soldiers expressed this broken legitimacy and baseline distrust through common reference to the Habsburg peace offer as "the swindle" (*der Schwindel*). While both less abstract and less far-reaching a concept than "the Prussian" (*der Preuß*) or "the big ones" (*die Große*), "the swindle" similarly articulated the foundational shift in soldiers' perceptions of their state, along with its leaders and allies, to a ground of suspicion and distrust. "I believe that the peace offer is once again a real swindle concerning the new war loan, so that the brothers receive money again," one soldier characteristically wrote.³⁷ "Hopefully the swindle also comes to an

Ausnahmen. Jedenfalls hat das Angebot zu einer sichtlichen *Hebung* der Truppenstimmung *nicht* beigetragen. Diese ist, wie schon im Bericht vom 31. vor. Mon. zum Ausdruck gebracht, *recht* schlecht. Kriegsmüdigkeit und Verdrossenheit haben nach wie vor die Oberhand. Zahlreiche Äußerungen hierüber nehmen oft Formen an, die es dem Zensor bedenklich erscheinen lassen, solche im hohen Grade entmutigenden Kundgebungen unbeanstandet nach der Heimat passieren zu lassen."

³⁷ Ibid., 94. "Ich glaube daß das Friedensangebot wieder ein richtiger Schwindel ist wegen der neuen Kreigsanleihe, daß die Brüder wieder Geld bekommen."

end soon,” wrote another: “I have little hope for Kaiser Karl’s peace offer now after the setbacks we have suffered, that will now once again be construed as weakness.”³⁸ Strikingly, even those soldiers who did not explicitly use the term “swindle” expressed the sentiment behind it in near identical terms: “Maybe it is also only a maneuver for a war loan, so that the German people shall see that the Supreme Command has good will towards peace.”³⁹ Some were even more cynical: “Peace is always spoken of when a new war loan subscription is coming, and now it will be again soon.”⁴⁰

The soldiers were quite correct, at least as far as the chronological correlation went. The ninth and final war loan subscription began at the end of September, though, notably, it took in 4.6 million marks less than its immediate predecessor in March, a decrease of over thirty percent.⁴¹ The Imperial state had conducted war loan drives every six months starting in the September 1914, meaning there was a new drive every March and September. But that documented pattern only bolstered soldiers’ increasingly cynical perception of both the loan itself and the Austro-Hungarian peace offer. As one soldier wrote, the peace offer “is a fraudulent misrepresentation [*eine Vorspiegelung falscher Tatsachen*] because the ninth war loan is underway. Then it will be talking nonsense [*ein Quatsch gemacht*], as usual, to change the people’s minds.”⁴² Somewhat ironically, army command inadvertently helped foster this cynical perception of “the swindle” by informing Germany’s soldiers of the peace offer itself in at least

³⁸ Ibid. “Hoffentlich geht der Schwindel auch bald zu Ende. Von dem Friedensangebot von Kaiser Karl erhoffe ich wenig jetzt nach den Rückschlägen wo wir erlitten haben, das wird ja doch wieder als Schwäche ausgelegt.”

³⁹ Ibid., 95. “Vielleicht ist es auch nur ein Manöver zur Kreigsanleihe, damit das deutsche Volk sehen soll, daß die Heeresleitung guten Willen zum Frieden hat.”

⁴⁰ Ibid., 95. “Es wird immer von Frieden gesprochen, wenn eine neue Kriegsanleihe gezeichnet wird und jetzt ist das bald wieder.”

⁴¹ Konrad Roesler, *Die Finanzpolitik des Deutschen Reiches im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1967): 79, Table 5.

⁴² RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 1918,” 95. “Aber das [Angebot] ist eine Vorspiegelung falscher Tatsachen, denn die 9. Kreigsanleihe ist im Gange, dann wird wie gewöhnlich immer ein Quatsch gemacht, um das Volk umzustimmen.”

some instances, which only highlighted the *Kaiserreich*'s ever-decaying legitimacy even more: "The Austrians have indeed made a peace offer. A captain read it to us earlier today. At the close, he gave a cheer for our royal family. It found little resonance with us however, because it doesn't matter to us how the war ends. Because we still remain under the control of others [*Denn Knechte bleiben wir ja doch*]."⁴³

More ironic still, the very captain who composed the report and included these excerpts completely ignored their most direct implication in the conclusion of his summary: namely, that the enlisted men still ostensibly under their command were not the easily manipulable cogs that programs like Patriotic Education (*vaterländischer Unterricht*) and commanders like Ludendorff assumed them to be.⁴⁴ Their behavior could not be modified whole-cloth simply by propagating a new narrative, especially one which evermore troops saw as "nonsense" and "fraudulent representations" of a reality they had experienced first-hand (i.e. representations that contradicted their *Kriegserlebnis*), but which elite decision-makers like the OHL only knew through reports from below (i.e. through *Kriegserfahrung*).⁴⁵ Indeed, in the same breath, the report's author acknowledged as much, but nonetheless still reported hope for a potential new propaganda tack which he promoted to his superiors:

Of late it appears that after Wilson's, Clemenceau's, and Balfour's answers became known, a larger portion of letter-writers—albeit gradually—are coming to the realization that guilt [*Schuld*] for the prolongation of the war must be laid with the *enemy* and not, as

⁴³ Ibid. "Der Österreicher hat ja ein Friedensangebot gemacht. Ein Hauptmann las es uns heut vor. Am Schlusse brachte er ein Hoch auf unser Herrscherhaus aus. Bei uns fand es aber wenig Wiederhall, denn uns ist es gleich wie der Krieg endet. Denn Knechte bleiben wir ja doch."

⁴⁴ For brief summaries of the establishment and aims of 'Patriotic Education,' see: Deist, "Military Collapse," 189-190; and Robert L. Nelson, *German Soldier Newspapers in the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 38-39.

⁴⁵ It is worth noting here as well that this also belies Ludendorff's self-exoneratory claims about the influence of leftist propaganda amongst the troops, which he reported to his staff officers during the 1 October meeting. Reports from *his own army* informed him both in August and September (at a minimum) that most soldiers themselves held their own domestic decision-makers responsible for the war's continuation, and in fact, had also illustrated their ability to see through such ham-handed manipulation attempts in numerous excerpts included in the postal surveillance reports.

the letter-writers still continuously emphasize so often, “the big ones” in the Empire [‘den Grossen’ im Reiche] and those who see “profit” from this war. Appropriate educational work [Eine geeignete Aufklärungsarbeit] in this domain could perhaps deepen this realization, and in this way, the peace offer could help us to a practical success in the near future.⁴⁶

Here was the wishful thinking of the “officer caste” in a sharply distilled form. Despite *explicitly acknowledging* that the letter-writers themselves continued to blame the “big ones” and war profiteers at home for the war’s continuation (and thus also for the on-going suffering and deprivation of both themselves and their loved ones), the report’s author sought emotional and moral refuge in the same kind of deluded optimism Hindenburg and Ludendorff had deflected Thær’s honest reports with in May.⁴⁷

Indeed, even those excerpts he chose to illustrate this point belied his wishful narrative. The few soldiers who expressly blamed the Allies for the war’s continuation *still* had no hope for—let alone expectation of—a German victory. Rather, they too articulated a sense of impending defeat and loss, even when they greeted that sense with the horror their military superiors preferred: “What’s happening with the peace offer that Austria made? I think that nothing will probably come of the offer, because our enemies do not want to make peace for the

⁴⁶ RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 1918,” 92-93. Emphasis original. “Neuerdings scheint aber, nachdem die Antworten Wilsons, Clemenceaus und Balfours bekannt geworden sind, bei einem größeren Teil der Briefschreiber—wenn auch allmählich—die Erkenntnis aufzukommen, daß die Schuld an der Verlängerung des Krieges dem *Feinde* zur Last gelegt werden muß und nicht, wie noch immer so oft von Briefschreiber betont, ‘den Grossen’ im Reiche und denjenigen, die aus diesem Kriege ‘Profit’ sehen. Eine geeignete Aufklärungsarbeit auf *diesem* gebiet könnte vielleicht diese Erkenntnis vertiefen und auf diese Art dem Angebot zu einem praktischen Erfolge für die nächste Zeit verhelfen.”

⁴⁷ While secondary to the main lines of argument here, it is worth noting that this kind of institutionally-anticipatory shoehorning of optimism into reports such as these—especially those which attempted to objectively gauge morale and served as crucial informational links between the Field Army Commands and the OHL—also played their own small, but critical role in the formation of the stab-in-the-back myth. As Michael Geyer summarizes: “The deep rift between field army commands and Supreme Command [by late September/early October], in any case, was apparent to everyone. It was papered over only long after the fact when Ludendorff soft-pedaled his original assessment of the situation and made the armistice initiative look like a temporary lapse of an overworked general staff officer and his bureau that had been exploited by panic-stricken civilians for their own ends.” Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 471. The kinds of deluded optimistic assessments provided in reports such as these were sources of raw material out of which Ludendorff and others could construct the soft-pedaled, retroactively reimagined narrative of the OHL’s actions that fall, and served to paper over the kinds of internal tensions and rifts within the “officer caste.”

time being. They still want to make us small, *and they will do it too.*”⁴⁸ This was the most optimistic voice included amongst the excerpts: one which overtly blamed the Allies, but nonetheless believed in their full capacity to militarily and politically subjugate Germany—and apparently believed it strongly enough to communicate it to a loved one at home. Indeed, viewed through any pre-war or “traditional” (for lack of a better word) political frame, the politics of the “encouraging” letters were ambiguous at best. The superlative possible outcome these exceptional men now hoped for was simply the aversion of total catastrophe, much like the Supreme Command itself. “The enemy wants to annihilate us on German soil, and they will succeed too” one soldier mused: “It will produce still-unending amounts of lament and misery [*Jammer und Elend*]. We can still be happy if the war doesn’t reach the Rhine; it no longer belongs to the realm of impossibility.”⁴⁹

Still more distressing for Germany’s autocratic and conservative leaders, at least some soldiers explicitly connected their cynical reading of the Habsburg peace note with the ever-deepening thanatological disconnect between themselves and the domestic political and military elites whose decisions structured both their quotidian experiences of the war and any potential for its eventual end. One soldier sardonically summarized the situation as he saw it:

At the beginning of the week there was talk of a German retreat from the St. Michel salient, where all sorts of things would have been lost again. Yesterday the entire society was prattling about an Austrian peace offer to the Entente. It would probably be time to make peace [*es wäre wohl an der Zeit Frieden zu machen*], because both sides stand in the same position as 1916 as well, and finally there must be some sage people among them [*gescheiterle dabei*] who realize that the entire history no longer has a purpose. Our all-merciful Kaiser [*Unser allergnädigster Kaiser*] has once again made great intonations, which he of course does not believe himself. The entire story would seem

⁴⁸ Ibid., 101. Emphasis added. “[W]ie ist es den mit dem Friedensangebot das Österreich gemacht hatt [sic] ich denke von dem angebot wird wohl nichts werden denn unsere Feinde machen vorläfich [sic] keinen Frieden die wolle uns doch klein machen und sie werden es auch schafen.”

⁴⁹ Ibid., 102. “Die Feinde wollen uns nun auf deutschen Boden vernichten und es wird ihnen das auch gelingen. Noch unendlich viel Jammer und Elend wird es geben. Wir können noch froh sein, wenn der Krieg nicht an den Rhein getragen wird, es liegt dies garnicht mehr im Bereiche der Unmöglichkeit.”

terribly ridiculous to me if one did not have the awful seriousness in the form of mass graves and hospital trains before one's eyes day after day. Because the entire bluff is yet another agitation for the outstanding war loan, and if it was serious, then one could say "thank god, now we can soon get a small word in, because otherwise nothing sensible will come of it."⁵⁰

Unintentionally, the Habsburgs had provided a trial run of how the strategy Ludendorff would later claim he was pursuing at the end of September—namely, using an armistice offer as a measure to buy time for the army to regroup before the final battle, whatever its form⁵¹—was likely to play out in the German Field Army as it was then constituted. For all of the specific points this soldier raised—the rumors he considered credible about the on-going German retreat; the sense of futility in further fighting when “the entire history no longer has a purpose;” the absolute distrust of the *Kaiserreich*'s leaders and characterization of them as both mentally and morally incompetent—the most significant was also the most earnest: “The entire story would seem terribly ridiculous” were it not for the “mass graves and hospital trains before one's eyes day after day.” Indeed, there could be scarcely be a pithier distillation of the thanatological disconnect between command and the soldiery or its scale by the end of September: what propaganda narrative from any source could compete with the daily experiential reality of “mass

⁵⁰ RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 1918, 96. “Am Anfang der Woche wurde von einem Rückzug der Deutschen am St. Michel Bogen gesprochen, da wäre wieder allerhand verloren gegangen, gestern schwätzt die ganze Gesellschaft von einem Friedensangebot Österreichs an die Entente, es wäre wohl an der Zeit Frieden zu machen, denn jetzt stehen wir hüben wie drüben auf den Gleichen Standpunkt wie 1916 auch und endlich müssen doch mal gar solche gescheiterle dabei sein, welche einsehen das die ganze Geschichte keinen Zweck mehr hat. Unser allergnädigster Kaiser hat auch wieder mal große Töne geschwungen, an die er natürlich selber nicht glaubt, die ganze geschichte [sic] käme mir nur furchtbar lächerlich vor, wenn man nicht den schrecklichen Ernst in Gestalt von Massengräbern und Lazarettzügen Tag für Tag vor Augen hätte, denn der ganze Bluff ist jedoch wieder Agitation für die hervorstehende Kriegsanleihe, und wenn es mal Ernst würde, na dann könnte man sagen, Gott sei Dank, jetzt können wir auch bald ein Wörtchen reden, denn sonst kommt doch nichts vernünftiges mehr zustande.”

⁵¹ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 464-472. Geyer concisely summarizes how this piece of Ludendorff's narrative fit with the larger stab-in-the-back myth: “The stab-in-the-back legend asserts that government officials and members of the Reichstag were shocked by the results emanating from Spa [at the end of September]. The argument continues that whereas Ludendorff, who had lost his composure in July and August due to the strains of overwork, quickly recovered, the civilians did not. They squandered their last chances to put up resistance against the Allies and did nothing to stop antiwar propaganda. The result was the descent into an armistice that, in the wake of the revolution, amounted to a capitulation, although a continuation of war could have salvaged the German position.” Ibid., 464-465. As he importantly reminds us, however, “[t]he only thing that seems true about this story is that Ludendorff faced the situation of late September with a preternatural calm.”

graves and hospital trains,” particularly when the purpose of that narrative was to induce men to continue risking death and mutilation to kill for their state in a war the men themselves believed they could not win?

Nonetheless, Ludendorff insisted on further manipulation attempts in precisely this vein, even as he informed the gathered officers that the German Army was on the edge of existential catastrophe. As Thaer went on to describe in his diary, the *Feldherr* even framed the armistice offer *he had pushed for* as part of a larger political strategy to shift the blame for Germany’s defeat from his shoulders, though this in turn was presented as part of a larger attempt at salvaging the “honor” of Germany’s ruling elite. That attempt at honor-salvage actually began with Hertling, who immediately resigned after agreeing Germany must pursue an armistice. As Ludendorff presented it to Thaer and the others, Hertling informed the War Council that “[a]fter so many years of honor, he could not and did not want to end his life as an old man now tendering a plea for an armistice. The Kaiser accepted his resignation.”⁵² This then left the government without a Chancellor, a vacancy the First Quartermaster-General hoped to exploit:

Ludendorff added: “So at the moment we have no Chancellor. Who it will be remains to be seen. *I have, however, asked the senior ministers to now also bring those circles into government whom we mainly have to thank that we have come so far. So we will now see these gentlemen move into the ministries. They should now conclude the peace which now will need to be concluded. They should now eat the soup they have cooked for us!*”⁵³

With these words, Ludendorff apparently ended his remarks and left the room.⁵⁴

⁵² Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235. “Nach so vielen Jahren in Ehren könne und wolle er als alter Mann nicht sein Leben damit beschließen, daß er jetzt ein Gesuch um Waffenstillstand einreiche. Der Kaiser habe sein Abschiedsgesuch angenommen.”

⁵³ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235. Emphasis original. “Ludendorff fügte hinzu: ‘Zur Zeit haben wir also keinen Kanzler. Wer es wird, steht noch aus. *Ich habe aber S.M. gebeten, jetzt auch diejenigen Kreise an die Regierung zu bringen, denen wir es in der Hauptsache zu danken haben, daß wir so weit gekommen sind. Wir werden also diese Herren jetzt in die Ministerien einziehen sehen. Die sollen nun den Frieden schließen, der jetzt geschlossen werden muß. Sie sollen die Suppe jetzt essen, die sie uns eingebrockt haben!*’”

⁵⁴ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235.

The impact on the officers was palpable and immediate. According to Thaer, it was so affectively overwhelming for the men gathered there, it produced an inadvertent moment of intense collective intimacy: “The effect of these words on the listeners was *indescribable!* While Ludendorff spoke, one heard hushed moans and sobbing, while for many, probably most, tears rolled involuntarily down their cheeks. I stood to the left of the General Intendant, General von Eisenhart. Involuntarily we had held each other’s hands. I squeezed his so hard I almost broke it.”⁵⁵ Despite Ludendorff’s overtly dour mood since August and Thaer’s own pessimistic assessments of the military situation since April, this report from the First Quartermaster-General came as a massive shock, one so intense it apparently reduced a roomful of Germany’s most-senior career officers to literal tears. Yet those tears were their own powerful evidence of the fact that these men *all recognized that Germany was defeated*, and in fact recognized it so deeply, they inadvertently and involuntarily breached their own internal codes of masculine and military affective decorum in the moment of that recognition. As Thaer himself put it: “I was completely beside myself.”⁵⁶

Indeed, the shock was so personally intense for Thaer that he actually followed Ludendorff into the next room and continued to breach his own sense of propriety: “I went after him immediately and—I had known him for so long—clasped his right upper-arm with both hands, which under other circumstances I would never have allowed of myself, and said: ‘Excellency, is this really the truth? Is this the last word? *Am I awake or dreaming?* This is too

⁵⁵ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235. Emphasis original. “Die Wirkung dieser Worte auf die Hörer war *unbeschreiblich!* Während L. sprach, hörte man leises Stöhnen und Schluchzen, vielen wohl den meisten, liefen unwillkürlich die Tränen über die Backen. Ich stand links Neben dem Generalintendanten Gen. v. Eisenhart. Unwillkürlich hatten wir uns an der Hand gefaßt. Ich habe die seine fast kaputt gedrückt.”

⁵⁶ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235. “Ich war völlig außer mir.”

horrible! What should happen now?!”⁵⁷ In a total reversal of their roles five months prior, it was now Ludendorff who had to convince Thaer of the dire state of the German Army: “He remained completely calm and mild and said to me with a deeply sad smile: ‘Alas it is so, and I see no other way out.’”⁵⁸ It thus appears that by 1 October 1918, at the latest, at least this subset of the Supreme Command had entered what Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls the “dreamland” of defeated nation-states: a “state of unreality” wherein “people are suffused, after their initial depression, with feelings of relief, liberation, and salvation that mirror their exhilaration at the beginning of the war” during the conflict’s unsuccessful conclusion.⁵⁹ While clearly at the beginning of this complex and contradictory affective state, Thaer nonetheless articulated its emergence in quite literal terms, experiencing the initial, explicit recognition of defeat as a fantastic nightmare of a particular kind: a potentiality so horrific as to be functionally considered impossible, were it not for the fact that it now stood before him as an indisputable reality, resulting in a larger sense of existential disorientation, desperation, and depression.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235. Emphasis added. “[G]ing ich ihm gleich nach und—ihm ja seit so lange bekannt—umfaßte ich mit beiden Händen seinen rechten Oberarm, was ich unter anderen Umständen mir doch nicht erlaubt hätte, und sagte: ‘Excellenz, ist das denn [sic] Wahrheit? Ist das das letzte Wort? Wache oder träume ich? Das ist ja zu entsetzlich! Was soll nun werden?!’”

⁵⁸ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235.

⁵⁹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Picador, 2003): 10-11. For his full discussion of “dreamland” and defeat: 10-14.

⁶⁰ I use the adjective “fantastic” here in the sense described by Tzvetan Todorov: the descriptor for a moment of encounter with the “supernatural,” i.e. with something which calls the perceived laws of reality into question, or, more simply, something perceived as (metaphysically) “impossible.” Such encounters with the fantastic thus force the protagonist to choose between one of two mutually exclusive possibilities: either the laws of reality have remained intact and what they’ve seen and experienced is an illusion of some kind (with the implication that one may have gone insane or otherwise lost the ability to accurately interpret and experience empirical reality), or reality and its laws--or, at a minimum, the protagonist’s understanding of them--are other than what one thought, and one must adopt a new metaphysical picture of reality as a result. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975 [1970]). The point here is not to argue that Thaer or anyone else directly or literally experienced defeat and its recognition as a “supernatural” event. Rather, the point is to highlight the particular disoriented emotional complex that comes with the human encounter with anything considered “impossible,” whether metaphysically or functionally. Incidentally, it is also worth noting here that Ludendorff appears to have gone through this process beginning, at the latest, on 8 August, which may in part explain his calm demeanor c. 29 September.

6.2 Thanatological Politics on the Cusp of Defeat

It was in this context that Thaer first implicitly raised the possibility of an *Endkampf* with Ludendorff, warning him that the “request for an armistice must have an awful impact on our troops, precisely on our best people and troops, because for these bravest of men, too, dying right before the end will be more difficult still, because the battle must go on yet.” Worse still, “for the rabble [*Kanaille*] at home it can still become the signal for a general rebellion.”⁶¹ Whatever was left of the “spider’s web of fighters” holding the ever-retreating German line would, in Thaer’s view, no longer be willing to sacrifice on the orders of their commanders after Germany sued for peace. Even the “bravest” of them could no longer be expected to fight once command made known that such sacrifice was indisputably futile—that it could in no way bring about a German victory, however defined. More than that, should the home front “rabble” erupt in rebellion and revolution, who would be left to quell the presumed chaos? According to Thaer, it was with these precise concerns in mind that Ludendorff had decided on his course, i.e. to try and “save his army” by ending—or at a minimum, pausing, as he would later claim—hostilities as quickly as possible:⁶² “My dear Thaer, you will trust me that *I*, myself, have seen all this before my own eyes a hundred times. It is however now my last hope, perhaps *the* straw I am grasping at, that

⁶¹ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 236. “Ich fügte hinzu: ‘Das Waffenstillstandsgesuch muß auf unsere Truppen schrecklich wirken, gerade auf unsere besten Leute und Truppen, denn auch für diese Tapfersten wird das Sterben so vor Toresschluß noch Schwerer, denn der Kampf muß doch weitergehen. Und für die Kanaille in der Heimat kann es doch das Signal zur allgemeinen Rebellion werden.’”

⁶² According to Imperial Germany’s final Chancellor, Max von Baden, Ludendorff told his liaison officer, Colonel Haefen, on 2 October that “I want to save my army” (*Ich will meine Armee retten*): Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente* (Berlin: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 1927): 340.

perhaps our army could, in this way, be spared being beaten unto annihilation, with all of the still far-worse consequences.”⁶³

In Thaer’s analysis, then, Ludendorff’s course at the end of September had *already* precluded the possibility of a German *Endkampf*, whatever the *Feldherr* would later claim. Thaer implicitly recognized that it was the expectation of and hope in the possibility of German *victory* that was so central to the troops’ morale on this ideational level, and thus to their willingness to continue obeying the chain of command. Absent that hope, increasing numbers of men sought escape from military authority however they could find it, hollowing out the army over the course of the summer and into the fall, and producing the drop in soldierly “quality” Thaer had been lamenting since April. This meant that the OHL was now left in “command” of an army that was, as a general proposition, no longer willing to sacrifice on its orders, i.e. a collective of armed men who would only *conditionally* accept the command authority of the military representatives of their state. Even the “bravest” could not be expected to willingly lay down their lives “right before the end,” and such “brave” men already appeared to be in extremely short supply by the end of Georgette. And if the troops were now unwilling to fight for an evermore-illusory prospect of victory, why would they be willing to do so *after* a decisive defeat—and one which would drastically increase their personal chances of death and mutilation in the process, at a point when such self-destruction could only ensure further loss?

These considerations directly belie Scott Stephenson’s argument that in the autumn of 1918, “the soldiers of the combat units of the *Westheer* were a relatively select group within a vast *Millionenheer*” in a militarily positive sense, since “Ludendorff had ensured the best of

⁶³ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 236. Emphasis original. “L. erwiderte: ‘Mein Lieber Thaer, Sie werden mir zutrauen, daß *ich* mir das alles hundertmal selbst vor Augen geführt habe. Es ist aber jetzt so meine letzte Hoffnung, vielleicht *der* Strohalm, an den ich mich klammere, daß vielleicht unserer Armee auf diese Weise erspart werden könnte, vernichtend geschlagen zu werden mit allen dann noch viel schlimmeren Folgen.’”

Germany's remaining soldiers were at the front at the beginning of that fateful year."⁶⁴ As Thayer and others noted in mid-April, the exact opposite was in fact the case, and it was only now, at the end of September, that Ludendorff had come to recognize it too. The concentration and continual deployment of Germany's "best" soldiers for the "Great Battle in France" earlier in the year had ensured that it was *precisely* those units which suffered the greatest losses and were thus hollowed out the most quickly and deeply—and it was *these* men Ludendorff now purported to be desperate to save.⁶⁵ Further, whatever replacements those units received, especially by the

⁶⁴ Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 50. It is also significant that Stephenson appears to uncritically accept the Imperial German Army's conception and definition of "good" soldiers, and thus with their characterization of what made for the "best" combatants.

⁶⁵ Wilhelm Deist, "The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth," trans. E.J. Feuchtwanger, *War in History* 3:2 (1996): 197. Deist pointed out this hollowing of the mobile divisions decades before Stephenson began work on his monograph. Stephenson, however, ignores this and virtually all of Deist's insights through the conflation of Deist, whose politics were left of center but was not even born until 1931, and Erich Otto Volkman, a far-right archivist and propagandist active from 1919 until his death in 1938, who served as a General Staff Officer during the First World War and argued for the reactionary side during the Weimar "historiography wars." This further suggests that Stephenson is unclear on how to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, let alone the methodological complexities necessarily attendant to working with either. As he writes, apparently unaware or unconcerned with 1) the radically changed contexts of the two works (first and foremost the Second World War and the Holocaust occurring between them); and 2) the fact that Deist was self-consciously producing a secondary work for scholarly discussion and debate, while Volkman was preparing an expressly politicized history to serve an explicit political agenda; and apparently viewing Volkman as a secondary author of greater validity than Deist, who only merits mention in Stephenson's view because his analysis is newer: "For a description of the discipline at and behind the front during the last days of the war, see [Erich Otto] Volkman, *Der Marxismus und das deutsche Heer [Marxism and the German Army]*, Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1925], 202-204. For a more recent interpretation: Wilhelm Deist, "Verdeckter Militärstreik im Kriegsjahr 1918?" in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Munich: Piper, 1995), 146-167. (Both accounts must be read with caution, because both authors have ideological reasons [albeit from different points of the political spectrum] to emphasize the disintegration in the German Army; Volkman in order to emphasize the extent of defeatist subversion and Deist to highlight the bankruptcy of the Hohenzollern system.)" Brackets and parentheses in original. All of Volkman's works are listed as "Other Secondary Sources" in his bibliography, alongside other apparent primary sources such as Gustav von Dickhuth-Harrach, ed. *Im Felde Unbesiegt* (Munich: Lehmanns Verlag, 1920) and Heinrich Marx, *Handbuch der Revolution in Deutschland 1918-1919* (Berlin: A. Grübel, 1919). This suggests that in addition to necessarily asking Stephenson to clarify what political agenda he himself is serving through this conflation of Weimar- and Nazi-era right-wing apologetics and (at most implicitly anti-militarist) scholarly analyses first published in 1986 and 1992 which remain historiographically pertinent (all the more since he implies that *his* work has no ideological inflections), all readers of his scholarship should be extremely wary of any and all of his analytic claims, based as they are on a foundation of such methodological confusion. Ironically, one must apply the care to reading Stephenson's work that he refused to apply to Volkman: reading carefully for what historical reconstructions can be gleaned from such a deeply and obviously flawed work, while largely if not entirely ignoring the author's stated interpretations of those reconstructed events except as primary source evidence for that historical present (and thus for what, in most cases, would be a different scholastic project entirely). On the Weimar "historiography wars" and their politics, see:

fall, did not come from any coterie of “elite” troops—there were no more to draw from—but from whatever undrafted men the OHL could find, wounded men declared “fit-for-service” once again, or through some other form of bureaucratic shuffling.

Stephenson’s claim that “those who survived and remained with their decimated battalions until the armistice did so in spite of opportunities to evade the danger at the front” to such an extent that “[t]hese circumstances, of themselves, suggest that many, perhaps most front-line soldiers used a different set of criteria to make their decisions about obedience and duty than the remainder of the army” thus appears quite untenable.⁶⁶ It is worth deconstructing his argument in some detail, however, because its untenability stems in large part from the assumptions Stephenson shares with the 1918 Supreme Command—that is, from the extent to which Stephenson appears to take the officer corps at their word as to the state of affairs in the German Army that fall. To dissect it, therefore, is to simultaneously probe the assumptive architecture of the officer corps in the autumn of 1918 *and* its subsequent residue within the current historiography.

First, Stephenson’s argument severely underestimates the danger of such evasions and the costs of their potential failure, particularly for deserters and especially for those stationed the furthest forward.⁶⁷ Indeed, the risks involved in escaping military authority were powerful behavioral blocks for many, and one of the key aspects that make desertion, in particular, such a

Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (Munich: Paderborn, 2002); Markus Pöhlmann, “Yesterday’s Battles and Future War: The German Official Military History, 1918-1939,” in *The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919-1939*, eds. Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶⁶ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 50.

⁶⁷ Ziemann provides a useful overview of these dangers and concerns through his discussions of soldiers’ “Refusal of Violence:” Ziemann, *Violence and the German Soldier*, 93-158, esp. 93-120.

weighty sign of dissatisfaction and the loss of legitimacy within the army.⁶⁸ Moreover, even in cases of outright *defection*, at least some men felt a sense of loyalty and responsibility to their comrades still toiling in the German Army. Dominik Richert, for example, refused to give any information to the French which could potentially endanger German troops after his defection because “I had deserted to save my life and not to betray my former comrades.”⁶⁹ Whether a soldier stayed or went, as it were, did not in-and-of-itself illustrate anything about the calculus for the decision or the relationships that soldier had with his fellows.⁷⁰

Second, as numerous internal reports had made abundantly clear for years by that point, ideational concerns were consistently secondary to mundane material ones when it came to soldiers’ morale. Indeed, the 5th Army’s postal surveillance report of 28 September 1917 summarized the point very directly: “The mood of the troops is dependent on three major factors: food, position (including rest quarters and service), [and] weather,”⁷¹ and those same concerns retained their primacy throughout the Spring Offensive, evidenced minimally in the widespread looting of enemy stores Thayer and Ludendorff discussed in May.⁷² Material, experiential circumstances played a much greater role in soldiers’ decision-making than either Stephenson or the OHL itself allowed for in their analyses of the situation. Immediate corporeal self-interest—access to what rations the German Army could still provide, relative shelter from enemy

⁶⁸ See: Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914-1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), esp. 109-251.

⁶⁹ Dominik Richert, *The Kaiser’s Reluctant Conscript: My experiences in the War 1914-1918*, trans. David Carrick Sutherland (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012 [1989]): 256.

⁷⁰ The final point is most pertinent in the case of those who stayed: their unwillingness to desert or otherwise shirk in an archivally documented way should not be read as some vote of confidence in or continued belief in the legitimacy of the Imperial state absent additional evidence, given the myriad and overdetermined reasons for any given soldier to stay his immediate behavioral course.

⁷¹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 17,” 24. “Die Stimmung der Truppen ist abhängig von drei großen Faktoren: Verpflegung, Stellung (einschließlich Ruhequartier und Dienst), Wetter.”

⁷² Thayer, *Generalstabdienst*, 198.

shellfire, access to medical care—as much as the “set of criteria to make their decisions about obedience and duty” could keep men in the German Army in the fall of 1918.⁷³

Third and finally, Stephenson follows the OHL in taking a narrow view of what constituted the political sphere, and therefore of what constituted meaningful political behavior amongst the soldiery in the dying days of the war. “Both the *Drückeberger* [shirkers] behind the line and the *Stammmannschaften* [cadres] in the trenches prayed that the politicians would work out a peace as soon as possible” he writes: “Therefore, in the last several weeks of the fighting, whether a soldier stayed with his unit or abandoned it, the political considerations influenced the decision. Yet the decision to stay or flee was rarely a political one.”⁷⁴ Ironically, Stephenson himself admits 1) that soldiers throughout the army were united in their desire to see the war end as quickly as possible; and 2) that the politics of a possible armistice *did* influence soldiers’ decisions, particularly around desertion. Nonetheless, he contradicts both accurate assessments in the very next sentence, seemingly assuming, like Ludendorff, that “political decisions” could only be those expressly motivated by explicit party-political actors or their overt ideologies.

The accusation that the Germany Army was “heavily contaminated by the poison of Spartacistic-socialist ideas,” as the First Quartermaster-General apparently claimed in his remarks to the gathered officers on 1 October, was thus an implicit statement of this myopic view of wartime politics, on top of, of course, being wildly inaccurate.⁷⁵ As Geyer notes, both on 29 September and afterward, Ludendorff “treated politics as he always did—as an extension of war-fighting.”⁷⁶ And while he clearly takes a less narrow view of the political than Ludendorff,

⁷³ Indeed, in the context of that year especially, Thær’s earlier assertion that “a confident mood is still actually the most important thing” appears more as a testament of faith than an empirical description of Germany’s military circumstances. Thær, *Generalstabdienst*, 196.

⁷⁴ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 65.

⁷⁵ As Stephenson acknowledges, even East German historiography was clear about the ineffectiveness of explicit political agitation amongst combat troops: Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 29-30, footnote 31.

⁷⁶ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 469.

Stephenson shares this basic myopia, writing: “By November 1918, issues such as the outcome of the war or the future of the German monarchy were secondary to life and death considerations, as well as the support of one’s comrades, cover from the rain, and the prospect of hot rations.”⁷⁷ Yet it was precisely those foundational thanatological issues that had driven soldiers’ increasing politicization *since before the offensive even began* and continued to escalate that politicization along an anti-state trajectory throughout the spring and summer. The issue of the “outcome of the war,” especially, had prompted a great many soldiers to turn their attention to politics for the first time, and in fact undergirded one of the soldiery’s earliest recorded political preferences that year: namely, opposition to the January strikes *out of fear they would prolong the war*.⁷⁸ Further, that escalating politicization had reached a critical mass of soldiers by July at the latest, when the military medical services were forced to take on policing duties to try and stem the tide of malingerers and shirkers, not in November on the eve of the armistice.⁷⁹

Most basically, the soldiers left in the *Westheer* in the fall of 1918 did not see “the outcome of the war or the future of the German monarchy”—especially the former—as separate or distinct from “life and death considerations.” Rather, those thanatological concerns formed the foundational point of orientation for soldierly politics in the fall of 1918, and in fact united their specific parochial issues with the quotidian concerns of the home front. As one soldier quoted in the 5th Army Postal Surveillance report of 28 September 1918 eloquently illustrated, Germany’s frontline troops not only produced complex socio-political interpretations of their circumstances, but also communicated their analyses to those at home, even with the threat of (in this case, successful) postal monitoring and censorship:

⁷⁷ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 65.

⁷⁸ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled “A. H. Qu., den 24. Februar 1918,” 44.

⁷⁹ *Sanitätsbericht II*, 758.

The [Habsburg] peace offer is unlikely to be received well. I hold that its purpose is not to bring about peace either, because under the present circumstances, it must fail due to the demands on both sides. But it is likely that the governments will get the nations [*die Völker*] behind them again for a while. Those at the top do not want peace for a long time, even if the nation [*das Volk*] would like it. But who is the nation [*das Volk*] and what is it there for? To keep its mouth shut and let them take what little it was able to laboriously acquire for itself. At home everything is squandered, wife and child half-starved because they couldn't push and hoard [*nicht schieben und hamstern können*], illnesses; these are things that transform all desire and interest into wrong. In any case, I have been converted from some views [*Anschauungen*] through the war. But that nevertheless means holding out whether one wants to or not. And that is bitter.⁸⁰

Even for those who did not *exclusively* (or perhaps even primarily) blame their domestic elites for the perpetuation of the war and their attendant suffering, that coterie was nonetheless included as a subset of 'those at the top.' A more expansive concept of responsibility was in no way inherently exoneratory of Germany's political and military elite, whatever the *Kaiserreich's* postal surveillance officers and later historians like Stephenson have assumed.

While approached from yet another angle, this soldier, too, articulately the political bifurcation taking place in Germany along the thanatological lines chiefly conditioned from above. Indeed, it was precisely *because* Field Army soldiers understood that the course of action determined and agreed on by Germany's domestic decision-makers about "the outcome of the war" and how to pursue it—which, as Thae's diary illustrates, various OHL officers also understood would affect "the future of the German monarchy" since at least the spring—had a *direct influence* on their "life and death considerations," both for themselves and for their loved ones at home, that gave soldiers' behavior its increasingly inherent political significance. Staying

⁸⁰ BA-MA RH 61/1035, report labelled "A. H. Qu., den 28. 9. 1918," 103. "Das Friedensangebot dürfte wohl nicht viel Anklang finden. Ich halte seinen Zweck auch nicht für den Frieden herbeizuführen, weil er unter den jetzigen [sic] Verhältnissen an den beiderseitigen Forderungen scheitern muß, wohl aber, daß die Regierungen die Völker wieder für eine Zeitlang hinter sich bekommen. Oben wollen die noch lange keinen Frieden wenn ihn auch das Volk möchte. Aber wer ist das Volk und wozu ist es denn da? Um Mundzuhalten und sich das bisschen [sic] noch nehmen zu lassen, was es sich mühsam erarbeitet hatte. Zu Hause verludert alles, Weib und Kind halb verhungert, weil sie nicht schieben und hamstern können, Krankheiten, daß sind Sachen die alle Lust und Interesse in das Verkehrte verwandeln. Jedenfalls ich bin auch durch den Krieg von manchen Anschauungen bekehrt. Aber trotzdem heißt gewollt oder ungewollt aushalten. Und das ist bitter."

with one's unit could often be the best way to ensure one's personal survival in the final days of the war, as it would be again in 1945,⁸¹ but that did not mean one relished the decision nor had any confidence in his state any longer, which had already "squandered" the resources of the "nation" and left a country of "half-starved" wives and children to return to if one survived. Quite the contrary: it left many "bitter" at being forced to "hold out" *independent of the macro-political circumstances*, and that bitterness was directed at those "at the top" who were ignoring the will of the "nation," in whose name they were ostensibly governing, and thus appeared to be continuing the war for their own ends.

Given that Germany, like every other belligerent in the autumn of 1918, had a mass conscript army, and one that had been left tapping every available source of manpower since the previous year, that army was actually representative of the German "nation in arms" to at least some extent in late 1918. While the army of course consisted only of men, and thus innately constituted a homosocial vision for and microcosm of the nation as a whole, those who made it up were necessarily drawn from across the nearly full socio-economic, geographical, and, by that point, generational spectrum of men within the territories the Imperial state controlled. And virtually all contemporary sources and subsequent historiography agree: by the end of September at the absolute latest, those men wanted an end to the war as soon as possible above all else, regardless of whether they were in the Field or Replacement Army. It was their *state* which no longer appeared to be responding to that will in any way, despite receiving numerous reports like that from the 5th Army.⁸²

⁸¹ See the discussion in: Michael Geyer, "Endkampf 1918 and 1945: German Nationalism, Annihilation, and Self-Destruction," in *No Man's Land of Violence: Extreme Wars in the 20th Century*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Bernd Weisbrod (Wallenstein Verlag, 2006).

⁸² As Ulrich and Ziemann note, while only the full set of postal surveillance reports survive for the 5th Army, evidence from other surviving reports from units at various levels, which have been preserved in a much more

Worse yet for those in any way invested in the *Kaiserreich's* continued existence as a political entity, many at home held nearly the same view of Germany's present circumstances as this exhausted and embittered soldier. One of them was the eighteen-year-old Ruth Hildebrand, who wrote in her diary on 11 September 1918:

There is no more happiness on earth as long as this war lasts. It is the greatest ruin that could come over the world. What are the people who move on the earth now! They bear their *fate* with listlessness, with silent despair. Is not driving you insane when all you see amongst the people is unhappiness! The men sacrifice their jobs, their careers, the happiness of their families; all the little everyday joys that make life more beautiful. They sacrifice their lives forward, at the front, and if they return home after a few days, they have become other people. The terrible agitation and deprivation has destroyed their nerves. They are numbed to all impressions. And the women—the women of the upper classes and also of the common people are often fighting heroes; against a world of unhappiness, they stand alone and must suffer not only psychologically, but also bodily. And the children, who see their mothers' dreams, what will become of them? Does not a shadow also fall on their sunny childhood? The lowly people rises up, the mob becomes master of the land. Where does justice and fairness remain? The world is full of lies and it's all the war's fault.⁸³

As she had previously done in early April, this young woman poured her anxieties and despondency into her diary. In the process, she captured not only the omnipresence of that “silent despair” across *Front und Heimat* and its human circuits of transmission, but also translated the

fragmentary form, paint a quite similar picture. Most notably, the postal surveillance report for the German 6th Army, also stationed on the Western Front as part of Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, from 4 September 1918 stated outright: “War weariness and depression are general phenomena. The letter writers have accepted for themselves the naked truth that: ‘We can’t be victorious’ and partly even combine this with the opinion that Germany must be defeated.” Bernd Ulrich and Benjamin Ziemann, eds. *German Soldiers in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, trans. Christine Brocks (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2010): 178.

⁸³ DTA 1419-2 (1280-2), 21-22. Emphasis original. “Es gibt keine Fröhlichkeit mehr auf Erden solange dieser Krieg dauert. Es ist das größte Verderben das über die Welt kommen konnte. Was sind die Menschen noch, die sich auf der Erde bewegen! Sie tragen ihr *Schicksal* mit Unlust, mit stiller Verzweiflung. Ist es nicht zum wahnsinnig werden, wenn man unter den Menschen all das Unglück sieht! Die Männer opfern ihren Beruf, ihre Laufbahn, das Glück ihrer Familie, alle kleinen Freuden des Alltags, die das Leben verschönen, sie opfern ihr Leben da vorn an der Front u. wenn sie auf Tage in die Heimat zurückkommen, sind sie andere Menschen geworden, die furchtbaren Erregungen u. Entbehrungen haben ihre Nerven zerstört, sie gegen alle Eindrücke abgestumpft - und die Frauen — die Frauen der höheren Stände u. auch die aus dem Volk sind oft kämpfende Helden; gegen eine Welt von Unglück stehen sie allein und nicht nur selisch [sic] auch körperlich müssen sie leiden, u. die Kinder, die der Mütter Träume sehen, was wird aus denen? Fällt da nicht auch ein Schatten in ihre sonnige Kinderzeit! Das niedrige Volk erhebt sich, der Pöpel [sic] wird Herr im Lande. Wo bleibt Gericht u. Gerechtigkeit, voll Lügen ist die Welt u. alles das hat der Krieg verschuldet.”

broader grievances articulated in the 5th Army's postal surveillance reports of 31 August and 28 September directly into the language of sacrifice. Her detailing of what German men, specifically, had given up went a long way towards explaining *why* the experiences of 1918 could and did “transform all desire and interest into wrong” for a great many German soldiers. As Hildebrand poignantly articulated, when soldiers “sacrificed” their lives, they did so literally: giving up “jobs,” “careers,” “the happiness of their families”—all the socio-economic and affective activities and connections that make up the “living” of a life—*even if they survived*. Indeed, her description of psychologically damaged soldiers as “numbed to all impressions” captured quite precisely the implicit affective sacrifices demanded by the state since the beginning of the war and the home front's evermore dour perception of it in the conflict's twilight hour. Even those who biologically survived had already sacrificed their lives—their social, psychological, and emotional lives as they were before the war. If they did not survive, then those specific losses of “the little everyday joys that make life more beautiful” became not only permanent and indisputably irrevocable, but futile as well; part of the war's globe-spanning “ruin.”

Further, those sacrifices by Germany's military men begat further sacrifices that necessarily reverberated both intergenerationally and geographically across front and home. Indeed, Hildebrand spelled out the affective consequences for the women and children in Germany of living under conditions where one necessarily needed to “push and hoard” to avoid being left “half-starved” or worse.⁸⁴ “They stand alone and must suffer not only psychologically, but also bodily.” And this in turn cast a “shadow” over the next generation, who grew up seeing

⁸⁴ Belinda Davis has explored these home front dynamics in detail for Berlin and highlights the essential role “women of lesser means” played in the revolution: Belinda J. Davis, *Home Fires Burning: Food, Politics, and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

their mothers' suffering with their fathers absent, but also matured in circumstances of often-dire material deprivation that had its own social and corporeal effects on Germany's youth.⁸⁵ But for Hildebrand, like the OHL, this was terrifying as much for its potential political consequences as its human ones. The fear that by producing such *national* suffering, increasingly understood as such, the war—notably abstracted from any of its decidedly human causes in Hildebrand's rendering—had now destroyed so much that it could potentially release the power of the “mob” of “lowly people” (*niedrige Volk*) and leave a world devoid of “justice and fairness,” was not solely an anxiety held by the Supreme Command. Yet even framed in terms of “sacrifice” as opposed to “squandering”—i.e. from divergent *moral* perspectives—her sketch of the *conditions* reigning in Germany was nearly identical to that of the embittered 5th Army soldier: the “people” or “nation” (*Volk*) pulling apart from the ostensible nation-*state* as a result of the tribulations of the war. And it was in *this* context that the heads of the OHL, the Kaiser, and the civilian government collectively decided *not* to fight to the last man for the first time, initiating the “beginning of the end” of the war.

6.3 Armistice Notes and *Endkampf* Debates

The first high-political effect of this implicit rejection of national suicide by the *Kaiserreich*'s military and political leaders on 29 September 1918 was the ascension to power of Imperial Germany's final Chancellor, Prince Max von Baden, four days later, on 3 October.⁸⁶ Von Baden led a new, much more politically inclusive cabinet, which included members of the Catholic

⁸⁵ Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 191-1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁸⁶ Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen und Dokumente* (Berlin: Deutsche-Verlags-Anstalt, 1927): 335-352.

Center Party (*Deutsche Zentrumspartei*), Progressive People's Party (*Fortschrittliche Volkspartei*, FVP), and National Liberal Party (*Nationalliberale Partei*, NLP), as well as Philipp Scheidemann of the Majority Social Democrats (MSPD) as a state secretary without portfolio: the same coterie of parties behind the Reichstag Peace Resolution the year before.⁸⁷ The same day he became Chancellor, and after some initial resistance, von Baden then sent a note to the American President, Woodrow Wilson, via Switzerland, requesting the immediate armistice demanded by the OHL.⁸⁸ Echoing Ludendorff's urgency, recommended tack, and language from the 1 October officers' meeting, the note stated:

The German government appeals to the President of the United States of America to take the establishment of peace into his hands by informing all warring states of this appeal and to invite them to dispatch plenipotentiaries in order to initiate negotiations. It accepts that program which the President of the United States of America established in the congressional address of 8 January 1918 and in later enunciations, namely the speech from 27 September, [i.e. Wilson's fourteen points] as the basis for peace negotiations.

In order to avoid further bloodshed, the German government requests to bring about an immediate conclusion of an armistice on land, sea, and air.⁸⁹

Thus, on the night of 3-4 October 1918, Imperial Germany officially began the diplomatic process to bring the war to an end.

Wilson did not reply until five days later, on 8 October.⁹⁰ In the interim, this *implicit rejection* of national suicide by Germany's military and political leaders, now instantiated in German diplomatic policy, sparked a series of *explicit debates* on the subject once news of von

⁸⁷ See the concise narrative overview in: Robert Gerwarth, *November 1918: The German Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 68-70.

⁸⁸ Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 352. See also: Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014): 547; Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 70.

⁸⁹ Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 352. "Die deutsche Regierung ersucht den Präsidenten der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika, die Herstellung des Friedens, in die Hand zu nehmen, alle Kriegsführenden Staaten von diesem Ersuchen in Kenntnis zu setzen und sie zur Entsendung von Bevollmächtigten zwecks Anbahnung von Verhandlungen einzuladen. Sie nimmt das von dem Präsident der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika in der Kongreßbotschaft vom 8. Januar 1918 und in seinen späteren Kundgebungen, namentlich der Rede vom 27. September, aufgestellte Programm als Grundlage für die Friedensverhandlungen an. |Um weiteres Blutvergießen zu vermeiden, ersucht die Deutsche Regierung, den sofortigen Abschluß eines Waffenstillstandes zu Lande, zu Wasser und in der Luft herbeizuführen."

⁹⁰ See: Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 387-403.

Baden's armistice note became public on 5 October.⁹¹ These debates took place on two interrelated but distinct tiers, and centered on the merits and possible forms of an *Endkampf*: an expressly suicidal "final battle," fought past the point of military defeat, but which would allegedly salvage Germany's "honor."⁹² The first was a high political one, wherein the army, navy, and civilian governments all argued the question internally, amongst themselves. The second was a popular one, where various public figures and politicians debated the issue in the country's newspapers alongside numerous others discussing it in their private correspondence. And one man was responsible for kicking off the debate on both tiers: Walther Rathenau, founder and head of the War Raw Materials Department (*Kriegsrohstoffabteilung*).

Rathenau first drafted an essay titled "Time is of the Essence" (*Die Stunde drängt*) upon learning about the formation of the von Baden government and the OHL's armistice initiative.⁹³ In it, he argued that "[p]opular resistance, a national defense, the insurrection of the masses is to be organized. Not for the purpose of prolonging the war, but for peace. For a dignified peace."⁹⁴ While this article was never published, Rathenau immediately circulated it amongst Berlin's elites, and it entered Cabinet discussions on 6 October, when Finance Minister Siegfried von Roedern introduced it as "Rathenau's call for a *levée en masse*."⁹⁵ The piece therefore kicked off the explicit high-political conversation around *Endkampf* in earnest *immediately after* the OHL

⁹¹ Käthe Kollwitz marked the event in her diary on 5 October 1918, noting simply: "The Reichstag gathers. Imperial Chancellor Max von Baden makes an armistice offer to Wilson [*Der Reichstag tritt zusammen. Reichskanzler Max von Baden macht ein Waffenstillstandsangebot an Wilson*]." Käthe Kollwitz, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Jutta Bohnke-Kollwitz (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1989): 375.

⁹² This was principally derived from historical memories of the "martyrdom of Magdeburg" during the Thirty Years' War. On the siege of Magdeburg and its place within the historiography the First World War generation drew on, see: Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007): 141-177; on the relation between this historiography and the "second Thirty Years War" thesis and framing: 224-231.

⁹³ Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 482.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 482.

⁹⁵ Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 482.

had persuaded von Baden to initiate a course of diplomatic action intentionally designed to foreclose that very self-destructive possibility.⁹⁶ In Rathenau's internally-circulated vision, this final mobilization would tap Germany's last dwindling pools of manpower through a "new" appeal which did not rely on coercion from "army bullies, naval enthusiasts, or movie producers," but would instead promote dutiful volunteerism.⁹⁷ "Insurrection in national defense is the duty. The country is unexhausted. Not all forces, not all hearts are at the front. Cities, railway stations, offices, rears are full of people, field-grey and city-grey."⁹⁸ In the view he presented to his fellow Imperial elites, Germans could "endure the war as long as we want."⁹⁹

While "Time is of the Essence" never went to press and functioned more as an internal memo, a different piece making a near-identical argument appeared in the center-right newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* the following day, 7 October.¹⁰⁰ That piece, titled "A Dark Day" (*Ein dunkler Tag*), urged the German public: for "[t]he defense of the nation, an insurrection of the people must be [...] initiated [...]. There is absolutely no time for delay."¹⁰¹ This "insurrection" (*Erhebung*) would be the rallying of the German people's "will to self-assertation and self-determination in liberty" he contended to *Vossische Zeitung*'s middle-class readers, and thus could not and would not be a sacrifice for such crass material aims as "the usurpation of

⁹⁶ This may explain, in part, why Rathenau attacked Ludendorff in the piece, echoing—perhaps inadvertently—the earlier critique of the Chief of Staff of Army Group German Crown Prince, Friedrich Graf von Schulenburg, when he asserted that "[t]hose who lost their nerve must be replaced." Quoted in Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 483. "Wer die Nerven verloren hat, muß ersetzt werden." On Schulenburg's earlier criticism: *Ibid.*, 470-471.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 483.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 483, footnote 104.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 483, footnote 104. "Wir halten den Krieg beliebig lange aus."

¹⁰⁰ Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 482.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 459. "Die nationale Verteidigung, die Erhebung des Volkes muß eingeleitet...werden. ... [Es] darf kein Tag verloren gehen."

global hegemony.”¹⁰² As Geyer summarizes, it was a vision of war “fought for subjective or emotional war aims such as dignity or integrity.”¹⁰³

The initiative failed immediately. Only two days later, on 9 October, von Baden asked Ludendorff directly about Rathenau’s proposal as articulated in the *Vossische Zeitung*. The First Quartermaster-General apparently replied that a “*levée en masse* would destroy more than one can tolerate.” He therefore “did not expect anything from a *levée en masse*” and remained opposed to the idea.¹⁰⁴ Apparently anticipating one of the core demands that would come with Wilson’s second note of 14 October, according to von Baden, it was still “Ludendorff’s opinion” on the 9th that it was “better to clear out than break [*Lieber räumen als abbrechen*].”¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, what was most significant was that Rathenau had “pushed the issue of popular insurrection onto the political stage and into the public realm,” as Geyer observes.¹⁰⁶ He had, in effect, introduced the question of *Endkampf*—and therefore the broader question of collective self-destruction—to both the German nation and the rulers of the ostensible nation-state in the war’s twilight hour, at a moment when that nation in almost all its various imaginings was being riven from that state by the thanatological consequences of four years of global conflict.

Wilson’s second note demonstrated that the OHL’s vision of the peace process barely warranted the title of pipe dream. Indeed, it showed that their approach, at least as they had articulated it to both their staff officers and the heads of state and government from 29 September to 1 October, could in no way bring about any of its desired outcomes. The American President made clear that it was the Allies who would set the terms for an armistice, and that a

¹⁰² Quoted in Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 484.

¹⁰³ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 484.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 485.

¹⁰⁵ Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 395.

¹⁰⁶ Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 483.

ceasefire would need to preserve the current Allied military advantage.¹⁰⁷ More than that, the final paragraph made clear that Germany's domestic politics would require further alteration as a precondition for any armistice:

It is necessary, also, in order that there may be no possibility of misunderstanding, that the President should very solemnly call the attention of the Government of Germany to the language and plain intent of one of the terms of peace which the German Government has now accepted. It is contained in the address of the President delivered at Mount Vernon on the Fourth of July last. It is as follows: "The destruction of every arbitrary power anywhere that can separately, secretly, and of its single choice disturb the peace of the world; or, if it cannot be presently destroyed, at least its reduction to virtual impotency." The power which has hitherto controlled the German Nation is of the sort here described. It is within the choice of the German Nation to alter it. The President's words just quoted naturally constitute a condition precedent to peace, if peace is to come by the action of the German people themselves.¹⁰⁸

The note of 14 October had, in effect, "framed the hard choice" for both the German state and the German nation quite directly, and for the first time: "Take a risk in order to win the desired benefits, or be safe, do nothing, and get nothing," as Jane McAlevey describes in abstract.¹⁰⁹

In this instance though, the "hard choice" was even more existential in both a micro-corporeal and macro-political sense. The latter was more obvious. While the note did not specify what or whom actually constituted the "arbitrary power" which had thus far "controlled the German Nation" in the opinion of the American President, it strongly implied that this referred to the Kaiser, and perhaps also the third OHL, and was understood as such by Germany's leaders.¹¹⁰ It thus further implied, but did not yet explicitly specify, that the abdication of the

¹⁰⁷ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 70-73; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 548-549.

¹⁰⁸ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1918, Supplement 1, Volume I, The World War, ed. Joseph V. Fuller (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993): Document No. 285, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1918Supp01v01/d304> (accessed 4 November 2023). Max von Baden includes the full German translation of the note in his 1927 memoir: Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 407-408.

¹⁰⁹ Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016):36.

¹¹⁰ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 70-73; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 548-549.

Kaiser was a pre-condition for peace.¹¹¹ Wilson's second note thus strongly intimated that on this macro-level, there would be no way to save the *Kaiserreich* as a state. Given the vision of Germany's dire circumstances the OHL articulated at the end of September, the choice was between a "peace at any price"—and a price now likely to include the continued existence of the Imperial German state in any form recognizable or desirable to this "officer caste"—which was essentially a surrender to the Allies and a submission to their peace terms, but which might keep "the" army intact as a semi-controllable entity; or a peace "by the action of the German people themselves," which in the minds of many of these men meant ceding political power to the increasingly undisciplined, armed masses that constituted the Field Army, already shot through with "Spartacistic-socialist ideas" in Ludendorff's opinion. Already by 14 October, the high-political "hard choice" appeared to be between capitulation and revolution: between two forms of death for the Imperial state.

But on the micro-level, this choice dove-tailed quite directly with the thanatological question becoming the evermore decisive influence on German soldiers' political behavior: "How do I best ensure my own survival?" In a context where one's sacrifice *could not* contribute to a German victory, however defined, continued obedience to one's military superiors often seemed to promise only self-destruction—even if one survived, as Hildebrand so evocatively noted. There was thus a series of "hard choices" being framed in an overdetermined manner on this micro-level that were setting the baseline conditions of possibility for any of the approaches to the end of the war being debated by the political and military elites, or, for that matter, the public at large. As a critical mass (or more) of Germany's fighting men now prioritized their own personal survival above all other concerns, they came to face the same question as Dominik

¹¹¹ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 73.

Richert at the end of July: if I continue to obey the chain of command, will it increase the probability of my survival? And as more and more had shown through increasingly diverse means since May, the answer in a great many sectors was a resounding “no.”

But even in places where discipline remained intact, like the majority of the forwardmost lines, this same implicit thanatological calculus operated.¹¹² What this meant on the most foundational level, then, was that military discipline had become contingent on the extent to which it could enhance a given soldier’s chances of survival, at least as a general proposition. And this put the military and the state it served in a deeply precarious position. As the armed wing of the state and the wielder of its violence, the military *required* a mass of people to be willing to risk their own death and mutilation to kill on its orders for it to be able to perform its function on even the most rudimentary level. In the absence of a sacrificial consensus, and thus with no “higher” logic to supersede an individual’s survivalist one, this necessary mass began to dissipate and discipline increasingly became a matter of circumstance, not course. Thus, in direct contrast to what the *Kaiserreich*’s leaders and subsequent historians like Stephenson assumed, these individual calculations about how to stay alive were actually *upstream* of any military or political policy. As Deist noted, analyses which are “based on decisions at the top, pay insufficient attention to the instrument the military leaders had to use, *the army itself*.”¹¹³ And precisely for this reason, the quotidian thanatological concerns of the men who made up that

¹¹² Even Stephenson admits as much: “The front-line troops wanted an end to their ordeal and an opportunity to go home. Nothing else really mattered, and that was a fundamental reason why political agitation among the combat units fell largely on deaf ears. Men overwhelmed by fatigue and war-weariness were more willing to surrender or straggle behind the line.” Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 30. This is part of his broader argument that “In the fall of 1918, each of these men was confronted with a stark choice: continue to fight against overwhelming enemy forces in a war that was clearly lost, or abandon unit and comrades to seek some sort of life-preserving alternative in surrender, desertion, or mutiny.” *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹³ Wilhelm Deist, “The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth,” trans. E.J. Feuchtwanger, *War in History* 3:2 (1996): 186-187. Emphasis added.

“instrument” were *inextricably linked* with both the war’s ultimate outcome *and* the Germany monarchy’s future.

But that did not stop Wilson’s second note from shifting the *Endkampf* debates Rathenau had precipitated the week before. On the high political level, Ludendorff now performed a total about-face in a contentious War Cabinet debate on 17 October.¹¹⁴ He now argued that Germany would get better peace conditions if it continued fighting, and that while it remained possible that the allies could breakthrough, it was no longer the imminent threat it had been three weeks prior.¹¹⁵ The Chancellor, however, remained dedicated to the course Ludendorff and the OHL had already committed them to. As Alexander Watson summarizes, “Prince Max was determined to pursue the approach to Wilson to the end. The first note of 3 October had raised popular expectations of peace that could not be disappointed without provoking a dangerous wave of anger and Ludendorff had been unable to justify why fighting on should secure a better peace.”¹¹⁶ At the same time, Wilson’s second note galvanized the naval high command to begin seriously thinking about a final desperate confrontation with the British Navy in the North Sea, which even then they understood to be suicidal. “Even if it is not to be expected that this will bring a decisive turn in the course of events,” a naval strategy document of 16 October stated, “nonetheless it is from a moral perspective a question of the Navy’s honour and existence that it does its utmost in the final battle.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ The full minutes of this War Cabinet meeting can be found in: Bundesarchiv (Hauptdienststelle), Koblenz (hereafter: BA-K) N 1089/63 Nachlass Arnold Brecht, *Vorgeschichte des Waffenstillstands und Revolution*, “Sitzung des erweiterten Kriegskabinetts vom 17. Oktober 1918” (hereafter: 17 Oct 1918 Cabinet Meeting), 1-41. The full transcript was also published in: Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 419-452. Concisely summarized in: Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 549.

¹¹⁵ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 549.

¹¹⁶ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 550.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 552.

More importantly however, the disappointment of Wilson's second note escalated the popular *Endkampf* debate taking place on the home front. In Berlin, at least some sensed the contours of the coming debate before the discussion-proper even emerged. The artist Käthe Kollwitz, who had previously helped convince her husband Karl to allow their younger son, Peter—killed in combat on 22 October 1914—to volunteer for the army during the “August Euphoria,” noted in her diary already on 1 October that there was a “terribly oppressive atmosphere in politics” and “defeat on the Western Front.”¹¹⁸ “Germany stands before the end,” she wrote: “Contradictory feelings. Germany is losing the war.”¹¹⁹ Ironically, Kollwitz reached the same conclusion—and at the same time—as Ludendorff, despite coming from opposing political circles and motivations: “What will happen now? Will the patriotic feeling flare up again so much that a defense to the last will begin? [...] It seems like insanity to me when the game is lost to not abandon it and save what there still is to save. The youth who still live, Germany must keep, otherwise it will be absolutely impoverished. Therefore, *not another day of war* when one recognizes that it is lost.”¹²⁰

But according to Kollwitz, the effect of Wilson's second note in the capital pushed in the exact opposite direction. She wrote in her diary on 15 October: “Wilson's answer. Wicked disappointment. The mood [*Stimmung*] for defensive war to the end grows. I'm writing against it. On 15 October Aunt Toni died. Fierce flu epidemic. Karl [her husband, a medical doctor] saw

¹¹⁸ Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 374. “Furchtbar drückende Atmosphäre in der Politik. Niederlagen an der Westfront.”

¹¹⁹ Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 374. “Deutschland steht vor dem Ende. Widersprechendste Gefühle. Deutschland verliert den Krieg.”

¹²⁰ Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 374. Emphasis original. “Was kommt nun? Wird das patriotische Gefühl noch einmal so aufflammen, daß eine Verteidigung bis zum letzten einsetzt? [...] Wahnsinn käm es mir vor, wenn das Spiel verloren ist, es nicht abubrechen und zu retten, was noch zu retten ist. Die Jugend, die noch lebt, muß Deutschland behalten, sonst verarmt es absolute. Darum *nicht einen Tag weiter Krieg*, wenn man erkennt, daß [er] verloren ist.”

150 sick patients in one day.”¹²¹ Even as thanatological reality continued to belie Rathenau’s claim that “cities, railway stations, offices, rears are full of people, field-grey and city-grey” who could and should volunteer for a “national insurrection,” Kollwitz nonetheless saw the idea begin to gain steam. At least in the Empire’s capital, when faced with the now inescapably binary choice between ending the war or trying to in some way vindicate the sacrifices made during the fight, significant elite circles—not just political, but also social and cultural, and across the explicit political spectrum—began to opt for the latter in their mid-October rhetoric.

Yet the entire debate on both its tiers was a mirage, the discussion of a fantasy. Within the army itself, a pair of contemporaneous suicides—one in the Saxon Army, the other in the Württemberger contingent—illustrated the degree to which any version of *Endkampf* was a nonstarter, regardless of a soldier’s expressed politics. The first occurred on 15 October, when an N.C.O. in the Saxon Army “shot himself in the head with his lover in the Park Hotel in Leipzig,” two months shy of his twenty-second birthday.¹²² According to the report sent to the Deputy General Command of the XIX Army Corps on 17 October and received the following day, this young man “was declared unfit for duty [*Kriegsunbrauchbar*] on 26 September 1918 because his right lower-leg [*rechte Unterschenkel*] was amputated.”¹²³ But that was not the end of his military service: “At his own request, in order to be able to continue serving the Fatherland, a doctor cleared him for office work [*Bürodienst*],” and so he had remained in the army until his self-

¹²¹ Kollwitz, *Tagebücher*, 376. “Wilson’s Antwort. Böse Enttäuschung. Die Stimmung für Verteidigungskreis bis zum Ende wächst. Ich schreibe dagegen. Am 15. Oktober Dienstag ist Tante Toni gestorben. Heftige Grippeepidemie. Karl 10 Tage.”

¹²² Sächsisches Staatsarchiv-Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (hereafter: SStA-HD) 11352 Stellvertretendes Generalkommando des XIX. Armeekorps, Nr. 1292 ‘Selbstmorde, Unglücksfälle, Krankheiten, Beerdigungen und Entlassung Genesener aus dem Lazarett,’ report labeled “Leipzig, den 17. Oktober 1918. | Gericht des I. Ers.-Batls. | Inf.-Regts. ‘König Georg’ Nr. 106 | Dem | stellv. Generalkommando des XIX A.K. | Leipzig.” All the following details come from that report, which is the one surviving record of this suicide. “Der am 18.12. 1896 geborene Unteroffizier der 8.Komp. [F.B.] hat sich am 15.10.18 gegen Abend im Parkhotel zu Leipzig mit seiner Geliebten durch Kopfschuss erschossen.”

¹²³ Ibid. “[Er] war am 26.9.18 als kriegsunbrauchbar, da ihm der rechte Unterschenkel amputiert war.”

inflicted death.¹²⁴ According to the report, it was not the amputation, but the clear and impending German defeat which caused his suicide: “About the motive for the suicide, only so much is known thus far. He indicated in a letter to his mother that *he could no longer live to see the conclusion of an unfavorable peace for us*. He therefore wanted to depart from this life.”¹²⁵ The report then concluded by noting that “[s]o far, the suicide has not been covered in the press.”¹²⁶

Few individuals better embodied the state of the German Army in mid-October 1918 than this young man. In a literal sense, he personified the continuation and escalation of the conditions behind Ludendorff’s initial push for an armistice at the end of September. As the *Feldherr* had told Thaer and his fellow officers two weeks prior, “he [Ludendorff] now clearly recognized that the continuation of the war is useless,” and thus “takes the position that an end must be made as quickly as possible *to not unnecessarily sacrifice the bravest people who are still loyal and able to fight*.”¹²⁷ Here, presumably, was one of “the bravest people” Ludendorff did not wish to “unnecessarily sacrifice:” one “loyal” enough to *voluntarily* continue his military service even after being *permanently maimed* in the course of that service. And yet this was precisely the point. However “brave” and “loyal” soldiers like the Saxon N.C.O. may have been in the eyes of someone like Ludendorff, he was no longer “able to fight” by the time the First Quartermaster-General changed his stance on *Endkampf*, and this made him irrelevant for any potential future military operation. Even more importantly, the fact that he was only declared

¹²⁴ Ibid. “Auf eigenen Wunsch, um dem Vaterland weiter dienen zu können, hatte er sich vom Arzt av.H.Burodienst [sic] schreiben lassen.”

¹²⁵ Ibid. Emphasis added. “Ueber die Beweggründe zum Selbstmord ist bisher nur soviel bekannt geworden, dass er in einem Brief an seine Mutter angibt, *er könne den für uns ungünstigen Friedensschluss nicht mehr erleben*, er wolle deshalb aus dem Leben scheiden.”

¹²⁶ Ibid. “Bisher ist der Selbstmord in der Presse nicht behandelt worden.”

¹²⁷ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 235. Emphasis added. “Er habe sich nie gescheut, von der Truppe Äußerstes zu verlangen. Aber nachdem er jetzt klar erkenne, daß die Fortsetzung des Krieges nutzlos sei, stehe er nun auf dem Standpunkte, daß *schnellstens* Schluß gemacht werden müsse, um nicht noch unnötigerweise gerade noch die tapfersten Leute zu opfern, die noch treu und kampffähig seien.”

“unfit-for-duty” on 26 September, after his amputation, strongly suggests that this N.C.O. was a direct casualty of Ludendorff’s delayed action after the “black day” at Amiens. He was thus one more individual example of Ludendorff “unnecessarily sacrificing” both “the bravest people who are still loyal” *and* those still “able to fight.” Indeed, this N.C.O. had already done all he could do after his amputation by taking on administrative duties in the rear, which could then potentially free up another “able-bodied” man for combat service at the ever-receding front.

But as the contemporaneous suicide of a thirty-year-old conscript in the Württemberger *Landsturm* illustrated, “able-bodied” had not only become a highly flexible concept by this point in the conflict. For at least some of those who fell under the category in the war’s dying days, it could appear as a functional death sentence. According to the initial report by the man’s Convalescence Squadron Leader (*Genesenden-Eskadronsführer*), dated 17 October 1918, the conscript in question had reported there on 30 September for a fifteen-day recovery leave (*Erholungsurlaub*), which began on 2 October.¹²⁸ He returned from this leave on 15 October, after which “he was presented to the departmental doctor on the morning of 16 October 1918 in order to determine his fitness for duty. This same doctor declared him ‘fit for service’” (*Kriegsverwendungsfähig*).¹²⁹ When he then failed to report for duty later that afternoon, his absence “was noted,” though the report does not specify by whom. After the man did not appear for the next three roll calls, he was consequently reported as missing to the Lieutenant in charge of the squadron.¹³⁰ The surviving documentation does not specify when, where, or by whom this

¹²⁸Landesarchiv Baden-Württemberg Hauptstaatsarchiv Stuttgart (hereafter LBW-HS) M 77/1 Bü 1058 Meldungen über Unglücksfälle, Selbstmorde und Erschießung von Kriegsgefangenen in Notwehr, report labelled “Abschrift. | Train Ersatz Abteilung 13 Genes.Eskadron | Ludwigsburg, den 17.10.18.”

¹²⁹ Ibid. “Am 15.10.18 nachte vom urlaub zurückkommend, wurde er am 16.10.18 vormittags dem Abteilungsarzt zwecks Feststellung seiner Dienstfähigkeit vorgestellt. Dieselbe lautete ‘kv’.”

¹³⁰ Ibid. “Bei der Einteilung zum Arbeitsdienst nachmittags ¼ 1 Uhr wurde das Fehlen des [G.L.] bemerkt. | Nachfragen im Laufe des Nachmittags, beim Apell um 6 Uhr nachm. und abends waren ergebnislos. Das Gleiche auch am 17.10.18 vorm.6.3 Uhr beim Apell. Hierauf meldete der stellvertretenden Nachtmeister, Sergeant [D], um 10 Uhr vorm. dem Eskadronführer, Herrn Leutnant [B], das Fehlen des Mannes.”

soldier's body was found, but according to the statistical compendium of suicides and attempts in the Württemberger Army, the conscript shot himself sometime after his inspection on 16 October.¹³¹

A short-follow up report from 18 October then speculated on the reason for the suicide: “It is the point of view of the department that the suicide may have been committed in a placid state of depression, possibly the due to the latest outbreak of the chronic STD from which [he] had already suffered for years.”¹³² The soldier's muster roll, included with this set of reports, further specified that the man had been conscripted in May 1917, but had already been treated for “chronic gonorrhoea” (*chronisch. Tripper*) twice, first from 28 August to 25 September 1917, then again a year later, from 17 to 30 August 1918. The muster roll also lists two other hospital stays—one from 7 to 14 August 1917, the other from 1 to 27 September 1918—but does not specify a reason.¹³³ Ultimately, however, whatever evidence the relevant authorities found pertaining to the motive appeared inconclusive. The “reason” for the man's suicide was listed in the Württemberger compendium as “unknown” (*unbekannt*).¹³⁴

Here was in many ways the equal and opposite case of the Saxon N.C.O.: an officially “able-bodied” man who opted for death rather than continue his military service to the Imperial State. Yet the temporal and thanatological particulars highlighted the same underlying military and political reality as his Saxon counterpart. Whatever form it might take, *these* would be the

¹³¹ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470 ‘Namensliste zu Selbstmorden und Selbstmordversuchen aus den Kriegsjahren 1914-1918 und Nachkriegsjahr 1919 des württembergischen Heeres sowie Kriegsgefangener.’ Section I, Lf. Nr. 173.

¹³² LBW-HS M 77/1 Bü 1058 Meldungen über Unglücksfälle, Selbstmorde und Erschießung von Kriegsgefangenen in Notwehr, report labelled “Train Ersatz Abteilung 13 | J. Nr. 19886 | Ludwigsburg, den 18.10.18.” “Nach Ansicht der Abteilung dürfte der Selbstmord in einem gemüthlichen [sic] Depressionszustand verübt worden sein, möglich, daß letzterer durch die chronische Geschlechtskrankheit, an welcher [er] schon jahrelang leidet, ausgelöst worden ist.”

¹³³ LBW-HS M 77/1 Bü 1058, “Auszug | aus der | Kreigs-Stamrolle | der | Genesenden Eskadron | Train ersatz Abteilung No 13 | während der Mobilmachung | für den | Landstpfl. Fahrer [G.L.]”

¹³⁴ LBW-HS M 1/7 Bü 470, Section I, Lf. Nr. 173.

soldiers mobilized to fight to the last: the *actual men* who would necessarily constitute the “unexhausted” forces first Rathenau, then later Ludendorff, fantasied existed somewhere within Germany’s decimated populace in October 1918.¹³⁵ More than that, *even if* the Württemberger *Landsturmmann* had lived to join a *levée en masse* in whatever form it may have taken, it would still come at a deceptively catastrophic cost to the war effort. The man was a driver (*Fahrer*) in a railway unit, and thus one of the men tasked with the crucial logistical work that kept any army fighting (and, as Thaer had noted in May, severely hindered the advances the Germans were able to make that spring).¹³⁶ “Only at the cost of stripping mining and the railways, and therefore crippling Germany’s industrial capability to wage war, could they be conscripted,” as Alexander Watson notes.¹³⁷ In that sense, any “final” mobilization would be inherently self-destructive on both a literal, human-individual and a metaphorical, macro-military level.

Perhaps most importantly, this pair illustrated the intense degree to which sacrifice and suicide had become synonymous for the non-commissioned members of the armed forces in the immediate aftermath of Wilson’s second note. The Saxon N.C.O., of course, was more explicit about the connection he experienced between the macro-political and the micro-thanatological, as the paraphrased letter to his mother makes clear. Whatever Rathenau may have told himself and his fellow political elites on 6 October about a *levée*’s ability to secure “a dignified peace,” this ostensibly hyper-loyal soldier did not share that opinion. He did, in fact, dissent in the strongest possible terms available to him, quite literally choosing death before the “dishonor” of living “to see the conclusion of an unfavorable peace.” Yet the Württemberger *Landsturmmann*’s

¹³⁵ On Rathenau: Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 459-460, 482-486; On Ludendorff’s mid-October fantasy that he could suddenly have an additional 600,000: *Ibid.*, 489-491.

¹³⁶ LBW-HS M 77/1 Bü 1058, “Auszug | aus der | Kriegs-Stamrolle | der | Genesenden Eskadron | Train ersatz Abteilung No 13 | während der Mobilmachung | für den | Landstpfl. Fahrer [G.L.]” The muster roll lists his unit as the “Train ersatz Abteilung No. 13.”

¹³⁷ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 549.

suicide pointed towards the same larger truth: Germany's remaining manpower *would not* fight a war past the point of defeat, even if they had to kill themselves to avoid it. The fact that this man shot himself 1) the day after Wilson's second note became public, and 2) literally within *hours* of being declared "fit" for combat duty, strongly suggests that at least one critical piece of the motivational matrix for his suicide was the desire to avoid being sent to the front at a point when taking on such risks could in no way bring about a positive outcome on any level, from the individual to the high-political.

This orientation towards the "hard choice" amongst the soldiery may have found its most extreme and exceptional expression in suicides such as these. Indeed, the surviving Bavarian statistics recorded soldiers' suicides increasing throughout the spring and summer and reaching a high point in August, before dropping quite precipitously for the final third of the year, making these self-inflicted mid-October deaths even more quantitatively anomalous (Figure 15). But as an *orientation*, it was anything but anomalous or exceptional, as the final postal surveillance report for the 5th Army illustrates. Filed on 17 October 1918, the same day as Ludendorff's about-face on *Endkampf* in the War Cabinet meeting, the report began by noting that "Germany's new peace offer made a strong impression on the troops."¹³⁸ But as their response to Austria-Hungary's peace note of 14 September presaged, that impression was overwhelming negative, at least as far as the "officer caste" was concerned. "With a superficial examination of these letters, one could initially ascribe an invigorating effect of the peace offer on the troops," the report's author wrote, "something along the lines that the ardently-desired peace they all

¹³⁸ BA-MA RH 61/1035 Feldpostüberwachung.- Aktenauszüge. Report labelled "A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918," 106. "Das neue Friedensangebot Deutschlands hat suf die Truppen starken Eindruck gemacht."

want has moved into the foreseeable future. That is, however, also the entirety of its positive achievement!”¹³⁹

Given that the 5th Army’s troops had already reached and then immediately surpassed new heights of despair in August and September, the primary effect of the German peace offer was to hypercharge the survivalist pessimism deepening and spreading amongst the soldiery since the summer. Indeed, the report made two interrelated facts clear from the start: 1) the soldiers wanted peace at any price, immediately; and 2) they were now explicit and unequivocal in their refusal to continue sacrificing for the state:

For the vast majority of soldiers, the offer had a downright paralyzing effect, especially in regards to holding-out [*Durchhalten*] and joy-in-battle [*Kampfesfreudigkeit*], and gave the pessimists and defeatists [*Miesmachern*] substantial grist for their mill. Countless numbers write “We can’t anymore,” “Germany is done for” [*Deutschland ist kaputt*], and similar things. Still in the spring of this year one could say of the majority of letter writers that a peace at any price was not up for grabs. *Now peace at any price is demanded*, impetuously demanded. “We can’t anymore, we don’t want to anymore, we want to go home.” The number of those who write home “I won’t put my head on the line anymore, *I will not be so dumb as to still pointlessly put my life on the line*” is startlingly large.¹⁴⁰

At the exact moment Ludendorff was changing his story and position on *Endkampf* in the highest halls of political power, and the debate on the subject was heating up in the country’s newspapers at home, the soldiers left on the Western Front were telling anyone who would listen—from loved ones to postal censors, and in no uncertain terms—that they *would not* risk

¹³⁹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918,” 106. “Bei oberflächlicher Betrachtung dieser Briefstimmen könnte man dem Friedensangebot zunächst eine belebende Wirkung auf die Truppen zuschreiben und zwar in der Richtung, daß der von allen so heiß ersehnte Frieden in absehbare Nähe gerückt sei. Das ist aber auch der ganze positive Erfolg!”

¹⁴⁰ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918,” 106. Emphasis added.” Bei der großen Mehrheit der Heeresangehörigen hat das Angebot besonders in Bezug auf Durchhalten und Kampfesfreudigkeit geradezu lähmend gewirkt und den Pessimisten und Miesmachern reichlich Wasser auf ihre Mühlen gegeben. “Wir können nicht mehr”, “Deutschland is kaput” [sic] und ähnliches schreiben Unzählige. Noch im Frühjahr dieses Jahres konnte man von der Mehrheit der Breifschreiber sagen, daß sie für einen Frieden um jeden Preis nicht zu haben seien. *Jetzt wird Frieden um jeden Preis verlangt*, stürmisch verlangt. “Wir können nicht mehr, wir wollen nicht mehr, wir wollen nach Hause.” Die Zahl derjenigen, die da nach Hause schreiben: “Ich halte den Kopf nicht mehr hin, *ich werde nicht so dumm sein, noch zwecklos mein Leben auf’s Spiel zu setzen*”, ist erschreckend groß.”

death and mutilation now that it was undeniably “pointless” (*zwecklos*) and national sacrifice meant only personal self-destruction.

As had been the case throughout the war, however, the author of the 17 October report, too, refused to recognize, let alone reckon *with*, what the soldiers were no longer implying, but telling everyone directly: they wanted to live, even if it meant living in a new and uncertain socio-political world, because continued adherence to the authorities of the old one promised only “pointless” death. Instead, the author took pains to highlight the one piece of news that he found reassuring: “there are also voices—not from officers or higher-officials, but from simple soldiers [*einfachen Soldaten*]*—*who in their loyal conviction to hold-out [*Überzeugungstreue zum Durchhalten*] and in their tenacious belief in a favorable outcome of the war for Germany reveal that good spirits still stick [*steckt*] in the troops as well, which work tirelessly for the great cause.”¹⁴¹ By mid-October, however, such optimistic framings could barely hold for a sentence, as the author made clear in the very next line that “these voices should not belie the true attitude of the majority.”¹⁴² For that majority, as in August and September, “querulousness, war-weariness and strong longing for peace still have, as ever, the upper hand.”¹⁴³

Perhaps most importantly, this captain concluded his executive summary with his own implicit admission of how hollow “sacrifice” of any kind had now become for the 5th Army’s soldiers, one which simultaneously highlighted command’s broader inability to comprehend that essential fact:

¹⁴¹ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918,” 106. “Allerdings liegen auch Stimmen vor, nicht von Offizieren oder höheren Beamten, sondern von einfachen Soldaten, die in ihrer Überzeugungstreue zum Durchhalten und in ihrem zähen Glauben an einen für Deutschland günstigen Ausgang des Krieges erkennen lassen, daß auch noch guter Geist in den Truppen steckt, der unverdrossen für die große Sache wirkt.”

¹⁴² BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918,” 106. “Doch dürfen diese Stimmen über die wahre Gesinnung der Mehrheit nicht hinweg täuschen.”

¹⁴³ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918,” 106-107. “Verdrossenheit, Kriegsmüdigkeit und starke Sehnsucht nach Frieden haben noch immer die Oberhand.”

Closer inspection of the present army correspondence involuntarily imposes the impression on the reader that our cause must be given a new, great pull [*Zug*]; a slogan which will reawaken all the good that sticks [*steckt*] in the German soldier, pushes the sullenness [*Mißmut*] aside, and shows the soldiers in an intelligible, popular manner why he must still submit himself [*unterwerfen*] to further adversity and where we'll end up if we succumb in this struggle.¹⁴⁴

As had been the case previously in August and September, the report contained a striking combination of honest reporting and delusional analysis. While ostensibly trying to frame the need for “a new, great pull” as a positive opportunity for the army, the very call for a new “slogan” was its own admission that the *previous* pull, the previous slogan(s), had now failed. It was therefore a latent recognition that the tenuous but thus-far enduring sacrificial consensus of 1914 no longer existed, at least for a critical mass of soldiers on the Western Front. Instead, those soldiers saw the thanatological disconnect between themselves and their political and military leaders in ever-clear terms as the war continued to “pointlessly” drag on. As one soldier quoted in the report wrote: “Holding out is for people who do not need to hold out.”¹⁴⁵

The further irony was that those soldiers who *did* still want to hold out, did so for the same reasons first claimed by Rathenau and now by Ludendorff, which were themselves the final gasps of the *earlier* sacrificial consensus, not some new “pull.” One of them was Karl Uhrmacher, the young war volunteer who had been serving with a field artillery regiment since October 1914, chiefly as an adjutant (though that was much to his chagrin).¹⁴⁶ On the same day

¹⁴⁴ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918,” 107. “Es drängt sich dem Leser bei näherem Einblick in die gegenwärtige Heereskorrespondenz unwillkürlich der Eindruck auf, als müsse einmal wieder unserer Sache ein neuer, großer Zug gegeben werden, eine Parole, die all das Gute, das im deutschen Soldaten steckt, wieder weckt, den Mißmut beiseite schiebt und in verständlicher, populärer Weise dem Soldaten zeigt, weshalb er sich noch weiter dem vielen Ungemach unterwerfen muß und wohin wir gelangen, wenn wir in diesem Ringen unterliegen.”

¹⁴⁵ BA-MA RH 61/1035, “A. H. Qu., den 17. Oktober 1918,” 109. “Das Durchhalten ist für Leute, die nicht durchzuhalten brauchen.”

¹⁴⁶ On his joining the field artillery, see the postcards sent to his parents on 15 and 27 October 1914: BA-MA MSG 2/10343. On his dissatisfaction with being an adjutant, see: BA-MA MSG 2/10346, letter to parents dated 6 May 1918. By that point, he had been an adjutant for a year, according to the letter.

that the 5th Army's final postal surveillance report was filed and Ludendorff made his about-face in the War Cabinet, Uhrmacher wrote to his parents:

We have lost power [*Macht*], but army and home front [*Heer und Heimat*] may well consider that we don't lose our honor as well. Your defeat [*Eure Niederlage*] does not need to be dishonorable, but it can become so through the manner in which it originates and who it favors. Now we must grit our teeth and everyone in his position must do his duty to the utmost while fate completes its course. No matter how hard our lot might become, it is only unbearable when it is self-inflicted. Will we all face our grandchildren with a clean conscience? Hopefully the events of the last few weeks bring all their duty and responsibility into consciousness once again.¹⁴⁷

Here was the exact response to von Baden's peace offer that Rathenau had hoped for amongst the soldiery, and followed his same logic. Uhrmacher was clear that Germany had lost the war: the only choice he saw the country facing was whether that defeat would be "honorable" or "dishonorable," a perhaps inadvertent echo of Rathenau's claim that a *levée* that October would secure "a dignified peace."

Yet Uhrmacher also embodied the deluded optimism that had retaken hold of Ludendorff by mid-October. When asked by the Chancellor about shoring up the Western Front with troops from the East during the War Cabinet meeting taking place that same day, the First Quartermaster-General argued explicitly that "[t]hese troops [on the Eastern Front] no longer have offensive power [*Stosskraft*]. We have already taken out all the good ones. They have no more offensive power, but do have a certain defensive power [*Abwehrkraft*]. One should not underestimate that the troops in the East no longer have the spirit [*Geist*] like in the West."¹⁴⁸ Yet

¹⁴⁷ BA-MA MSG 2/10346, letter to parents dated 17 October 1918. "“An Macht haben wir verloren, aber möge Heer und Heimat wohl bedenken, daß wir nicht auch noch unsere Ehre verlieren. Eure Niederlage braucht nicht unehrenhaft zu sein, aber sie kann es werden durch die Art, wie sie entstanden und begunstigt worden ist. Nun, wir müssen auf die Zähne beißen und ein jeder an seiner Stelle seine Pflicht bis zum äußersten tun, während des Geschick seinen Lauf vollendet. Mag das Los noch so hart werden, unerträglich ist es nur, wenn es selbstverschuldet ist. Ob wir da alle unseren Enkeln gegenüber ein reines Gewissen haben? Hoffentlich bringen die Ereignisse der letzten Wochen allen ihre Pflicht und Verantwortung noch einmal zu Bewußtsein.”

¹⁴⁸ BA-K N 1089/63, 17 Oct 1918 Cabinet Meeting), 4. "Stosskraft haben diese Truppen nicht mehr. Wir haben alles Gute schon herausgenommen. Sie haben keine Stosskraft mehr, aber eine gewisse Abwehrkraft. Es darf nicht unterschätzt werden, dass die Truppen in Osten nicht mehr den Geist haben, wie die im Westen.”

he still argued in that same meeting that “[i]f the army gets across the next four weeks and it gets into winter, then we will be ‘in a nice position.’ If it succeeds in lifting the mood [*Stimmung*] during these four weeks, that would be of extraordinary military value,” a direct contradiction of his assessment at the end of September that had started the very peace process he was now trying to undermine.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, the idea that the tides of war could suddenly and unexpectedly shift one’s fortunes “while fate completes its course” was the one optimistic straw the *Feldherr* clung to even on 1 October. When asked by Thaer if he really believed “that the enemy will grant an armistice,” Ludendorff apparently replied: “In war, one can never know such things.”¹⁵⁰

Uhrmacher represented the downmost limit of *Endkampf*’s appeal within the army, something he inadvertently made clear in a letter to his parents from 20 October 1918. After first noting that “the people still hoped that an armistice of some kind would be accepted,”¹⁵¹ he described how he had changed his mind in the aftermath of Wilson’s second note:

Now I hope that everyone finally realizes how close to the abyss we are. Whereas I had previously desired peace, even with great burdens, in order to prevent something worse, I believe today that only a final battle to the last [*nur ein Endkampf bis zum Untergang*] can save our honor. Perhaps a kind fate is worth the last of the German people’s sacrificial courage [*Opfermut*] and still gives us a favorable opportunity for peace, even if the enemy would become murderous. Bad times will come, and for a nation [*Volk*] of 70 million, there is no Thule [the mythical land beyond the borders of the known world in classical and medieval literature] where its remnants find refuge, like the last Goths. But I fear, as always, that the nerves of our nation will not stand the final endurance test.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ BA-K N 1089/63, 17 Oct 1918 Cabinet Meeting), 17. “Wenn die Armee über die nächsten vier Wochen hinüberkommt und es in den Winter geht, so sind wir ‘fein heraus.’ [sic] Wenn es gelingt, die Stimmung während dieser vier Wochen zu heben, würde das von ausserordentlichem militärischen Werte sein.”

¹⁵⁰ Thaer, Gneralstabdienst, 235-236. “Glauben Excellenz den, daß die Feinde den Waffenstillstand gewähren werden?”; “Im Kriege kann man so etwas nie Wissen.”

¹⁵¹ BA-MA MSG 2/10346, letter to parents dated 20 October 1918. “[I]mmer noch hofften die Leute auf Anname eines Waffenstillstands in irgend einer Art.”

¹⁵² BA-MA MSG 2/10346, letter to parents dated 20 October 1918. “Nun hoffe ich doch, daß allen endlich eine Erkenntnis kommt, wie nahe wir am Abgrund sind. Nachdem ich ein bisher noch einen Frieden selbst mit großen Lasten erwünscht habe, um Schlimmerem vorzubeugen, glaube ich heute, daß nur ein Endkampf bis zum Untergang unsere Ehre retten kann. Vielleicht lohnt ein gutiges [sic] Geschick den letzten Opfermut des deutschen Volkes und gibt uns doch noch eine gunstigem [sic] Gelegenheit zum Frieden, wenn auch der Feind des Mordens würde wird. Schlimmen Zeiten werden kommen und für ein Volk von 70 Millionen gibts kein Thule, wo seine Reste Zuflucht finden, wie die letzten Gothen. Ich furchte aber noch immer, daß die Nerven unseres Volkes die letzte Belastungsprobe nicht aushalten werden.—”

For all his apocalyptic rhetoric however, Uhrmacher also recognized that this notion of *Endkampf* was on some level a fantasy, or at the very least, only belonged to the realm of abstract future possibilities. Indeed, he concluded the letter with a return to reality: “Now back to the present. Yesterday we also marched back over the same ground [*zurückmarschiert*].”¹⁵³ Even those soldiers most ardently in favor of *Endkampf*—in this case, one who spent considerable time serving as an adjutant at regimental headquarters and continued to do so that October, and had already become a commissioned officer by August 1915¹⁵⁴—still admitted two inescapable facts in mid-October: 1) Germany had lost the war; and 2) continuing fighting promised only self-destruction, regardless of whether one considered it “honorable” or not.

Despite his initial reservations at the start of the month, Max von Baden and his government stayed committed to the course the OHL had set them on at the end of September. On the same day Uhrmacher was making his case for *Endkampf* to his parents, von Baden’s Vice Chancellor, Friedrich von Payer, was rejecting it in yet another cabinet meeting and reaffirming the government’s commitment to ending the war, whatever despair they felt over the task, stating in no uncertain terms: “We are the ones to make the lost war lost. We carry the responsibility before history.”¹⁵⁵ In keeping with this orientation, that same day, the government drafted its response to Wilson’s second note, which was dispatched the following morning, 21 October 1918. As Robert Gerwarth summarizes, it “was an exercise in damage control” which attempted to assuage Wilson’s fears about the continuation of “arbitrary power” in Germany.¹⁵⁶ It stated

¹⁵³ BA-MA MSG 2/10346, letter to parents dated 20 October 1918. “Nun zurück zur Gegenwart. Gestern sind wir also zurückmarschiert.”

¹⁵⁴ BA-MA MSG 2/10344, *Feldpostkarte* to his parents dated 2 August 1915. The postcard lists his rank as “Leutnant.”

¹⁵⁵ Quoted in Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 504, footnote 193.

¹⁵⁶ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 73.

explicitly that the “first act of the new government was to submit a law to the Reichstag through with the constitution of the Reich was changed so that approval of the parliament is required for decisions about war and peace.”¹⁵⁷ After emphasizing that the majority of the “German nation” supported these reforms, the note then concluded: “The President’s question as to with whom he and the governments allied against Germany are dealing is therefore clearly and unequivocally answered: the peace and armistice offer goes out from a government which, free from every arbitrary and unaccountable influence, will be supported with the approval of the overwhelming majority of the German nation.”¹⁵⁸

Wilson, newly bolstered by the defeat on 21 October of a Republican motion in the U.S. Senate to prevent him from negotiating with Germany prior to their surrender and generally pleased with the reply, responded quickly.¹⁵⁹ His third and final note was sent two days later on 23 October 1918. The good news, as far as Germany’s leaders were concerned, came at the outset: “the President of the United States feels that he cannot decline to take up with the Governments with which the Government of the United States is associated the question of an armistice.”¹⁶⁰ It had come over a month after they’d demanded it of the civilian government, but the OHL would get their ceasefire. Wilson was equally clear, however, that it would not come on terms acceptable—let alone desirable—to men like Hindenburg or Ludendorff. While this note, too, refrained from explicitly calling for the Kaiser’s abdication, at least in part due to Wilson’s

¹⁵⁷ Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 470. “Die erste Tat der neuen Regierung ist gewesen, dem Reichstag ein Gesetz vorzulegen, durch das die Verfassung des Reiches dahin geändert wird, daß zur Entscheidung über Krieg und Frieden die Zustimmung der Volksvertretung erforderlich ist.”

¹⁵⁸ Max von Baden, *Erinnerungen*, 470. “Die Frage des Präsidenten, mit wem er und die gegen Deutschland verbündeten Regierungen es zu tun haben, wird somit klar und unzweideutig dahin beantwortet, daß Friedens- und Waffenstillstandsangebot ausgeht von einer Regierung, die, frei von jedem willkürlichen und unverantwortlichen Einfluß, getragen wird von der Zustimmung der überwältigenden Mehrheit des deutschen Volkes.”

¹⁵⁹ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 74.

¹⁶⁰ *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1918, Supplement 1, Volume I, The World War, ed. Joseph V. Fuller (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993): Document No. 327.

growing fear of Bolshevism spreading in Germany,¹⁶¹ it did expressly demand military capitulation if any of the *Kaiserreich*'s wartime rulers maintained either their *de facto* or *de jure* power:

Feeling that the whole peace of the world depends now on plain speaking and straightforward action, the President deems it his duty to say, without any attempt to soften what may seem harsh words, that the nations of the world do not and cannot trust the word of those who have hitherto been the masters of German policy, and to point out once more that in concluding peace and attempting to undo the infinite injuries and injustices of this war the Government of the United States cannot deal with any but veritable representatives of the German people who have been assured of a genuine constitutional standing as the real rulers of Germany. If it must deal with the military masters and the monarchical autocrats of Germany now, or if it is likely to have to deal with them later in regard to the international obligations of the German Empire, it must demand, not peace negotiations, but surrender. Nothing can be gained by leaving this essential thing unsaid.¹⁶²

Whatever form peace took, it would not come on anything like the OHL's "honorable" terms.

Predictably, especially after his about-face six days before, Ludendorff and the larger "officer caste" balked at this final note and rejected it outright.¹⁶³ This prompted two different attempts to force the nation's hand on the question of *Endkampf*, one by the army, the other by the navy. Against the Chancellor's explicit wishes for them to stay at the OHL headquarters in Spa, Hindenburg and Ludendorff immediately left for Berlin, where they arrived on the morning of 26 October.¹⁶⁴ They attempted to meet with the Kaiser, but were rebuffed and sent to see the Vice Chancellor, as von Baden had fallen ill. The two of them, along with the Chief of Staff of the Naval High Command, Magnus von Levetzow, his commander, the Chief of the Admiralty Admiral Reinhard Scheer, and the war minister, General Scheuch, went to Payer's apartment.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 74.

¹⁶² *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1918, Supplement 1, Volume I, The World War, ed. Joseph V. Fuller (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993): Document No. 327.

¹⁶³ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 74-75; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 550.

¹⁶⁴ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 75; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 550; Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 505.

¹⁶⁵ Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 505.

According to Levetzow, they tried to convince the Vice Chancellor that “the honor of the nation and of the soldier requires a rejection of the excessive demands of Wilson.”¹⁶⁶ Once again, however, Payer reaffirmed the von Baden government’s rejection of national suicide, as he went on to explain:

I have a great deal of sympathy for the manly and soldierly character of the plan [to continue war] and I did not expect good things to come from armistice negotiations, judged by the way Wilson treated our armistice request. But it was my duty to assess the situation calmly rather than follow my sentiments. An Army Commander with his entourage may well end his illustrious career with a death ride, but a people of seventy million cannot make the decision about life and death according to a single estate’s conception of honor. It cannot make its future dependent on hopes rather than facts.¹⁶⁷

The civilian government made clear that the only degree of self-destruction it would countenance was that of *individuals*, like the Saxon amputee: those who voluntarily took their deaths into their own hands to “save their honor.” There would be no collective suicide organized or ordered with their sanction or support.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff now confronted the Kaiser and used a tactic which had worked several times before when it looked as though they would not get their way: they threatened to resign.¹⁶⁸ Thus, on 26 October 1918, the OHL essentially forced an ultimatum on the Wilhelm II: back his Chancellor, von Baden, continue the armistice negotiations, and reject national suicide; or back his supreme military commanders, Ludendorff and Hindenburg, prepare for a *levée*, and see the nation “martyred” in an *Endkampf*. As he had done on 29 September, the Kaiser once again rejected the prospect of national suicide. He not only dismissed Ludendorff:

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 505-506.

¹⁶⁷ Quoted in Geyer, “Endkampf 1918 and 195,” 42. See also: Geyer, “Insurrectionary Warfare,” 506.

¹⁶⁸ Isabel V. Hull, “Military Culture, Wilhelm II, and the end of the monarchy in the First World War,” in *The Kaiser: New Research on Wilhelm II’s role in Imperial Germany*, eds. Annika Mombauer and Wilhelm Deist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 249. See also: Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 75; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 551.

he fired him.¹⁶⁹ Hindenburg, however, was ordered to stay on for fear that his dismissal would be too demoralizing.¹⁷⁰ For the second time in a month, the Kaiser had behaviorally rejected the call for a war-to-the-last, and with it, the call for collective self-destruction.

Simultaneously, however, the Navy was attempting to implement its own *Endkampf* scheme. Already on 16 October, in the immediate aftermath of Wilson's second note, the Navy had begun seriously thinking about a final apocalyptic confrontation with the British Fleet. Indeed, as soon as the Naval Command learned on 4 October that Ludendorff felt they might need to obey an anticipated demand from Britain to surrender the fleet in order to get the armistice he had then just demanded, the High Seas Fleet Chief of Staff, Rear Admiral Adolf von Trotha, began drawing up plans for an assault on the Royal Navy.¹⁷¹ Now, on 24 October, in the immediate aftermath of Wilson's third and final note, Trotha completed the plan. Scheer approved it on 27 October, the day after Ludendorff's firing. It called for the entire Imperial High Seas Fleet to sail into the area of the North Sea between the English Channel, England's east coast, and the coast of Holland, the Hoofden, for a night attack, in the hopes it would provoke the British Grand Fleet to sail out for a final confrontation. The plan was to be kept secret from the crews, however, until they were already at sea and all connections with the mainland were cut off.¹⁷² It was also kept secret from both the Kaiser and the Chancellor; the Naval Command only informed Ludendorff.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 470-471. Geyer argues this was at least in part due to rift the armistice initiative opened up between the field commanders and the OHL: "The deep rift between field army commands and Supreme Command, in any case, was apparent to everyone. It was papered over only long after the fact when Ludendorff soft-pedaled his original assessment of the situation and made the armistice initiative look like a temporary lapse of an overworked general staff officer and his bureau that had been exploited by panic-stricken civilians for their own ends." *Ibid.*, 471.

¹⁷⁰ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 75; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 551.

¹⁷¹ Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 78.

¹⁷² Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 79; Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 552; Mark Jones, *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918-1919* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 34-36.

¹⁷³ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 552.

Rumors had been swirling amongst Germany's sailors of an impending operation almost the entire month, however, and when the order did finally go out on the night of 29 October, the sailors rebelled. The planned assault was consequently abandoned the following morning, though the rebels surrendered shortly thereafter, around 1,000 sailors were placed in confinement, and order was quickly restored. When the flotilla then docked at Kiel during the night of 31 October-1 November after successfully completing a maneuver to test the sailors' loyalty, the commanders felt discipline had been reestablished enough to allow the sailors to disembark, though some additional sailors aboard the *Markgraf* were arrested shortly before docking, with some then being taken to a prison in central Kiel.¹⁷⁴

Over the next four days, increasing numbers of rebellious and disgruntled sailors began gathering in a series of public meetings of increasing size, motivated chiefly by concern with the fate of their imprisoned fellows.¹⁷⁵ On 3 November, some 6,000 people demonstrated for the release of the *Markgraf* sailors, with some of the protestors breaking into the army barracks without resistance from the sentries, arming themselves, and freeing the imprisoned men. When a squad of officers and N.C.O.'s subsequently fired on the crowd, starting a short firefight which killed seven and wounded twenty-nine, it lit the latent anti-state tinder that had accrued with the sacrifices of the previous four-and-a-half years.¹⁷⁶ The following night, the military men of Kiel formed councils in all barracks in the city and on all ships docked in its harbor.¹⁷⁷ Thus, on 4 November, "[t]he revolt now became explicitly political," and revolution began to spread as sailors set out from Kiel to other parts of Germany.¹⁷⁸ As Michael Geyer notes, when the naval

¹⁷⁴ Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 38.

¹⁷⁵ Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 38-39.

¹⁷⁶ See the detailed recounting in: Jones, *Founding Weimar*, 43-48.

¹⁷⁷ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 553.

¹⁷⁸ Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 553-554.

munity linked up with reemergent labor unrest in the Ruhr resulting from the War Ministry's latest recall of workers to the army, as well as with now-pervasive food riots and urban unrest, chiefly by the women and children left at home, "the stage for the revolution was set."¹⁷⁹ When faced with the choice of either collective suicide or collective rebellion against the people, forces, and institutions attempting to force them into the act of self-destruction, Germany's sailors chose the latter. The Naval Mutiny thus reframed "the hard choice" for the German nation *as a collective*, because it illustrated how far an elite caste was willing to go to realize its idea of honor. Now, as a collective, it was explicitly rejecting national suicide in both its words and, most importantly, behavior on the ground, even if it meant the end of the Imperial state.

6.4 The Kaiser's Final Rejections

By early November, this national rejection of national suicide reached all the way to the top. The Kaiser himself, after already having functionally rejected the prospect of collective self-destruction on 29 September and again on 26 October, was now faced with one last form a national martyrdom could take: a death ride (*Todesritt*), a form of personal suicide which would symbolically double as a national one. The chief proponent of this plan for the Kaiser's orchestrated suicide at front was Admiral Paul von Hintze, the former Foreign Minister and Wilhelm II's former personal adjutant who was now the liaison between von Baden's government and the Imperial cabinet.¹⁸⁰ Over the course of 1 and 2 November, Hintze claimed that "I became convinced that the Kaiser had to go to the front, the fighting front. Nothing better

¹⁷⁹ Geyer, "Insurrectionary Warfare," 507.

¹⁸⁰ Hull, "Military Culture," 254-255; Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 77, especially footnote 18.

could happen for him, the monarchy, or the dynasty, than if he had been, for example, wounded at the fighting front,” though later in the same memorandum he would say “killed.”¹⁸¹ He then broached the idea with the Kaiser on 3 November as an alternative to abdication, presenting the death ride as a kind of personalized *Endkampf* wherein Wilhelm, as the symbolic convergence of the monarchy, dynasty, army, and nation, would ride out at the head of “his” army and, especially if he met a “heroic” end, inspire a national uprising.¹⁸²

This idea enjoyed a deceptive degree of support both within the OHL and amongst the wider conservative and militarist political circles around them. The former Chancellor Georg Michaelis, for instance, pleaded with the Empress along similar lines to Hintze on 28 October, arguing that Wilhelm and his government should head to the front, “calling on his people to join the last battle and declaring that he personally was drawing his dagger.”¹⁸³ But it had the most support within the Supreme Command. Thaer first heard about the idea on 5 November and was immediately supportive of it, as he noted in his diary:

I have just learned from Major von Münchhausen, the Kaiser’s aide-de-camp, and also from [Major] Stülpnagel [the Chief of Operations] that an opportunity might be created through which the Kaiser finds a soldier’s death at the front during a small special attack on an appropriate position, and for his loyal adherents to follow him in this path. Whoever wants should sign up. I asked to be included in it. I think that most of the older officers amongst us will be there.¹⁸⁴

But as in Hintze vision, this was not a plan for an individual choosing to “end his illustrious career with a death ride.” It was instead explicitly meant to undermine the armistice and thereby to undercut the rejection of national suicide, as Thaer described: “Admittedly it would need to be

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Hull, “Military Culture,” 254.

¹⁸² Hull, “Military Culture,” 254-255.

¹⁸³ Quoted in Hull, “Military Culture,” 255.

¹⁸⁴ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 252. “Durch Major von Münchhausen, Flügeladjutant des Kaisers, und auch durch Stülpnagel erfarhe ich soeben, daß evtl. Gelegenheit geschaffen wird, durch einen kleinen Spezialangriff an geeigneter Stelle für den Kaiser an der front den Soldatentod zu finden, für seine Getreuen, ihm auf diesem Wege zu folgen. Wer will, soll sich melden. Ich habe gebeten, dazu mitgenommen zu werden. Ich denke, die meisten älteren Offiziere von uns werden dabei sein.”

staged very quickly, because otherwise the armistice could intervene. On Friday, 7 November, it will be decided.”¹⁸⁵

At that fateful meeting, the Kaiser refused, opting instead to remain with the OHL, where he had been since 28 October, while looking to them to prepare a counter-revolutionary campaign now that unrest had spread out from Kiel.¹⁸⁶ Though the riders had signed on, Hindenburg, who had never supported the plan, and Hans von Plessen, the Kaiser’s personal adjutant for the past 26 years, called off the death ride on 8 November.¹⁸⁷ As he had done implicitly and behaviorally in the War Cabinet meeting of 29 September when agreeing to Ludendorff and the OHL’s armistice plan, and again on 26 October when he backed von Baden and his plan to continue peace negotiations and fired Ludendorff, the Kaiser now *explicitly* rejected both the plan for his personal self-destruction and its desired-outcome—national suicide in a final battle to the last. While even now, on the eve of his abdication and escape into exile, he could not accept that the state he still ostensibly led was about to gasp out its last breath, Wilhelm was unwilling to commit either personal or national suicide. Like the overwhelming majority of soldiers remaining in “his” army, Wilhelm wanted to live. But as with the “officer caste” and broader coterie of socio-political *Kaiserreich* elites, he had realized last of all that choosing life and rejecting sacrifice—now with its suicidal core brutally exposed—had become one and the same.

Final confirmation of the complete slide of national sacrifice into personal self-destruction came in an unusual meeting on the morning of 9 November 1918: the so-called

¹⁸⁵ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 252. “Freilich müßte es sehr schnell in Szene gesetzt werden, denn sonst kommt womöglich der Waffenstillstand schon dazwischen. Am Freitag, den 7. 11. soll sich das entscheiden.”

¹⁸⁶ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 77.

¹⁸⁷ Hull, “Military Culture,” 254.

“Army Parliament” (*Armeeparlament*), as Hintze termed it.¹⁸⁸ It was the brainchild of Colonel Wilhelm Heye, the Chief of Operations at the OHL, and was meant to provide Hindenburg and Wilhelm Groener, Ludendorff’s successor as First-Quartermaster General, with evidence that the army would not march behind the Kaiser to put down the revolution, which they hoped would convince the Kaiser that he should abdicate (which they in turn hoped would dampen the revolutionary unrest).¹⁸⁹ There were no staff officers or senior commanders consulted. Instead, the assembled group would consist of five regimental, brigade, or division commanders from each of the ten armies closest to the OHL’s headquarter—that is, fifty lower-level frontline commanders with firsthand experience of the conditions and morale at the front that November, not the members of the “officer caste” from which the Kaiser and heads of the OHL usually heard.¹⁹⁰ Heye and Groener hoped that such a meeting would prevent these men’s assessments from being ignored or sidelined higher up the chain of command, as they had so often been during the war.¹⁹¹ Heye informed them that they would each be asked two questions: “(1) How do the troops feel towards the Kaiser? Is it possible for the Kaiser to lead the troops in battle to recapture the homeland? (2) How do the troops stand on Bolshevism? Will they take up arms to combat Bolshevism in their own country?”¹⁹²

In the event, thirty-two of these frontline commanders arrived in time for Heye’s briefing, a further seven arrived while it was in progress, and the last eleven were unable to make it to Spa

¹⁸⁸ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 83.

¹⁸⁹ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 82-83. As Hull discusses at length, this was itself its own sign that the monarchical state was unsalvageable, as even those, like the OHL’s officers, who considered themselves ardent monarchists had continually “instrumentalized” the Kaiser over the course of the war, with the proposed death ride being the culmination of that trajectory. The fact that the OHL was now in favor of abdication showed how far their vision of the nation, too, had divested from the *Kaiserreich* as an ostensible nation-state. Hull, “Military Culture,” esp. 245-258.

¹⁹⁰ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 83.

¹⁹¹ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 83-84.

¹⁹² Quoted in Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 85.

in time due to weather and transportation breakdowns.¹⁹³ To the first question, twenty-three answered no, it was not possible for the Kaiser to lead the troops to recapture the homeland; another fifteen were doubtful, but less certain; and only one answered affirmatively.¹⁹⁴ To the second question, nineteen were doubtful that their men would fight against “Bolshevism” under any circumstances; twelve believed their men could, but only after an extended period of rest and training; and eight were certain their men would not.¹⁹⁵ Heye’s impression was that the men were completely worn out and wanted to go home, and that only a direct, non-metaphorical threat to their home and family might inspire them to take up arms against the revolutionaries.¹⁹⁶ Afterwards, Heye informed Groener, who then briefed the Kaiser along with Hindenburg. Wilhelm II abdicated later that same afternoon and Phillip Scheidemann declared Germany a republic from the balcony of the Reichstag building.¹⁹⁷ The armistice, famously, went into effect two days later, at eleven am.

Whatever dreams of collective self-destruction or counter-revolutionary ferment these men harbored, Germany’s citizens had aborted through their behavior, those left in uniform above all. By 9 November, neither the OHL nor the Kaiser could deny the fact any longer, as the nation—not as an abstraction, but as a concrete collective of *living people*—had forced their hand: sacrifice the state to save the *Volk*, in its dual sense as both “people,” a plurality, and “nation,” the singular entity comprised of that plurality. The thanatological disconnect between those in command both politically and militarily and those continually expected to obey their directives and execute their orders had now ensured the destruction of the state. As the Army

¹⁹³ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 86.

¹⁹⁴ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 86.

¹⁹⁵ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 86.

¹⁹⁶ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 86.

¹⁹⁷ Stephenson, *Final Battle*, 96. See also: Gerwarth, *November 1918*, 102-121.

Parliament finally made undeniable to those at the top, in continuously pursuing the offensive, especially after Georgette, the OHL had effectively destroyed not “the” army itself, but all of its potential as a counter-revolutionary instrument.

6.5 National Survival and State Demise

So long as sacrificing for the nation, specifically as manifested in the *Kaiserreich* as a claimed “nation-state,” could be plausibly experienced as being in the service of some form of victory, Germany’s soldiers were willing to do so. But when months after a critical mass of them had recognized that the war was lost and any further “sacrifices” could in no way bring about an outcome commensurate with what was already given up both individually and collectively, the *Kaiserreich*’s military and political elites *explicitly and publicly* called for more. The mutinous sailors were thus a synecdoche of the larger nation-at-arms, which is what allowed their uprising to spark off the larger *Revolution der Kriegsbeendigung*: if the leaders of the Imperial state were going to force them to choose, behaviorally, between suicide and survival, they chose the latter, whatever the high-political consequences.

Thaer was thus quite correct when he wrote to his wife on 30 September 1918 “[t]hese days are suddenly those which will decide the fate of our country and our people and also our family, perhaps for 100 years, perhaps forever.”¹⁹⁸ As the emotionally-charged meeting of 1 October illustrated, the *Kaiserreich*’s “office caste” experienced the realization that Germany was militarily defeated and its army had dissolved into an ever-decaying “spider’s web of

¹⁹⁸ Thaer, *Generalstabdienst*, 233. ““Diese Tage sind augenblicklich solche, die über das Schicksal unseres Landes und unseres Volkes und auch unsere Familie entscheiden werden, vielleicht für 100 Jahre, vielleicht für immer.”

fighters” as exceptionally sudden, which produced an intense sense of disorientation and a series of hitherto unprecedented actions from the third OHL. It was indeed a crisis in the older, narrower sense: the spatially- and temporally-compressed moment of decision between “life-deciding alternatives;” originally, the moment when a doctor made a decision about a patient’s treatment that would result in the person either living or dying.¹⁹⁹ So it was that the day before, 29 September, the War Council, at the behest of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, had decided on continued national life.

But Thaer was also correct in asserting that the decisions Germany’s leaders made during those crucial days would have distinct, though related, and enduring consequences for the “country” (*Land*), the “people” (*Volk*), and for individual families, including his own. For the country, organized into the Imperial state, the decision ultimately meant death. As Wilson alluded to in his second note, and the Kiel mutiny and subsequent revolution subsequently demonstrated, the powers that had controlled Germany throughout the war would not be permitted to remain, as neither the German people, nor Germany’s victorious enemies, would allow it. Yet that meant the exact *opposite* consequence for the *Volk*, as both “nation” and “people.” Making peace, even at the cost of Imperial Germany’s permanent destruction as a state, ironically ensured that the *literal people* who made up the nation that state claimed to embody, from the highest-level political and military elites to the masses of common soldiers and their loved ones at home, would live on in much greater numbers. The “nation” would survive in no small part because its state did not. But, as Thaer’s final category—“our family”—recognized, the ultimate consequences of these decisions would reverberate on every level of society, down to the individual. And those consequences and reverberations would not stay

¹⁹⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2006): 358-360.

contained in time, but would in fact play a crucial role in determining Germany's trajectory both throughout the rest of the twentieth century and beyond.

Conclusion:

The “Spirit of 1918” and the Biographies of the German Nation

Your fellowship is a fellowship of pain and nothing more. And if that pain were actually collective instead of simply reiterative then the sheer weight of it would drag the world from the walls of the universe and send it crashing and burning through whatever night it might yet be capable of engendering until it was not even ash.

— Cormac McCarthy, *The Sunset Limited: A Novel in Dramatic Form* (2006)

Over the course of 1918, the German nation rejected the prospect of national suicide. Virtually every segment of society, from munitions workers and protesting urban women to the Kaiser, conscripted replacements in the *Westheer* to the OHL, rejected collective self-destruction in the way that mattered most: in their *behavior*. In this sense, 1918 represented something of a curious inversion of 1914. The return of the war of movement and Germany’s early operational victories in late March led many contemporaries to remark on the similarities with the beginning of the war, both at the front and at home. But unlike in 1914, when the “Spirit” of the August Days was able to experientially mask the self-destructiveness inherent within it and masses of Germans inclined their behavior toward death as a result, Germans’ various experiences over the course of 1918 showed them in no uncertain terms how far they had slid. Once the degree of this slide became apparent—which, notably, occurred at different times for different societal segments—the overwhelming majority of Germans chose life, whatever the cost. But the very last group to make that choice was also the one that had led—both literally and symbolically—the nation into

and in the war, and the ones seen as representatives of the *state*. Once it became clear that the German people could not trust these leaders and their state to either try and keep them alive or, even more minimally, ensure their sacrifices were not in vain, that state's days were numbered. Germany's wartime leaders had thanatologically riven their state from the nation they claimed it embodied, a divestment the state could not and did not survive.

One could thus perhaps speak of a "spirit of 1918" based not around an optimistic socio-emotional and moral orientation towards national sacrifice like its 1914 predecessor, but on survivalist pessimism. For the overwhelming majority of Germans, recognition of Germany's defeat may have led to despair, but only in exceptional cases did it lead to their suicides. Indeed, it is a significant and striking contrast that *all* of the *Kaiserreich's* final leaders chose both personal and national survival when confronted with the "hard choice," while the Nazi leadership in 1945 did the exact opposite.¹ Those who could not let go of their deluded optimism in the war's final weeks advocated for collective death, but their hand was forced by the behavior of the others who, generally suffused with ever-deepening pessimism as the ultimate futility of their "sacrifices" became clear, saw no reason to risk death without a cause. The people of Germany, and those in the armed forces, above all, wanted to live, even if it took a political revolution and the permanent destruction of the *Kaiserreich* to do it.

If this particular historical story of suicide, sacrifice, and state collapse raises larger questions, many were anticipated years if not decades before its writing. Perhaps most notably, Benedict

¹ It is with the latter observation that Christian Goeschel begins his analysis of suicide during the NS-Zeit: Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 1.

Anderson concluded his magnum opus, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, with a chapter titled “Memory and Forgetting,” which itself ends with a short reflection on “the biography of nations.” These final reflections chart, in abstract, the relations between memory, forgetting, consciousness, and narrative in human biographies, and how these have translated into the structural premises of the metaphorical biographies of communities imagined as nations. They are reflections that return one to the central question of the “I” and the “we:” the complex narrative requirements for creating collectivity out of *sui generis* individuality.

“All profound changes in consciousness,” Anderson wrote, “bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.” These narratives have distinct psychosomatic roots which both imbue them with their specific character *and* create the central problem those narratives address and attempt to transcend: “After experiencing the physiological and emotional changes produced by puberty, it is impossible to ‘remember’ the consciousness of childhood. How many thousands of days passed between infancy and early adulthood vanish beyond direct recall! How strange it is to need another’s help to learn that this naked baby in the yellowed photograph, sprawled happily on rug or cot, is you.” Already at this point, history intrudes—as a narrative force necessarily distinct from memory, even while it is inevitably tied to it. “The photograph,” now both a visual and material artefact, “is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence (birth certificates, diaries, report cards, letters, medical reports, and the like) which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from

memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not [sic] be ‘remembered,’ must be narrated.”²

“As with modern persons, so it is with nations,” according to Anderson. “Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity [...] engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity.’”³ But this identity narrative must, in the case of the nation, necessarily differ from that of biological *homo sapiens* in at least one crucial respect: “In the secular story of the ‘person’ there is a beginning and an end. She emerges from parental genes and social circumstances onto a brief historical stage, there to play a role until her death. After that, nothing but the penumbra of lingering fame or influence.” “Nations,” by contrast, “have no clearly identifiable births, and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural.”⁴ Indeed, he added in a footnote that “[f]or such apocalypses the neologism ‘genocide’ was quite recently coined.”⁵ Thus, “[b]ecause there is no Originator, the nation’s biography can not [sic] be written evangelically, ‘down time,’ through a long procreative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it ‘up time’—towards Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, where the lamp of archeology casts its fitful gleam.”⁶ Most importantly, at the foundation of each of these up-time narratives are deaths, “which, in a curious inversion of conventional genealogy, start from an originary present.” Most pertinently here, “World War II begets World War I.”⁷

² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (New York: Verso, 2006): 204.

³ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 205, footnote 35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

This is a thanatological structuring of a certain kind, one which bears a particular relationship to human loss. Anderson used Fernand Braudel's famous history of the Mediterranean to illustrate the point. "For Braudel, the deaths that matter are those myriad anonymous events, which, aggregated and averaged into secular mortality rates, permit him to chart the slow-changing conditions of life for millions of anonymous human beings of whom the last question asked is their nationality." But this is not the end: "From Braudel's remorselessly accumulating cemeteries, however, the nation's biography snatches, against the going mortality rate, exemplary suicides, poignant martyrdoms, assassinations, executions, wars, and holocausts. But, to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/forgotten as 'our own.'"⁸

To probe and explore either the history of a person or a nation is thus to contest with this inescapable reality of erasure. Each name—whether of a specific individual or a given collectivity imagined as a nation (or anything else)—is the title of a complex meta narrative: the overriding "narrative of narratives" which fashions coherence out of the ever-multiplying threads and trajectories—both potential and actual—that make up the living of a life. Or, in case of the nation, inherently imagined via the metaphorical apparatus of human biography, it is the title of the story of all the lives of those who imagine themselves to be part of it, which substitute for the trajectories of an individual life. As Anderson wryly noted, "[a]gainst biology's demonstration that every single cell in a human body is replaced over seven years, the narratives of

⁸ Ibid., 205-206.

autobiography and biography flood print capitalism's markets year by year."⁹ *Stirb und werden*: out of death—whether cell or human—comes “continuity.”

But what links these spheres together is, at bottom, death itself. Indeed, death is the crucial fact which must be forgotten to create this sense of continuity and coherence. Like “the” German army, “the” German nation, however imagined, was far from the static entity implied by its definite article. Germany's borders in 1914 were different than those in 1915, which in turn were different from those in 1916, 1917, and 1918—fluctuating with the assaults and counter-assaults of the war—before being politically redrawn at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. Germany's people were different too, and not uniquely so: “on average almost 900 Frenchmen and 1,300 Germans died *every day* between the outbreak of war in August 1914 and the armistice in November 1918,” as Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker note.¹⁰ In aggregate, the horrific mathematics appear even simpler: in losing roughly two million soldiers out of a total pre-war population of roughly 60 million people, Germany lost *at least* 3.3 percent of its total population in the course of four-and-a-half years. In both cases, the definite article is a mask, and a denial: a denial of the dynamism that is the most essential and important feature of any collectivity, and a denial of death.

“The” German nation is the fiction produced by this denial, this “forgetting” of the individual losses that necessarily produced “Germany” in its human form. Awareness of these relations is perhaps this is why Anderson found it “useful to begin a consideration of the cultural roots of nationalism with death.”¹¹ “Religious thought,” he noted, “responds to obscure

⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹⁰ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14-18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002 [2000]): 22. Emphasis original.

¹¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 10.

intimations of immortality, generally by transforming fatality into continuity (karma, original sin, etc.). In this way, it concerns itself with the links between the dead and the yet unborn, the mystery of regeneration.” “The” nation claimed to be the truth that substituted for this religious hope as its hegemony began to wane over the eighteenth century. “With the ebbing of religious belief,” Anderson argued, “the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What was then required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning,” which the nation was uniquely equipped to conceptually achieve.¹²

Subsequent analyses complicated the story of secularization and Enlightenment on which Anderson’s argument is based. But ironically, this has only lent more credence to his specific arguments on death and transformation. What is *Endkampf* if not a form of secular reimagining and transformation of fatality into continuity? Indeed, the historical roots of the “national” concept in the religious wars of the seventeenth century highlight that rather than being in an oppositional relationship, religious and nationalist modes of thanatological “transformation” could and did work together to send millions of individuals sliding down an inclination toward death that ultimately brought “their” state down with it.

Sacrifice was the concept that could house both these imaginings under a common heading, fusing the religious and nationalist modes into a cathartic synthesis that behaviorally inclined the populace toward death in a way and to a degree hitherto unknown. That, or it appealed to one or the other sensibility, but still inclined in the same direction nonetheless. If the

¹² Ibid. 11.

war was a “path to general sacrifice” (*ein allgemeiner Opfergang*), as the psychologist Paul Plaut put it in 1920,¹³ this was at least conceptually prefigured in the sacrifice of Magdeburg (*Magdeburgs Opfergang*) nearly three hundred years before.¹⁴ “Sacrifice” functioned as a bridge between the literal, individual biographies of the people who made up the German “nation,” and “the” collectivity’s metaphorical biographies. By imagining either their own deaths or those of their loved ones as “national sacrifices,” those individual losses could be inscribed into a collective story of a transcendent entity which made the destruction *worth something*.

That did not mean, however, that the state claiming to embody that entity would be able to make good on its sacrificial wager. The claims of a nation-state cut both ways. When the leaders of that state thanatologically cleaved it from the nation, the state could not survive. With the collapse of the *Kaiserreich*, a certain biography of the German nation also ended, its life as an Imperial State of the formal kind gone forever, never to return. The Imperial (with a capital “I”) imagining of the nation could not even survive in the minds of those who had led it through its twilight hours, as the subsequent stories of Wilhelm II, Hindenburg, and Ludendorff implicitly attest. In the aftermath of 1918 and the destruction of the state in whose name so many millions officially gave their lives, the debates over “who owns the dead” took on a brutal political significance, one which only intensified after Hitler’s ascension to the Chancellery in 1933. However-much representatives of the new German Republic may have tried to lay exclusive claim to the care of veterans and attempted to impose their narrative of the war’s

¹³ Paul Plaut, “Psychographie des Kriegers,” in eds. William Stern and Otto Wiegmann, *Behefte zur Zeitschrift für angewandte Psychologie*, Vol. 21, *Beiträge zur Psychologie des Kriegers* (1920): 5.

¹⁴ See: Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years’ War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007): 141-177.

thanatological and political legacy,¹⁵ there's was only one highly contested interpretation in that sphere. The thanatological cleavage between state and nation remained, as the survivors debated the meaning of their millions of dead, the political form "their" community should consequently take, and who subsequently belonged to "it."

Against this going mortality rate are exemplary suicides and poignant martyrdoms of a different kind, committed during a time of war and holocaust. When snatched from the ever-accumulating, ever-decaying detritus of the past, these violent deaths give rise to new narratives: of a life, of a war, of a regime. Such narratives will not in themselves produce any new result or bring about any new future. But telling this story of loss—the word, with all it hides, and the event, with all it destroys—can perhaps highlight that which officialdom would, seemingly, rather we all forget, in all its horror and possibility.

¹⁵ See: Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

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