



CONVERSATIONS WITH THIRD REICH CONTEMPORARIES

FROM LUKE HOLLAND'S *FINAL ACCOUNT*

STEFANIE RAUCH

UCLPRESS

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Stefanie Rauch

 **UCLPRESS**

First published in 2025 by
UCL Press
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

Available to download free: www.uclpress.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.



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Rauch, S. (2025). *Conversations with Third Reich Contemporaries: From Luke Holland's Final Account*. London: UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800088658>

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ISBN: 978-1-80008-863-4 (Hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-80008-864-1 (Pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-80008-865-8 (PDF)

ISBN: 978-1-80008-866-5 (epub)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800088658>

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Glossary

Abitur	High-school diploma
‘euthanasia’/‘Aktion T4’	Murder of around 250,000 men, women and children with disabilities in Germany and German-annexed territories
Allgemeine SS	General SS
Amtsleiter	Office leader (NSDAP political rank)
Anschluss	Annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in March 1938
Arbeitsdienst	Labour service
Arbeitsdienstführer	Labour service leader
Arbeitsmaidenführerin	Leader of female labour service
Ardenennenoffensive	Battle of the Bulge
‘Aryanisation’	Forced expulsion and expropriation of Jews
Bannführer	Banner leader (a rank in the Hitler Youth)
Batteriechef	Battery commander
BDM Glaube und Schönheit	BDM sub-organisation Faith and Beauty for women aged 18–21
Bekennende Kirche	Protestant anti-Nazi movement
Bündische Jugend	Youth movement during the Weimar Republic with a <i>völkisch</i> nationalist outlook
Bund Deutscher Mädel (BDM)	League of German Girls
Denazification	Removal of Nazi influence after the Second World War
<i>Der Stürmer</i>	Tabloid-style Nazi newspaper published by Julius Streicher, notorious for its antisemitic propaganda

Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH Werk Mauthausen Ober-Donau	SS-owned company for procuring and producing building materials for construction projects
Deutsches Jungvolk (DJ)	Section of Hitler Youth for boys aged 9–14
Deutsch-national	National conservative outlook; associated with Paul von Hindenburg
Fähleinführer	Flag leader (a rank in the Hitler Youth)
Feldunterarzt	Junior medical officer
Feldwebel	Sergeant
Fernsprecher	Telephone operator
Flakhelfer	Anti-aircraft helper (youth conscripted to operate flak guns)
Flugzeugführer	Pilot
Freiwilligenlegion Flandern	Flemish Volunteer Legion
Funker	Radio operator
Gestapo	Secret police in Nazi Germany
Grundschule	Primary school
Gymnasium	Grammar school
Handelsschule	Commercial school
Mühlviertler Hasenjagd	The killing of most of some 500 escaped Soviet POWs from the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp on 2 February 1945 with local involvement. Called ‘hare hunt’ by the SS
Hauptschule	Lower secondary school
Heimabend	Social gathering of Hitler Youth organisations revolving around political education, readings, and singing
Heimwehr	Home Guard (Austrian paramilitary)
Hermann-Göring-Werke	Hermann Göring Works (industrial conglomerate)
Hitlerjugend (HJ)	Hitler Youth. Sub-branches for navy (Marine-HJ), air force (Segelflieger-HJ), motor corps (Motor-HJ)
Horst Wessel song	Anthem of the Nazi Party

Hygiene Institute of the Waffen-SS	SS medical research institute, responsible for human experiments
Joachim Mrugowsky	SS doctor, involved in human experiments
Judenaktionen	Euphemism for Nazi operations against Jews
Jugendkompanie	Youth company
Jugendschaftsführer	Youth leader (a rank in the Hitler Youth)
Jungzugführer	Junior platoon leader (a rank in the Hitler Youth)
Junker	Class of conservative landowners in Prussia; also a class of military aircraft
KZ	Common abbreviation for concentration camp
Kommissarbefehl	Commissar Order issued 6 June 1941 by the German Armed Forces High Command, ordering soldiers to shoot Soviet Communist Party officials taken prisoner. Rescinded in May 1942.
Kompaniechef	Company commander
Kriegshilfsdienst	War auxiliary service
Kriegsmarine	German navy
‘Kristallnacht’	So-called ‘night of broken glass’: antisemitic violence in November 1938
Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service	Removal of ‘non-Aryans’ from the civil service, 1933
Leutnant	Lieutenant
Lidice	Czechoslovakian village with around 500 residents that was destroyed by the Nazis in 1942 as a reprisal for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. Men and boys were executed immediately, and women and children deported. Some children were selected for ‘Germanisation’ and adopted by German parents. Fifty-three women died in concentration camps. At least 80 children were murdered.

Luftwaffe	German air force
Lyzeum	Secondary school for girls
Mädelschaft	Smallest unit within the League of German Girls (BDM)
Mischlingslager	Nazi camp for so-called ' <i>Mischlinge</i> ' (people of 'mixed Jewish blood') under Nuremberg Laws
Mitläufer	Fellow traveller (denazification category)
Mittelschule	Middle school
Mittlere Reife	Secondary school diploma
Mutterverdienstkreuz	Decoration for women with four or more children
Nachrichtenabteilung	Signals detachment
Nachtjäger	Night fighter
Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalten (Napola)	National Political Institutes of Education: elite secondary boarding schools in Nazi Germany
Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP)	National Socialist German Workers' Party
NS-Frauenschaft	National Socialist Women's League
Nuremberg Laws	Antisemitic laws enacted in Nazi Germany in 1935
Oberfähnrich	Senior cadet
Obergauleiter	Senior regional leader (Nazi Party rank)
Obergefreiter	Senior corporal
Oberkriegsverwaltungsrat	Senior war administration councillor
Oberleutnant	First lieutenant
Oberscharführer	Senior squad leader (SS rank)
Oberschule	Secondary school
'Operation Barbarossa'	Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union
Ordensburgen	Elite Nazi training schools
Organisation Todt	Civil and military engineering organisation in Nazi Germany which exploited forced labour

Ortsgruppenleiter	Local NSDAP group leader
Ostwall	Defensive line on the Eastern Front: Panther–Wotan line
PAK	Anti-tank gun
Panzergranadiere	Armoured infantry
POW	Prisoner of war
Realschule	Six-year secondary school with vocational focus
Realgymnasium	Nine-year secondary school with a focus on sciences
Regimentsstab	Regimental staff
Reicharbeitsdienst (RAD)	Reich Labour Service: six months' labour service in Nazi Germany performed by young men and, during the war, also by young women
Reichsfluchtsteuer	Tax on emigrants, targeted especially at Jews during the Nazi period
Reichskanzlei	Reich Chancellery
Reichsluftfahrtministerium	Reich Air Ministry
Reichsschrifttumskammer	Nazi office under Joseph Goebbels' Reich Chamber of Culture (<i>Reichskulturkammer</i>) controlling all aspects of literature, including publishing and libraries
Reichswehr	German army during the Weimar Republic and the first two years of the Nazi regime
Röhm Affair	So-called 'night of the long knives': purge of SA leadership by the SS
Schutzhaft	Protective custody, a euphemism for the extra-legal incarceration of political or other opponents
Schutzstaffel (SS)	Paramilitary organisation initially subordinate to the SA and from 1934 to Adolf Hitler
Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS (SD)	Nazi intelligence service

SMG	Submachine gun
Soldbuch	Soldier's pay book
Sozialwart	Social warden
SS Einsatzgruppen	SS task forces, mobile killing squads that played a key role in the mass killings of Jews on Soviet territory
SS Prinz-Eugen-Division	SS division recruited from ethnic Germans, created in the spring of 1942, and deployed in anti-partisan warfare
SS Sanitätsbattalion	SS medical battalion
SS-Oberführer	Senior leader (SS rank)
Stabsoffizier	Staff officer
Stahlhelm	Veterans' organisation and paramilitary organisation after the First World War
Stammführer	Tribe leader (a rank in the Hitler Youth)
Standartenführer	Colonel (SS rank)
Sturmabteilung (SA)	Storm troopers: paramilitary wing of NSDAP
Sturmabannführer	Major (SS rank)
Umerziehungslager	Re-education camp
Unterarzt	Junior doctor
Unterleutnant	Second lieutenant
Unteroffizier	Non-commissioned officer (NCO)
Untersturmführer	Second lieutenant (SS rank)
Vaterländische Front	Patriotic Front (Austrian nationalist organisation)
Verfügungstruppe	Combat support troops. SS branch, at the disposition of the army during the war
<i>Völkischer Beobachter</i>	Nazi Party newspaper
Volksempfänger	Radio
Volksgenossen	Member of the ethnically defined community
Volksschule	Primary and lower secondary school

Volkssturm	Home guard militia deployed at the end of the war, conscripting boys in their early teens and elderly men
Wachoffizier	Watch officer
Waffen-SS	Armed wing of the SS
Wehrmacht	Armed forces in Nazi Germany
Wehrpass	Military documentation book
Westwall	Defensive line on the Western Front: Siegfried Line
Wirtschaftsstab Ost	Part of the Economic Organisation East tasked with the economic exploitation of the occupied eastern territories, including through forced labour in the East and in the <i>Reich</i> , and the exploitation of resources

Acknowledgements

This sourcebook would not exist without Luke Holland, who created a remarkable collection of interviews. I would also like to express my gratitude to Yvonne Hennessey at ZEF Productions and to Sam Pope. This book is part of the ‘Interpreting Perpetrator Voices’ project at UCL’s Institute of Advanced Studies (2021–5), which is generously funded by the Pears Foundation. I am grateful to UCL Press, to Pat Gordon-Smith, in particular, who was encouraging from the outset, Elliot Beck, and the production team.

UCL’s Institute of Advanced Studies and the Wiener Holocaust Library offered an ideal environment in which to complete this book. I benefited greatly from discussions with colleagues at UCL. I am particularly grateful to Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, and Zoltán Kékesi for many stimulating discussions and their invaluable comments on earlier drafts. The book has also been shaped by the collaborative Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project ‘Compromised Identities? Reflections on Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism’ (2018–21), including discussions with Christoph Thonfeld and Bastiaan Willems.

I would like to acknowledge Max Haberich for transcribing and translating the excerpts and Graham Riach for creating still images and subtitled clips. My thanks also go to UCL Library Services and Digital Collections for archiving the interview collection. Finally, I am grateful to the anonymous readers for their helpful reviews and recommendations.

Introduction

Following Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945, millions of Germans and Austrians navigated changing circumstances and prospects amid the 'Third Reich's' demise. The Allies confronted them with the horrific record of 12 years of Nazi rule, including genocide and a devastating war. Of course, many already had a degree of knowledge about, and indeed involvement in, the violence Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators had inflicted on their victims. As 'final victory' turned to defeat, contemporaries began to rewrite what was, for many, a defining part of their lives.

In the intervening decades, the role played by 'ordinary Germans' in the 'Third Reich' and the Holocaust has continued to garner interest and stir debates, including in ideas of national character, collective pathologies, responses to denazification and trials of Nazi crimes, debates about the importance of Hitler and the constraints of dictatorships, and the question of intention versus structural developments towards the so-called 'Final Solution'. Interest in ordinary people's involvement in Nazi rule is still growing, with ever more sophisticated and nuanced research into the *'Volksgemeinschaft'* (ethnically defined community), 'bystanders', and mid- to low-level actors. The 'peace years' and the ways in which Germans and Austrians reacted to and participated in ostracising and persecuting Jews and others deemed 'undesirable' are being examined, throwing into question the assertions of 'mere bystanders'. Increasingly, the involvement of an ever wider circle of actors drawn from large sections of society has been uncovered.

The ways in which 'Third Reich' contemporaries negotiated the Nazi past in the three successor states – the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the German Democratic Republic (GDR), and Austria – has

become its own field of study. Historians have shed light on the political, social, cultural, legal, generational, and personal contingencies that have informed a particular set of responses as well as how these contingencies have influenced certain interpretative and representational strategies in relation to others. In the last three decades, scholars have been exploring issues around representation, narrative, and identity in ego-documents, cultural artefacts, oral history, and literary sources. Parallel to this development, there has been a marked increase in the number of oral history accounts being collected and made available to both scholars and wider publics.

This book brings these two strands together, presenting a selection of excerpts from interviews about the Nazi past in light of self-representational strategies, generational aspects, and post-war developments. In this way, this sourcebook aims to introduce readers to the context of interview co-production and take the subject beyond 1945, to indicate shifts in representation and identity.

The excerpts were selected from a collection of filmed interviews conducted by British documentary filmmaker Luke Holland (1948–2020). The interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2017 (especially 2010–14). With support from the Pears Foundation as founding partners, Holland's project titled 'Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies' encompasses 295 interviews in different parts of Europe and South America, with 150 men and 124 women (274 in total). They were born primarily between 1918 and 1927 (but dates of birth range from 1905 to 1934). The interviewees were from a range of countries, but most were from Germany and Austria. Holland asked them about their memories of, involvement in, and reflections on the 'Third Reich', the Second World War, and the Holocaust. The unedited interviews amount to around 500 hours and are open for research at UCL, the Wiener Holocaust Library, and France's audio-visual archive, the Institut national de l'audiovisuel (Ina).¹ Holland, whose mother was a Jewish refugee, had spent his childhood in the 1950s at the Bruderhof, a German-speaking Christian community in Paraguay.² He only found out about his Jewish family background as a teenager. Holland, renowned for the five-part BBC Storyville series *A Very English Village* (2005), and the films *I Was a Slave Labourer* (1999), *More Than a Life* (2002), and *Good Morning Mr Hitler* (1993), died on 10 June 2020, shortly before the premiere of his film *Final Account* (2020), based on some of the interviews in the collection, at the Venice Film Festival.

This sourcebook focuses on the interview collection's strengths: first, the reflexive nature of the interviews, which specifically address

interpretations of the past, and second, the generational aspect, as most of the interviewers' interlocutors belong to cohorts who were still only young adults by the time the war ended. This affects the level of their prior involvement: the older cohorts, who planned, organised, or initiated war and genocide, are not represented here. But despite their relatively young age, some interviewees had benefited materially, often through their families, such as through 'Aryanisation', that is, the expropriation of those designated and persecuted as Jewish, careers or studies enabled through membership of a Nazi organisation, or exploiting forced labour. Others had facilitated and enacted persecution, or had perpetrated violence, such as in anti-partisan warfare. Most built new lives in the three successor states, which largely integrated the former *Volksgenossen* (members of the '*Volksgemeinschaft*').

Holland was not the first to record interviews with 'Third Reich' contemporaries. Since the late 1990s, the impending passing away of the remaining Nazi perpetrators and their enablers, facilitators, helpers, witnesses, and beneficiaries has resulted in increased efforts at recording their accounts, a process that has been championed by institutions including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Interviews conducted by filmmakers, most notably Claude Lanzmann and Guido Knopp, are among the most prominent, given the wide reach of documentary films. While few people will ever be confronted with several hours of an in-depth, audio-only oral history interview, short snippets from filmed accounts embedded in a wider narrative as part of a documentary can reach far larger audiences. These accounts remain under-used by scholars and they are still largely absent from exhibitions and other educational resources and programmes. Among the obstacles to accessing these sources are ethical and political concerns, resource deficits in pedagogy, the need for significant contextualisation, and a dearth of the prerequisite language skills. Therefore, scholarly editions of important texts continue to be invaluable for both research and education.

How do we approach these particular accounts? Can they provide new insights into the history of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and their legacies, as well as mass violence elsewhere, in both the past and the present? How can we authenticate, corroborate, and compare them with other sources or other historical contexts? Given the primacy afforded in Holocaust education and memorialisation to first-hand survivor testimony and especially filmed accounts, how do we reconcile what seem to be contradictory approaches to testimonies depending on the subject matter and how we identify or characterise the narrator?

How can we make the often seemingly invisible work of the interviewer, filmmaker, or journalist transparent to a wider audience? Expressing judgements about what is morally right and wrong has been shown to prevent critical evaluation and analysis; how can we learn and teach techniques for assessment that are both alert to the historical context and the needs of the present in which we engage with the topic?

In the wider context of mass public engagement with not only the Holocaust but also continuing and new forms of racism, antisemitism, and prejudice today, and with numerous representations of perpetrator voices in different media, it is even more important to raise critical awareness of these important issues. This sourcebook is about more than the excerpts it presents and curates: it is about the question of how and by whom knowledge is produced; the impact of emotions and empathy; the contingency of life narratives; the role of performativity; and opportunities and challenges for pedagogy.

Locating perpetration and complicity: key developments and their impact on oral history

Oral history as an academic discipline, heuristic method, and primary source developed over the twentieth century, especially its latter half. It is by now well established and encompasses a wide array of approaches, in a variety of disciplines, including history, sociology, cultural studies, memory studies, and psychoanalysis. This is also true for its curation. In the public realm, oral history features in documentaries, exhibitions, and community projects. Technological advances have made recording and sharing oral history ever more accessible. The reuse of oral history, however, remains under-theorised.³ Often, clips from oral histories are added for illustration, or narratives are taken at face value, especially where marginalised voices are concerned, as the presumed authenticity of 'lived experience' is afforded an important place in some public and academic discourses. Scholarship on Holocaust survivor testimonies has contributed much innovation in this area and advanced critical analyses of the sources held at repositories such as the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive, USHMM, or the USC Shoah Foundation.⁴

Until the 1990s, oral histories of Nazism and the Holocaust rarely intended to include the voices of people who had benefited from or facilitated oppression. Initial interest was directed at opposition to Nazism. Jewish survivors and other victims of Nazi violence, alongside the experiences of 'ordinary Germans', gradually came into oral history's

view in the 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, issues around transgenerational memory transmission and complicity increasingly came to global attention. Since then, interest in complicity and perpetration has grown, resulting in oral history and other interview projects, especially in the territories of the former Soviet Union where local populations frequently witnessed mass murder, and where many got involved in the violence, whether by choice or requisition.⁵

These developments ought to be seen in the context of the wider historiography and public conceptions since the end of the Second World War. The extent to which oral histories and other audio-visual accounts were collected, by whom, when, and about what topics, is intimately linked to the history of confronting questions around the nature of perpetration and complicity. These questions have from the outset been associated with apportioning guilt and responsibility.

Soon after the Nuremberg Trials, before West German and Austrian courts, an increasingly narrow view of high-level and direct perpetrators and of a ‘clean *Wehrmacht*’ prevailed. In the public sphere, the involvement of the wider population was no longer acknowledged after the end of ‘denazification’. The 1960s registered significant events in confronting the Holocaust and its aftermath, notably the trial of Adolf Eichmann (broadcast at the time and now available online), which put survivor testimony centre-stage and has been termed the beginning of the ‘era of the witness’,⁶ while the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial marked a reckoning of a younger generation with the Nazi past. What did not happen in this period was an attempt at speaking to those accused of Nazi crimes. John M. Steiner, a sociologist who had survived several concentration camps, however, began to apply the Frankfurt School notion of the ‘authoritarian personality’ to his analysis of *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen-SS* veterans, whom he surveyed through questionnaires in the 1960s. In the 1970s, he also conducted interviews with them. He was joined by others – predominantly filmmakers and journalists, but also a psychiatrist who had formerly studied Rudolf Hess and others during and shortly after the war – who had developed an interest in mostly high-level (for example Hitler’s inner circle) and direct perpetrators (especially camp guards).⁷ The 1970s thus saw a flurry of activity, the results of which were published or broadcast. In the case of two ambitious projects – Eberhard Fechner’s *Der Prozess* (1984), a documentary about the Düsseldorf Majdanek Trial, and Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985) – broadcast did not take place until the mid-1980s.⁸ From the late 1970s, but particularly during the 1980s, when *Alltagsgeschichte* (the social history of everyday life) developed in West Germany, historians and

sociologists began to conduct in-depth, biographical interviews with Germans about the Nazi past.⁹

Meanwhile, the scholarship on Nazism focused on the nature of the regime and, later, of its relationship to the German people. Subsequent debates revolved around the supposed antithesis of coercion versus consent, and in relation to the Holocaust between ‘intentionalists’, who held that Hitler had planned to exterminate the Jews all along, and ‘structuralists’, who argued that it had been rather a ‘twisted road to Auschwitz’.¹⁰ The latter placed more emphasis on local initiatives and a wider group of actors. Although public opinion and people’s accommodation to Nazism came into view in this period, notions of perpetration and complicity remained largely limited to a small group of easily identifiable perpetrators. This changed most significantly in the course of the 1990s. Ever wider groups of actors in war and genocide were brought into scholarly and public view due to a number of developments: access to sources in the dissolved Soviet Union that were formerly closed to Western scholars; a renewed scholarly focus on racial ideology; Christopher Browning’s seminal study of police battalion 101; an exhibition about crimes of the Wehrmacht; Daniel Goldhagen’s contested argument about German ‘eliminator’ anti-semitism; the rise to attention of the ‘Holocaust by bullets’; and the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica.

This trend has continued into the present, as the ‘ordinary men’ have become ‘ordinary Germans’, replacing the earlier focus on the men at the very top or pulling the trigger. Insights from genocide studies have resulted in an increasing emphasis on situational factors and the mutability of identities. So-called ‘bystanders’ are now seen as crucial for the genesis or hindrance of violence.¹¹ The trend in the scholarship has been to move away from fixed labels and identities, as it has been acknowledged that people move in and out of perpetration. In addition, scholars such as Daniel Bultmann question the very focus on ‘the category of “perpetrator” as vanguard for understanding a conflict or violence more generally’ because an ‘individual is always already part of a social field with various interdependent structural positions’.¹² ‘Bystanding’ too is not a fixed position but, as Mary Fulbrook argues, a temporary state, because ‘those who are initially simply witnesses to violence by chance ... become themselves more deeply involved in the dynamics of systemic or state-sanctioned violence over an extended period of time’.¹³ Current research tends to focus on different facets of involvement and the situational factors that foster it. This includes paying close attention to the local, regional, and national

socio-cultural dynamics that affect the level of involvement in violence versus assistance provided to the persecuted. The study of complicity is concerned with questions around compliance with the prevailing laws and norms turning into complicity, with differing conceptions of responsibility and accountability, and what constitutes involvement or a contribution to wrongdoing and harm.¹⁴

Scholarly and arguably public interest in perpetration and complicity has therefore expanded from what used to be a focus primarily on high-level or direct perpetrators to include bureaucratic and administrative functionaries and from there to the murkier territory of facilitating, benefiting, endorsing, and ignoring suffering and persecution. Conceptions and notions of perpetration and complicity differ over time and place. This, in turn, impacted on interviews with people who were considered to fall into these categories.

Given these developments, it is no surprise that the last three decades have experienced a steep increase in the number of accounts being collected and made available to both scholars and wider publics. Time, of course, is working against these efforts as fewer and fewer witnesses of Nazism, war, and genocide are still alive, and as their age is skewed towards younger cohorts.¹⁵ Holland's 'Final Account' project constitutes a significant contribution to these more recent developments.

Somewhat older cohorts were included in the collections of the Institute for History and Biography, whose own mostly audio-only interviews stem from the 1980s onwards and include working-class people, post-war elites, and GDR citizens. Other collections of varying sizes have been deposited there too, focusing on particular groups, such as female *Wehrmacht* auxiliaries. The Workshop of Memory at the Institute for Contemporary History in Hamburg has been home to interviews, including with Germans who experienced the 'Third Reich', since 1990. Since the late 1990s, USHMM has led an initiative aimed at collecting the accounts of 'Perpetrators, Collaborators, and Witnesses' of the Holocaust, primarily in the former Soviet Union, but also including around 100 interviews with Germans conducted in several stages: by sociologists in the late 1990s; historians of the German Institute for History and Biography around 2004–5; and historian Wendy Lower around 2010. Starting in 2009, the *Projekt MenschenLeben* at Austria's Österreichische Mediathek has been collecting hundreds of narrative life history interviews with Austrian men and women, including 'Third Reich' contemporaries.¹⁶

'Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies'

Most of the German and Austrian individuals interviewed by Holland for 'Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies' were born c.1918–27. Among the German cohort, less than a dozen are of the first 'war-youth' generation (1900–14), 65 per cent are of the first 'Hitler Youth' generation (1915–24), and just under 30 per cent are of the second 'war-youth' generation (1925–33). Fulbrook notes that the first 'Hitler Youth' and the first 'war-youth' generation 'carried' the 'Third Reich' because they had the 'greatest enthusiasm for and active participation in the Nazi project'.¹⁷ Due to the time elapsed, the 'front generation' born out of the First World War – that is, the generation that conceived of, initiated, and organised war and genocide in the 1930s and 1940s – is absent here.¹⁸ Among the Austrians interviewed by Holland, more than 60 per cent were born between 1920 and 1925; thus they experienced Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria (known as the *Anschluss*) in March 1939 as teenagers or young adults.¹⁹

The German and Austrian men and women interviewed by Holland, including ethnic Germans from different countries, were situated on a wide spectrum of involvement and experiences under Nazism. Holland also sought to explore the complex motivations for and facets of involvement and collaboration of people in Nazi-occupied territories, and their post-war reflections on their past behaviours and attitudes, conducting interviews with people from France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Slovakia, and Ukraine. He recorded interviews in Paraguay and Argentina, mostly with ethnic Germans already born in these countries rather than Nazis escaping prosecution, with the conversations primarily revolving around local Hitler Youth groups and support for the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) and the war. The pan-European, even global ambition of Holland's project is of note and sets it apart; it also reflects a growing interest in the scholarship in the European dimension of war and genocide and transnational history.²⁰

Holland's interlocutors come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, including farming families, the working class, middle class, and nobility. At least a third of the men had attained the *Abitur* qualification (a high-school diploma permitting the graduate to attend university), and a similar proportion of the women had attended a higher school for girls (*Lyzeum*). Most of the German, ethnic German, and Austrian (and some of the French, Dutch, Belgian, and Ukrainian) men interviewed by Holland served in either the *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen-SS*, *SS*, air force (*Luftwaffe*), or navy (*Kriegsmarine*), or were conscripted into

the home guard militia (*Volkssturm*), which enlisted boys in their early teenage years and elderly men, in various capacities and across different, and often multiple, theatres of war. Among the women, we find a variety of pre-war and wartime occupations, ranging from homemakers and domestic workers to students, nurses, and civil servants, as well as those employed in the service and media industries, and as secretaries or in other capacities in non-military, military, and National Socialist organisations.

Most interviews took place in the narrators' own homes, a few in public, and some in retirement homes. Holland's recruitment methods encompassed local gatekeepers, the *Zeitzeugenbörsen*,²¹ word of mouth, visiting retirement homes, and approaching people in the street. The interviews varied in length between 30 minutes and several hours. Some people were interviewed more than once, or together with their spouses or as part of a group of friends or retirement home residents. At the beginning of each interview, Holland set out the project's purposes (research, education, memory). Only a few of his interlocutors knew about his background. Holland asked questions – probing, sometimes suggestively – about life history and upbringing, the Nazi period, specific topics of interest (for example, education, the November Pogrom, often referred to as 'Kristallnacht', Jewish acquaintances, responses to anti-semitism and persecution, occupation/war service, and knowledge of atrocities), and more abstract themes around perpetration and complicity, guilt, and responsibility, the 'German character', and lessons for the future. The post-war years were covered to a much lesser extent, but the topics here included intergenerational conflicts. Many interviewees showed photos and photo albums, along with medals, documents, or memoirs. Some of Holland's interlocutors were experienced narrators, used to giving talks in schools and elsewhere, or having written a book or memoir about their experiences. But many were not used to speaking about their past, with some verbalising their thoughts perhaps for the first time. Holland speaks German without accent but with limited vocabulary and grammar, frequently leading to misunderstandings and irritation, not least in his encounters with regional accents, colloquialisms, and turns of phrase. Most interviews were conducted and filmed by Holland alone. For his interviews in France and the Netherlands he enlisted interpreters; several scholars and interviewers aided him in interviews in Germany and Austria or conducted them on his behalf. Cornelia Reetz conducted 15 interviews on Holland's behalf. Her questions mirror those asked by Holland, but she interrupts her interlocutors less and there are fewer language-based misunderstandings in her interviews.

In the wider landscape of audio-visual accounts, Holland is not the only filmmaker who has made his interviews available for research.²² What sets his endeavour apart is that it was from the outset designed as both an archive and a film project. This distinguishes ‘Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies’ from the *Shoah* outtakes and Fechner’s unedited interviews conducted for *Der Prozess*, which were made available at archives only some time after the broadcast of the documentaries, as more of a byproduct. Indeed, the ‘Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies’ archival collection preceded the film and opened to research soon after the film’s general release. Holland’s documentary *Final Account*, produced by Participant Media and distributed by Focus Films, focuses on 12 men and women (eight Germans and four Austrians), supplemented with a range of other accounts from the interview collection.²³ The sourcebook goes beyond the film and includes a wider range of voices and themes. It also includes most of the people featured in the film, thereby enabling more sustained engagement with the film text where required. Where the film largely removed Holland, the sourcebook brings the filmmaker-interviewer back into view. It is a reminder of the many possible permutations his work might have taken in the sense of ‘unmade cinema’, not least as Holland’s death in 2020 foreclosed realising his other film ideas and plans for the collection.²⁴

Editorial decisions

The sourcebook complements other editions, such as Ernst Klee, Willi Dreßen, and Volker Rieß’s still widely used *‘The Good Old Days’: The Holocaust as seen by its perpetrators and bystanders* (1991), which consists of contemporary written sources, all relating to men. More recently, Sönke Neitzel’s *Tapping Hitler’s Generals: Transcripts of secret conversations, 1942–1945* (published in German 2005, translated into English 2007) opened hitherto overlooked sources to a wider audience, curating a set of transcripts originating from the Western Allies’ practice of bugging the cells of German prisoners of war (POWs). As a result, that edition too focuses exclusively on men.

In *Voices from the Third Reich: An oral history*, published 1989, Johannes Steinhoff, Peter Pechel, and Dennis Showalter present the results of interviews with 157 men and women in major West German cities and Vienna, presumably in the latter half of the 1980s. The editors focus on the toll exacted by the war on all those affected and frame the interviewees as ‘war victims and survivors’.²⁵ The interviewees were born

especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century, with many in their sixties at the time of interview and including some prominent figures such as Helmut Kohl, and two of the editors, Steinhoff and Pechel who are *Wehrmacht* veterans. The book provides some historical context around the themes it covers, but no critical discussion of the excerpts.

Eric Johnson and Karl-Heinz Reuband's 2005 *What We Knew: Terror, mass murder, and everyday life in Nazi Germany. An oral history* was the first scholarly edition of excerpts from oral histories with German 'bystanders' alongside survivors of persecution. *What We Knew* assembles excerpts from oral history interviews with German men and some women. They were conducted in the latter half of the 1990s amid the debates surrounding the contested *Crimes of the Wehrmacht* exhibition. The overarching frame of Reuband and Johnson's work was 'knowledge' rather than behaviour, although many excerpts clearly indicate various types of involvement. *What We Knew* includes four men (two of them were born in 1920, the other two in 1915 and 1907) who witnessed or participated in Nazi violence. Based on an accompanying survey conducted in 2000, Johnson and Reuband argue that around a third of Germans knew about mass murder, a further 10 per cent suspected it, and 60 per cent were unaware. In this calculation, however, we are missing those who *partook* in killings, who may, depending on what victim groups are being included, range in the hundreds of thousands. Given that the survey was conducted in 2000, the cohorts intimately involved in organising and executing mass murder would have died already, further skewing the results. Its framing as answering the question of 'what Germans knew' was very much in keeping with the scholarship of the time in which the interviews originated, such as Peter Longerich and Bernward Dörner's studies into what Germans knew and could have known.²⁶

This sourcebook offers a curated edition of excerpts relating to the side of the persecutors that have their origin in the work of a documentary filmmaker. The volume both widens access to vital sources and provides critical approaches to studying this challenging material, thereby opening a corpus hitherto largely neglected by scholars and especially historians.²⁷ Each excerpt is prefaced with a biographical note about the speaker, the content and length of which can vary considerably, depending on the level of detail provided in each interview. In addition to the biographical note, a short commentary highlights key themes and issues. The voices of women, Austrians, and ethnic Germans are presented throughout, thus supporting different research avenues and topics in teaching while raising attention to a more diverse range of perspectives. The selected

excerpts are only from German-speaking interviews, which make up the majority of the collection. This sourcebook includes excerpts from 101 interviews with 102 people. Around two-thirds were born in Germany, including East Prussia and Pomerania; around a fifth in Austria; and the remainder in Alsace, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Poland. Thirty-nine are female, 61 male. Around 20 per cent were born between 1912 and 1919, but half of those in 1918–19; around 40 per cent between 1920 and 1924; around 30 per cent between 1925 and 1927; and just a few between 1928 and 1931. That is, most of the interviewees belong to cohorts who were young adults by the time the war ended – some when it had started. The volume's focus on agency complicates reductive notions around 'knowledge' which have tended to sideline explorations of behaviour under Nazism. It enables the study of reflections on the past which goes beyond static, positivist interpretations of oral history interviews that ignore the impact of the intervening years and the context at the time of the interview. Finally, the sourcebook provides a unique perspective on interviewer–interviewee interactions while raising attention to the – intended, imagined, or actual – audience, including the readers of the volume.

The excerpts included in this edition represent only a fraction of a collection of 500 hours of recordings. The interviews themselves are not representative or exhaustive. The way in which the excerpts are presented warrants explanation. Interviews as sources come in three main formats: as text (transcripts, summaries, reports, protocols), audio recordings, and video recordings, the latter two in full or in excerpts, edited or unedited. Here, the selected excerpts were transcribed and translated into English by a bilingual translator, and edited by the editor of the sourcebook, with an emphasis on keeping the text as close to the German original as possible while also being intelligible. General issues of translation are compounded here by the fact that the original language of the interviews is often far from clear. This is due to a number of reasons, including regional dialects, inexperienced narrators, Holland's language skills, and the narrators' age. The use of passive or third-person or second-person singular formulations, such as 'one' or 'you', is very common.

Where speakers interrupt their speech, leave a sentence unfinished, or are interrupted, this is indicated with an en dash, for instance: 'And this–, it was already renovated, the Olympic Stadium.' The use of [...] indicates that an excerpt has been shortened. Additional information, such as explanations, missing words, or paraverbal expressions like laughter or crying and gestures, is provided in square brackets, for

example: ‘And then we stood there [lifts up her right arm to a Hitler salute], what did we do? If one had to stand a long time, we rested our arm on the shoulder of the one in front [laughs].’ German nouns relating to, for example, organisations (such as *Waffen-SS*), ranks (such as *Leutnant*), and education (such as *Abitur* or *Gymnasium*) are written in italics. The glossary provides explanations for these and other terms. When interviewees speak of ‘Russia’, this may denote countries other than Russia, such as Ukraine. It should also be noted that ‘the East’ was both an idea – ‘living space’ to be conquered – and a reference to an ever-shifting geographic region as seen from Nazi Germany.

Certain terms are given in inverted commas to raise attention to their origins. This includes: ‘Third Reich’, a term constructed by the Nazi regime to suggest continuity with the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and the German *Kaiserreich*; ‘Aryan’ and ‘Aryanisation’, which are both based on a Nazi racial ideology; ‘Kristallnacht’, a shorter version of the euphemistic term ‘Reichskristallnacht’, or ‘night of broken glass’, which the Nazis used to refer to the anti-Jewish violence of 9–10 November 1938; and ‘*Volkgemeinschaft*’, a term preceding the Nazi period but which in that time denoted an ethnically defined community which would transcend traditional socio-economic barriers.

Inevitably, transcripts and translations are poor substitutes for the richness of audio-visual recordings. Even the most faithful transcript cannot hope to capture everything. The introduction of punctuation, correct grammar, or the omission of pauses and fillers, and ellipses, all for the sake of readability and intelligibility, can obscure deeper meanings, even distort. Tone and audio-visual cues are often lost.²⁸ These issues are compounded by translation. Nonetheless, enabling a critical engagement with these sources beyond German speakers is essential.

Source criticism

Interviews do not capture and reveal an ‘authentic self’: they are situational and dynamic.²⁹ An interview consists of at least three parties: interviewer (and in some cases a team of camera people and technicians), interviewee(s), and the intended or imagined audience (academic, public, family members). We might add the chosen technology as another key party: the audio recorder, phone, or camera impacts on the interaction. Finally, actual third parties might be present or enter and exit the interview at different moments, such as family members, carers, friends, and acquaintances. Both interviewer and interviewees play a

role or perform in and to a particular context that affects and constitutes particular subject positions. On the part of the interviewer that could be, for instance, a type of ‘citizen prosecutor’ meting out justice with the help of indignant audiences, or ‘confessor’ or ‘therapist’ offering a path to redemption or rehabilitation. In practice, such positions will likely shift and be negotiated during an interview. It matters how close interviewers feel to their interlocutors. This, in turn, can vary depending on how sympathetic they may seem and on interviewers’ own political (for example, left-wing or conservative/right-wing) or personal backgrounds: for instance, whether they are survivors of Nazi persecution, like John M. Steiner, *Wehrmacht* veterans, like Eberhard Fechner, descendants of the side of the perpetrators, such as German historians in the 1980s, or descendants of the side of the victims and survivors, like Holland. Other factors also influence an interview, such as whether a narrator is experienced or talking about certain aspects of their life to an outsider for the first time. Age and health play a role, too. Late in life often there is a greater need to make sense of one’s life and reconcile self-image and what may be conflicting experiences and behaviours. We may also consider interviewees’ agendas: do they want to ‘set the record straight’, pass on their ‘lessons from history’, or record their stories for their families? Agenda and dynamics are considerably different in other settings and contexts, such as interviews with convicted perpetrators in prison – for example, John Steiner’s interviews with Auschwitz perpetrators, Gitta Sereny’s interviews with Franz Stangl – or interviews conducted in Rwanda and Cambodia.

Interviews, then, are not transparent documents; they are contingent, and ought to be seen in the context of their co-production, and in relation to their specific status as both artefacts and works of art. As a filmmaker, Holland was acutely aware of other films and projects utilising interviews (including Steiner, Lanzmann, and Father Desbois’s work recording witness accounts in Ukraine), and he was conscious of potential uses of the interviews in a later documentary film. One important intertextual reference point here is Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, in relation to which Holland’s interviews and the feature-length documentary are positioned. The filmed interviews conform to a particular framing and *mise-en-scène*, partly to ensure optimum lighting and sound conditions, partly to position some of the narrators in a specific way, such as against the background of a bucolic landscape or in front of family photographs. In other cases, the setting is less optional, especially where narrators are in care or retirement homes, where their frailty is on permanent display, thereby complicating the relationship between

interviewer and interviewee, and how it may be perceived. Interviews are a performance, too, with Holland oscillating between seeking to build trust with his interlocutors and not getting too close to them. He characterised his interlocutors as belonging to the ‘perpetrator side’, which shaped how and what he asked them, and who he was looking for, while opening him to criticism for potentially giving the ‘perpetrator side’ the last word. But in the interviews, he offers his interlocutors a different position, that of *Zeitzeugen*, ‘contemporary witnesses’, a role with which many are familiar and which they are eager to embody. The figure of the *Zeitzeuge* has come to encompass survivors of the Holocaust and other Nazi violence and witnesses to such violence, in a documentary format popularised by Guido Knopp at the German broadcaster ZDF. These ‘witnesses’ belonged to the German and Austrian ‘majority population’, some of whom ‘witnessed’ violence in close proximity, in which they did not intervene on the part of the victims and to which they may have contributed in different ways. Such interview excerpts have become a common sight in German documentaries. Wulf Kansteiner argues that Knopp’s documentaries suggest that the sensible way to behave for the average morally sound citizen is not to offer resistance and to keep their thoughts to themselves, and to later bear witness.³⁰ It is certainly a much less loaded, less threatening term than ‘perpetrator’ or ‘bystander’, and has effectively been depoliticised in the past two or three decades. Indeed, given the widespread familiarity with *Zeitzeugen* on TV, it provides interviewees with a safe, neutral subject position, a template or script for telling and performing not just stories but personas in a particular way. This allows Holland to establish trust, by suggesting a non-judgemental approach, while asking probing questions; it allows the interviewees to frame their past in ways that do not implicate them, offering them a way to distance themselves while having been close to the events, in the service of ‘memory work’. However, Holland asked some of his interlocutors towards the end of the interviews whether they considered themselves to be perpetrators, eliciting different responses, ranging from critical reflection to rather more tetchy exchanges or rejection of such a label.

Holland’s interviewees defy generalised labels, but few of them would have fallen under (notoriously inappropriate) justiciable categories, as far as can be known based on the interviews and archival records. Conceptions of complicity cannot be separated from their national or regional context, with different issues at stake in Germany as opposed to territories once colonised by or under German control. The present in which interviewers and interviewees engage in interaction

also shapes the encounter. Major public debates or controversies, media coverage of trials or exhibitions, geopolitical events, personal circumstances, and life cycle all impact on the narrative. This is true not only for the interviewee, but also for the interviewer whose professional background and agenda, personal stake, and other considerations, such as funding, are influenced by the wider socio-political context in which they work.

At the time of the interviews, Holland's interlocutors had reached old age, with most in their eighties and even nineties. Nazi crimes were once again the subject of public debate from 2010 onwards, as a string of octogenarians and nonagenarians were being put on trial for their service in the Nazi camps, following the landmark ruling in the Demjanjuk case in 2010 which enabled the prosecution of a wider set of concentration camp personnel beyond the guards. The trials since 2010 have been targeting not only former guards but also office and support staff at concentration and death camps – without whom, it was now held, the camps could not have functioned, somewhat broadening the view of perpetration and complicity. However, the trials have also, once again, relegated Nazi crimes to the confines of the camps. As such, few 'ordinary Germans' would consider themselves on a par with the defendants, even though their administrative functions may have highlighted the variety of ways in which people facilitated Nazi violence. Perhaps of more relevance for the interviewees in Holland's project would have been the exhibition *War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–4*, which toured Germany and Austria from 1995 to 1999, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors and causing public and private debates as it pulled a far greater proportion of the adult male population into the realm of Nazi crimes. However, the original exhibition was redeveloped amid the controversies, with some of the photos having been wrongly attributed. The revised exhibition, *Crimes of the German Wehrmacht: Dimension of a War of Annihilation 1941–4* (2001–4), was by comparison toned down and may have rather reinforced 'clean *Wehrmacht*' narratives.

Publishing excerpts from 'Third Reich' contemporaries raises ethical challenges. One often-cited concern is the question of audiences' affective responses to perpetrator (and other) voices. These responses can vary and may range from indignation to sympathy. Empathy is frequently considered as particularly contentious in this context and can constitute a distressing experience for researchers, readers, viewers, or visitors engaging with perpetrator voices in different settings. Some scholars, educators, and others fear it may be insensitive to the victims or overwhelm listeners or viewers to the extent that they accept

self-exculpatory narratives, even condone perpetrators' actions. Others, however, consider empathetic engagement with those on the side of the perpetrators as a prerequisite for understanding issues around perpetration and complicity, both at the time and in terms of their legacies, and to develop safeguards for present and future.³¹

Linked to this are other ethical questions concerning the ethics of interview production and dissemination (for example, providing a platform for Holocaust denial or incitement of hatred, the use of hidden cameras, and risks to interviewees' safety, health, and reputation), and of the use of interviews as sources, or in educational and public settings. There are also debates around archiving such sensitive material and allowing access to researchers, genealogists, educators, and journalists. More recently, questions of care have come to the fore that address the emotional distress that collecting and working with such accounts can cause to researchers and other listeners or viewers. Practices and theories of curation link to archival services, pedagogy, and wider public engagement. From accessioning collections to preparing them for research access through to selecting, organising, and presenting interviews or excerpts for the public sphere, whether in classroom teaching, museum exhibitions, or documentary film, perpetrator and other contested accounts can present distinct challenges.

Survivor testimonies are often presented to document what happened and its emotional toll, and to facilitate an emotional, empathetic engagement of visitors or viewers with the subject. Frequently, such testimonies are deployed in the public sphere without contextualisation or discussion of how they were created. This stands in marked contrast to the increasingly sophisticated analyses of ego-documents and specifically audio-visual accounts by scholars. What might be the pedagogical aims of employing accounts from the side of the persecutors more widely in the public sphere (museums, documentaries, commemorative events, memorial sites) other than arousing an indignant moral response in the visitor or user, or simply providing biographical information about a particular person or group of actors? Is there an intrinsic need to treat them differently from survivor testimonies? Key to a pedagogy with *all* oral history accounts would be to sensitise viewers and visitors to the process of their production, and to both the general workings of human memory and the particularities of confronting the Nazi past. This would provide viewers with critical interpretative resources with which to reflect on and make sense of these and other accounts. It is hoped that this sourcebook can play a part in raising such issues in different educational and research contexts.³²

As an anthology foregrounding source criticism and readers' engagement with questions around representation and knowledge production, the sourcebook calls attention to representations of the past which may obfuscate, distort, or deny. The events referred to in oral histories may or may not have occurred as narrated or even have occurred at all; their value often lies not in finding out about what happened, but what it means to the narrator. Annotating oral histories for historical veracity could reduce them to no more than unreliable, tendentious, inferior historical sources; often, stories are so patchy as to render corroboration impossible; and annotating them for narrative or representational strategies risks imposing one reading of the interviews, prejudicing other interpretations. False claims may include a muddling of timelines, such as confusion around when Jews, and those designated as Jews under Nazi racial laws in Germany and Austria, had to start wearing the yellow star. More gravely, readers will also encounter Holocaust denial and historical revisionism aimed at relativising or minimising the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes. There is, of course, no shortage of denialist or revisionist material online already. But the presumed immediacy and authenticity of oral histories of lowly actors, and the authority of ageing witnesses, who seemingly have no agenda, can be far more compelling than some notorious deniers' claims. The commentary on each excerpt or set of excerpts is intended to sensitise readers to patterns of interpretation and representation, including falsehoods, and to provide a starting point for further discussion and exploration. While the inclusion of denial and antisemitic narratives may be seen as risking their reproduction and normalisation, the vital aim of this edition is the opposite: sharpening readers' critical literacy of such narratives and especially of co-produced sources such as interviews.

Book outline

The excerpts in this sourcebook are organised thematically across three loosely chronological parts. All excerpts, which vary in length, are accompanied by a short biographical note and commentary about the excerpt. Excerpts from the same person are cross-referenced. Each part is prefaced by an introduction offering a wider contextualisation of the excerpts and highlighting particular aspects. Each introduction is bookended by suggested questions and recommendations for further study.

Notes

- 1 'Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies' is an archival project initiated and directed by Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd) in association with UCL, the Wiener Holocaust Library, the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel, France (Ina), and founding partners, Pears Foundation. The collection can be accessed at Ina, the Wiener Holocaust Library, and UCL (UCL staff and students only), and as of 2025 also at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute and Free University Berlin. Also available are further resources, such as a detailed collection guide, interview synopses, and select transcripts. For more information, see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/collections/ucl-digital-collections/browse-collections/final-account-third-reich-testimonies> (accessed 15 June 2024). A recording of the launch event hosted by the Wiener Holocaust Library is available on YouTube: 'Virtual Archive Launch: Third Reich Testimonies', 25 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYZqe-ZoEVU> (accessed 26 October 2024).
- 2 UK Jewish Film, 'Board members: Luke Holland', <https://ukjewishfilm.org/people/luke-holland> (accessed 8 February 2025).
- 3 There is a vast corpus of literature and practical handbooks on how to prepare, conduct, and transcribe oral history interviews, much less on how to interpret them, and less still on analysing interviews conducted by others. See, for example, Quinlan, MacKay, and Sommer, *Community Oral History Toolkit*; Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A practical guide*; Yow, *Recording Oral History*; Mackay, *Curating Oral Histories*; Hamilton and Shopes, *Oral History and Public Memories*; Thonfeld, 'Collecting and interpreting qualitative research-elicited data for longitudinal analysis'; Bornat, 'Secondary analysis in reflection'; Halbmayer, 'Sekundäranalyse qualitativer Daten aus lebensgeschichtlichen Interviews'.
- 4 See especially Hartman, 'Learning from survivors: The Yale Testimony Project'; Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies*; Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*; Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*; Matthäus (ed.), *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor*; von Plato, Leh, and Thonfeld (eds), *Hitler's Slaves*; de Jong, *The Witness as Object*; Roseman, *The Past in Hiding*.
- 5 Yahad-In Unum is a Christian organisation founded and directed by Father Desbois, Braman Endowed Professor of the Practice of the Forensic Study of the Holocaust at Georgetown University's Center for Jewish Civilization. Yahad-In Unum has interviewed close to 4,500 'eyewitnesses' to the 'Holocaust by bullets' in Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Poland, North Macedonia, Moldova, Lithuania, and Romania. USHMM provides access to more than 1,800 interviews conducted in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. Yahad-In Unum oral history collection, USHMM, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn38217> (accessed 29 June 2024). For debates on oral history and ethics in different contexts, see Bar-On, 'The use of a limited personal morality to rationalise horrendous evil'; Sheftel and Zembrzycki, 'Who's afraid of oral history?'; Cave and Sloan (eds), *Listening on the Edge*.
- 6 Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*.
- 7 See PsychData, John M. Steiner, 'Autoritäre Einstellungen und Statusmerkmale von ehemaligen Angehörigen der Waffen-SS und SS und der Wehrmacht'. Forschungsdaten zur Studie; Leibniz-Zentrum für Psychologische Information und Dokumentation (ZPID) Forschungsdatenzentrum für die Psychologie; USHMM, John M. Steiner Collection; Library of Congress, John Toland Papers; Sereny, *Into That Darkness*; Dicks, *Licensed Mass Murder*. See also the later work of Segev: *Soldiers of Evil*.
- 8 See also the documentary *Lagerstraße Auschwitz*, dir. Ebbo Demant (West Germany, 1979).
- 9 See, for example, Niethammer (ed.), 'Die Jahre weiß man nicht, wo man die heute hinsetzen soll'; Rosenthal, '... Wenn alles in Scherben fällt...'; Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*.
- 10 Schleunes, *The Twisted Road to Auschwitz*; Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews*; Mason, *Social Policy in the Third Reich*; Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*; Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth'*.
- 11 See, for example, Burleigh and Wippermann, *The Racial State: Germany 1933–1945*; Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*; Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve police battalion 101*; Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*; Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*; Longerich, 'Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!'; Kulka and Jäckel (eds), *Die Juden in den geheimen NS-Stimmungsberichten 1933–1945*; Dörner, *Die Deutschen und der Holocaust*; Bankier, *Die öffentliche Meinung im Hitler-Staat*; Harvey, Hürter, and Umbach (eds), *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany*; Morina and Thijs (eds), *Probing the Limits of Categorization*; Schmichen-Ackermann (ed.), 'Volksgemeinschaft': Mythos, wirkungsmächtige soziale Verheißung oder

- soziale Realität im 'Dritten Reich?'; Steber and Gotto (eds), *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany*; Wildt, *Volkgemeinschaft und Selbstermächtigung*; Fujii, *Killing Neighbors*; Jones (ed.), *New Directions in Genocide Research*; Straus, *The Order of Genocide*; Anderson, *Perpetrating Genocide: A criminological account*.
- 12 Bultman, 'Evidence and expert authority via symbolic violence', 5.
 - 13 Fulbrook, 'Conformity, compliance, and complicity', 37.
 - 14 Wächter, 'Introduction: Complicity and the politics of representation'. See also Docherty, *Complicity*; Sanders, *Complicities*; Lepora and Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise*.
 - 15 Many interviews conducted by academic researchers as part of significant projects, however, are not available for further research; for example, Rosenthal (ed.), *Als der Krieg kam, hatte ich mit Hitler nichts mehr zu tun*; Welzer, *Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi*; Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall, *Opa war kein Nazi*.
 - 16 For more detail, see Stefanie Rauch, 'Guide to collection & finding aid: *Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies*', available at UCL, Library Services, Collections, UCL Digital Collections, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/collections/ucl-digital-collections/browse-collections/final-account-third-reich-testimonies> (accessed 26 October 2024).
 - 17 Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives*, 12.
 - 18 Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives*, 12.
 - 19 Based on an analysis of Ruth Beckermann's interviews of Austrians visiting the *Wehrmacht* exhibition in Austria, Heer distinguishes between four age groups among men: war children (1929–35), the 'last reserve' (1925–8), the soldiers (1920–24), and the old (1915–19). The latter 'had already developed a clear political standpoint before the Nazis came to power' (p. 86). The small group of women interviewed he distinguished into those born 1930–35, and those born 1920–35, the latter of whom had been exposed to Nazism for a longer period of time and whose responses were similar to those of their male counterparts. See Heer, 'That is what is so terrible', and Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*.
 - 20 See, for example, Fisher and Mezger (eds), *The Holocaust in the Borderlands*; Gordon and O'Sullivan (eds), *Colonial Paradigms of Violence*.
 - 21 *Zeitzeugenbörsen* are charities, usually organised at the local level, which host and/or arrange talks about the past by so-called *Zeitzeugen*, or 'contemporary witnesses' to younger generations.
 - 22 The unedited interviews of filmmakers Fechner and Lanzmann are open to researchers. This is true also for select interviews from *The World at War* (Thames Television, 1973–4). USHMM, *Shoah Outtakes*; Akademie der Künste: Eberhard-Fechner-Archiv, *Der Prozess*; USHMM, Imperial War Museum, World at War Oral History Collection. The *Shoah* interviews are discussed in, for example, McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger (eds), *The Construction of Testimony*; Vice, *Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah' Outtakes*.
 - 23 See Participant Media, 'Final Account discussion guide'.
 - 24 Fenwick, Foster, and Eldridge, 'Introduction'. Holland kept a video diary during his interview travels, the transcripts of which will be added to the archival collection as supplementary resources in due course.
 - 25 Steinhoff, Pechel, and Showalter, *Voices from the Third Reich*, xx.
 - 26 Klee, Dreßen and Riefel, *The Good Old Days*; Neitzel, *Tapping Hitler's Generals*; Johnson and Reuband, *What We Knew*; Dörner, *Die Deutschen und der Holocaust*; Longerich, *Davon haben wir nichts gewusst!*.
 - 27 Claude Lanzmann published the text for his documentary *Shoah*: Lanzmann, *Shoah: An oral history of the Holocaust*. Two recent publications have focused on the outtakes, freely available through USHMM online, in an attempt to make them more widely accessible and highlight their potential for research. Analysing significant interviews which do not appear in the film, Sue Vice demonstrates how new insights can be gleaned from such sources, not only about the making of the film but also the history of rescue and survival: Vice, *Claude Lanzmann's 'Shoah' Outtakes*. The outtakes are also the subject of McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger (eds), *The Construction of Testimony*.
 - 28 For a selection of the excerpts, subtitled clips and commentary are available on the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism*, 'Film Collection', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection>.
 - 29 On the construction of self and narrative strategies in different contexts, see, for example, Fivush and Haden (eds), *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self*;

- Liebllich, McAdams and Josselson (eds), *Identity and Story*; Fulbrook and Rublack, 'In relation'; Bielby and Murer (eds), *Perpetrating Selves*; Presser, 'Violent offenders, moral selves'.
- 30 Kansteiner, 'Aufstieg und Abschied der NS-Zeitzeugen', 340.
- 31 Langer, 'The missing voices of the killers'; Laub and Auerhahn, 'Probing the minds of Nazi perpetrators'; Schmidt, 'Perpetrators' knowledge'; Twiss, 'Can a perpetrator write a testimonio?'; Jessee, 'The limits of oral history'; LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Bird, "Compromised identities?".
- 32 See <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> for an approach to embedding interview excerpts in an exhibition through contextualising them as part of a scholarly discussion in short films. Also discussed in Bird, Fulbrook, Rauch, and Willems, '*Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazi rule: An exhibition*'. The approach was developed by Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Stefanie Rauch, and Christoph Thonfeld as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded interdisciplinary project titled 'Compromised Identities? Reflections on Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism' (2018–21) at UCL. The online exhibition and short films were made possible with generous funding from the Pears Foundation.

Part I

Belonging: community as opportunity

The 'Third Reich' offered unprecedented activities for young people regardless of socio-economic background, organising children and adolescents and introducing them to Nazism through play, song, sports, leadership, and social bonds. From March 1939 onwards, membership of the Hitler Youth changed from voluntary to compulsory for children aged 14–18. From April 1940, children aged 10 and above had to join the junior organisations.¹ Young people were also called on to contribute to Nazi society through compulsory labour and military service. Among those of working age and adults, many benefited from the 'Third Reich's' new opportunities, be they for leisure, employment, socio-economic mobility, or promotion. While antisemitism alone is insufficient for explaining National Socialism's wide appeal, antisemitic and racial thinking was nonetheless widespread, extending from rural to urban areas. The social, economic, and cultural exclusion of Germans and Austrians designated or identifying as Jewish was not only a top-down process, but performed, enacted, and sometimes initiated at the grassroots level.

Starting with Raul Hilberg's famous triad of victims, perpetrators, and bystanders, the scholarship on perpetration and complicity has developed sophisticated analyses of society and the roles played by those not directly involved in violence.² Two concepts, categories, and approaches stand out here, that of the '*Volksgemeinschaft*' and that of the 'bystander'. Michael Wildt has termed the ethnically defined community, or '*Volksgemeinschaft*', a means of self-empowerment for Germans, and considers antisemitism and violence central components in processes that were as much 'from below' as they were top-down. He suggests looking beyond the 'activists', at the 'spectators, passers-by, and bystanders' who 'played an elemental role as people who granted tolerance and

approval or acted as accomplices'.³ Thomas Kühne sees community and belonging, especially masculine camaraderie, as the basis for participation in mass murder.⁴ Fulbrook recently argued that 'certain types of social relations and political conditions produce a greater likelihood of widespread passivity' when people are faced with collective violence. In such a 'bystander society' people are less likely to act on victims' behalf following 'a process that developed over several years'.⁵

Part I assembles a wide range of perspectives relating to notions and practices of community and belonging, pre-war persecution, and antisemitic ideologies. The excerpts speak to issues around education, participation in and membership of Nazi organisations, and culture under Nazism. They also shine a light on the isolation of victims and the privileges of the 'Aryan' majority society. The destruction and violence of 'Kristallnacht' in November 1938 elicited different reactions, which indicate how much the dial had shifted at this point as shock was outweighed by overall indifference. The excerpts further attest to responses to and involvement in the persecution of Jews, with a focus on pre-war practices of social and economic exclusion, and perspectives on 'Aryanisation'. **Part I** includes a librarian who refused to serve a Jewish reader and who was involved in the purging of undesirable books from liquidated libraries (see [excerpt 25](#)); an SS man who felt indifferent to the burning of the synagogue in Munich, which he witnessed from a distance as he was sworn into the SS (see [excerpt 27](#)); and a family taking the opportunity to buy furniture at a cheap price from Jews forced to emigrate (see [excerpt 32](#)). We can also see how racial and especially antisemitic ideologies continue into the present – for example, in statements accusing Jews of racketeering (see [excerpts 22, 34](#)). But lives and experiences under Nazi rule were also complex: while some may have benefited from the regime or complied with it, they may also have had experiences of persecution and even victimhood. For example, a navy pilot whose father was arrested and imprisoned at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp following 'Kristallnacht' (see [excerpt 38](#)); a Jewish grandmother being imprisoned at the Theresienstadt ghetto (see [excerpt 3](#)); and a disabled aunt being killed as part of the Nazi programme ('Aktion T4') of murdering people with disabilities, also referred to as the Nazi 'euthanasia' programme (see [excerpts 41, 42](#)).

Suggested questions to consider when reading the excerpts:

- To what extent are people's narratives a reflection of 'what really happened' or how the narrators made sense of the past in the intervening years?

- How can we interpret expressions of shock at or claims of opposition to Nazi crimes and parallel stories of happy memories and a sense of belonging?
- How might parental background and political leanings have influenced children?
- Is the involvement or complicity of ordinary Germans complicated by the fact that some of them also experienced Nazi violence, for example against family members?

Further study

Frank Bajohr, *'Aryanisation' in Hamburg: The economic exclusion of Jews and the confiscation of their property in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2002).

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Richard Evans, *The Third Reich in Power: 1933–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

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Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and violence through the German dictatorships* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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Elisabeth Harvey, Johannes Hürter, and Maiken Umbach (eds), *Private Life and Privacy in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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Zoltán Kékesi in conversation with Kelly Jakubowski, *Think Pieces: The UCL IAS review*, UCL Think Pieces Podcast, Episode 1, 'Sonic Legacies: Memory, music and the Third Reich', 3 March 2024,

- <https://thinkpieces-review.co.uk/podcast/episode/sonic-legacies-i> (accessed 26 October 2024).
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- Dagmar Reese, *Growing Up Female in Nazi Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).
- Helen Roche, *The Third Reich's Elite Schools: A history of the Napolas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- Mark Roseman, *The Barbarians from our 'Kulturkreis': German-Jewish perceptions of Nazi perpetrators* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2017).
- Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's lives under the Nazis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).
- Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto (eds), *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social engineering and private lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- Matthew Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (London: Arnold, 2003).
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- Wiener Holocaust Library, *Pogrom 1938: Testimonies from Kristallnacht*, transcribed and translated primary sources collected in late 1938, available on Wiener Digital Collections, <https://www.whlcollections.org/novemberpogrom> (accessed 8 February 2025).
- Michael Wildt, *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft and the Dynamics of Racial Exclusion: Violence against Jews in provincial Germany, 1919–1939* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2012).
- Kim Wünschmann, *Before Auschwitz: Jewish prisoners in the prewar concentration camps* (London: Harvard University Press, 2015).

Films

- A German Life*, dir. Jonathan Kent (Austria, 2016).
- Final Account*, dir. Luke Holland (UK/USA, 2020).

Youth and education

Many of Luke Holland's interlocutors experienced part of the 'Third Reich' as children or adolescents. The first example here is that of

Austrian woman Erna F. Her happy memories of a League of German Girls cycling tour from Linz to Berchtesgaden, where the group briefly met with Adolf Hitler at his holiday residence, in many ways captures the experiences and challenges of that cohort. Its formative years were shaped by National Socialism and the extraordinary offers it made to young people, yet anything experienced as positive was subsequently tainted after 1945, and variably negotiated by way of justification, distancing, or denials.

Differences in interaction between Holland and his interlocutors can be seen, for instance when comparing his conversation with Erna F. (see [excerpt 1](#)) and Klaus K. (see [excerpt 4](#)). Erna F. is probably being interviewed for the first time. Her responses are monosyllabic and she requires prompting and questions from Holland. By contrast, the more experienced narrator Klaus K., a former elite school pupil who has given many public talks and written a book about his experiences, speaks largely freely, at length, and without requiring much encouragement from Holland.

1. Happy memories: 'he was an impressive figure'

Erna F. (E.F.), born 1922 in Linz, Austria, interviewed in her retirement home by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 89 (see [figure 1](#)). She is joined by her younger sister Elisabeth M. (E.M.), born 1928, for part of the interview. Catholic. Their father was in favour of the Nazi regime and



Figure 1 Erna F. in her room in a retirement home. E.F. & E.M. Video Testimony (124F2) interviewed by Luke Holland on 3 October 2011. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

worked in the Office for War Invalids. Erna F. was in the League of German Girls (BDM). She attended the *Volksschule* and a commercial school from 1936 to 1938. Subsequently, she worked as a secretary in the finance department of the Hermann-Göring-Werke in Linz. She got married at the age of 20 and subsequently left paid employment. See also [excerpt 105](#).

Erna F., along with other girls from the League of German Girls (BDM), visited Berchtesgaden and met Adolf Hitler. Her comment on the absence of a photo from the event is ambiguous, reflecting a mix of longing for a memento of a significant moment and the possibility that any such memento might have been discarded after the war, either due to changing attitudes or to avoid repercussions.

- E.F. We were friends, we went on excursions [together].
L.H. Where to?
E.F. To the Mühlviertel, hiking.
L.H. In the mountains.
E.F. Yes. Saturday, Sunday. On one occasion we cycled to Berchtesgaden.
L.H. To—?
E.F. To Berchtesgaden.
L.H. That was quite a way, wasn't it?
E.F. Yes. That's where Hitler was. He had the Berghof.
L.H. You visited the Berghof.
E.F. Yes. He greeted us.
L.H. Who?
E.F. Hitler. Yes, because we were from Linz.
L.H. Tell me about that day.
E.F. He greeted us. And [noted] that we had gone on such a long bike tour. We went by bicycle. He was an impressive figure.
L.H. Pardon?
E.F. He was an impressive figure.
L.H. An impressive figure. And did he have—. Today young people carry little books, for signing. What's that called? Autograph?
E.F. Autograph.
L.H. Did you ask [him] for an autograph?
E.F. No, you wouldn't get it.
L.H. Tell me about meeting the Führer. How did that go?
E.F. That was a long time ago! We were on the Obersalzberg. [We had come] from Linz, right? He greeted us, briefly, he never had much time.
L.H. Up at the Berghof?

- E.F. Up there, yes.
- L.H. And how long were you with him? Just briefly?
- E.F. Very briefly. A few minutes.
- L.H. Did anyone take pictures?
- E.F. No, unfortunately not. It would have been nice.
- L.H. To remember [it].
- E.F. Yes. Or one would have thrown it away after the war.
- L.H. When was that exactly? Was it before the war? It must have been after the *Anschluss*.
- E.F. After the *Anschluss*, yes.
- L.H. And then—. The war started in '39, in September. So when did you cycle to the Berghof?
- E.F. That was in late '38, or early '39. Yes, about then.
- L.H. Early '39, that would have been in the spring, or was it still winter?
- E.F. In the spring.
- L.H. Or was it in the autumn of '38?
- E.F. In the spring, I think.
- L.H. It could have been in the autumn of '38, you think.
- E.F. It could have been in late '38.
- L.H. How many girls were in this group that went to Berchtesgaden?
- E.F. Not so many. I think about 10 girls, at most.
- L.H. Accompanied by an adult or did you do that by yourselves?
- E.F. Only the girls.
- L.H. And you were all about the same age?
- E.F. Yes. How old were we? 14, 15 years old.
- L.H. And your parents agreed to—?
- E.F. Yes.
- L.H. The distance from Linz to Berchtesgaden is quite considerable, isn't it?
- E.F. It's far, yes.⁶

2. A collective experience? 'I am a prototypical product of the cohort of '26'

Heinz K. (H.K.), born 1926 in Dresden, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 83. The family moved to Pirna in 1934. His father was a senior tax inspector in the civil service, and a national conservative in his political outlook. Heinz K. attended a *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school) until 1943. He was a member of the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth and he became a

youth leader. Following the Reich Labour Service (RAD), Heinz K. was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* in spring 1944, joining the armoured infantry. Heinz K. first saw action in March 1945 at the Western Front, then in the Fulda/Werra region, serving as a runner. He fled the front close to the end of the war and was captured by US troops. He became a film critic after the war. See also [excerpt 128](#).

Heinz K. describes his youth as ‘typical’, having undergone all stages of Nazi youth education, flak training, labour service, and conscription, which he believes shaped him to this day. He characterises himself as naive at the time. His narrative shows how his post-war understanding of Nazism, which he developed over the years, has impacted his view of his past. He characterises his youth as a representative example of his entire cohort. He also argues that it was common for parents at the time to fear that their children might reveal to the authorities what they heard at home, potentially leading to the parents’ punishment. This is an often-cited trope in post-war accounts which implies that the parents were opposed to Nazism, though this may not have been the case.

H.K. Naturally, I was like all, or almost all the young people of my age, with the *Pimpfe*, they were called. That was in the Hitler Youth. A *Pimpf* in the *Jungvolk* was up to 14 years old, and then one became a *Hitlerjunge* in the HJ. And I must admit that I was a rather committed *Hitlerjunge*. At that time, it was unfortunately the norm among young people. It was simply also—. One made a certain offer to young people that also satisfied their need for adventure, through field sports, through camping, also through a certain distancing from the parent generation. The Party decreed: ‘Youth will be led by youth.’ That was the [youth leadership] hierarchy: *Jugendschaftsführer*, *Jungzugführer*, *Fähleinführer*, *Stammführer*, *Bannführer*. That’s ingrained in me. I only made it to *Jugendschaftsführer*, marked by a red-and-white cord as a status emblem. But I participated in everything, especially a lot of sports. According to a statement by the Führer, the German boy should be ‘as fast as greyhounds, as hard as Krupp steel, and as tough as leather’. Of course, this was all preparation for war, which wasn’t clear to us back then, at least not to us boys: we were too naive for that.⁷

[...]

H.K. Scenes like this played out in many families: out of fear [of] being implicated, one did not openly express political views, and so on, in front of the children. Well, and I still hold that against my parents.

Back to the schooldays in Pirna: I went through the *Oberschule* and more or less automatically joined the *Jungvolk*, but without much enthusiasm. I was never a fan of field sports or big competitions; that just wasn't me, even back then. It never occurred to me, or to anyone my age, really, to resist or defend ourselves against it. I said to you, in this respect, I am a prototypical product of the cohort of '26, as I participated in everything that happened to boys born that year. This started early: in the *Oberschule*, we entered a so-called defence training camp. Defence training. At that time, we were 15, 16. The war had already started, the outbreak of which we had not experienced with any real enthusiasm. But we probably believed that it was necessary, that it was a defensive war, and all of Hitler's lies that you can still read about today. And these defence training camps were set up during the war for the pre-military age groups. And the defence training camp I entered back then was, of all places, in Straßnitz [Strážnice], in the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, now the Czech Republic. There, we were drilled and trained by injured *Waffen-SS* people who didn't have to return to the front. They taught us shooting and all aspects of military training. That was the first point. Then I was, that was in 1943, then I was around 16 and most of our class was sent as *Luftwaffe* helpers to Berlin. That meant we were assigned to flak cannons. That was the time of many Anglo-American air raids on German cities and also on Berlin. We were trained in the use of the flak and had to operate it. We lived in barracks in northern Berlin, Berlin-Tegel, and I believe I still attended school three mornings a week. So it was a bit of both. But, otherwise, the important thing was our training as flak cannon operators. I was incredibly lucky, as so often in my life. I was transferred from this position in north Berlin to another position near Lake Tegel and the Borsig Works. A week after my transfer there was a direct hit, a bomb landed on the cannons of my earlier position and – I can't remember how many – 10 of my classmates and friends were killed. That was basically a lucky break, one of several I've had in my life. The next stage for a typical boy during the war, after this *Luftwaffe* helper time, which lasted five or six months, I can't say it exactly, was the *Arbeitsdienst*, which was a standard step in the so-called re-education of young Germans to become honourable men and great people. I was sent to Jesau in East Prussia, near Königsberg [today Kaliningrad, Russia]. There was an airfield, and we from the *Arbeitsdienst* had to fell trees and process them. This *Arbeitsdienst* lasted, well, about

a quarter of a year at least. It was so long ago. That was much more unpleasant for me. I never trusted any kind of pressure, [but] at the defence training camp and with the flak, one was still surrounded by friends from schooldays. But this aversion to force and drill, and so on, grew with each experience, with each stage. It was rather pronounced particularly during this *Arbeitsdienst* period, where the forced social grouping played a significant role. No one was himself any more.⁸

3. Not joining the Hitler Youth: 'I didn't even try'

Hans P. (H.P.), born 1920 in Breslau, Germany (today Wrocław, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 90. Protestant. His father, a left-wing member of the peace society, had been a judge but was removed from this position in 1933 and taken into 'protective custody' (*Schutzhaft*). After his release, he was barred from his profession and worked in a bank. Hans P. volunteered for the Reich Labour Service (RAD) aged 17 and started studying mechanical engineering a year later. Conscripted in October 1940, he served in the artillery during the attack on the Soviet Union from the beginning. Hans P. was released from the *Wehrmacht* because he had a Jewish grandmother, but due to his frontline service he was allowed to complete his university course. In 1944, Hans P. was sent to a camp for people considered as being of 'mixed blood' (*Mischlingslager*) following the 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws. There he dug trenches for tanks, and later he worked for the tram in Breslau. After the war, he worked for the Russians and became an engineer.

Not all German and Austrian children joined Nazi youth organisations; some avoided them or joined only under pressure, while others joined against their parents' wishes. Those classified as Jewish or 'Mischlinge' under Nazi racial laws, such as Hans P., whose maternal grandmother survived the Theresienstadt ghetto, were unable to access membership of Nazi youth organisations. Hans P.'s critical view of how otherwise 'unpolitical' children were groomed into Nazism through sports, games, and free uniforms reflects his post-war understanding. As a young person unable to participate, his view at the time might have been different.

L.H. Is that when you joined the Hitler Youth?

H.P. No. And I wouldn't have been able to. Because I had a Jewish grandmother in my family. She was Jewish.

L.H. On your father's side or your mother's?

- H.P. Mother.
[...]
- L.H. But was this Jewish presence in your family the only reason not to join the Hitler Youth?
- H.P. I didn't even try.
- L.H. You didn't want to.
- H.P. My father would have beaten me up if I had done that.
- L.H. Was there any pressure from the teacher?
- H.P. Pardon?
- L.H. Was there any pressure from the teacher, the school and from your classmates that you should join?
- H.P. No. They all had learned enough in school, and, with a few exceptions, were totally apolitical. That was done in a very clever way at the time, that the boys were caught with sports and games. They were busy. They got a uniform. If you didn't have the money for a uniform, you were given one. So, there were very few who didn't join. In my class [there were] one or two who didn't join, and four boys who were Catholic. Everything else was—. Breslau was Protestant. Prussian. There were one or two of those who didn't join.
- L.H. Those were the exceptions.
- H.P. We were the exceptions, yes.⁹

4. Elite education: 'no one was forced to attend a *Napola*'

Klaus K. (K.K.), born 1927 in Bernburg/Saale, Germany, interviewed twice by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 83. His father had joined the NSDAP in 1933/4 and was a senior regional leader. His mother was in the National Socialist Women's League. Klaus K. was in the *Jungvolk* and attended one of the Nazi elite boarding schools, known as *Napola*, in Ballenstedt. He later joined the *Waffen-SS* and was trained in a tank division in Paderborn. He was only briefly deployed towards the end of the war. He was captured by US troops in April 1945 and released after three months. He taught history after the war. He wrote a book about his experiences during the Nazi period. See also [excerpt 23](#).

Klaus K., an eloquent and experienced narrator, has reflected on and gained extensive knowledge about the *Napola*. Holland positions him as a witness who can illuminate the wider history of the *Napolas*, rather than focusing solely on Klaus K.'s own experiences. Consequently, Klaus K. delivers what appears to be a well-practised narrative. His evocation of the *Napolas*' inclusion and mingling of children from

different socio-economic backgrounds may to an extent reflect the lasting impact of the Nazi notion of the '*Volksgemeinschaft*'.

K.K. Regarding the selection process, it's important to understand that parents, wherever Germans had influence – not only in Germany but also in former colonies and in South America, particularly Central America – believed these schools could raise their children to be particularly German in the spirit of National Socialism. Therefore, it was a completely voluntary situation. In fact, it remained voluntary until the end. No one was forced to attend a *Napola*. Parents signed their children up for a *Napola*. Later, as I mentioned yesterday, the teachers went into the classes – that was, however, after 1939/40, after '41, perhaps '42 – to look for the most promising students. In consultation with the parents, it was then decided whether the student would be allowed to take the entrance exam. As I said: initially, it was purely a parental decision and remained so. It was always a parental decision. In the beginning it worked like this: the parents signed up their children, and the children then turned up at the *Napola* for a week-long exam, without anyone knowing them beforehand. Whereas later, the student had already been observed in class at elementary school. [...] The entrance exam was conducted by the teachers as well as by older students assessing subjects, sports, academic performance, athletic performance, and then, above all, character traits, if someone very–

L.H. May I interrupt you quickly to ask: did the students come from a poorer [socio-economic] class, or from which class?

K.K. From all classes.

L.H. From all classes of the population.

K.K. Yes. I want to make that very clear using our school class as an example. We had students–, we had a student whose father was *Arbeitsdienstführer* for the female *Reichsarbeitsdienst*. Then we had students from generals, who would in previous times have probably sent their child to cadet school, to Potsdam, for example. Then we had completely–, from the middle class, as we were at home. My father was a salesman. And we had – a great deal of importance was placed upon this – a great many students from the working class. Because they said: we must have students where the parents perhaps had formerly grown up as Social Democrats, but suddenly realised that National

Socialism could give their children a special advantage. It was all the same, from which political niche and social niche they came. So we were very mixed, and it was like that in each class.¹⁰

5. New opportunities: 'they made me a leader straight away'

Ruth Ob. (R.Ob.), born 1921, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 92. Catholic. Her father was an engineer, and they frequently moved because of his work. In 1938, she took part in an exchange with an English family and spent several weeks in Slough, England. She attended the Berlin Olympics. She held a leadership role in the League of German Girls (BDM). She completed her *Abitur* in spring 1941, got married in 1942, and had two children during the war. Avoiding the air raids on Berlin, Ruth Ob. stayed near Breslau (today Wrocław, Poland) with her children, before joining her husband near Brünn in Moravia (today Brno, Czech Republic), and ultimately fleeing westwards from the advancing Red Army in January 1945. Her husband worked at Siemens and served in the *Wehrmacht*, returning from Soviet captivity in 1949. She moved to Spain in the 1950s. See also [excerpt 32](#).

Her membership of the BDM conflicted with her Catholic faith. She enjoyed the immediate leadership role she was given, organising social-political evenings with readings and singing. Such opportunities were appealing, especially for girls whose prospects would have expanded significantly. This was also true for adult women who attained roles in various sectors, enabling them to take on new responsibilities and travel.

R.Ob. We were all in the BDM. The BDM was the League of German Girls. That was fun at the beginning because they made me a leader straight away. I was a *Führerin* and had 12 young girls, around 10 years old. I was 14, 15 myself. I had to call together the 10-year-olds once a week to have a *Heimabend* with them. This *Heimabend* involved readings, singing, everyone bringing a piece of wood to heat the oven, so that the room where we came together was warm. We planned excursions and weekend trips. But those trips irritated me. I am Catholic thanks to my mother. And to them [the Nazis], the Catholic Church was [like]: how can you? [makes derogatory gesture]. They always looked a bit down on me. [But] me and a classmate [...] insisted on going to church every Sunday! It irritated the senior *Führerin* that we wanted to go to mass at 10 a.m., because she had a different programme

in mind for us. But we just said: 'No, we have to! Our parents demand it, and we have to go.' They couldn't do anything about it! And we were always happy to annoy her a bit. Those were little moments of friction. But they had no consequences in any way.

L.H. How come you were made a *Führerin* straight away? Why? Did you put yourself forward, or were you chosen?

R.Ob. No, no, they asked me: 'If you want a group [*Mädelschaft*], you can have one!' 'Alright, I'll be a group leader.' That was an honour, but it was only because of the way I handled the little ones. And they couldn't get enough [of me]. They kept coming to me. They were always very enthusiastic.

L.H. Did parents need to give their permission for someone to join the BDM or Hitler Youth? Was that voluntary, or was there a degree of pressure from the teachers? How did one get to join?

R.Ob. No, nothing from the teachers. They had no influence over us. That was voluntary. You came home and said: '*Führerin* so-and-so told me I could become a group leader.' I said: 'Yes, I want to do that.'

L.H. And your parents didn't mind? There was no—

R.Ob. What could they say? They were, of course—. My mother didn't say anything.¹¹

6. Joined under pressure: 'it simply wasn't to my taste'

Edith Ba. (E.Ba.), born 1925 in the Brandenburg region, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Caroline Goldie (C.G.) in 2009 at the age of 84. Her father had been serving in the military since the Weimar Republic and regularly met with Hermann Göring. The family read the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's newspaper. Edith Ba. was in the *Jungmädel* and the League of German Girls (BDM) and attained the *Abitur*. During the war she served as a teaching assistant near Kraków. She regularly talks to young people about her experiences. See also [excerpts 48, 62](#).

Edith Ba. claims her father was reprimanded to ensure she joined the *Jungmädel* and the League of German Girls (BDM). While this may have been the case given her age and cohort, her assertion might reinforce the idea that ordinary Germans were generally coerced into participating in Nazi organisations. Edith Ba. states that she found the BDM boring, not due to political reasons, but because it was an inconvenience. She draws attention to her rebelliousness and ingenuity by

describing how she threw away magazines she was supposed to sell and instead paid for them herself. Her alleged disinterest in politics is certainly possible but also serves to distance herself from the Nazi past.

C.G. Were you in the BDM, for example? Most were—

E.Ba. Oh yes! Oh yes! You couldn't get around it. There was nobody from our class, besides my girlfriend with whom I later became friends, who had a Jewish mother. We're still friends, we still meet. She wasn't allowed to join. She was a so-called half-Jew. But all the others were in it. My father came home one day when I was 10 and said, 'You must sign up with the *Jungmädels*.' The first level was the *Jungmädels*. And I couldn't imagine what that would be like. I wasn't yet so much up for group events and the like. I probably said: 'Yes.' One wasn't allowed to contradict the parents back then. And I said: 'Oh yes, I'll be sure to do it.' And put it off for a year. Then my father was cautioned at his workplace. Then there was a big scene at home of course. He said: 'You go down there straight away and sign yourself up. I'm having problems. I'm getting into trouble.' Well, I did it. I even got these clothes: black skirt, white blouse, and actually had to go once a week to a so-called *Heimabend*. I didn't like that because I had no interest in it. It was also extremely boring. I would rather have gone to the cinema, or met up with my girlfriends, and was often absent. There were no political reasons for that, it simply wasn't to my taste. As if today I had to participate in a football club and wasn't at all interested in football. So, I can't say that I was a big political activist. It's simply that I didn't like it. Now and then some kind of leader came and brought some kind of magazine that one was supposed to sell. Each one [of us] had to take a bundle and commit to selling it. Of course, I had to do that as well. I always tossed them in the dustbin, because I found it embarrassing to ring doorbells and sell people this newspaper. It was too time-consuming! I always had a lot of pocket money and paid for them myself! [laughs] And my relatives in the East did the same thing. It was exactly the same thing.

C.G. What kind of newspaper was it?

E.Ba. I can't remember what it was called. That must have been some sort of, a kind of propaganda thing. Back then, I wasn't at all interested. I didn't know what was in it! It was a nuisance for me.¹²

7. Family conflicts: 'I regret that I wasn't able to tell him how right he'd been back then'

Hans W. (H.W.), born 1927 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Iris Wachsmuth in 2009 at the age of 82. Protestant. He was in the Hitler Youth, volunteered for the SS in 1943, and was captured by US troops in Braunau, Austria. He frequently gives talks in schools and at memorial sites to young people. See also [excerpt 117](#).

Hans W. has dedicated much of his life to educating younger generations by giving talks in schools and other venues. His goal is to use his past enthusiasm for the Hitler Youth, the military, the SS, and the war as a warning. He volunteered for the SS around the time of the Battle of Stalingrad because he still believed in final victory. In this excerpt, he talks about signing up to the SS against his father's will and despite his warnings.

H.W. [...] as I stood at the train station in Friedberg and waited for the train, suddenly, there came my father on a bicycle, and he was so sick because of his lungs. Back then he still worked and slaughtered pigs and the like, privately, and we had not been able to say good-bye because he was up and out very early and I was a little later, and there he came on the bicycle in terrible weather to say to me: 'You idiot, [you] volunteered! Now we'll never see each other again.' Those were my father's last words to me. He was right, but not in the way he expected. He never returned. Because six weeks later, after this argument, the Russians came. They took him away, and we never heard anything from him again. I regret that I couldn't tell him how right he'd been back then.¹³

8. A family event: 'I stumbled towards the Führer's car, the bouquet of flowers in my hand'

Dieter Ba. (D.Ba.), born 1924 in Köslin in Pomerania (today Koszalin, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 86. His father was an agronomist with his own business. Dieter Ba. was in the Hitler Youth. After attaining the *Abitur*, he volunteered for the navy in 1942. He received submarine training in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad, Russia) and became a lieutenant on a submarine in the Eastern Baltic Sea. He later retrained for the marines in 1944–5. He was captured by British troops in April 1945 and spent two years near Newcastle, England, in a POW camp for officers. Dieter Ba. completed

an agricultural apprenticeship before commencing work for different airlines. See also [excerpts 74, 99, 123](#).

Dieter Ba.'s anecdote about touching Hitler's hand as a child is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it highlights how relatively common the experience of seeing Hitler was, providing a personal and tangible link to the regime through public pageantry. Secondly, Dieter Ba. criticises his aunt for pushing him towards Hitler and exaggerating the event, turning a brief touch into a full handshake, reflecting the pride this moment held for some in his family.

L.H. You said earlier that you shook hands with Hitler once. What happened? Why?

D.Ba. He built [a number of *Ordensburg*, elite schools]. One in the Vogtland, one in the Hunsrück, one near us in Pomerania in Dramburg [today Drawsko Pomorskie, Poland]. Near Dramburg. By the name of *Ordensburg* Krössinsee. About 10 kilometres from Dramburg. My father had a sister and an aunt in Dramburg. My father said: 'Next week let's go to Dramburg, to Aunt J.' Or whatever she was called, something like that. 'We can stay overnight. And the Führer is expected to come!' Yes, the Führer. I must add to that: we had toys, and these popular figures made from lanolin, they were called, real soldiers and so on, real children's toys, and the desirable figure was Hitler with the moveable arm. With a moveable arm. That was a small figure, shaped after Hitler, and this figure could move the arm like this [moves his arm up and down]. That was at the beginning of the 1930s, when everyone was crazy about Hitler. And the Führer's car, with which he drove through the crowds. This Mercedes 300 or what it was called at the time, with compressor. That interested us more than Hitler. In any case, we played with those things. And so we drove to Dramburg, stayed overnight at the relatives, and the next morning Hitler was supposed to visit, and the streets were already overcrowded. That was a small town with maybe 7,000 people and narrow streets. And the castle [*Ordensburg* Krössinsee] which he had inaugurated was 10 or 8 kilometres away. But he drove through Dramburg, because Dramburg had a railway station, and he had his special train at the station. So he came back from Krössinsee, and the streets were blocked off by SA, who linked arms and formed a chain. But the streets were so narrow, and hundreds of people around, how one could see on photos and film, in the streets through which

Hitler passed, crowded with people. The aunt with whom we stayed, Aunt J., lived on this street. She was a 150 per cent Nazi. She loved Hitler. She was a totally enthusiastic Nazi follower. We were going to stand at the window and watch him drive past. 'No,' Aunt J. said, 'we'll go down and try to get as close as we can to the Führer. How about', she asked my mother, 'if Dieter gave the Führer a bouquet of flowers?' Hitler was known to like children. That's what he made it look like, anyway. Being kind to children. That was all show. But politically clever. So Aunt J. bought me a bouquet of flowers. And now we were down in the street. And [we could hear] loud screaming, 'Heil! Heil!' [Hitler was] still 100 metres away. Then the car convoy approached. Then came the motorcycles, the advance guard. Then the Führer's car. He stood upright in the car, and did this [gestures with his hand]. 'Heil! Heil! Heil!' And in front us was the chain of SA. When the Führer passed in front, my aunt gave me a push from behind so that I, under the linked arms of the SA—. Just shoved me in the direction of the Führer's car. I stumbled towards the Führer's car, the bouquet of flowers in my hand. Hitler had his guard detail. He stood in front next to the driver, and right behind him were the guards. They were prepared and accepted the bouquets. So I now came with the bouquet, and wanted to give it to Hitler, and he also reached out with his hand, and all that happened was a touching of the hands [demonstrates by clapping his hands]. I could only touch his hand, and at that moment his guards took my bouquet, and he drove on. So that's all it was [claps hands again]. There! And it wasn't anything more than that. But still, right? I don't even remember if he smiled at me, or if he looked at me. It happened so fast. And, apart from that, [there were] several other children with bouquets. I was not the only one. Only one of many!

L.H. And your mother and aunt were proud?

D.Ba. They told the entire family: 'Yes, Dieter shook Hitler's hand.' But that was totally wrong. All there was, was a touch, a clap. How else should it work? He drove at walking speed. He didn't stop because of me.

L.H. Your father's reaction? Do you remember how your father reacted?

D.Ba. I cannot say! I didn't see my father. I was myself so excited, so emotional, that I didn't care what they said! All I know is that Aunt J., said: 'Yes, and Dieter shook Hitler's hand.' It's obviously

not true! But because she was so enthusiastic. 'And I had the bouquet of flowers,' she also said. 'I gave Dieter the bouquet so he could give it to the Führer.' Well, absurd! But *c'est la vie*. That was the story.¹⁴

9. Conflicted by songs against the Church: 'no way Adolf knows about this'

Karl-Heinz R. (K.H.R.), born 1926 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 84. Protestant. His father was a hairdresser who had his own salon. Karl-Heinz R. was in the *Jungvolk* from 1936, where he served as a social warden. Later he joined the Hitler Youth. After the *Volksschule*, he trained as a commercial apprentice at a Nazi-oriented firm from 1940 onwards. He was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* in January 1944, where he trained as a combat medic. He saw some action in East Prussia. He was captured by the Red Army at or near the Stutthof concentration camp. He was a POW in the Ural region. He became a deacon after the war. See also [excerpts 35, 112](#).

Karl-Heinz R., a devout Protestant, was an admirer of Hitler and often felt conflicted by derogatory remarks and songs about priests and faith. He rationalised these conflicts by believing that Hitler was unaware of them. At the time, he saw Hitler as a divine messenger sent by God. See also [excerpt 35](#).

K.H.R. But from my childhood it is a bit important for me to say: [...] In 1936, I joined the *Jungvolk*, as the last possible opportunity for my age, at 10 years, after that it was impossible as a volunteer. On 20 April 1936. When I was still at school! I really liked being part of the *Jungvolk*, but I didn't feel greatly inclined to participate in camping trips and excursions. I wasn't terribly healthy either. But I managed to avoid things here and there. When I transferred to the Hitler Youth, I was called to the office, that was at the time in Charlottenburg [...]. In any case, I went there, it goes without saying, and they tried to convince me to join the *Waffen-SS*. Immediately, as a volunteer. And then I told them that, due to my view of life and my Christian faith, I didn't want to do it. Although I very much worshipped Hitler. I was a major Nazi. But I don't want to join the *Waffen-SS*, I'll wait for conscription when the time comes. I'll gladly accept conscription, and then I'll be proud. But I don't want to join the *Waffen-SS*. That would be too much of a particular way. That was the essence of what I said. Well, my

parents were happy with that. At the same time in school—. I only finished school in 1940, and in the years from 1938 to 1940 I had a very National Socialist teacher, which I really liked of course. And he said: ‘Man, R., you’re a very reasonable fellow, you could go to—’ I think it was called *Napola*, or something like that. That school was also in Spandau. ‘You could go to the *Napola*.’ ‘I need to talk to my parents about it, I’ll think about it.’ And that’s what I did. These are a few important things from my childhood which are important for me to talk about. And then I—. Following the advice of my parents I rejected the suggestion. The *Waffen-SS* story came later. I rejected the *Napola* idea because my parents told me: ‘We’ll not create any barriers for you. We allow you to do it. You can do all of it. But you need to know that, in these times, you may need to abandon your faith in Jesus Christ. That could happen!’ That wasn’t really all that important to me yet. I lived for the song: ‘The strong Führer, sent to us by God, to save the *Heimat*, the *Heimat*! Our clothes are brown like the soil. Young soldiers in turbulent times.’ I liked to sing that. With all my heart! God has called him, and he’ll bring us success. But there was another song that has to be mentioned in this context. I only remember bits of it. It went: ‘Don’t get cheated any more! No priest will give you bread!’ Then there was a stanza with ‘lies’. The fourth line ended in ‘hardship’. I don’t remember any more than that. I only remember that I was too much of a coward to admit that I didn’t like this song, compared to the other one, ‘The strong Führer, sent to us by God’. And I was convinced that Hitler didn’t know this song, ‘Don’t get cheated any more, no priest will give you bread!’ [...] In any case, I only moved my mouth a bit, so that I wouldn’t attract attention. That wasn’t that easy. Attracting attention was not so nice. I didn’t want to attract attention, so I pretended to sing along, but inside I was angry about this song and thought: no way Adolf [Hitler] knows about this. Otherwise this song would not exist. [Telephone rings] Just a moment!

L.H. I’ll hand you the phone because you’re connected [to the microphone]. Yes, that’s good.

K.H.R. So where do we go on from here?

L.H. Regarding these songs, you just thought that Adolf didn’t—

K.H.R. He didn’t know about [them]. Yes, exactly. I had quite a positive attitude towards Hitler and I simply didn’t think he knew about that. Those were the main things.

- L.H. You didn't think he knew, you mean.
- K.H.R. I didn't believe Adolf could know this song. Otherwise the other song isn't right: 'The strong Führer sent to us by God.' Because only one could be true. Or he wasn't aware of his calling. Or he just pretended to be pious.
- L.H. What were the words of the second song?
- K.H.R. The second song goes: 'Don't get cheated any more! No *Pfaffe* will give you bread.' The third line ends–
- L.H. What's a *Pfaffe*?
- K.H.R. *Pfaffe*: priest. [Telephone ringing] Excuse me. [Telephones] Also from the parish. Most of our connections are related to faith.
- L.H. You were just talking about the second song.
- K.H.R. 'No priest gives you bread.'
- L.H. So when one wants to compare: Hitler gives you bread but the priest won't.
- K.H.R. Yes, as it were. Yes, yes, exactly! 'Don't get cheated any more.' Then came a sentence with 'lying' and a sentence with 'hardship'. I don't remember it by heart. Because I always wanted to escape attention, I never sang along. I couldn't bring myself to sing along [points to his heart].¹⁵

10. Participation in the Olympic Games ceremony: 'a great experience'

Hella Po. (H.Po.), born 1921 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2011 at the age of 89 (see [figure 2](#)). Her father was a metalworker. Hella Po. was in the League of German Girls (BDM) and performed during the opening ceremony of the Berlin Olympics in 1936. She attended the *Volksschule* and the *Lyzeum* until tenth grade, and subsequently went to a commercial school for two years. Later, she worked at AEG as a stenotypist and as a secretary for a company which produced parts for planes. This company then worked for the Reich Air Transport Ministry and the army. She earned a high salary in this role. She worked there until she got pregnant and moved away from Berlin to the Baltic coast. Her first child was born in February 1945. Her husband was a lieutenant in the *Wehrmacht* and fought in France and at the Eastern Front. See also [excerpt 72](#).

Like Erna F. (see [excerpt 1](#)), Hella Po. fondly recalls her time in the BDM, especially during the 1936 Olympic Games where she was among 2,000 Berlin schoolgirls performing in the opening ceremony, a moment captured in Leni Riefenstahl's 1938 propaganda film, *Olympia*.



Figure 2 Hella Po. in her living room. H.Po. Video Testimony (079F) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 25 February 2011. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

She characterises and criticises herself as naive, for not grasping the political implications of the songs they sang.

H.Po. Of course I joined the BDM. I was an only child and was very much sheltered at home. And then in class some said: 'Yes, now we're part of BDM and we'll have a *Heimabend*. Sunday we'll go on an excursion, and that is so great.' They also had uniforms. I managed to persuade my mother by saying: 'The best in the class will all be there.' It was a trick, but it was true. So I was allowed to go to the *Heimabend*, and also on a Whitsun excursion, where it was said: we take care of ourselves. I had no idea how to make soup or anything else. And we had an open fire and so on. And we came home totally dirty and hungry, but we were on the road and found that extremely great!

C.R. What else did you do with the BDM?

H.Po. Oh dear, yes, then we had *Heimabende*. That was also important. I wanted [to say] for this conversation: later it became clear to us that we, as girls, were prepared for 'Germany, people without space'. As great as it is where we are, we need more space [coughs] and then we sang: 'Do you see the dawn in the East? The sign to freedom, to the sun. To the East we ride.' Always to the East. We were stupid: all that meant nothing. [...] Yes, and then the draft was introduced. All young people were in organisations. In our class there were two girls who were not part of it.

One had a Jewish father, and the other one's parents did not want [her to join]. At the time, they were not-. They were not approached, politically. Not in our school anyway. It was a-, yes, it was a break. We had-. On Monday mornings, classes started when we all went to the auditorium, and there was a brief prayer, by the director or a priest, then a song was sung, and then we went to the classrooms.

And after 30 January 1933-. I was 12 years old. Then all of a sudden on Monday mornings, there was a roll call. No more prayer, it was a roll call. Our director in SA uniform, he was a burly one, told us something, and then we-. We didn't sing the Horst Wessel song yet. That came later. Let me jump forward in time a bit. When the national anthem was sung, it was never on its own. After the anthem there was always the Horst Wessel song: 'Raise the flag, the ranks tightly closed, SA marches,' and so on. The two songs always came together. And then we stood there [lifts up her right arm to a Hitler salute], what did we do? If one had to stand a long time, we rested our arm on the shoulder of the one in front [laughs]. We did that-, we were kids, adolescents. We didn't think any of this was bad. Then flags were raised here and there. On 1 May we were told: Berlin, and that we were role models, and the flags. Then something happened that was very important for me personally. The Olympic Games came to Berlin.

C.R. Could you not hold the microphone like that, then everything gets entangled.

H.Po. Oh dear, of course! Then I'll ruin your machine.

C.R. No, no. It's only that one can't understand you well.

H.Po. Alright, then it wouldn't be recorded. Can you hear me?

C.R. Yes, yes.

H.Po. Then the Olympics came to Berlin. That was of course an enormous event. We were told: For the opening ceremony a major gymnastics performance by Cologne-, Berlin schoolgirls should take place. Selections took place and I put in a huge effort to be chosen. That meant that a) one was part of a great experience and also, that one had an incredible number of days off from school. We didn't know that right away but that's what happened. We had to-, groups got bigger and bigger, one started out in a small group to practise the exercises, and then in increasingly bigger ones, until we went for practice at the sports field. I don't know if this is of interest to you.

C.R. We'll look [at the photos] in a moment.

H.Po. Yes. Then we went quite often over to the *Reich* sports field, to practise to music. [We wore] brilliant white leotards, white leotards. Then we went to the large *Maifeld* in front of the Olympic Stadium. We were, as I said, 2,000 schoolgirls doing gymnastics. When we were done, we converged forming an avenue. The marathon started at the Olympic Stadium and the runners came through the avenue formed by us. That must have been for the film, too, a film was made, a really great thing. I saw it at some point in the cinema. That was about the Olympics.¹⁶

11. Tourist guide at the Olympic Games: 'that was the most interesting part of the whole Olympics for us students'

Ursula Se. (U.Se.), born 1921 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 91. Her father, a musician, died in 1940. Her mother was a clerk. Ursula Se. attended the *Lyzeum* and went to a tailoring school. She participated in the 1936 Berlin Olympics with her League of German Girls (BDM) group and served as a guide for foreign visitors.

Like Hella Po. (see [excerpt 10](#)), Ursula Se. has fond memories of her performance as part of the Olympic Games. She comments on Jesse Owens's victory, although without giving his name, only referring to him as 'a Black man', joking that Hitler would have washed his hands after having to congratulate the African American athlete, mocking Nazi racial ideologies. However, her own views at the time remain unclear. She may be giving new meaning to her own reactions. Hitler did not in fact shake the athlete's hand, nor any of the other gold medallists that day.

L.H. Tell me something about this opening ceremony of the Olympics '36. You were there as gym–

U.Se. Gymnastics group.

L.H. From your school. Did you have to practise for it for weeks, or how was that?

U.Se. Yes.

L.H. Tell me something about it.

U.Se. There was a lawn. The surface underfoot was a lawn. And this–, it was already renovated, the Olympic Stadium. Not the way it is today. But it was modernised. And in the lawn was always something like a thick nail. And this round point was always the

point where you had to stand, and from there do your exercises. So that it looked consistent. The distance from one to the other was consistent. That worked. All in–, I believe, we were all dressed in white. All in white! I don't have a single photo of it. But that was still fun, because there–. And then it happened, and that was terrible, that Mr Hitler had to shake hands with a Black man, because he was a super runner, a runner. But he certainly washed his hands a hundred times afterwards. I don't know! [laughs] [...] But there were still many foreigners visiting Berlin. And us students, who spoke a second language, had to pin on a little flag: the French flag and the English flag. That meant: if [visitors] wanted to know something, they could ask us, in French or English. There were many from the north there, Swedes, Danes and so on. We led some of them around, as [their] guides. To get to know Berlin. That was the most interesting part of the whole Olympics for us students.¹⁷

12. Ambivalence: 'I always had my reservations'

Rudolf Sch. (R.Sch.), born 1924 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 88. His father worked at a theatre as sceneshifter. Rudolf Sch. attended the *Volksschule* and completed a painting apprenticeship, painting architectural models for Albert Speer at the Academy of the Arts, and in the Reich Air Transport Ministry. He was conscripted into the Reich Labour Service (RAD) in March 1942 to East Prussia and to Ukraine, building roads. From there he was inducted into the *Wehrmacht* and sent to the Caucasus. He was captured by the Red Army in Sevastopol. He gives talks about his experiences.

Rudolf Sch. claims he felt alienated from Nazism due to antisemitic slogans, contrasting with his family's positive experiences with Jews. He still admired Germany's early wartime victories. This reflects the broad support for the war, certainly during its initial stages, which tied many people to the regime despite earlier or simultaneous reservations. During his apprenticeship as a painter/decorator, he worked on architectural models for Albert Speer at the Academy of the Arts and the Reich Air Transport Ministry, which was building a bunker for Göring. His experiences highlight how individual careers were often intertwined with Nazi initiatives, demonstrating that few professional paths remained untouched by the extensive societal and political shifts of the 'Third Reich'.

R.Sch. I experienced the Hitler movement as a young man, as a child, as they marched through the streets: 'Germany, wake up! Death to the Jews!' I was disturbed by the 'death to the Jews' part. Because I knew Jewish people. My mother worked in textiles and did fine needlework at home. We often went with her to help her deliver things. These lingerie people, this firm, were Jewish people. They were very nice. The woman who ran it always gave us sweets, chocolates, and so on, as little gifts, when I went with them. I always thought it was nice and I liked them all. I couldn't understand at all why the Nazis were so furious and angry with the Jewish people. Well, that alienated me from them. That's why I didn't join the Hitler Youth.
[...]

R.Sch. Then we painted the architectural models in Speer's offices. That was in the Academy of the Arts on the Pariser Platz [in Berlin], where Speer had his whole staff. He was the architect of the Reich, and so forth and so on. When Hitler came and looked at the models, with his staff and coterie, then, of course, we had to disappear right away to the back rooms under guard. We weren't allowed to see anything. But it was all very interesting. We also worked in the Reich Air Transport Ministry. There was a bunker, deep in the earth, for *Reichsmarschall* Göring, with ventilation shafts and anything you can imagine, renewable air supplies and so on. Everything had to be top quality, and we also worked on that. [...] One day, at Christmas I got a package. Göring had given a Christmas package to each employee who was participating in the construction.

L.H. To whom?

R.Sch. Well, to the employees. To all who worked there. But we were constantly under guard. *Leibstandarte*. What were they called? *Leibregiment* Göring. Yes, and also elsewhere.

L.H. And that was the building where the foreign office is now?

R.Sch. No, that was the Reich Air Transport Ministry. Today it's the Ministry of Finance. A huge complex.

L.H. Did you ever see Speer? Did he come there?

R.Sch. Yes, we often saw Speer.

L.H. Tell me: what was he like? What do you remember?

R.Sch. Oh, nothing. The people didn't speak to us at all, so, no conversation at all. Those were two different worlds [laughs, shakes his head]. They spoke only with their kind. They had nothing to do with us. We were only-, we only saw them from a distance.

Everything was immediately hidden away, when these people came with some high-ranking guests. Then the guards came right away to block our path.

L.H. Can you explain to me a little more clearly what your job was there?

R.Sch. We painted the architectural models. They were primarily made of wood, sometimes also out of plaster. That was the job. That was what we had to do. Otherwise, nothing. To paint the 'stone' so that one saw whether it was to be sandstone or marble. That had to be conveyed. We also painted the other things colourfully, so that this architecture—. Those were giant things! Some were so big; you could practically walk into them. [...] They were about 12 metres long and 6 metres wide.

L.H. And well made, I imagine.

R.Sch. Yes, of course. A great deal of work went into that. By wood sculptors and the like. It had, of course, to be painted with colour so that it looked as real as possible. That was indeed very interesting, but, as I said: in the beginning, young colleagues were exempt from military service, but then, as the war really got under way, that was no longer the case. That was over with.

L.H. The enthusiasm for the Führer, for Hitler back then, did you see any of that, did you experience it? How do you explain that? How was that expressed? How did people see that?

R.Sch. Yes, I was, for example, always—. I was never a real Nazi. I always had my reservations. First of all, the hatred for the Jews that they always preached, I found that repugnant. My parents were of the same opinion, and thought: that must inevitably lead to war, what Adolf [Hitler] is doing. And that is what happened.

L.H. The question actually was about this enthusiasm for National Socialism. How did that, how do you explain that, in your opinion?

R.Sch. So, the enthusiasm—. Well, of course, in the early part of the war, there was a certain marvelling over that fact that the German troops were so victorious. I would have to lie if I said that it didn't affect people. Even the people who weren't as much for it, like us.¹⁸

13. Irritated by antisemitism: 'I had always heard the opposite from my mother'

Gerhard Ho. (G.Ho.), born 1922 in Lower Lusatia, Brandenburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 87 in

the presence of a priest. Protestant. The family moved frequently due to his father's managerial position in the textile industry. Gerhard Ho. was in the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth. Conscripted in 1941, he served in France and on the Eastern Front, including during the retreat through Ukraine. He contracted diphtheria around Easter 1944.

Gerhard Ho. claims he felt conflicted about racial education at school, as it clashed with the positive views his mother held about Jews stemming from her employment in a Jewish household. Coming from a devout home and maintaining a daily prayer routine, as well as this association with Jewish people, may have kept him somewhat detached from Nazism. The narrative that Jews 'suddenly disappeared' is common in post-war accounts, sometimes referring to forced emigration, but also to incarceration, ghettoisation, deportation, and murder. This 'sudden' disappearance, as recounted, belies the prolonged period of discrimination, expropriation, and disenfranchisement that the persecuted individuals endured. Gerhard Ho. appears to confuse 'Kristallnacht' in November 1938 with the boycott of Jewish businesses in 1933.

G.Ho. I think the Race Laws came about in '35.

L.H. Maybe '36.

G.Ho. I think '35.

L.H. The Nuremberg Laws.

G.Ho. That's—. Ah yes! The Nuremberg Race Laws, we had to learn them by heart at the time. Such nonsense!

L.H. Do you still remember what you had to memorise?

G.Ho. I only know that at the time, what angered me very much [was]: 'No Jew can be a *Volksgenosse* [member of the German *Volksgemeinschaft*].' That was part of it, wasn't it. 'No Jew can be a *Volksgenosse*.' Or something similar. I don't remember exactly. That was all so long ago. But that made me angry. And that was because, I have to say, my mother as a young girl, 16, 18, grew up in a Jewish household. The family—, but I don't remember where that was. My mother was there for two years. She always talked a lot about the family M. They must have been very nice people. My mother was something like an adopted daughter to them, and she always talked about what they were doing. How they were doing things. That it's different from us. I got to know matzos for the first time and things like that. But she always talked in very nice terms about these people. And then, I've still got it here, they gave her a real gold engraved lady's watch as a farewell present:

- with many thanks for your help, or something like that, with many thanks to my mother. I've got it. I've got it in the safe!
- L.H. Farewell, that meant–.
- G.Ho. When my mother left.
- L.H. From the Jewish home where she was for two years.
- G.Ho. Yes, yes. It must have been two years.
- L.H. And your friend from school [...]. You said he left from one day to the next.
- G.Ho. Yes, suddenly gone.
- L.H. Suddenly gone.
- G.Ho. Yes. We didn't know a thing. The teacher said they moved away, and that can happen. Happened to me many times that we moved.
- L.H. Was it that he didn't show up at the beginning of the new school year, or in the middle of the year?
- G.Ho. It was right in the middle.
- L.H. Do you remember approximately in which year this was? Do you have any memories of it?
- G.Ho. I can't say. I think it was–, it would have been about '35. There is some connection with these weird Race Laws. I don't know. But it was very irritating at the time, these formulations. Because I had always heard the opposite from my mother. I still remember, was it in '38, or when was it–, when the synagogues were burned down, when was it? In '38, was it not? That's when my mother also got terribly upset. She went shopping at a Jewish store, Levi in Forst, she went shopping there. There were SA [men] by the door and [they] photographed her. My mother was quite beside herself because she was so angry and furious, I remember that! Because she was not supposed to go in there. And afterwards the store was boycotted to such an extent that it had to shut down, that store.
- L.H. Belonged to the Levis, you said.
- G.Ho. Their name was Levi. In Forst at the market.
- L.H. Where?
- G.Ho. In Forst.¹⁹

14. 'Illegal' Hitler Youth leader in Austria: 'we organised ourselves for the most part'

Karl Sch. (K.Sch.), born 1918 in the Salzkammergut region in Upper Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 92.

Protestant. His parents owned a large butchery. He too became a butcher before the war. Karl Sch. joined the Hitler Youth and became a leader at a time when membership of the Hitler Youth was illegal in Austria; he was imprisoned for five weeks because of it. He was in the Reich Labour Service (RAD) from November 1938 before being conscripted into the *Wehrmacht*, where he became a lieutenant. He served in the East from the beginning of the campaign against the Soviet Union. He was wounded in Crimea. Following further training, he was assigned to the regimental staff in Ukraine. Later he was sent to France. He was a POW in Canada.

From 1933 to 1938, the Nazi Party was banned in Austria. Born in 1918, Karl Sch. joined the Hitler Youth as a teenager, becoming a leader and serving five weeks in prison for his activities. Many Austrians looked longingly to Germany, which seemed economically favourable compared with Austria's high unemployment in 1933. Karl Sch. still praises aspects of the Nazi period, like the RAD, suggesting it as a model for today's youth who he perceives as lacking respect for authority. He still sees positive elements in National Socialism. Of note too is his assertion that 'we organised ourselves for the most part', echoing the Hitler Youth slogan of 'youth led by youth'.

K.Sch. May I say that I was imprisoned?

L.H. Who was imprisoned?

K.Sch. Me!

L.H. I see! Why?

K.Sch. Because I was a leader in the Hitler Youth.

L.H. You were a Hitler Youth leader back then.

K.Sch. Yes. In the *Verbotszeit* [the period in which the Nazi Party was banned in Austria, 1933–8].

L.H. When was the *Verbotszeit*, actually?

K.Sch. From–, well. National Socialist thinking began in the 1920s, at the end of the twenties. And in the thirties it was completely normal. It grew stronger and stronger.

L.H. What led you to the Hitler Youth? What attracted you to it?

K.Sch. Well, for me, from the outset, the military thinking and the whole order and comradeship, and when we made camp. [...] There was no alcohol, no drugs or anything like that at all. Whenever I had a sausage, I shared it, of course. Everyone appreciated it.

L.H. For you the Hitler Youth was something attractive.

K.Sch. Yes, because of the comradeship and also everything that we did, the sports and also the camping. Because we organised ourselves for the most part.

- L.H. How big was the group? How many members did you have?
- K.Sch. It covered Ebensee to Goisern. Overall, there were 40 or 50 boys there who enjoyed that.²⁰

Careers and complicity

Contemporaries often present membership of Nazi organisations or certain professions out of ideological reasons as deplorable. By contrast, opportunism is frequently seen as acceptable and almost subversive. Others, however, cite idealism to defend their actions, by suggesting that the regime exploited youthful ideas and that they were unable to understand the true nature of the Nazi regime.

15. Brother and husband joining SA to further their career: 'otherwise they would never have been taken into the civil service'

Anne Jo. (A.Jo.), born 1918 in Frankfurt, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 94. Catholic. Her father was a senior civil servant working for the post office. Anne Jo. attended the *Lyzeum* and worked for the post office before, during and after the war. Her brother and husband were both in the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). See also [excerpts 21, 73](#).

Mere membership of a Nazi organisation or lack thereof does not indicate the extent of someone's Nazi sympathies nor the degree of their complicity. Opportunism certainly played an important role, be that for securing a place at university, a job, or a promotion. For Anne Jo., who was from an educated middle-class background, the possibility of avoiding membership in a Nazi organisation by forgoing university and picking a trade seemed inconceivable. Rather, joining an organisation to be able to study was considered not only the sensible but the only choice, as seen in Anne Jo.'s defence of her brother and husband joining the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), which she downplays as 'nothing special'.

- L.H. If I understood that correctly before, your brother was in the *Stahlhelm*.
- A.Jo. *Stahlhelm* and then he had to go into the SA. He could never have gone to university, he would have had to leave his studies, if he wasn't in the SA or something like that. None of them could continue their studies. They had to be either in the Party or in

the SA or SS if they wanted to study. SS was again somewhat different. But SA. Oh, that was nothing special.

L.H. What was the SA actually? What did they–

A.Jo. Gosh. Yes, what was it? They came together now and again, and then they marched around a bit. I don't know anything more than that. My brother and my husband, he was also in it, otherwise they would never have been allowed to study. They mostly said they had lectures, or who knows what, how do I know? They weren't like that. But they had to join! Otherwise they would never have been taken into the civil service.

L.H. That was a uniformed–

A.Jo. They were–, yes, yes. Brown shirts and armbands [points to the upper arm]. Caps. It was nothing special. They didn't participate in everything.²¹

16. SA man on the sidelines?: 'all Jewish professors were dismissed'

Rudolf M. (R.M.), born 1912 in Westphalia, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2009 at the age of 97. The son of a legal expert at the highest administrative court in Germany, Rudolf M. was a law professor. He had studied law and gained his doctorate before the war. He was a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and served in the *Wehrmacht* in the East. See also [excerpt 89](#).

Despite the prevalent Nazi tendencies among many students in the 'Third Reich' and the educated backgrounds of high-ranking Nazis, there is a persistent belief that education insulated students from Nazi ideologies. Even today, education is often portrayed as a safeguard against extremism, antisemitism, and 'thuggery', often associated with less educated, lower socio-economic groups. This perspective may have been influenced by post-war educational efforts about Nazism, and the left-wing student protests in the 1960s, possibly altering perceptions of universities' roles during the Nazi period. Rudolf M., a law professor, is keen on maintaining the narrative that he remained detached from National Socialism, despite studying law and earning his PhD during the Nazi 'peace years'. His trajectory is distinct from that of other interviewees, as he belongs to an older cohort that experienced the Nazi regime as adults.

As a student in the 1930s, he witnessed the book burning at the Friedrichs-Wilhelm-University Berlin (today's Humboldt University). He claims that it was unsettling to see Jewish professors being pushed out.

However, historical accounts do not suggest any significant opposition among students witnessing the book burning, a public demonstration of power and impunity. The act, which was witnessed by thousands of onlookers, had been organised by the German Students Union. Rudolf M.'s portrayal of the risks of opposition might be influenced by later events and knowledge, such as the actions of the 'White Rose' group led by Sophie and Hans Scholl which occurred much later and during the war.

He misdates the Law for the Restoration of Professional Civil Service to 1934, when in fact it dates to 7 April 1933. The book burning in Berlin took place on 10 May 1933. The notion of the 'silent majority', which he uses here to describe the onlooking crowd, was coined after the war. Rudolf M.'s use of the term indicates the interplay between public and private discourses.

R.M. Politically, things were quiet for me then. I studied in Berlin during this time, and I was left alone. But I was shocked, shocked to witness how right-wing radicals behaved, even at the university. Also against Jewish professors-. That was deeply shocking, how they pushed them out. They staged scenes, made their lives impossible. It was a very small minority, but it did exist.

L.H. Did you witness that?

R.M. Yes, quite! We, the others, stood there but we could not, from our side-. We could only have intervened using cudgels, but that was not an option.

L.H. Do you remember a specific case, or the name of a professor?

R.M. Yes, I can! As it happened, the three academic mentors I valued most were Jews, incidentally. One of them was Martin Wolff, a civil law professor with extraordinary knowledge, a magnificent pedagogical talent. Listening to him was an aesthetic pleasure. I idolised him. He moved-, was fired, 'to restore the professional civil service'. What an impudent term! The man was a tenured professor, one of the top academics of the University of Berlin. He went to England and continued to teach there, I believe in Oxford. He was also a Jew.

L.H. In which year did he have to step down?

R.M. I witnessed that. Well, the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service was adopted in 1934. And then essentially, well, really all Jewish professors were dismissed. I don't know for how long he would have received his pension.

Wolff was immediately invited to England, and then he was gone. And my second most highly regarded professor was Leibholz, who in public law–

L.H. May I briefly interrupt: Was there any protest from the students at all, or–?

R.M. That was not possible. Among us [we felt] bitterness and desperation, but helplessness. Even more, or not even more, it became exactly evident when the books were burned. I think that was in some November '34 or '35, so relatively early, at the University of Berlin: a pile of democratic, liberal, Marxist literature. The keyword was Marxist, and liberal also had a bad reputation. They carried a huge pile of books, the radicals, and made a giant bonfire. Then they stood around the fire and bawled. And everyone else [was] silent in the background. Afterwards people ask: why didn't you take action? I can only repeat: that works–. That didn't work like that! The police stood behind them, they had the KZs [concentration camps] behind them, they had behind them [the power to decide] whether someone could continue to study at university. Brother and sister Scholl in Munich–

L.H. Did you witness the burning of the books?

R.M. I witnessed it. It was–

L.H. Were you very close, or where did you stand exactly?

R.M. I also felt a mixture of bitterness, but at the same time desperation and hopelessness. You knew: If you do anything here, your studies are over. Even if you're not put in a KZ.

L.H. Were you a spectator? Did you stand by a window?

R.M. It was in the square in front of the university, a very large square, thousands of us were gathered there. There were thousands of us, but–

L.H. And were you called to go there? Did one have to watch, or–

R.M. No, no. Not at all.

L.H. So there was something going on, and out of curiosity–

R.M. If you like, it was a silent demonstration. Those responsible knew exactly that the silent majority in the background was absolutely against it. But they also knew that [the silent majority] could not do anything about it. I repeat: The least that could have happened was immediate dismissal from the university, and the next step was the KZ, and the next judgment by the court, death penalty, as with brother and sister Scholl in Munich.²²

17. Family ties to high-ranking Nazis: 'I don't know how much my father really knew about those terrible things that happened'

Ingeborg Re. (I.Re.), born 1921 in Hildesheim, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 92. Protestant. Her father was a jurist who had joined the NSDAP before 1933. The family moved to Berlin, where her father was a senior legal secretary at the Reich Ministry of the Interior. He was responsible for overseeing all the fire brigades. She was a member of the League of German Girls (BDM) in Breslau (today Wrocław, Poland) and Berlin, and taught English to other girls in this context. She attained the *Abitur* in 1939 and began to study. During the war, she worked in counter-espionage at the German embassy in Madrid. Her boss was arrested after the war, but Ingeborg Re. avoided arrest.

The cohort primarily represented in this sourcebook did not initiate the greatest crimes of the 'Third Reich'. The generation of their parents and grandparents, however, conceived of, organised, and carried out mass murder, and benefited from the opportunities created by the Nazi regime. This is rarely easy for the children and grandchildren to acknowledge. This is true even or especially for the children and grandchildren of people in positions of considerable influence, which also furthered their own careers or helped them stay away from the most dangerous locations during the war.

Ingeborg Re. downplays her father's status and involvement. She also brushes over her own complicity as a member of German counter-espionage operations in Madrid. She had obtained this position thanks to her father's connections.

Here, her father's 'idealism' serves as a distancing and exculpatory strategy, insinuating that he did not see the regime's crimes. Notably this is in response to a probing question by Holland. Initially, she defends her father by highlighting his belief in the primacy of the law, which seems to put her on solid ground. However, when Holland challenges this notion with a question about the regime's 'unjust laws' targeting Jews, Ingeborg Re. hesitates. She begins to consider her father's potential actions under such laws but quickly retreats, questioning how much he really knew about the regime's atrocities. This shift in her narrative focuses on her father's knowledge rather than his actions as a senior legal secretary at the Ministry of the Interior, revealing a common defensive strategy among descendants of Nazis to mitigate familial guilt.

I.Re. My father was—, he belonged to the Party. He was an idealist, who went through life wearing blinkers. I very often spoke with

- my brother about this in later years. We asked ourselves: How was it possible, that our father did not see what it was [really] like? He was a lawyer. That was all that excited him.
- L.H. A lawyer concerns himself with justice and injustice, or with—?
- I.Re. Yes, with breaches of the law.
- L.H. With breaches of the law. But—
- I.Re. Yes! The law must be obeyed.
- L.H. Pardon?
- I.Re. The law must be obeyed.
- L.H. Even when the law is unjust? I'm thinking about the anti-Jewish laws back then.
- I.Re. You see, I cannot answer that. I don't know. You are perfectly right. He could have—. But I don't know. I don't know how much my father really knew about those terrible things that happened. I don't know. Even though officially, Himmler was his highest boss.
- L.H. The question is—
- I.Re. Once—
- L.H. Sorry, I interrupted you.
- I.Re. No. I remember, once I was invited with my parents – I don't recall if only with my father or with both – to a building complex [which was] like a luxury hotel. [Reinhard] Heydrich was there for a reception. Heydrich is a character with a very, very bad reputation in this awful story. At the time, he was a good-looking young man. I don't know if they wanted to reel me in so I could go to more events like this. But it was only this one time. It wasn't until later that I learned who this Heydrich was and was relieved that it was all over with this one short visit [laughs]!²³

18. Subsidies for landed estates: 'because of that we were doing very well'

Jolanthe B. (J.V.B.), born 1925 in the Fraustadt district, Silesia (today Wschowa County, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 87. She is from a noble family which owned land and an estate. She worked at home during the war. She attended college. She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). Her father was a major in the 6th Army and served at Stalingrad. She became an author and social worker after the war and wrote books about her experiences. See also [excerpt 69](#).

No socio-economic group was completely immune to the influence of Nazism. People from different backgrounds found certain aspects

of Nazism appealing or beneficial. This included the nobility and aristocracy, who, despite being repulsed by some elements, largely accommodated themselves to the new regime. Jolanthe B., from a family owning a large estate in Silesia, claims that Nazi subsidies improved her family's financial situation. Despite this, Jolanthe B. quickly shifts focus in her narrative to her mother's alleged kindness towards leasehold farmers. As a writer and novelist, Jolanthe B.'s storytelling is polished and well rehearsed.

J.V.B. From my early childhood, I know that we didn't have much money. My father was an officer. He inherited the estate from his grandmother and basically had no idea about farming. We always had to be very thrifty. On reflection, my father valued all the lights being turned out, and we lived very frugally, in general. I—, as a child, things went relatively well for me, because I had distanced myself as much as possible from the family and from supervision, and was always in the farmyard with the animals, with the horses. I had, I think, from my seventh year on, my own group of little boys, who had to obey me. I was the child of the castle, and they had to obey the child of the castle. We got up to rather a great deal of mischief. Usually, we were punished for that, got smacked, or something like that. I can also call to mind rather wild escapades that I set in motion back then. I was a very wild child, was very bad at school, because it simply wasn't any fun for me. I did not like going to school. But, as I said, horses. Horses were everything to me. My parental home—, no, now I must add to that: during the Nazi period, after 1933, the farming estates, which were for the most part in a very bad condition, were subsidised. They received money, were effectively bought off, so that they weren't against Hitler. The idea came from [President Paul] von Hindenburg. He initiated all of that. Because of that we were doing very well. My father then established a great thoroughbred horse-breeding operation. The farm improved as well. And then my mother did something that I found very, very wonderful: at Christmas she organised a Christmas festival for the farmers. And each child of each farmer got a present.²⁴

19. Hereditary health court: 'the physicians advised, but my father made the decision'

Hanna La. (H.La.), born 1922 in Hamburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013, partly in the presence of her husband, at the age of 91. Her mother was from a noble family and her father was a judge at Hamburg's Higher Regional Court. He was a member of the NSDAP. Hanna La. was a member of the League of German Girls (BDM) and joined its sub-organisation BDM *Glaube and Schönheit* ('faith and beauty'). She completed the *Abitur* in 1941. She worked on a farm for a year. After an air raid destroyed the house, she moved to Celle in 1943.

Hanna La.'s father presided over forced sterilisation cases, a role that Hanna La. mitigates by highlighting his conscientious decision-making. Her characterisation of these actions as merely 'not nice' reflects a broader societal and indeed political delay in acknowledging the victims of such practices. The social discourse surrounding forced sterilisation and purportedly hereditary illnesses has not progressed as significantly as it has for other groups persecuted by the Nazis, such as Jews, Sinti and Roma, and forced labourers, whose recognition also faced considerable delays. During the Nazi period, around 400,000 people were forcibly sterilised.

L.H. What was your father's position in Hamburg, where was he employed as a jurist?

H.La. Higher Regional Court Hamburg. Higher Regional Court. [...] Yes. Well, every judge-, my father held a senate. A Higher Regional Court consists of different senates. And my father presided over two senates as far as I know, one of which was the prize court [concerning the seizure of ships], the other, I'm afraid to say, wasn't nice either, the other was hereditary health.

L.H. I didn't catch that. Could you explain that better please?

H.La. Hereditary health.

L.H. Yes.

H.La. Yes. That was a big topic under Hitler. Yes, hold on, it was about, yes-, now I know what that was about. It was about whether men were allowed to remain fertile or whether they, how do you say, were made, would be operated on, so that they can't have children, and that came before the court. That came before the court and for various reasons it was said, 'No, this man mustn't have children, his head isn't sufficiently clear,' and the court made that decision, that was the hereditary health court.

- L.H. Hered—?
- H.La. Hereditary. If it, if he had children, then perhaps a certain illness might get passed on to the children. And that's why some people were made sterile.
- L.H. Was your father a doctor?
- H.La. Also.
- L.H. Or more of a jurist?
- H.La. Yes.
- L.H. Had he studied medicine too?
- H.La. No. Actually, it's good that you've asked, because I know that my father spent much time with the physicians to make sure he doesn't do anything wrong. That's true.
- L.H. Does that mean that your father decided whether these people were allowed to have children, or that the physicians made the decisions? Or did your father receive from them, how do you say—
- H.La. Together. They did that together. He never gave a verdict without consulting a physician. That's how I mean it.
- L.H. There was medical advice.
- H.La. The physicians advised, but my father made the decision.
- L.H. Was he the highest—?
- H.La. Yes. Hereditary health court. That was called a senate. He held two senates, prize court and hereditary health court. He presided over both.
- L.H. For Hamburg or the whole region up north?
- H.La. Only for the Higher Regional Court. Higher Regional Court Hamburg. I don't know how far that stretches. But the Higher Regional Court was in Hamburg. There he had these two posts. And later, that was dangerous.
- L.H. Did homosexuals [*sic*] also come before the court back then?
- H.La. I didn't hear that term being used. No, no, that wasn't the case. No, no, it was about health. Homosexuals aren't, they don't want children, they don't bring children into the world. It was about heredity.
- L.H. Was that somehow connected to 'euthanasia', the 'euthanasia' programme, how do you say, 'unworthy life'?
- H.La. I know what you mean. My father had—, no, communists came before him too, unfortunately, communists came before him too—, but no, my father said later, when it was all over, 'Thank God that I never got into a position where I had to sentence someone to death.' He said that. He was very grateful. Meaning that he didn't have to do that.

- L.H. Communists were also tried before his court?
- H.La. Yes, but I can't tell you—
- L.H. For their political position, for being against Hitler or National Socialism, or did it have to do with that business with the illnesses? I didn't understand that part.
- H.La. No, all I know is that he was the most senior head of both senates, that much I know. But he also spoke of a communist. Because he must have had some of them, seeing how happy he was that he never had to issue a death sentence. As far as I know communists also came before his court. But I don't know in which department, in which department they came to him. I don't know how that happened. How it happened that communists were there, too, I don't know.²⁵

20. *Leibstandarte* Adolf Hitler: 'the population held us in high esteem'

Karl H. (K.H.), born 1914 in Lower Saxony, Germany, interviewed three times by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 and 2012, at the age of 97 during the first interview. Protestant but dropped out of Church in 1938. His father was a civil servant working for the railways. Karl H. attended a *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school) and a commercial school. He completed a merchant/business apprenticeship before volunteering for the *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler in 1935. Later he was transferred to the Hitler-Jugend-Division. He served in Berlin, France, Croatia, Hungary, and Austria. He was captured by US troops in Austria and interned in Darmstadt and Neuengamme. After his release in 1948, he retrained as a dyer and later worked in an office. See also [excerpts 98](#), 102.

One of the older narrators in this selection, Karl H. joined the *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler, starting as a pay clerk and rising to an SS administrative officer due to his commercial background. He leveraged his position for career advancement, leaving the Protestant Church in 1938 to further his opportunities within the SS, and being tasked with elite assignments such as guarding the Reich Chancellery and key Nazi figures like Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich. He also helped his wife secure a position at the Reich Labour Service (RAD), handling legal matters. Karl H. took pride in his uniform and considered himself among the regime's elite. He denies any SS wrongdoing or witnessing any crimes. He viewed 'Kristallnacht' as justified revenge for the murder of a German official, which was the Nazi pretext for the violence. He

represents the SS as a professional career path, which offered him career advancements not possible in the *Wehrmacht*. Yet for Karl H., Nazism was more than an opportunity to embark on what was then a well-regarded career: he maintains a strong ideological commitment to Nazism and its values. Holland's questions around the SS as an elite unit, wearing of the uniform, and female attention, bring this to the forefront.

L.H. Did you feel part of an elite?

K.H. Yes.

L.H. How did you express this feeling?

K.H. We had to form guards of honour. We had to stand guard at the Reich Chancellery and other ministries. [We] were always preferred in this respect. The population held us in high esteem, too. When I think back, some came back from holiday saying: 'So-and-so shook my hand, because I'm in the *Leibstandarte*.' They probably didn't wash their hand for eight days!

L.H. Who shook their hand, for example?

K.H. When someone was on holiday.

L.H. I see.

K.H. Acquaintances. [They said,] 'Oh, you're from the *Leibstandarte*? You must have shaken Hitler's hand. Then let me shake your hand, too!' The population respected us. We wore uniform when we went home on holiday. If not, we needed a holiday pass with a special note that we were wearing civilian clothes. To document our behaviour in public, so that we behaved well. [...]

L.H. That means, when you went into town in the evening-, or were you allowed-. Were you allowed to go to Berlin on the weekends?

K.H. Yes.

L.H. For dancing, did you wear the uniform or civilian dress?

K.H. No, always uniform.

L.H. Always uniform?

K.H. Yes.

L.H. Even when you were in contact with the civilian population, then?

K.H. Yes, then too.

L.H. And the people?

K.H. Later, as a sergeant, I was allowed to go out as a civilian without the special pass.

L.H. But before you became a sergeant, as a normal, how do you say?

K.H. Soldier.

- L.H. As a soldier, did you—. Dancing in Berlin, there were nice dancing halls back then, right? Quite a few.
- K.H. Berlin-Wannsee.
- L.H. Where were you in Berlin? In which—
- K.H. In Wannsee.
- L.H. Wannsee.
- K.H. Opposite the barracks was a ballroom, where there was dancing during the week.
- L.H. And was the SS more popular with the girls? Were you more successful?
- K.H. Yes.
- L.H. The uniform.
- K.H. You bet.
- L.H. You bet?
- K.H. Yes, sure. There were also squabbles between the *Wehrmacht*, formerly the *Reichswehr*, and the SS. Because we were always considered superior. And the others were not regarded as highly.²⁶

Social and economic exclusion

The persecution of Germans and Austrians under Nazi racial legislation was exacerbated by informal practices. Their lives grew isolated, and their livelihoods were increasingly imperilled. From being ostracised by friends, neighbours, and acquaintances to facing boycotts and then losing their jobs or shops, their exclusions encompassed many spheres of society before 'Kristallnacht'. On the other side of this are those who began to ignore them, stopped inviting them, ceased buying at their shops, benefited from now vacant positions, or took over their shops and customers.

21. Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service: 'then the Jews were gone'

Anne Jo. (A.Jo.), born 1918 in Frankfurt, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 94. Catholic. Her father was a senior civil servant working for the post office. Anne Jo. attended the *Lyzeum* and worked for the post office before, during and after the war. Her brother and husband were both in the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). See also [excerpts 15, 73](#).

The excerpt reflects a casual acceptance of antisemitic stereotypes, such as the claim that the legal profession had been 'in Jewish hands'.

It highlights the benefits ‘Aryans’ gained when Jews, or those categorised as such under Nazi racial laws, were ousted from university positions and other civil service roles following the enactment of the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service in 1933. Anne Jo’s narrative shows no reflection on these stereotypes or the consequences for those displaced to make way for individuals like her brother. The use of the euphemism ‘the Jews were gone’ illustrates the lack of attention paid to the Jews’ fate, as she focuses on her brother’s career advancement without concern for those who suffered because of these policies.

A.Jo. My brother passed his university-qualifying exam in 1931. And my brother had always said, as a young boy: ‘I’ll be a criminal investigator.’ He wanted to join the criminal police. However, he couldn’t go to the police, because he wore spectacles. That wasn’t possible back then. He said, ‘Then I’ll study law.’ And then my father – why, I don’t know – was summoned, and he was asked: ‘What does your son want to become?’ My father said: ‘My son wants to study law.’ Because our name is M., the career counsellor asked: ‘Are you a Jew?’ My father said: ‘No.’ ‘And he wants to study law?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Get that out of your head! Only Jews are studying law. And if your son is not a Jew, he can’t count on getting a place.’ That’s true! To that my brother said: ‘Oh dear! What should I study now?’ [...] Then my mother said: ‘Go ahead and study medicine.’ ‘No, no!’ ‘Veterinary medicine.’ ‘Yes.’ But Frankfurt had no faculty for veterinary medicine. The nearest was in Gießen. Then it was: find a room in Gießen. Then we said: ‘We have a university in Frankfurt, and if you can study veterinary medicine, you can also study human medicine!’ ‘Good!’ He said he would study medicine. Then he studied medicine until 1933. Then the Jews were gone. He said: ‘So! And now I can study law.’ And then he studied law.²⁷

22. Jewish cattle dealers: ‘Father didn’t sell them anything’

Regine W. (R.W.), born 1924 in Friesland, Lower Saxony, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 88. Protestant. Her parents had a farm. Regine W. attended the *Volksschule*, worked at the family farm before the war, and did an agricultural apprenticeship during the war. She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). Her father was conscripted late in the war and sent to the Eastern Front. He was a POW in Russia for two years. See also [excerpt 119](#).

The excerpt highlights the antisemitic and economic marginalisation of Jews in the agricultural sector. Regine W.'s father refused to sell cattle to a Jewish trader, allegedly because of formal bans and the social and economic repercussions of defying such rules. His compliance appears to have been motivated by the fear of social ostracism and potential economic repercussions concerning land leases, rather than a fear for personal safety. This reflects a broader pattern of antisemitic stereotypes, which accused Jewish cattle traders of exploiting local farmers and profiteering from their debts. The exclusion and eventual deportation of Jews was portrayed as justified, even a form of justice (see also [excerpt 34](#)).

L.H. Did you join the BDM?

R.W. Yes.

L.H. Were there any people of the Jewish faith at all in the area?

R.W. Yes, there were some cattle dealers who were Jews. Then I heard that they—. One couldn't sell to them any more.

L.H. From when on?

R.W. I must have been 13 when we heard this.

L.H. So around '37.

R.W. Yes.

L.H. Did these cattle merchants live in the town or did they come from further away?

R.W. They came from Neustadtgödens, that's just before you get to Wilhelmshaven. [...]

L.H. Did they come to your farm to buy animals from you?

R.W. Yes, they came. But Father didn't sell them anything.

L.H. Because of this ban, you mean.

R.W. Yes.

L.H. One had to respect that.

R.W. Yes.

L.H. What would have happened if your father had simply ignored the ban and sold some animals?

R.W. [Grimacing] Well, then he would have been looked at with suspicion by the others, or be bullied or so.

L.H. He couldn't run that risk.

R.W. No. No. No. Everybody became very cautious because they were afraid of incurring disadvantages, as I said, regarding land leases and so on.²⁸

23. Child activism: 'we had the task of standing guard in front of a Jewish department store'

Klaus K. (K.K.), born 1927 in Bernburg/Saale, Germany, interviewed twice by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 83. His father had joined the NSDAP in 1933/4 and was a senior regional leader. His mother was in the National Socialist Women's League. Klaus K. was in the *Jungvolk* and attended one of the Nazi elite boarding schools, known as *Napola*, in Ballenstedt. He later joined the *Waffen-SS* and was trained in a tank division in Paderborn. He was only briefly deployed towards the end of the war. He was captured by US troops in April 1945 and released after three months. He taught history after the war. He wrote a book about his experiences during the Nazi period. See also [excerpt 4](#).

Klaus K. claims to have guarded a Jewish department store to prevent people from entering when he was still in the *Jungvolk*. While this is a compellingly candid story, there are reasons to doubt its occurrence, at least in this form and context. What he describes would probably have been the boycott of Jewish businesses which took place in 1933, meaning he would have only been six years old. He dates the incident to 1937, when he was nine years old. It is possible that he conflated different incidents, or (mis)interpreted some of his activities as a child in light of knowledge that he acquired later.

K.K. Then, everyone had a task on the day of service, [...] whether Wednesday or Saturday. I exactly remember an occurrence in 1938. We had the task of standing guard in front of a Jewish department store, in which, above all, workers made purchases, because, as is the case today in department stores, it was less expensive. Because there they got butter cheaper, or a shirt, or whatever they wanted to buy. And us little kids, I was still only nine, had to take up our positions in front of the Jewish business, and had to link arms, and were not allowed to let anyone through. Or should pay attention to who went in there, and so on, and so forth. That was, for example, a job for a Saturday. On a Saturday morn–, uh, afternoon. I, myself, with a friend – I've written about this in my book – I can still remember it exactly. My friend said: 'Let's go inside. There must be something going on there. I think that you recognise Jews this way: the Jew stinks. One can smell the Jews.' That was a typical byword in National Socialism: 'The Jew smells from a distance.' That was a typical slogan. So, us both in uniform – in uniform! – went

into this Jewish business, and from then I, I don't remember any more what happened. I believe we grew frightened, as nine- or ten-year-olds, and very quickly ran out again, because we, basically, we didn't know what we wanted there! That was this one story about Jewish business, which you can barely imagine today.

L.H. Nine years old, that means, that was 1936.

K.K. That was-, yes. No, that was '37. '37. 1937.²⁹

24. Changing stories about antisemitism on public transport: 'I was on the tram wearing the Hitler Youth uniform'

Heinz Sa. (H.Sa.), born 1920 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 92. His father was a shoemaker. Heinz Sa. attended the *Oberschule* and studied medicine. He was a choirboy at the Berlin State Opera from 1930 to 1935. He played the accordion in the *Jungvolk* and entered the Hitler Youth aged 16. After completing the Reich Labour Service (RAD), he joined the *Wehrmacht* in 1938 with the Infantry Regiment Guben. The regiment marched to Schneidemühl (Piła) and built trenches. Heinz Sa. was later part of the campaign against Poland. He was able to study medicine with a regiment in Berlin from January 1940, serving in medical hospitals during holidays. He became a psychiatrist after the war.

As suggested in relation to [excerpt 23](#), a story being compelling does not necessarily mean that it occurred at all, or in the way in which it is told. Of course, stories changing over time, depending on context and audience, is a normal feature of human memory and storytelling. But depending on what is being told and who the speaker is, embellishments, exaggerations, and omissions may take on significance and point to wider patterns of interpretation.

The following two excerpts are from two interviews by the same narrator, recorded at different times. They indicate how stories change from one instance of retelling to the next. They also reveal antisemitic stereotypes. The yellow star was made compulsory at different times in different areas between 1939 and 1945. In Germany and Austria, that was the case in the autumn of 1941. Heinz Sa. would therefore not have seen a woman wearing a yellow star on a Berlin tram while he was still in the Hitler Youth. If it occurred at all, the incident might have happened when he was an adult during his military service in Poland, where Jews were forced to wear such a badge soon after the invasion, or later in the war in Berlin when he was stationed there again.

Despite his claims around coercion in the ‘Third Reich’, there was a much greater range of options available to many contemporaries.

At the end of the first version, the artifice of the conversation comes to the forefront, with Heinz Sa.’s mundane request for a toilet break and for the interview to end, and an exchange about disconnecting him from the microphone.

Version 1

H.Sa. I remember an experience when I was on the tram wearing the Hitler Youth uniform, and there was a Jewish woman sitting on a seat. The other people were standing. Then she was challenged: ‘Get going! Out with the Jew! Make room!’ That is something that I can still remember. To me, it was so embarrassing that I right away left that part of the tram. I went through the door to another part of the tram. That was– [bows and shakes his head].

L.H. How did one know she was Jewish?

H.Sa. She looked like it! And they had to wear the star! So that one could see–, it was simple to see who was Jewish.

L.H. From when on did Jews have to wear this star?

H.Sa. I don’t remember that. But relatively soon. It was–.

L.H. Did you see how people wore the star?

H.Sa. Yes, of course.

L.H. Where was it?

H.Sa. Here on the chest or on the arm. In any case where one–

L.H. Not on the back?

H.Sa. No, not on the back. Just on the front.

L.H. And how large?

H.Sa. Yes, about the size of a hand. Like a clenched fist.

L.H. And what colour?

H.Sa. Yellow. Yellow with black writing.

L.H. And where was it worn? Left, or on the right side?

H.Sa. I don’t remember that. Definitely on the front.

L.H. Was there a ‘J’, or the word ‘Jew’ on the yellow star?

H.Sa. The word ‘Jew’ was on it. As far as I can remember there was the word ‘Jew’. The star, and in the middle ‘Jew’.

L.H. Was that simply accepted, or did one find that somehow strange or unjustified or a crime, or was it simply accepted as normal, part of daily life?

H.Sa. The Jews couldn’t do anything about it, and the others went along with everything. I never heard anyone say that it was

- absurd that Jews had to wear the star. Nobody dared to speak up.
- L.H. You said nobody dared to speak up. That means people were afraid?
- H.Sa. Of course!
- L.H. Or did they agree with it?
- H.Sa. Everybody had to do what the Party demanded. Of course.
- L.H. But were the people, most people, not Party members but the majority, in agreement with the policy towards the Jews? Or did one criticise that in private, or was it accepted?
- H.Sa. As I told you before: privately, if one had those contacts, like my parents, they held back. But that was at a time when they wore no stars, because we did not admit anyone to our home who wore a star. So, it must have been before that. But my parents still had contacts [with Jews]. They were nice people. And because my father had a shop, he had—, there were also Jews shopping here. That's why there was no reason to do anything against it.
- L.H. But you say the Jews wearing stars were not invited by your father.
- H.Sa. No, no. That was not possible any more.
- L.H. Why was it not possible? What do you mean?
- H.Sa. One was under observation, everywhere. People said with whom—. Who goes where? 'Oh, he goes in there!' Above all, our downstairs neighbours. We lived on the first floor. They always watched what was happening. I have to go to the toilet.
- L.H. Yes, I have to disconnect you. You are connected to the microphone. Just a moment! I still have to untie this thing.
- H.Sa. I hope that we are also slowly coming to an end.
- L.H. Yes, it's also time for lunch. Now you can go. It is fine now. Watch out for the cables but you can go through there, and then left. Meanwhile, leave the cables simply there.³⁰

Version 2

In the second interview around two months later, Heinz Sa. relates the story again. He says that he gave up his seat for an elderly Jewish woman. This caused so much dissent on the tram that he had to get off at the next stop. It is unknown whether this incident occurred at all, or whether multiple incidents were rolled into one, or whether his interpretation of the incident changed. It is possible that he is reinforcing his position as a 'contemporary witness' by constructing stories that place him in significant situations.

H.Sa. I sat in the tram, I was 15 years old, when an elderly lady came, and I should have seen that she wore a Jewish star. I stood up so that she could sit down. Then there was quite a scene! How I as a boy would make room for a Jewish woman. I walked very quickly to the front of the tram and got off at the next stop. That is something I can still remember.³¹

25. Librarians as gatekeepers: 'I was no longer allowed to serve him'

Maria F. (M.F.), born 1912 in Linz, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 90 (see [figure 3](#)). Her father was a civil servant. She too was a civil servant and worked as a librarian.

Maria F. is interviewed in a retirement home, her hospital bed in clear view behind her throughout, a setting which may influence how viewers perceive her narrative. In the first excerpt, she talks about an incident when she refused to lend books to a Jewish reader. Her sadness at the events appears genuine. Her focus on her own emotions obscures any deeper analysis of her role and responsibilities as a civil servant in a municipal library, a position that typically carries advantages and responsibilities, and of the lack of agency she projects.

In the second excerpt, Maria F. played a significant role in removing banned books from several liquidated libraries. While deselecting books



Figure 3 Maria F. in her room in a retirement home. M.F. Video Testimony (085F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 19 March 2011. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

is a common part of a librarian's duties for managing collections, here books are deselected on ideological grounds and include all books by Jewish authors. Maria does not mention this aspect until prompted by Holland, indicating perhaps a reluctance to discuss the broader implications of her actions. The double meaning of 'Jews had to go' in her response is particularly noteworthy, pointing not only to the removal of books by Jewish authors but also to the removal of Jewish people from Germany and Austria. Her focus is on books related to Catholicism, a subject that is likely closer to her own 'lived experience' and identity. Her claims regarding the removal of works by Catholic authors and 'light reads' in the 'Third Reich', such as books by Ludwig Ganghofer, are incorrect, while 'Kurt Mahler' is not a literary author at all. Rather, the blacklisting of books largely focused on Jewish, communist, and pacifist authors or subjects.

Of note is also the interaction between Holland and Maria F. when he repeatedly asks for the meaning of the German word *einstampfen* – that is, pulping. He may be repeating his question either because he does not understand the meaning of the word or because he sees some deeper meaning and significance in the method of destruction of the books. In instances like these, we perhaps see Claude Lanzmann's influence: a similarly persistent focus on detail and language as in *Shoah*. Rather than revealing any hidden truths, however, the flow of the conversation is disrupted here.

Jewish readers

L.H. Frau F., is there anything that comes to mind? An image or an experience, something that could give me an idea of the times back then. You spoke, I believe, when we talked briefly yesterday, about a customer who came to the library. Could you tell me about that again?

M.F. That was after the *Umbruch* [Germany's annexation of Austria in March 1938, the so-called *Anschluss*]. That was a reader, an older man, a very dear older man, who always borrowed books. Suddenly he came and had a Jewish star above [points at chest]. I wasn't allowed to lend him anything any more. After a few days, no one heard anything any more about him. They took him away.

L.H. You say you couldn't lend him anything. What do you mean by that?

M.F. I was no longer allowed to serve him.

L.H. And how did you find out that you could no longer serve

- him? Could you tell me a little more about that? I'm trying to understand it.
- M.F. The Jews were required to wear the Star of David. And he came to return some books, wearing the star, and wanted to borrow new books, and I said: 'I'm sorry, I can't give you anything.' That was very sad.
- L.H. You mean, it was sad for you or also sad for him?
- M.F. Also. Both. It was painful for me.
- L.H. What was the man called?
- M.F. W.
- L.H. And his first name?
- M.F. I don't remember that.
- L.H. Frau F., how did you know that you weren't allowed to serve him?
- M.F. Because it was forbidden to serve Jews.
- L.H. How did you know that it was forbidden to serve Jews? Please explain that to me a little more clearly.
- M.F. Yes, in general. The instruction came. Jews were not allowed to be served.
- L.H. What do you mean by 'instruction'? Was it an order from your boss, or was it written, or how did you find out that you couldn't lend books to Jews?
- M.F. They didn't show up any longer. They had taken them all away, all the businesspeople.
- L.H. In the library, was there a sign or a text, Jews were no longer allowed to receive any books, or something like that?
- M.F. No. [Shakes her head.]
- L.H. Was there any written order at all, did people talk about it, or did one simply know?
- M.F. I don't remember. I only know that one was not permitted to serve Jews any more, that [was the] instruction. In any case they no longer came.³²

Library liquidation

- L.H. The Christian library was liquidated.
- M.F. Yes, and I had to oversee it all. I had to liquidate all the libraries.
- L.H. Who had to liquidate them?
- M.F. Me.
- L.H. And you were responsible for that?
- M.F. Yes.
- L.H. How many libraries did you liquidate?

- M.F. Three. Two of them were incorporated into the city library. But [their staff] weren't hired. I am a civil servant. They didn't-. They received only a small compensation.
- L.H. What does it mean 'to liquidate a library'? How do you liquidate a library?
- M.F. Closing it down.
- L.H. What happened to the books in such a library?
- M.F. Well, for the most part, it was a big cleansing exercise. Thirty thousand books were destroyed. Hitler had yes-. There was his own list. For example, all the light-hearted things that old people like to read had to go.
- L.H. What kinds of books? Give me a few titles, so that I have some idea.
- M.F. Yes, Ganghofer, for example. Does the name mean anything to you? That was all eliminated as inferior.
- L.H. What else?
- M.F. Yes, the old people-, one didn't know any more what books one could give them that they would enjoy, because so many were eliminated as inferior. Thirty thousand books were eliminated and *eingestampft* [pulped].
- L.H. *Eingestampft*, what does that mean?
- M.F. Brought to a factory and pulped.
- L.H. What does *eingestampft* mean?
- M.F. [They were] pulped.
- L.H. Incinerated, or what did one do with these books? How do you destroy a book?
- M.F. Yes, they were brought to a factory and in a-, pulped, that's all I can say. Destroyed.
- L.H. Incinerated or broken up or something else?
- M.F. Smashed up [gestures with her hand].
- L.H. And then taken away somewhere or broken?
- M.F. Broken.
- L.H. Destroyed.
- M.F. Yes.
- L.H. How many?
- M.F. Thirty thousand.
- L.H. Were you there? Did you help select the books?
- M.F. I had a list.
- L.H. And on the list was-?
- M.F. Which books one could take to the city library, and which were to be destroyed. All those that had anything to do with Catholicism [...] had to go.

- L.H. Did that happen in libraries in the whole country, or only in Linz?
In all of Austria?
- M.F. I don't know. I can only talk about Linz.
- L.H. What was your responsibility in this liquidation? What did you actually-. What responsibility did you have in the whole story?
- M.F. Yes. I had to look for books that were to be destroyed and for books that we would take over. I had a list that I had to sort through.
- L.H. Did you have helpers, or did you have to do it all alone?
- M.F. Yes, one [helper], who was with the SA, he was dangerous. I often wanted to save something. But I didn't dare to.
- L.H. What do you mean? You saved books for yourself or sent them back, so that they would be taken into the [city] library?
- M.F. I would have liked to have done that. At home I had an enormous library, where I had taken books home. But on this occasion, I wasn't allowed to. He was there, and he was in uniform.
- L.H. In uniform.
- M.F. [Nods] He was watching me.
- L.H. He stood next to you all day?
- M.F. Watching me.
- L.H. What was the fellow called?
- M.F. Paulitsch.
- L.H. And the first name?
- M.F. I don't know. It's been such a long time.
- L.H. But he was an SA man, you mean, and not SS.
- M.F. Yes. A brown uniform.
- L.H. When did they do this? When did this liquidation of the books begin?
- M.F. Rather soon after the *Anschluss*.
- L.H. Shortly thereafter. And how long did it last? Days, weeks, months? How long does it take to liquidate a library?
- M.F. It took a couple of weeks to go through all three libraries.
- L.H. Did you accompany them, when they took the books down from the shelves and loaded them on a lorry? How were they transported?
- M.F. By lorry.
- L.H. And did you go to these other libraries, to these Christian libraries, for example, did you go there to pick up books?
- M.F. I was in the individual libraries and sorted through [the books]. This one is for us, that one is for the lorry for pulping.

L.H. That means: You went with the lorry?

M.F. No, it went separately.

L.H. The books simply arrived. So who took them down from the shelves and put them on the lorry?

M.F. I had to sort through them. This one stays, that one gets taken away. Two men loaded it all up and they took it away.

L.H. That means, you yourself didn't take all the books out of the shelves. Somebody else did that.

M.F. Yes.

L.H. And who was that? Did they send younger fellows for that? Was it library employees, or did they come from the SA?

M.F. No. I don't know.

L.H. In uniform or not in uniform?

M.F. No.

L.H. Not in uniform. Perhaps one of these firms when one moves house.

M.F. I have no idea. I only—, this batch will be taken away, this batch stays.

L.H. So that means you had to look at each book, at least at the title?

M.F. Well, at the creator.

L.H. Creator is the—?

M.F. Author.

L.H. Can you tell me from memory—, you certainly can't remember all of that, but can you tell me a few names of authors who were permitted and those who were not?

M.F. No, I can't remember.

L.H. For example, the ones that were not allowed.

M.F. Yes, Ganghofer, Kurt Mahler. All those light reads. Romances, the light reads. Hitler wanted only worthwhile material.

L.H. Give me a few examples of the worthy ones, that Hitler had on the positive list.

M.F. I don't remember.

L.H. Schiller, for example.

M.F. Well, he certainly stayed.

L.H. Goethe.

M.F. Yes.

L.H. Hofmannsthal?

M.F. He was a Jew.

L.H. What happened to Hofmannsthal? Did he have to go?

M.F. [Nods] Jews had to go.

L.H. That meant all Jewish writers.

M.F. Yes. I had, for example, a South Tyrolean clergyman, he wrote the most beautiful travel descriptions you can imagine. I've got it at home. My second husband loved it. But it had to be kept secret.³³

'Kristallnacht'

The anti-Jewish violence on 9–10 November 1938, known as the November Pogrom, 'Reichskristallnacht', or 'Kristallnacht' ('night of broken glass'), marked a turning point and escalation in the persecution of Jews. During this public spectacle Jewish shops, homes, and synagogues were vandalised and destroyed, and scores of Jewish men were arrested and imprisoned in concentration camps. Many of those who were persecuted as Jews desperately sought to emigrate after 'Kristallnacht'. The excerpts presented here indicate different types of responses to persecution, ranging from shock to indifference to tacit approval.

26. Silence: 'everyone kept quiet'

Hans B. (H.B.), born 1925 near Krefeld, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 85 in the presence of his wife. Catholic. He volunteered for the navy in 1941, later serving in the army at the Eastern Front in 1945. After the war, he became a teacher, joined the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, and served in the municipal administration.

Hans B. was in Kaldenkirchen during 'Kristallnacht', when Jewish shops were damaged and plundered, and the synagogue's roof was destroyed. He characterises the general response as one of shock but concedes that there were approving voices too. He dates the beginning of antisemitism in this town to 'Kristallnacht', disregarding the previous years in which Jews had been increasingly marginalised.

L.H. There used to be a synagogue here in Kaldenkirchen, wasn't it?

H.B. Yes.

L.H. Were you there? Were you here in '38 at the so-called 'Reichskristallnacht'? Do you remember that?

H.B. Yes.

L.H. Tell me about it.

- H.B. I remember how the Jewish shops were plundered here. They were the kind of store where people, for example, bought [Christian] communion outfits for their children. Rich people.
- L.H. Don't stand up, you're connected [to the microphone].
- H.B. Oh, OK. I'll show it to you in a moment. I was there [in Kaldenkirchen]. That was on the day the windows were smashed. I remember that exactly because in Kaldenkirchen, the synagogue didn't burn in the evening. It was so closely connected to the other houses that they would have gone up in flames [too]. Instead, the roof was smashed by the SA one day later. I remember that very well. We have often talked about it, the people here.
- L.H. Smashed, but not burned.
- H.B. No, that was too dangerous. It was in the narrowest quarter of Kaldenkirchen, in what is today the so-called *Synagogengasse* [lit. Synagogue Alley], where the little church, or the little prayer room of the Jews used to be. It was demolished. I witnessed that. That was one day later. And the shattering of the shop windows, that was performed for us at the church. Directly across from the tower was a large goods store, which—. As children we didn't understand that, though. But that was not done by the children. The SA did it. It was also no people's revolt, or anything like that. It was ordered [from above], but we didn't know that the day before. I'll stop talking now, otherwise I'm just blithering on.
- L.H. What do you mean?
- H.B. Someone who keeps on talking. Better if you ask questions! I don't know if I'm talking too much.
- L.H. This public, how did the city's population react when they smashed the windows of the Jewish shops, and knocked down the synagogue? What do you remember about that? Afterwards, you certainly read about it, talked about it and other things. But when you look back on these times, you were a young fellow, 13, 14 years old. What—?
- H.B. I can't give you an honest answer because everyone kept quiet. I only know that I stood there by the church. Across from the church tower were the two big Jewish stores which were demolished that day. As children, we were completely taken aback. But there were also, there were also people whom I heard saying: 'Oh boy! That's only right. They nailed our Lord to the cross.' That happened. [...] Otherwise, people stood there in shock. For good reason! Until then, we hadn't had any problems with the Jews. But things like that were also being said.³⁴

27. Tacit approval: 'to be honest: we didn't care'

Herbert Fu. (H.Fu.), born 1919 in Bregenz, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2014 over two days at the age of 95 (see [figure 4](#)). Catholic. His father was a merchant. Herbert Fu. volunteered for the SS *Verfügungstruppe* (*Waffen-SS*) in March 1938. He also did Reich Labour Service (RAD). Herbert Fu. served in the regimental staff throughout the war on the Eastern Front. See also [excerpt 33](#).

In this excerpt, Herbert Fu. claims that he was among a cohort that was sworn into the SS in Munich at midnight on 'Kristallnacht'. He states that he neither cared, nor felt sorry for the Jews. In the interaction with Holland, it becomes apparent that he had never considered the vandalism, violence, and arson of that night a crime. Holland's questions make him ponder this issue seemingly for the first time, conceding that in principle it was a crime but repeating that he did not see it as such at the time.

H.Fu. That was on 9 November '38. That was the date on which the SS was always sworn in. The SS from all over Germany gathered before the *Feldherrenhalle* [Field Marshal's Hall, Munich]. The few regiments that we had. I can name them: Lahr, first, second, third. Only four regiments. And a few tambour regiments. Those who had not yet pledged allegiance, they marched at the *Königs-*, not the *Königsplatz*, the *Odeonsplatz* [square in Munich] before



Figure 4 Herbert Fu. in his home. H.Fu. Video Testimony (247M), interviewed by Luke Holland on 5 November 2014. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

the *Feldherrenhalle*, at night. We stood there for a long time, chatting among ourselves. Later, Hitler came, Himmler, and so on, and so forth, walking through the rows [of SS men]. Then, someone gave the order: 'Three rows, step forward!' He did not walk past every row, but took, say, three rows at a time. Then he walked past again. [...] And to the left, above the hall, [was] the glow of fire. We didn't know what it meant. Something was burning. We were taken back to our barracks. The next day, we were told: 'Kristallnacht'. We had no idea! We had been asleep. Then we heard about 'Kristallnacht'. And on one of the next Sundays, my friend B. said: 'Come on, let's look! They burned down the synagogue of the Jews.' That was it: the glow of the fire we had seen, as we were standing there, not knowing, just a fire in the distance. That was the burning of the synagogue! During our pledge ceremony, at just that time they set the synagogue on fire.

L.H. Was that planned or was that a coincidence?

H.Fu. The synagogue? That was clearly planned. It's only logical. That was no coincidence.

L.H. And among the comrades the next day, when you found out about this. Your friend B., for example. Did you consider this a crime, or see it as somehow justified, because the Jews were not liked?

H.Fu. To be honest: We didn't care. That they'd burned down the synagogue did not really move me. I didn't feel sorry [for them]. They should accept our religion or none. I didn't support [the burning of the synagogue], but I also didn't feel sorry about it. I must be honest about that. I was without any inner feeling. I didn't care about the burning of the synagogue. I didn't care. Then I went there with a friend, and we saw the remains of the synagogue. It wasn't that big. I don't remember it being that big. Met B. from the *Wehrmacht* by chance, who was standing there, too. 'Hi there!' Then the people gathered, and we looked at where the synagogue had once stood. I did not feel pity for the Jews. No, that didn't move me. If they had burnt down a church, I wouldn't have felt for the Catholics, either.

L.H. So for you, it wasn't a crime? You didn't see it that way.

H.Fu. No, for me—. Wait a moment. Crime. I didn't perceive it that way. I didn't care about it. But looking at it from legal angle, you would have to consider it a crime. If you destroy someone else's property, then you're a criminal. But I did not see it that way. I would have said 'no' without thinking. I must be honest about that.

- L.H. On the day on which you saw the ruins, did you know who was responsible for it?
- H.Fu. No, I didn't.
- L.H. Did you ask yourselves that? Was it a few rowdies, a few hooligans?
- H.Fu. I don't know to this day who did it. It may have been a commando from somewhere, SA or SS or from the Party. They probably chose certain people, 20 or so, with torches, and they did this and that. I imagine that's how it was. But from which side it was organised—. I'm sure it was organised.
- L.H. But did you know at the time that the state was behind it? Did you suspect that the state, the Nazi state—.
- H.Fu. No, I didn't look for the state being behind it. I looked for the Party being behind it.
- L.H. Was that not the same thing at the time, state and Party?
- H.Fu. Yes, Party and state. I don't think so. For the Party leadership in Munich, for instance, what did they have to do with the state? The Party was everywhere in the state, I acknowledge that. But if the SA leadership agreed to do this, for example, what does that have to do with the state? That was an SA affair, and they chose SA men with torches. 'Set it on fire!' That's probably how it was. I'd imagine so. I mean, I don't know if it was SA or SS or someone else, I don't know. Surely it was the SA. For sure.³⁵

28. Shock and approval: 'there was in fact a lot of discussion about it'

Gertrud P. (G.P.), born 1917 in Pforzheim, Germany, interviewed together with her husband Alfred P. (A.P.), born 1920 in Pforzheim, by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the ages of 92 and 89, respectively. Her first husband was killed at the Eastern Front in 1942. Alfred P. is the son of a goldsmith and served at the Dutch border and in 'Operation Barbarossa'. He was a POW from 1944 to 1948/9.

Gertrud P. talks about a range of reactions to 'Kristallnacht' in Pforzheim, admitting her own indifference, and noting that some public responses were approving. Of note is her assertion that, while some people were shocked, no one asked why this was being done: by 1938 this was widely understood and did not happen in a vacuum. Her stated indifference contrasts with her claim that at the time they felt they 'must get through it', that they needed to endure the Nazi regime as they could not do anything against it.

- L.H. Frau P. or Herr P., if you think back on those times, where were you in '38, when the 'Reichskristallnacht' happened? Do you have memories of the 'Reichskristallnacht'? Do you remember?
- G.P. Is that where the synagogue—.
- A.P. Yes!
- G.P. Well, one ran quickly into the cellar or somewhere else, to avoid it, when one had heard: oh, the synagogue is under attack. One has very bad memories of it. But one couldn't do anything about it.
- L.H. How did you experience that, when you heard about it for the first time?
- G.P. Word went around among the people like on a conveyor belt. That Party members and the SA, that they broke into the synagogue. That's what one heard from people. But of course, one disappeared very quickly and didn't hear anything else. And thought: no, that something [like this] is happening! But one remembers!
- L.H. And you, Herr P., did you experience that too? Where were you that night, 'Kristallnacht'?
- G.P. '38.
- A.P. '38.
- L.H. When the synagogue burnt down? [...] Where were you when the synagogue here in Pforzheim was burned down or destroyed?
- G.P. Knocked down, yes.
- L.H. With fire?
- G.P. No, not with fire. Just knocked down.
- L.H. Why wasn't it set on fire?
- G.P. I don't know.
- L.H. Was it close to other houses?
- G.P. Yes, it was practically in the middle of the city!
- L.H. Maybe that was the reason.
- G.P. Oh yes. The synagogue was practically in the middle of the city. And in—. How can I say that? In the middle of the city. Zerrenner Street.
- A.P. And the Goethe Street.
- G.P. Right on the corner.
- L.H. It would have been dangerous then, if one—.
- G.P. Yes, because there were houses all around. There were many houses. That would have ended badly.
- L.H. Were there people, who back then—. I don't know how to express it properly. But did people back then feel sympathy with the Jews

or was there already so much hatred of the Jews that the people—. Were you shocked, personally?

G.P. People were a little bit shocked. But one didn't say: 'Why are you doing this? You mustn't do that!' But there was in fact a lot of discussion about it. Of course, there were also people who said that it served the Jews right. 'They've done a lot of bad things!' There were also people who said things like that.

L.H. What did they say?

G.P. Possibly things like that they had harmed other people, money and the like. Some also said: 'They've done a lot [of bad] to other people.' It serves them right, and so on. 'They don't need to visit [the synagogue] any more.' People talked about it a lot. Some said good things, others said bad things.

L.H. What did they say then? That the Jews—. You need to explain it better. I didn't understand that. What did the people say about the Jews?

G.P. Well, maybe this: They took away too much from us, took away too much money, whatever it was. They owned many houses in Pforzheim. There were many Jews here.

A.P. Yes.

G.P. And then everyone said: 'They demand too much rent,' and things like that. The others said: 'That doesn't matter.' Most said nothing at all, because they were afraid that [gestures toward possible dangers with her hands] there would be consequences if you said something. Back then, it was better to keep quiet and say nothing at all.

L.H. What was your personal opinion? Can you remember what you thought back then?

G.P. I said: 'It's all the same to me. I can't do anything about it, that it's come this far. But now we must get through it. One must get through it.' Nobody could do anything about it, you see.³⁶

29. Indifference: 'I certainly didn't get upset about it'

Ilse R. (I.R.), born 1918 in Vienna, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 93 (see [figure 5](#)). Catholic, but atheist before and during the war. Her mother was a devout Catholic. Her grandfather was an early member of the NSDAP. She worked for her father, who administered buildings. During the war she was a homemaker. She got married in 1939 and had a child in 1940. Her husband was a POW in Siberia from 1944 to 1946. See also [excerpts 30, 42, 58](#).



Figure 5 Ilse R. in her home. I.R. Video Testimony (141F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 29 February 2012. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

For Ilse R., ‘Kristallnacht’ did not register much, as she was not personally affected, and as no one died in the arson attack on the synagogue. She contrasts her own lack of interest, which she puts down to her youth, with her father’s strong reactions. By accepting his characterisation of the Nazi arsonists as barbarians, she effectively distances herself from the incident while justifying her indifference.

L.H. What do you still remember about it?

I.R. The first synagogue, the first temple, was set on fire, in our sixth district, by those so-called ‘Hitler boys’, allegedly without orders, but probably under order. In any case, it was set on fire, and my father said: ‘These aren’t civilised people! They are barbarians. They set fire to a church, a temple.’ My father didn’t understand that at all. It seemed foreign to us as well. Who acts in such a primitive way?

L.H. You weren’t married yet then, were you?

I.R. No, I wasn’t married then.

L.H. Did you already know your husband at that time?

I.R. That was before the war.

L.H. That was ’38, November ’38. When did you meet your husband for the first time?

I.R. I met my husband at the German School Association when I was 16 years old. We knew each other for a very long time.

L.H. So, you already knew him in ’34.

- I.R. Yes, we were a group of young people. We did sports together. We didn't immediately start dating, as they say today, but we knew each other well.
- L.H. Good. So, you knew each other from '34 onwards.
- I.R. Sorry?
- L.H. You already knew him in '34, in the mid-thirties.
- I.R. Well, I was 16, 17 years old.
- L.H. Mid-thirties, then.
- I.R. Yes.
- L.H. You therefore knew your husband when 'Kristallnacht' happened, in '38.
- I.R. We got engaged in '38 and married in '39.
- L.H. I want to understand that exactly. So, the question is: Did you talk to your husband-. You told me what your father said about 'Kristallnacht', but what did the man you later married say about 'Kristallnacht'?
- I.R. My father?
- L.H. No, your future husband, whom you were in love with at that time. What did he say about-
- I.R. About what?
- L.H. 'Kristallnacht'. The burning of the temple. Did he comment on it?
- I.R. He didn't take notice. That was back when I barely knew him. We didn't talk about it.
- L.H. You didn't talk about it.
- I.R. We didn't talk about the temple.
- L.H. Why not?
- I.R. Well, it wasn't a topic of conversation. When we were together as a youth group-, we did folk dancing. That's what we did. We played fistball, went skiing in winter. No, the temple wasn't talked about at all. That was a topic [...] when we talked about it in the family, where my father said: 'That's impossible! How can a civilised people do something like that? They are barbarians!' My father got very upset, but my husband had nothing to do with it. I think he didn't know anything about it. You see, so much happened then. The temple was not the most important event at the time. Many other things happened too.
- L.H. How did the burning of the temple, 'Kristallnacht', and the breaking of the windows of Jewish businesses-. You must have seen it, didn't you?
- I.R. Well, in Vienna, we didn't really see it. I didn't really notice it. We heard about it, but I didn't go out onto the street.

- L.H. But you just said that it was a topic at home. Your father commented on it.
- I.R. Yes, my father was upset about the burning of the temple.
- L.H. You still remember that.
- I.R. I still remember that. When he said: 'Barbarians! They aren't humans! Who does something like that? They are barbarians!' That left an impression on me.
- L.H. So it was a topic for your father. And I wonder if it was a topic for you too, this burning, or were you too busy?
- I.R. No. It wasn't so shocking for me, you see. Burning-, it didn't bother me that much. No one burned. No people. If a house burns down, that can happen, that didn't matter to me. I accepted that my father said that [who did it] were barbarians. That was just so, completely-. You just don't do that. But I certainly didn't get upset about it.³⁷

Facets of 'Aryanisation'

The following three excerpts have in common that the speakers present their families' material benefit from 'Aryanisation' and the forced emigration of Jews as a way of supporting affected Jewish friends and acquaintances: by buying their property from them, they could assist persecuted Jews. In their narratives, it effectively becomes a win-win situation. The motives at the time and exact circumstances cannot be established. The speakers' narratives of their families' acquisition of Jewish property as a way of supporting Jews certainly help to preserve their positive images of their families.

30. Property management: 'he got these houses from his Jewish friends'

Ilse R. (I.R.), born 1918 in Vienna, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 93. Catholic, but atheist before and during the war. Her mother was a devout Catholic. Her grandfather was an early member of the NSDAP. She worked for her father, who administered buildings. During the war she was a homemaker. She got married in 1939 and had a child in 1940. Her husband was a POW in Siberia from 1944 to 1946. See also [excerpts 29, 42, 58](#).

Ilse R. talks about her father's property management business in Vienna, which is linked to 'Aryanisation'. Holland's attempts at

understanding the exact nature of her father's business are unsuccessful as Ilse R.'s explanations remain broad and vague. It is conceivable that her father did in fact, as Ilse R. claims, administer these houses in good faith; yet his business thrived from these transactions. Her assertion that property ownership was reinstated after the war should be viewed with caution given the chequered history of property restitution.

I.R. What happened to the Jews was largely swept under the carpet. We had already heard about, and we had already seen, in the beginning, Jewish businesses being closed. Then the Jews were obliged to wear the Star of David on the street. My father, at the time, took a great many Jewish houses under his administration. Back then my father became, on short notice, an administrator. That is, my grandfather—. My father was out of work for 10 years, when the factory had gone out of business. And afterwards, after these 10 years of unemployment, my grandfather, who had rescued a fortune from the whole disaster when the factory fell apart, he bought for my father a [property] administration office, I don't remember for how many thousands of [Austrian] shillings. My father had no idea about that type of business, I should add. But within two years, he had passed his administrator's exam and got the concession. And because he had so many Jewish friends, in a short time he had 150 houses instead of the initial 50 houses that he had taken over. Most of the Jews, [who were] the owners of these houses, had left for America in time, or otherwise, not only to America. But there were several—, there were also tragic cases among them, who didn't emigrate. Among them was a married couple, an elderly one, with a handicapped son. The Jews were forced together at Nestroyhof, and [this family] had a room there. My father would send them [things], he didn't dare go there himself. There were people on lookout, left and right of the gate, who made note of exactly who went in and out. Back then, my mother and I took the things to this married couple. And I must say, that was a very disturbing scene: the people were resigned, they had a dignified bearing, I must—, that's what I always told my children, and it was true—, they went forward to meet this fate, that they, with their son—. A dreadful future. They knew that exactly. The other two sons emigrated to America in time. The parents also wanted to go to America with their youngest son, who, as I said, was handicapped and had epilepsy. But the Americans wouldn't take them because he was

ill. They didn't take anyone who was ill. The parents would have had to leave the son behind. They would have got a visa. But they stayed behind in the apartment with the poor fellow. We visited them there once or twice and brought them things from my father. Then they were sent to a KZ [concentration camp] and probably, or certainly, all died.

[...]

L.H. If I've understood correctly: your father took over the houses. He took over several houses.

I.R. He took over many Jewish houses.

L.H. How did that work? Could you tell me more exactly—. How do you take over a Jewish house? How did that work, back then?

I.R. Well, there was a certain time when that was possible. He had barely opened the office, when the friends said, Herr S., Herr S. has a building management company, we'll give [the property] to Herr S. That is how he got these houses from his Jewish friends. In this way he formed the basis for a larger business. At first it was a very small business, with 50 houses. Then later, he had 150, and then later even more. There were some added to that. In any case, it was a thriving business, and his son later took over.

L.H. With the houses that he had taken over from the Jews: was that a purchase or was that forced?

I.R. Yes, the houses were requisitioned. In any case, my father was allowed to administer them.

L.H. Administer means sell or take over?

I.R. It was all the same. My father administered them, and when the war was over, he gave them back to the owners. It was a simple matter. No matter what the Nazis had planned in the meantime with the houses, that was no longer in effect.

L.H. What happened with the houses where the Jews didn't come back?

I.R. So, I must say, back then I corresponded with America. I could speak English very well. I had been trained in it, English letter-writing. And the contact with America was with the sons, with the children there. The houses were all returned [to the owners].

L.H. What do you mean by 'returned'? Did the Jews have to pay again, or—?

I.R. No, they didn't have to pay. It was their property! [...] I believe it was like this: Those who wanted to emigrate needed capital, otherwise the state would not have let them travel. The Jews had

to pay for the emigration permit. And that's probably how the houses were acquired. Please, I don't know much about how that was resolved. I wasn't informed about that. I only know that the houses were then all given back to the Jews.³⁸

31. Taking over lease and furniture: 'she paid them a fair price'

Florian Ka. (F.Ka.), born 1925 in Glatz, Silesia (today Kłodzko, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in a series of four interviews in 2013 at the age of 88. Protestant. The family moved to Berlin in 1928. His father was an artist and his mother was from a wealthy family, who ran an art gallery in Berlin. Florian Ka. studied zoology and wrote a doctoral thesis, and later re-founded his mother's art gallery. He was in the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth. He was conscripted into the Reich Labour Service (RAD) in 1943, and subsequently drafted into the *Wehrmacht* as a gunner and deployed to Denmark in late 1943. He was ill for one year. In late 1944, he was sent to the Eastern Front, fleeing from the Red Army from January 1945 onwards.

His mother took on the store lease of a Jewish businessowner whose lease had not been renewed after 'Kristallnacht'. She allegedly paid a fair price for some of the furniture which he claims enabled the Jewish family to emigrate. He also claims that after the war their children visited to thank his mother. The *Reichsfluchtsteuer* (Reich flight tax) had been introduced in 1931, but it was used by the Nazis to strip Jews of their assets. Florian Ka. is incorrect in stating that 1938 was the last possible moment for Jews to leave the country. Many did, however, in the wake of 'Kristallnacht'. While it was often impossible in practice, Jews were still able to emigrate from Germany and Austria even after the beginning of the war in September 1939, until 23 October 1941, after which the systematic, large-scale deportations from the *Reich* to the East began.

F.Ka. In the district windowpanes were smashed. A baker, such a poor little girl, who sold bread nearby. The window had been smashed and 'Jew' was scrawled over it and so on. That was so—.

L.H. Do you remember that?

F.Ka. Yes, yes. And we—, my mother owned a shop with two windows at the Kaiserkorso [in Berlin-Tempelhof]. Then she moved, across to the better side of the street to the Manfred-von-Richtthofen-Straße. And this corner shop with five windows was really a small store, a fashion store. One could buy all kinds of things there, from Jewish owners. That was the G. family. That was finished in 1938.

Their lease wasn't renewed. My mother took over this shop and paid for the furniture and whatever there was. With that money [the G. family] was able to leave Germany. After the war when we started up again, my mother was in this store, whether they were a couple or brother and sister I don't know, the G. [family's] children wanted to see what had happened to the store. It hadn't been bombed but was a little bit damaged. They showed real gratitude, that my mother had paid so generously, for the glass table, or whatever it was, and for some cabinets. With that money [their relatives] had been able to leave Germany. That was a nice experience that the children visited. Yes.

L.H. And your mother bought this store in order to—?

F.Ka. She could have done with the furniture, but that wasn't like her. We didn't have that much money. But business was good, and that was the better side of the street, [with] five windows. After '39 business was better there than on the other side of the street, and that shop was torn down anyway. So she couldn't have stayed there.

L.H. What kind of business was it?

F.Ka. It was books and handicrafts.

L.H. Your mother was the owner of this bookstore?

F.Ka. The owner, yes. My mother, yes. Then when the money was gone, the money my father blew, he always said: 'I invested the money I inherited in art. Invested in K.' Then she wanted to do something again and then she—. She had a brother in Fürth and got the money from the inheritance to set up a business. [...]

L.H. How did it go, taking over the business from the G. family? Did one negotiate directly with the family, or was there an office here in Berlin?

F.Ka. Well, the building belonged to somebody else. [The G. family] had only rented it.

L.H. Oh, the G. family had rented it.

F.Ka. They had rented it, and then their lease was terminated.

L.H. Terminated?

F.Ka. Yes, they had to leave, after the 'Kristallnacht'. Also, the windows were smashed. My mother took over the furniture and what else there was, and paid them. And not just a few pennies, but a reasonable amount, corresponding to the value. It wasn't an awful lot, but still: It was enough for them to leave Germany.

L.H. And was that normally the case? Was what your mother did an exception?

- F.Ka. Well, it was generous, wasn't it? It was unusual! One said: The Jews, we don't have to pay them anything! But we had Jewish friends. Always have had. My father's best friend was a Jew. I visited them often, on their honeymoon in Amsterdam, and then in Israel. [...]
- L.H. So your mother bought the furniture from these Jewish people. Did she want to help them, or did she want the furniture?
- F.Ka. Well, on the one hand she wanted the furniture and had use for it. Display cases and so on. Not all of it. But she paid them a fair price. She didn't buy them for next to nothing but paid what they were worth. I don't know how much money that was, but certainly several hundred marks. And that was sufficient for them to leave Germany. It was at the last moment, '38. Afterwards they would have been stuck. There was a *Reichsfluchtsteuer* [lit. 'Reich flight tax'] and such things, right.³⁹

32. Purchasing furniture: 'you can interpret it whichever way you like'

Ruth Ob. (R.Ob.), born 1921, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 92. Catholic. Her father was an engineer, and they frequently moved because of his work. In 1938, she took part in an exchange with an English family and spent several weeks in Slough. She attended the Berlin Olympics. She held a leadership role in the League of German Girls (BDM). She completed her *Abitur* in spring 1941, got married in 1942, and had two children during the war. Avoiding the air raids on Berlin, Ruth Ob. stayed near Breslau (today Wrocław, Poland) with her children, before joining her husband near Brünn (Brno) in Moravia (today Brno, Czech Republic), and ultimately fleeing westwards from the advancing Red Army in January 1945. Her husband worked at Siemens and served in the *Wehrmacht*, returning from Soviet captivity in 1949. She moved to Spain in the 1950s. See also [excerpt 5](#).

Ruth Ob. characterises her grandmother as a 'friend of the Jews' (*Judenfreundin*), who, along with her parents, allegedly bought furniture from Jews to help them emigrate. In Nazi Germany, the term *Judenfreund* had negative connotations, denoting someone who sympathised or associated with Jews (see also [excerpt 33](#)). Ruth Ob. family's home was now furnished with items they could not have afforded otherwise; she calls it a 'good opportunity'. She claims that buying furniture directly and not through an intermediary helped the Jewish owners.

She acknowledges that the actions can be seen as either beneficial to the Jewish owners, self-serving, or both.

L.H. Tell me about that.

R.Ob. I was already grown up then. I was in the last year at school and the final exams [*Abitur*] were coming up. But at 'Kristallnacht', I remember that my mother told me: 'Just imagine what happened: They destroyed all the Jewish shops!' My grandmother was a friend of the Jews. As this pogrom was happening, she went into a certain quarter of Berlin, where mainly Jews lived and had their shops. She went shopping there! My mother said: 'We now have a beautiful bedroom made of mahogany. Perfect!' A few days later, an elegant salon arrived: sofas, pillows, armchairs, a desk, bookshelves. Beautiful. Wonderfully carved out of oak. That was all from the Jews. My parents bought that, because the Jews needed money to leave Germany. They felt sympathy for the Jews because of our Jewish friend in South Africa. So they tried to help them as much as they could.

[...]

L.H. One bought these things in a store or from a Jewish-.

R.Ob. No, not in a store. These were their private possessions. They wanted to leave for America by boat and needed to pay for the voyage. They needed money, so they sold their furniture.

L.H. Through an agent or directly to your family?

R.Ob. No, directly. My grandmother went to them and said: 'Good, we'll take this! I'll send for a mover to collect it.'

L.H. Was that for-.

R.Ob. For my parents it was an excellent price. It looked quite classy in our place!

L.H. Pardon?

R.Ob. It looked classy, refined, since we now had such beautiful things at home. My parents had only had wartime furniture [from the First World War]. They had married in '18 or '19 and lived rather modestly. Now, they could finally afford something finer.

L.H. For a good-

R.Ob. In a certain way for a good cause. For helping the Jews.

L.H. But also for a good price!

R.Ob. That, too! I don't know for how much. We didn't speak about that.

L.H. Buying these things, was it to help the Jews, or to get a new wardrobe? What was more important?

R.Ob. No. Well, it was both. You could combine the two. If there hadn't been the opportunity, my parents would not have hel–, not have bought new furniture. But since they had the chance, they were happy to be able to help the Jews. You can interpret it whichever way you like.

L.H. Did many people do that?

R.Ob. Yes, yes! Of course. Yes, yes.⁴⁰

Antisemitism(s)

Various antisemitic prejudices, stereotypes, and racialised ways of thinking about and seeing the world circulated at the time, which affected how the persecution of Jews and other victim groups was perceived. As some of the following excerpts demonstrate, even after several decades, there are ideological continuities in 'Third Reich' contemporaries' interpretations of the past. Notably, these include distinctions between 'Jews' and 'Germans' as though mutually exclusive; notions that Jews could have 'only' been excluded or deported, but not killed; that they got what they deserved; or that Jews are particularly clever or superior, echoing Nazi antisemitism, which conjured Jews as a formidable foe that had to be eliminated.

33. In favour of exclusion only: 'you don't have to love the Jews. But you also don't have to exterminate them'

Herbert Fu. (H.Fu.), born 1919 in Bregenz, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2014 over two days at the age of 95. Catholic. His father was a merchant. Herbert Fu. volunteered for the SS *Verfügungstruppe* (*Waffen-SS*) in March 1938. He also did Reich Labour Service (RAD). Herbert Fu. served in the regimental staff throughout the war on the Eastern Front. See also [excerpt 27](#).

Herbert Fu. professes that he is 'not a friend of the Jews', using the German term *Judenfreund* – which held negative connotations in the 'Third Reich' and denoted someone who sympathised or associated with Jews (see [excerpt 32](#)) – but opines that Jews should not have been killed, 'merely' kept from holding office. Of some note here is his conspiratorial 'between us' address to Holland, whose Jewish identity was not known to him, nor to most of Holland's interviewees. He claims that he did not receive any 'overt political education against Jews'. Yet he also claims that he was opposed to the Nazi policy towards Jews. Herbert Fu. freely

admits to disliking Jews but insists on his own innocence as he denies any knowledge of wartime atrocities against Jews.

L.H. What did you think of the Führer's policy towards the Jews?

H.Fu. That was completely wrong, of course. My principle was: leave Jews or incense [that is, the Church] alone! That would have been my goal. Between us: we don't have to appoint Jews to government. If they own certain companies, which aren't run well or aren't desirable, one can get rid of them. I don't have anything against that. But the normal Jew, who works and sees to his business—. I don't know. [...] And the policy towards Jews, I've always rejected it. Even though I'm not a friend of the Jews! I'll say that, too. The Jews have always been persecuted, in every century, and they were always the cause for pogroms. [...] You don't have to love the Jews. But you also don't have to exterminate them. And certainly not in the way that Hitler did.

L.H. Do you speak like this after reflecting on this matter? What was your opinion as a young man? Was it marked by the political education in the SS you had to submit to as a young man? I would imagine this political education on the policy towards the Jews—

H.Fu. Yes, there were negative perspectives on the Jews. 'The Jews are our misfortune,' we've heard from Streicher.

L.H. Julius Streicher?

H.Fu. Yes, yes. This came up in between other issues. But overt political education against Jews: no, that didn't exist. That was about German history. And when Jews were touched upon, they were portrayed negatively. That was clear. But that one should kill or shoot Jews, I never heard that. I also didn't see that in the units I served with.⁴¹

34. Resentment: 'the Jewish swindle stopped when the Nazis came'

Johann L. (J.L.), born 1921 in Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 90. His parents were farmers, and he also did farm work before the war. After the war, he joined the police. Johann L. served in the navy from 1938/9 following his Reich Labour Service (RAD). He was a POW in British captivity until 1946.

When asked about the genocide of Jews, he only acknowledges knowing during the war that Jews were not treated 'fairly'. He seemingly justifies this by accusing Jewish cattle dealers of ruining farmers'

livelihoods. He claims that Nazi intervention stopped this ‘racketeering’ and ‘returned’ (‘Aryanisation’) what Jews had allegedly stolen. This downplays Nazi violence against Jews, which amounts to revisionism and even denial, and blames Jews for the violence perpetrated against them. The excerpt also speaks to Nazism’s appeal to lowly rural communities, with Jews portrayed as rich swindlers exploiting poor farmers.

L.H. May I ask: When did you learn about the great crime, the murder of the Jews, for the first time? When were you informed about that? After the war or during the war?

J.L. It was known everywhere after the war. Also during the war. We knew that they were not treating the Jews well, because they [the Jews] hadn’t treated us well either. I know how many small farmers went out of business. That was because of the Jews! When a horse died, a farmer couldn’t just buy another one, a second one. Where did he get one? From Jews! He got it cheaper, but the Jew came after him to repossess it. He didn’t adhere to the terms of the sale, and demanded the horse back before the money was paid back. And the farmer couldn’t do it. Why should he sell it? He forfeited it. The scoundrels got rich and the farmers poor. That was how it was. I experienced it myself in my home community. I know how it worked. Oh yes, oh yes. But then it was over, the Jewish swindle stopped when the Nazis came. They took everything away from [the Jews] and returned everything [to the farmers] that [the Jews] had stolen. Yes, that’s how it was. They got it back. First it was taken from them and then they got it back. [The Jews] were gone very, very, fast. How many Jews were there in Vienna? Fast as can be, they were there and then they were gone to America! They took money with them, and the poor [Jews] got the short end. They couldn’t flee. The rich were gone. They knew very well why they were disappearing.⁴²

35. God’s punishment: ‘Germans were used to punish Israel’

Karl-Heinz R. (K.H.R.), born 1926 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 84. Protestant. His father was a hairdresser who had his own salon. Karl-Heinz R. was in the *Jungvolk* from 1936, where he served as a social warden. Later he joined the Hitler Youth. After the *Volksschule*, he trained as a commercial apprentice at a Nazi-oriented firm from 1940 onwards. He was conscripted into the

Wehrmacht in January 1944, where he trained as a combat medic. He saw some action in East Prussia. He was captured by the Red Army at or near the Stutthof concentration camp. He was a POW in the Ural region. He became a deacon after the war. See also [excerpts 9, 112](#).

Devout Protestant Karl-Heinz R. relates how at the time he considered the persecution of Jews to be partially justified. He believed that Germany was God's instrument for punishing the Jews. He further talks about how he continued to grapple with this issue to this day. The excerpt suggests continuities in his thinking, which indicates the persistence of antisemitism rooted in Christian anti-Judaism.

L.H. We can now continue our conversation. We just spoke about the important role of the Church, and how the Nazis exploited that: that the Germans or the Nazis were 'God's henchmen'. Did you believe in that?

K.H.R. Yes, exactly. A little, because I know from my knowledge of the Bible that in the Old Testament, prophets said that, yes, God exacts punishment, and the like, doesn't he? And I spoke of the eyeball, didn't I? And then, on the other hand, I said that we wound God's eyeball when we attack the Jewish people, and such, and very possibly even destroy it. That is naturally all a later realisation. But I thought it partially justified at the time. You see-, I don't know if you have much knowledge of the Bible. In the Old Testament, everything is according to the law, and the New Testament then brings absolution to the people through Jesus. Whoever believes in him is saved. That has been my creed from childhood on, even if there was much conflict and doubt and disbelief at different times. But these facts-, I don't believe in the literal story there, and I'm no kind of Christian fundamentalist. I'm not. I find fundamentalism very dangerous, whether it's ideological or of the Church, the religious kind. But I am also somewhat educated theologically, and know a great deal because of that, but I also knew things before, through my deacon training after the war. And to me, it's again become even clearer, this possibility, that God in fact uses a rod to punish the people of Israel, but that he afterwards might destroy the rod. Do you understand, or is that too German, too theoretical?

L.H. No, I got it.

K.H.R. I've thought about this a great deal. Because it's impossible for my current religious feeling and knowledge that the Jews

sometimes come off badly in the New Testament. But perhaps I can help you understand by talking about a rule of mine about the Jews. I had told you that for some years, or at least, many months, and repeatedly, I had wanted to repudiate my Christian beliefs. During that time, I had a conversation with a priest here, who was impressed by my sister, a very pious woman, that she was so open to many historical things, and to things critical of the Bible. He was surprised by that. I could always exchange views with my sister on certain things, also criticism, we have a very good exchange, and we respected each other and had or have very few differences of opinion. We had a further conversation, my sister and me and [the priest], all three, in her home. She was still [mentally] switched on at the time. That was several years ago. He said: 'Brother R., I tell you very frankly, [...] if there was no Jesus, then I, according to my understanding, would have to become a Jew.' That illuminated my relationship to the Jewish people and, in fact, to the Jewish tradition and the Jewish tradition of the Bible, and so forth, that is never very pro-Israel, rather is also very Israel-critical. The prophets were scathing in the Old Testament. And the New Testament even more so. It's another question. But this thought, that moved you now to this question: is it my opinion that the Germans were used to punish Israel, that we were the instrument for that? I have to say: yes.

L.H. Israel or the Jews?

K.H.R. The Jews. Israel and the Jews, the difference—. I know that one can very much differentiate.⁴³

36. Prejudice: 'they always succeed at their business'

Karl-Ludwig B. (K.B.), born 1920 in Stettin, Pomerania (today Szczecin, Poland), interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2010 at the age of 90. Protestant. His father was a breeder owning a large estate. Karl-Ludwig B. joined the Hitler Youth and completed the *Abitur* in 1937, after which he did Reich Labour Service (RAD) followed by military service, as he volunteered for an officer's career. He took part in the invasion of the Sudetenland in 1938, the invasion of Poland, and the French campaign, and served in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, 'Operation Barbarossa', and Latvia. He was captured in May 1945 by the Red Army. He wrote a book about his experiences. See also [excerpt 111](#).

In this excerpt, Karl-Ludwig B. describes how his wartime observations of a Jewish craftsman in Russia contradicted his earlier belief that

Jews worked only in finance. Instead of questioning his prejudice, he remarks on the Jews' alleged adaptability, which he finds admirable. He perpetuates antisemitic stereotypes by describing them as 'very clever' for doing jobs that the 'native population' would not, thus gaining economic advantages. He continues to differentiate between 'Jews' and the 'native population', a persistent Othering of Jews.

K.B. I only really noticed the Jewish population in the Soviet Union, in Ukraine, that's where I've had that opportunity. To answer your question: my experience was, and that influenced my idea of the Jews, that they were craftsmen. Tailor, shoemaker, everything. Back home, they [the Jews] had done something completely different! Here [in Germany], they did financial business. So: I learned from that that the Jews are intelligent enough, flexible enough, and clever enough always to do what the natives can't or don't want to do. That's how they claim their place in society and establish themselves financially. Because they always succeed at their business. The Jews were hated in the Soviet Union, even though they said otherwise. I have rarely heard such aversion expressed to a Jew as from a Russian, who said [to me in Russian]: 'Ugh, Jews!' But the way he said it! It was as though he had to vomit right away. It was an unbelievable experience! And I was raised very differently. We had Jewish friends, but they were baptised. We had a Jewish classmate, who was a very fine fellow. When they asked us before the college exam, 'What do you want to do next?', he said, 'I don't stand a chance here. I must become a rabbi.' I don't know what became of him. I didn't hear from him again. His father had been a soldier in the First World War and received the Iron Cross First Class.⁴⁴

37. Jews as Other: 'they were far superior to us Germans'

Emmi F. (E.F.J.), born 1921 near Hamburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 90. Her father was a member of the NSDAP. He held a managerial position in a large wholesale company. She attended the *Volksschule* and middle school. She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). Emmi F. joined the NSDAP in 1939 at the age of 18. She completed an overseas export apprenticeship and then worked for an overseas export company in Hamburg. She met her husband during the war in Hamburg, where he was an anti-aircraft helper until he

was transferred to East Prussia as a senior corporal in the air force. She was transferred to Ukraine for six months as her company was deployed there, in 1943. Upon her return from Ukraine, she largely stayed in Berlin but worked for the *Wehrmacht* in Latvia for two to three weeks in late 1943/early 1944. See also [excerpt 47](#).

Similar to Karl-Ludwig B. (see [excerpt 36](#)), Emmi F. characterises Jews as superior, which she offers as a reason for why they were murdered. She initially appears to equate the murder of Jews and the killing of soldiers in combat, but following persistent questioning from Holland concedes that there is a difference.

L.H. Why did the Nazis expel the Jews and murder them?

E.F.J. I believe there were two reasons. First, the Jews were their greatest enemies. They were intellectually far superior. The Jews are basically a people of high intellectual standing. To this day. Right? I would say so. Is that OK to say? Yes. Now I've lost the thread. Oh my!

L.H. I asked you: why?

E.F.J. And the Jews came to Segeberg, [starting with] a single Jew. He drew all the other Jews there with him. He recognised: we can make something of this place! We can build something. And they began to build. They really built a portion of the city. They did indeed! They did it! They were far superior to us Germans. It's true. And that must be accepted. Whether it's still true today, I can't say. But at the time, they were far superior.

L.H. But my question was about why they killed them, why they drove them out and murdered them?

E.F.J. Because they were cleverer than him.

L.H. [Cleverer] than who?

E.F.J. Than Hitler! Or his coterie. Let's put it this way, Hitler's coterie. That was Hitler, Himmler, von Manstedt [*sic*; probably referring to Erich von Manstein]. Gradually some of them come to mind again.

L.H. Was that a reason to murder an entire people?

E.F.J. Oh, possibly it's—, if there's no other possibility—. If no other option is available, then one commits murder. What is war, after all? It's also murder, right? For me, every war is murder.

L.H. A war is when two countries, and especially the armies, the *Wehrmacht* of both countries—. But what happened to the Jews was in fact a genocide, was a mass murder and they didn't just murder foreigners, but also the civilian population. The Jews were Germans, right?

- E.F.J. But if you think of people forcibly conscripted into the *Wehrmacht*. Some only went because they had to. Now they're in the *Wehrmacht* and are now deployed to fight against another people, what is that then? Isn't that also murder?
- L.H. If two militaries, two armies-- Did I express myself properly? Do you understand what I'm saying?
- E.F.J. Yes. An army is enough--
- L.H. Two armed units combat each other militarily: that is war.
- E.F.J. That is war.
- L.H. But if someone murders their own people, as with the German Jews -- many Jews were German back then -- if one murders their own people, as it happened back then, that is indeed something different from war.
- E.F.J. Of course, that is different! That is murder.
- L.H. And the question was: why did the Nazis murder the Jews?
- E.F.J. Because the Jews were so superior to the Nazis. Intellectually. Up here [taps her temple]. I don't mean physically, or in terms of weapons. Rather they were far superior to them intellectually.⁴⁵

Experiences of persecution

Some of Holland's interlocutors experienced persecution in their own family. For some this would have dented their support for the Nazi regime or the war effort; for others it may have resulted in a rejection of the affected family member.

38. Father arrested at 'Kristallnacht' and imprisoned at Sachsenhausen: 'he was still so naive'

Wilhelm S. (W.S.), born 1919 near Hamburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 93. Protestant. His adopted father, Jewish under Nazi racial laws, was a merchant, and had a business which went bankrupt following antisemitic laws. Wilhelm S. was in the Hitler Youth (*Marine-HJ*) and began a two-year traineeship in an electric machine factory after completing middle school. Wilhelm S. was conscripted into the Reich Labour Service (RAD) in spring 1938, followed by the air force's maritime aircrafts units in November 1938. His father was arrested on 'Kristallnacht', imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, and released after four weeks. He died around one year later. Wilhelm S. served in Poland and

France and spent three years in training to become a pilot, mainly in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Magdeburg. Later, he was a night fighter in the Netherlands. His wife was in the NSDAP and a leader of the female labour service.

Wilhelm S. was adopted by a proud German Protestant who had served in both the First World War and the earlier German suppression of the Herero and Nama in German Southwest Africa (now Namibia), which turned into genocide in 1904. Considered Jewish under Nazi racial laws, his father was arrested during 'Kristallnacht'. While Wilhelm S. refers to the 'KZ Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen', the Oranienburg concentration camp closed in July 1934. His father would have been imprisoned at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Wilhelm S. expresses ambivalence, blaming his father for not seeking to emigrate sooner, believing his military record would protect him. Wilhelm S., who wrote a book about his experiences, speaks almost uninterrupted for over 15 minutes in this excerpt, indicating a practised narrative, reflecting different 'chapters' in his life and book.

W.S. They arrested my father and took him to the KZ [concentration camp] Oranienburg-Sachsenhausen. My father was still so naive, even though economically he worked at the lowest level, as a night watchman: 'I won't be arrested! My national outlook is well known. That will soon be over. I will be rehabilitated.' He still talked like that. He didn't realise that it wasn't about him. It was about his race. And my mother, the 'Aryan', had a breakdown. Overflowing with tears. So I went home. Got three days of special leave. I was, after all, wearing a uniform. Then I-, it is also described in my book, one can find it there, I had my father's medals, he had First World War medals but also from the Boxer Rebellion in 1903 in German Southwest Africa. Not Boxer, the Herero Rebellion. He also had medals from that. Then I drafted a letter, and with this letter and the medals and documents I went to see the *Gauleiter*. The Hamburg *Gauleiter* was-. We had been incorporated into the city in '37, we were all part of Hamburg now. I went to see *Gauleiter* Kaufmann. Of course, Kaufmann did not receive me. But one of his emissaries did and listened to everything I had to say. The national attitude of my father's, 'you have the completely wrong man', something along those lines. I tried to defend him, with the vocabulary of someone who had just turned 19. That's all I could do. He listened to me in a benevolent way. He even smiled when he saw the medals and

made some notes on my letter. I went home. It's all I could do, I had to go back to being a soldier. Thankfully, my mother had a friend in her parish, the wife of a doctor. I knew she was well taken care of. So I went back to being a soldier. And at Christmas, after just four weeks, my father was back home.

L.H. So you managed, on your own initiative, to get him out of the KZ. Maybe with some help from your mother's church.

W.S. No. Whether my intervention was the reason why he was sent home after four weeks, or whether it was a sum of other reasons, that he was a Protestant, not of the Jewish faith, his national attitude was known, and now an 'Aryan' adopted son created some-. All that taken together may have triggered his release. At Christmas. And Christmas I was also on leave. Official leave. And I had to register the following: my father had collapsed, mentally. He never said a word about bad treatment or anything like that. They probably were not allowed to say anything. Under threat: 'If you utter one word about bad treatment you'll be back in the KZ in no time.' He was totally withdrawn. Not a word about good or bad treatment, or anything at all. In any case he was back. But in what condition! He had collapsed, mentally. He seemed to have finally understood into what trap he had fallen, as a Jew. He realised it only then. The consequence was that he tried to emigrate, which would have been possible, if he had been well to do. But that was no longer the case. No, he had collapsed mentally. [He was] not on the path of resistance, but he was so disappointed that he collapsed mentally. I didn't recognise him. They had shorn his hair, and his Kaiser Wilhelm beard. He looked terrible. But the special feature was that he had mentally collapsed. He had become totally introverted. He always used to talk and so on. He had gone silent. One can put it that way. Naturally he still mentioned this, that, and the other. He had gone silent. And he lived for one more year. He suffered from a bit of asthma. Maybe the asthma had got worse because of all that. Asthma also has a mental component. Not solely physiological, but also influenced by one's mental state. A doctor in Eppendorf told me that afterwards. I was on leave for Christmas-, no, hang on, I have to add something. For years [sic] he didn't go outside. He was totally withdrawn. He stopped leaving the apartment. I cannot remember-, as a soldier I wasn't there, but I know from my mother, that he didn't go downstairs again. It was Christmas '39, that was one year later, the Polish

campaign was over, I was back home as a soldier on Christmas leave, in our small apartment. I was lying on a mattress in the kitchen, we only had two rooms. And I was aware of my father's death so far as—, he had a rattling breath, due to his asthma. One could hear it through the wall, his rattling breath. And sometime in the night, at two or three o'clock, he had stopped breathing. It is interesting that one can sleep despite, or because of, some permanent noise. And that one suddenly wakes up when the noise stops! And the other way round, that one comes alive if everything is quiet and there is a sudden bang. But also the other way round: if a permanent noise, this rhythmic breathing, suddenly stops, one wakes up. That's how I experienced it. Then my father had died. Then this chapter of my Jewish father was over for me.⁴⁶

39. Catholic brother arrested then drafted: 'he was certainly no Hitlerite!'

Margarete U. (M.U.), born 1917 in the Salzburg region, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 93. Catholic. Her father was a master tailor. She attended the *Volksschule*, *Hauptschule*, and a convent school in Bad Ischl. For two years, she worked in a French (Catholic) family's household. She returned in 1938. The couple she had worked for was later arrested and sent to concentration camps.

In her conversation with Holland, Margarete U. stresses the importance of the Catholic faith for her family and for her own life. For her, this demonstrates her distance from Nazism, which impacted on her family as her brother, a member of a Catholic student fraternity, was arrested in May 1938 soon after the *Anschluss*. After the *Anschluss*, tens of thousands of people were arrested, including Jews and political opponents. Margarete U.'s brother was released after three months in custody and conscripted soon thereafter. He died in November 1941 in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg).

L.H. You returned [from work in France] in '38.

M.U. I came back in May '38 because my brother had been arrested by the Nazis in March.

L.H. Why had he been arrested?

M.U. Because he had belonged to a Catholic student fraternity. That was the reason.

L.H. Why was this organisation viewed negatively by the Nazis?

- M.U. Well, because that was a–, how should I say this? The *Vaterländische Front* was a Christian party that governed at that time. And the Nazis suppressed all of that. All parties, and all fraternities. Student fraternities. They were transformed into German fraternities. That is all, let's say–, I don't know whether one says suppressed or eliminated.
- L.H. They had to stop. To change.
- M.U. To stop, yes. And my brother was arrested and was under investigative arrest for three months. Then he was released but had to join the military in 1939. He had to do his year of military service.
- L.H. What was your brother's name?
- M.U. L. Haven't we already talked about this?
- L.H. It doesn't matter if we have, because this is the first time that it's on tape.
- MU And we didn't say the last names of my parents: B.
- L.H. B.
- M.U. I was also called B.
- L.H. Not B. Don't touch the microphone, please.
- M.U. Not B. Oh yes! And my brother was L., the one who was arrested. And he had to go to the military, and after a year the war started. The war broke out in '39. In fact, he never came back alive. In '41 he was killed, in November 1941.
- L.H. Where?
- M.U. In Leningrad as it was called then, so in today's Saint Petersburg.
- L.H. That was certainly difficult for the family.
- M.U. Yes, that was very difficult. Besides that, he was already married, and in April the next year would be–, his daughter was born. He did not live to see that.
- L.H. He was required to enlist, although he was arrested, and they thought he was an opponent. Did he want to join the military? Had he made any statements against Hitler?
- M.U. He was certainly no Hitlerite! In no way at all. But it was enough that he was with a Catholic student fraternity. I believe these–, how should I say it? These–, back then at the university there were certainly also many Nazis. And the Catholic fraternities and the Nazis, they fought each other. That was in the Weimar Republic, I believe. The way it happened was that they picked him up immediately the next day. They marched into Vienna, and the next day they picked up all the students.
- L.H. Immediately after they took power?
- M.U. Yes, immediately after they took power.

- L.H. Really, and one couldn't hide, it happened so quickly?
- M.U. Yes. When they picked him up, he was at his parents-in-law's house, and that's where they got him. They knew exactly where he was.
- L.H. How did they know that?
- M.U. Betrayal.
- L.H. Betrayal, how?
- M.U. Someone must have said, 'This is where you'll find him.'⁴⁷

40. Communist uncle killed in re-education camp: 'if only he had kept quiet'

Günther Fl. (G.Fl.), born 1920 in Upper Lusatia in eastern Saxony, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 90. Before the war he worked as a watchmaker. His stepfather was a miner who died in a mining accident. Günther Fl. volunteered for the *Wehrmacht*, serving in Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, Romania, and Russia in a paratrooper regiment. He was a radio operator, initially as a non-commissioned officer and later as a sergeant. He was captured by US troops who handed him over to the French.

Günther Fl.'s uncle, a communist, was imprisoned in a re-education camp. The family received a postcard stating that he had died of a lung infection, but they knew this was a lie. Rather than condemning the regime, the family opined that if the uncle had remained silent, he would have been safe. Most Germans and Austrians did not need to fear the Nazis if they kept their opinions to themselves and did not act on them. It was not an option available to those persecuted as Jews, Sinti and Roma, 'asocial' individuals, or those deemed 'unworthy of life'. Günther Fl.'s frame of reference is the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where he lived after the war, and whose repressive apparatus he compares to the Nazi regime. He recounts the enthusiasm elicited by the economic improvements seen as a result of the establishment of the new Nazi regime.

- L.H. Some say, and perhaps you can help me to understand this, 'We only found out after the war how bad it had been then for the regime's opponents. About the camps. About the people who were killed.'
- G.Fl. No. There were concentration camps. They were set up for political refugees [*sic*]. One of my uncles was killed in such a camp. My mother received a letter that said that her brother had died of a lung infection in such and such a camp. Those were

open cards. She was so shocked that the postman would have read it. Therefore, everyone would have known that my brother was in the *Umerziehungslager* [re-education camp] as a Hitler opponent. ‘*Umerziehungslager*’, the National Socialists called it. But it was pure–, there was not much possibility of re-education of those who were in there.

L.H. It was a KZ [concentration camp].

G.Fl. Later it became a concentration camp.

L.H. In which year was that?

G.Fl. In my opinion that must have been in ’35, ’36.

L.H. Very early. And he was snatched as an opponent. What is there–?

G.Fl. Yes, the communists.

L.H. He was a communist.

G.Fl. He was a communist, yes. Then there were also the Social Democratic leaders. Primarily they were concerned with the leader types, the leaders, the party heads. They imprisoned them and wanted to re-educate them there in the camp.

L.H. Re-education.

G.Fl. Yes, political re-education. We were told that was the reason for the whole camp.

L.H. What happened to him? Did he survive or was he killed?

G.Fl. [Shakes his head] He is–, and in the message on the card it said that he died of a lung infection.

L.H. Did one know that was a lie?

G.Fl. That was clear. In plain language, it was clear that he was killed.

L.H. That means, already very early, in ’35, there was this crime of the state [against your uncle]. But despite that, you were enthralled with Hitler, although in your own family someone–. He was a relative.

G.Fl. Well, as a young person one said to oneself: oh well. In plain language: if he had kept quiet, then nothing would have happened to him. It was like that in general. One couldn’t say very much against the state. That was understood right away. But we didn’t take that so seriously. Exactly as it was in the GDR, which took over practically everything from Hitler’s programme and continued it as before.

L.H. So, instead of seeing the regime as criminal, you accepted that the opponent, the man that they locked up, was the criminal. Was that your opinion?

G.Fl. Yes. Back then, I, as I was relatively young, I was 14, 15 years old, then one had seen the National Socialists as a party like

other parties, the communists and the Social Democrats. And there was still the Centrist party. [...] I believe, over 30 parties were listed there on the ballot. It was utter confusion. That's why one hadn't taken the National Socialists seriously, out of all the parties. It became clear only later that they were ruthless in asserting themselves over others. But by then there was nothing more to do. One couldn't change anything any further without risking one's own life.

L.H. You mean: first came the enthusiasm and then the fear. Did I express that properly?

G.Fl. Yes. [...] It had to some extent balanced out: the improvement in the lifestyle and the fear. So, the fear was somehow repressed. It's going better, we're living again, and so one kept one's mouth shut.⁴⁸

41. Aunt killed in 'euthanasia' murders: 'we received a notification that she had died from pneumonia'

Johann R. (J.R.), born 1919 in Ingolstadt, Germany, and Anna R. (A.R.), born 1925 in Ingolstadt, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2014 at the age of 95 and 89, respectively. Catholic. His father worked for the railways in Ingolstadt. Johann R. joined the Hitler Youth (*Motor-HJ*). He went to Nuremberg Nazi Party rallies and to the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, including the opening ceremony. He completed his *Abitur* in 1938 and volunteered for the military, joining the pioneers and taking part in the attack on Poland. Later he served in France and was deployed to the East from 1942, including Ukraine, and then Denmark. He was captured by British troops in Lübeck and released in August 1945. Initially, he worked in agriculture, and then studied at a polytechnic. He wrote chronicles about his wartime experiences. Johann R. and Anna R. got married in 1944.

Anna R. joins the interview later on and little is known about her background. Holland frequently questioned interviewees about the 'euthanasia' murders. In this excerpt, Anna R. recounts the fate of her mentally disabled aunt, who she believes was killed under 'Aktion T4'. She was sent to Irsee, and the family received notice of her death, falsely attributed to a 'lung infection', which was a common cover-up for the murder of people considered 'unworthy of life'. Holland's approach often centres on factual enquiries about these events rather than exploring, for instance, their impact on his interlocutors. While he aims to uncover unknown details, the advanced age and memory limitations of his interlocutors often make such revelations unlikely.

- A.R. I had an aunt who was sent to Haar, a borough of Munich. Munich-Haar.
- J.R. Does Haar mean anything to you?
- L.H. Yes.
- A.R. And at the end of the war–
- J.R. That's where she stayed. And at the end of the war, she–
- L.H. Do let Frau R. continue if she still remembers.
- A.R. Then we, my sister and my mother as this aunt's sister, Aunt A., were notified: 'A. is very ill.' The next day, or a few hours later: 'Unfortunately, A. has passed away.'
- J.R. Then there was this visit.
- A.R. That was when A. still lived normally. But she was ill. In Haar, she had to–. As a child, I experienced how she–. But that was a different time. I was at my parents' and my sister's [telephone rings]. Then, Aunt A. was announced: 'You have a visitor.' And this visitor, Aunt A., came. [Phone conversation] The incident was this: Aunt A. came with a carer. 'So, A., how are you?' Very simple questions. We had no idea what illness she had. 'Oh, I'm fine.' 'What do you get up to?' 'Knitting. This and that.' Quite normal. And finally, with mother, she had to say goodbye to us. [...] Then her anger came through. In the end, I won't forget, she was begging on her knees: 'Come with me! Come with me!' The carer had to drag her out. She did not want to go. She was dragged out. I remember that. [...] But her death was because they simply killed these ill people, these mentally ill people.
- L.H. That was also the case with this aunt.
- A.R. Yes.
- L.H. Are you convinced, or is this a–
- J.R. We received a notification that she died from pneumonia.
- A.R. That was all.
- L.H. Did you get a card or something?
- A.R. A notification.
- L.H. And what did it say?
- A.R. I don't remember.
- J.R. Heart–. It must have been something about pneumonia.
- A.R. But it must have–
- L.H. What was the name of this clinic? What kind of–
- A.R. Haar.
- L.H. Was she killed there or somewhere else?
- A.R. There was a place, Irsee in Swabia. Many people from Haar died there.⁴⁹

42. Aunt killed in 'euthanasia' murders: '*verlinzert*'

Ilse R. (I.R.), born 1918 in Vienna, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 93. Catholic, but atheist before and during the war. Her mother was a devout Catholic. Her grandfather had joined the NSDAP early on. Her father administered buildings and she worked for her father. During the war she was a homemaker. She got married in 1939 and had a child in 1940. Her husband was POW in Siberia from 1944 to 1946. See also [excerpts 29, 30, 58](#).

Ilse R. believes that her aunt, who had an unspecified disability, was killed as part of the 'euthanasia' murders. She recalls a term her aunt used, *verlinzern*, a word creation that suggests Linz (Hartheim) as a killing site. Intriguingly, Ilse R. proposes that 'perpetrators and victims' are close together, perhaps in recognition of her family's ambiguous role in the 'Aryanisation' of Jewish property (see [excerpt 30](#)).

I.R. Were people killed near Linz? In Linz? Then my aunt was one of the victims. My aunt R. went to Linz. They said, 'We will be *verlinzert*!' That must have been the castle. Yes, they killed her there.

L.H. Why?

I.R. Yes, she was mentally disabled. 'Unworthy life'. Do you understand? She wasn't Jewish or anything like that. Unworthy life! For years, she lived with her sister, then her sister died, then my mother had her in the extended family, which was unbearable because my grandmother said she wouldn't put up with it any longer. Then they sent her to Steinhof [in Vienna]. Shortly afterward, the Nazis invaded. Her mother visited her daily at Steinhof. My aunt said, 'We will be taken away from here.' She was clear-headed enough. 'We're going to Linz, we're going to be *verlinzert*.' My mother asked, 'What does that mean?' 'Yes, we'll disappear there. We'll be gone.'

L.H. Who said that: 'We'll be gone'?

I.R. Aunt R.

L.H. So she knew what was going to happen.

I.R. My mother told her sister. She was very energetic and immediately went to the home to get her out. But she was already gone. Then we received a death notice, about 14 days later. That was quite something.

L.H. What did the death notice say?

- I.R. They sent a fake notice and wrote that she died of a dental embolism. But she didn't have a single tooth in her mouth. That was the funny part.
- L.H. How old was your aunt?
- I.R. Not yet 60. Maybe 55, 57. I sometimes think about the poor woman. They knew somehow what was going to happen to them. I hope that they received injections and didn't have to suffer. That's what I hope. You see, perpetrators and victims, they're always very close together.⁵⁰

Notes

- 1 Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, 32.
- 2 Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders*.
- 3 Wildt, *Hitler's Volksgemeinschaft*, 280. See also Latzel and Maubach (eds), *Geschlechterbeziehungen und 'Volksgemeinschaft'*.
- 4 Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide*.
- 5 Fulbrook, *Bystander Society*, 2–3. See also Morina and Thijs (eds), *Probing the Limits of Categorization*.
- 6 E.F. & E.M. Video Testimony (124F2), 3 October 2011. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Hitler enthusiast', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 7 H.K. Video Testimony (048M), 30 October 2010.
- 8 H.K. Video Testimony (048M), 30 October 2010.
- 9 H.P. Video Testimony (072M), 17 February 2011.
- 10 K.K. Video Testimony (105M), 23 June 2011. For more information about the *Napolas*, see Roche, *The Third Reich's Elite Schools*.
- 11 R.Ob. Video Testimony (222F), 2 October 2013.
- 12 E.Ba. Video Testimony (011F), 24 July 2009.
- 13 H.W. Video Testimony (013M), 27 July 2009.
- 14 D.Ba. Video Testimony (038M), 13 July 2010.
- 15 K.H.R. Video Testimony (051M), 3 November 2010.
- 16 H.Po. Video Testimony (079F), 25 February 2011. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Good times, bad rumours', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection/> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 17 U.Se. Video Testimony (163F), 17 August 2012.
- 18 R.Sch. Video Testimony (165M), 19 August 2012.
- 19 G.Ho. Video Testimony (021M), 12 March 2010.
- 20 K.Sch. Video Testimony (084M), 18 March 2011.
- 21 A.Jo. Video Testimony (212F), 18 March 2013.
- 22 R.M. Video Testimony (015M), 16 December 2009.
- 23 I.Re. Video Testimony (223F), 4 October 2013.
- 24 J.V.B. Video Testimony (208F), 16 February 2013.
- 25 H.La. & N.La. Video Testimony (219FM), 12 August 2013.
- 26 K.H. Video Testimony (134M), 25 June 2012.
- 27 A.Jo. Video Testimony (212F), 18 March 2013.
- 28 R.W. Video Testimony (157F), 4 July 2012. For antisemitism directed against Jewish cattle traders, see Fischer, *Jewish Cattle Traders in the German Countryside*.
- 29 K.K. Video Testimony (105M), 22 June 2011.
- 30 H.Sa. Video Testimony (206M), 31 January 2013.

- 31 H.Sa. & S.Mr. Video Testimony (206MF), 17 March 2013.
- 32 M.F. Video Testimony (085F), 19 March 2011. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Sad accomplice', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 33 M.F. Video Testimony (085F), 19 March 2011.
- 34 H.B. Video Testimony (022M), 12 March 2010.
- 35 H.Fu. Video Testimony (247M), 5 November 2014. For a short clip, see Zoltán Kékesi, 'A Pandora's box: The Horst Wessel song in the collection "Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies"', <https://compromised-identities.org/musical-memories> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 36 A.P. & G.P. Video Testimony (028MF), 17 March 2010.
- 37 I.R. Video Testimony (141F), 29 February 2012. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'How to be a "decent" Nazi', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 38 I.R. Video Testimony (141F), 29 February 2012.
- 39 F.Ka. Video Testimony (216M), 7 August 2013.
- 40 R.Ob. Video Testimony (222F), 2 October 2013.
- 41 H.Fu. Video Testimony (247M), 5 November 2014.
- 42 J.L. Video Testimony (142M), 29 February 2012. For antisemitism directed against Jewish cattle traders, see Fischer, *Jewish Cattle Traders in the German Countryside*.
- 43 K.H.R. Video Testimony (051M), 3 November 2010.
- 44 K.B. Video Testimony (041M), 20 July 2010.
- 45 E.F.J. Video Testimony (158F), 5 July 2012.
- 46 W.S. Video Testimony (170M), 26 August 2012.
- 47 M.U. Video Testimony (067F), 21 January 2011.
- 48 G.Fl., H.V., & W.A. Video Testimony (098M2F), 12 May 2011.
- 49 J.R. & A.R. Video Testimony (246MF), 21 May 2014.
- 50 I.R. Video Testimony (141F), 29 February 2012.

Part II

Territorial expansion, war, and genocide

After annexing the Sudetenland and Austria in 1938, Nazi Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, followed by Denmark, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Yugoslavia, and Greece. The war culminated in a ‘war of annihilation’ in the East with the invasion of the Soviet Union from 22 June 1941. It was embedded in the imperial conquest of supposedly racially inferior populations and of colonising future ‘living space’, in which local populations were enslaved and where ‘the routine conduct of mass killing essentially created a colonial mentality among the perpetrators in which new, expanded norms of behavior reigned supreme’.¹ One facet of this was the anti-partisan warfare, which was extremely brutal and intertwined with genocidal violence, since the largely imagined conflation of Jews and partisans served as a cover for killing Jews. *Wehrmacht* soldiers enacted extreme violence against local populations, and later claimed they were under attack, which often served as a justification strategy. Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer note that ‘revenge was a powerful motivator and functioned regardless of individual soldiers’ political attitudes’.²

Waitman Wade Beorn highlights that the Holocaust in the East was largely public, often local, especially the ‘Holocaust by bullets’, and relied on large numbers of local and regional collaborators. This remains a sore and contested point in a number of Eastern European countries.³ SS *Einsatzgruppen*, special killing squads – ‘reinforced by additional Police Battalions, local auxiliaries, and the *Wehrmacht* – were systematically murdering Jews of all ages and sexes’, thus involving a much larger range of direct and indirect perpetrators and accomplices than is often assumed.⁴ The *Waffen-SS*, the military branch of the SS, was ‘heavily involved in the commission of the Holocaust through their participation in mass

shootings, anti-partisan warfare, and in supplying guards for Nazi concentration camps. They were also responsible for many other war crimes.⁵

Out of 18 million men who served in the *Wehrmacht*, 10 million did so in the Eastern theatre of war. Estimates of how many *Wehrmacht* soldiers were involved in crimes vary from as low as 5 per cent to as high as 60–80 per cent. If we were to accept the low estimate, that would still leave half a million *Wehrmacht* perpetrators. Alex J. Kay and David Stahel recently proposed that perpetration should include not only direct breaches of international law at the time, but also crimes such as sexual violence, theft and starvation, and coerced and forced labour.⁶

Despite scholarly work proving otherwise, the myth of the *Wehrmacht* as having remained ‘clean’ was dominant for much of the second half of the twentieth century. In the mid-1990s, an exhibition travelling through Germany and Austria challenged the wider public to confront the ‘crimes of the *Wehrmacht*’, particularly the ‘genocidal dimensions of the war of annihilation’.⁷ The exhibition and accompanying public debates revealed to a large audience in Germany and Austria how even lowly *Wehrmacht* soldiers had been involved in genocidal violence. They were part of the important role played by the *Wehrmacht* as facilitators of SS and police violence, and as perpetrators of violence against alleged or actual partisans, Jews, other civilians in the occupied territories, commissars, and Soviet POWs. Genocidal violence, previously kept safely at bay in the courtrooms, now entered the homes of millions of Germans and Austrians, raising questions about the father or grandfather sitting at the dinner table. Yet even today, war and genocide are often perceived as somehow separate, unconnected, especially in the public sphere. For ‘Third Reich’ contemporaries, and especially *Wehrmacht* veterans, this separation is crucial for maintaining a positive self-image in light of the changed moral landscape after 1945. Notably, admissions of violence against partisans are usually accompanied by veterans’ claims that it had been permissible under international law. This was not a ‘successful legal strategy’ at the Nuremberg Hostages Trial 1947–8, the seventh of the 12 Nuremberg proceedings where war crimes against civilians and POWs by the German armed forces were tried. As Beorn notes, the tribunal ‘dismissed categorically any legality of German reprisal killings’.⁸

In [Part II](#), we encounter a diverse range of speakers, whose involvement during the war ranged from working as nannies to serving as rank-and-file soldiers to white-collar workers, all supporting the German war effort in different ways.

Few spheres of life were untouched by the war, especially as early quick victories gave way to drawn-out campaigns marked by increasingly

heavy losses, and violence against Jews, Sinti and Roma, people with disabilities, Poles, alleged and actual partisans, and Soviet POWs. Following the invasion of the Soviet Union, the murders and massacres of Jews and whole Jewish communities turned into genocide: organised mass murder by various means – including shooting, poison gas, starvation, overwork, and exhaustion – and it did not go unnoticed. Nicholas Stargardt notes that Germans ‘spoke most about the genocide of the Jews after heavy air raids, or as they awaited the imminent arrival of the Western Allies’ as they feared revenge for German crimes.⁹ Soldiers on leave, passing through, or in military hospital along with civilian and auxiliary workers returning from their deployments to newly occupied territories, brought with them stories of extreme violence against Jews, actual and alleged partisans, and Soviet POWs. While this is well documented, the excerpts assembled here stand out for their candid nature and the widespread reports of such knowledge and witnessing, and sometimes perpetrating, among a wide range of people. However candid, these narratives conform to present-day sensibilities and norms to varying degrees. In some cases, they reveal rather more than the speakers may want to give away, including admissions of involvement, of having been beneficiaries, or of ideological continuities in Nazi racial thinking.

The conquest of new territories also opened new opportunities, offering jobs and land, including to women who flocked to the East as nurses, nannies, teachers, and secretaries.¹⁰ One of the excerpts includes the extraordinary narrative of a woman from Hamburg working in import and export who was assigned the civilian equivalent rank of a general for her work in Ukraine exploiting local resources (see [excerpt 47](#)). There is also a secretary to an SS man responsible for ‘Germanisation’ of occupied territories (see [excerpt 46](#)), and a woman who performed a song and bore the Nazi flag during the hanging of alleged partisans (see [excerpt 87](#)). Among the men, encounters with violence during civilian labour, labour service, or military service were common, including security duty during a hanging (see [excerpt 81](#)), working a civilian job in a concentration camp quarry witnessing the daily violence against inmates (see [excerpt 64](#)), indiscriminate shooting of civilians (see [excerpt 83](#)), and the searching of houses inhabited by Jews (see [excerpt 75](#)).

Suggested questions to consider when reading the excerpts:

- To what extent did knowledge of atrocities implicate the speakers?
- How does the interviewer seek to elicit stories about violence and complicity?

- Can those who benefited from job opportunities or cheap stolen property, who facilitated violent acts, or witnessed them be considered complicit?
- To what degree might the stories about atrocities be influenced by information the interviewees gleaned after the end of the war?
- In what ways do these stories conform to or contradict what you know about this subject?
- Where we can see embellishments or falsehoods, to what extent are they deliberately misleading or an effect of memory and reinterpreting the past through the present?

Further study

Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw (eds), *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social processes and social dynamics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

Waitman Wade Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: At the epicenter of the Final Solution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

Waitman Wade Beorn, *Marching into Darkness: The Wehrmacht and the Holocaust in Belarus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Stefanie Rauch, and Bastiaan Willems (eds), *Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond: Compromised identities?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

Rachel Century, *Female Administrators of the Third Reich* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at War: 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

Gaëlle Fisher and Caroline Mezger (eds), *The Holocaust in the Borderlands: Interethnic relations and the dynamics of violence in occupied Eastern Europe* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2019).

Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Michelle Gordon and Rachel O'Sullivan (eds), *Colonial Paradigms of Violence: Comparative analysis of the Holocaust, genocide, and mass killing* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022).

Elisabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi Germanization of the 'East': Agents and witnesses* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

Olaf Jensen and Claus-Christian W. Szejnmann (eds), *Ordinary People as Mass Murderers: Perpetrators in comparative perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the 'Final Solution'* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

- Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German women in the Nazi killing fields* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).
- Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs (eds), *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The bystander in Holocaust history* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2018).
- Jeff Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front: The German infantry's war, 1941–1944* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- Ben Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans: German armies and partisan warfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- Monika Sommer, Michaela Raggam-Blesch, and Heidemarie Uhl, *The Vienna Model of Radicalisation: Austria and the Shoah* (Vienna: House of Austrian History, 2022).
- Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A nation under arms, 1939–45* (London: Bodley Head, 2015).
- Wiener Holocaust Library, *Testifying to the Truth: Eyewitnesses to the Holocaust*, transcribed and translated primary sources collected in the 1950s, available on Wiener Digital Collections, <https://www.whlcollections.org/testifying> (accessed 8 February 2025).

Films

- Auschwitz: The Nazis and the Final Solution*, dir. Laurence Rees (UK, 2005).
- Einsatzgruppen*, dir. Michael Prazan (France, 2009).
- Shoah*, dir. Claude Lanzmann (France, 1985).
- The Nazis: A warning from history*, dir. Laurence Rees (UK, 1997).
- The Sorrow and the Pity*, dir. Marcel Ophuls (France/West Germany/Switzerland, 1969).

War and empire building

For regular troops, the experience of war and conquest varied depending on time and location. Featured here are three perspectives that variously emphasise a warm reception by the local population in the Baltic states (see [excerpt 43](#)); the brutality of the front line (see [excerpt 44](#)); and the sexual opportunities engendered by war and facilitated by the *Wehrmacht* command (see [excerpt 45](#)). The eastern expansion opened other opportunities, such as for obtaining land and housing, or new jobs, be that for pragmatic or idealistic reasons. These opportunities were both means and ends, a way of binding Germans and Austrians to the

regime, with the promise of living space (*Lebensraum*). The subsequent three excerpts relate to women who worked, for a period, in the East in roles that were closely associated with longer-term Nazi goals: resettlement (see [excerpt 46](#)); economic exploitation (see [excerpt 47](#)); and ‘Germanisation’ of the East (see [excerpt 48](#)).

43. Positive reception in the Baltics: ‘we didn’t have any difficulties with them’

Hermann G. (H.G.), born 1920 in Lower Saxony, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 91. Protestant. His parents had a farm. He was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* in October 1939. He was in Lübeck before being transferred to Denmark. After six months, he was transferred to East Prussia before participating in the attack on the Soviet Union from the beginning, serving in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. He was wounded in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) and had a leg amputated in September 1941. He began an apprenticeship at the Office for Water and Soil. He also served in the *Volkssturm*, instructing elderly men in the operation of rifles and hand grenades.

Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union, known as ‘Operation Barbarossa’, was marked by extreme brutality from the start. Hermann G.’s assertion that the German army was welcomed by local populations in the Baltic states is largely true; many Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians saw the German invasion as a liberation from Soviet occupation, with some of them collaborating with the Germans in the murder of Jews. He cites this as evidence of the German army’s allegedly good conduct, attempting to separate the war effort of German troops from Nazi ideology. Hermann G. differentiates between regular troops and the SS. This attempt to keep the *Wehrmacht*’s image ‘clean’ omits the well-documented involvement of regular troops in genocidal and other violent acts. His emotional response when recalling the front lines suggests that he experienced a long-term psychological impact from the war.

H.G. Half a year before the Russian campaign got under way, we were transferred, the entire division, to East Prussia. Dirschau [today Tczew, Poland] near Danzig [today Gdańsk, Poland] was the collection point. I still remember that. We were only allowed to march at night, and we had to [march] to East Prussia, until we got close to the border. We didn’t quite make it all the way. Then, I still remember, that was at 2.30 a.m., the whole front erupted in thunder, as though the front was burning, from the heavy artillery.

I still remember it [crying]. Terrible! But we had to [with trembling voice]. We had to march on. We were assigned to the tanks. I still remember that exactly. They were the ones to break through [enemy lines], and we had to be behind the tanks. Not immediately behind them, but a bit further away. That meant protection for us and for them, when they made a stop so that they couldn't be attacked right away. We went by way of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia all the way north. Saint Petersburg today. Fighting. To make an estimate, I'd say we had to march some 2,500 kilometres.

L.H. How far?

H.G. 2,500 kilometres until we arrived.

L.H. On foot.

H.G. On foot. We had transport [only when] something was going on, if we faced enemy fire.

L.H. That means you took part in the Russian campaign early on, right at the beginning.

H.G. Right at the beginning. We were, I'll say this, wherever we marched was German-occupied territory. Today these regions are all free again. They were quite favourable towards us, I have to say.

L.H. The Baltic people.

H.G. The Baltic people. We didn't harm them, on the contrary. If we had a bit of bread left over, we shared it. Or if we didn't have enough, we could get something from them. We didn't have any difficulties with them.

L.H. The reception from the people was positive.

H.G. From the people, yes.

L.H. You were the liberators.

H.G. [laughs, voice trembling] If you like, yes.

L.H. From communism.

H.G. From communism, yes. That's it. The war didn't have much to do with the Nazis. The Nazis started it, with Poland and so on. But what we experienced, as soldiers, was something entirely different. The ones with the SS and SA and the like, that was something totally different. Those fellows would certainly not have had the same reception.¹¹

44. Frontline memories: 'it was such an inferno'

Günter N. (G.N.), born 1923 near Krefeld, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 86 in the presence of his wife. Catholic. The son of businesspeople, he attended the *Realgymnasium*

(science-focused secondary school). He was in the Hitler Youth and served in the *Wehrmacht*, including in Greece and in Ukraine. He was wounded in Italy and captured in 1944.

Similar to Hermann G. (see [excerpt 43](#)), Günter N. becomes emotional when recalling his service on the Eastern Front. He served near Kyiv from November 1943 to February 1944. He refers to the Russian offensive (possibly the Dnieper–Carpathian offensive in which the German army suffered heavy losses) as a ‘super-inferno’, characterising it as a defensive battle and claiming that he cannot remember what exactly happened. Veterans often report extreme brutality by the Red Army, either denying German brutality or framing it as self-defence against the Soviet troops. His ‘amnesia’ may point to the considerable losses among the German troops but perhaps also instances of extreme violence against the Soviet troops. His description of the offensive aligns with Hermann G.’s notion of the ‘burning front’, indicating common war tropes among veterans.

G.N. The offensive started on Christmas Eve. [...] The offensive started on Christmas Eve 1943. And in the morning around three o’clock it grew a bit calmer, you see, and then we could go– [blows his nose], we were sent to a Christmas Eve church service [...] and since then I can no longer sing *Silent Night*, *Holy Night*. Five hundred men, dirty, lice-ridden, wet, cold. They sing *Silent Night*, *Holy Night* with broken voices. I never saw any of them again. To this day, I can’t sing or listen to *Silent Night*, *Holy Night*. Even today. And then we moved along the front, until one day I found myself again in the hospital in Posen [today Poznań, Poland] but I couldn’t tell you how I got there, even with the best will in the world. And then we were with those on leave from the front–, soldiers on leave. Raced to Munich with the hospital train, into the hospital, and then the parents got word: ‘Please come immediately.’ [weeps] It still gets to me. I can’t even talk about it coherently. I–, my parents received a telegram: ‘Please come immediately.’ My mother came to [...] the hospital. At the train station a Bavarian said in dialect: ‘Young woman, where do you want to go?’ ‘To the military hospital. To the one from last week.’ ‘Young woman, you don’t even need to go there, they’re all already dead.’ That was the welcome to Germany my parents received. After that we went to Italy, to the Italian front. I was wounded by partisans.

L.H. Maybe we came back a little too quickly from Russia to Germany. I know that it’s difficult for you to think back to these times.

But if there are details from your experiences on the Russian front, I would very much like to hear about them.

G.N. One can't describe it. One can't describe it.

L.H. No?

G.N. I could try. One can't. Only battle noise [gestures with both hands]. One can't depict it. The words are simply lacking. It was such an inferno. A super-inferno, the whole night through, and for hours you heard the Katyushas [rocket launchers], because our, those behind us-. One just can't put it into words. Those cacophonies. The most infernally threatening battle noise cacophonies. Carpet bombing doesn't compare to it. First the Russians with their Katyushas, with their huge masses of munitions. Then they chased their people forward. We did too. Naturally, we only thought about one thing [gesture of throat-cutting]. And-, until it grew calmer. I can't talk about details. One simply knows-. I still don't know today what we did, or-, a real defensive battle. In detail-, one can't describe it.¹²

45. Brothels: 'we paid four or five marks, or however much it was'

Henri O. (H.O.), born 1924 in Alsace, France, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 88. His father was an electrician, who worked for the German war production. The family lived in Strasbourg and Rothau. Henri O. worked in a technical capacity in construction. He was conscripted into the Reich Labour Service (RAD) from 1942, followed by the *Wehrmacht* (infantry) in October 1942. After training in Bautzen, he served in Kraków, Czechoslovakia, and Russia. He was captured in Sevastopol. One of his brothers was also in the *Wehrmacht*, while two brothers fought on the side of the Allies.

Henri O. discusses his time in Kraków and Warsaw in a matter-of-fact manner, listing infrastructure, security, work schedules, and the nationality of units assigned to the 'workers' without mentioning the people forced to work or their conditions. The horrific experiences of ghetto inhabitants and slave labourers contrast sharply with the apparent enjoyment of *Wehrmacht* soldiers using *Wehrmacht*-supervised brothels and soliciting services from young French women, whose participation may have been voluntary or forced.

H.O. In Kraków, there was a district where all the Jews were. That was fenced off, along the sidewalk, with barbed wire. In the morning the German soldiers came, they were soldiers from the

Flakabwehr, and fetched them. Then they marched out to their workplaces, to work. Yes.

L.H. Did you see that yourself, at the time?

H.O. Yes, I did! They came, there was the barbed wire fence around the—. That was in Kraków. I was in Kraków, yes.

L.H. Can you describe to me what you saw in detail? Where were the people locked up?

H.O. In that district! That was a whole district, and along the sidewalk were tall posts, about 2 metres tall, with barbed wire. In the morning a big gate was opened. Then the workers had to get out in front and had to follow the military to their workplace. What was unique: this was the Division Degrelle. They were Belgians, volunteers for Adolf [Hitler].
[...]

H.O. In Warsaw there was a place for soldiers where one could go on Sundays and eat soup or whatever. There the Germans had—, also had—, what was that? Where one could go and visit women. Those were brothels. And there were lots of girls, many French girls, who the Germans had brought in from France, for the soldiers.

L.H. That means the girls were taken from France.

H.O. And came to a former hotel. There were German military and, the way it goes when you are 18 years old, and the women came and made sure there was protection, rubbers. Afterwards a military doctor gave you a shot, against syphilis and so on. But that didn't happen very often, that one—.

L.H. You are sure those girls were French?

H.O. Oh yes! They spoke to us in French. They were French.

L.H. They were French.

H.O. Yes, the Germans got them in France and brought them here. How did we put it at the time? To a whorehouse.

L.H. Were the women paid or were they forced labour?

H.O. I don't know. I didn't get to know that much. We paid four or five marks, or however much it was. It took three minutes, then we had to get out.

L.H. Did you have to wait in line?

H.O. There weren't that many people. It was nothing unusual. One advanced slowly. I don't know. One went once to—, but after, it was not that interesting.

L.H. Was that in Warsaw or in Kraków?

H.O. In Kraków. In Warsaw it was the same.

L.H. There was something similar.

- H.O. Yes, wherever there was military.
 L.H. So, it was organised by the *Wehrmacht*.
 H.O. By the *Wehrmacht*.
 L.H. Did you have a chance to ask the women where they were from, which town?
 H.O. One was Parisian, from Paris.
 L.H. And how old?
 H.O. Oh, those were girls, about 25 years old.¹³

46. Resettlement, 'Aryanisation', 'Germanisation': 'they shut all the Jewish shops. Then the "Aryans" got in'

Edith S. (E.S.), born 1924 in Yugoslavia, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 88. The family moved to Neutitschein (Nový Jičín) in the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia, in 1926. The family changed their Czech name to German after the annexation of the Sudetenland. Her father was director of a hat factory. Edith S. was in the League of German Girls (BDM). She did her Reich Labour Service (RAD) and left school with a secondary school diploma. She worked at the SS Office for Race and Settlement as a secretary from 1941 to 1944, initially in Neutitschein, then Reichenberg (Liberec) and Fulnek. She fled from the Red Army to Munich. See also [excerpt 52](#).

The SS department Edith S. worked for was responsible for resettling South Tyroleans to the East, which involved expelling current inhabitants, including Jews, through 'Aryanisation'. Noteworthy is Edith S.'s inability, or refusal, to remember her tasks, references to 'Aryanisation', and Holland's persistent probing amid her incoherent, fragmented, and at times barely intelligible responses. Her joke that she would no longer go to prison may indicate an awareness of wrongdoing. She describes her tasks as 'technical' rather than 'political', even though she worked at an SS department enacting official policies. To her, 'Aryanisation' was a simple, formal procedure, routine and unremarkable, reflecting how contemporaries often viewed such actions differently from how we do today.

- E.S. What did I do in Reichenberg?
 L.H. At your workplace there.
 E.S. Those were always also–, he was an officer, deep–. You know, from one military office to another, in Silesia, or so. I wrote the letters. But what was inside [the letters], don't ask me. I don't remember. Irrelevant stuff, basically.

- L.H. Pardon?
- E.S. Nothing political in any event. Not at all. Basically, it was all technical letters. They shut all the Jewish shops. Then the 'Aryans' got in.
- L.H. These cases happened in this office. 'Aryanisation' was mentioned in these letters.
- E.S. Yes. Well, they did everything in a hidden way. It simply said: 'This [person] here'. One knew, however, that it was a Jew. They took everything away from them.
- L.H. Can you explain to me: how did this process of 'Aryanisation' happen in the office, in the work that you did back then?
- E.S. I can tell you—
- L.H. These letters that you wrote, were there certain cases, where one—
- E.S. You know, it was not so important, how should I say it, so consequential, in political terms. Otherwise, I would remember it very differently. Oh my, it was basically more like everyday stuff, from office to office, and not all that political. My father's friend had probably very cleverly put me in [this job]. I had to do something so that I stayed away from these things. It was more like working in sales, the correspondence about certain—, but not so political. I only know, I can still hear my father [say]: 'Come, we'll put her in there!' [laughs] That's how it was! We weren't allowed to do anything. In fact, I wanted—
- L.H. What do you mean: 'they put you in there'? So that you had a safe position?
- E.S. Yes! Nothing very political, you know, more among us. Departments. It was a department. But basically harmless. I have as far—. It was a department. Whether it was that important — probably not. In any case, someone called me from Reichenberg: 'Is my wife in Dresden?'
- L.H. Your boss was—
- E.S. An officer.
- L.H. With the SS.
- E.S. With the SS. He was a *Standartenführer*.
- L.H. What was he called?
- E.S. *Standartenführer*. It's like a colonel.
- L.H. What was his name?
- E.S. Müller. Simply Müller [laughs]!
- L.H. With the SS. *Sturmbannführer*, or—?
- E.S. How the career was—. I also knew his wife. I was even friends with his daughter.

- L.H. What was the daughter's name?
- E.S. I don't remember.
- L.H. Where was this SS office?
- E.S. That was in Fulnek at that time. That is near Neutitschein. [The Neutitschein department] was moved to Fulnek, and I had to go with them.
- L.H. How long was this–, when did you start working there? At 17 or 18?
- E.S. No. Hang on. 17!
- L.H. Did you do an apprenticeship first?
- E.S. No. In fact, I went directly there. They trained me. Something like that was possible only during wartime.
[...]
- L.H. What division did [the *Standartenführer*] belong to?
- E.S. I don't remember. What the connections were–, it wasn't a division. It was something special, what he did there. He had his remit but wasn't with the fighting group.
- L.H. More administrative.
- E.S. Yes. That was sort of more political.
- L.H. You spoke before of 'Aryanisation'. That was part of his responsibility.
- E.S. Yes. That was part of it.
- L.H. Do you remember at all the content of these letters that you had to write? Please try to remember.
- E.S. Do you know, it was very hidden. Gosh. You know, harmless. [...] My task was a harmless one. [...] Because I would have remembered if it had been something of note. That was more directed towards the outside. Sometimes I was even able to help people. The boss, of course, couldn't know that. One time he found out about it. I did it behind his back. He–
- L.H. I would really like to know about the content of these letters. Do you still remember what you wrote? What was it about? Especially what it had to do with the 'Aryanisation'. That is a very interesting topic. As a contemporary witness, perhaps you remember a special detail.
- E.S. That went very quickly. If someone was a Jew, they got him out right away. They were simply–, not much was written about that. I was never confronted with any of that. We had people for that. Above all, my father was a salaried employee [as opposed to a civil servant or member of SS or military], that was possibly also taken into consideration. They were very careful. It was bad, all

of that. It was very bad. Afterwards. The war was terrible. Bad enough. But with the letters, I didn't have so much to do with that – not that I was consciously aware of.

L.H. You weren't consciously aware of it.

E.S. I wasn't consciously aware of it, no–

L.H. Possibly looking back–

E.S. All I know–. Yes, yes, but he is a Jew: him and him and him. Auschwitz? That happened very quickly. There wasn't much correspondence. There was not much correspondence. And they were all soldiers, who picked them up. Or very good–. There was also the Nazi Party, too, wasn't there. Oh dear. Terrible.

L.H. Do you believe that this office, where you worked, was also involved in these–

E.S. Yes. But, as I said, he knew exactly–. Then my father would also–. What is my father? No, we must be more careful! It was like this: alright, we are not permitted to talk about anything that happens there. Which I did anyhow. I didn't always tell my parents everything, though.

L.H. For example, what didn't you tell your parents? What could you talk to them about? Frau. S., you must–. This is a wonderful opportunity for us to confront this history.

E.S. Yes, for me as well! I've forgotten a great deal [laughs].

L.H. That's why I'm insisting a bit. I'm sorry if I–

E.S. No, no! I don't blame you for it. I get it.

L.H. I don't want to drill down, where you don't–

E.S. No, you're not doing that. I know exactly what you–

L.H. It's for our cooperation.

E.S. Exactly.

L.H. We're trying to be as honest as possible.

E.S. I'd say: I don't need to hide anything any more. They won't put me in prison now [laughs].

L.H. Of course not! You're a very important figure.

E.S. Oh dear. I hope I'm the right one!

L.H. One might say you held a key role in the office. That means, you saw the correspondence. You had a good relationship with your boss, with this *Standartenführer* Müller. That means you are a contemporary witness.

E.S. Yes. But he didn't tell me everything. But, how shall I put it, it was–, and as I said, also back then with the Jews–. How far does it go? Terrible. That was horrible for me.
[...]

- L.H. I'm just trying to better understand what the responsibility was of this office that you worked for.
- E.S. Yes, that was the resettlements. These resettlements. I do remember that. The resettlements from Southern Tyrol, from Italy, right?
- L.H. But that was later.
- E.S. Yes.
- L.H. But I wonder, in the beginning, '40, '41, as this process of 'Aryanisation' went on, and the Jewish population–
- E.S. So, Fulnek was part of it. The South Tyroleans. I became more aware of that later. Oh dear, eventually one sees these things. Because I never wrote a letter where, say, such and such, that Jew will be handed over and everything will be taken away from him. It wasn't like that. Shops were taken away from them. I didn't see that there.
- L.H. That didn't occur in the letters, or did it?
- E.S. No! That's why! What did I actually do there [laughs]? That's what I'm thinking now. I know about the South Tyroleans, later. They were resettled because they were German. Their properties were taken from them, and Italians then moved in. [The South Tyroleans] came to us. I dealt with them. I got to know them.
- L.H. You spoke before about repressing [the past]. I find it interesting how someone can work in an office for three years and now no longer know what the task of this office was.
- E.S. True, you are right!
- L.H. Do you understand the question? It's a legitimate question, isn't it?
- E.S. Yes. You know, there are also the departments, especially in the military. They didn't tell me everything. I didn't know everything. I didn't know. I was just an employee, nothing more. Such a big–. I was young, just a minor employee. Also the Italians–, now that comes to mind. I noticed a lot about that back then. I felt very sorry for these people. They would have much preferred to stay down there. That was Fulnek. It was in the main thing [about] the resettlement of the people down there.¹⁴

47. New markets in Ukraine: 'who was available? I was, of course!'

Emmi F. (E.F.J.), born 1921 near Hamburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 90 (see [figure 6](#)). Her father was a member of the NSDAP. He held a managerial position in a large



Figure 6 Emmi F. in her home. E.F.J. Video Testimony (158F), interviewed by Luke Holland on 5 July 2012. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

wholesale company. She attended the *Volksschule* and middle school. She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). Emmi F. joined the NSDAP in 1939 at the age of 18. She completed an overseas export apprenticeship and then worked for an overseas export company in Hamburg. She met her husband during the war in Hamburg, where he was an anti-aircraft helper until he was transferred to East Prussia as a senior corporal in the air force. She was transferred to Ukraine for six months as her company was deployed there, in 1943. Upon her return from Ukraine, she largely stayed in Berlin but worked for the *Wehrmacht* in Latvia for two to three weeks in late 1943/early 1944. See also [excerpt 37](#).

Emmi F. held the civilian rank of a general while working for the *Wirtschaftsstab Ost* in Ukraine from January to July 1943. She expresses considerable pride in her achievements. Her description of keeping the local population separate and subservient aligns with Nazi ideology of the time. Her initial desire to go to 'Africa' and subsequent acceptance of the 'East' as a suitable alternative suggests a colonial mindset.

- L.H. How was it, Frau F., that you were sent to the East, and when exactly?
- E.F.J. How it happened that they sent me to the East? I volunteered. I wanted to go to Africa. But it was war now. And I worked for a firm in Hamburg. Overseas exports. They were tasked with supplying the civilian population in the Ukraine. And, in fact, the site was in Stalino [Donetsk, Ukraine]. My boss travelled

there and then he called and said he urgently needed a female employee. Who was available? I was, of course! In place of Africa, I thought it was great. I signed up for it, had to travel to Berlin, to the *Wirtschaftsstab Ost*, was examined physically and psychologically, and got my permit, identification papers so that I could travel there. Then I was assigned to an *Oberkriegsverwaltungsrat* Mock, who accompanied me. I was not allowed to stay alone at night in the compartment, in the main carriage, that was inappropriate. As a female, I was given my own compartment. And so, I travelled there. On the way I met with my boss, who was coming back from there, because he wanted to purchase materials: machines or nails, or whatever. Everything you can imagine was needed. When we were over the border, the border was closed to civilians. He was here, and I was there. That was very peculiar! Then I built up a firm, at 21 years of age! I managed that rather well.

L.H. What was the firm called?

E.F.J. It was also called Georg Grotjahn and Co. That was the Hamburg firm that built the subsidiary there.

L.H. So you were responsible for building up the subsidiary.

E.F.J. Yes. Not responsible for it, I built it up.

L.H. Alone, or who helped you?

E.F.J. I had a few men with me.

[...]

L.H. Can you describe to me your duties back then a little more specifically? You said you had built up this firm, or a branch of this firm in the East.

E.F.J. Yes. We had the—. Here is the [River] Don to sketch it out a bit. And here lies the town, Stalino. And this is the way to Berlin and Hamburg. That was very, very far away, at least at that time. And now, here, this whole mass of people needed to live. We wanted to maintain them. They were supposed to be there for us. It was done in such a way, to influence them, so that they were in favour of Hitler. I don't know how to say that. It sounds stupid, doesn't it?

L.H. No, please carry on! It's fine.

E.F.J. I lived out there, but never tried to influence the people, because I always thought: they must stay who they are. They were Ukrainians and not Germans. Ukrainians must be Ukrainians. They must live their lives the way they are accustomed to. But under Stalin they had had it even worse than under Adolf Hitler!

Stalin was very bad. That just occurred to me. None of them wanted anything to do with Stalin.

L.H. Was it your duty then somehow to make the Ukrainians more German-friendly? To prepare them for the arrival of the German bureaucracy or the *Wehrmacht*?

E.F.J. No. That wasn't really my task. My task was to make sure that the people had something to eat and that they were clothed. I exported–, I imported–, finally, my imports! I imported clothes from Germany, as far as there were any. That wasn't easy. And we exported, what is it called? Oil. Sunflower oil. There were huge quantities of it. There were fields, one could drive an hour in the car, up a mountain, and see only fields of sunflowers. Beautiful yellow fields. Yes. Now I've got sidetracked.

L.H. And you were responsible for this import–export. Oil imported to Germany, sunflower oil, and clothes exported from Germany–

E.F.J. into Ukraine. For example, an airplane. Once we had an airplane. Then we had cars. Car parts. They were in such demand, especially the car parts.

L.H. And your responsibility was only for the civilian side, or the military side as well?

E.F.J. No, only the civilian side.¹⁵

48. Teaching near Auschwitz: 'the German children weren't beaten, but the Polish children were beaten'

Edith Ba. (E.Ba.), born 1925 in the Brandenburg region, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Caroline Goldie (C.G.) in 2009 at the age of 84. Her father had been serving in the military since the Weimar Republic and regularly met with Hermann Göring. The family read the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's newspaper. Edith Ba. was in the *Jungmädels* and the League of German Girls (BDM), and she attained the *Abitur*. During the war she served as a teaching assistant near Kraków. She regularly talks to young people about her experiences. See also [excerpts 6, 62](#).

Her Reich Labour Service (RAD) lasted until autumn 1943, after which she performed war auxiliary service as a school assistant in Bielitz (Bielsko-Biała, Poland) in East Upper Silesia, near Kraków, from autumn 1943 until spring 1944. About 30 kilometres from Auschwitz, she taught Silesian ethnic German and Polish boys, the latter subjected to corporal punishment. She claims she was not aware of Auschwitz at the time, but she now knows that the camp's laundry was washed in Bielitz.

It is unlikely that Edith Ba. was entirely unaware of Auschwitz or other Nazi crimes given her location and opportunities to speak with soldiers. This excerpt highlights how teaching in the East was infused with Nazi ideology, showing significant disparities in the education and treatment of ethnic German and Polish children.

C.G. You weren't in Berlin at the end of the war?

E.Ba. No, no, I was in the *Arbeitsdienst* until autumn '43, and then in the *Kriegshilfsdienst* right after that. One couldn't go to university right away, the way one had thought, rather there were new laws, and then came the *Kriegshilfsdienst*, and then one was assigned either as a streetcar conductor or as a factory worker in the weapons factory. And I had heard from someone that one could also go to the Red Cross. Then I signed up for the Red Cross. No, wait a moment. No, no, no, that was later! No matter. No, in the *Kriegshilfsdienst*, I became an assistant teacher. Those eligible to go to university were assigned to [teach at] *Volksschulen*, because the teachers had been enlisted. And they sent me to East Upper Silesia! That's near Kraków. But not in the so-called General Government. Kraków was occupied and I was in the part that belonged to that, came into a village school, and had to take over third grade as schoolteacher, teaching all subjects without any sort of training. [Addressing the waitress] When do you close here? I thought maybe—, but then you're still open for a little longer. Yes, that was naturally a crazy atmosphere, in that school. They were Silesians, of course, and Germans. Because this part of Silesia had ended up in Poland, after the First World War. The place was called Bielitz, today called [Bielsko-]Biała, you wouldn't know it, but, as I said, not far from Kraków. And I lived in the city, and had to go to my village school every day and teach the so-called ethnic German children. Those were families, who in fact had stayed there as Germans, and then I had another class with Polish boys, who were 14, 15 years old. But they were not allowed to learn much. It was a very limited programme for them. They weren't supposed to be educated. One could only teach them some German and basic arithmetic. At that time there was still corporal punishment. If they didn't behave, I had to take a cane [laughs] that the head had given me and was supposed to hit them on their hands. But I thought: I don't want to do that, I'm not used to that, and he said: 'You can't do otherwise, you have to do that here.' The German children weren't beaten, but the Polish

children were beaten. But they didn't take it so seriously, these boys. They laughed while it was going on. But those were crazy customs [laughs]!

C.G. When was that? '44?

E.Ba. No, that was from autumn '43 until spring '44. Half a year of *Kriegs[hilfs]dienst*. That's what that was called.

C.G. And did you see anything during the trip of the destruction of villages, or anything like that, or did that only happen later?

E.Ba. One travelled from Berlin to that town via Breslau [today Wrocław, Poland]. Those trains were hardly used by private individuals, but mostly the military. And then the whole time, those many hours, went very slowly and one spoke with the soldiers and naturally heard a great deal about the mood, and had many conversations. But it was not so sensational. It was not especially exciting. I still wanted to say, the place Bielitz, where I lived then, I first figured out after the war, years later, that that was about 30 kilometres away from Auschwitz. And that was absolutely unknown. I never heard the word Auschwitz, and it was never mentioned anywhere that there was a KZ [concentration camp] there. And then I learned later still that laundry from the KZ was washed in the town laundry. The trucks or whatever drove there from the KZ, and– [gestures]. So there was a certain exchange [with the camp].¹⁶

***Waffen-SS* and SS**

One of the strengths of the collection is the number of veterans from the *Waffen-SS* and SS. They are conscious of public perceptions of these units and keen either to establish their personal innocence or to defend the reputation of *Waffen-SS* and SS, or of their own unit.

49. SS cavalry: 'I never saw anything'

Peter H. (P.H.), born 1926 in the north west of Rhineland–Palatinate, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2010 at the age of 84. His father had been an innkeeper who became unemployed until finding work again in 1933. The family also had a small farm. Peter H. joined the *Jungvolk*. He served in the *Waffen-SS* cavalry. He received cavalry training in Warsaw for several months and in Croatia from mid-March 1944. In the spring of 1944, he was sent to Hungary. He was assigned

to the telephone operators and was first deployed late autumn 1944. He was captured and interned by Hungarians and Russians, claiming to be a civilian. He was released and returned to Germany. He had nightmares for a decade after the war.

When asked by Reetz for details about his division or unit, Peter H. reluctantly admits he was in the *Waffen-SS*, specifically the SS cavalry. He is clearly aware of how his SS membership may be perceived and tries to depoliticise it, claiming he joined only out of a love for horses. However, despite his claims to the contrary, there was also a cavalry unit in the *Wehrmacht*. Unprompted, he brings up the subject of the persecution of Jews when discussing his time in Warsaw, perhaps because he felt a need to fend off possible accusations. When directly questioned by Reetz about SS crimes, he insists he never noticed anything about the war and the Jews in Poland, that he was there only briefly, and that he saw no Jews in Hungary. He offers romanticised descriptions of Warsaw, Hungary, and his work with horses. His narrative includes an incoherent story about a comrade identifying a Jew's house in Hungary and being slapped by a superior, hinting at another dimension of his unit's operations that he is not revealing.

C.R. When you came to Warsaw, what was your impression of the city? It was already relatively late in–

P.H. It was. Yes, yes. It was late, in '44.

C.R. Early '44, you said.

P.H. Early '44. Just a moment! I was inducted in December '43 and had to be in Warsaw by Christmas of '43. That was it.

C.R. What was the situation in the city? It was relatively late in the war.

P.H. The war passed the area by quickly, as is known today. We did not stay there very long. There was a lot going on. I underwent training in Warsaw. We went to the cinema every so often, at that time. The ceiling was gone. One could also still smoke there. Only soldiers were permitted. The city was quiet otherwise. When people today – I feel I can say that – talk about Warsaw and the Jews, I was in Warsaw [and] I never noticed anything about that in the city. One didn't see a thing. It was quiet. Just like in peace time. Good food, the Polish girls cooked and the German cooks, that was it. I was there until the end of February [1944], [then on] to Croatia.

C.R. Which unit were you with?

P.H. The cavalry.

- C.R. But you don't want to specify the barracks.
- P.H. [shakes his head] No. It doesn't matter for today. Nothing at all. No question.
- C.R. I know that there were different divisions, and that not all who were in the SS were involved in some kind of crimes. But I'd welcome it if you were to talk about it because then you could clarify a few things. Part of this job with the [interview] archive is to clarify things that maybe are presented wrong in the current discussion.
- P.H. Yes, I can see that. I can say that I was inducted by the *Waffen-SS*, SS cavalry. I was with the horses. The *Wehrmacht* didn't have those. And in Poland I didn't notice anything, not a thing, about the war. Transports, police: nothing. Never noticed a thing. I wasn't there for very long.
- C.R. Were you—, did one have to go through an inspection, because the SS was a bit of an elite unit, or not any more at this point?
- P.H. That unit included volunteers. All others were assessed wherever they were needed. And I never had to undergo anything like that in our unit. I was in Budapest. And Budapest is a big place, with a lot going on. And I never noticed that Jews—. I never saw any Jews there. Whether they were all gone—. There weren't any. It wasn't a topic of discussion for us. Never. Not as soldiers, not during training lessons and not when we were on duty. Not an issue.
- C.R. How was the difference between *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen-SS* explained? Did one have a choice: you can join the *Wehrmacht* or the *Waffen-SS*?
- P.H. Yes.
- C.R. Did anyone explain the difference?
- P.H. It was about the cavalry, about the horses. That was the main reason for me! Not the infantry. And the others had [no horses]. That's why I joined the SS.
- C.R. When you arrived in Warsaw, did you know that you would join the SS or could you still choose between—?
- P.H. No. When we came to the barracks it was already SS. All young fellows.
- C.R. I don't recall: did one volunteer for the SS or was one inducted?
- P.H. One could volunteer but one could also be drafted.
- C.R. And you?
- P.H. I was drafted.
- C.R. I didn't know that one could choose. You said you chose to join the cavalry.

- P.H. I was with the cavalry. That's why my induction happened late because then I had to go there. That is the point. I'd like to add: we went all the way across Hungary. I never saw anything. And when I read about it today in the newspaper, I always shake my head, thinking: that was such a peaceful country! I never saw anything. I can mention one episode: we went through Hungary on an open lorry. It was a beautiful summer. We had a *Feldwebel* with us by the name of *Oberscharführer* Tönjes. He was the paternal type. We stood on the open lorry and drove I don't know where to. I don't know [incomprehensible] or we were transferred or we had baggage with us. Then we came to a town, a sizeable town, when my buddy Walter, who stood next to me, said: 'Peter, back there is the home of a Jew. Take a look.' There was a sign and Walter had seen that.
- C.R. At the house.
- P.H. At the house. Then the *Oberscharführer* walked over on the open lorry and slapped his face.
- C.R. And slapped your friend.
- P.H. Slapped the soldier. He was my age. 'Peter, a Jew is living there.' There was a sign. I don't know if there was a star on it. We didn't see any Jews anywhere in Hungary. It was not an issue. And *Oberscharführer* Tönjes slapped him. That was the attitude.
- C.R. Why did he slap him?
- P.H. Because he said: 'A Jew is living there.' Maybe he also said: 'We could go there and check it out.' I don't remember. So Walter was slapped. Quite hard! He was a policeman who had been drafted. A Berlin policeman. He was drafted into the *Waffen-SS*. And I was with the *Waffen-SS* because I wanted to be with the horses. Horses meant everything to me.
- C.R. I also always liked horses.
- P.H. In Hungary we got horses again. Yes. We had horses there, and then I was moved on. Otherwise, I would have been stuck with the infantry, and I didn't want that.
- C.R. That means that for most of the war you didn't actually have horses, unfortunately.
- P.H. Oh, that was great! In the morning, we went out riding, three of us. It was warm. And we were riding. There was a wide creek, as wide as this room here. Maybe a little wider. And 2 metres deep, quite a bit. Then we were all sweaty. And then we were told: take your clothes off! Take everything off, wash the horses.

It was nice water, clean. So we herded the horses into the creek, us behind them completely naked, and we scrubbed the horses.¹⁷

50. *Waffen-SS* volunteer: 'I'm proud to have been part of this force'

Wolfgang St. (W.St.), born 1926 in Rummelsburg, Pomerania (today Miastko, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2008 at the age of 82. He attended a boarding school *Gymnasium* and was in the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth. He served in the *Waffen-SS* in the East. He was captured by US troops in Ebensee, Austria.

Wolfgang St. still takes pride in his SS membership and stands by voluntarily enlisting in the SS at the age of 15 in 1941. His pride is predicated on his denial of crimes committed by German troops, including the *Waffen-SS*, and an effort to separate the war from the genocide and other atrocities against civilians. While Wolfgang St. acknowledges that crimes occurred, he does not attribute them to specific actors. Instead of condemning the murders unequivocally, he minimises them by pointing out that other countries also 'disliked' Jews and Sinti and Roma. He views these crimes through the lens of Germany's reputation rather than showing concern for the victims. Additionally, he considers Jews as 'foreign', thus denying the existence of German Jews, which reflects a continuity of Nazi racial thinking and the persistence of racial categories. Finally, he relativises Nazi crimes by comparing them to the flight and expulsion of Germans from the East in 1945, calling for an end to being reminded about the mass murder of Jews.

W.St. No one can tell me that a German soldier would have treated people that badly! Cutting off people's heads or God knows whatever else is supposed to have happened, that's just not like us. And that's why, I still stand by that, I wasn't an SS man after the war but I'm proud to have been part of this force, and I heard in captivity that foreign troops were glad to have had the *Waffen-SS* by their side. Then they could be certain: nothing will happen to us! I only want to mention the Romanians. The Romanians are people who like to run away, who don't stay [and fight]. I talked to the father of a boy, who I'm still writing to today, and he said: 'Oh man, it was good when we heard: The SS is coming.' Because the SS stayed [to fight]. That is the difference.

- L.H. What does that mean?
- W.St. They stood for something and kept standing for it. They weren't running away. Other people run when danger is brewing. We were trained, or already built that way: We're not going anywhere. I am also one of those fellows, unfortunately. But afterwards, after the war, that proved to be an advantage. If I hadn't acted like that nothing would have become of me.
[...]
- L.H. If you think about the people who have suffered: the Jews, the Gypsies, all groups who were treated so horribly by the Nazis. What do you think about it? You were such an enthusiastic participant.
- W.St. Yes, but a participant in the war! Not as a Jew- and Gypsy-killer, no. I mean, to be honest, we don't like these people very much. I'm not one to say the world revolves around the Germans. No. But one could acknowledge on the other side that it's not 'just a German' thing, that one doesn't like the Jews, or doesn't like the Gypsies. Rather, that's a little bit the case all over the world. I always look at a person the way he presents himself to me, so if I'm dealing with a Jew-. Through my professional activities, I have always had to do with many foreign nationalities. They were all very happy with me because I have a different outlook. I appreciate anyone who works, and I don't appreciate anyone who's shirking, even if they're German. What more can I say?
- L.H. It is true of course that antisemitism occurs in many countries. That is well known. But these gruesome things, these gas chambers, the murder of Jews is not normal. Something truly horrible happened here in this country. And somehow, you don't reject that, do you?
- W.St. As I said: I don't like what happened then. It's not good. It's also bad for our name. I am always keen to see that Germany is a respected nation in the world. And then you hear things like that. One doesn't like that very much. But it happened. But I hope that after so many decades, it's finally possible to say: these young people, and I count myself among them, because I was not involved at all, at some point it's finally enough! It's sad enough. You see: What should I say about my parents and other Pomeranian people being driven out of Silesia, out of Pomerania? Bad things happened. But we don't draw attention to that every day.¹⁸

51. SS training camp, Dachau: 'there were also Jews there'

Kurt S. (K.S.), born 1922 near Salzburg, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 88. His father was a mechanical engineer from the Sudetengau, and his mother was the daughter of a farmer. After leaving school at 14, he started an apprenticeship. Soon after the *Anschluss*, he volunteered for the *Waffen-SS*, reporting to the 6th Company in Dachau on 1 April 1938. After his training, he was assigned to the 8th Company SMG, an anti-tank defence unit, and after the invasion of Poland to the SS *Totenkopf* Division as part of the attack on France. He later served in Greece and on the Eastern Front, including in Rostov-on-Don and Taganrog. See also [excerpt 82](#).

During his training in Dachau, Kurt S. saw inmates on the way to forced labour. This included someone he knew, the Jewish police commandant of Böckstein, Austria, who had been arrested after the *Anschluss* as a member of the Austrian *Heimwehr*. This highlights that in some instances the persecution of Jews and other victims was not at all anonymous: soldiers, police officers, SS men as well as local onlookers recognised some of the victims; here Nazi violence is a much more intimate process than the often mechanised public image of persecution suggests.

K.S. And on 1 April 1938 [I was] transported to Dachau, to the sixth company. That was a completely new post, and it wasn't even yet furnished. There was only straw. That's how it started. That was the first shock for us, because—, one can imagine, there was only straw laid out in the rooms. And it always had to be clean! But if you had to go somewhere, you dragged all the straw out in the hall, down the stairs, and then it all started. There was cleaning duty, up the stairs, down the stairs, up the stairs, down the stairs [...]. Some took it as bullying. I didn't, because—, possibly I was just too young to grasp it all. For me it was fun. After four weeks—, yes, it lasted four weeks until we got our room furniture, and very slowly each day, a new uniform, then boots, and then the next day the rifle. In any case, that took about four weeks, until we were complete soldiers in appearance [laughs]! And then the exercises started. I want to state in advance that we had three months' probation. So, after three months, in these three months one could go back home, if you didn't like it.

L.H. If one didn't like it, or could they send someone away, if—?

K.S. Well, they could send someone away, and I could leave, too.

- L.H. One could choose.
- K.S. Oh yes. But only for three months. After three months, that was over. Then there were in fact the four years that one had to commit to. That was in effect after three months. Well, in any case: I stayed. It was fun for me! I was good at sports, and it was fun for me.
- L.H. Was Dachau then already a camp for prisoners, or was it more of a training camp for young soldiers?
- K.S. No, no. That was nearby. The concentration camp was nearby. But [this is] not where we were.
- L.H. And you knew that there was a camp there, for political enemies, and—
- K.S. We knew that. We saw the prisoners walking [past] every day! Early every day, from the KZ [concentration camp] there, the prisoners were guarded by the support unit [*Verfügungstruppe*]. The support unit then afterwards, during the war, became the Division Brandenburg. That was purely an engineering unit, the Brandenburgers. And they were there as an SS support unit. They guarded the concentration camp. Had their own entrance, about a kilometre away from us. And then early in the morning came the—
- L.H. They were the guards from the camp?
- K.S. They were the guards from the camp. And they always sent the prisoners somewhere on work assignments. Either to the fields, or somewhere to construction. So, they were always there, and in the evening they came back to the camp. And we were about, no, maybe we were 400 metres away from them.
- L.H. And the prisoners, were they political [prisoners]? The whole story with the Jews hadn't yet begun.
- K.S. There were also Jews there.
- L.H. There were already Jews there?
- K.S. They were already there.
- L.H. Before 'Kristallnacht'? 'Kristallnacht' only happened in November '38.
- K.S. Yes, in Austria. But the Jews were already there.
- L.H. They were already locked up?
- K.S. They were already locked up.
- L.H. That was very early! We're talking now of April and March and May '38.
- K.S. I only know that, because our police commander was also a Jew, and he was sent there right away. I even saw him there outside.

- L.H. Where?
- K.S. In the camp.
- L.H. In Dachau?
- K.S. Yes, on the way to work.
- L.H. The [former] police chief.
- K.S. He was the [former] chief of police from here. From Bad Gastein. Oh, what was his name, I don't remember. He had a-, if I'm not-, a kind of Czech name. But I can't remember it.
- L.H. And he was a Jew, and he very early, shortly after the *Anschluss*–
- K.S. He was arrested shortly after the *Anschluss*.
- L.H. Before the whole thing started with 'Kristallnacht'?
- K.S. Yes, please, I'm not really sure.
- L.H. Maybe [you could] look into it.
- K.S. But he was put away right after they took power.
- L.H. Did he express his opposition, or had they taken him away because he was a Jew?
- K.S. I really can't say. I was already out when I saw him. I can't say for sure. But why he was put away–. I almost think–, or it can also be, because he was a member of the *Heimwehr*, he was with the other side. But it–, he was with the *Heimwehr*, and maybe that's why he was imprisoned. But I believe rather as a Jew, because he was a Jew.
- L.H. You couldn't speak with him, or you didn't encounter him there.
- K.S. I only saw him, how he went to work with a work commando. One wasn't allowed to speak with anyone. That was what I wanted to say about the concentration camp. I still remember that a train line went through our barracks courtyard to one side, between two, between the Brandenburgers and ourselves. And it went directly into the concentration camp. I don't know, but I believe, when I was there, that every month a train came through. If that was provisions or what, it was all in closed train cars. So, I can't say, if prisoners were transported with it or what, I don't know. But I know that a direct train connection went into the camp.¹⁹

European perspectives

War and occupation enlisted and at times enthused local populations for the Nazi cause, which could mean different things depending on the context: liberation, the prospect of independence, material benefits, a sense of belonging, even fulfilment, or witnessing of Nazi crimes.

52. Ethnic Germans welcome their 'liberation' in Czechoslovakia:
'we were Germans, after all'

Edith S. (E.S.), born 1924 in Yugoslavia, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 88. The family moved to Neutitschein (Nový Jičín) in the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia, in 1926. The family changed their Czech name to German after the annexation of the Sudetenland. Her father was director of a hat factory. Edith S. was in the League of German Girls (BDM). She did her Reich Labour Service (RAD) and left school with a secondary school diploma. She worked at the SS Office for Race and Settlement as a secretary from 1941 to 1944, initially in Neutitschein, then Reichenberg and Fulnek. She fled from the Red Army to Munich. See also [excerpt 46](#).

Edith S.'s father was the director of a hat factory. Austrian culture was very important for the family. Her parents were initially enthusiastic about the 'liberation' from the Czechs, but that changed when the Germans treated them like 'illiterates' who had to be educated.

E.S. I wasn't at all enthusiastic [about the arrival of the Germans in 1938]. At first, yes: liberation from the Czechs! We were Germans, after all. From the Czechs—. My goodness, Hitler, great! Later, we no longer said that. That's how it was. 'Home into the Reich!' To Germany! After a year, we said: 'That's enough.' Yes, they treated us as though we were illiterate. 'We have to teach these people the basics.' That's how they are—, they have their 'facade', we always said. The SA. They were always in sort of yellow uniforms. Their facade! They believed they must first teach us culture. Like this [raises her fists]! We weren't keen on that. That was the general mood.

L.H. How quickly did that go? Did this enthusiasm in—

E.S. Very early indeed. Very early. When, in 1938, as we were freed, so to speak, as Hitler called it, and Austria also, all of Austria. Austria was also no longer enthusiastic afterwards.

L.H. But was it spoken of as a liberation among people?

E.S. At first, yes. Liberated from the Czechs! And afterwards we realised: the Czechs had given us more freedom than we later saw from Hitler. That was in the border regions.

L.H. That was in '38, in October, this so-called liberation, as they saw it.

E.S. Yes, exactly. Oh, we welcomed them! The soldiers were also nice to us, there were no issues there [laughs]! The evil part was the

politics. Above all, we really had, some of us – they treated us as though they had to teach us culture. You can probably imagine how quickly the enthusiasm disappeared.²⁰

53. Polish and German ancestry: 'I became more and more German'

Edmund K. (E.K.), born 1925 near Zgorzelec, Poland, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 in Argentina at the age of 85. He had a Polish father and a German mother. He was in the Hitler Youth and started an apprenticeship with the railways, but then volunteered for the paratroopers aged 16, serving in Russia from the age of 17 as a signal technician. He was captured by US troops and offered the opportunity to join the Polish army, subsequently working for the military police in Italy. He got married and moved to Argentina in October 1947 where he became a medical doctor. He wrote a book about his experiences.

Edmund K. became enamoured with German discipline and unspecified National Socialist ideas, which he continues to defend. This surprises Holland, who asks if he is 'serious', caught off-guard by this admission, given that most of his interlocutors carefully distance themselves from National Socialism. Edmund K.'s discussion on the relationship between National Socialism and antisemitism, and his own views, is vague, though he concedes that antisemitism was fundamental to National Socialism. His infatuation may partly stem from his dual heritage, finding a sense of belonging in Nazi Germany. Emigrating to Argentina after 1945 may have contributed to his retention of this identity. This is true also for his unusual admission of being a National Socialist, as he was less exposed to German memory discourses.²¹

E.K. I am the son of a Polish man and a German woman. From the very beginning I spoke Polish and German. With different-. Sometimes I spoke more Polish, sometimes more German. That depended on whether I visited my grandmother, my mother's mother. Then I spoke more German. If I wasn't there for a longer period, I spoke more Polish. But I felt I was a Pole, until the beginning of the war, when my father, who was a Polish policeman, had to go east, with the [Polish] security forces. My mother, who was German – during the First [World] War she had worked in a military hospital – was immediately employed by the German administration, which forced me to join the Hitler

Youth. I was 14 years old when the war began. My birthday was on 1 September, and the war began on 1 September. When I joined the Hitler Youth, I noticed what a big difference there was between what was offered to young people in Poland and what the administration offered young people in Germany. And I became more and more German. I am an enthusiastic glider pilot. I wrote a request, sent it off, and four weeks later I was inducted into a glider school, with a train ticket, all paid for. I didn't have to pay a penny myself. I liked the sense of order in Germany. You could for example leave your bicycle in the street for 14 days. Nobody touched it. This order and discipline filled me with such enthusiasm that I became a German. A dedicated German. My mother, she always saw me as a bureaucrat. To her, officialdom was the greatest thing that existed. Although I wanted to take the exam and go to university, I had to bow to her will, and I became an apprentice with the railways. I didn't like it, and with 16 and a half years I joined the German paratroopers.

L.H. As a volunteer?

E.K. Paratroopers were always volunteers. It was an elite outfit, a division at the time, and consisted entirely of volunteers. At the age of 17, I already fought in Russia. The whole war, everything I experienced, is in this book here. When the war was over, we were in a POW camp. There were about 250,000 POWs. And we were sorted by the units we belonged to in the German *Wehrmacht*. For example, the first paratrooper regiment was together, the artillery regiment was together. And one day we got the order from the Americans that all those born in Poland and wanted to join the Polish army should report. I asked the commander of my regiment what he thought about that. He said: 'If you want to go, just go.' So I joined the Polish army. It was the second corps of the 8th British army. The corps of General Anders. I was allocated to the military police. I did the police training course in Italy. Military training was not needed, we all were soldiers, experienced fighters. But the police was something different.

[...]

E.K. When you say 'I'm a National Socialist' then the people automatically think that I'm antisemitic. That's why I explained this to you, to show you that with me there's no anti-ism at all.

L.H. Would you also describe yourself as a National Socialist? That's what you just did. Did you mean that, or—?

- E.K. I, uh-. The idea, also the order, for example the order in the streets, I was so enthusiastic about all of that that I'm still holding it with this regime. If you want to call it National Socialism or anything else: this system, as it was at that time, I approve of that. I am, for example, against the system that we have today in Argentina.
- L.H. Are you still for Adolf Hitler?
- E.K. I'm not for Adolf Hitler, Adolf Hitler is dead. But I'm for the way he organised the country. I'm for that. Whether it's Hitler or somebody else. An organisation like that, I approve of that.
- L.H. Are you for the race politics of the National Socialists?
- E.K. No, no.
- L.H. Can you be a National Socialist, a Nazi, and-?
- E.K. No. Nazis and National Socialists are two different things!
- L.H. So: Can one be a National Socialist and-, well, all Nazis were National Socialists, but that doesn't mean that all National Socialists were Nazis. One can, however, be a Nazi without being in the Party.
- E.K. Yes.
- L.H. I have also met people who said to me: 'Mr Holland, I joined the Party, but that doesn't mean that I was a convinced Nazi. I had to do that in order to keep my job.' It's complicated. But to return to my question: Is it possible to be a National Socialist and friendly to the Jews?
- E.K. Yes, it is.
- L.H. Yes?
- E.K. Yes, certainly. But when one is a National Socialist, that means that one supports the politics of the National Socialists. That you identify with them. And a cornerstone of National Socialism was, indeed, antisemitism.²²

54. Living close to Struthof: 'depending on the wind direction, one could smell more'

Lucienne H. (Lu.H.), born 1927 in Alsace, France, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 84. She talks about the Struthof concentration camp and German soldiers lodging in her family's home.

Lucienne H. focuses on the crimes committed at nearby concentration camps in Alsace. By boarding German soldiers, her family was drawn into the war effort. Holland seems surprised by her assertion that they were aware of killings and gassings at the Struthof concentration

camp, with the smell of burning flesh a visceral sense memory. She does not feel implicated by German crimes and can be open about this; it is also possible that she filled in the gaps of her knowledge at the time with what she has learned about Struthof since.

Lu.H. We knew [about] it during the war. We already knew that gas–, yes, yes. And the smell [points to her nose], I can still smell it.

L.H. Pardon?

Lu.H. I can still smell it [points to her nose].

L.H. You can still smell it.

Lu.H. Yes. It was terrible. Sometimes, some days: *oh là là*. As though they burned meat. These poor people. These poor people. [...]

L.H. That is interesting. I only wanted to say: now one knows, if one sees the files, and there is proof, and the people can talk without fear. But you're saying that they were already informed, here in the area, about the destruction and the burning [of bodies] during the war.

Lu.H. Yes, yes. We already knew [about that]. Because of the way they [were forced to] work. How the prisoners worked paving the streets. [...] That's how one knew. Depending on the wind direction, one could smell more [or less]. I was young, but I remember it very well. It was terrible. Terrible! And then we didn't dare any more–. We always went for walks. We used to go for walks in Struthof. It was just a stroll. But we could smell it! They called: 'Hello!' We weren't allowed to walk any more.

L.H. Why?

Lu.H. Well, they were afraid that we would see something. The gas chamber and everything.

L.H. How near did you come to Struthof on these walks? How far were you from the fence? Were you very close or far away? A few hundred metres, or–

Lu.H. Yes, maybe a few hundred metres. We couldn't go any further.

L.H. What did you see on this stroll? Can you remember?

Lu.H. They were completely new barracks. How the guards sat there. There were several barracks. They ate there, and then there were some barracks. We also saw those who left in the cars. Oh, yes. These poor people. Someone from the village was killed there.²³

55. Belgian volunteer legion: 'the Flemish National Party asked their members to report for the fight against communism'

Oswald O. (O.O.), born 1924 in Belgium, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) over two days in 2012 at the age of 87. His father was active in the Flemish National Movement. Oswald O. was a member of the General Flemish Youth Association (AVNJ). He volunteered at the start of 'Operation Barbarossa' for a Dutch volunteer legion, the *Freiwilligenlegion Flandern*, which was incorporated into the *Waffen-SS*. He became a war correspondent and was wounded three times. He trained in Poland and East Prussia and fought in the East from November 1941. After attending an officer school in Bad Tölz in 1944, he was promoted to the SS rank of a second lieutenant and led a youth company at the end of the war at the Oder. Oswald O. lived in Germany under a false identity for four years but later returned to Belgium and served one year in prison. His father, who had worked for German counter-espionage, died in prison, following a conviction for denouncing partisans. Oswald O. worked for a construction company after his return to Belgium, later in politics, and since retirement he has been engaged in social work. See also [excerpt 131](#).

In Belgium, the promise of independence in return for fighting bolshevism attracted volunteers who signed up to fight. Oswald O. insists that his unit was incorporated into the *Waffen-SS* involuntarily, and he also defends and maintains the honour of his unit.

O.O. The German occupying forces made an agreement here with the Flemish National Party, and asked: 'Do you want to set up a Flemish volunteer legion against communism?' 'Yes!' Of course, from the German side that was a kind of blackmail. They said: 'If you fight with us against bolshevism then you'll get your independence after the war. You must fight for your independence on the Eastern Front.' That's why the leadership of the Flemish National Party asked their members to report for the fight against communism. Of course that was a kind of blackmail, wasn't it. But on the other side it was a voluntary mission against bolshevism and for our Flemish independence. As soon as the war with Russia started, I volunteered. I was 17 years old when I went to the front, to the German *Wehrmacht*. The agreement was: Flemish legion, Flemish officers, commands in Flemish, and so on. Then we went to Poland by train and we arrived at the training ground. These legions knew nothing about what had been agreed. There was

only *Waffen-SS*. And they said: 'You're all part of the *Waffen-SS* now.' We said: 'We don't want that. We volunteered for the Flemish Legion, not for the *Waffen-SS*.' They said: 'If you don't want to be part of the *Waffen-SS* then you can go over to the Dutch.' Because the Dutch already had a legion in Poland. Then I said: 'I'm not joining the *Waffen-SS*.' And I went over to the Dutch. I became part of the Dutch Legion. But the Flemish leadership, which had signed the agreement with the Germans, was disappointed. The Flemish leader then went to Berlin, or wherever, and tried to straighten out the situation. Then there was a kind of compromise. The Flemish Volunteer Legion was set up, with a stripe on the sleeve saying, 'Flemish Volunteer Legion' and the Flemish lion. But we were incorporated into the *Waffen-SS*. That's what Himmler did in the war with all foreign troops. Himmler wanted more and more power, and incorporated all these foreign volunteers into the *Waffen-SS*. There were Muslims in the *Waffen-SS*, there were Indians, there were Russians, there were Englishmen: it was a multiethnic army, all coming under the name *Waffen-SS*. Naturally that was our misfortune after the war, that we had been inducted into that against our will.²⁴

Women in Nazi organisations, German society, and war and occupation

While they were subordinated to men in the Nazi gender hierarchy, some women were able to find interesting, even prestigious work during the war, including in Nazi organisations or at firms connected to the war effort.

56. Cooking for Goebbels: 'I supervised all the personnel'

Erna J. (E.J.), born 1919 in the Brandenburg region, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 91. Protestant. Her father worked on an estate and was later drafted into the *Volkssturm*. She moved to Berlin in 1936, where she worked as a chef in a care home for elderly women from the nobility and later as a lady's companion. She was the chef and home economist for the Goebbels family in their home on the outskirts of Berlin, from 1943 until quitting due to heart problems. Erna J. fled from the Red Army from February 1945. Her fiancé died in Leningrad (Saint Petersburg).

Discussing her assignment as the chef and home economist for Joseph Goebbels and his family, Erna J. focuses on some of the more mundane details of the position. Her storytelling is detailed, focusing on what was in her own purview, such as her ingenuity in making a replacement for whipped cream during wartime, with the below an abridged version from a much longer excursion. She condemns Magda Goebbels as a ‘fanatic’ over the murder of her children, suggesting she primarily holds Magda Goebbels responsible, possibly due to particular notions of motherhood or sympathy for Joseph Goebbels. Erna J. ends the interview citing tiredness, potentially avoiding the distressing topic of the murdered children she cared for, showing an uncharacteristic brevity. Notably, she calls the Nazi intelligence service (*Sicherheitsdienst*, abbreviated as SD) the *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, which was the security service in the GDR. This reflects post-unification debates around Germany’s ‘two dictatorships’ and indicates that the GDR serves as a way of interpreting the Nazi past, and vice versa, for Germans who lived in the GDR after 1945.

E.J. I had to go to the employment office. We had an employment book listing one’s training. I had to request a change, from lady’s companion to office clerk. I came to the employment office and then the official said to me: ‘You are a chef by profession. Goebbels is looking for one. You must go there.’ I say: ‘I wouldn’t consider it! I’m not going there.’ Well, to be brief, to get to the point, I got three summons that I should present myself to Frau Goebbels. And the fourth one worked, because [it threatened]: ‘We can also take other steps.’ So I went to Frau Goebbels, in the ministry. Well, and then I was hired. And every four weeks I handed in my notice. But the notice was never accepted. Despite that, I had a very nice time there. We lived outside, what was it called? Waldhof am Bogensee. Near Wandlitz. In the middle of the forest.

L.H. On the Bodensee?

E.J. Bogensee.

L.H. Waldhof am Bogensee. The Goebbels family had a house there.

E.J. No, there was a–, what was it now? A farm estate that belonged to the city of Berlin and was allotted to Goebbels for his use.

L.H. How far is that from Berlin? Where was that exactly?

E.J. Yes, well, do you know where Bernau is? It’s next to Bernau. One kilometre? I can’t tell you exactly. From there I was driven by the courier car.

- L.H. And the Goebbels family already had all the children by then?
- E.J. Yes, the six children were still there. [...] I have the pictures of the children from that time.
- L.H. You can show them to me later.
- E.J. Good. We have to stop soon, I–
- L.H. What was your job there?
- E.J. Chef and housekeeper. I supervised all the personnel and was responsible for everything. Spent 14 days there with my predecessor. I was supposed to be trained [by her], and I saw how badly she cooked! Even the children noticed that. I learned a lot from the Criminal Police, they were the SSD [*sic*: *Sicherheitsdienst* – SD]. They didn't volunteer for the SSD [*sic*]. They were in part police officials, who were transferred to the SSD [*sic*], *Staatssicherheitsdienst*. I had a conversation with one of them, he was already 40 years old. His wife had a baby, a little girl, and the wife wanted very much for the child to be baptised. That wasn't possible as a Nazi. As he was with the SSD [*sic*] now. He told me that. I said: [...] 'Your wife is in Berlin on her own every day. She can do what she wants. It's none of your business.' Then he understood what I had said, and said: 'So, my child will be baptised [laughs]. No one needs to know if I let my child be baptised, if I find it necessary.' Yes, I have to say: I didn't go there gladly, but I got on very, very well with people. The children loved me. When one of the children had a birthday, then each child was allowed to invite one other child. Then I made ersatz whipped cream. There wasn't any back then. Whipped cream. See, it was like this. Many people said to me: 'Oh, you sat right at the source.' No! We lived the way Goebbels had promised! He didn't see to it that there was extra to eat, for us, for him. We lived from our ration cards, like any normal citizen. I wasn't a Nazi; I still stick to that. Although these days I sometimes think it would be good, if everything was put in order the way the Nazis did it then. I wasn't very happy to be there. And, as I said, I gave notice every four weeks. But the notice wasn't–, but the children wanted ersatz whipped cream, that's what I just wanted to tell you about. I don't remember how it was made. I only know that skimmed milk was cooked with flour, and then whisked. Back then they didn't have these electric mixers that we have today.
[...]
- L.H. How did you get the news of what happened with the Goebbels family?

- E.J. Well, on the radio, because the war was over. Via the German radio, no? There came the *Volksempfänger* [lit. 'people's receiver'; radio]. Only we didn't call it the 'people's receiver', rather we called it 'Goebbels' mouthpiece'.
- L.H. Were you shocked by this news?
- E.J. No, I was only sad. I was very, very sad. I was so sorry for the children. The parents should have killed themselves, but let the children live. Because Quandt, her first husband, would have taken care of the children. And Grandma Bern, who was [Magda Goebbels's] mother, she would also have looked after the children. [The grandmother] was supposed to be poisoned with them. They were out in—, where they had the villa, Schwanenwerder. A soldier came to pick her up. But she must have bribed him so much on the way, that he let her go. And that's why she wasn't poisoned with them.
- L.H. You wonder: how is it possible for a mother and a father to poison their own children?
- E.J. Yes.
- L.H. That was also unbelievable for you, because you knew the Goebbels family?
- E.J. It was unbelievable to me. But when I heard it—, I know how fanatical she [Magda Goebbels] was about the Party. On the other hand, I looked at the children, they weren't in any party. And Göring's daughter, she also stayed alive. They could have [too], the children. The two parents could have killed themselves, as far as I'm concerned. But they could have let the children live. Yes, it's very sad. That moved me very much. When you know the children. And they were very loving. Never badly behaved or naughty. Not once. So, now you need to finish. Otherwise, I'll fall asleep right here!²⁵

57. Censorship: 'every article had to be presented'

Ursula S. (U.S.), born 1912 near Dresden, Germany, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2011 at the age of 98. Her father was a merchant and the director of a construction company. Ursula S. studied geography and cartography in Leipzig and attained a doctorate in 1938, subsequently working in the editorial department at Brockhaus (a publisher known especially for its German encyclopedia). She got married in late July 1943 and left paid employment in December 1943 when she got pregnant. Her husband died in the war in July 1944.

At Brockhaus, every article had to be approved by the *Reichsschrifttumskammer*. Ursula S. claims that the geography department was less affected by Nazi censorship and ideology. This is despite a *völkisch* orientation of the field of geography, the way in which the continent was racially mapped, how maps were redrawn, and how cartography was utilised in the quest for 'living space'.

U.S. Then in 1938 I got my doctorate, and still didn't really know [what I was going to do]. But shortly after that, my professor asked me if I was available, the company Brockhaus had approached him, asking whether he had a former geography student who could work in their editorial department. That was offered to me. I thought: That's a very good thing! And took the job very gladly, in 1939, and was then, as I said-. Yes, then the war started. Working was a little more difficult than in normal times. And now about the Nazi period: it was dictated from above, one must-. For us in geography, it was still alright. But every article had to be presented to the *Reichsschrifttumskammer* in Berlin. Every week our editor-in-chief had to go to Berlin and present new articles or revised pieces for approval. He fought very hard. He probably accomplished some things that others, possibly, would not have been able to do. He did it very skilfully. But that makes the work a little-. I could imagine that in peacetime it would have been more enjoyable and easier.

C.R. Could you give me an example of what was censored?

U.S. Honestly, I don't remember. Yes, in geography, there was, as I said, not much to change, to improve. But the philosophers and the German literature specialists had, of course, more difficulties, to see that they said nothing positive at all about past times, or whatever. No, it certainly wasn't easy. Some editors clearly had a harder time [than me]. But it worked out well for me!²⁶

58. Married to a Nazi supporter: 'I know that it's a contradiction'

Ilse R. (I.R.), born 1918 in Vienna, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 93. Catholic, but atheist before and during the war. Her mother was a devout Catholic. Her grandfather was an early member of the NSDAP. She worked for her father, who administered buildings. During the war she was a homemaker. She got married in 1939 and had a child in 1940. Her husband was a POW in Siberia from 1944 to 1946. See also [excerpts 29, 30, 42](#).

Holland confronts Ilse R. with her husband's erstwhile support for the Nazi regime. She had told Holland earlier in the interview that her husband's attitudes only changed when 'he discovered this thing with the shoes in Romania'. According to Ilse R., her husband had spoken to her about an incident while he was stationed in Romania building telegraphs. There, he saw a cart full of children's shoes. From this he concluded that the children had been murdered. He told her about this incident while on leave in 1943. He was now 'done' with the Nazis and permitted their son to be baptised. He had earlier left the Church but later rejoined.

Ilse R. acknowledges that it may be seen as a contradiction that she married a Nazi supporter despite her father's alleged anti-Nazi views. She presents her marriage and pregnancy as a means of escaping other wartime duties, thus stressing her agency. She claims that love, along with these practical reasons, helped her overlook her husband's Nazi convictions. In addition, she reassures both Holland and herself that her husband had been 'decent' and 'would never have committed a crime'.

L.H. If I remember correctly, you told me before that your husband was rather supportive of the Party. He was for the NSDAP until he discovered this thing with the shoes in Romania. That changed everything. But my question would be this: your father, you told me before, was rather against the Party.

I.R. Yes, 100 per cent.

L.H. But your husband was very much for the Party.

I.R. Yes, at first.

L.H. You also told me, if I remember correctly, that you were very influenced by your father.

I.R. Yes, quite. What my father told us always came true.

L.H. But you told me that your father had a big influence on you. Is that right?

I.R. Yes, definitely. He'd certainly had an effect on us! I remember my father as an intelligent man, and I respected his opinions! I knew: he knows what he's talking about.

L.H. My question is this: you respected your father. Your father's statements influenced you. But you fell in love with a Nazi and married him.

I.R. You mean, I married a Nazi, although—

L.H. It's only a question.

I.R. I know that it's a contradiction. Basically, you're right. It was, however, like this: my husband and I, we got to know each other

in this German school club, and my husband was my first love. I was very, very much in love. And his convictions didn't matter. The feelings were stronger. My father also didn't try to talk me out of my husband. He didn't do that.

L.H. He didn't?

I.R. No. He always said: 'F. is an upright person.' And he was [an upright person]. My husband was certainly decent. He would never have committed a crime or anything, he would never have done something like that. No, I don't think so. And his convictions were pretty much all the same to me because I was very much in love. Oh my, when you are young and have nothing but romance in your head. Then the war came–, was right ahead of us! When I married, the war had already started. I married in '39, as the war had already started. I wanted somehow–. It was, perhaps, a certain selfishness. I knew: if I'm married, perhaps if I become pregnant right away, then it will be easier for me to get through this war. Then I won't have to serve anywhere.²⁷

59. Enjoying advantages: 'I was somebody then!'

Theresia S. (T.S.), born 1917 in the Salzkammergut region in Upper Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 93. Catholic. Her father was a blacksmith. She worked at a tailor's shop from the age of 15. Her employer was a member of the NSDAP, and it is possible that she was also a Party member. She tried to hide from the Allies at the end of the war but was arrested and interned for one week at the former Ebensee concentration camp.

This excerpt is marked by Holland's confusion due to his misunderstanding of the period Theresia S. is referring to. While he asked her about the time after the *Anschluss*, she discusses the Allied occupation and the issues she faced because of her wartime position at a Nazi firm and her implied Party membership. The conversation includes back-and-forth exchanges until the misunderstanding is cleared up. Her Austrian dialect and vague descriptions of her involvement add to the confusion. However, this misunderstanding leads to a revealing moment where she candidly talks about the improved status she enjoyed during her employment, describing how she was 'somebody' then. This status had repercussions, as she was interned by the Allies at the end of the war at the former Ebensee concentration camp after initially trying to hide from them.

- L.H. So that was in '38, right after the *Anschluss*. What do you remember [about that]?
- T.S. One tried to get away because they immediately– [makes a gesture of grabbing something]. They nabbed everyone who was with the Nazis, and I had to be with the Nazis because the people I worked for, the L. tailors, were Nazis. Top Nazis! I had to, otherwise they would have fired me. Then I would have been without work. So I had to be part of it. My father said: 'Now go off to the farmers and stay there. Then you're out of the way.' Yes.
- L.H. What does it mean, 'being part of it'? I didn't understand that very well. What was the name of the family?
- T.S. The farmers?
- L.H. No, the tailors.
- T.S. L. There were many with that name here in Ebensee. That was the L. tailor.
- L.H. That's where you were employed.
- T.S. That's where I was employed.
- L.H. Was it a large firm?
- T.S. Yes, a nice firm. We had six helpers and three seamstresses.
- L.H. And you were an apprentice?
- T.S. Yes, I was only an apprentice. Then I became a helper, when I went out to the farmers. That's where he sent me, and he didn't know a thing.
- L.H. How long were you with L.?
- T.S. Ten years.
- L.H. When did you start working there?
- T.S. First I went to the sisters [nuns], to the *Josefhaus* [Catholic order]. There I learned how to cook. And a bit of tailoring, sewing. Then my girlfriend told me: 'We need a tailor. Can't you come as an apprentice?' I said: 'I'll ask Mother.' She said: 'Of course you can go!' So I became an apprentice and I stayed with them. I was fifteen years old. First the sisters. I'd left school at fourteen. First the sisters, then to the tailor.
- L.H. That means in '41, '42. No. '32. Beginning of the thirties.
- T.S. Yes.
- L.H. You were there for 10 years, until '42.
- T.S. Yes, yes.
- L.H. The war was already under way.
- T.S. Because the war came. I then left because I had joined them. They would have nabbed me. Because I was part of it.

L.H. You have to explain that better. I don't understand it. Why would you have been nabbed? I simply don't understand it.

T.S. Because I was with the Nazis.

L.H. What?

T.S. With the Nazis? How do you say? The National Socialists.

L.H. Where were the Nazis?

T.S. Here, in Ebensee. He was a great Nazi, my boss. And I was employed there. So I had to be part of it. Otherwise, he would have fired me.

L.H. But working for a Nazi at the time doesn't mean you would have had problems.

T.S. But of course!

L.H. You were only employed as a tailor.

T.S. You don't have a clue! They came to get me, and I went off to the farmers. They didn't know anything, and father never told them anything.

L.H. Frau S., more slowly please, otherwise I can't follow. Please try again.

T.S. It was like this: they would have caught me like the others, because I was the woman who wrote to—. It's just that I was part of it. I'm sure you understand. I was part of it.

L.H. What does it mean in this case, part of it?

T.S. I was with the Nazis [beats her hand several times].

L.H. But only as an employed worker.

T.S. Correct.

L.H. Did you share your boss's political views?

T.S. My views didn't matter.

L.H. Pardon?

T.S. My views didn't matter. That is beside the point. What is important is that I was part of it. Then I went off to the farmers, as I told you already, there I went into hiding, and that's where they found me. One of them came to get me and did—. I had to walk up to the KZ [concentration camp], to the men there and the sick.

L.H. Can you repeat that once again, in a German I can understand. Tell me again what you just explained.

T.S. A man came to get me.

L.H. Where did he get you?

T.S. From the farmer. He found me.

L.H. How did he find you?

T.S. No idea! Nobody knew about it. And he found me. Somehow, they must have heard that I was out there.

L.H. They must have heard. Somebody must have talked.

T.S. Oh sure! And then they came to get me.

L.H. At night? Can you briefly describe—

T.S. No, it was daytime.

L.H. Who came to get you?

T.S. [...] what was his name? [The man] who came to get me. Gosh, no. I don't remember his name. And he brought me back.

L.H. Back where?

T.S. To Ebensee, to my mother. Mother cried, and all that. Then I had to walk up there. Nothing else I could have done. I had to walk up there, to the—

L.H. Where to?

T.S. To the KZ.

L.H. But why would they lock you up in the KZ? I really didn't understand that.

T.S. Why I had to go to the KZ? Because I was part of it.

L.H. You're talking about the time after the war. When the Americans were already here.

T.S. Yes, yes, sure.

L.H. That's why.

T.S. Yes, sure.

L.H. I would like to go back to the war. We'll get to the Americans later. That's why I asked myself: why would you have problems because you worked for a Nazi? They were in charge here during the war. You didn't have any problems back then.

T.S. No. I didn't have any problems then. I was somebody then!

L.H. You were somebody then.

T.S. Yes, certainly. Because I worked there. Because they were bigwigs. You understand that.

L.H. Top Nazis.

T.S. Yes.

L.H. That means if you had a job, if you were employed by a top Nazi, then you were somebody. Is that correct?

T.S. Yes, very much so.

L.H. And what did that mean? What effect did that 'being somebody' have?

T.S. Well, you had benefits everywhere, and people would greet you in a very friendly way, the same it would be today, too. What do I know, whatever it was that I imagined as a young woman back then! I was nobody. Yes. I was poor. Then I—, when I had to enter the KZ, I just collapsed.

- L.H. Were you taken up to the KZ after the war?
 T.S. Yes.
 L.H. And how long were you there, locked up, too?
 T.S. No, I wasn't locked up.
 L.H. They just questioned you.
 T.S. Yes, they came to get me and took me up there. They didn't ask me if I wanted to go anywhere. They put me in a lorry and drove me up to the KZ. Out of town.
 L.H. And how long were you up there? Very briefly or—
 T.S. Around one week. Well, then they took me to see a doctor. It was tough. Fairly tough. Oh my, I don't want to think about it. I don't remember everything. How I collapsed. First, they took me back down, then I was home, who knows for how long. One or two days. And then I had to go back up. They didn't release me. Do you understand what I'm saying? Again, back in the car and again back up.
 L.H. And how long were you there? You just said, a week.
 T.S. Yes, I was up there for a week.
 L.H. You managed it well.
 T.S. I had to.
 L.H. Can we go back a bit, before the Americans— [tape ends abruptly].²⁸

60. Interesting work: 'I shouldn't say this, but it was a wonderful time'

Anneliese Tn. (A.Tn.), born 1922 near Krefeld, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 88. Her father was a commercial employee. She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). Following the *Volksschule*, she completed a three-year commercial apprenticeship and subsequently worked in local government, in the Food Supply Department, on the provision of food ration cards and accommodation for soldiers. After transferring to the head office, she was responsible for correspondence, including writing letters of condolence to families of fallen soldiers. Her brother died in the war. After the war, Anneliese Tn. worked for the occupying American forces.

She describes her wartime work as 'interesting' and acknowledges the many benefits it provided. She mentions the presence of Russian 'rural labourers' (presumably POWs or forced labourers), many of whom died. She inexplicably shares an episode from after 1945, where she refused to show a Russian man the burial site of these labourers, ostensibly out of fear of being taken away to Russia,

but perhaps inadvertently revealing her ideological commitment and possible involvement in forced labour administration. Anneliese Tn. further notes that those who did not join the League of German Girls (BDM) or Hitler Youth faced disadvantages, while Party membership was beneficial. Her previously claimed 'fear' of not joining the Party dissipates into a concern over losing privileges.

A.Tn. So, I shouldn't say this, but it was a wonderful time. It was a terrible time, right. But-, how should I express it? I liked the work. It was quite interesting. I also had advantages through [the work]. Yes.

L.H. What were the advantages?

A.Tn. Yes, how should I-. I must tell you about one other small thing. After the war-, it was directly after the war, there was a Russian officer with us one evening. At my boss's house. And then he asked if there were graves of Russian [forced] labourers at the cemetery, who at the time had been with the farmers. My boss said: 'Yes, there are some graves.' Then [the Russian officer] said: 'Could you drive me there one time?' Then the boss said: 'No, Frau K., she'll go with you.' He called me and said that I should go with him. 'No, I'm not doing that.' [...] I said: 'I don't want to be in Moscow this evening.' It was a joke. But I didn't go with him.

L.H. You could have shown him then where the graves were? Did you know that?

A.Tn. What, then?

L.H. He wanted to know where the graves were.

A.Tn. Yes.

L.H. There were-

A.Tn. Yes, yes.

L.H. Where they ended up. Those who died.

A.Tn. Yes. They were buried in our cemetery. That's what he wanted to know.

L.H. Did you know where the Russians were buried back then?

A.Tn. Yes, I knew that.

L.H. Did many Russians come here?

A.Tn. Pardon?

L.H. Were there many Russians? The prisoners who worked for the farmers?

A.Tn. No, there weren't that many.

L.H. Were they an important source of labour, these Russians? Because the young men were at war.

- A.Tn. Pardon?
- L.H. The young men were called up by the army, into the *Wehrmacht*, into the SS. That means then that there was a lack of labour. And the Russian workers replaced the young men. Did I express that properly? The Russian prisoners were required to work for the farmers. Is that right?
- A.Tn. Yes. And many died [nods]. But one had to participate. You can understand it only then.
- L.H. You're saying that one was required to participate. One basically had no—. Did one have to take part in it, back then? What did you mean?
- A.Tn. What, take part in it?
- L.H. You said, back then one had to participate in it. What did you mean by that?
- A.Tn. Well, if you were working for a public authority, you had to, so to speak, you couldn't step out of line.
- L.H. Step out of line?
- A.Tn. No, one couldn't do that.
- L.H. And what happened with those who tried to step out of line?
- A.Tn. No one dared to do that. I don't know anyone who would have done that. No, they were all afraid.
- L.H. Afraid of what?
- A.Tn. Yes, well. Hitler was still in power, wasn't he? It was very bad.
- L.H. But the way I understand it, from books and long conversations with other people, those who experienced it, some were very afraid, but others were also convinced National Socialists.
- A.Tn. Yes, many.
- L.H. Some weren't afraid at all. The opposite. They were happy to go along.
- A.Tn. Yes, certainly. There were some, they were in the Party, NSDAP, it was called, and had other views. But you had no choice.
- L.H. It was a long time ago! They were difficult times. Did you have to join the BDM? Were you inducted as a young girl?
- A.Tn. Yes, I was also in the BDM.
- L.H. And did all young girls have to join the BDM?
- A.Tn. Yes.
- L.H. Or could one say, 'I'd rather not!?' How did it go? Did one have a choice?

- A.Tn. Only very few. I want to be clear: they would have been at a disadvantage, see, if they had not joined the BDM or the Hitler Youth.
- L.H. What were these disadvantages?
- A.Tn. [shrugs her shoulders] I don't know how to say it. No, but it was much better, if they were in the Party! I know that my boss certainly wouldn't have joined out of conviction. One had to, otherwise he would have been let go.
- L.H. That meant then: if one wanted to keep one's job, according to you, one had to be in the Party.
- A.Tn. Yes. Yes.
- L.H. What would have happened to your boss, if he had left the Party-. He was a member of the NSDAP?
- A.Tn. Then they would have, I want to be clear-. My boss, he was a senior civil servant at the local authority. He would have lost his job right away. What they wouldn't do! You had to join the pack! [lit.: 'You had to howl with the wolves']
- L.H. That is an expression that I never heard before.
- A.Tn. You haven't?
- L.H. No, I'm learning new things every day. My German is slowly getting better through these conversations. Were your parents-, did your parents convince you to join the BDM? Did they say: 'Go ahead and join!'?
- A.Tn. No, we never talked about it.
- L.H. One didn't do that.
- A.Tn. I was in it, and I went on their outings. Working for the public authority, we had to be part of it. Our boss, the mayor, he often came in a brown uniform. He was 100 per cent-, what could you do? You couldn't break ranks.²⁹

61. Secretary to a convicted Nazi war criminal: 'I was not very mature at all really!'

Susanne D. (S.D.), born 1919 in Halle/Saale, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Iris Wachsmuth multiple times between 2009 and 2011. She was aged 90 when she was first interviewed. Educated at a *Lyzeum*, she was the secretary to Professor Joachim Mrugowsky at the Hygiene Institute of the *Waffen-SS* from 1939 to 1945.

Susanne D. continues to deny that human experiments in the camps fell under Mrugowsky's purview and maintains that their work at the Hygiene Institute was focused on finding a cure for typhoid and other diseases in the camps. She consistently defends Mrugowsky's character

and expresses how she was shaken by the verdict at the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial, where he was sentenced to death for his role in Nazi human experimentation. Susanne D. had written an affidavit in his defence, which was not used in evidence.

Holland showed particular interest in Susanne D., interviewing her in her Berlin retirement home around a dozen times. Her narration is rarely coherent, making the interviews challenging to follow. Holland often repeated questions and confronted her with information but without gaining further insights. Susanne D. is eager to discuss the past with Holland.

The two excerpts below, from two different interviews several weeks apart, are among the more coherent extracts. Still, she veers into tangents and muses about herself as a 'butterfly'. She seems unable to see Mrugowsky as a perpetrator, considering his 'idealism' as an argument against the possibility that he would have had any involvement in crimes. She also fails to recognise her own role, or why epidemics were rampant in concentration camps. Such denials from someone so close to Nazi crimes and ideology are hardly surprising, but they show quite how pervasive this type of response has been, seemingly regardless of proximity to and degree of involvement in Nazi crimes.

On the nature of the Waffen-SS Hygiene Institute

L.H. What was the primary task of the Hygiene Institute? What kind of work was done there?

S.D. We have, we had camps, prisoner camps and the like, where epidemics broke out, and the hygienist was the doctor, who had to treat the camp and had to destroy [the disease]. That's how the Hygiene Institute came to be. We had a whole lot of Polish camps and so on. There were all the camp doctors everywhere who just fought for people's health, didn't they? If later there were elements that were excessive—, I can't imagine it, because in the time I worked there, I didn't experience any kind of gross offences or anything like that. I don't know that. But probably they did occur. Then again, it was the case that Mrugowsky's nature was not malicious.³⁰

Idealism

S.D. I was for a long, for some time, then, Professor Mrugowsky's secretary. And Mrugowsky was also SS-*Oberführer*, I think. And we had the Hygiene Institute that Mrugowsky had built with assistants and assistant doctors, and so forth. And I was also there

with them as a secretary. And then came politically–, exactly when that was, I don't remember, that Mrugowsky was brought into the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial. And Mrugowsky was even hanged. Even though he was an idealist. That is the confusing thing, which I today–. Also, it's interesting when you come to reflect on these things that it's all history, what happened then. I was not very mature for my age at all, really! I had my positions, but the lows and the climate afterwards, again because of the conflict around me wanting to testify for Mrugowsky in Nuremberg, but I couldn't save him. And he had a family and four children. Back then, there was the so-called SS settlement. It was in Zehlendorf. They had these little houses there. So, that is a small area, that I still remember. But where repeatedly the tragic moments play out. This up and down, through which my world practically fell apart. And that is the curious thing, which I today now and then–, possibly set in motion through you, through these questions. That these issues that I had forgotten long ago are reawakened. Which is good. Because, I mean, for my 90 years, I've learned enough [laughs]! I'm not really inclined to still learn about history or anything like that. Or to somehow act self-important. That all happened in the past. About that, I am basically a little butterfly. It's easier that way. Because we can in no way turn back the clock or do things over better. We lived in it then and now we live today. And yes, today we can learn, we can take a good look at ourselves today. Look at America today and the development, and there the president [Barack Obama] interests me greatly. I like him.

L.H. You spoke earlier of 'tragic moments'. What did you mean by that? What did you want to say about it?

S.D. Yes, here, I mean the tragic–, the death of Mrugowsky, who was hanged. Who had nothing to do with the whole thing. Who lived in that time as did we all. The Americans, however, didn't understand that. That was the tragic thing. Mrugowsky's family stayed in Rathenow, he came from Rathenow, did his studies here, was financially somewhat constr–, he wasn't very rich, but was a great idealist in his profession, you see. And his family stayed in Rathenow. No, he came from Rathenow and his family stayed here in Zehlendorf in the settlement. I believe it was an SS colony. And his death was to me also a tragic thing, that I, on a human level–. I have worked through it. And today, when we talk about these things that entered into our lives, and into the present, still, we say, it happened. Our life goes on.³¹

Concentration camps and forced and slave labour

The Nazi regime built a wide network of concentration camps, subcamps, and labour camps, already before the start of the Second World War. Some of the German and Austrian camps were located close to towns and cities. The excerpts here highlight a range of ways in which people thought about and encountered the concentration camps in Germany and Austria, including in the capacity of a guard (see [excerpt 63](#)), a civilian worker (see [excerpt 64](#)), and a nanny looking after the children of a member of the SS and camp personnel ([excerpt 65](#)). Forced and slave labour was exploited across the German sphere of influence. In the *Reich*, jobs vacated by men conscripted into the army and additional workforce needed for the war effort were filled with forced and slave labourers.³² This could include people assigned to rural farms or urban factories; or factories attached to concentration camps. Thus forced and slave labour was ubiquitous, a fact few Germans and Austrians could claim to have been ignorant about. Some of Holland's interlocutors were aware of the terrible conditions the concentration camp inmates in particular were forced to endure (see [excerpt 68](#)). Others maintained that the forced labourers assigned to or requested by their families – on farms or estates – were well cared for (see [excerpt 69](#)). In the case of concentration camp inmates forced to work, some considered it just punishment for whatever 'crimes' had led to their arrest and imprisonment (see [excerpt 70](#)).

62. Perception of safety: 'we had very minimal crime here'

Edith Ba. (E.Ba.), born 1925 in the Brandenburg region, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Caroline Goldie (C.G.) in 2009 at the age of 84. Her father had been serving in the military since the Weimar Republic and regularly met with Hermann Göring. The family read the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi Party's newspaper. Edith Ba. was in the *Jungmädels* and the League of German Girls (BDM), and she attained the *Abitur*. During the war she served as a teaching assistant near Kraków. She regularly talks to young people about her experiences. See also [excerpts 6, 48](#).

Edith Ba. claims that she did not know what concentration camps were and that she had only heard about labour camps for criminals. Like many contemporaries, she marvels at the perceived safety in the streets during the Nazi period, thereby suggesting that the threat of arrest in a 'labour camp' deterred crime. This implies that these 'labour camps' were recognised as far worse than ordinary prisons, that she considered them

to be justified, and that she thought of the prisoners as criminals rather than individuals persecuted for political opposition, 'asocial' behaviour, or under racial laws.

Her claim is contradicted by her story about her father bringing home tomatoes from a concentration camp. Although she is talking about Oranienburg, she may actually be referring to Sachsenhausen as the Oranienburg camp closed in July 1934. The nonsensical story about sourcing metal on the black market in the Warsaw ghetto serves to sanitise these places while also implying a degree of criminality with regards to black market activity. She does not question why her father was at the camp or the Warsaw ghetto.

C.G. Did you see or hear or know anything about KZs [concentration camps] and the like in this whole time? About what happened there?

E.Ba. No. I'd never heard the expression KZ. That's how it was for many people. We heard that there were work camps for people who had somehow broken the law, criminals-. We had very minimal crime here, you could go through the Tiergarten [Berlin] at night or come home late. I walked from the opera, from the German Opera, very often all the way home and wasn't bothered by anyone. There was hardly any theft. They were all terribly afraid that they would be locked up, right? There was no more begging. In Berlin, we'd always had beggars at the door. It would ring constantly. The poverty was very high back then, as was the unemployment. Afterwards, that completely changed. No, so these were work camps, but we didn't know what that was like. My father came home once, I remember it still, but that must have been later, maybe '42, and brought a big bag of tomatoes with him and said: 'I have these from Oranienburg, from the work camp Oranienburg. They're growing tomatoes there.' That was a KZ. Of course, he hadn't seen the bad part. He had some business there, I don't know what. Later, he was also in the Warsaw ghetto, because the *Luftwaffe* had problems sourcing metal. They didn't have enough metal for their equipment. And there was a black market, according to my father, in the Warsaw ghetto, and you could buy it there. But it wasn't often or repeatedly. But those were things that one heard about.³³

63. Recognising a Jewish prisoner at Sachsenhausen: 'he hadn't done anything'

Karl-Heinz L. (K.L.), born 1921 in Mark Brandenburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in Berlin, Germany, in 2009 at the age of 88. The son of entrepreneurs attended the *Gymnasium*, was in the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth, and served in the *Wehrmacht* and the SS. He served at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp from 1 April 1938 until 1 March 1939. See also [excerpt 132](#).

While he was a guard at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Karl-Heinz L. recognised one of the inmates: a kindly Jewish man he knew, to whom he had sold stamps several years before, and who was likely arrested and imprisoned during 'Kristallnacht'. Karl-Heinz L. claims that he was outraged by the man's imprisonment, but insists that he had to keep his mouth shut or face consequences. Somewhat surprisingly, Holland ends the interview at this point rather than asking any further follow-up questions; it is unknown whether this was because of prearranged timings, tiredness, or other reasons.

- L.H. So you were how long-. When did you move to Sachsenhausen?
K.L. I arrived on 1 April 1938, and I was let go on 1 March 1939.
L.H. You worked as a guard in Sachsenhausen for 11 months.
K.L. I was there for 11 months. The first two months were basic training. Three weeks each month we had military training and one week of guard duty. It was always [one week per] battalion. That, that, and that. There were four battalions. It was our turn every fourth [week], once a month. You had to have been there for a couple of months to have enough experience. [...] One time I saw a man, I say [to a friend]: 'I know him. He bought some stamps from me for the *Deutsche Nothilfe* [German Emergency Aid]!' And I wanted to go over to him. He hadn't done anything wrong at all! But a friend held me back and said: 'You idiot! Haven't you noticed yet what's going on here?' That was Mr W. Well, that was that. After 11 months, I was back home.
L.H. Mr W. was-
K.L. In the striped suit.
L.H. And he was-
K.L. He was, he stood in front-. With others, he stood in front of the camp gate, waiting to be selected. And there I, 15 metres away, I recognised him right away. But didn't go over to him after all. That would not have ended well for me [laughs]!

- L.H. What was Mr W. doing there? Why did he stand in front of the gate?
- K.L. He was being selected for some work or other.
- L.H. But why was he sent to Sachsenhausen?
- K.L. I can't tell you that. Probably [because] he was a Jew. Yes. See? That's when it started. That's also in my book. First, they had a red triangle and a brown triangle and 'workshy' or 'political' and suddenly, yes, lots of Stars of David.
- L.H. So you saw a man, a Mr W., in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp whom you had known before the war. Already earlier, the war had not even begun.
- K.L. Yes, that's true. I did not know anything about the camp. It is somewhat off to the side. It was not right in the middle of town. If you drove through Sachsenhausen, you didn't see any of it.
- L.H. What did you think of that? You see a man that you knew from civilian life and who you thought had bought stamps from you.
- K.L. At school we got stamps, that was in 1932. They were a little more expensive, around two or three *Pfennig*, and we wanted to sell them, they were for the *Deutsche Nothilfe*. And I think it was him. He said: 'Go on then, show me what you've got, young man!' He pushed the cloth-scrubbed table to the side and chose his stamps. He was probably inspecting the notching. And bought one of each type of stamp from me. And that was more than if he had only bought a two-*Pfennig* stamp or a six-*Pfennig* stamp. Which would have been enough for a postcard at that time. That was a big win for me.
- L.H. And now you see Mr W., the same man, in that kind of striped—
- K.L. Yes, in prisoner's clothes. And he had a Star of David here, in two colours. Yellow and, I believe, brown. One yellow triangle and one brown triangle. And that is how we knew that he was a Jew. He hadn't done anything illegal or anything, not a thing. Although one of my comrades said, 'All of the prisoners know what they are in here for.' Naturally, you could take that whichever way you wanted. At 16 you don't understand everything. I turned 17. At 17, I was released.
- L.H. Did you ask yourself the question: 'What is Mr W. doing here?'
- K.L. He hadn't done anything.
- L.H. Did you then—. Now, of course, you can reflect on it. But what did you think about it then? Here is a man whom I used to know; he bought stamps from me. And suddenly, here he is with these stripes.

- K.L. [I thought] that it was outrageous that they locked him up. We didn't agree with that. As you can imagine. But in the thick of it [shakes his head] you hold your tongue, at 16. I'm sorry. But that's how it was. Anything else would be absurd.
- L.H. Keep quiet, then.
- K.L. Yes, yes. Keep your mouth shut. Shut up!
- L.H. And everyone kept quiet?
- K.L. Yes. Everyone, everyone kept quiet.
- L.H. No exceptions?
- K.L. Well, I don't remember anyone revolting against it. But people were not in agreement. But they did it. It was ordered, and an order must be obeyed. Or else.
- L.H. They did it or 'we did it'?
- K.L. We-, well, the whole group. No. I know when we cleaned our rifles in the evening or had clean and repair time, then we chatted. Then we talked among ourselves.
- L.H. Thank you, Herr L. I'll end [the interview] here. End of tape 1 with Herr L., here in Berlin on 21 August 2009.³⁴

64. Stonemasonry apprenticeship at a concentration camp quarry: 'slowly, if there were a few dead bodies, one got used to looking at them'

Franz S. (F.S.), born 1925 in the Mühlviertel region of Upper Austria, interviewed twice by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 85. The son of a barrel-maker, Franz S. attended the *Volksschule* and *Hauptschule*. In 1939, he was assigned to a three-year stonemasonry apprenticeship at the quarry at the Gusen concentration camp from the age of 14, working for the Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH Werk Mauthausen Ober-Donau. Franz S. was conscripted in 1943, trained in Vienna and the Netherlands, and sent to Dnipropetrovsk in Ukraine. He was captured by the Red Army and was a POW in the Soviet Union. See also [excerpt 115](#).

The excerpts below are taken from two different interviews. Recalling the maltreatment of prisoners and gas vans at the Gusen concentration camp makes Franz S. emotional. The first excerpt indicates that he sought to make sense of his experiences, rationalising how he learned to look away, pretended not to notice, and got used to seeing dead bodies. In the second excerpt, he describes a selection of prisoners, including a woman and her two granddaughters, and the brutality of the SS guard. He claims that his impulse was to intervene on their behalf, but that he felt unable to do so. He imagines himself in this situation, trying

to reassure himself that he, who now has a granddaughter of a similar age to the two girls, would not have acted in the same way as the SS man. His more recent experience as a grandfather is bringing the past to life again in ways that are discomfiting for him.

Initiation

L.H. May I ask: how did it affect you when you first came to Gusen? It was already a camp. There were already prisoners there.

F.S. Yes.

L.H. So may I ask: You came to this camp for the first time when you were 14 years old. What was your first impression? What do you remember? Can you describe the first day in Gusen, in the KZ [concentration camp], when you saw the prisoners, and saw what went on there? How did that affect you, and what did you see?

F.S. The striped clothes, a cap of sorts. I'd never seen anything like it. That was totally alien to me. My father observed how an SS guard kicked an inmate with his boots. He only told me about this later. He said: 'Didn't you see that, how he kicked him to the ground with his boots, like a football?' I said: 'No, I didn't see that.' 'That's good.' He was afraid that I would turn out like the SS man. Such a brute. I was completely overwhelmed. And then I started focusing more on cleaning. And if, let's say, someone was beaten up somewhere, I'd take a deep breath and walk away. Pretended not to notice. Because you'd fall apart if you-. And slowly, if there were a few dead bodies, one got used to looking at them. And when we looked, we noticed that the supervisor, said: 'Don't always look!' But not in an evil way, but because [close to tears] it breaks everybody's heart. And the prisoner just looks at you, as if he wanted to ask for something [with trembling voice]. You cannot help him. So we just went on. But that's not a life. And time passed.³⁵

Witnessing a selection

F.S. I once saw a transport, that was, I believe, in '41, in the autumn. There was-, the transport was about 200 metres long. And at the end was an SS man with a rifle, wearing a steel helmet, and in front of him were two girls and their grandmother. The two girls held hands. They wore coats and headscarves tied in the back, because it was already autumn. I almost wanted to ask if the two children belonged here. But I thought, no, otherwise he'll say: 'You come over here too.' They were still wearing normal

clothes. They were being taken to 'selection', as it was called, where they were sorted: this one can work and the other [can] no longer [work]. I say that, and it comes to memory now and again, because I now also have a grandchild, a girl the same height. The SS man, he was in charge. But there's no way I can imagine that I would threaten such a little girl with a rifle—. No. I still have that picture before my eyes.³⁶

65. Nursery nurse to SS family near Mauthausen: 'they killed so many people. We didn't go there often with the children'

Margarete S. (M.S.), born 1925 in the district of Melk in Lower Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 85 (see [figure 7](#)). She worked as a nanny for an SS man and his wife, who was employed in the Mauthausen concentration camp.

Margarete S. held this position for six years while the children's mother worked in the camp canteen and the father, a *Waffen-SS* armourer, served in Russia. Margarete S. left school early to take up this position, which perhaps offered more interesting prospects than she might have had otherwise. She describes how she went to the concentration camp for dental appointments: the dentist was a prisoner. She further speaks of the killing of Jews and the burning of the bodies, which could be smelled from afar. She also witnessed the prisoner escape dubbed the *Mühlviertler Hasenjagd* ('hare hunt') by the SS (not



Figure 7 Margarete S. in her home. Video Testimony (091F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 29 March 2011. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

the prisoners, as she claims), how the escapees were shot dead and their bodies were left out for several days. The *Mühlviertler Hasenjagd* occurred on the night of 1–2 February 1945 when around 500 mostly Soviet prisoners attempted to escape the Mauthausen concentration camp. Local police, home guard, *Wehrmacht*, and civilians joined the SS's hunt for the escapees, with most being caught and killed. Only 11 are thought to have survived.³⁷ Margarete S. is correct in stating that two of the escaped prisoners were hidden by a family in the market town of Schwertberg.

Margarete S.'s narration is matter of fact, and she seems somewhat excited about Holland's interest in her story, possibly looking forward to being featured in the news or a film. She answers Holland's questions with unusual openness, not seeming to consider how her responses might be perceived. She appears empathetic towards the escaped prisoners but harbours no resentment towards the SS families whose children she cared for. She also seems to feel no sense of guilt or unease about her proximity to these events, perhaps because she did not directly cause them or felt she had no agency in the process.

- L.H. May I ask you very briefly about your childhood. Where did you go to school?
- M.S. I was only in elementary school. Then, at 13, I left school because the farmer was drafted into the war. I quickly left school, because they needed girls to tend to the children. Then I worked there for a year. [...]
- L.H. At 13 you were already—
- M.S. I was already working, yes. In the school years.
- L.H. At 13. That is very young.
- M.S. That was during the war.
- L.H. Was that normal? Did that happen with other girls as well? Was it just you, or was it like that everywhere?
- M.S. The teacher had asked if we wanted to leave school because they need a nanny.
- L.H. They needed nannies, you say. Did you find a place quickly, or how did you manage that?
- M.S. Well, for one year I was a nursemaid, and then I was with an SS family for six years as a nanny, in the castle.
- L.H. In the castle near us.
- M.S. Yes. I was a nanny for six years. I looked after the children. Because the children's mother was in the camp canteen, worked there in the canteen. In the camp, in the KZ [concentration camp].

- L.H. And the husband?
- M.S. The husband was in the war. He was here first, then he went to Russia. He left. He didn't want to stay here, and he didn't kill any prisoners. He was an armourer.
- L.H. With the *Waffen-SS*?
- M.S. With the SS, yes. Armourer.
- L.H. What was the man called?
- M.S. Mulle.
- L.H. Müller?
- M.S. Mulle. His wife was in the camp canteen.
- L.H. And you worked at Frau Mulle's house?
- M.S. Yes, in the castle.
- L.H. What did you do all day? Look after the children?
- M.S. I looked after the children, three girls, and cooked. Everything. Cleaned!
- L.H. Were you happy? Was it hard work?
- M.S. Yes.
- L.H. Did you have a good relationship with your employer?
- M.S. Yes, a very good relationship. [They] were very nice people.
- L.H. They were nice people.
- M.S. Yes. They, the ones who lived in the castle, the families, they were all nice. And in my-, they all left, they didn't kill anyone. They all left. They weren't here, later. No one. Only one stayed.
- L.H. That means that the castle was used to house the families of the SS?
- M.S. Yes, there were six SS families. Seven including the [castle's] side wing.
[...]
- L.H. And you have-, you wanted to tell me a little about the camp here. The KZ Mauthausen. Did you interact much with the camp?
- M.S. No, not much.
- L.H. You visited it now and then.
- M.S. We visited the mother with the children. We visited the mother often, but not that much.
- L.H. When you said 'the mother', what do you mean? Where she worked, Frau Mulle?
- M.S. Yes, Mulle.
- L.H. You accompanied Frau Mulle to the KZ sometimes.
- M.S. Yes, we went with the children to see their mother. Yes, they wanted to be with the mother sometimes. She never came home. She slept there at the camp. She worked nights in the canteen.

- I also went to the cinema at the camp. The prisoners took care of my teeth. Made them straight.
- L.H. So that means that they had a dentist there.
- M.S. Yes. The prisoners were the dentists. They fixed my teeth.
- L.H. Was it a good dentist?
- M.S. Yes, [they] were all nice.
- L.H. Was he a—, where did the dentist come from? Which nationality?
- M.S. I don't know.
- L.H. Was he a Russian or a Pole?
- M.S. No, he spoke German.
- L.H. Maybe he was a German!
- M.S. Yes.
- L.H. And was he an employee or a prisoner?
- M.S. That was a prisoner. He was very nice, the prisoner. They killed only the poor and the Jews upon arrival, they went right into the gas chamber, and they burnt them right away. Then it stank. When they turned on the crematoria, then it smelled as far as the castle. They killed so many people. We didn't go there often with the children. I didn't go there often with the children. It wasn't like that. I could have gone to the cinema. They would have taken me with them. But who would have looked after the children? There were many children here. I also have a photo. I had more than 10, 15 children that I had to look after. The women all went to the cinema, and I had to take care of the children. But [they were] very nice people. From Dresden and Cologne.
- L.H. That means then, the women from the castle were at the cinema in the camp, and you were responsible for all the children of the women who were sitting in the cinema.
- M.S. I looked after 10 or 15 children. The house had two floors. Six apartments. I checked on each floor if they were asleep. And they all liked it that I stayed with them. The children were very sweet. They visited me 10 years ago. They were in Germany and visited me.
- L.H. That was after the war.
- M.S. Yes, long after the war. They'd already grown up.
- L.H. It's very nice that they remembered how you looked after them, so they weren't alone. So that means: the mothers, the wives of the SS men went to the cinema in the KZ. Was there a cinema in the KZ?
- M.S. Yes.
- L.H. I didn't understand that. Was there a cinema in the KZ?

M.S. A cinema, yes. I went often. To the cinema, to see the weekly news. And then they sang: 'Today Germany belongs to us and tomorrow the whole world.' There was an old man, Herr Mulle, the grandad. And he pounded on the table as they sang. It made him that happy. Then I said: 'That's not going to happen [laughs]!' They were from Carinthia. The parents of Mulle, who then went to Russia, the parents were from Carinthia. They were real Nazis. During the war, I was in Ried and bought meat. The Americans were already driving by with their tanks. We looked and thought: the tanks are coming. Then I cycled home very fast and said to them: 'You must take down the Hitler pictures now.' They had pictures of Hitler all over the walls. They thought I was imagining things because they didn't believe that the Americans had already come as far as Ried. They couldn't believe it.
[...]

M.S. The day [the prisoners] broke out, I went with my husband's brother—, he was on leave, he was in the navy. And his sister was in Mauthausen, in the cinema. And when we were back home, [the prisoners] broke out. At that time, we could have been overrun by the prisoners. I said to my mother: There's gunfire. And it was so bright. It was so cold. A cold night. It was so-and-so many degrees [Celsius]. Then we looked out of the window and saw how they were running around, fast. They only wore scraps for shoes. And then they went into a house where I'd been, by the woods is where the house was. I used to live there with my mother and my brothers and sisters. That's where the prisoners went. [...] They fed pigs and had a lard oven. And [the prisoners] ate it all up. That's how hungry they were. But they soon caught up with them, they shot them all [touches the back of her head]. They killed them, one by one. They lay there for eight days, and only then did the farmer [...] drive them to the camp. The escape of the Russians. The *Hasenjagd* [lit. hare hunt], they said, the prisoners.

L.H. Who called it a 'hare hunt'?

M.S. Well, it was the 'hare hunt' season at the time. When the Russians broke out. Prisoners.

L.H. Who used this expression, the SS, the farmers?

M.S. No, the prisoners themselves.

L.H. These Russians who came here to that house, they were given something to eat. Is that right? Did I understand that correctly?

M.S. Yes.

- L.H. And they were then all caught by the SS.
- M.S. Yes, in the camp. Some of them they shot right there, then drove them into the camp.
- L.H. Did you see how some of these prisoners were shot, or did you not see that?
- M.S. I certainly saw how they were lying there, dead, in the early morning. We didn't go outside because they'd been shooting. Didn't leave our flat. They ran directly up to the house by H.Se. woods, by the castle, that house. But there was also another house, a long one, that was just newly built. I lived there for 30 years, with my mother. Twenty years. Because I got married at 21.
- L.H. Is that the house, that one here, opposite from the castle, about 150 metres from here?
- M.S. Yes. The house by the woods. That's where they ate everything up: the pig feed, that was set up and the potatoes and everything. That's how hungry they were.
- L.H. And that's where they were caught, eventually.
- M.S. That's where they caught a few, yes.
- L.H. What kind of impression did that make on you? What did you think when you saw that? When you saw these people back then.
- M.S. That was really terrible. They were lying there for eight days, until they were taken away.
- L.H. They left them there for eight days. The corpses.
- M.S. The corpses, yes. It was winter. They delivered the others to the KZ with horse and cart. They burnt them there.
- L.H. Of the 500 Russians who broke out-. A hare hunt, you said.
- M.S. They called it the 'hare hunt'.
- L.H. How many survived?
- M.S. Not many got away. But in Schwertberg, a family hid a couple of them. You know that, don't you? They hid a couple [of the escaped prisoners] in Schwertberg with a family. Their people had been in Russia, those who hid them. They were lucky! If the SS had found out they hid those people, they would have shot them right away. Up at the castle was a barn, they also chased [the escaped prisoners] up there.³⁸

66. Reporting escaped camp inmates from Bergen-Belsen:
'we don't know what happened to them'

Heinrich Se. (H.Se.), born 1927 in Celle, Germany, interviewed twice by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 84. He was raised by his

grandparents, who had a farm and a small hauling business. He attended the *Grundschule* and *Mittelschule*, and he was a member of the *Jungvolk*. The family lived very close to the Bergen-Belsen army barracks and a few kilometres away from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

An excerpt from the interview with Heinrich Se. is prominently featured in Holland's *Final Account* as a stand-out scene, filmed on location at Heinrich Se.'s former family farm and its outbuildings. This setting makes his story about escaped prisoners seeking refuge in the barn vivid and tangible. It indicates how the inmates were perceived as criminals whose return to the camp was socially desirable, which could challenge viewers to reflect on their responses. In the excerpt presented here, Holland interviews Heinrich Se. at home, where he sits in an armchair in his living room, covering similar ground to their walkthrough of the former family farm. This raises attention to Holland's choices for the film and how the impact of this story might have differed had the at-home version been used. Heinrich Se. appears to smirk when recounting how he recognised escaped Jewish inmates by their 'hooked nose', reproducing antisemitic tropes. This smirk may not necessarily indicate amusement but rather an awareness that such remarks are socially unacceptable today.

L.H. Were you obliged to, well, I want to express this exactly, were you required or was it expected of you to report to the camp, the concentration camp, that you had found someone on the farm?

H.Se. Yes, we had to, yes, [it was] in our own interest. We wanted to get rid of them too, didn't we? We didn't want to have them living with us forever. They had to be reported and were then dealt with accordingly. We don't know what happened to them.

L.H. So it was an obligation. Could people have been hidden there, I don't know, or was—?

H.Se. They could have been, yes. But how would that help us, right? We would have been burdened for ever.

L.H. Did people question that? Did they discuss it? Did they even say: 'Should we hide them' or call, I don't know if there were phones back then. Or did they send a boy? How did they report to the camp, inform the people at the camp?

H.Se. By phone.

L.H. Ah, there were phones.

H.Se. Yes.

L.H. You had a connection back then?

H.Se. Yes.

L.H. And what did they say? Hello, here, here—

H.Se. Here is H.Se. This morning someone hid here last night and needs to be picked up.

L.H. And in the meantime, where was the prisoner, just sitting in the kitchen or outside in the barn?

H.Se. Yes, yes. As I said, [they were] still hidden, but we knew where they were, didn't we? They were also afraid. They didn't know what was happening, did they? But sometimes they were also hungry. But in the pigsty, they always found something, whether it was grain or potatoes.

L.H. How many cases were there, such cases where people from the column, prisoners, got away and hid with you and you then—

H.Se. There weren't many, but there was always a bit of commotion. It happened.

L.H. Multiple times?

H.Se. Yes.

L.H. And was there a case where it was—, were they always individual escapees? Or was there a case where there were more people?

H.Se. No, they were mostly individual cases.

L.H. You say mostly. And that means—, I don't know, I'm trying to understand, was it weekly, monthly, did it happen two or three times, five times, or 10 times, approximately?

H.Se. A few times a week, yes.

L.H. Pardon?

H.Se. [speaking louder] A few times a week. There were quite a few people passing by.

L.H. So, that means it happened—

H.Se. Yes, yes.

L.H. —weekly?

H.Se. [points in one direction] Well, in the meantime, trains arrived too, it became more frequent towards the end. As I said, Belsen became a hub towards the end and, and—.

L.H. You say it became more frequent towards the end, meaning the trains came continuously, or—

H.Se. They came more often than before.

L.H. But, daily, or—?

H.Se. Well, daily, I don't know, you can't say daily, but they came more often and many times they were heavily guarded on the way, thoroughly guarded so they couldn't escape.

L.H. Were some shot on the way?

- H.Se. No. No, they always asked us that back then too. We didn't see them getting shot. [Pause] It wouldn't have helped if they were shot–, then they would have had to carry them further.
- L.H. Did you know, Herr S.–, what did you know about the prisoners? Did you know they came from the East, or did you think they might have come from Berlin? Did you try and find out? Did you talk with the escapees–. These are multiple questions here. Did you talk to those who escaped and hid on your farm, or [H.Se. shakes his head], or did you know that they were Jews, or what did you think at the time? I'd like to know that.
- H.Se. Well, if they were Jews, you could recognise them [smirks] by their crooked nose [laughs], couldn't you? But they didn't know where they had arrived from. They were transported anonymously.
- L.H. You said Jews could be recognised. You could recognise Jews?
- H.Se. I believe, I had the feeling, by their crooked nose and so on [smirks].
- L.H. Did you see people that you immediately recognised as Jews?
- H.Se. Yes, you could see that. It was somehow terrible, but it was obvious to us that they had to go back up there.³⁹

67. Father's involvement in deportation to Dachau: 'he was so disappointed at what they did'

Herta Wa. (H.Wa.), born 1921 in Vienna, Austria, and Hilda C. (H.C.), born 1930 in the Austrian Burgenland, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2014 at their retirement home at the ages of 92 and 83, respectively. Herta Wa.'s father was a police officer in Vienna. Her cousin was in the SS. Both women were in the League of German Girls (BDM).

The conversation between Holland and the two women in the retirement home indicates the limits of such interviews. Holland seeks to find out more about Herta Wa.'s story about her father, a Viennese police officer who helped transport prisoners by train to the Dachau concentration camp in 1938, which could have been the early arrests of political opponents but also Jews after the *Anschluss* or the arrests of Jews after 'Kristallnacht', and which she claims left him disillusioned. The two women prevent further questions about the father by alleging they were under constant threat from the Nazis, which led to their compliance with the rules. While Herta Wa. claims that Dachau was only a camp for political prisoners, in fact all prisoner 'categories' were represented there, including Jews, especially later in the war.

H.Wa. My father came home one day and said to my mother: 'Please get a bag ready for me with a shirt, underwear and – I don't know – a toothbrush, and so on.' Mother said: 'What's going on?' He said: 'I can't talk about it now, I'm not allowed to.' Then he was gone for three days. When he came back, he'd been crushed. Later, he told us, he had a–, well, he was a policeman. He had to escort a train full of people to Dachau. He saw so many things. And he told Mother: 'It's not what we thought it was.' He was so disappointed at what they did, with everything. How they stuffed the people into the wagons.

L.H. You're saying, now he knew what was going on?

H.Wa. Yes, later. Because he was with the police.

L.H. Aha! So with him–

H.Wa. He was in the Viennese police.

L.H. And you said he had to leave for a few days to accompany a train.

H.Wa. Yes. A transport to Dachau. That was a concentration camp. Dachau. But that was only for political prisoners.

L.H. Do you still remember when, roughly, in which year? Was this early on, or–

H.Wa. '38. In the summer of 1938.

H.C. As early as that?

H.Wa. Yes, in the summer.

L.H. People were already being sent from Vienna to Dachau?

H.Wa. Yes.

L.H. And what were they, political prisoners or Jews?

H.Wa. Politicians. Political people who were against Hitler. The opponents. So they ended up in Dachau. Either, they–

L.H. Did Dachau already mean anything to you, back then?

H.Wa. No.

L.H. But what did your father–. Did he say anything specific about what he experienced, or only that one expression?

H.Wa. No. He just accompanied that transport. They were unloaded, and he came back to Vienna. Twelve or 20 policemen, as an escort. It was a long train, after all.

L.H. Did your father have to escort trains more than once, or–

H.Wa. No. Just that one time. Then he had enough! Then he already had enough.

H.C. He wasn't allowed to talk about it.

H.Wa. No!

H.C. Back then, we were very—. If you did anything the Nazis didn't like, you were locked away immediately.

H.Wa. Locked away, yes.⁴⁰

68. Witnesses to slave labour: 'in the evening one often saw that half-dead people lying on boards were transported back home'

Herbert Sf. (H.Sf.), born 1927 in the Salzkammergut region in Upper Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 84. His father, who had worked in a weaving mill, disappeared during the Second World War in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad, Russia). Herbert Sf. attended the *Volksschule*, *Hauptschule*, and *Oberschule*. He was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* in 1944. He worked for the Austrian railways after the war.

A prisoner convoy would pass his house daily on the way to work. He saw how in the evenings on the way back some were dead or half dead, being carried back to the camp. While this clearly left an impression on Herbert Sf., who was an adolescent at the time and, as he states elsewhere in the interviews, an enthusiastic supporter of National Socialism at the beginning, he does not express any emotions about or reactions to what he witnessed.

H.Sf. Every day the prisoners were marched past our window to the barracks camps, which they had to build, where they built the tunnels. The prisoners walked past with the guards very early, had to work hard the whole day, and in the evening one often saw half-dead people lying on boards taken back.

L.H. Did you see that yourself, Herr S.?

H.Sf. I saw that myself.

L.H. Could you describe more exactly what you saw?

H.Sf. Well, how the people, in the morning still, to some extent, one can say, were relatively fit and in the evening, many were carried past our house back to the camp almost starving or already dead.

L.H. Were they under guard?

H.Sf. They were under guard, oh yes.

L.H. Who were the guards?

H.Sf. SS.

L.H. Uniformed SS?

H.Sf. [Nodding]

L.H. Men? Women?

H.Sf. Men.⁴¹

69. Forced labour on the estate: 'they were our workers'

Jolante B. (J.V.B.), born 1925 in the Fraustadt district, Silesia (today Wschowa County, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 87. She is from a noble family which owned land and an estate. She worked at home during the war. She attended college. She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). Her father was a major in the 6th Army and served at Stalingrad. She became an author and social worker after the war and wrote books about her experiences. See also [excerpt 18](#).

She talks about how the Poles were forced from their homes, which were given to Germans, and had to work on the German farms and estates, including her family's. She claims that the forced labourers assigned to her family were treated well.

J.V.B. A purple P on a yellow background. Every Pole had to wear it. As with the Star of David, the Poles were required to wear a P.

L.H. What did this P mean?

J.V.B. So that one knows: This is a second-class person. Each Pole had to wear a P. I said: 'We won't do the P. Away with it! We are in charge here. Let's go to church.' Which we did. No one dared to say anything! That was great. That was my godchild, the little one. I still visited her later.

L.H. Were the Poles there as volunteer workers, or were they there as forced labourers?

J.V.B. No! All of them were forced labourers. One family came earlier, they came voluntarily. The others had to, they only-. Our Polish administrator, he was half-German, but he could speak Polish. They selected the people from the neighbouring village. They were all farmers whose land had been taken away, and now they had to become workers. Do you understand? They were-. I wrote about all of that in the book here. I wrote three novels about that, because I was so outraged by it. A quarter of a year afterwards I was in Poland and researched everything, exactly how that was. Part of it I'd known before, and part of it I hadn't known. What did I just want to say? Yes, they had-, they were chased away from their houses, and Germans were put in them, in their houses and their farms, and [the Poles] had to work on the farms. They were here. They worked for us. Because the German men were at the war.

L.H. So they replaced the men who went to war, those on the front.

J.V.B. Yes.

- L.H. And the Poles' houses were then taken over by the Germans.
- J.V.B. Yes.
- L.H. Where did the Germans come from who were installed there?
- J.V.B. Partly from Poland. They lived in Poland, and wanted to be farmers. They applied for a farm, and then, indeed, they were given a Polish farm.
- L.H. Did they come from the cities, maybe, or--?
- J.V.B. No, not from the cities. From a village, from the countryside, of course.
- L.H. German farmers who didn't have any land.
- J.V.B. Yes, or their sons. On average, a German farmer had three sons. Only one could get the family farm. The others then took one in Poland. Or it was given to him. That's how it was. It was shocking how badly they were treated.
- L.H. The Poles.
- J.V.B. We'll – we'll later talk about my time in Poland – then I'll tell you about that. I know a great deal about that.⁴²

70. Witness to slave labour near Ravensbrück: 'we assumed they had done something and were being punished for it'

Else B. (E.B.), born 1919 in the Oberhavel district, Brandenburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Iris Wachsmuth in 2009 at the age of 90. The daughter of farm labourers, she too worked on farms from the age of 14 onwards until she got pregnant and married aged 20. Her husband died in the war. She lived around 15 kilometres away from the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Else B. saw women imprisoned at the Ravensbrück concentration camp who were forced to work in agriculture, with one of them particularly catching her eye. The woman's beauty challenged Else B.'s ideas about criminality and who might be imprisoned in the camps, believing that the inmates were serving their punishment for crimes they had committed, like in any other prison.

- L.H. And what did one say, what did you think among yourselves? Before, you told me about these women, they came to work, to harvest the potatoes and so on. And you had no contact with these women.
- E.B. [shakes her head]
- L.H. Did you want to meet them? What would you have asked if you could have met with them back then?

- E.B. What do you think [laughs]? Sometimes–, yes, at first one thought, how do you say: Yes, they are coming–, they have done something wrong and are being punished. As–, in general, yes. I didn't know about concentration camps or what was different about them. That was more political really, apparently. We thought it was a prison. One therefore didn't think much more about it, young man.
- L.H. Were the women wearing uniforms?
- E.B. Yes, the matrons had their uniforms, and the prisoners wore their prisoners' uniforms. The striped ones and with their numbers. There was never a name or anything, just numbers [shrugs her shoulders].
- L.H. Did you often see these people walking through the village, to harvest, or–, how often?
- E.B. Young man, they picked them up on the fields with a vehicle. Like I said, they harvested potatoes, and in the morning, they were taken to the fields. We were just–, we only saw them at work. That was it. Only at work. Unfortunately, the man who drove them up there is no longer alive. He had more contact with them. [...] The other estates had no tractors. [But] he was more advanced. It was the smallest estate, but he wanted to accomplish a bit more. He was also the first with a first potato-digging machine.
- L.H. Were you curious back then? Did you want to know where these women came from? You talked about a woman with beautiful hair. What did she look like?
- E.B. No, they were all dark-haired, like you. Well, not like you, she didn't have a man's face. But beautiful hair! She always– [strokes her hair]. Then she sat down one time, and I thought: such a pretty woman and she is in prison. You wonder: what she might have done, or something like that. But we didn't know anything [about them].
- L.H. You thought she was there serving her prison time.
- E.B. What?
- L.H. She was serving out her punishment.
- E.B. Yes, well, we assumed they had done something and were being punished for it. Just like in prison today, or something. Whereas today some people do something bad and they are not punished at all, or very little. Sometimes one is a little too humane, I think. That's why it's all getting out of control.⁴³

71. Forced labour camp at the inn: 'they were locked away'

Maria Kn. (M.Kn.), born 1924 near Krefeld, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 86. Her parents had a farm and an inn, which housed soldiers during the war. A forced labour camp was located at the inn's banquet hall.

This interaction between Maria Kn. and Holland indicates how misunderstandings can shape and dominate some conversations. Holland repeatedly asks questions about the banquet hall where the forced labourers were housed, which Maria Kn. refers to as a 'camp'. She grows increasingly impatient and exasperated at his lack of understanding her. More importantly, the interaction points to the popular image of 'camps', which surely must feature barbed wire, watchtowers, and barracks, which is so entrenched that Holland seems to struggle to imagine an ordinary banquet hall as the quarters housing forced labourers.

L.H. And these Russians [you mentioned], were they POWs? Tank mechanics? Who were they?

M.Kn. Prisoners.

L.H. of war–

M.Kn. From the war, yes.

L.H. Soldiers. How old were they? Were they young?

M.Kn. I can't–

L.H. Around 20?

M.Kn. They could have been older, it depends.

L.H. And they lived with the farmer?

M.Kn. Yes. No, with us, they had their quarters in the hall.

L.H. With you.

M.Kn. And from there they were picked up every morning.

L.H. Did you get paid to feed the Russians?

M.Kn. No, we didn't feed them. They were with the farmer the whole day.

L.H. And who paid you for the rooms?

M.Kn. How would I know? That was none of my concern. My father had to take care of that. I don't know anything about that.

L.H. And he got paid?

M.Kn. Yes.

L.H. That's what you suppose.

M.Kn. I suppose so.

L.H. And who was responsible for the Russian prisoners? Where did they come from? Was there a prison from which they were fetched, or–

M.Kn. [shaking her head] No, I don't believe so. One day they were simply here. They came—. Their quarters were here with us. We had a large hall. That was their quarters.

L.H. What was your contact with the Russians? Did you have any contact with them?

M.Kn. [shaking her head] Yes, with those who worked with us, yes. But nothing else.

L.H. There were also Russian POWs at your home?

M.Kn. Yes, we had one who worked with us, sure.

L.H. One?

M.Kn. One.

L.H. And for how long was he with you?

M.Kn. He had to return to the camp in the evening.

L.H. The camp. He didn't live with you?

M.Kn. In the house, yes, but in the hall.

L.H. When you say camp, I don't know what you mean: he had to be back in the camp in the evening.

M.Kn. Where all of them were together.

L.H. Why do you call it camp?

M.Kn. That's what we called it at the time. Don't know.

L.H. But a camp is where one is locked away.

M.Kn. Yes, they were locked away. They were prisoners. They were taken to work in the morning and returned in the evening.

L.H. And where was the camp?

M.Kn. In our hall.

L.H. And how many of them were there each day?

M.Kn. I don't know. Twenty-five? I don't know. It depended on how many were needed.

L.H. And these 25 went to different farms?

M.Kn. Yes.

L.H. So where was the camp? Was it behind—

M.Kn. No, it was in the hall!

L.H. Was that a barn?

M.Kn. No, it was built as a hall.

L.H. But you lived on a farm at the time.

M.Kn. Yes, a farm with an inn and a hall.

L.H. You must explain it clearly to me, otherwise I don't get a picture of it.

M.Kn. There was an inn with a hall attached.

L.H. So there was this farm, with an inn and a large hall. And in this hall were the 25 POWs.

M.Kn. Yes, whether it was 25, I don't know.
 L.H. Like a camp, one could say.
 M.Kn. Yes.
 L.H. Was there a guard at night or were they free?
 M.Kn. Yes, sure there was a guard.
 L.H. One or two.
 M.Kn. I don't remember that. It was so long ago.
 L.H. Do you remember that? I'd like to know how things worked here. I'm trying to create a picture.
 M.Kn. That's what it was like!
 L.H. Tell me what you remember.
 M.Kn. Nothing! I know they were there. And– [makes gesture of giving up].
 L.H. And they were guarded. There was a guard there. Was he armed?
 M.Kn. No. He wasn't armed. Not that I know of.
 L.H. Not that you know of. What kind of guard was that, from the *Wehrmacht* or the SS?
 M.Kn. Could have been SS. I don't know.
 L.H. Did he live with you? Did he have his bed in your house?
 M.Kn. I can't say. Must have been like that. Yes, there was a room in between, and there he must have–. All this was so long ago.⁴⁴

Persecution and murder of Jews

Around six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust. Murder of this scale and geographic expanse involved a lot of people, both as direct perpetrators and as indirect helpers and facilitators. It also produced many witnesses. The killings at Libau/Liepāja and Šķēde beach in 1941, where plenty of German navy soldiers watched (and in at least one case filmed) the mass shootings of thousands of Jewish men, women, and children, are a case in point. Perpetrators and witnesses talked and wrote about what they had done and seen, and in some cases had taken photos of, which they showed to other people. The circle of those who had heard of the horrific violence that was committed against Jews especially in the East became ever wider, with stories about shootings particularly commonplace. In the following selection of excerpts, 'Third Reich' contemporaries discuss what they knew, when, and how, with some personally involved or in close proximity, and others negotiating the complicity of family members.

72. Of gassings and mass graves: ‘there were some very strange rumours but they passed us by’

Hella Po. (H.Po.), born 1921 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2011 at the age of 89. Her father was a metalworker. Hella Po. was in the League of German Girls (BDM) and performed during the opening ceremony of the Berlin Olympics in 1936. She attended the *Volksschule* and the *Lyzeum* until tenth grade, and subsequently went to a commercial school for two years. Later, she worked at AEG as a stenotypist and as a secretary for a company which produced parts for planes. This company then worked for the Reich Air Transport Ministry and the army. She earned a high salary in this role. She worked there until she got pregnant and moved away from Berlin to the Baltic coast. Her first child was born in February 1945. Her husband was a lieutenant in the *Wehrmacht* (infantry) and fought in France and at the Eastern Front. See also [excerpt 10](#).

Hella Po. is an engaging narrator who talks about her knowledge about the camps and what was happening to the Jews. SA-run Oranienburg (March 1933–July 1934) was an early concentration camp where prisoners were forced to work under harsh conditions and under threat of punishment; it was not a camp for ‘expert workers’ in decent conditions as she claims. Oranienburg is sometimes confused with the Sachsenhausen concentration camp (July 1936–April 1945), which imprisoned more than 200,000 people and where 35,000–40,000 people died.

It is plausible that she had not heard of Auschwitz at the time. Information about mass shootings in the East was much more widely shared. Notably, she claims that a new word emerged, ‘gassing’, after the beginning of ‘Operation Barbarossa’. There is a contradiction in her statements that rumours about mass killings and mass graves circulated yet no one dared to talk about them. This is common in such interviews, where narrators often insist that people only ‘whispered’ about these matters or discussed them ‘in secret’, ‘in confidence’, or ‘behind closed doors’, sometimes literally covering their mouths while speaking.

C.R. Let’s go back to the thirties, also the early war years, because the deportation of Jews began after the pogrom.

H.Po. We didn’t really notice what was happening. We did notice that politically undesirable people were suddenly gone. It was said: ‘They are in the KZ [concentration camp].’ But it took some time until we understood what a concentration camp was! And there

was a concentration camp near Berlin, in Oranienburg. They were in part–, one only found out later, [the prisoners] were specialists. In Oranienburg people fared fairly well on a human level, but naturally they were also locked up. They did constructive work, they were designers and engineers, and what not. Our neighbour in Tegel talked about that. They prepared large construction drafts, they had to return to their barracks in the evening, they had no contacts. The KZ Oranienburg was known in Berlin. We didn't know the name Auschwitz at the time.

C.R. And there were no rumours [about] what happened there?

H.Po. There were some very strange rumours, but they passed us by, you know, because that was so unreal. I know that suddenly there was this new word: gassing [orig. *vergasen*]. Yes? We had no idea what that was about. I don't understand why we didn't want to know more about that at the time.

C.R. How and when did this term appear?

H.Po. During the war.

C.R. Can you remember when you heard it for the first time?

H.Po. So the war started in '39. Yes, after the Russian campaign, after '41. After the Russian campaign started. In the beginning, in '39, Poland came first, then France. Or first France, then Poland? I am confused now. No, we started with Poland. Yes, obviously.

C.R. In what context was it mentioned, the gassing?

H.Po. That people were being exterminated. And that there were mass graves. People would only whisper about that. Nobody dared to talk. Those who were involved in it in some capacity, because they needed helpers for that, they were either very strictly shielded, in barracks, or when they came home, told not to ever talk about it, God forbid. Many of course talked about it anyway because they needed to get rid of that mental pressure. So some things filtered through. And one would have known a bit more about these things in Berlin than elsewhere in the country. But we were simply – I don't know– so under the thumb. 'What the people in charge do is alright. It's good.' Terrible.⁴⁵

73. Mass graves and shootings in the Baltics: 'they arrested Jews, forced them to dig graves, shot them, and then put them in the graves'

Anne Jo. (A.Jo.), born 1918 in Frankfurt, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 94. Catholic. Her father was a senior

civil servant working for the post office. Anne Jo. attended the *Lyzeum* and worked for the post office before, during and after the war. Her brother and husband were both in the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). See also [excerpts 15, 21](#).

Anne Jo. tells a story about challenging possibly antisemitic utterings by patients in a doctor's waiting room, after a trusted source told her about mass shootings of Jews and mass graves in the Baltic countries. But the story is not so much about the mass murder of Jews that she claims to have found out about in 1943. Rather, it is about her integrity and the alleged threat to her safety, expressed by the doctor warning her not to talk about such matters publicly again.

A.Jo. I had a colleague who was very much against the Nazis. He had a friend who came back from the front. He had been in the Baltic countries. He told us – now some things are coming back to me – that in the Baltic countries, that was Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, they arrested Jews, forced them to dig graves, shot them, and then put them in the graves. That's what he told us. I was there [when he did]. I was then, sometime later, in a doctor's waiting room. The people [waiting] talked about the Jews – I don't want to say complained, exactly – but in any case spoke about the Jews. I was quiet at first. But then I couldn't stand it any more. It just slipped out, and I told them: 'Oh, you know, that's not true at all. I have a colleague who came back from the Eastern Front. He was in the Baltics, and he told us how they were treating the Jews. So, it isn't true what you say. It's not true.' Then they stopped talking. I then went into the doctor's office. He said to me: 'Please don't do that again, talking about politics in the waiting room. The man–, there was a patient here just now who wanted your name and address. But I didn't give it to him. I said: "That is medical confidentiality, you can't have the name and address." But please, please, don't ever do that to me again.'⁴⁶

74. Witnessing transport of concentration camp inmates: 'we only noticed that they were terribly emaciated'

Dieter Ba. (D.Ba.), born 1924 in Köslin in Pomerania (today Koszalin, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 86. His father was an agronomist with his own business. Dieter Ba. was in the Hitler Youth. After attaining the *Abitur*, he volunteered for the navy in 1942. He received submarine training in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad,

Russia) and became a lieutenant on a submarine in the Eastern Baltic Sea. He later retrained for the marines in 1944–5. He was captured by British troops in April 1945 and spent two years near Newcastle in a POW camp for officers. Dieter Ba. completed an agricultural apprenticeship before commencing work for different airlines. See also [excerpts 8, 99, 123](#).

Holland's question about whether Dieter Ba. realised he lived in a 'criminal state' leads to a lengthy response about the extent of his knowledge about crimes and the degree to which he was influenced by antisemitism. His response conforms to a common trope in such interviews, where contemporaries often deny all knowledge before detailing what they did in fact know and witness: Dieter Ba. first claims 'not knowing' about the camps or murders, then describes considerable knowledge about what was happening. He asserts that he only learned about concentration camps after the war but contradicts this with a story about a close encounter with a deportation train carrying emaciated people on board and being told in confidence (indicated by being shushed) that they were Jews who 'were slowly dying'.

L.H. I believe you said that one didn't know. What was it that one didn't know? People couldn't know all the things that were made public later. I believe that [even] today we [still] don't know everything. But people always say: 'We didn't know about that.' One didn't know everything. But one knew quite a bit. One knew about the deportation of the Jews [...]. What was said in the *Stürmer*. The synagogues that were burned down. All that happened before the war. That means one knew that one lived in a criminal state. Is that right?

D.Ba. Well, it was all done in a clever way. We found the *Stürmer*–, of course one looks at it as a kid, if there is a [public display] board, for reading. And there were, from an artistic perspective, great cartoons! But: the Jew was always portrayed in a negative way. As a bad person, as bringing ruin to mankind, and so on. And therefore, everyone said: 'Well, I am blond! I am not like that! I am not like that Jewish cripple in the picture. I am not like that. I am Germanic.' Yes, alright. And the injustice done to the Jews, one couldn't–, to this extent it was beyond belief. It was not fathomable. And also, it wasn't known about. It only became clear when the first concentration camps were uncovered after the [Allied] invasion. I still remember clearly, we were on a train, a transport to Bremerhaven, and in the area of Neumünster a

train station was bombed and our train stopped. We had to stop, because repairing the tracks could take hours, everything was in total darkness. Since there were no more passenger trains we were transported in cattle cars. There was straw for us, and we lay down on the straw in our navy uniforms to get to Bremerhaven to our mission. To make it short, we crossed the tracks, and there was a train carrying red wine. The train had been hit and the red wine came pouring out. Everybody went over there and tried with a cup or a canteen or whatever one had, to get some of the red wine. Of course, people got drunk. And staggered—, total darkness. One couldn't—, absolute blackout. We staggered across some track and there was a train, with freight cars. The freight cars only had little slits which had bars [over them]. And there were SS guards. Well, we were soldiers, and the SS were soldiers, so we went over there. Because the train stood there and could not advance, just like ours, we saw how the sliding door was opened a bit so the people inside could get some air. And then I saw for the first time KZ [concentration camp] inmates, which we only found out later. A train full of KZ inmates. In their typical clothes, these striped things, a kind of smock. And they pushed to the gap by the door to get some air. The door of course had a bolt. But one could see them leaning out. All around were SS guards with dogs to make sure no one escaped. SS were soldiers, we were soldiers. So we asked: 'Comrades, what are you up to? Where are you going?' 'We are making a transfer.' 'What kind of people are those?' 'They are prisoners. All prisoners.' 'Oh, I see.' 'Yes, the prison in wherever was bombed and now we must go to alternative quarters. So we are taking all the prisoners to the prison in Neumünster.' Or wherever else it was. We only noticed that they were terribly emaciated. They didn't say a word. There were only these pale, grey, sunken faces, who stared without a sound and here and there reached out. Not a sound! It was absolutely quiet. This picture was for us—. I was there with a friend. We said: 'Prisoners, man, the poor sods! That looks terrible. They all look like they're at death's door.' 'Well,' said my friend, 'imagine you're in prison. Then you wouldn't look much better!' The conversation was that simple. Then we went back to our train because we had nothing else to do there. And then one of our men said, in confidence: 'Don't you know? They come from a KZ!' 'What?' 'Yes, they are KZ inmates. They're slowly dying.' 'Shush!' 'Yes, you can be sure of that! They are not convicts. They come from a KZ. They are Jews,

foreign workers, and so on. They are being transferred, probably to another KZ. But shush!’ That was the whole story. But it was an encounter with KZ inmates who were transported just like we were.⁴⁷

75. *Waffen-SS* and rounding up Jews: ‘it was a Jewish locality, that’s probably why we went there’

Helmut Ro. (H.Ro.), born 1922 in Landshut, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 88. His father was an early member of the NSDAP, the mayor and local NSDAP group leader in a small town in Northeast Bavaria until c.1934/5, a member of the *Allgemeine SS*, and a forestry superintendent. Helmut Ro.’s mother was a leader in the local National Socialist Women’s League. His sister was in the League of German Girls (BDM) and Helmut Ro. joined the Hitler Youth. He completed the *Abitur* in 1940 and volunteered for the *Waffen-SS* in 1941. He spent the summer of 1941 in a cavalry brigade in Lublin/Poland, before being assigned to a tank unit which was formed in Italy. Subsequently, he was sent to Russia in the autumn of 1942. He was captured by the Red Army but escaped from a train, made it to Linz and was imprisoned by US troops. He worked in agriculture after the war and studied agriculture before becoming a civil servant in Bavaria. He tells people he was only in the *Wehrmacht*.

This excerpt indicates the way in which interviews can reveal rather more than a narrator intended, when an unexpected question by the Holland upends a *Waffen-SS* veteran’s practised narrative, leading to an unformed, incoherent, vague but intriguing story – which cannot be corroborated – about visiting a Jewish man’s house, drinking too much alcohol and falling asleep, some violence, and recriminations by the superiors for unspecified reasons. It raises questions about the duties performed by Helmut Ro. and his unit, which Holland does not follow up on, perhaps because of the confusing nature of the story, or Helmut Ro.’s distinct regional Bavarian dialect.

L.H. What was the contact with the civilian population like? Did you have much to do with the Russian population?

H.Ro. Mostly no. Mostly no, as–, because tanks were always allocated to different houses, together with the occupying forces [gestures in one direction], where they were also able to sleep. I [points at himself] had little to do with the civilian population and principally nothing unpleasant [shakes his head]. We talked with

them using gestures, but that it would have come to an altercation, never. Never [shakes his head. Pause of several seconds during which he looks down and fumbles with his shirt]. Well [moves his head to one side]. On—, once it was so, we drove with a truck and it went to some larger locality, we stopped there, and then civilians asked us whether we wanted something to eat or drink. And then the following happened to me. As a young man of course I also drank, and the people, the civilians, it was Jews in this cases [grimaces], it was a Jewish locality, that's probably why we went there [moves his head to one side and back], I had, after several glasses of vodka, I was out [L.H. laughs briefly], and the comrades said, 'Go up into your truck, you're drunk,' and that was resented, the leadership resented our company for that of course, that some soldiers received so much alcohol there, and so it is possible [looks down] that there were clashes. But otherwise, there was nothing.

L.H. What do you mean by clashes? What happened there? [...]

H.Ro. Well, in that locality, like, that they had to come out of the houses [gestures away from him] and, and then [lifts shoulders], well yes—, and I was then already completely drunk [lifts both hands to his head], I don't know that any more, all that happened there. There probably were some slaps in the face, that's how I mean it, right.

L.H. How did you get the alcohol? [...] And you talked about Jews, if I understood correctly. How were the Jews involved in this, where did the Jews in this story come from?

H.Ro. Well, the Jews, the houses belonged to them. I know only one thing, that in the house where I was made drunk, that this was a Jew's house [*'Judenhaus'*]. And then I was out. Yes and I believe the comrades then [grimaces, moves head from side to side] picked an argument probably, but I don't know that any more [moves hand away from himself, then places hand on his collar, moving it away from his neck, scratching his neck], I was already asleep then.

L.H. You mean there was trouble with the Jewish family, because you received alcohol?

H.Ro. Yes, there was trouble.

L.H. But the Jews then had problems, did I understand that correctly, because they gave you alcohol?

H.Ro. Yes, to everyone really, they gave to everyone [...] but I was small and inexperienced and after one glass [of] vodka or two or three I was already—.

L.H. Were there rules, were you permitted to have this contact with civilians?

H.Ro. Of course [...].⁴⁸

76. Father's work in the freight depot en route to Auschwitz:
'they were murdered and then burnt'

Hugo Go. (H.Go.), born 1923 in Ehrenforst, Upper Silesia (Ślawięcice, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 89 (see [figure 8](#)). Catholic. His father had been a supporter of the Zentrum party and was a civil servant working for the railways. The family lived in the train station of Ehrenforst. Hugo Go. was in the *Jungvolk* and Hitler Youth. He volunteered for the navy in October 1941, serving in Greece, Yugoslavia, and during the retreat from Crimea. He was captured by the Red Army in Belgrade. Hugo Go. lived in the GDR after the war.

Hugo Go. features in Holland's film *Final Account*, providing a compelling narrative due to his family's proximity to the deportation of Jews to Auschwitz. His father, the freight transport manager at Ehrenforst train station, directly facilitated the transport of Jews, a role compounded by the fact that the family lived at the station, located on the line to Gleiwitz (Gliwice), and near Blechhammer, both sub-camps of Auschwitz. He speaks of the family's faith and the alleged toll the deportations took on his father, who was acutely aware of the Jews' fates.



Figure 8 Hugo Go. in his home. H.Go. Video Testimony (155M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 2 July 2012. *Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies*, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

Hugo Go. rationalises these events through his post-war experiences in the GDR, with its network of informants making it necessary to keep secrets and speak in confidence. This suggests that the post-war context provided a framework for processing and representing the Nazi past. His own proximity to forced labour as a soldier, which he mentions in relation to a Russian woman he sought to impress, remains unexplored as Holland takes him back instead to the train station and his father's work.

L.H. You said you saw the Jews pass by in transports. Can you tell me something about that? What kind of transports, what cars?

H.Go. They were mostly in cattle cars. And were transported off. I still remember my father at the time came home now and again and said: 'Today Jews were sent off again.' They already went to Auschwitz then. Then one said quietly: 'They will be sent through the chimney.' But one couldn't say that in public. Otherwise, one would have ended up there, too. There were these camps and subsidiary camps belonging to Auschwitz that are often talked about today. We did, I have to say honestly-. That was so secret. My father knew that that's where these people were taken. None of them returned. They had to be somewhere. That was terrible. Most of the population I'd say-. I just said it: train station nearby-, we didn't know about it. It was all kept very secret. And above all: everyone was afraid of everyone else. It was exactly as it was in the GDR later. Nobody said anything, you kept everything to yourself. Because everyone was afraid to end up there. So, as I said, one kept one's mouth shut.

L.H. You just said, Herr G., that one saw the cattle cars passing by. Did you see the cattle cars passing by?

H.Go. I was on leave '44-, wait, on leave in '43. I saw every day how the guard teams brought Jews back from work to the camps. In the early morning, they sometimes carried comrades who were unable to walk, on some kind of stretchers. I saw that quite often! Most importantly the people who arrived. Mostly in cattle cars. They were discharged in the freight yard. And then marched to the various camps. The camps were all around the town. Barracks had been erected where everywhere-, Russians were there, too. I remember: there was a camp, and there were-, maybe a pleasant memory, there was a Russian girl, and I, when I was on leave, and because we lived at the station, and the station was about 3 kilometres from the town. [...] Then I talked to them, as well as I could at the time. They were in a camp, in barracks,

in the woods, but without any guards. They had been sent here or came here. But they could walk around freely. They weren't imprisoned. They were in the whole area around the works, [which was] full of barracks. You can imagine: that was built within two or three years. That would have required an immense number of—. I'd have to tell a lie. I don't know how many forced labourers were working there, to create all this from scratch.

L.H. The arrival and the discharging of the Jews, was that a daily occurrence, or on and off? How often did you see that?

H.Go. That took place irregularly. That was irregular. I was already a soldier. I only know it from my father, who said every so often: 'Oh man, today a number of them were taken away.' He said it with regret. My father was not a Party member. On the contrary, a Party member wanted to harm my father. But that's a different story.

L.H. What about the chimney? Your father said something about the chimney. 'They go up the chimney,' or something like that. Once again, could you explain that to me in a bit more detail? What was it that your father said?

H.Go. They were burnt! 'Today some were sent to Auschwitz again. They will all be blown out through the chimney.' That means they were murdered and then burnt. That was meant by that. The chimney meant the crematorium, you see. We were quite dejected, I have to say, my parents and I were quite religious, so that this affected us quite a lot. But, as I said, we had to keep our mouths shut, or else we would have been next.

L.H. When did your father say that for the first time, about the chimney?

H.Go. Oh, I can't tell you that. Even if I wanted to! I just don't know. Because he said that when I—, I only became a soldier in '41. It did come up. I really can't pin it down. I only know that this phrase came up. When my father said that he was always quite depressed. He was head of freight transport, and part of his job was the processing of freight trains leaving the works, as we said at the time. That was part of his duties.

L.H. What was part of his duties?

H.Go. Well, to register these trains. Whenever there was another freight train loaded with people, going to Auschwitz. That had to be recorded, in the papers at the freight yard, where the trains went, those were his duties that he had to—, that everything was in order, to put it that way.⁴⁹

77. Atrocity photos from the East: 'the people who do that don't have a conscience'

Siegfried F. (S.F.), born 1915 in Köslin, Germany (today Koszalin, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 97. He moved to Berlin around 1933. His father was an academic who became a banker after being wounded in the First World War. Siegfried F. attained the *Abitur*, initially studied medicine, then languages, and later at a technical college. He was a bomber pilot from 1939 onwards. He was a POW in England and Canada.

In 1942, Siegfried F.'s brother-in-law, who had served with a tank unit, presented to him a set of photos he had taken secretly in the East, possibly near Kyiv, which could refer to the Babyn Yar massacre of 33,771 Jews on 29–30 September 1941. The photos showed Jews being shot and buried. Despite the lack of detail about what exactly was on the photos, where they were taken, and how it was that his brother-in-law came close enough to take them, it is well established that soldiers did take photos, including of shootings and hangings, and that these photos were shown to other soldiers and even friends and family. Of further note is his shock at the killing of women and children, which he claims led him to question his sense of being German.

L.H. When did you first accept that this was a criminal regime and that an enormous crime was being committed?

S.F. Once I flew over Buchenwald with my squadron. That was a large KZ [concentration camp]. We could get a bit of an impression because we flew low on purpose. We were wondering: 'What is happening in Buchenwald?' We asked around and heard some things one could hardly believe: gassing or mass shootings. [...] Something that also affected me: I happened to be home on leave at the same time as my brother-in-law. He had a small camera and had had the opportunity to capture how Germans, members of whatever units, shot Jews into huge holes and buried them. He showed us the photos. I said: 'Is this Germany?' The people who do that don't have a conscience and can't think one bit like human beings. It had gone totally astray, like I said. But—

L.H. When did you see these photos?

S.F. Pardon?

L.H. When exactly did you see these photos?

S.F. That was, well, when was that? In '42. Yes, in '42 on leave.

- L.H. Who took the photos?
- S.F. My brother-in-law.
- L.H. What was his name?
- S.F. He took them illegally. He was a troop leader with the tanks, and he always secretly took pictures, which he kept. And he could smuggle out the photos easily, without being controlled.
- L.H. What was the name of your brother-in-law?
- S.F. I only want to say: it was horrible to see what was shown on the photos. For me, this was—. Then I said—. As a pupil, I can add that, my sister had a friend, a Jewish girl. And this Jewish girl, very pretty, blonde, blue eyes—. The three of us gave piano concerts, six hands playing. It was unforgettable! That's how I had interactions with Jewish families. [...] And in Berlin, you should have seen how the Nazis wreaked havoc! In the elegant homes and villas. The expensive furniture and what else there was, was thrown in the street and destroyed. This got some people thinking! To me this was clear early on, but I never dared open my mouth. If I had, then I probably wouldn't be here today. That happened to quite a number of people. Unfortunately.
- L.H. My question, back to the photos: where were these pictures taken of the graves you talked about?
- S.F. In Russia, where the Jews were herded together and buried. First shot, then buried. There were not enough barracks to house them. Then they said, dig holes, the Jews had to do that themselves, stand at the rim [mimics noise of a machine gun], gone, finished. The photos he took would be valuable today! But unfortunately—
- L.H. Where exactly, in which place were these pictures—
- S.F. Most likely, it must have been near Kyiv.
- L.H. What was your brother-in-law's position? How come he had access to—
- S.F. He was *Batteriechef* with the heavy tanks. And at the time, they advanced to the Caucasus, with heavy tanks.
- L.H. Was he with the regular army or the SS?
- S.F. The *Wehrmacht*. Oh, he had a low opinion of the SS! That was true for many people. As I said: all the terrible things the SS did. It's unspeakable.
- L.H. What was the name of your brother-in-law?
- S.F. His name was, a Hanoverian name, S.
- L.H. And his first name?
- S.F. Well, what was that? Ask me! Well, doesn't matter. But—

- L.H. Maybe you'll remember. Could you describe in a bit more detail what those photos showed, and what your reaction was?
- S.F. Well, I only got to see them briefly, but it was eye-opening, as it were. The things one saw in the photos. And above all, one was very confused. There were not only men, but also women and children who were all liquidated. One can never make amends for something like that.⁵⁰

78. Invitation to participate in the shooting of Jews: 'of course, we said "no"'

Gerhard W. (G.W.), born 1917 in North Rhine–Westphalia, Germany, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2010 at the age of 92. Catholic. His father was a foreman/weaver in a Jewish company, which was later 'Aryanised'. Part of his education was at a religious order's boarding school. He attained his *Abitur* in 1937. After the Reich Labour Service (RAD), he served in the military. By the end of the war, he was a captain of the reserve. During the war, he was a non-commissioned officer in Poland at the military barracks in Konitz (Chojnice). He was wounded in Russia where he lost an eye, and suffered a bullet wound to his lungs at the Siegfried Line. Due to his injuries, he subsequently served as a trainer. See also [excerpt 120](#).

Gerhard W. claims that he once was invited to participate in the shooting of Jews. He insists that he refused to do so, and without suffering any consequences. He further tells Reetz about being tasked with locating quarters in the homes of deported, and possibly killed, Jews. In one such 'empty' home, he found the photo of a pretty girl who looked 'Aryan', which indicates the extent to which he had absorbed Nazi racial thinking. He says this left him with pangs of conscience, perhaps because it brought home what had occurred in the shooting he had refused to go and watch, but which still occurred. Yet he feels that he was lucky and not involved in 'Nazi matters'. He mentions the story of a deserter and admits deserting never occurred to him. He highlights the Röhm Affair, also known as the 'night of the long knives', when in July 1934 the SS violently purged the SA leadership, as the point at which he should have recognised Nazism as a criminal regime.

G.W. Once I had this experience: we had in our group two NCOs. One was a Party district leader in his civilian life, the other one was also something in the Party, or the SA, I don't remember the details. They came to our room one day and invited us, Herr S.

and me, to spend the afternoon participating in the shooting of Jews. That was the first time I was ever confronted directly with such actions. Of course, we said 'no'. We were allowed to do that. And we went right away to our superior and made clear to him: 'How is it possible that people can promote something like that here in our company?' Something went down the next day, I didn't see it, but I know it happened. Then I was ordered with a group to find quarters for the military command. That meant entering empty homes. I remember that I entered the home of a Jewish professor, where everything was in disarray. I noticed a photo: a blonde, pretty young girl, with a face as 'Aryan' as you like. I still have that picture. And I wrote a caption underneath it, in an album about this period. It was terrible. What happened there left a tremendous impression on me. The question is: what do you do when you are confronted with that? I experienced some pangs of conscience. I never let myself be pushed into anything Nazi-related. I didn't have to. Thank God. In the military you were relatively safe from anything like that, unless there was a stupid commander. And I met many comrades who thought along the same lines. But when push comes to shove—

- C.R. Many who participated in such shootings said they had to do it.
G.W. Well, we could have been part of it. But we weren't because we refused to.
- C.R. Did you refuse right away?
G.W. Yes. And we were not afraid. I felt safe.
- C.R. Did anything happen to you when you refused?
G.W. No, not really. It was a strange thing. Maybe you're familiar with Gerhard Zwerenz. He is famous because he refused orders in the war, and fled, left his unit, and, I believe, went across the border to Russia. Nothing like that ever occurred to me. But it was, when you think about it afterwards—. One knew that the Nazis were people who had no regard for consequences, criminals, in principle, one sensed that and knew it. At the latest, and I was able to see that even as a young man at the time during the Röhm Affair. 1934, I think. When people who were—, even Nazis were simply killed because the Führer had ordered it. Strangely enough that passed us by somehow. One seems to have erected something like a wall to keep these things away.⁵¹

79. Military police involvement in persecution of Jews:
'I immediately saw that the man was a Jew'

Albert W. (A.W.), born 1924 in the Vulkaneifel district in Rhineland-Palatinate, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2010 at the age of 85 (see [figure 9](#)). Catholic. His parents had a hair salon and a small farm. After the *Volksschule* and attending a commercial school, he completed a wholesaler apprenticeship before being conscripted in 1942, serving as a radio operator in the East following training in France. After a time in the mountain infantry in the Carpathians, he served in the military police in Hungary for one year. He was in Miskolc, Hungary, in 1944 during the deportations of the Hungarian Jews. He was captured in May 1945 in Czechoslovakia by the Red Army and made to march on foot to Auschwitz before being transported on to a POW camp in Stalingrad (Volgograd) where German POWs had to rebuild the city. Albert W. became a hairdresser after his return to Germany.

Albert W. is a memorable narrator, partly due to his distinctive dress and engaging storytelling, including mimicking gestures such as pulling a pistol. When he served in the military police in Hungary in 1944, he searched houses, possibly primarily for deserters, and he appears to have regulated traffic during deportations. He knew about the mass deportations of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz and their fate, with other soldiers informing him about anti-Jewish operations and gas vans. At the beginning of the story, he quickly downgrades his involvement from



Figure 9 Albert W. in his home. A.W. Video Testimony (045M) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz, 22 July 2010. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

having been a 'part of it' to 'experiencing it' and finally just 'seeing it'. Albert W. misdates the deportations of Jews from Miskolc to November 1944: they started in June 1944. He recounts finding a Jewish man hiding in the attic of his lodgings in Miskolc and deciding not to arrest him, using antisemitic tropes to describe the man and suggesting that his potential future usefulness as a pharmacist influenced his decision. Albert W. claims that he decided that 'this Jew shall live', indicating the power he had over life and death and perhaps absolving himself of other actions.

C.R. And did you hear something about how the Jews had been treated?

A.W. Yes, later! '44. In '44, I was in the military hospital. As I said, I had had an adventurous flight to Hungary. I came to the hospital in Hungary, and after that I was in a battle group, with the mountain troops in the Carpathians. After that I was in the German military police. I was with the military police for one year. It was then that I was part of the persecution of the Jews. I experienced that. We were there in Hungary. I saw the whole action against the Jews. How the entire population was brought to the train station and deported. I also had an interesting experience in Miskolc, in Hungary.

C.R. What happened?

A.W. The following happened. I looked for quarters and came into a house and heard German being spoken. I had learned a great deal of Hungarian. The wife said: 'We have no room here. There's a bench.' I could sleep there. 'We don't have any other place.' Then I took off my rucksack and everything and lay down on the bench. I said: 'The bench is fine, I'll sleep here.' I indeed slept on the first floor of the house. I had four hours of duty, all around the clock. I had to patrol for four hours through the city, then I was off duty. I came back from the patrol alone in the evenings. We were short-staffed. I had to go alone and had the 'Military Police' tag here on my chest. They called the military police the 'dogs', and they were hated. The soldiers always gave us a wide berth. They were afraid of the military police.

C.R. Why was that?

A.W. Yes, the military police caught the [soldiers] who came back from the front, and sent them to the front again.

C.R. The German soldiers?

A.W. Yes, the German soldiers. The military police were feared by the soldiers. I was humane, you see. I always helped everyone.

In any case: I came back from patrol and got lost in the house. I went up a floor higher, in the twilight. Then suddenly I was on the attic landing. By the door to the attic. And there was a kitchen cupboard there. It was November and bad weather. And from the kitchen cupboard there was the trail of someone who always went to the cupboard. So I went and opened the kitchen cupboard. It was completely empty. I thought to myself: that seems suspicious. Got my pistol out, safety off, loaded it [mimics drawing a pistol]. And then I turned the cupboard around. It was empty. And there was a door there, and a room. I went in and there sat a man about 60 years of age. There was a bed, a chair, and a toilet bucket. I immediately saw that the man was a Jew. So I went to him and said: 'You're a Jew.' He said: 'I'm the pharmacist here in Miskolc.' He said, 'I'm a pharmacist,' not 'I'm a Jew.' He spoke German. The people were hiding him. And the others—. I had seen how the whole population had been transported to the train station. And they still hid the man, the pharmacist. I said to him, 'I never laid eyes on you.' I said to him, 'I'll tell the people they need to clean the loft. I discovered you following the trail to the cupboard in your hiding place. I won't report you. I'm supposed to report you, but I won't tell on you. I didn't see you.' Then I went downstairs to the woman and said: 'Listen, you need to clean the loft. Following the traces, I found the man, the pharmacist, who lives in the room. But I won't tell on you. You'll see, in 14 days the Russians will be here in Miskolc. Then the man will be saved. The other Jews are all being transported to Auschwitz.' I said to the woman. She could speak German. She was a half-German woman from Hungary. We spent a few more days there, then we moved out. I never saw the man again. I never went upstairs again.

C.R. You said you were there when the Jews were transported away.

A.W. I watched. I watched in the city. I had traffic duty in Miskolc. I did traffic duty in the military police. I saw whole columns of Jews with suitcases arriving and being marched to the train station. I saw that myself. Women, men, children. It was in November '44.

C.R. Did you know what it was all about?

A.W. Yes, certainly. I had some people with me who had already been in military police in Russia. They told me about actions against the Jews [*Judenaktionen*]. In a furniture truck—, they had to go into a furniture truck. Then they piped in the exhaust gas. That's what they told me. They were there. They always knocked on

the walls of the vehicle. And in half an hour they were all dead. Gassed with auto exhaust fumes. In Russia. Watched it himself. An older military policeman. He told me. And he said, 'The rest of the population will be gassed in Auschwitz.' He told me that in confidence. I knew everything about the actions against the Jews. That's why I thought: this one Jew, he should survive. If that had come out, I would have been shot. Because I didn't report him. That was punishable by death. Something like that. But I thought: as a pharmacist, the man can still help people, I thought. They shouldn't gas him at Auschwitz. I can give you a sworn statement, that I did that, and I didn't tell anyone about it. I told no one! You couldn't trust anyone.⁵²

Killing of partisans, POWs, and civilians

The following set of excerpts focus on the war in the East, especially 'Operation Barbarossa', which was from the outset extremely brutal and is referred to as a 'war of annihilation'. The 'Commissar Order' directed the killing of Soviet political commissars. Soviet POWs were either treated appallingly or killed on the spot. The exploitation of local resources was factored into the warfare from the outset, in the knowledge that this would not leave enough supplies for the local populations. Special taskforces, with the aid of regular German troops, started killing Jews almost immediately after attacking the Soviet Union, with the massacres soon turning into the genocide of Jewish men, women, and children. The anti-partisan warfare, which was enmeshed with the genocide, saw reprisal killings of 'hostages', of whole families and even entire villages where it was suspected or claimed that partisans were being harboured or supported. Even decades after the war, many veterans still claimed that the reprisal killings were justified and entirely in keeping with international law. Finally, during the retreat, the German military practised a 'scorched earth' policy, leaving nothing behind for either the 'enemy' or the local population, meaning they were left to starve.

The excerpts reflect many different types of involvement in and perspectives on the war of annihilation, from providing security at a hanging (see [excerpt 81](#)) to being a combat medic on standby during the massacre of a village (see [excerpt 85](#)) through to witnessing the shooting of Jews under the guise of the anti-partisan warfare (see [excerpt 80](#)).

80. Witnessing the shooting of partisans and Jews: 'we were told of course that they were snipers or partisans'

Friedrich K. (F.K.), born 1923 in Dresden, Germany, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in the presence of his wife in 2011 at the age of 87. His father was a gynaecologist who retrained as a psychotherapist when he went blind. Friedrich K. joined the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth. After completing the *Abitur* early in 1941, he volunteered for the Reich Labour Service (RAD), building embankments in the Memel Territory (Lithuania), and repairing runways for air supplies for the *Wehrmacht* through the Baltic to Novgorod at the beginning of 'Operation Barbarossa'. In the autumn of 1941, he began studying medicine in Freiburg, Germany, before he was conscripted in 1942, serving in France and Ukraine during the retreat. He was captured by US troops in May 1945 in Germany. He became a physician after the war.

In this excerpt, Friedrich K. discusses an incident during his Reich Labour Service where SS men were shooting people. This is of interest for several reasons. First, he explicitly connects the killing of alleged partisans to the killing of Jews. This is unusual, as veterans typically claim that the anti-partisan warfare was separate from the persecution and murder of Jews. Jews were characterised as partisans or partisan-friendly, to justify their killing. Second, this incident occurred during the Reich Labour Service, possibly explaining his candidness. Friedrich K. highlights that the people were shot without judicial process, implying that the killings might have been acceptable to him had any kind of process been followed. Third, Friedrich K. distances himself from the shootings by insisting that he arrived when the SS men were on a break, thus not directly witnessing the killings. This distancing could be an attempt to avoid further questions and possible accusations. He slightly misdates 'Operation Barbarossa' to 21 June 1941. It began a day later, on 22 June 1941. He may further be confusing the beginning of 'Operation Barbarossa' with the German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 where the Nazis announced they were 'returning' fire on Poland, falsely claiming Poland had attacked Germany first as a pretext for war.

F.K. Well, now it was June and in mid-June our [*Reichsarbeitsdienst*] camp was disbanded. And we were all sent to different places.

C.R. In what year was this?

F.K. In '41. And I found myself with a unit out in the country, on a farm. It was very close to the border, the border with Russia. Lithuania.

That was shortly before 21 June [1941]. We were seconded to the *Wehrmacht*, and on 21 June the Russian campaign began. I remember well how on 20 June in the evening–, there was another *Wehrmacht* unit there. Then we all had to line up, and then he read the Führer Order that in the morning after 4.55 o'clock, or whenever, we would return fire. Then we had to, we moved–. The troops had already moved out in the night. We went around midday, behind the troops. And I still remember, I was totally new in this outfit. We had no military training with weapons, and suddenly they gave us a carbine and a steel helmet, and all the rest. We moved on bicycles, looted from Holland, for the entire advance into Russia. We were delegated as labour service, to repair the runway for supplies, directly behind the advancing front, directly behind the first troops. So that we were, at times, ahead of the following troops, in the beginning. That was naturally very exciting. I still remember when at the border–, it was a bit crazy. There were [...] two of us. We were sent out in advance to scout the way. That's what we did, and then we came to Ebenrode [Nesterov, Russia], which was right on the border. The locals were all out in the streets, and they had set up large tables, everyone got a flower for their buttonhole, and everyone got something to eat and drink. We were celebrated as though we had already won! They were so excited. Then we crossed the border and saw the first bloated horse cadavers and the dead soldiers from the first fighting at the border, and we carried on. We went, to make it brief, through the entire Baltic region with this unit, and reached, after many detours, the Valdai Hills, at the source of the Volga River. For me it was over at Lake Ilmen, first south and then north of Novgorod. That's where the advance was stopped. That was already in late autumn. One more experience may be interesting in this context: when we came to Dünaburg [Daugavpils, Latvia] we heard some shooting going on. We were always on our bicycles [gesture of turning pedals]. There was the *Waffen-SS*. *SS*–, or *Waffen*–, or–. I don't remember exactly. There was a yard, a schoolyard, and there they had shot people. We thought they were snipers, that's what they were called in the beginning, before they were called partisans. They had caused some trouble in town but among them were also, I believe, Jewish citizens. 'Now we'll take a break, then we go on.' That had quite an effect on me already at that time, how someone can be like that. 'Now we've shot them all, and now we'll have a

breakfast or lunch break, and then we'll move on.' That was the first and really the only time that I indirectly experienced such shootings, when we went through this newly conquered city.

C.R. How did you assume that they may have been Jewish?

F.K. I don't know! We were told of course that they were snipers or partisans. But it was common knowledge that the Jewish population, or everyone who-. Doesn't matter, it's all about individual people, no matter what-. In any case, it was a group of people who they massacred without any [legal] sentencing.⁵³

81. Securing the hanging of partisans in Croatia: 'that was shocking for us'

Hugo S. (H.S.), born 1925 in Upper Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 85 (figure 10). Catholic. His family moved to Linz in 1935. His father was an administrator in local government until 1938, who was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* as an administrator in Linz from 1939. In 1943, he was imprisoned at the Dachau concentration camp and liberated by US troops in 1945. Hugo S.'s mother was arrested by the *Gestapo*, his siblings were taken to a children's camp, and he was sent to a Nazi penal camp for pre-military training. He was soon conscripted into the *Wehrmacht*, serving in Yugoslavia for one year, followed by Italy and Hungary. He was a radio operator in the infantry. Hugo S. held office in an Austrian town after the war.



Figure 10 Hugo S. in his home. H.S. Video Testimony (061M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 January 2011. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

Hugo S., whose father was imprisoned at the Dachau concentration camp, recounts his involvement in the public hanging of alleged partisans in Vinkovci, Yugoslavia (present-day Croatia). He was among the soldiers securing the area to prevent a reprisal attack during the execution of a couple and their daughter, who was about his age. This incident left a deep impression, possibly because he could relate to the young woman. Given the nature of anti-partisan warfare in Yugoslavia, it is likely that there were other similar events. Notably, Hugo S. refers to the hanged family as 'delinquents', possibly reflecting the contemporary perception and justification of their punishment.

L.H. Your father was in the KZ [concentration camp], in Dachau, because he opposed Hitler, and had spoken against the regime at home. You, as a young soldier, 18, 19, 20 years old, fought against people who tried to defeat Hitler and the Nazis and the Germans. How did that affect your conscience? Do you understand the question?

H.S. I do.

L.H. Did you think about that, or did you think: [the partisan] is the enemy, because he wants to kill you?

H.S. The partisans—, on the one hand, he was our enemy, but I also saw how badly we treated him. That was harrowing. For example, I remember, I was in Vinkovici, in Yugoslavia. In the evening a patrol went into a little village because one had heard that there were allegedly partisans there. They searched the house, and, on the way back, the washhouse, which was separate, off to one side. They went in and opened it up. At the same moment, a shot was fired, and the soldier, a friend of ours, was dead. So the next day at five in the morning the alarm sounded and we had to go out to the village, and were positioned along the street every 10 or 15 metres. Then a junior officer came with a truck. They had erected gallows on it, three of them. They were intended for the father, mother, and daughter. The junior officer stood on the truck, and there was a chair up there. And the delinquents had to climb up on the chair. The junior officer put the rope around their neck, and then gave the order to drive on. With that the chair fell down and the person was hanged. They tried to reach [grabs over his head], but there was nothing more to be done. That was awful for us. It was—. It was because we were overcome with fear. What will happen to us now? Can we hold our own when they [the partisans] try anything? And I often considered,

in later missions, when we crossed a river or a lake at night, that it would be very easy to desert to the other side. I often played with that thought. Then the war would have been over for me. I knew, however, that if I did that, all my relatives, my siblings, my parents would pay for it. That one would sacrifice them. That was always the reason I was never serious about deserting or the like.

- L.H. The family that was hanged, in what place was that?
- H.S. I don't remember. From Vinkovici, that was our base, where our barracks were, from there we drove for about half an hour to a little village. I don't remember what it was called.
- L.H. Was it in Serbia?
- H.S. It was in Croatia.
- L.H. Today's Croatia, then it was Yugoslavia.
- H.S. Yugoslavia, yes.
- L.H. The girl—, there were three people.
- H.S. There were three people, yes. Father, mother, and daughter.
- L.H. How old was the daughter, what do you think?
- H.S. The daughter was around 18, 19. The parents around 40, 50.
- L.H. How far were you from the site?
- H.S. Well, they drove through—. That must have been about 20, 30 metres.
- L.H. Did the soldiers have cameras? Many soldiers had their little Leica [cameras].
- H.S. No, we didn't have anything like that. It didn't exist. Not for us, anyway.
- L.H. Not at all? Because on the Eastern Front there was rather a lot. One sees many photos that were taken by soldiers.
- H.S. No, we didn't have that.
- L.H. If one had had a camera, would there have been the possibility of photographing these scenes, or would the officer not have allowed that?
- H.S. We certainly wouldn't have dared, because it wouldn't have been allowed.
- L.H. Did the people have to watch? Did they bring them there to see it?
- H.S. We had to position ourselves along the entire main street, every 20 metres or whatever that was, to prevent partisans launching an attack from further above, below, or to the side, and disperse us. We didn't know how strong the units were. We were positioned there for protection. But we were very scared!
- L.H. And the village population, did they have to be present for it?

H.S. Some of them. Only some of them.

L.H. Were they brought there?

H.S. No, they weren't brought there.

L.H. They simply stood around.

H.S. They stood around, yes.

L.H. Was that at the marketplace, or where was the site?

H.S. That was the main street that ran through the village. That was where they first put up the gallows, three of them.

L.H. Who put them up? Did you have to help?

H.S. No, we were only there, armed with rifles, to ensure security.

L.H. How many were you? How many soldiers were standing about there?

H.S. Well, our company, that would have been about 70, 80 people.

L.H. Which company?

H.S. I don't remember.

L.H. And the officer, your officer, who gave the order? Who was that?

H.S. I don't remember that either. That was a junior officer who wasn't from our company but was assigned to us, who had to deal with things like that several times.

L.H. The head of your company? What was his name?

H.S. They kept changing every three or four weeks. That always changed very often because I was with the wireless operators where I was needed. I was sent where you needed wireless operators and telephones. I wasn't always with the same unit.

L.H. What was the unit called? Which division was it?

H.S. The one in Gmunden, in Gmunden and in Czechia, I can't recall exactly where their main base was. One officer was called Winker. I'm not sure what his authorisation was.

L.H. What was the division called, or what was this section of the army called? Company or division, because I'm not familiar with that.

H.S. A rifleman's unit, it was in any case.

L.H. What was it called?

H.S. I don't remember.

L.H. Mountain troops?

H.S. Yes, mountain troops.

L.H. And the number of this division?

H.S. I think, I think it was '48, but I can't say for sure if it wasn't another number. It was no longer so organised. New units were added that weren't there at first.

- L.H. Were there still more cases like the one you've described? Or was that the very worst thing that you experienced with civilians and the army?
- H.S. That was basically the worst thing that we were part of.
- L.H. That you can remember.
- H.S. Yes.⁵⁴

82. SS Special Commandos: 'these round-ups were never carried out by the fighting troops'

Kurt S. (K.S.), born 1922 near Salzburg, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 88. His father was a mechanical engineer from the Sudetengau, and his mother was the daughter of a farmer. After leaving school at 14, he started an apprenticeship. Soon after the *Anschluss*, he volunteered for the *Waffen-SS*, reporting to the 6th Company in Dachau on 1 April 1938. After his training, he was assigned to the 8th Company SMG, an anti-tank defence unit, and after the invasion of Poland to the SS *Totenkopf* Division as part of the attack on France. He later served in Greece and on the Eastern Front, including in Rostov-on-Don and Taganrog. See also [excerpt 51](#).

Kurt S. reproduces Nazi justifications linking the killing of partisans and the killing of Jews. He claims that civilians would only have been killed if weapons were found on them, which would make them partisans or their helpers, thus justifying the killings. Like other contemporaries, he claims that the killing of civilians only ever happened 'in the rear', not at the front where he was fighting, and that it was carried out only by SS task forces, not *Waffen-SS* units. He concedes that the SS task forces, or *Einsatzgruppen*, may have killed not only partisans but also civilians, which he then seeks to justify by claiming this only happened if they had weapons on them. While he does not mention Jews, with support from the *Wehrmacht*, *Waffen-SS*, order police, auxiliaries, and local collaborators, the *Einsatzgruppen* killed 1.5–2 million Jews, including under the guise of anti-partisan warfare.

- K.S. I had one experience, but not with our unit. Rather, that was with [puts his hand on his forehead], you see, not so smart after all, the brain! There are parts that I no longer—. In any case, it was in southern Ukraine. And in fact, there, partisans blew up our entire resupply train of about a hundred wagons, carrying incredible amounts of gasoline – gasoline autos and motors was all we had – and ammunition. And the entire spearhead came

to a halt because we didn't have any more supplies, neither gasoline nor food nor ammunition. And then one indeed carried out a cleansing action [*Säuberungsaktion*]. But [these were] partisans! But I cannot remember that, let's say, a Russian soldier who was imprisoned was shot. That-. No [shakes his head]. That would have to have been a partisan. A partisan would be, without much ado-, [it was a] quick process, they were dealt with. That is true. And not just a few [of them]! In that time, there were certainly some thousands [of people], who they had rounded up there. But these round-ups were never carried out by the fighting troops. Again, a special commando troop came from Berlin.

L.H. Tell me more about [...] what you know.

K.S. Well, all I know is that a special commando unit from Berlin combed not only through a village, but a very huge area, and made arrests. And I know that these people were court-, what is that called? Drumhead court martial. They were put against the wall or in a ditch and shot. That much is certain. That is common knowledge.

L.H. What kind of people were they, who did the drumhead court martial-

K.S. What, those who carried it out? Who executed them?

L.H. Yes.

K.S. Those were all SS people. Special Commandos. With the black uniform and the swastika there [points to the upper arm]. And here they had 'Special Commando' [points to the wrist]. *Verfügungstruppe Sonderkommando*.

L.H. So, *Einsatzgruppen*.

K.S. Yes, a real *Einsatzgruppe*. Only for these things.

L.H. And who were the victims that they executed?

K.S. Yes, the victims, that was the partisans. Partisans, who against-, or blew something up, they were then liquidated.

L.H. But how were the partisans caught? They were in the forests and-

K.S. Yes, they combed the whole area. It was a big Special Commando unit. I don't know how strong exactly. But they-, very many-, or also, if something was close to a city. They found them and most likely they also found weapons, and then-. I really doubt that all of them were partisans. But that is true, that really-, but behind the front. That was all in the rear [areas]. At the front, nothing like that happened. I know a case-. The name is not interesting, I don't remember it. Maybe I even have it somewhere in a book.

- I have a book–, I don’t know, if you know it. *Memory. Memory of–* [attempts to get up].
- L.H. Wait a moment! Don’t stand up [microphone would detach otherwise].
- K.S. Oh, alright.
- L.H. We’ll look at that later.
- K.S. I have a book, with a foreword by me. It even describes a–, it is a journal. He describes his missions literally every day. At first, he was on the staff. On the staff of just such a Special Commando unit. There were also such executions–. Now, I don’t remember if he experienced it himself or if he only watched it from a distance. I can’t say. But he describes it exactly. If that interests you, I can bring you the book. I know that such things happened. But all of that was in the rear.
- L.H. You said before that you doubted that all of them were partisans. Who could it have been otherwise?
- K.S. Yes, well, they were–, how would you know. I didn’t see it myself. I only knew it from hearsay. But I knew that they were civilians. I know that much.
- L.H. So civilians were also executed.
- K.S. Were also executed.
- L.H. Shot, without a formal process. Just shot, you mean.
- K.S. Yes with–. Yes, there was no trial there. If one found weapons with them, then they were done. You wouldn’t give it a second look.⁵⁵

83. Indiscriminate shooting: ‘we could no longer distinguish between Russians and civilians’

Friedrich E. (F.E.), born 1925 in Salzburg, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Angela Huemer in 2008 at the age of 82. He served in the *Wehrmacht* at the Eastern Front. After the war, he was a member of the Upper Austrian Veteran Association. He wrote a book about his experiences. See also [excerpt 84](#).

Friedrich E. becomes emotional as he vividly recounts to Holland an incident in Russia, where, in pursuit of a Russian tank division, he and his comrades indiscriminately shot at soldiers and civilians, leading to a village (which he likens in size to Salzburg, implying it was a rather large town or city) ‘going up in flames’. This appears to be something he urgently wants to confess to save his ‘soul’. It is possible he genuinely did not know the location, especially amid the chaos of a pursuit and

subsequent fire and massacre. However, it is also possible that he, like other veterans, remains intentionally vague to avoid potential legal or other repercussions.⁵⁶

F.E. Once, we had fought off an attack. The Russians had lost many tanks. We had some losses too, but not many. And then the battalion commander ordered us to pursue the Russians and destroy the tanks. Then we drove into a very large village. I don't know the name, I never saw [a name]. But it was about as big as Salzburg or half of Salzburg. A big village. Entirely built from wood. The tanks that we had pushed back, the Russian tanks, T-34s, were at the ready, had flak, set up PAK, tank defence cannons. We came under fire right away. Darkness had just fallen. We returned fire. I had two double-track SMG, heavy machine guns, that ran automatically with distance effect and breadth effect. We shot these tanks with the cannons and finished them off, that was an 8.5 cannon, and [shot] the Russians with machine guns. Unfortunately, every tenth shot was a tracer, so within 10 minutes the whole village had gone up in flames. And that is my sad experience [coughs], excuse me, that we could no longer distinguish between Russians and civilians. When everything burned, everyone fled and we just shot at them. And that's why I, not as an excuse, but for my own soul, you might say, wrote it down.⁵⁷

84. Shooting captured Russian soldiers: 'it wasn't normal, but it wasn't just once or twice'

Friedrich E. (F.E.), born 1925 in Salzburg, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Angela Huemer in 2008 at the age of 82. He served in the *Wehrmacht* at the Eastern Front. After the war, he was a member of the Upper Austrian Veteran Association. He wrote a book about his experiences. See also [excerpt 83](#).

Friedrich E.'s confessional interview continues with stories about captured Soviet soldiers. He estimates that 20–30 per cent of them were shot dead rather than taken prisoner. Holland addresses Friedrich E. as a *Zeitzeuge*, a 'contemporary witness', when he asks him about feelings of guilt. In this way, Holland seeks to encourage frank responses on sensitive topics, carefully ensuring that Friedrich E. does not feel as though he stands accused of wrongdoing but is instead providing an important service for present and future. While Friedrich E. claims that

he was not present when the shot prisoners were thrown into mass graves, he speaks of 'we' here. This may indicate a general 'we' denoting the German army or it may be a slip of the tongue suggesting that he was more closely involved in these incidents.

F.E. It was like this: the Russian tanks, we basically couldn't communicate with them. We only fought against them. Either they shot us down or we shot them down. But just as the Germans had tank troops, so did the Russians. They were soldiers trained to advance with the tanks. We could talk to them, and our unit, even when their hands– [lifts his hands up in gesture of surrender], I watched how they – I can't say how many – instead of being taken prisoner, they were shot.

[...]

But as a rule, we captured the tank troops and transported them back to a camp. A company was designated, or part of the company, to bring them back to the camp for Russian prisoners. They were treated well in that they got food and were not beaten. But there were also cases where I saw, where we–, well, where some commander–. Let's say, there was a squad, a company, a battalion, where a squad leader perhaps had said: 'Shoot all the tank troops!' That happened.

L.H. You speak of cases.

F.E. Yes.

L.H. How many cases? Once, twice, three times? Was that normal?

F.E. No, it wasn't normal, but it wasn't just once or twice. I can't say it so exactly now, but, let's say–, it's also dangerous to try to express it in per cent. But 30 per cent. Twenty per cent were shot, and the rest taken prisoner. It depends, however, on the circumstances. If the Russian tank troops still defended themselves using their rifles and machine pistols or machine guns, then there was also, naturally, grounds to shoot them. But there were also cases–. There were two, three where I was present, where there were no grounds and the people, the soldiers, were shot regardless.

L.H. How did you react to these things as a *Zeitzeuge* [contemporary witness]? Like it was acceptable in wartime or did you feel guilty?

F.E. I already felt guilty back then.
[...]

F.E. Generally, the Russians were taken prisoner, with the exception of–, what percentage I can't really tell you. But I saw exceptions where all–, the tank troops – not the tank occupants, they drove

away with the tanks – were shot. And buried in mass graves. They had to dig the graves themselves, and then we put them in–, I was not there, but–.⁵⁸

85. An anti-partisan operation: ‘the massacre back there was so terrible that it’s unlikely that anyone survived’

Karl R. (K.R.), born 1922 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 and 2013 at the age of 90/91. His father was a commercial employee. Karl R. attended a *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school) in Berlin-Lichterfelde. He completed an apprenticeship in a bank. He was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* as a combat medic, treating frostbites at a military hospital in Bärwalde in der Neumark (today Mieszkowice, Poland), and transferred several times, before being deployed to Ukraine. He also served in Paris, the Vosges, Vienna, Thessaloniki, and Athens. He studied medicine after the war and completed a doctorate. He gives talks about his experiences.

Karl R. discusses an anti-partisan operation he volunteered for, ostensibly out of boredom, as a combat medic, providing care in case the participating SS men and other personnel were injured. Towards the end of the excerpt, he reveals that the massacre was framed as justified revenge or reprisal for a partisan attack. Despite his close proximity and assigned role, Karl R. portrays himself as a passive observer throughout the event, in contrast to the assistant doctor who was distressed at the unfolding massacre of the village. Karl R., who regularly speaks in schools and other contexts, has recounted this story before and relates it twice to Holland in separate interviews. Notably, important details change between telling, including his proximity to the massacre, the identity of the killers, and the number of people killed. This variability suggests that while Karl R. vividly and willingly discusses the incident, it may not have happened in this way, or even at all.

L.H. You spoke earlier of an action that you were involved in. I think there was a division or unit of Hungarian SS men there. And you were, somehow you played a role there with–. I don’t know.

K.R. Well, we were–

L.H. Maybe you can tell me this story from the beginning, so that I understand the whole context. What happened and when? In what year and month?

K.R. 1943. I became a soldier in the winter of ’41. This was in the winter of ’42–43. Shall I tell you how it came about?

- L.H. Please.
- K.R. We were assigned to go to Stalingrad, but it was already too late. We didn't make it to Stalingrad. They had to find some use for us. There was a unit consisting mainly of Hungarians and SS who were supposed to clear the Prypiat swamps of the enemy. Which they did, but in a completely inhumane manner in my view. Namely, a place that I don't know the name of and didn't know then either, was alleged to be a hotbed of partisans. Apart from occupying the place, they also forced people into one of the larger buildings, perhaps the house of a commandant, surrounded by the Hungarian troops, especially mounted troops. They forced everyone into this building which was located at the edge of the place. And then they began to fire their machine guns at the building. The people inside were desperate and ran outside, where they were shot by the Hungarians, mounted Hungarians. And then they set fire to the big house, it was ablaze and the people inside held out as long as they could. But when the smoke got too thick, they left the house and then the same game was played. The Hungarian troops, you sensed that they had fun with it, yes. And they shot at everything that came out of that house. And I would assume that not a single person survived. And why we, as medical corps, had to be there eludes me to this day, because these people were civilians. They weren't even able to defend themselves and whatever came out of the house, was shot. No one in the house can have survived that. And when this action was over, there hadn't even been anything for us to do, none of the Germans had been wounded and so we—
- L.H. Could you tell us that in a bit more detail? Dr R., why were you there? I don't understand. How did it come about that you were a member of this action? I didn't—
- K.R. We weren't members. Rather, we were principal witnesses on the sidelines. That was because we were ordered to step in if one of the German troops was wounded. But that didn't happen. People didn't fight back at all.
- L.H. Earlier you spoke of Hungarian SS men but now you are talking about German troops.
- K.R. Both. They were both there.
- L.H. Both, *Wehrmacht* or SS?
- K.R. SS. SS and Hungarian troops who had volunteered.
- L.H. But they were also in the SS?
- K.R. Yes. All foreigners who joined the Germans came to the SS.

- L.H. And how did that happen? You were in the *Wehrmacht*, weren't you? I don't fully understand how you were connected to this action and how many paramedics there were.
- K.R. There were our assistant doctor—. There were four of us.
- L.H. There were only four of you?
- K.R. There were four of us, yes.
- L.H. And how many were there of the others, the German and Hungarian SS troops?
- K.R. You couldn't count them because it was a huge area and at one end was this house, which called itself the town hall, and it stretched far into the distance at the other end.
- L.H. Was it a village?
- K.R. Yes, it was a village. It was a village.
- L.H. How many people would you think lived there?
- K.R. There were maybe 15 houses. There would have been at least four or five people in each house.
- L.H. Earlier you said that they wanted to clear this place of the enemy. Were these people civilians, were they Jewish, was it a Jewish village? Do you know anything about the population in the Prypiat—
- K.R. Yes, I would say that it was probably a Ukrainian village. And I, none of us entered the village. We were at the very edge, not least so as not to get too close to the wildly shooting Hungarians. It was somewhere at the edge of the Prypiat swamps. And they wanted to do that because they believed that partisans were hiding there. And set the houses on fire and then it would pop occasionally. Which was seen as proof that ammunition had been hidden. But it was also apparent that no one was shooting from any of the houses. It may well have been the case that partisans were hiding there, but there was no proof. And I know why we were there. Put simply, we were the Rovno [Rivne, Ukraine] commando. We were, as I said, an assistant doctor, a medical sergeant, and two combat medics.
- L.H. Who sent you there? Or did you volunteer for this action? How did that work?
- K.R. Yes, that happened because we had been so miffed. It was Christmas. We were in this house, I described it to you earlier, without windows, without doors, and so on. There was only liquor to drink because everything else was frozen. And then he said: 'We are looking for volunteers.' We said: 'For what?' Then he said: 'For Rovno.' Rovno was far behind [the front] and we

- said: 'Let's go to Rovno.' And then from Rovno, I don't know who gave the order, we were ordered to deploy to the Prypiat swamps.
- L.H. Did you have any idea what kind of action that would be when you volunteered? You said you were bored. There was this horrible house where you were staying. You said you were bored. Maybe you wanted to do something different. Is that right? Please, I'm trying to properly understand the situation.
- K.R. Yes, yes.
- L.H. I don't understand how you got involved in this action. Did you know what they had planned?
- K.R. No. No. Not at all. Because Rovno was so far behind. That's why we didn't have any idea that we would be deployed to any kind of operational area. [...]
- L.H. Was that in the morning or evening? When did it start and how long did this action in this village last?
- K.R. That was in the evening. It started at dusk, and it was in December. December, January. We were transported by some truck. Then we got off the vehicle and then they said, you could practically overlook the whole village. We stood at the beginning of the village, we just stayed there. We didn't want to intervene in the events in any way, but we just wanted or should only be there so that if one of us is wounded, that he would be cared for.
- L.H. Was there a kind of-, did anyone address the troops before you went in there? Was there an officer? Who was responsible for this initiative? Was it a German officer or a Hungarian?
- K.R. We didn't see anything at all. In my opinion, it must have been a German. And yes, and of course-, although one of them came from-. You have to imagine that [terrain] like a tub. You had the individual houses and at the other end, semi-circular, there was that big house. And then somehow someone came and said: 'We have already searched the whole village, but we haven't found anything,' and-. He then went away again and we stood around, it was freezing, and waited for something to happen. And yes, and then suddenly it all kicked off with the machine guns. And then the Hungarians came on their horses. They were fully into it. I gave a lecture about this at Humboldt University. And there was a young girl and she suddenly said: 'Typical, typical for the Hungarians, typical, they were such pigs.' So she had already heard about similar experiences.
- L.H. The Hungarians were on horseback. So that was the cavalry. Is that correct?

- K.R. Yes, yes. Yes, on the small horses that are common there.
- L.H. How far away were you from this action? You said you were keeping back a bit. But what kind of distance would that have been?
- K.R. Yes, we were at one end and the massacre happened at the other end.
- L.H. How far away?
- K.R. How far away? It would have been around 500 metres.
- L.H. Did you—. What did you say to each other as combat medics? Did you think about intervening? To try and stop this action? Did any of that happen? Was there any conversation between you paramedics?
- K.R. Well, imagine yourself in that situation, standing there, freezing, in the middle of the night. And you didn't know exactly what was going on back there. You only heard the constant banging. And if one of them came closer to us with his horse to check if there were any left, you'd see him, and he'd clear off again. We didn't leave our place at all and weren't asked to go any further either. And then, 'Now it's over, you can go home,' that's roughly how it went.
- L.H. And what was left of the village and the people?
- K.R. I would say: no one.
- L.H. No one?
- K.R. No. Well, it could be the case that—. But the massacre back there was so terrible that it's unlikely that anyone survived. Our assistant doctor, he was quite a young man. He was pacing back and forth, grabbing his head and said: 'That's terrible, that's so terrible.' That didn't help anyone. But he wasn't able to help anyone. He also couldn't go and say: 'Now that's enough, stop shooting.' There would certainly have been a captain who would have said: 'You are crazy, I'll court martial you.' They'd say that if you're not ensuring order then the troops will deal with you next. Yes, the whole thing actually was no longer an act of war, but murder, murder, quite simply. And—. But sanctioned. I also don't know if there was a senior officer at all. We didn't see one. We were just waiting to see if anyone got shot somewhere. Our assistant doctor, he was a nervous wreck.
- L.H. And you? How did that affect you?
- K.R. Me? Well, terrible as well. That it had to be somehow. Such actions resulted in real hostility. Such actions led to enmity. It no longer was—, so against German troops, against partisans, that was then a real hostility.

- L.H. You just said that it somehow had to be. So was it somehow accepted? Did you somehow accept it as if it–. You said that on the one hand it was not part of the war, it was murder, but on the other hand you also say that it was somehow accepted or tolerated. What did you mean by that?
- K.R. I don't understand what you mean by that.
- L.H. You have just said that it was kind of accepted, it was kind of tolerated. And that was, this cruel massacre, this murder, as a young man you had–. You kind of watched it. You were a spectator, you might say. You were a contemporary witness to this crime.
- K.R. It was already very dark, and you only saw it from a distance. We couldn't leave our spot because we would have ended up in the line of fire. So we just had to wait there, we were damned to be there and if something happened treat our own people.
- L.H. But none of them were injured? Not the Germans and not the Hungarians, right?
- K.R. I can't say for sure, but probably not.
- L.H. Did anyone ask you about this action afterwards? Do you have to write a, how do you say, a letter or a, what do you call it, a report [...]?
- K.R. No.
- L.H. Did your officer, the lieutenant who was responsible for this, this medical corps, the four of you who were there, did he submit anything?
- K.R. No. Afterwards we went to our quarters and there was a stream of wounded German soldiers. They had mostly stepped on mines laid by the partisans. The partisans had put them down and the German soldiers walked over them and were–. Like I have already told you, they were amputated under very, very primitive circumstances.
- L.H. Did that happen before or after this action?
- K.R. After. After the action.
- L.H. After. And were these things somehow connected or not? This was somewhere completely different? Was it far from this place?
- K.R. Well, not far, but some distance away. And because something like that had probably already happened elsewhere, it was therefore an act of revenge, I would say.
- L.H. And did you also look at this as somehow enacting revenge at that time? Or did you know that it was a huge crime even then?
- K.R. Yes, that's–.

- L.H. Or is that only the case in retrospect, on reflection?
K.R. No. It became clear to us that it was a crime, that it had nothing to do with warfare.⁵⁹

86. Anti-partisan warfare: 'you want to survive, nothing else matters'

Horst Wn. (H.Wn.), born 1924 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 88. His father was a printer. Horst Wn. attended the *Volksschule* and was a printer apprentice. Conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* in 1942, he volunteered for a paratrooper regiment in the air force, serving in Ukraine, Russia (Nikopol, Sevastopol), Romania, Moldova, Germany, and France (Battle of the Bulge). He held the rank of a non-commissioned officer. After the war, he lived in the GDR, where he joined and held office in the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). He also became a history teacher.

This excerpt by matter-of-fact narrator Horst Wn. is notable for his focus on technical details, a common trait among veterans, who often extensively discuss weaponry while being terse on other subjects. Horst Wn.'s assertion that partisans 'stood outside the law' reflects a conviction shared by many soldiers and a sentiment that persists today, despite the interconnection of anti-partisan warfare with the killing of civilians, including Jews, and the disproportionate reprisal killings of 'hostages'. Horst Wn. has rationalised the war through the lens of survival, viewing killings as automated reactions, and leading to distrust even of his superiors. He stresses his good relations with the civilian populations but reveals as an aside that this relationship was asymmetrical, relying on the civilians' subordination unless they wanted 'trouble'.

- L.H. Did you have much contact with the civilian population?
H.Wn. The air force had a lot of contact with the civilian population, relatively speaking, because the civilian population regarded us as the least hostile, on the one hand; on the other hand, they knew that if they challenged us, then there'd be trouble.
L.H. Then what?
H.Wn. Then there'd be trouble. That was the case on one occasion.
L.H. Tell me: what happened?
H.Wn. Well, partisans tried to attack our unit despite our superior cannons and tanks: what nonsense. They tried attacking from the forest.
L.H. What did you do?

H.Wn. Well, we responded with a barrage. We deforested the woods a bit with grenades. If you hit the bottom of a tree with a heavy anti-tank gun, the tree will come down. Well, you know, this sounds casual, but you no longer feel anything at that point. You mechanically complete a task. And clearly partisans stood outside the law; we didn't make any arrests among partisans. And if a partisan aims at you, then you're not going to say to him, 'Hey you, that's no way to behave,' how stupid would that be? One of them thought he was quite the hero; he was hiding high up in a tree with a machine gun and frequently took out people from our unit. Surely, that's not decent. I then used a scissor telescope, which can't be seen but can still move in either direction and zoom in. I looked at the area, where the shooter, the sniper, could be. How would you detect him? That's useful for today's army too. If the sniper is hiding in a tree for four or five hours, then the leaves he's covered himself with will start to wilt. So you look at the tree and if it's got wilted leaves, then you can assume there's the sniper's nest. You use the telescope and zoom in, load the weapon, then look again and you can see the nest and something falling. And that's that. War. You live longer if you're the faster and better shot. It is my conviction that that's true for all soldiers in the world. You live longer if you're the faster and better shot. You mustn't think that someone might die, because then the other guy can shoot faster. So you get used to a self-defence situation in combat, at war. You want to survive, nothing else matters. Later, by the end of the war, you would even take aim at your own superiors.⁶⁰

87. Girls marching and singing at partisan hanging: 'it was horrible'

Maria Ad. (M.Ad.), born 1925 in the Serbian part of the Banat region, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 86. Ethnic German. Her family moved to Belgrade around 1931 and to Vienna in 1944. Her father was a photographer and served in the SS Prinz Eugen Division. Maria Ad. was in the League of German Girls (BDM) and worked for the *Wehrmacht*, helping to 'repatriate' ethnic Germans to Germany. See also [excerpt 130](#).

Maria Ad. reluctantly recalls how her BDM group had to march and sing the Horst Wessel song when four alleged partisans were hanged in a public place in Belgrade. She served as the flagbearer. She expresses her

discomfort at the song they sang. This indicates the lasting impact the incident had on her, not only having to witness a hanging but also having been drawn into it, with the music acting as a trigger.

M.Ad. I haven't told you yet what we had to do in Belgrade, and what the Germans did. There is a large square, the Terasje. They hanged four people there, in four different places. Partisans. It was horrible. And we had to march. Simply had to. Ordered by the Germans, nothing to do with our ethnic Germans. We had to march [draws a square with her hand] past all four hanged men. And we didn't protest that we didn't want to do it. Then we sang a song, also. But—, that was captured on camera. But not by my father. Such things happened. That's when we learned what they were capable of. But anyway. Then we sang a song, and I don't want to hear or speak the lyrics ever again. That was done, how shall I put it, as a warning to the others. For the—, not for the communists but for the partisans, as a warning of what can happen. Because on the other side, the partisans killed many, Germans. Our people, too. Only when the Germans were there, that never happened before. And so it was meant to be a warning, or for revenge. And we had to go and be there. We didn't enjoy it. [We didn't enjoy] the song, either!⁶¹

88. Starvation and cannibalism in POW camp: 'at first, they ate the dogs. Then they ate each other'

Walter Pu. (W.Pu.), born 1924, grew up in Tyrol, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2009 at the age of 85. He joined the Hitler Youth in 1936 when such membership was still illegal in Austria. After attending the *Volksschule*, the son of a butcher shop owner completed an apprenticeship at the Hermann-Göring-Werke in Steinach, Austria. Following his Reich Labour Service (RAD), he was conscripted into the mountain brigades and served in the East. He later trained as an air force pilot, serving again at the Eastern Front. He was captured by the British and was a POW in Cambridge, England, and Fort William, Scotland.

The *Wehrmacht* held Soviet POWs in often horrendous conditions, mainly due to ideological reasons, with a lack of food and inadequate lodgings for a large number of captured enemy soldiers. The result was starvation and disease being rife. Walter Pu. talks about Mongolian POWs who in their desperation took to cannibalism; he

claims that he too ate human meat during this time when they had run out of all supplies.

W.Pu. And the Mongolians all came out of the ditches with their hands raised [raises his hands in gesture of surrender], didn't they? Their hands up. Thousands of them. And then they saw us: not so many. We surrounded them and took them prisoner. But we had nothing to eat. They started eating the dogs because there were no supplies. Then we sent an SOS [message] asking for military personnel to bring them back to [...] a camp where they could stay. What happened was that the Germans said they would send somebody. [...] Nobody came. We were there with the people, thousands of prisoners, and nobody-. What can you do? They ate each other, because there was nothing to eat. And it was also cold. The first time that I ate human flesh. It tastes sweet. But, as I said, the lieutenant colonel gave an order, one day, and he said: 'All those who are still capable of coping with the fatigue for six weeks, and the skiers – the feet are frozen! – those who can endure it, they can go back, and we remain here with [the prisoners].' The prisoners [were] all dead. I was lucky, I was a good skier! I went to the doctor. He looked at my feet, just examined them and said: 'Fine! You can go back!' We had been, I think, we had been about 5,000 and of those 5,000, 1,000 got back. The others were frozen or were eaten up by the-. That was my front experience. Then I came back to Germany, to Plauen.

L.H. Could you stay a little longer in Russia?

W.Pu. No, we came back.

L.H. No, I still have a question about your time in Russia. How many Mongolians did you capture?

W.Pu. I can't say exactly how many-. They were fenced in so- [points with his hand]. Thousands. Thousands of Mongolians.

L.H. Did they get something to eat, these prisoners?

W.Pu. No, at first, they ate the dogs. Then they ate each other. And, as I said, with us-, the doctor examined you to see if you were capable of the six-week march back or not. And I was fit [enough]. I was good at skiing. And he said, 'You are able to make it back.' And the others died with the prisoners.

L.H. They died?

W.Pu. Never heard from them again!⁶²

89. Partisans and international law: 'one was condemned, even according to the law, to take a gruesome revenge as a deterrent'

Rudolf M. (R.M.), born 1912 in Westphalia, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2009 at the age of 97. The son of a legal expert at the highest administrative court in Germany, Rudolf M. was a law professor. He had studied law and gained his doctorate before the war. He was a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and served in the *Wehrmacht* in the East. See also [excerpt 16](#).

Professor of law Rudolf M. seeks to bolster his claims that the killing of partisans as practised by the German troops in the Second World War was entirely legal by referring to his understanding of the law. This claim was refuted in the Nuremberg Hostages Trial, as the German practice of reprisal was deemed disproportionate and arbitrary, often at a ratio of 50:1 or 100:1. War crimes were committed in the West, too, albeit less so than in the East. Another revisionist claim he puts forward is that the brutality of the war in the East was forced on them by the Red Army rather than being an integral part of 'Operation Barbarossa' from the outset; Nazi ideology constructed the threat of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' that served as both motivation and justification for murder.

R.M. And from the first day on it was a very hard fight. Very hard. A completely different war than in the West. You can indeed say in the West the participants adhered to the usual methods of international law, except for an extremely small minority. The rules of war were followed accordingly. I can't recall any breach of international law. That didn't happen. In Russia, from the first day, for the Russians there was no law. They treated prisoners differently and, as an observation, for the German soldiers the biggest worry was about ending up in their prisons. One couldn't know if one would be killed very quickly or cruelly transported to Siberia with minimal provisions, to a work camp there. The Russian was feared because of his brutality and because of the injuries of the worst kind that they inflicted on the prisoners. And as partisans, they-. When we had conquered large parts of Russia, there were very quickly partisans, who may not and cannot exist according to international law. Yes, [they blew up] hospital trains, supply trucks. And when I was in such a hospital train on two occasions, that was also the big worry. [...] In short, the partisan war was particularly cruel on both sides, where, however, as far as I know, the generally recognised rule is: if

a partisan is caught, for one partisan, 10 times in vengeance is allowed, as deterrence.

L.H. What does that mean?

R.M. So, if a partisan is caught. If a partisan kills your own soldiers in an ambush in civilian clothing, in other words, not as soldiers, [the army] is permitted to kill 10 times the number of partisans. I can't say if that's true. Luckily, it was my great luck that I never experienced that, never encountered partisans, was always on the front lines. And was always grateful for my destiny. Because if one captured partisans, one was condemned, even according to the law, to take a gruesome revenge as a deterrent. Because you couldn't get around it.

L.H. That means, if one caught a partisan—

R.M. We had partisans disguised as civilians who killed our soldiers in an ambush. In this case according to prevailing international law, very severe retaliation was allowed and practised in the interest of deterrence. Because all [soldiers] have the same fear, that something like that happens to them in an ambush: hospital train blown up. Supply train blown up, and so on. I luckily never experienced that. How did I get on to that topic? Well, just as an example: they didn't respect international law. I don't doubt that there were also Russian commanders who abided by it. But as far as I had to do with it, it was always very cruel. And with bad bodily injuries inflicted on a battalion, very, very bad. And then our own soldiers were so embittered after such an experience and were able to apprehend the people responsible later. They set up a court martial right away, the regiment did, and five soldiers of the respective unit were hanged, which expressed 100 per cent the deepest feelings of our own soldiers, because [the captured enemy combatants] had carried out these terrible criminal activities. You can imagine what they did. The worst physical torture on German prisoners. That being said, I don't assert that it was [incomprehensible] because God knows that we didn't treat our Russian prisoners well.

L.H. What happened with the Russian prisoners?

R.M. Well, they were badly fed, and many died because of poor nourishment. They were very badly treated! And the Russians, as prisoners, were certainly treated worse than the French or the Americans because of these things. We had no interest in this gruesome conduct of war. But a part of the Russian command

saw this as a useful method and knew that it acted as a deterrent.
That was also a reason—

L.H. A deterrent?

R.M. That was also one of the reasons why the Germans fought to the last man, in order not to be defeated. Not to be taken prisoner. We were all afraid of that. Monstrous. In the West, there was a different outlook. There, some would have welcomed imprisonment!⁶³

Notes

- 1 Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide*, 7.
- 2 Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 264. See also Shepherd, *Terror in the Balkans*, 30.
- 3 Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe*, 2.
- 4 Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe*, 205. See also Beorn, *Marching into Darkness*. Scholars such as Thomas Kühne and Edward Westerman have explored the relationship between masculinity and violence, while Claudia Koonz, Jill Stephenson, Elizabeth Harvey, and Wendy Lower have focused on women in the 'Third Reich', including their involvement in Nazi crimes. Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide*; Westerman, *Drunk on Genocide*; Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*; Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany*; Harvey, *Women and the Nazi Germanization of the 'East'*; Lower, *Hitler's Furies*.
- 5 USHMM Holocaust Encyclopaedia, 'Waffen-SS'.
- 6 Kay and Stahel, 'Crimes of the Wehrmacht: A re-evaluation', 96–8. The figures are quoted in Kay and Stahel.
- 7 Heer, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter*; Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941–45*; Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe*.
- 8 Beorn, 'A Calculus of Complicity', 336.
- 9 Stargardt, *Witnesses of War*, 376.
- 10 Harvey, *Women and the Nazi Germanization of the 'East'*.
- 11 H.G. Video Testimony (132M), 12 November 2011.
- 12 G.N. Video Testimony (019M), 10 March 2010.
- 13 H.O. Video Testimony (203M), 24 January 2013. For more information about *Wehrmacht*-run brothels, see, for example, Röger, *Wartime Relations*. For a short clip, see Zoltán Kékesi, 'A Pandora's box: The Horst Wessel song in the collection "Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies"', <https://compromised-identities.org/musical-memories> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 14 E.S. Video Testimony (199F), 15 December 2012.
- 15 E.F.J. Video Testimony (158F), 5 July 2012.
- 16 E.Ba. Video Testimony (011F), 24 July 2009.
- 17 P.H. Video Testimony (044M), 22 July 2010.
- 18 W.St. Video Testimony (004M), 4 November 2008.
- 19 K.S. Video Testimony (032M), 12 April 2010. On the Dachau SS training camp, see Dillon, *Dachau and the SS*.
- 20 E.S. Video Testimony (199F), 15 December 2012. For more information on ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia, see Mezger, *Forging Germans*.
- 21 I would like to thank Zoltán Kékesi for sharing his insights on this interview: Zoltán Kékesi, 'From Hitler to the Junta and back: Memories of a Wehrmacht Veteran in Argentina' (forthcoming).
- 22 E.K. Video Testimony (117M), 10 August 2011.
- 23 Lu.H. Video Testimony (176F), 18 September 2012.
- 24 O.O. Video Testimony (160M), 17 July 2012.
- 25 E.J. Video Testimony (049F), 31 October 2010.
- 26 U.S. Video Testimony (075F), 23 February 2011.

- 27 I.R. Video Testimony (141F), 29 February 2012.
- 28 T.S. Video Testimony (089F), 22 March 2011.
- 29 A.Tn. Video Testimony (023F), 12 March 2010.
- 30 S.D. Video Testimony (012F), 27 July 2009.
- 31 S.D. Video Testimony (012F), 14 August 2009.
- 32 See, for example: Dick, *Builders of the Third Reich*; Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis*.
- 33 E.Ba. Video Testimony (011F), 24 July 2009. The Oranienburg concentration camp closed in July 1934. If her father visited the camp in 1942, that would have been the Sachsenhausen concentration camp.
- 34 K.L. Video Testimony (014M), 21 August 2009.
- 35 F.S. Video Testimony (058M), 13 January 2011.
- 36 F.S. Video Testimony (058M), 14 September 2011.
- 37 For more information, see KZ Gedenkstätte Mauthausen, 'Mühlviertel Hare Hunt', <https://www.mauthausen-memorial.org/en/History/The-Mauthausen-Concentration-Camp-19381945/Muehlviertel-Hare-Hunt> (accessed 9 October 2024).
- 38 M.S. Video Testimony (091F), 29 March 2011. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Exciting times', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 39 H.Se. Video Testimony (135M), 8 December 2011.
- 40 H.Wa. & H.C. Video Testimony (239F2), 5 March 2014.
- 41 H.Sf. Video Testimony (122M), 30 September 2011.
- 42 J.V.B. Video Testimony (208F), 16 February 2013.
- 43 E.B. Video Testimony (008F), 21 July 2009.
- 44 M.Kn. Video Testimony (020F), 11 March 2010.
- 45 H.Po. Video Testimony (079F), 25 February 2011.
- 46 A.Jo. Video Testimony (212F), 18 March 2013.
- 47 D.Ba. Video Testimony (038M), 13 July 2010.
- 48 H.Ro. Video Testimony (092M), 29 March 2011. See also: Rauch, 'Reconsidering post-war narratives of involvement in Nazi violence'.
- 49 H.Go. Video Testimony (155M), 2 July 2012. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Keeping the trains rolling', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 50 S.F. Video Testimony (156M), 3 July 2012.
- 51 G.W. Video Testimony (042M), 21 July 2010.
- 52 A.W. Video Testimony (045M), 22 July 2010. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Perpetrator or rescuer?', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 53 F.K. Video Testimony (076M), 23 February 2011.
- 54 H.S. Video Testimony (061M), 15 January 2011. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Victim as perpetrator?', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 55 K.S. Video Testimony (032M), 12 April 2010.
- 56 See, for example, Rauch, 'Gender and transgressive violence in post-war accounts', 121–2.
- 57 F.E. Video Testimony (003M), 31 October 2008.
- 58 F.E. Video Testimony (003M), 31 October 2008.
- 59 K.R. Video Testimony (198M), 28 November 2012. See also Rauch, 'Reconsidering post-war narratives of involvement in Nazi violence'.
- 60 H.Wn. Video Testimony (197M), 26 November 2012.
- 61 M.Ad. Video Testimony (121F), 19 September 2011. For a short clip, see Zoltán Kékesi, 'A Pandora's box: The Horst Wessel song in the collection "Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies"', <https://compromised-identities.org/musical-memories> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 62 W.Pu. Video Testimony (007M), 2 June 2009.
- 63 R.M. Video Testimony (015M), 16 December 2009.

Part III

Aftermath

When the Western Allies entered Western Germany in the autumn of 1944 they expected a swift end to the war. Instead, their advance soon stalled. The change in fortunes during the war from around 1942/3 onwards had contributed to a growing distance from the regime among many Germans and Austrians.¹ However, many still fought on until the very end, driven in part by a fear of revenge for Germany's crimes.² After Germany's unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945, Allied efforts at rooting out Nazism and punishing the guilty soon gave way to Cold War pragmatism. Different cohorts adapted to the three successor states in different ways.³ All three states integrated the 'Third Reich' contemporaries, with different myths and reinterpretations or select elements of the past serving as the glue that held the new societies together. This came at the expense of justice for the victims and holding perpetrators to account, as 'emphases on certain types of crime and degrees of leniency in sentencing those found guilty differed markedly between states and over time'.⁴ The Nazi past, however, remained contested, particularly in West Germany from the 1960s onwards. After reunification, the 1990s saw the emergence of narratives centring on German victimhood (especially because of the Allied air raids and the expulsion from the East at the end of the war), which competed with a distinct focus on Holocaust victims and increased public awareness of *Wehrmacht* crimes. Austria began to reckon with Austrians' involvement, and in some cases prominence, in the Holocaust and Nazi Germany's 'war of annihilation' against the Soviet Union.

Part III focuses both on the immediate 'aftermath' – defeat and liberation – and the speakers' long-term attempts at variously confronting or denying the past, reinterpreting it in the service of the present, passing

on what they believe are the lessons from history, and, ultimately, seeking to integrate their experiences into a changed environment, while maintaining a positive self-image.

The excerpts presented here highlight the many ways in which ordinary Germans, Austrians, and others sought to make sense of the Nazi past and their role within it – especially when prompted and confronted by, for example, media reports, trials, children and grandchildren, and indeed interviewers.

The narrators reflect on their experience of the end of the war from the perspective of the present, often in conjunction with an assessment of the Nazi period, the war, and how they related to both. Some critically consider their own roles and trajectories, while others claim they remained steadfast and aloof from Nazism throughout. Yet others seek to pinpoint turning points in their lives, either when they fell for Nazism and the lure of war and victory, or when they were disenchanted, recognising the extent of the horrors inflicted on Nazi Germany's millions of victims. A sizeable group refuses to acknowledge this, indulging in various shades of historical revisionism through to outright Holocaust denial. A couple of them took to confronting their past and educating younger generations, often following what they considered a watershed experience. Notably absent from Austrian interviews is the notion of Austria as Nazi Germany's 'first victim', which suggests that in the private sphere this discourse never held much sway for this cohort. The impact of the present and intervening decades is ever present, but most obvious in references to other wars and conflicts, political developments, popular films, books, and acrimonious encounters with family members. The interviewer's own agenda and positioning shapes the conversation's direction and the interaction, and is audible in the types of questions that are asked, interjections, and reactions.

Suggested questions when reading the excerpts:

- The speakers were mostly still young adults in their early to mid-twenties by the end of the war. How might this have affected how they experienced the end of the war and how they have come to view it in old age?
- What types of pseudo-arguments and antisemitic tropes can be identified in the revisionist and denialist accounts?
- What purposes might be served by the various strategies of representing the Nazi past? What elements of the past can be used to build a positive image of past and/or present?

- Do you find you are more empathetic to some of the interviewees than others, and why might that be?
- How does the interviewer elicit and hinder certain representations of the past and present?

Further study

Dan Bar-On, *Legacy of Silence: Encounters with children of the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Julia Wagner, and Christiane Wienand (eds), *Reverberations of Nazi Violence in Germany and Beyond: Disturbing pasts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

Christopher Browning, *Collected Memories: Holocaust history and postwar testimony* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular sentiment in the Nazi era: 1938–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Peter Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (London: Belknap Press, 2008).

Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi persecution and the quest for justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Konrad Jarausch, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945–1995* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Hannes Heer, Walter Manoschek, Alexander Pollack, and Ruth Wodak (eds), *The Discursive Construction of History: Remembering the Wehrmacht's war of annihilation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Erin McGlothlin, *The Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction and Nonfiction* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2021).

Christina Morina, *Legacies of Stalingrad: Remembering the Eastern Front in Germany since 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi Past: United Germany and the legacy of the Third Reich* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Bill Niven, *Germans as Victims: Remembering the past in contemporary Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (eds), *Memory: Histories, theories, debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

Frank Trentmann, *Out of the Darkness: The Germans, 1942–2022* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

Harald Welzer, *Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German family remembrance* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2005).

Films

Der Prozess, dir. Eberhard Fechner (West Germany, 1984).

East of War, dir. Ruth Beckermann (Austria, 1996).

Getting Away with Murder(s), dir. David Wilkinson (UK, 2023).

KZ, dir. Rex Bloomstein (UK, 2006).

My Nazi Legacy, dir. David Evans (UK, 2015).

2 or 3 Things I Know About Him, dir. Malte Ludin (Germany, 2005).

The immediate post-war period

Germany's unconditional surrender to the Allied armies on 8 May 1945 marked the end of hostilities and the beginning of the long aftermath of war and genocide. In the immediate period after the surrender, many in the cohort interviewed by Holland were in their twenties and responded to the resounding defeat in different ways. Kurt Se. (see [excerpt 90](#)), for instance, describes his profound shock, even considering suicide. Similarly, former *Napola* pupil Hans M. (see [excerpt 91](#)) was devastated after having been raised to believe in German superiority. Hans-Friedrich L. speaks of a 'stolen youth' (see [excerpt 92](#)), which is a later, common interpretation of the past among this cohort, who claimed to have been seduced, misused, and misled, and resented having to start over, often without a completed education or apprenticeship. Near the liberated concentration camps, some of the local populations were afraid of the Allies and the former inmates, such as described by Theresia K. (see [excerpt 93](#) and [excerpt 94](#)), who sought to hide her boyfriend, who had been a guard at the Ebensee concentration camp, from the Allies. Many sought to evade Allied capture and punishment. Kurt Se. withheld from the Allies that he had held the rank of lieutenant at the end of the war (see [excerpt 90](#)); Ferdinand Kr. sought the removal of his SS blood-type tattoo and, following infection, was almost caught (see [excerpt 95](#)); Rosemarie Be. stole a stamp from the British and issued release papers to other Germans in the internment camp (see [excerpt 96](#)); and Heinz Pa. took on a false identity as an Italian to escape first to Italy and then on to Argentina ([excerpt 97](#)).

The experience of captivity varied depending on the theatre of war and which of the Allies captured German and Austrian soldiers. Those who were POWs in the Soviet Union certainly fared far worse than those in Western captivity. Dieter Ba. considers his time as a POW in Britain as a formative, creative time, from which he benefited for the rest of his life (see [excerpt 99](#)). Both Viktor H. (see [excerpt 100](#)) and Martin D. (see [excerpt 101](#)) speak of being confronted by the Americans with footage of

the liberated concentration camps as part of their re-education, claiming this resulted in disbelief, even laughter at the time.

90. Shock in 1945: 'I thought I needed to shoot myself'

Kurt Se. (K.Se.), born 1925 in Salzburg, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 84. Catholic. Both his parents were *Volksschule* teachers and both welcomed the *Anschluss*. Kurt Se. attended the *Gymnasium*, joined the Hitler Youth, and volunteered for the *Waffen-SS (Hitler-Jugend Division)* in May 1943 after the German defeat at Stalingrad (Volgograd). Captured by British troops in May 1945, he was interned in different camps, including in Austria. He went to university in 1947 and became a jurist.

Kurt Se. talks about his response to the end of the war in May 1945: his sense of shock and life not worth living any more and thinking about suicide. Having served in the *Waffen-SS*, he was taken prisoner by British troops and interned in the former concentration camp of Neuengamme, before being sent around different POW camps, eventually being transferred to Austria in 1946 where he spent one year and a quarter in internment, calling it a very formative time which he used to study. He admits that he kept from the Allies that he had held the rank of a lieutenant.

K.Se. I made it back to my unit, '45, in May '45, it was the end. I was deeply affected, I must say, because I thought: it is over. Life isn't worth living any more. And I wanted for a moment-. I thought I needed to shoot myself, because there was no hope, was there? And [I had been] educated in such a way, or one can say programmed, that I perceived this as terrible. Naturally, a day later I saw that life goes on, and it would have been insane to have made use of my pistol. We became prisoners very soon, a few days later. I had meant to make my way to Austria in civilian clothes, but I was stopped by an English military patrol, and was put in the camp, or the KZ [concentration camp], of Neuengamme. First it was very uncomfortable because we were told: 'All members of the *Waffen-SS* step forward!' I hadn't really expected that we would experience special treatment. No privileged treatment either, of course. And we spent more than a week in a cellar, in a second cellar, with only a light shaft. We felt very depressed at that point. Only contrary to expectations, we were released, and initially joined others, even a unit of the

Wehrmacht. But very soon we were separated out again, and put in different camps in northern Germany, where the situation was very bad, as far as food was concerned. I really suffered from hunger and was down to 56 kilograms. But for a young man, in the company of comrades, it is bearable. And I was mentally active then, learned languages. We did not have to work because it was ultimately an internment camp. And then I came, by way of various camps, to Austria, '46. There they even looked for us [Austrians], Austrians should make themselves known. Naturally we thought now we'll be released into freedom, to Austria. But that was not the case. But in Austria we were then first declared 'NE' in our papers. We did not have a military ID any more but I had wanted to make my own way. ['NE'] meant: 'not fit for release'. I was interned in Austria for another year and a quarter and was released from imprisonment in July 1947. Naturally this time has shaped me, due to, let's say, the loss of freedom, the very primitive accommodation. I never slept on a mattress but only on the pieces of clothing I had, very few. But one also learns how to do that. I had no body fat and just lay there. But I also, in this time, started studying again because I was curious: languages and all kinds of lectures. Later also in Glasenbach. I was, and I need to say that, one of the youngest there. That came about simply because of my military rank, just made it in. I could have stated a different rank. I would have passed muster without a problem as a simple soldier, due to my youth. But I didn't then-. I did not disclose that I was a lieutenant at the end [of the war]. Only an *Oberfähnrich*, mind you. But I was-. My parents knew that I was an *Oberfähnrich*, and concealing that – all this was in Germany – could have been very bad for me. That was a false statement, that was especially punished.⁵

91. Devastated at the end of war: 'I cried like a baby'

Hans M. (H.M.), born 1929 in the Uckermark district of Brandenburg, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 81. He had been at one of the Nazi elite boarding schools, the so-called *Napolas*. Both parents were hairdressers and had their own salon. He helped build the *Ostwall* in the Warthegau in the summer of 1944. In the winter of 1944/5, the *Napola* boys volunteered for the *Volkssturm*. They received weapons and infantry training in early 1945 and were first deployed in mid-April 1945, defending Potsdam against British troops. Their unit

was subordinated to the *Waffen-SS*. He fought in Spandau until early May 1945 until he was wounded and hid from the Allies. He lived in the GDR after the war. He studied physics and German and became a teacher, and later a dramatic adviser.

The former *Napola* pupil, an experienced narrator, has probably recounted his story many times before. He describes his devastation upon hearing of Germany's surrender, expressing his disbelief and tears after five years of being taught as the future elite and believing in German superiority. The excerpt also hints at the widespread deception and subterfuge at the end of the war when many soldiers tried to downplay their rank or affiliation to evade capture.

H.M. I went to the village. There weren't many people left on the estates. But I did find one estate, and a woman there said: 'The Russians were here. They said Germany surrendered today. You should—. The war is over. The soldiers should hand over their weapons there and there. And if German soldiers are found when the village is being searched again, they will be shot and the village will be burnt to the ground. So don't make any trouble for us.' I went back, reported this to [my superior] and didn't want to believe it. And said: 'Herr Hauptmann, that is impossible. Germany cannot have given up.' Then he put his arm around my shoulder and said: 'You know, my boy, sometimes the truth needs more courage than a lie.' Then I understood that that was the end, and I cried like a baby. Because for me, after five years of elite school training, I just couldn't imagine that Germany would surrender. I succumbed to an exhausted sleep, and when I came to the group was gone, including Herr Hauptmann, and including my compass. What they had left me was my camouflage suit, a pistol, Mauser pistol, a grenade, and a bread bag with a metal box of flyer's chocolate. That was called Schoka-Cola at the time, with caffeine for staying awake. I was desperate that the Hauptmann had deserted me, and I went to the village, in my uniform with the pistol in my right hand, and thought, showdown, just like in *High Noon*. But no enemy came, so I went into the house. The estate's dog tore itself away from its chain, jumped me, I fell and lost consciousness. When I came to, a Russian patrol noisily entered the room where the farmer's wife had put me. And I noticed: my camouflage suit was gone. And she had taken my *Wehrpass* from my uniform, that's how smart she was, and had

shown this *Wehrpass* to the Russians. And they knew: whoever has a *Wehrpass* is not a soldier. Soldiers have a *Soldbuch*. On it was my date of birth and a photo. Seeing that, the two Russian soldiers turned very soft. Cussing in their way [...]. 'Go home.' And that was the end of that. Then I needed some time, due to my injuries, until I returned to Templin. My parents' home had burnt down but my mother was alive.⁶

92. Defeated: 'I did not feel liberated'

Hans-Friedrich L. (H.F.L.), born 1918 in Hamburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 94. His father, who died in 1936, had been a ship engineer. Hans-Friedrich L. was in the *Bündische Jugend*, which was later incorporated into the *Jungvolk*. He joined the Hitler Youth (*Flieger-HJ*). Following his *Abitur* in 1937, he completed his Reich Labour Service (RAD) for six months. Subsequently he served in the *Luftwaffe* until May 1945. He was in brief captivity in France until September/October 1940, and after his release served in a fighting unit from 1941 in the East, Southern Italy, and Western Europe from where he flew missions against England. After losing an eye when he was shot down in March 1944, he served as a staff officer in Prague until the end of the war. After the war, he studied engineering and later became a self-employed architect. His wife was taken to the Urals by the Russians and returned in 1947.

Hans-Friedrich L.'s statement that he did not feel 'liberated' in 1945 hints at Germany's reinterpretation of the end of the war. In 1985, Richard von Weizsäcker, then the German president, termed 8 May 1945 the 'day of liberation'. The stolen youth trope is likely an interpretation that Hans-Friedrich L. adopted much later, but he was certainly not alone in feeling angry at having to start over again. While he speaks of his Christian background, his denomination is not known. For Hans-Friedrich L., the end of the war also meant the loss of his wife, who was taken to the Soviet Union and only returned in 1947, which would have added to his sense of having also been a victim of Nazism.

H.F.L. To me, back then, I did not feel liberated. On the contrary: I felt burdened and put at a disadvantage by my own government, by my own people. That I, at 27 years of age, was on the street again with nothing. But I didn't feel myself to be somehow liberated.

L.H. When did you recognise that it was a criminal regime? When did you really—?

- H.F.L. Indeed, yes. That set in together with the developments of '44, that one increasingly doubted the measures that were resorted to in Germany, doubted, and that one had the feeling, with the Christian background that I had, that sins were being committed. Sins against our fellow men and against our fellow citizens. Yes.
- L.H. Did you recognise that you were serving a criminal regime? That you were there, that you participated in, and that you also have a certain blame for-. I'm not formulating the question as a judgement, rather to hear your answer.
- H.F.L. Yes, we, the so-called young people of that day, at 27 years of age, university-track students with life experience, without a profession, without anything. We ascertained that we had been abused. That they had robbed us of our youth and the possibility of growing up. We subsequently tried to catch up in arduous-, or with great effort. Many succeeded. Others were broken in the effort. To that extent, the epoch and National Socialism committed a crime against us. That gradually dawned on us.
- L.H. You just spoke of a stolen youth. Did I understand that correctly? That your youth was stolen from you?
- H.F.L. Yes.⁷

93. Hiding SS boyfriend: 'we said, we must hide him'

Theresia K. (T.K.), born 1923 in the Salzkammergut region in Upper Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 88. Her father was a carpenter. She attended the *Volksschule*, *Hauptschule*, and a sewing school. Theresia K. was in the League of German Girls (BDM). She married a former SS man and guard at the Ebensee concentration camp. See also [excerpt 94](#).

Theresia K. hid her then boyfriend, who had been a guard at the Ebensee concentration camp, from the Allies, though he was ultimately arrested. While she expresses empathy for the prisoners, she does not seem to hold her boyfriend responsible for their treatment. Ebensee was notorious for exploiting prisoners as slave labour, who performed 'back-breaking work of digging tunnels' while being 'mistreated by especially violent guards'. Around 27,000 people, mostly from Poland, the Soviet Union, and Hungary, were imprisoned at the Ebensee concentration camp, over 8,100 of whom died there. The camp guards fled when US troops approached. The camp was liberated on 6 May 1945.⁸

- L.H. Tell me the story! How did you hide him?
- T.K. We had a camp. [It was] guarded. He was there with the guards. They could have—. And suddenly it was said: 'The Americans are coming! They're already in Traunkirchen.'
- L.H. The liberators!
- T.K. Yes. Then we said, we must hide him. Otherwise, they would come and get him.
- L.H. Then you hid him, and where? Can you tell me the whole story, from the beginning? But in German language [that is, not in local dialect] I can understand. If not, I'll be quickly at a loss.
- T.K. Yes, how shall I put it? It was said that the Americans were coming, and they were already in Traunkirchen. They came and opened the gate, the big one, the camp gate. And they all came out, the prisoners. But I had a hiding place, in the house. That was terrible for me. But it was nothing. I don't know about the timing, but someone gave me away, that I had hidden him. Then the police came, they got him and took him away. They took him to the camp in Salzburg.
- L.H. Then he became a prisoner.
- T.K. Yes. He was there for three years.
- L.H. Could you visit him?
- T.K. No. I visited him only once. There were no visiting hours.
- L.H. There was no way to visit?
- T.K. No. No way to visit. But he was in good shape. Because he was a tailor he worked for the Americans.
- L.H. How did you decide to hide him? What made you do it?
- T.K. Because they would have [gesture of cutting the throat], you know.
- L.H. You wanted to save his life.
- T.K. Yes, I saved his life.
- L.H. Let's go back. We met for the first time two days ago, two or three days ago. And you told me that prisoners worked in the town. And they suffered so much from hunger. What did you do?
- T.K. The prisoners! In the morning a troop of them came, with a man from the SS. And we had a meadow. And they all went to the meadow [makes a gesture of eating] because they were hungry. They had nothing else. And this happened every day. The same every day. They had to work without food. Terrible. And my husband was with them as a guard. That's how I met him.
- L.H. Did you say the prisoners ate the grass?
- T.K. Yes. They ate the grass.⁹

94. Reactions to liberated prisoners: 'our people were afraid'

Theresia K. (TK), born 1923 in the Salzkammergut region in Upper Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 88. Her father was a carpenter. She attended the *Volksschule*, *Hauptschule*, and a sewing school. Theresia K. was in the League of German Girls (BDM). She married a former SS man and guard at the Ebensee concentration camp. See also [excerpt 93](#).

This excerpt indicates what the local reactions to the liberation of the camps may have looked like, with the local population possibly afraid of revenge, given the inmates' appalling treatment, and given popular ideas about the camps as housing criminals.

- L.H. Frau K., you ran a great risk to hide your boyfriend. But no one helped the prisoners.
- T.K. That wouldn't have worked. I am telling you. That wouldn't have worked.
- L.H. You mean it was no use.
- T.K. No, then you'd be done for [makes gesture of cutting the throat]. That wouldn't have worked.
- L.H. People were afraid—
- T.K. Fear. People were afraid. When it was said the gate will be opened at three o'clock, they drove up there. The jeep. 'They're opening the gate!' I locked everything. They screamed out in happiness, that they got out, that was terrible at the time.
- L.H. The prisoners then came to town?
- T.K. They walked about, yes.
- L.H. One just let them walk out.
- T.K. They just came out, with a white flag.
- L.H. Then they walked into town.
- T.K. Yes.
- L.H. Can you describe that? Please give me a picture so that I can visualise that.
- T.K. I only know that they walked past us because our house was next to the street. That's where they all came down. Now our people were afraid and locked them up. Then I said: 'No need to lock them up.' They are being given what they want. They won't do anything, they were happy to get out, all of them. I can still see them today, how they drove up there. How they said: 'We're opening the gate now.' You cannot imagine the screaming. How they were screaming.

- L.H. They screamed.
- T.K. Out of joy.
- L.H. Out of joy. Did you hear the screaming?
- T.K. Yes, of course!
- L.H. How was that? Explain it to me.
- T.K. Screaming screams of joy. Joy because they were now outside. Some people were afraid because of [makes gesture of eating]. I said they won't do anything. Then you give them something if they are hungry.
- L.H. Did they come down on the same day? Down to the town, or did they first–
- T.K. No, no. Right away at three o'clock, I still remember that. That's when the jeep drove up. And I said: 'Now they'll open the gate.' The others, my neighbours, said: 'They won't let them out.' I said: 'What are you talking about? They drove up there. Now all of them will come.'
- L.H. How many were up there?
- T.K. I can't say for sure. [...]
- L.H. Did the prisoners come to the door and ask for something to eat? Were they at your home?
- T.K. They all came by because I lived over there. That is the street.
- L.H. How far was your home from the main entrance to the KZ [concentration camp]?
- T.K. It was quite a way away. The camp was way up there. Where the tower is now. They come back every year, on the day, people who come to visit that.
- L.H. To remember.
- T.K. Yes. I also have here [a photo of] my daughter and a prisoner [points to a photo]. Both died.
- L.H. Was [your boyfriend] already hidden in the house, when the prisoners came to the door to beg?
- T.K. Yes, of course!
- L.H. Was he already hiding in the attic?
- T.K. Of course!¹⁰

95. Tattoo removal to evade capture: 'of course, I was afraid that they would catch me'

Ferdinand Kr. (F.Kr.), born 1922 in Schelle (Šaľa), Czechoslovakia (today in Slovakia), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) over two days in 2013 at the age of 90 (see [figure 11](#)). Catholic. Ethnic German.



Figure 11 Ferdinand Kr. in his home. He is showing Luke Holland where the tattoo of his blood group used to be. F.Kr. Video Testimony (213M), interviewed by Luke Holland on 20 March 2013. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

He attended the *Gymnasium* and began to study medicine. He joined the SS but continued to study as assistant doctors were needed. He trained with an SS medical battalion in Stettin (today Szczecin, Poland) and studied in Gießen for four semesters to become a junior medical officer. Subsequently, he was an intern at a hospital in Schotten. Close to the end of the war, he disposed of his uniform and pay book, and was captured by US troops who took him to Homburg but did not realise that he had been in the SS. He was then at a displaced persons camp at Hoechst. When registering for a university course in medicine, he lied, stating that he had been in neither the *Wehrmacht* nor the SS. See also [excerpt 124](#).

The blood type tattoos of former SS and *Waffen-SS* members elicit much interest, including by Holland who asked all the SS and *Waffen-SS* veterans about this, and even convinced some of them to show it on camera. For Ferdinand K. it was not only a reminder of his *Waffen-SS* service but also potentially incriminating and standing in the way of his post-war education. He had the tattoo removed but was nearly caught when the wound got infected. He candidly admits to having lied about his *Waffen-SS* membership on application forms.

F.Kr. [The Allies] were always afraid that the [German] people would still do something here [against them]. But the people were all in shock from the whole war and from the misery. If [the Allies] had the opportunity, however, they also [said] ‘Hands up!’ and

took a peek here [points to the inside of his upper arm]. When I saw that, I took off and travelled to Passau. In Passau there was, in fact, a high school that had been evacuated from Slovakia, from a monastery, and I knew that there was a doctor there. I went to the doctor and showed him [the tattoo] and begged him: 'Can you please get rid of this?' [Points at the inside of his upper arm.] 'Yes, that's no problem, I'll get rid of it.' Then I lie down. I didn't need a shot. It only took a moment. [...] Then a kind of plaster on top, and a cream. There was no penicillin. I went back to Erlangen. One day I thought: this hurts so badly! It's swollen and perhaps I'll get blood-, an infection. Phlegmon or something like that. Then I went to the outpatient service at the university hospital and saw a doctor. He was a foreigner. I showed it to him and said: 'I've got a boil.' He looked at me and said: 'What a curious boil.' Oh, that was, of course, a shock for me! Then I thought to myself: so. And I stand up, go to get my file card, which was still on the secretary's desk. I snapped it up like a crazy man and got out of there. Otherwise, he might have turned me in. And I travelled back to [the doctor in] Passau and showed it [to him]: 'So, here! Am I going to die, or what is this?' Then he treated it with Rivanol. Then it was somehow fine. Of course, I was afraid that they would catch me. The university would have dismissed me right away. One had to state [on the enrolment form]: were you *Wehrmacht* or SS, that was terrible. I answered 'no' on every form and was done with it. For me that was a serious shock, but I had already had serious shocks and was already a little hardened. And the interesting thing is: the human being, when he finds himself in such a situation, like a tiger instinctively senses: danger! There is imminent danger! Something is happening. You must react quickly. Faster, faster than the others. And then, perhaps, it will work. Perhaps. Well, and that's how it was.¹¹

96. Stealing release papers from the British: 'many were released'

Rosemarie Be. (R.Be.), born 1924 near Potsdam, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Iris Wachsmuth (I.W.) in 2009 at the age of 85. The daughter of a teacher (father) and a gardener (mother), she was in the League of German Girls (BDM) where she was a section leader, and later she served as a Red Cross helper during the war.

Her great-grandmother had been Jewish. Rosemarie Be. wrote a book about her experiences.

After the end of the war, Rosemarie Be. forged British release papers using a stamp she had stolen from a British official. She claims to have handed such release papers to anyone who needed them in their internment camp. Rosemarie Be. does not feel uneasy about this, but rather presents it as a funny story. This story links to the wider issue of deception and the falsifying of papers and identities in the wake of Germany's defeat.

R.Be. Afterwards, I let them all go, with my-. I had stolen a stamp from the English – sorry! – and then put together a lot of discharge notices, in Lübeck. Not only for my people, but anyone out on the street. They all came to us in the house and received [from me] an official-looking paper that said they were therewith free to go [laughs]! With these in hand, we then travelled to the Rhineland.

I.W. How did you come by the stamp?

R.Be. Well, somehow, I asked [a British official] questions, and then peeked to see what the discharge papers were always made with. He looked away for a moment and then the stamp was gone. Yes [laughs]. It's naturally very funny, but certainly, for those affected, it wasn't so pleasant. Many were released in this way.¹²

97. With false papers to Italy and Argentina: 'I could disguise myself as a mountaineer'

Heinz Pa. (H.Pa.), born 1919 in Flensburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in Argentina in 2012 at the age of 93. His father worked in a paper factory. Heinz Pa. was in the *Jungvolk*. He left school at the age of 17 and went to sea as a ship's boy. He was conscripted into the air force but was sent back to the navy, recording hits, clearing mines, and later as a radio operator on a submarine in the North Atlantic. Subsequently he served in the Mediterranean (Italy and Egypt, the island of Elba). After the war, he went to Italy using false papers, got married in Rome, and emigrated to Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Heinz Pa. justifies his acquisition of false papers by wanting to be reunited with his Italian fiancée. He pretended to be Italian, obtaining a new passport under this identity. Traveling to Italy, he reunited with his future wife and worked as a technician. He later emigrated to Argentina, allegedly due to conflicts with his mother-in-law. If true, this story

suggests that individuals could easily assume new identities at the end of the war to evade capture.

H.Pa. Then my father told me – listen to this! – my father told me: ‘Well,’ he says, ‘don’t come back into the city! Because the English, they are rounding up young Germans, they are brought before the mayor, whoever was there and whoever was young. And they come into a large room–.’ No, what is that called? A barn, a freight car?

L.H. I understand.

H.Pa. There they were locked in, the gate closed, and they were transported to the Ruhr area. They needed people for the mines, for the coal mines. Because Germans had to pay Denmark and France and everyone for the damage they had caused. Then all the coal trains drove to Denmark and came back empty again. He said: ‘Better not come here now, to avoid that.’ Then I said: ‘Oh man, that’s dangerous!’ Now: what happened? I couldn’t travel. For that you needed a permit. From the administration, the German administration or the English administration or whatever, in order to travel. Because of the police. Then I went to the train station, and there was a freight train there that came back empty from Denmark. I climbed into an empty coal car that headed south. My mother had already given me provisions. Then I rode south, to see what was going on. What I hadn’t mentioned yet: when I was on the island of Elba [as a soldier], I fell in love with an Italian woman. Now I wanted to go back. To Italy! But how to get to Italy? I couldn’t travel, couldn’t do this and couldn’t do that. There (in Italy) I travelled with this permit so that I wouldn’t be arrested. I got it from the mayor of the village where I worked. I had a good travel card. Now I went and got out, in Hamburg or wherever that was, out of this coal train. I spoke Italian, I should add. I asked: ‘Where are all the Italians here?’ All the foreign workers were concentrated in a camp, to bring them back to Italy. Where is that happening? ‘In Braunschweig.’ ‘Oh!’ Then [...] I went to the square, where there were a lot of Italians for transport back to Italy. I spoke Italian with them and became friendly with one. I say: ‘You, I have a fiancée there, I want to go to Italy, I’m a German,’ and so on. ‘Yes,’ he says, ‘we’re going to go to the police station, because we have no documents either. At the police station they’ll issue us a pass. With that, we can move around in Germany and so on.’ I say: ‘Oh man, do me a favour:

I need a pass like that.’ And then he gave me a different uniform, [Italian infantry marksmen] Bersaglieri uniform, a soldier’s uniform, that he’d got from someone else. And hobnail shoes so that I could disguise myself as a mountaineer. Then I went with him to the police station. We stood in the queue before the official who issued the documents. Then it was my turn. He said to me in German: ‘Your name?’ My colleague was behind me. I said: ‘I don’t understand what he’s saying. What is he saying?’ I gave him my name. That was all just a trick. Then he issued me a pass as an Italian!¹³

98. In defence of his achievements in the SS: ‘I was proud to have been part of it’

Karl H. (K.H.), born 1914 in Lower Saxony, Germany, interviewed three times by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 and 2012, at the age of 97 during the first interview. Protestant but dropped out of the Church in 1938. His father was a civil servant working for the railways. Karl H. attended a *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school) and a commercial school. He completed a merchant/business apprenticeship before volunteering for the *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler in 1935. Later he was transferred to the *Hitler-Jugend-Division*. He served in Berlin, France, Croatia, Hungary, and Austria. He was captured by US troops in Austria and interned in Darmstadt and Neuengamme. After his release in 1948, he retrained as a dyer and later worked in an office. See also [excerpts 20, 102](#).

Most people in the cohort interviewed by Holland would have benefited from the ‘youth amnesty’ the Americans and French applied to those born after 1 January 1919 who did not fall into the two most serious denazification categories. This did not apply to Karl H., who was born in 1914. As a member of the SS, Karl H. was interned by the Americans until 1948. He calls this period the time when they were ‘denazified’. Holland makes an offer to Karl H., providing him with the opportunity to either reject his Nazi past, considering it as ‘stolen youth’, or to reaffirm his pride. Karl H. chooses the latter, voicing his pride in his achievements in the SS which he believes he would not have attained in the *Wehrmacht*. This indicates how essential his SS membership is to his sense of identity.

L.H. May I ask, Herr H., in the post-war period, once everything was over, after the collapse you were a prisoner. Was there a moment

when you somehow, how do you say, when you acknowledged what had happened? Did you feel misled, or was it a disappointment? What did you do then? What effect did the sudden end of the war have on you?

K.H. For me, it was—

L.H. The terrible news about the KZ [concentration camps] and so on. What effect—?

K.H. A total collapse.

L.H. Yes.

K.H. I'd had no news from my family. And was discharged from prison and then interned because I belonged to the SS. We came from Babenhausen to a prison labour camp. We were fully undressed, naked, and searched, to see if we were hiding anything. Then we were taken to Babenhausen. And in the prisoners' discharge camp we were discharged. But not to go home. We were sent to Darmstadt to a refugee camp, a discharge camp, where we were interrogated, and so on, for denazification. My wife came to visit. She had found out in the meantime where I was. Then she went to a Mr—, the American head of the camp. 'Where are you from?' 'From the British zone.' 'Is your husband here?' I had obtained a job in the gardening centre, so I could be released to Hesse afterwards. Everything was divided into zones: the British zone, the Eastern and the Western zone. France had one for itself. They sent me off with the next transport. I arrived in Neuengamme in Hamburg in a KZ [concentration camp]. There, I had to testify again before the new civil court and in Bergedorf, I was sentenced to a fine of 400, 4,000 Marks. Alternatively, 100 days in prison. And when I was discharged in 1948, in February, they came and asked, around 20 July, after the currency reform, and requesting food expenses from me for 100 days. [...]

L.H. My question was, really, well, how this collapse affected you. You had been an enthusiastic [SS] member at the time?

K.H. Yes.

L.H. Of this elite troop, the *Leibstandarte* Adolf Hitler. One of the first divisions that was founded. Perhaps the first?

K.H. Yes.

L.H. Was it the first?

K.H. Yes, yes.

L.H. It was the first. And suddenly, it's all over. You're a POW. Denazification. And the Führer is dead.

K.H. Now, everything was about family.

- L.H. Now it's about family. But I ask myself: What did you think about these lost years? Did you think that everything was a waste? That it was a big mistake? That your youth had been stolen? Or were you at least proud that you were part of it and had joined.
- K.H. I was proud that I was part of it.
- L.H. Sorry?
- K.H. I was proud to have been part of it.
- L.H. I see.
- K.H. And I have to say, had I been a soldier in the *Wehrmacht*, perhaps I wouldn't have progressed as far. And afterwards, of course, the focus was on the family.¹⁴

99. POW in Britain: 'for me, those two years in prison camp were very formative experiences for my life'

Dieter Ba. (D.Ba.), born 1924 in Köslin in Pomerania (today Koszalin, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 86. His father was an agronomist with his own business. Dieter Ba. was in the Hitler Youth. After attaining the *Abitur*, he volunteered for the navy in 1942. He received submarine training in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad, Russia) and became a lieutenant on a submarine in the eastern Baltic Sea. He later retrained for the marines in 1944–5. He was captured by British troops in April 1945 and spent two years near Newcastle, in a POW camp for officers. Dieter Ba. completed an agricultural apprenticeship before commencing work for different airlines. See also [excerpts 8, 74, 123](#).

Dieter Ba. characterises his captivity in Britain as a very formative time and creative environment. He considers it a positive experience from which he benefited for the rest of his life. His assertion that the POW camp brought together people from disparate walks of life carries echoes of the Nazi idea of the '*Volksgemeinschaft*'. His idealised notions of cultural life in the POW camp may be glossing over some of the more challenging aspects of life in captivity.

D.Ba. All we had was a pistol and a rifle and a few anti-tank grenades. The war was over for me in a foxhole on 14 April 1945, where we were overrun by the English, and we were smoked out by flame tanks because the English wanted to avoid more casualties. So they advanced quite brutally in order to protect themselves and, well, to eliminate as many Germans as possible. I became a POW by way of Ostend, across the Channel and then two days on a train up to the Scottish border. Near Newcastle there was

a huge camp for officer POWs. That's where we were taken to. I spent two years there as a POW. It sounds funny when I say that this period as a prisoner, which was bearable for us compared to being a prisoner of the Russians, I have to say [about this period]: we were treated well. We were given food and tobacco. Everything else we did ourselves. And since this was an officers' camp, I met people from other service branches, and people from all professions. For me, those two years in prison camp were very formative experiences for my life. Because you meet people under [these] conditions who you would never meet in normal life, only in captivity. And from this kind of seclusion, which the imprisonment represents, emerges a creativity which compares to monastic education or monasteries: a tremendous mental activity, also a spiritual experience. I interacted with fellow prisoners who were from the theatre. There were actors, there were directors. At night when it was quiet and the lights were out, they could quote from *Faust* by heart. And recited poems. It was quiet in the hut, no one—. And in the background, one heard a voice reciting the prologue from *Faust* and reciting *Die Glocke* by Schiller. This impressed me tremendously and left its mark on what I could use later in life and enjoyed doing. With that I want to say: for some being a prisoner was depressing. For me it happened to be the opposite. It was inspirational. I benefited greatly from this, and in a way, I enjoy thinking back to this [period], because of how it left a mark on my entire life.¹⁵

100. POW in the USA: 'I'm still a fan of America'

Viktor H. (V.H.), born 1926 near Kitzbühel in Tyrol, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 85. He was one of 19 siblings. Ten out of 12 boys served in the war, four of whom died. His parents were farmers. He attended the *Volksschule*, *Hauptschule*, and a factory school. He was an apprentice in a factory which produced tanks and canons from around 1940. He was a member of the Hitler Youth (*Motor-HJ*) from 1938 to 1943. He volunteered for the Reich Labour Service (RAD) in 1943. He was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* to Berlin and transferred to France. The battalion was split, and he joined the paratroopers. He was captured by US troops. He was wounded and came from Cherbourg, France, to Liverpool hospital via Southampton in England. He was later in a POW camp in the USA.

Viktor H. speaks highly of his captors, whose treatment of POWs greatly impressed him, perhaps because of how starkly it contrasted with how the German army treated its prisoners, especially Soviet POWs. Viktor H. claims he first learned of the mass murder of Jews through a film shown in the POW camp cinema, which he and others dismissed as propaganda. He states that it took him a long time to believe the atrocities happened. A crucial event for him was talking to a camp survivor he knew, which suggests the importance of trusted sources in accepting such information. This resistance to acknowledging German crimes was common, as many people's identities were closely tied to the notion of German moral superiority, which the full revelations of the atrocities and mass killings challenged, along with their own sense of personal decency based on their conduct during the war. Notably, he uses the term 'Holocaust film', which has come into common use only in the last few decades.

V.H. I was a POW in a camp in America, in a camp with 10,000 prisoners. We had a football pitch and a tennis court. We played tennis wearing white socks. And they weren't washed, they were thrown away. We got new ones. That naturally made an impression on us. Then there was a cinema and a theatre and concerts. A lot was happening, a lot! They treated us very well. It wasn't imprisonment for us, it was a holiday. That's true! That's why I'm still a fan of America. Even if they sometimes do things I don't agree with. But I can't do much about that. But I'm still very much on their side, because no other country behaved like these Americans. I went to the cinema, and right after the war, they, in late '44 or so—

L.H. Late '45!

V.H. Ah, late '45. No, not late '45. In the spring of '45, or so. They showed us a film about Jews. A Holocaust film. In the cinema in America. The films were chosen by the Americans. And they showed these mass murders. I'm telling you, you won't believe it, but we all laughed and said: 'That's typical American propaganda!' They wanted to feed us these lies! They had to stop the film because the prisoners all laughed. They hadn't known about that, and they didn't believe it! We thought if something like that had happened, the whole world would have known about it. That's when I heard for the first time that such atrocities were supposed to have taken place. Only nobody believed it, everyone laughed, and the Americans had to cancel the films because no one took them seriously. That's how it was.

- L.H. People were laughing?
- V.H. We thought that it was a con! They were behind this, or I don't know what. That it was American propaganda against Hitler.
- L.H. What was on the screen, what did you see?
- V.H. Corpses, how they were thrown into ditches, gas chambers were shown, then marches, forced marches undertaken. And thousands of dead were shown, naked, and how they broke out their teeth. We said: 'That cannot be! Nobody does that. That is only hate propaganda of the Americans.' That was the first impression. It was a very long time before we started to believe that there was something to that. Something is not right. Wait: maybe they are right after all. Then we listened to witnesses. Interesting enough they were not in the film. There were witnesses who survived, and who talked about their experiences. Later I asked KZ [concentration camp] inmates, for example someone who was the president of the Federal Council of Austria–, well, no matter, maybe it will come back to me. I was a member of the state parliament, as a Federal Council substitute. I went to the meetings. We sat there and there was someone who had been in the KZ. I said to him: 'You know what, I can't find anyone who can tell me what really went on. In general, yes, but not on a personal level.' Then he told me what really happened.¹⁶

101. Reaction to concentration camp film: 'I could not reconcile what I saw in that film with my being German'

Martin D. (M.D.), born 1924 in Thuringia, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 89. His father was a merchant and businessman. Martin D. went to a *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school). He was a member of the Hitler Youth from 1936. In 1942, he volunteered for the *Wehrmacht* with his father's permission, serving at the Eastern Front and later in Normandy holding the rank of an officer. There he was captured by British troops in July 1944 and interrogated in Britain, followed by internment in Mississippi. After the war, he studied law and became a senior civil servant in the financial administration in North Rhine–Westphalia. Later, he worked as a lawyer and tax advisor.

Like Dieter Ba. (see [excerpt 99](#)), Martin D. greatly benefited from his captivity, in his case in the USA, where he was able to begin his career in law. Like Viktor H. (see [excerpt 100](#)), he claims that he disbelieved what he saw in the footage about the concentration camps, considering

it Hollywood propaganda. He remarks that this was because he could not reconcile what he saw with his German identity.

L.H. When did you acknowledge that this was a criminal regime? During the war or afterwards, looking back?

M.D. I only learned that it was a criminal regime through a film on Buchenwald, which was shown in June/July 1945, after the war. Wait. No, it was in '44. '45. The American film on Buchenwald was shown. I thought it was a Hollywood production. I could not reconcile what I saw in that film with my being German. I thought it was enemy propaganda.

L.H. Did you see that film when you were a prisoner?

M.D. Yes, as a prisoner in America.

L.H. So that must have been '45.

M.D. That was in '45, yes.

L.H. You just said the film was about Buchenwald. Wasn't it the film about Belsen, or Dachau perhaps? You're sure it was Buchenwald?

M.D. I don't recall. I always thought it was about Buchenwald because Buchenwald was the first concentration camp the Allies reached. But I don't remember. In any case, I considered it enemy propaganda.

L.H. What did they show in the film?

M.D. Figures who had formerly been human, so thin they were skeletons, and corpses lying around. Barbed wire and watch-towers. Indescribable misery.¹⁷

Interpreting the past

The contemporaries interviewed by Holland developed different strategies for confronting the past, which likely also changed over the years. External pressure, such as publicised trials, reports in the media, public debates, or probing questions by their children and grandchildren, would have led to a repositioning and to reinterpretations. Some simply denied the Holocaust or engaged in historical revisionism. A larger group acknowledged and condemned Nazi crimes but claimed their own distance from Nazi violence and/or Nazi ideology. A considerable number voiced a sense of unease about the past. A few transformed their ways of thinking, the most active iterations of which involved work towards reconciliation or education.

Denial

We encounter Holocaust denial and Holocaust revisionism, which can take the form of: downplaying the number of Jewish victims; denying that certain methods were used to exterminate Jews and instead claiming that they died through diseases and starvation; citing alleged Jewish misdeeds; pointing to other countries' crimes, including those of Israel; claiming that the number of German victims of flight and expulsion was similar to, the same as, or higher than the number of Jewish and other victims; and alleging that the war was defensive rather than a war of aggression.

102. Rewriting the past in veterans' gatherings: 'the idea was good'

Karl H. (K.H.), born 1914 in Lower Saxony, Germany, interviewed three times by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 and 2012, at the age of 97 during the first interview. Protestant but dropped out of the Church in 1938. His father was a civil servant working for the railways. Karl H. attended a *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school) and a commercial school. He completed a merchant/business apprenticeship before volunteering for the *Leibstandarte* SS Adolf Hitler in 1935. Later he was transferred to the *Hitler-Jugend-Division*. He served in Berlin, France, Croatia, Hungary, and Austria. He was captured by US troops in Austria and interned in Darmstadt and Neuengamme. After his release in 1948, he retrained as a dyer and later worked in an office. See also [excerpts 20, 98](#).

Like many veterans, Karl H. met with former comrades after the war until most had passed away. Holland tries to understand these get-togethers, particularly whether they discussed Nazi crimes, which Karl H. denies. When directly asked by Holland if he recognised that crimes were committed under Nazism, Karl H. deflects, stating that 'the idea was good'. A variant of this perspective, whereby some believed National Socialism was a good idea, but poorly executed, was common in the post-war period, as evidenced in surveys. It often left ambiguous what 'the idea' specifically entailed, reflecting a widespread but vague sentiment of endorsement for aspects of the Nazi ideology. He further laments the damage to Germany's reputation and that other countries were 'preaching hatred' against Germany. This is a common conspiracy theory among revisionists who sometimes see Jews or Israel behind an enduring focus on the Nazi past and the Holocaust. Karl H.'s rewriting of the history of the Second World War, particularly portraying the attack

on the Soviet Union as self-defence or a pre-emptive strike, shows the persistence of Nazi ideas.

L.H. In the post-war years, were you in touch with former–

K.H. With former soldiers, yes.

L.H. The soldiers, your comrades.

K.H. Yes. We had the first meeting in 1954, in Herford. One of us was an innkeeper. We had our first get-together in his pub in Herford.

L.H. How many showed up?

K.H. About 15 comrades. [...]

L.H. And what did you talk about? Did the former comrades talk about the old days?

K.H. The old days, and also–

L.H. About the old days.

K.H. Also about the time after the war. What everyone got up to, where he was after imprisonment, what he trained as, where he's working now, and so on. And where they live now, if they're married, have kids, everything about the family. We had several more meetings after that. When one comrade died, we went to his funeral. Then, another one died. [...]

L.H. May I ask, this meeting–. Did you meet several times in–

K.H. Yes.

L.H. In subsequent years? Until when? When was the last time you saw the old comrades?

K.H. We met the last time maybe in '98.

L.H. And now?

K.H. Now most of them are dead. There was no one to keep the meetings going.
[...]

L.H. I try to imagine what it was like to meet all the old comrades. You probably remembered the better days, the good days, the fun you had together. But I ask myself if you also reflected on this major crime that–

K.H. [shakes his head]

L.H. [The crime] that was perpetrated? You didn't talk about it? Maybe you didn't want to. I don't know. That was my question. Did you speak about that or not?

K.H. No, we didn't speak about that at all. Only about the war as such, what we all went through, and later about our families. Because the war was over, passé, wasn't it? That wasn't a major issue.

- L.H. You say it wasn't a big topic.
- K.H. The past. The future was more important. What everyone is doing, and so on. The older ones returned to their jobs, others learned something new.
- L.H. If you ask yourself, and I hope I can express this well. If not, you must help me or tell me if you don't understand the question. Thinking back to the 'Third Reich'–.
- K.H. Yes.
- L.H. You ought to acknowledge that the Nazis perpetrated an enormous crime. I'm speaking of the murder of millions of people. Millions of people were killed, weren't they? Especially Jews. I would like to ask you for your opinion if there was something in German history, or the German character, or German politics, that led to this. Could it have happened in any other European country? Or did it happen here in Germany, because of something–, how do you say? Specific, individual, unique–.
- K.H. The idea was very good.
- L.H. Which idea?
- K.H. That of National–, as such. National and social, those are topics that always go down well. That is why the other thing is absurd, that they perpetrated these crimes. This effectively led to the Second World War, which claimed many more victims than the action against the Jews. This was basically the consequence of all other people struggling against us. Still today, they are of the opinion that we as a German national people do not deserve a good reputation. Everywhere, they are still preaching hatred against us, some people, even after so many years, after 70 years.¹⁸

103. Denying the evidence: 'they would not have fit into these ovens'

Karl E. (K.E.), born 1921 in the Rhine–Ruhr area in North Rhine–Westphalia, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 89. Protestant. His parents were devout members of the *Bekennende Kirche* (Protestant anti-Nazi movement). The son of a locksmith, Karl E. was in the Hitler Youth (*Segelflieger-HJ*), volunteered for the *Luftwaffe*, and served in the East from 1942. He was captured in Czechoslovakia by the Red Army in May 1945 and demolished machinery in Auschwitz at the beginning of his captivity.

Karl E. openly denies the Holocaust, employing various denial tactics, such as repeating refuted claims that the crematorium ovens were

too small to burn human bodies, or that Jews were needed as workers and therefore would not have been killed. The crematoriums were specifically designed for a large numbers of bodies. While Jews were indeed exploited as slave labourers, this did not necessarily save their lives due to the horrendous conditions, which served as another means of killing. Some German leaders and industrialists argued for more workers, and their calls were sometimes heeded, but ultimately the intention to exterminate all Jews often overrode these 'rational' considerations. The conquest of the East was also envisaged as delivering millions more Slavic people as slaves for the *Reich*.

L.H. Are you still convinced that no gassing took place?

K.E. Yes. It's like this: the ovens, nobody could have been burnt in those. They were sort of red brown, at this height [indicates low height], so there were always six together, for a–, well, not for a home, for several homes, for heating. And only a spade would fit in there. You couldn't fit a man in there. That's what convinced me.

L.H. And you are still convinced?

K.E. Yes. Yes. I am convinced of that. [...] But nobody fit in the ovens. That would also have been totally useless. They could have buried them right away if they had done that. So, I am fully convinced.

L.H. Were you the only one who was convinced like that, or did your comrades–

K.E. Everyone. That was the common opinion. Yes, yes, yes.

L.H. Did you remain in contact with comrades who–, or did you lose contact?

K.E. No. Lost.

L.H. How do you know the others had the same opinion?

K.E. They said so, at the time.

L.H. They said what?

K.E. They said they were convinced. [...]

L.H. If one had–

K.E. It would have been nonsensical. They trained them as skilled workers, yes, and then to murder them, so–. They needed workers!

L.H. And if you met an Auschwitz survivor who as part of the *Sonderkommando* had to do this work. Who'd witnessed and seen how many people were gassed. If you were to meet a man like that and he told you: 'I experienced that myself. I've seen it

with my own eyes.' Would you believe him, or would you say that he lied?

K.E. I wouldn't say anything. I would leave it at that without comment. [...] It would not have worked. They would not have fit into these ovens. They were much too small, yes. That's why.¹⁹

104. Questioning the numbers: 'if you say today it wasn't six million, you make yourself criminally liable'

Alfred O. (A.O.), born 1929 near Ostrava in the Moravian-Silesian region (today Ostrava, Czech Republic), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 81. Ethnic German from the Sudetenland. His father was employed at the ironworks. The family attained Austrian citizenship in 1924. His parents sent Alfred O. to Silesia and Vienna to live with relatives, and he returned to Witkowitz (Vítkovice) after the Munich Agreement. He was a member of the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth, and attended the *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school) until 1945 when he was conscripted into the *Volkssturm* at the age of 15 and a half. At the end of the war, he fled from the Red Army to Austria. He was interned by US troops, for whom he translated. He was also briefly interned by the British. He later moved to Upper Austria. He gives talks in schools about his experiences.

Alfred O. subscribes to various conspiracy theories about the media and 'Hollywood's' continued focus on National Socialism and Hitler, often using 'Hollywood' as a euphemism for Jews. He mourns the German victims of flight and expulsion at the end of the Second World War, for which there are different estimates, which range from half a million to two million. Alfred O. further claims that in some cases the 'repression' of civilian populations was justified, such as following Reinhard Heydrich's murder. In the excerpt below, while he condemns the crimes against Jews, his main issue is with the figure of six million murdered Jews and the laws criminalising Holocaust denial. He is aware of what is legal to say, but clearly rejects the figures, citing a notorious Holocaust denier's book (*Did Six Million Really Die? The truth at last*, 1974) and other material which contains incorrect claims about the number of Jews in different countries, among other falsehoods. Of note is also his persistent refusal to name the Holocaust, referring only to 'it' throughout.

L.H. Do you accept the figures for the approximate numbers that were killed during the Holocaust? Do you accept the statistics that are generally—

- A.O. No, I'm not convinced. I'm not convinced, and that–, it's indeed some years ago. In English it is called *Did Six Million Really Die?*
- L.H. A question.
- A.O. Yes, [phrased] as a question.
- L.H. Did six million really die?
- A.O. Something like that. Reading the translated version, you start having doubts. The *Zürcher* or *Baseler Zeitung* of '46, they talk about 1.5 million. But I would say the most serious one is from an American University in Illinois, *Untergang des Ostjudentums*. That is based on figures from these yearly Jewish annual reports. They conclude that in Hitler's territory at its greatest expansion, there were 5.3 million Jews under his control. I don't know now who published it. It came out in the 1980s. And I ask myself: why are there no detailed figures, like in our case, with the Danube Swabians, although there's also different versions. Czech-German historians estimate about 30,000 victims of the expulsion after the war. That's indefensible. The Catholic Search Service estimates 270,000, but one must say, those are numbers, that's a grey area that one can't narrow down exactly to one person or to a thousand people. But this number of six million lacks detail, whereas in the American estimate are exact–
- L.H. Who did the study?
- A.O. I don't remember. It said: In Kyiv are so many Jews, so many are gone, so many were evacuated before the Germans marched in, and so on. Those are solid numbers. But it's like this: You know today, if you say today, it wasn't six million, you become criminally liable.
- L.H. In Germany or in Austria?
- A.O. No, here where we are.
- L.H. It is against the law–
- A.O. Yes, then you're a Holocaust denier.
- L.H. Not if it's only the number–, also if you say–
- A.O. No, there were not six million dead Jews.
- L.H. And what do you estimate?
- A.O. I can't say. That's a *Gretchenfrage* [from Goethe's *Faust*; that is, a very direct question about core or contentious issues, for example, religion or politics].
- L.H. What?
- A.O. Faust asked Gretchen, and so on. To which I don't want to give an answer. Because if it's too high or too low or really in the middle–I can only officially say: 'Six million died.' That's the

legal interpretation here. If today someone says it was one and a half or three or less than five–. Weizsäcker, for example, spoke of five million at the Nuremberg Trials. Weizsäcker. The father of a former federal president.

L.H. [tape error] is that a lesser crime?

A.O. Yes. Here, yes. That is considered denial.

L.H. If one said, three million instead of six million: would that be a lesser crime?

A.O. No! The crime is the same. There's no debate about that. And if it were hundreds of thousands, or 1.3 or five, in the *Baseler Zeitung*, or–, there's no debating the subject. That is just as unacceptable. Above all, the way in which that was done. It's the biggest disgrace in German history.

L.H. Did one sense at all what was going on before the end of the war? Were there rumours?

A.O. There were rumours about the concentration camps. One knew that there was a KZ [concentration camp] in Auschwitz. One knew–, hang on, which KZs are here? Theresienstadt was not known as a KZ, but as an *Anhaltelager* [a type of camp for political opponents in Austria in use from 1933 to 1938 before the *Anschluss*]. Was it in Bavaria somewhere?

L.H. Dachau.

A.O. Dachau! And it was somewhere in Germany. Dachau was known about.

L.H. Belsen?

A.O. [shakes his head]

L.H. Ravensbrück.

A.O. No. Those camps were completely unknown to us.

L.H. Or those in the east: Belzec, Sobibor, Majdanek.

A.O. No, those were completely unknown to us. Dachau was known, and Auschwitz was also known. But we don't need to discuss the underlying principle. That is, and I must repeat it: this point is so damaging for us, that we need a long time–. Or it will never, ever be erased from history. But it can't be the case that it all comes down to that, and basically says: What happened is the fault of the entire people. It wasn't the entire people. It didn't happen in public, like the expulsion [of Germans] happened in public. And here it was a small criminal band, Hitler's clique, who behind closed doors– [tape ends abruptly].²⁰

105. In defence of Hitler: 'it's Himmler's fault'

Erna F. (E.F.), born 1922 in Linz, Austria, interviewed in her retirement home by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 89. She is joined by her younger sister Elisabeth M. (E.M.), born 1928, for part of the interview. Catholic. Their father was in favour of the Nazi regime and worked in the Office for War Invalids. Erna F. was in the League of German Girls (BDM). She attended the *Volksschule* and a commercial school from 1936 to 1938. Subsequently, she worked as a secretary in the finance department of the Hermann-Göring-Werke in Linz. She got married at the age of 20 and subsequently left paid employment. See also [excerpt 1](#).

Erna F. suggests that Heinrich Himmler was a bad influence on Hitler, who was simply overwhelmed. Her sister, Elisabeth M., who has now joined the interview, agrees, suggesting the 'idea' of National Socialism was not inherently bad and lamenting the current presence of many foreigners in Austria, particularly Turks, stating this would not have occurred under Hitler. Elsewhere in the interview, both sisters doubt that six million Jews were killed: Erna F. suggests that the figure includes other victims and Elisabeth M. cites crimes by other nations, particularly by Israel against Palestinians.

There is a contradiction here between claiming Himmler being responsible for the Holocaust and that the figures are exaggerated. The thought that there would be fewer foreigners in Austria today under Hitler is left chillingly unfinished. Referring to other countries' alleged crimes, especially Israel's, is a common revisionist tactic seeking to downplay Nazi crimes or seeking to infer an equivalence.

E.F. Well, [Heinrich Himmler] was a bad influence on Hitler. It's Himmler's fault, he was cruel.

L.H. For example?

E.F. I also—, I can't say this with certainty, that he was part of the effort to get rid of the Jews.

L.H. But Hitler was part of it, too. Hitler was informed about it. And he agreed to it.

E.F. I think he didn't keep up any more.

L.H. Pardon?

E.F. He didn't keep up any more. He was in over his head. Don't you think?

E.M. Yes.

L.H. What do you mean by that?

E.F. It was too much for him.

E.M. The other people had too much influence on him.
 L.H. Pardon?
 E.M. The other people. His entourage had too much influence.
 E.F. Yes.
 L.H. On Hitler, you mean.
 E.M. Yes. The idea on its own was not too bad.
 L.H. What idea? What do you mean? Which idea was not too bad?
 E.M. Well, we now have so many foreigners! That wouldn't have been allowed under Hitler. We are full to the brim!
 L.H. Pardon?
 E.F. We are full to the brim with foreigners.
 E.M. England is different. They had colonies.
 E.F. We have so many Turks here.
 E.M. We didn't have any colonies.
 E.F. We have so many Turks. That would have been different. It's unfortunate.
 L.H. But you stated, if I understood correctly—. My German is not bad but—. My accent is not bad but sometimes I miss the simple terms. German language, difficult language. If I repeat myself, it's because I didn't understand, or because I'd like it if you tell me again. You said, this relationship between Himmler and Hitler—
 E.F. Himmler was a bad influence.
 L.H. So that means, in principle, under Hitler—. What do you make of him?
 E.F. I think he meant well but he was in over his head.
 E.M. [nods]
 L.H. In over his head?
 E.F. It was too much for him.
 L.H. What was too much, what do you mean?
 E.F. All that governing. That he governed, and had to keep his eyes on everything, that was too much for him.
 L.H. You mean the job was too big for him.
 E.F. Too big.
 L.H. And that's why things—
 E.F. All went wrong.
 L.H. But isn't it true that Hitler on several occasions came out against the Jews? He was not a friend of the Jews.
 E.F. No, he wasn't.
 L.H. But this policy of annihilation at the time, those mass murders, who was responsible for that, would you say? Who was instrumental in that and carried it out?
 E.F. I think it was Himmler.²¹

106. Comparing genocide victims to fallen soldiers: 'our young people were also killed on the battlefield'

Friederike Wi. (F.Wi.), born 1912 in Vienna, Austria, interviewed over two days by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 99 (see [figure 12](#)). Protestant. Her father was a school director. She was a sales representative. Her husband served in Yugoslavia and other locations.

One of Holland's oldest interlocutors, Friederike Wi., is a seasoned revisionist. She questions the number of Jewish victims and suggests that they could have simply emigrated. She blames other countries for not allowing Jews to enter and laments the lack of attention to 'German victims' compared to Jewish victims, whom she characterises as a 'foreign people', or Israel's alleged 'two million Arab victims'. Friederike Wi. falsely claims there were only 'three or four concentration camps'. Her antisemitism shows continuities from the 1930s. She expresses resentment towards Galician Jews, who were at the time referred to derogatorily as '*Ostjuden*' or Eastern Jews, who were more easily identifiable due to their customs and clothing. Her disgust for them is still palpable, as she does not attempt to hide her views.

F.Wi. Then came the *Anschluss*, on a Sunday, and I experienced some wonderful years. If one were to say anything against Hitler-. You can't. He was faced with the problem with our Jews. That's the



Figure 12 Friederike Wi. in her home. F.Wi. Video Testimony (138F), interviewed by Luke Holland on 21 February 2012. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

- fault of Emperor Franz Joseph. [...] Every third person [in Vienna] was a Jew!
- L.H. So you blame the Emperor.
- F.Wi. Yes certainly! He should have known that he can't do that.
[...]
- L.H. But that the Nazis, Hitler and the Nazis, that they were a criminal regime—
- F.Wi. What do you mean? What was their crime?
- L.H. The forcing out and murdering of the Jews. That's a crime, isn't?
- F.Wi. But our young people were also killed on the battlefield. I was in Normandy, on a battlefield as big as the central cemetery, lots of young Germans. No one writes about how they had to die. I was quartered with a farmer, and there were very young harvest workers. Then we heard that they were all dead. No one writes about that! That was also a crime, wasn't it, that they all died, the young people? There were only us women, because the men were gone.
- L.H. But that they—
- F.Wi. They're a foreign people, why should we mourn them? If a German mother lost her child, she was very sad and wept. They exaggerate that, because through that—. It was terrible. There were also Christians in the KZ [concentration camp]. There were also Christians who were murdered.
- L.H. Do you know how many—?
- F.Wi. Why should I trouble myself about a foreign people?
- L.H. You mean, the opinion that you are expressing now [...].
- F.Wi. They are a completely foreign people. Not like the Dutch or the English. The Jews are a totally foreign people. Why should I then—?
- L.H. 'Foreign' in what respect?
- F.Wi. A foreign people! A foreign people [shrugs her shoulders]. Another belief, kaftans, and they look ugly.
- L.H. But, for example, the Jews have already been in Germany for 1,000 years.
- F.Wi. A few, a few. Of the Frankfurt Jews, a couple. But not a quarter of a million. And those were German Jews. Those were Germans. But the others were Galician Jews.
- L.H. Is there a difference for you, between German and—
- F.Wi. Excuse me?
- L.H. What is the difference between Galician Jews and German Jews?

- F.Wi. Yes, they were already like Germans [smiles]! Like Germans. They worked very hard. They were very nice. Like us. But the others wore the famous kaftan, and they were ugly.
- L.H. The opinion that you now express—
- F.Wi. My best girlfriend was a Jew. I knew a couple of Jews with whom I got along very well. But it was our downfall. And now they're exaggerating it, aren't they? But the young people who died, who perished in Russia, in the cold, nobody writes about that.
- L.H. But don't you think that the death of a woman and a child in a KZ, in a concentration camp, from gas, in Auschwitz or in one of the other camps, isn't that—?
- F.Wi. It wasn't all that many! Perhaps three, four concentration camps. There were also many Christians who died.
- L.H. How many Jews were murdered?
- F.Wi. I don't know.
- L.H. They speak of six million.
- F.Wi. How many?
- L.H. Of six million.
- F.Wi. Yes, then where were they? Where were they? Not here! Here, there were 500—, half a million.²²

Distancing

In contrast to those contemporaries who deny the Holocaust or seek to minimise it, a larger group tends to distance themselves from the Nazi regime, its ideology, and its crimes. Some of them negotiate a sense of unease at what they did or did not do, or what they might have done.

107. Denying agency: 'Why should I feel guilty? I only carried out orders'

Walter A. (W.A.), born 1919 near Dresden, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 91. His father was a member of the NSDAP and the director of the local prison. His mother supplied food to the prison. Walter A. completed his *Abitur* in Pirna. He was a leader in the *Jungvolk*, completed his Reich Labour Service (RAD), and joined the *Luftwaffe*. There, he taught navigation as a non-commissioned officer and was promoted to staff sergeant by the end of the war. He does not specify where he served. He was captured by British troops but was released early. He became a primary school teacher after the war.

In the following excerpt, Walter A. appears affronted by Holland's question about guilt and whether he felt he was 'supporting a criminal regime'. His response is initially tetchy. The question of guilt had seemingly not occurred to him before. Walter A. seizes the opportunity to portray himself as a 'little man' without influence, despite his educational attainment and his father holding an influential position. He claims he merely followed orders from his superiors, even though he rose through the ranks in the air force. Like many other veterans, he asserts he was fortunate never to have fired a shot, let alone killed anyone. While this is possible, it is also a common trope in post-war accounts.

L.H. May I ask if you ever felt any guilt at all, that you participated in this, that you supported a criminal regime, albeit as a simple soldier?

W.A. [shakes his head] No. No.

L.H. As an *Unteroffizier*. Did you ever think about it?

W.A. No. No, I didn't.

L.H. Why not?

W.A. I don't know.

L.H. I don't want to accuse you with these questions, but I'd like to know—

W.A. Yes, yes. Why should I feel guilty? When it comes down to it, I only carried out orders.

L.H. But you supported a criminal regime.

W.A. What does 'support' mean?

L.H. As a soldier.

W.A. We never thought that there'd be war so quickly. That's why we all never thought about it.

L.H. But without the cover of war Hitler could not have carried out his mass murder.

W.A. No, probably not.

L.H. That's what I meant with my question.

W.A. When I became a soldier, nobody believed—, well, maybe not nobody, but we didn't think that we would be posted to the front that soon, just because there was a war on. No, so we didn't feel guilty. We were glad, to be honest, that we could serve our time quickly, *Arbeitsdienst* and army, so that we could finally start working in our profession.

L.H. At the time you certainly wouldn't have felt guilty. I'm asking about the post-war period. You had 70 years to think about

what you were a part of. You don't feel any responsibility for the consequences?

W.A. No, no. In that case you could constantly feel guilty when you decide who to vote for. If [Klaus] Wowereit– [Berlin's mayor at the time of the interview], I don't like him at all, but he'll be elected. Do I need to feel guilty, only because he's the mayor here? Imagine! If I haven't contributed to a situation in which I find myself, why should I feel guilty?

L.H. It was only a question. I don't want to accuse you but learn what your opinion is.

W.A. Yes, yes. That is my opinion.

L.H. There are many young people here in Germany today who harbour feelings of guilt. And I say they shouldn't feel guilty, the younger ones. But maybe the older ones feel that way because they didn't say 'no', because they participated, because they always obeyed.

W.A. That idea never occurred–

L.H. You could have resisted more–

W.A. But what could one have done–

L.H. Some did.

W.A. But they needed some influence somewhere, otherwise it wouldn't have been of any use. I was just a little man. I had no influence whatsoever on events. I only participated in all that because it was necessary. Because you had to, to move into a job more quickly. Afterwards one was glad–. I was glad that I got off lightly. I never had to fire a shot.

L.H. You were lucky.

W.A. I was lucky! I was so lucky, I really was, well, in luck. I was always lucky, always. Then we were sent to the Russian front, we dug in in the woods. Everything had been prepared, trees felled, we crawled underneath, and airplanes went by overhead. The Russian planes always sounded like sewing machines. One could always hear when a Russian plane approached. Until someone said: 'Here is a piece of cheese, and now get out of here.' I didn't once have to shoot at someone.

L.H. Once again, many thanks, Herr–

W.A. Don't mention it! But when I saw what happened to others in the war, they say: 'If I don't shoot at him, then he will shoot at me.' What should I do now? That is a problem. That's what happened to many soldiers, and they couldn't stomach that they had shot a human being.²³

108. Praying for forgiveness: 'we will all have to answer before God'

Margarete Bl. (M.Bl.), born 1922 near Hamburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2013 at the age of 91. Protestant. Margarete Bl. worked for the railways during the war. Her mother worked for the Red Cross.

This devout Protestant woman, who worked for the railways during the war and oversaw freight trains, witnessed female Jewish slave labourers every day. She characterises herself in hindsight as both a 'coward' and a *Mitläufer* (fellow traveller). (See also [excerpts 116, 119.](#)) Originally, *Mitläufer* referred to a specific denazification category but the term has since been widely used in social discourse. It can be used to criticise someone for not standing up against wrongdoing, or to downplay one's own involvement and ideological commitment by claiming to have been 'merely a fellow traveller'. It also implies having been merely swept along by the masses. Through her employment, Margarete Bl. may have been actively involved in deportations. She cites her family's faith as the reason why they found the persecution of Jews 'terrible' (see also [excerpt 76](#)). Holland asks her to leave a message for younger generations. Margarete Bl. stresses the importance of faith, which can also provide forgiveness for any wrongdoing.

L.H. That means, not doing anything is also a deed? If one could have done something, could have prevented something, one has a certain responsibility as well, no?

M.Bl. Yes, yes. You're involved, later.

L.H. So the many Germans who did not speak out, who witnessed these crimes, and didn't do anything, who just closed their eyes during their work, do they not have a certain complicity, a certain guilt?

M.Bl. Sure! It's cowardly. Also before God. It's cowardly that we kept our faith out of it to secure advantages for ourselves.

L.H. So one could and should have done more?

M.Bl. Perhaps one could have, but as I say: cowardly. If it's more convenient to keep out of things, and not become involved, then you can't be called to account. And thus, you are essentially free of guilt. Because you didn't do anything and therefore you're not guilty.

L.H. No guilt and innocence. A certain paradox, isn't it?

M.Bl. Yes, yes.

- L.H. May I ask you how you yourself fit into this paradox? Thinking back to this era, and how you behaved back then.
- M.Bl. I was pretty much a follower [*Mitläufer*]. A follower. And that was not good, either. One could have done more. One was cowardly, took the easier path and did not do anything. That's how I see it. And we will all have to answer before God. That we didn't do certain things we could have done. All one can do is pray for mercy, for forgiveness, that my sins may be forgiven. Without this forgiveness, we cannot reach God. We must pray every day that He forgives us our sins, so that we do not die guilty. For eternity, that is very important.
- L.H. With this little instrument, this digital machine, you can speak to the younger generation, the young people who deal with these difficult questions in their private lives as members of society. What did you learn from the past, that you would like to pass on to them? Something to do with the topic we are speaking about. What is your message for future generations?
- M.Bl. Faith! Faith is important. That we don't lose our faith. And forgiveness. We are all sinners, and we sin every day: in words, in ugly words or in our deeds. In all such things. In small details. Every evening, it is my daily wish that I may die without sin. That all my sins will be forgiven, so I can fall asleep in peace. At the end of every day, you can say: Lord, forgive my guilt. When I failed to do something, when I treated someone whom I met unkindly. That is the main thing. Not the everyday issues, but what's at the end. What comes at the end. That's what I would like. That is important to me.²⁴

109. Hearing but not believing: 'I took it as a rumour'

Karl-August S. (K.A.S.), born 1920 in Rostock, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 92. Protestant. He lived with his mother and grandmother in Schwerin and spent four years in a boarding school in Stralsund from 1933 to 1937. His grandmother came from a large estate. His father worked in southern Germany as a chemist for IG Farben. Karl-August S. was in the Hitler Youth and the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). He was conscripted in April 1941 after he finished his apprenticeship. He trained as a radio and telephone operator and served in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia in July/August 1941 during the advance until close to Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). He handed his writings and other documents to archives and gives talks about his experiences.

Karl-August S. states that in 1944 he heard about gas vans being used to kill Jews in Riga, but that he did not believe it. Karl-August S. maintains that because he did not believe what he was told, he did not actually find out about the mass killings of Jews until after the war. Holland repeatedly confronts him with what he sees as a contradiction. Karl-August S. claims that hearing and knowing, let alone believing, appear to be two very different things, a commonly found defence in such accounts. Like others (see [excerpt 100](#)), he credits a key encounter, here with a Sinti survivor in the 1950s, for leading him eventually to accept the truth about the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes.

L.H. The crime, this genocide that was carried out – when did you first hear about that? Did something filter through? Did you hear rumours?

K.A.S. No. Basically during the Nuremberg Trial, which I thought was a show trial. Towards the end of the war, I heard, for example, and it was regrettably true, that Jews in Riga, in Lithuania [*sic*; Latvia], were loaded into lorries and gassed. I still said to myself: ‘Good grief, what he is saying, he should be reported! One can’t let such lies get out!’ But it was true, as I know today.

L.H. What do you know today?

K.A.S. That Jews really were loaded into lorries and gassed.

L.H. When?

K.A.S. 1944. I couldn’t imagine that such a thing would be done. That filtered through to us.

L.H. What?

K.A.S. That got through to us, this news.

L.H. During the war?

K.A.S. Yes, but I didn’t believe it.

L.H. ‘That got through to us,’ what do you mean by that? Where were you, and from whom and when?

K.A.S. Yes, another comrade told us during the war. And I asked myself, ‘Where did he learn this?’

L.H. Where were you when you first heard this news about the gassing?

K.A.S. Probably East Prussia. On the retreat in East Prussia.

L.H. Retreat in East Prussia. In which year and month?

K.A.S. That must have been the end of 1944 or the beginning of 1945.

L.H. That means, then, before the collapse. Before the end of the war.

K.A.S. Yes.

L.H. Were you informed about the mass murder of the Jews?

- K.A.S. No.
- L.H. You just said you had received information about the murder of the Jews in the lorries. Isn't that right?
- K.A.S. Yes, I didn't believe it. I couldn't imagine it.
- L.H. The question wasn't if you believed it, rather whether you received information about it.
- K.A.S. I took it as a rumour.
- L.H. That's what I mean.
- K.A.S. But not as information.
- L.H. But, still, you heard it.
- K.A.S. For me, information means that I acknowledged it as a fact. But I didn't believe it.
- L.H. Acknowledging it is a personal thing. Some have acknowledged it and some have rejected it. You didn't want to believe it. But what I want to know is exactly when you had this information or—, yes, it is information, regardless of whether you believe it.
- K.A.S. That must have been 1945.
- L.H. January, February? You were retreating, you say.
- K.A.S. Yes. I was still in East Prussia then.
- L.H. But that a crime, an enormous crime was carried out against the Jews, when were you informed of this and when did you accept it?
- K.A.S. Yes, I believe, not until the fifties. Middle of the fifties. And, in fact, because, because I [heard it from] this one woman who was in the KZ [concentration camp], and the relatives in the KZ were Sinti. [...] I understood that it was true.
- L.H. You mean that it must be true.
- K.A.S. I didn't believe it until then.²⁵

110. Luck: 'with hindsight, I can say that I'm happy that I got scarlet fever'

Otto D. (O.E.D.), born 1925 in Insterburg, East Prussia (today Chernyakhovsk, Russia), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Caroline Goldie (C.G.) in 2008 at the age of 83. Protestant. Following the *Jungvolk*, Hitler Youth, and Reich Labour Service (RAD), he joined the *Waffen-SS*. He published a book about his experiences and frequently gives talks to young people. See also [excerpt 116](#).

Otto D. feels lucky to have avoided participation in criminal activities. In his case, this is because he contracted scarlet fever and thereby missed out on joining the notorious *Das Reich* division together

with his comrades. He believes that he would have become involved in the division's crimes had he not been ill.

O.E.D. And then I got scarlet fever. That happened as my comrades went on active duty. They all went to the division *Das Reich* and I got scarlet fever. And my brother wanted to visit me, and he was not allowed into my room, because scarlet fever is contagious, isn't it? I can still see him standing at the window there. Yes, but then I heard my comrades marching past my hospital to the train station, to the Division *Das Reich*. Gosh, what a gift it was that I didn't belong to that division! Because I have learned in the meantime about this Division *Reich*, what they did in Russia and later in France. Crimes! I don't know the details, but it was bad what this division-. I was spared because of this sickness. After my recovery, I went to Yugoslavia and there in Yugoslavia, they assembled a Division *Nordland*, which I later joined.

C.G. Everyone was new.

O.E.D. All new. The others were all Division *Reich*, and now I was suddenly Division *Nordland*, and-

C.G. Looking back, I mean, you lay there with scarlet fever and heard your company marching by. At that time, were you sad that you had scarlet fever and could not travel with them, or how was that?

O.E.D. Not sad that I could [not] travel with them. I didn't have any idea what was ahead of me. With hindsight, I can say that I'm happy that I got scarlet fever. Again, there were things that happened in my life at the right moment that spared me from having to do bad things. Also later, I can come back to that.

C.G. Shall we continue, or would you like to take a little break?

O.E.D. I'm fine! Up to you!²⁶

111. Keeping the *Wehrmacht* clean: 'there were many more decent people than the opposite'

Karl-Ludwig B. (K.B.), born 1920 in Stettin, Pomerania (today Szczecin, Poland), interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2010 at the age of 90. Protestant. His father was a breeder owning a large estate. Karl-Ludwig B. joined the Hitler Youth and completed the *Abitur* in 1937, after which he did Reich Labour Service (RAD) followed by military service, as he volunteered for an officer's career. He took part in the invasion of the Sudetenland in 1938, the invasion of Poland, and the French campaign,

and served in Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, 'Operation Barbarossa', and Latvia. He was captured in May 1945 by the Red Army. He wrote a book about his experiences. See also [excerpt 36](#).

Karl-Ludwig B. resents being painted with the same brush as those who caused the atrocities and laments having to live with what he calls a 'stain'. He argues that one should differentiate, claiming that there were more 'decent' people than 'indecent' ones. He asserts that many soldiers acted not 'wilfully' but out of a 'sense of duty', suggesting this should mitigate their responsibility. He leaves open to what extent this applies to him.

His assertion that the *Wehrmacht* was largely 'decent' must be seen in the context of post-war West German debates. For a long time, the popular belief was that crimes were committed solely by special forces, while the *Wehrmacht* remained 'clean'. This belief was only disrupted in the mid-1990s with a touring exhibition exposing the 'crimes of the *Wehrmacht*', sparking significant public debate and backlash. Karl-Ludwig B. concedes that he 'now' knows some in the *Wehrmacht* committed crimes too. While this suggests that his views have evolved in light of post-war revelations, ultimately it serves to buttress his defence of the *Wehrmacht*. He still denies witnessing, let alone committing, any wrongdoing during his military service, which included the main campaigns.

- C.R. So, with hindsight, one knows of many atrocities that happened in this war. I'd be interested in knowing how you feel about having fought on a side like that. Does that trouble you looking back?
- K.B. Of course it's not all the same to me. I'm painted with the same brush as those who did something like that. That is a stain with which we'll now have to live. [...] One must make distinctions. There were many more decent people than the opposite. [...] For example, when Kohl went to the Bitburg cemetery with President Reagan everyone said: 'How can Kohl do that? Three SS soldiers are buried there!' Everyone who was there knows that the SS, the *Waffen-SS* mind you, fought the way we [in the *Wehrmacht*] did. Because they were better equipped than we were they were thrown into every kind of shit. They were deployed more often, they had more losses than we did. They are first-class soldiers. In the SS there were, as well as in the *Wehrmacht*, I learned this only now, there were some who committed crimes. But one must distinguish between them. You can't demonise the entire

Wehrmacht because of that. And I don't think it's right that our Federal Constitutional Court permits that people can call soldiers 'murderers'. Because soldiers are sent into battle by governments. Today in Afghanistan, for example. They didn't choose that! It's an asymmetric war, and they aren't even optimally equipped and supplied for it. Hopefully they are at least properly trained. That crimes are committed—, I don't know if the percentage is greater than that of crimes committed in normal life. But even if that's the case: the vast majority of soldiers are decent people. They don't serve for sport, but rather out of a sense of duty. What held us together in the end was not the pleasure of being a soldier, but primarily the desire to stop the Russian army before the border, which we failed to achieve. At the very end, as we were only on the defensive, and the war approached its end, the squad held us together. One doesn't go—, one doesn't give up and one doesn't go over to the other side to stay alive, because the comrades—, one doesn't do that. That's what keeps it together.

C.R. You said that occasionally crimes were committed. How would you then evaluate that there were orders commanding these crimes? In this command structure, who would you describe as a perpetrator? Who would not be?

K.B. Yes, that's a difficult issue. I have to go a bit further back [to answer that]. It is the case that war changes people. May I take off my jacket?

C.R. Yes, it's getting very warm inside.²⁷

112. Pangs of conscience: 'I sometimes thought about it but put it away quickly because one cannot change anything'

Karl-Heinz R. (K.H.R.), born 1926 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 84. Protestant. His father was a hairdresser who had his own salon. Karl-Heinz R. was in the *Jungvolk* from 1936, where he served as a social warden. Later he joined the Hitler Youth. After the *Volksschule*, he trained as a commercial apprentice at a Nazi-oriented firm from 1940 onwards. He was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* in January 1944, where he trained as a combat medic. He saw some action in East Prussia. He was captured by the Red Army at or near the Stutthof concentration camp. He was a POW in the Ural region. He became a deacon after the war. See also [excerpts 9, 35](#).

The story Karl-Heinz R. tells here is compelling, but curious and unverifiable, raising more questions than it answers. The information

that is available about Stutthof is insufficient for corroborating this story. It is included here to indicate the difficulty in assessing narrated histories.

He claims to have been sent to the Stutthof concentration camp in May 1945, implausibly, only hours before the arrival of the Red Army, to tend to Russian auxiliaries. As a combat medic, he allegedly administered tetanus shots to at least 20 wounded men, using mostly the same syringe. This has caused him much unease, as he worries about having infected them with other diseases. Despite his self-professed agony over this alleged incident, he chose not to research the Stutthof camp after the war.

L.H. You talked about Stutthof earlier.

K.H.R. I talked about Stutthof, and I talked about being a POW in the Ural region.

L.H. And the injections, you had to inject people. Where was that, Stutthof?

K.H.R. Stutthof, yes. The injections were in Stutthof. They were injected using the same needle. Impossible, looking at it with my current knowledge, and from my knowledge at the time. But it didn't occur to me then. I was much too nervous. I injected one [person] after another and didn't change the needle.

L.H. Was there no other needle?

K.H.R. Oh sure! There must have been. Surely! I was offered some, but I didn't take them.

L.H. How many [people] did you inject?

K.H.R. Oh at least 20, if not more. It was like an assembly line. [...] Tetanus! Tetanus injections mainly. We didn't have to bandage them. We were supposed to give tetanus injections. Because they had some kind of injuries and had not yet been injected against tetanus. That was it primarily. That came back to me only now! Tetanus injections, all with one needle, many with one needle. Maybe I got a new one sometimes. I don't remember. Later that was an incredible burden for me. Because I may have even killed people because of that [raises his arms]. But-, oh well.

L.H. They were all Russians.

K.H.R. They were all Russian people. We never saw any other injured people, or anyone else who needed vaccinations. They were very calm. One couldn't have a conversation, maybe they were not allowed to. For us it was a job, and we carried it out. And while we were doing that, the Russian army entered the camp, and they grabbed everything, we were of course told: 'All German

soldiers surrender your weapons!’ Then I gave them my weapon. It was only a pistol. As a medic you only ever have a pistol. I didn’t have anything else. I gave it up, then that was done.

L.H. How long was it between your arrival at Stutthof and the arrival of the Russian soldiers?

K.H.R. Hours. Mere hours.

L.H. So you were there only shortly before.

K.H.R. Yes, yes. Just before. We did our work, then gave up the weapons. After a few days the march to East Prussia began, a 10-day march.

L.H. You became a POW after the injections?

K.H.R. Yes. From the moment the Russians arrived I was a POW.

L.H. Then you were a POW.

K.H.R. Yes. Nothing at all changed for me.

L.H. And who gave you the order to give the injections?

K.H.R. The *Wehrmacht*. Our officers, yes. The unit I was currently assigned to. Here is a medic and here is a *Feldunterarzt*. We put you two together and you go to Stutthof. At the time we didn’t know where to. I didn’t. I only found out later where we were.

L.H. The SS guards, were they still there, in Stutthof?

K.H.R. No. They had all taken off. The SS had left the camp in haste. That’s why we were called – because nobody was left to help them. And they’d asked for medics, somehow, maybe [it was] even the SS. I don’t know. The *Feldunterarzt* and I had no other task, if I remember correctly, but to inject tetanus vaccine because that was vitally important. Those people should not die of their injuries. And then I injected all with one needle. Many with one needle, which I became conscious of only later. And which came back to me again only today as we are talking. I sometimes thought about it but put it away quickly because one cannot change anything.

L.H. When you arrived in Stutthof, what did it look like? What did you see? It was a camp.

K.H.R. It was night.

L.H. It was a KZ [concentration camp].

K.H.R. Yes, barracks. Nothing special.

L.H. Did you do a bit of research afterwards? Do you know what Stutthof is?

K.H.R. I did not do any research. I heard that in Stutthof there was supposed to have been a KZ. But whether that is true wasn’t of great interest to me. To tell you the truth. It was all the same to me.

- L.H. After the war you didn't want to find out more?
- K.H.R. No. I had–, I was posted to the Curonian Spit and had to go to Stutthof. It was a long and stupid car ride, with the car tipping over as it went into a ditch. But nothing happened, we could continue, came to Stutthof and were somehow directed to the people we had to inject. I never saw the *Feldunterarzt* again, he didn't care about me. And I didn't care about him. I had my job and got my syringes and then gave the injections. I don't know why I did it all with one needle or where the other needles were. All this happened in 1945, in the second half of the year.
- L.H. That was when the war was over for you, shortly thereafter.
- K.H.R. Just a moment. Second half of the year is not correct. Not for Stutthof. It was in May. Yes, in May.²⁸

113. Collective but not individual guilt: 'a decent German even today feels a bit guilty about what was done to people in 1939'

Heinz H. (H.H.), born 1923 in Bernburg/Saale, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 89. His father worked in a managerial position. Heinz H. was in the Hitler Youth, and a soldier from 1941 to 1945. He served two years in France and two years in Italy. He was a radio operator in the signal detachment. He lived in the GDR after the war.

Heinz H. calls a sense of guilt a measure of 'decency'. Alluding to Holland's British nationality, he addresses Holland directly, mentioning the air raids on England as an example of what Germans ought to feel guilty about. For him, part of this feeling appears to stem from his alleged opposition to Nazism while having served in the war, another part from the anti-fascist memory discourse in the GDR that he was exposed to later.

Elsewhere in the interview, he states that he feels a sense of guilt because he 'was a soldier in the fascist war'. Heinz H. also believes that his grandmother may have been killed as part of the murders at the Bernburg 'euthanasia' killing centre in April 1941.

- L.H. After the war, did people talk about ['euthanasia' killings at Bernburg] or did they keep quiet?
- H.H. After the war one talked about it.
- L.H. One talked about it.
- H.H. And one was ashamed that such things happened in Bernburg.
- L.H. One was–?

- H.H. Ashamed! One felt guilty. One felt guilty that such a thing had happened in our town. Many people did.
- L.H. Did people feel guilty because they believed they shared the guilt, or because they knew it and didn't denounce it, or because they, as young soldiers, as was the case with you, returned to the front? You fought for the Führer, or at least for the German—
- H.H. Yes.
- L.H. Do you sometimes feel guilty?
- H.H. Without a doubt.
- L.H. Tell me, what do you mean by that?
- H.H. Whoever was against the war as a soldier— [leans forward, agitated]. I was a soldier for more than four years. I'd like to emphasise: not a single shot was fired from my rifle. But those were lucky circumstances, in that I was part of a communications unit that was not at the front. I never shot at people.
- L.H. But this feeling of guilt that we mentioned earlier—
- H.H. A bit, yes. One felt—. A decent German even today feels a bit guilty about what was done to people in 1939. Also to you in England! The air raids and such. Things that were then reciprocal. One felt a certain guilt.²⁹

114. Local knowledge versus claims of secrecy: 'we weren't allowed to tell anyone else'

Dora H. (D.H.), born 1923 in Southern Bohemia (now Czech Republic), and Luise K. (L.K.), born 1923 in Cologne, Germany, interviewed together by Luke Holland (L.H.) in their retirement home, both aged 86 (see [figure 13](#)). Dora H. moved to Austria in 1938. She worked in a factory in Steyr, Austria, during the war. Both were in the League of German Girls (BDM). Dora H. was sent to Thuringia, Germany, at the age of 15 to work for an officer from Salzburg for two years, after which she returned to Austria, serving as a *Wehrmacht* auxiliary and later as a nursery nurse in Linz. Luise K. attended a commercial school and became a secretary in a law firm, which is where she met her husband. Luise K.'s father was a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and a civil servant working for the railways.

Holland here interviews two women, who do not seem to know each other well, in a retirement home, with Dora H. talking about concentration camp inmates and their terrible working conditions. In the interaction between the two women, Dora H. speaks of what she witnessed at the time whereas Luise K. repeatedly insists that 'they didn't



Figure 13 Dora H. and Luise K. in a retirement home. D.H. & L.K. Video Testimony (034F2), interviewed by Luke Holland on 14 April 2010. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

know about anything’ – a well-worn trope – to the protest of Dora H. However, ultimately the two women build consensus by agreeing that people had to keep their opinions to themselves and that they could trust no one, in fear of denunciation.

- L.H. Perhaps we could have a short conversation about what actually happened with the KZs [concentration camps], and so on. You just mentioned them.
- D.H. We’re supposed to talk about KZs? I saw my first KZ inmate in Steyr. I was there in the *Kriegshilfsdienst*, where we all had to work with the machines.
- L.K. Did he look bad?
- D.H. In the morning the KZ inmates marched by, at around six. They brought them to Mauthausen, chased them, and they worked in a large hall. And we had a foreman—. At first, we were in the large hall. Then we weren’t allowed to go to the machines any more. He told us, this foreman, in confidence, what went on there. [The concentration camp inmates] worked with the machines. They often punched down on their fingers. They weren’t even allowed to stop then, they were forced to continue working. That’s what he told us. He was himself so shocked and could tell us that because he knew we wouldn’t tell anyone else. So that he wouldn’t also end up in the KZ.
- L.K. That was in this KZ.

- D.H. Because–, that was in the KZ with the KZ inmates, and that no one said anything. He trusted us. Because he would otherwise be immediately locked up. He'd have ended up in the KZ too. That was already, there were the towers, the big towers, with the SS on top with the dogs, observing the whole thing, whoever was being marched around, the KZ inmates. That was usually around 6.30 a.m. We had to leave at 6 a.m., so that we wouldn't see the KZ inmates.
- L.K. I see. That was interesting.
- D.H. Oh yes. It was forbidden, but we still knew, of course, that they were there. Everything was forbidden. We were no longer allowed to walk at that time of day.
- L.K. But nobody believed later that people didn't know about the KZ inmates.
- D.H. No, no. We did know about it. I also knew it from my father. My father was a driver for a big firm [...] and would pick up things from the pharmacy that were to be brought to the KZ. And he always unloaded everything at the gate. At first, he was permitted to enter and gave [inmates] cigarettes and whatever else. Then they realised that he was always giving cigarettes to the KZ inmates. And then he wasn't allowed to enter any more, and everything that he brought from the pharmacy, he had to hand over outside. But he knew what was happening there and told us about it. In our home very quietly–
- L.K. All in total secrecy!
- D.H. We weren't allowed to tell anyone else, but he told us about it. I knew it very, very early. It was awful.
- L.K. Nobody believed us, that we didn't know it!
- D.H. Yes, exactly!
- L.K. No one believed us.
- D.H. Well, I saw it myself, because our father, he had told us, and I then saw it in Steyr, because we had to work there at the *Arbeitsdienst* then. That was quite a time! We had to, we couldn't avoid it. We did as we were told.
- L.K. Yes, exactly!
- D.H. One couldn't resist it. No, one couldn't resist it. You couldn't just say: 'I'm not going.'
- L.K. We didn't take it so seriously, however, at the time. We were young and hadn't really considered that it could be any different. A different life in that period.

D.H. That's it, yes. It was terrible. Well, my father told us a lot, because he had to continually transport the medicines. And he told us everything that happened to the KZ inmates. But we didn't tell anyone else because we knew that he would end up in the KZ. What a time. Terrible.³⁰

115. A troubling past: 'I can still smell the crematorium'

Franz S. (F.S.), born 1925 in the Mühlviertel region of Upper Austria, interviewed twice by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 85. The son of a barrel-maker, Franz S. attended the *Volksschule* and *Hauptschule*. In 1939, he was assigned to a three-year stonemasonry apprenticeship at the quarry at the Gusen concentration camp from the age of 14, working for the Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH Werk Mauthausen Ober-Donau. Franz S. was conscripted in 1943, trained in Vienna and the Netherlands, and sent to Dnipropetrovsk in Ukraine. He was captured by the Red Army and was a POW in the Soviet Union. See also [excerpt 64](#).

Assigned to an apprenticeship at the quarry at the Gusen concentration camp aged 14, Franz S. still appears to suffer deep psychological issues as a result. He relates a story that seems to give him some comfort, salvaging a degree of pride from a period in his life that has left him doubting himself. He claims that, as a soldier during the war, he let a captured Russian soldier go, perhaps as he reminded him of the Russian inmates at the Gusen camp, still hoping that he made it home.

F.S. I can still smell the crematorium. When, at the crematorium, the smoke rose up from the chimney top as if car tyres were burning, then we said: 'They've added more [dead bodies] to the fire.' Because they put at least three men on it, on this sheet-metal grille. Until the skin was burnt up, there was a lot of smoke. You could smell it as far as St Georgen, that's 2 kilometres, if the air-, if there was an easterly wind. That's why I was always happy to travel home to Freistadt.

I went home on Saturday afternoon, because we had to work until 12. And on Sunday evening, I went back, because I had to start work at 7 a.m. I didn't have lots of time for reflection. Yes. That's why I still-. My wife said: 'Why are you screaming in the night?' Yes, I say, because I had a dream. Recently, when I was in the hospital, the psychologist asked me all sorts of questions, about what I think about. I said: 'Well, I was in Gusen.' And she

was very knowledgeable. She was a young person, but she had–, she was–. That is recent [presents papers], I've been invited to go to Gusen again. But I'm no longer fit enough to travel. [...] I won't go there any more. First: I can't cope with it. It churns it all up again. Now, the psychologist also said: I should try not to think about it any more. But I can't manage that.³¹
[...]

F.S. We were retreating, and a Russian was captured. We had the Russian prisoners in the rear, and we were, as one says, at the ready to relieve the men at the front. And now they bring the Russian, and the group leader says, the junior officer: 'You must watch him.' Now he's sitting there. He was already searched for weapons or ammunition, or things like that. I asked him if he was hungry. [...] I gave him a piece of bread from my bread bag, maybe this much [gestures]. [...] I could speak a little Russian. I tell him, [...] he should go. I see nothing, I hear nothing, I know nothing. He didn't know what to do. I had a rifle. I look away. Then he left, cautiously. Into the house, and then he was gone. I don't know if he made it through. In any case, the junior officer comes and asks: 'Where is the Russian?' I say: 'He has been picked up. He's already gone.' He said: 'Forget about him. We don't have to look after him any more.' And he was gone. I'm still proud of that because I too experienced captivity, that I could help him. Because the Russian prisoners were treated very brutally. In Gusen as well, in the concentration camp, there were Russians. And that's why–. I'm happy if he made it home.³²

Unease

For some, the intervening decades led to a change in thinking, even transformation. In case of Otto D. (see [excerpt 116](#)), nightmares made him confront both his past and how it affected his life and relationships after the war, ultimately resulting in his finding calm through peace work, Buddhism, and meditation. Hans W. (see [excerpt 117](#)) has likely not found peace but is driven by his sense of mission of preventing young people from becoming infatuated with Nazism in the way he had been as a child and adolescent. Gerda Su. (see [excerpt 118](#)) feels ashamed of her own behaviour during the war, when she insulted a Polish woman who did not want to make way for her on the pavement. Regine W. (see [excerpt 119](#)) reflects that her generation 'allowed it to happen', while Ludwig P. (see [excerpt 122](#)) laments his lack of 'courage'

at the time. Gerhard W. (see [excerpt 120](#)) dealt with the legacy of Nazism by becoming a teacher in the hope of learning from history. Josef We. (see [excerpt 121](#)) meanwhile feels he was used and seduced by Nazism, and actively worked in reconciliation, inviting survivors to Karlsruhe.

116. From nightmares to finding peace: 'meditation is part of my daily life'

Otto D. (O.E.D.), born 1925 in Insterburg, East Prussia (today Chernyakhovsk, Russia), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Caroline Goldie (C.G.) in 2008 at the age of 83. Protestant. Following the *Jungvolk*, Hitler Youth, and Reich Labour Service (RAD), he joined the *Waffen-SS*. He published a book about his experiences and frequently gives talks to young people. See also [excerpt 110](#).

Otto D. calls himself a *Mitläufer*, or fellow traveller, a term borrowed from Allied denazification proceedings and since given new meaning to denote minor followers or supporters of Nazism who were not ideologically committed, in part as a distancing strategy. (See also [excerpts 108, 119](#).) For Otto D., the journey from confronting his nightmares to finding peace through peace groups, meditation, and Buddhism appears to be an inward-looking one.

C.G. But do you believe you were a Nazi?

O.E.D. [laughs] No, I wasn't! But I was a *Mitläufer* [fellow traveller], like all the others. Not like all the others, but most Germans.

C.G. And do you feel guilty about this whole going along with it, being a *Mitläufer*?

O.E.D. For years, I didn't think about it at all. That came much, much later, when Mother had already been dead a long time. She had always said, 'Oh, [Otto], he has to open up.' But it didn't happen, and I didn't open up. I kept going: family, six children, and my job, did profit-sharing with my co-workers, and what else! I joined political parties and was in the church, my church council and in the church district, anything you can imagine! But I never confronted my past, you see.

C.G. You didn't speak to your children about it?

O.E.D. I didn't, no. That first happened—, began after a dream in which I was called an SS swine. That was about 20 years ago, 22 years ago. That dream started a process of reflection. And I told friends of mine then—, the mother was Jewish, she had been in

Auschwitz, [my friend] was a graphic artist. I told him about my first recollections that I had put down on paper. And he said, 'You must write more. You must read to us what you've written.' Why I hadn't done that yet! And I did what he told me to do.
[...]

C.G. But you have been able to find a little peace, then, through the way that you presented yourself in public?

O.E.D. Peace! It was a very long path to that. There's more to say about that. That was also, then, a meeting with Buddhists, a meeting with people [...] I got to know at Auschwitz [memorial site] with–, that I could speak freely with friends about these things. [...] All of which contributed to my feeling much, much better today. As I said: there were dreams, there were, there were also illnesses that came later. Whether it was cancer, stroke, or a broken femur that forced me, in hospital, and, yes, where I almost died several times, and always got well again! And–, these things also contributed to it. But then, above all, what I didn't think possible: meditation. I really found tranquillity alone and with others. And that is what I'm busy with now: writing down everything that I haven't yet addressed in my book.

C.G. Meditation is part of your life now. Or has it been that way for some time?

O.E.D. The first time was at Auschwitz [memorial site]. When I understood what meditation meant. [...] I saw monks from Asia, so from–. They weren't from Vietnam, rather–

C.G. Tibet, or–

O.E.D. No, they weren't from Tibet, rather–. Well, they were monks, it will come back to me. That's because of my age, that I sometimes don't right away–, from Burma! I saw these monks meditating on the tracks for days, and I thought to myself: what do these monks have to do with Auschwitz! From Burma! And then I heard that these monks had even walked from Auschwitz to Hiroshima on foot. And then I saw the head of that monastic order, how he bowed before a grandmother, an old woman.

I couldn't forget that. I still have pictures of those monks, of this leader. But how he had bowed before this elderly lady–. I don't know, had she been in Auschwitz herself? That impressed me so much that I thought: I would like to know more about Buddhists. What is that all about? Because here–, and I noticed how meditation changed them. Then it was my wish to learn from them. Which I did. It's now been 14 years since I saw the

monks. Ever since, meditation has been part of my daily life. I can't even let one day go by without meditating [smiles].³³

117. A reformed *Waffen-SS* veteran educates younger generations: 'I believed it, wanted to die a hero's death'

Hans W. (H.W.), born 1927 in Berlin, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) and Iris Wachsmuth in 2009 at the age of 82. Protestant. He was in the Hitler Youth, volunteered for the SS in 1943, and was captured by US troops in Braunau, Austria. He frequently gives talks in schools and at memorial sites to young people. See also [excerpt 7](#).

If Otto D.'s educational work (see [excerpt 116](#)) is more aimed at finding inner peace, for Hans W. the emphasis is on the impact of his work on others. He still grapples with the question of how it was possible that he and many others were so committed to National Socialism, to the point of volunteering for the *Waffen-SS* towards the end of the war, against the wish of his father, because he still believed in Germany's 'final victory'. Following a pivotal encounter with a Social Democrat in 1951, he began to reflect and change direction, eventually joining the Social Democratic Party. Such encounters seem to be of importance for many contemporaries who journey from commitment to Nazism, and often denial of its crimes, towards recognition of the 'Third Reich's' criminal nature (see [excerpts 100, 109](#)). In Holland's documentary *Final Account*, he is seen desperately challenging a teenage boy who is clearly enamoured with the far right. Born in 1927, Hans W. was only 18 when the war ended. His shock at how fully he had embraced the Nazi ideology remains evident.

L.H. And how did they test [if someone was ready to serve]?

H.W. We had to attend an examination, were examined medically, as to our health. So, the medical examination was the condition on which one was accepted as a volunteer [into the *Waffen-SS*]. I had also expressed the desire to join the air force. But— [looking at his military identification documents], but on 15 March, I'd already signed up for the SS. '44. 9 March.

L.H. How did one sign up for the SS? How did that go, exactly?

H.W. [sighs] So, then I—, I should be able to get this right. I signed up voluntarily, there were recruitment campaigns everywhere, and in the labour service there were brochures where you could fill in your name and register. I filled out such a form and handed it in. Then I was in the SS. Then I—, the exam was enough, that I

was capable of being deployed, that is, that I was healthy. I didn't need to go back. The rest happened automatically.

L.H. And did you do it because you didn't get into the *Luftwaffe*?

H.W. Well, that was—, what should I put it? That was before—. Stalingrad was the beginning when you could see that it really was not going to work out. Where we basically should have stopped. But we still believed in final victory. That is why I registered with the SS, because that was how I felt about it then. The SS was the elite unit. They had the best tanks and that was exciting for us. For me, anyway. And my father was not keen. I did it without his knowledge! Out of complete conviction. And that is what still haunts me. How was that a motivation for joining these ranks? But that was how we were raised! At school, ideologically, for the master race. And anyone not in favour was our opponent and our enemy. Everything was the Jews' fault. That ran deep since the *Judenfibel* [antisemitic publication]. Then the films, *Jud Süß*— [antisemitic film, 1940]. You must imagine, we were 175 inhabitants [in the village], and here came, in the Nazi period – we didn't even have electric light yet – the Nazi film unit came and showed the films: *Jud Süß*, the Nazi films were brought to all the little villages. You can't imagine today what kind of pressure that was [sighs]. I believed it, wanted to die a hero's death, had written a farewell letter to my parents: if I fall in battle, you should be proud, you shouldn't wear black, and all that nonsense. Today you wonder: how can that happen? But there were contradictions. When I was in Poland, I couldn't even imagine that Moscow was a city, a world capital like any other. That they had underground trains and—, it was all Bohemian villages [in my mind]. When I realised that I had been living in another world. And this [makes a gesture of removing a veil from his face], that this was pulled away from my face, and this crazy leadership, what happened there, I first grasped all that in 1951, when I met an old Berlin Social Democrat at the transportation works, who found in me a sort of friend. He opened my eyes. That was my entry point. Joined the SPD. First the union, 1951, and 1951 into the SPD, because of the debate at that time about rearmament. [...] The general attitude at the time was this: we don't want a weapon in our hands ever again. I never wanted to join a party again, but [...] realised that it was necessary. And my letters that I had written against rearmament, they were even in the *Hessische Nachrichten* [newspaper], about my reasoning

why we didn't need any arms. A great nation needs defences. But I wanted to be a citizen of the world. That came from the USA, a kind of world citizens' organisation. I was an early member in that. Those were my motives.³⁴

118. Shame: 'I believed that what the Nazis were doing was 100 per cent right'

Gerda Su. (G.Su.), born 1925 in the Brandenburg region, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 85 (see [figure 14](#)). Protestant. She was a nursery nurse before, during, and after the war. Her father was a farm labourer who used to support the Communist Party. Her mother had eight children, which earned her the *Mutterverdienstkreuz* (Nazi decoration for women with four or more children). Her father died in 1944. Gerda Su. was a member of the *Jungmädel* and the League of German Girls (BDM). She spent a part of the war in East Friesland, and four weeks in Posen (today Poznań, Poland), as a nursery nurse.

Gerda Su. expresses her shame at the way she behaved towards a Polish woman during the war, which contrasted sharply with the way in which an English woman treated her after the war, when she worked as a nanny in England for a short period of time. She compares this to Germans' behaviour more generally. Of note here too is that while she first states that she never got anyone arrested, she then concedes that she



Figure 14 Gerda Su. in her home. G.Su. Video Testimony (133F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 November 2011. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

would have done on one occasion. Her parents stopped her from doing so. This indicates her level of ideological commitment at the time and the change she underwent after 1945, given her outspoken condemnation of Nazism.

G.Su. When I was in England [after the war], there was an English corporal. He was the chief of the stables. Officers had horses, and there he was the chief. And 'our' Englishman was the colonel. Then she had said, the madam, 'Nanny, go with Charles [the child she was looking after] to the stables.'

L.H. You were a nanny then?

G.Su. I was a nanny then. That was in '49/'50. They had goats in the stables and sheep, and Charles got goat's milk. Cow's milk was 'too bitter', he didn't drink it. It was always boiled first. So she said: 'Nanny, go over there. The sheep are lambing.' Charles was supposed to inherit the estate. The colonel had a large estate in England. And she was Scottish. As we left the stables this English corporal appears, on a horse. And yelled at me, scolding me because I had gone into the stables. And he ranted in English. But I understood what he said. Including 'whore' and whatever else came up. Then the madam came back from her holiday and asked: 'Nanny, was everything ok?' I said: 'Yes. But this and that with the corporal of the stables.' Then she went to her husband and said, 'He's not allowed to do that.' I said: 'The war is not my fault. I'm also not to blame that he was a POW in Germany. But I can't put up with that. Even though I'm German, I don't think that's right.' So there: the colonel sent for him and reprimanded him. He had to come to us, an English corporal. Then he rang, and the madam came to fetch me. She said: 'Nanny, he wants to apologise to you.' He apologised, but all in English. He spoke German very well. But he was within his rights. In the last few years, we did some travelling with a rural association. All men, roughly of my age, who had been in the war, including some officers, and I said: 'The English are a very tolerant people. What German woman would have told her husband if an *Unteroffizier* had insulted a Polish woman? And who would have said: "This fellow insulted me, and as a Polish woman I don't have to stand for that." That would not have happened!' Then the men said, all of them: 'No. That would never have happened.' And I can't think of a German lieutenant, let alone a captain, who would have said: 'Come here, you now apologise to the Polish woman.'

They were ‘Polacks’ and you could insult them. I did that, too. During the war, I’m still ashamed of it today. During the war five or six Polish girls came the opposite way. We were just as many German girls. We walked on the pavement, and one of us left the pavement, because we did not all fit there. Then I said: ‘Why did you leave the pavement?’ ‘There wasn’t any room.’ I said: ‘They are Polacks. They could have left the pavement.’ That’s when one of the Polish girls stopped and said: ‘I am Polish. You are German and you can’t do anything about being German. I can’t do anything about being Polish. But I am not a Polack.’ I could have—she should have feared that I would call the police, or some propaganda official in uniform running around there all the time, *Ortsgruppenleiter* they were called, and told them: ‘That Polish woman there, go and get her.’ That would have been the end of her. That’s how we Germans were, unfortunately.
[...]

G.Su. And what I am telling you so freely, that I understood that the Nazis were criminals, many people will not admit that because they themselves were part of it. I was also part of it. I also participated in it. But I didn’t put anyone into the KZ [concentration camp], and I didn’t denounce anyone. But it could have come to that if my parents hadn’t said: ‘You keep your mouth shut!’ I knew some people who grumbled about the Nazis. Then I said: ‘If that fellow comes here again and rants about the Nazis—.’ He was a milk inspector. ‘Then I’ll report him.’ Then my mother said: ‘You better let that be!’ And my father, too: ‘You won’t do anything of the kind.’

L.H. So you were ready to—

G.Su. At the time I would have done it, yes. Because I believed that what the Nazis were doing was 100 per cent right. In my opinion they could occupy Russia, and Poland in any event!³⁵

119. Accepting responsibility: ‘we let it happen’

Regine W. (R.W.), born 1924 in Friesland, Lower Saxony, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2012 at the age of 88. Protestant. Her parents had a farm. Regine W. attended the *Volksschule*, worked at the family farm before the war, and did an agricultural apprenticeship during the war. She was in the League of German Girls (BDM). Her father was conscripted late in the war and sent to the Eastern Front. He was a POW in Russia for two years. See also [excerpt 22](#).

For Regine W., her grandchildren's questions about why she 'went along' appear to have been challenging. She concedes that she did indeed 'go along', but maintains that she, along with many others, did not realise the full extent of what was happening. She does not see this as a mitigating factor; instead, she suggests she should have been more inquisitive, rather than 'permitting it' to happen. Like others, she too considers herself a 'fellow traveller', a follower, or *Mitläufer* (see also excerpts 108, 116). She is far more willing to concede complicity than other contemporaries who were rather more involved in Nazi crimes; perhaps it is her relative distance that allows her to take on rather more responsibility than she can be said to carry.

R.W. We participated in it and everything that went with it. And if the grandchildren say: 'Granny, why did you do that? Why did you go along with it?' We didn't know! We went along with it. That's what people say now. It's what I say now.

L.H. You say that now.

R.W. Yes. I believe it was like that for many. Look at our BDM earlier, where we sang songs. Perhaps we didn't grasp what it was all about. It sounded good, we marched and went along, didn't we? It was, perhaps, our fault, but we didn't grasp it completely. All of this, and everything that happened, that came out only after the war. We were horrified.

L.H. Does one feel that one shares the responsibility in a certain sense, or—?

R.W. Can you please repeat the question?

L.H. [The question was] whether you, people of your generation, were *Mitläufer* [fellow travellers]. You characterised yourself as a *Mitläufer* before.

R.W. Yes.

L.H. Are you ready to acknowledge that you too are responsible in some respect for this whole story?

R.W. Yes, we are. We are. But back then we didn't think about it at all. We became aware of all that only afterwards. One can blame—, one can always claim now: 'We didn't know about it.' Perhaps that's what many people say. But I have—, we back then, we really didn't know it. But complicit, yes. We let it happen.

L.H. One should have, perhaps, sought out more information.

R.W. Yes, of course.

L.H. One should have asked questions.

- R.W. Yes.
- L.H. That's what you mean.
- R.W. Exactly.
- L.H. As one should.
- R.W. Yes. But the young people today, they would do research and ask questions until the situation was clarified.
- L.H. They don't let themselves be fooled.
- R.W. Yes, that's what I mean.
- L.H. And, back then, that happened to you.
- R.W. Yes.
- L.H. May I ask you a question, or at least, discuss something with you, something complicated. You can help me with the German language. I would gladly discuss a word that often occurs in such conversations, in the newspapers, and so forth. People speak about perpetrators.
- R.W. Perpetrators, yes.
- L.H. What is your opinion about perpetrators? I want to hear your opinion. What does it mean to be a perpetrator in the "Third Reich"? Where does being a perpetrator begin and where does it end? Did you understand the question?
- R.W. Yes, I did. I always say, we didn't know about it, but we are also perpetrators. We let it happen. We should have investigated. So, with hindsight, we too are perpetrators. That's how I see it. Yes. Back then we should have paid much more attention and researched the matter thoroughly. That's how I see it today. Yes.
- L.H. I'm very thankful to you for this conversation.
- R.W. Perhaps it's of use— [tape ends abruptly].³⁶

120. Learning from history by teaching about Nazism: 'can you imagine how a people can go that far?'

Gerhard W. (G.W.), born 1917 in North Rhine–Westphalia, Germany, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2010 at the age of 92. Catholic. His father was a foreman/weaver in a Jewish company, which was later 'Aryanised'. Part of his education was at a religious order's boarding school. He attained his *Abitur* in 1937. After the Reich Labour Service (RAD), he served in the military. By the end of the war, he was a captain of the reserve. During the war, he was a non-commissioned officer in Poland at the military barracks in Konitz (Chojnice). He was wounded in Russia, where he lost an eye, and suffered a bullet wound to his lungs

at the Siegfried Line. Due to his injuries, he subsequently served as a trainer. See also [excerpt 78](#).

Gerhard W. speaks to Reetz about not being able to ‘forgive himself’ for building what he calls ‘a wall’ between himself and reality. After the war he became a teacher, educating his pupils about Nazi crimes at a time when this was far from common, to the protest of the pupils’ parents, perhaps as a way of seeking penance. He did so by confronting the pupils with extremely violent reports, to shock them, a teaching method which few would endorse today. He speaks of ‘immunisation’ and ‘seduction’, viewing education as the means with which to prevent young people from taking a similar path. Of interest here too is his story about a pupil confronting him with a question about what he would have done, had he been ordered to kill someone. Gerhard W. responded to the pupil that he would not have followed such an order, but expressed his relief that he was never put in that situation, somewhat qualifying his moral certainty. The interaction he describes is also indicative of lively scenes that may have played out across the country, or certainly in West Germany, in a particular period. It highlights that the process of confronting the past in Germany was always also conversational, interpersonal, and relational.

C.R. I’m just trying to imagine: You are on the German side, and you know: yes, alright, we are now going to conquer Russia. But you know that the population will suffer the more you advance.

G.W. Yes. I can do—. I belong to those—. I already spoke of that wall [I built between myself and this reality]. I cannot forgive myself, looking back. That runs deep. Once a student—, I had the year 10 students at a secondary school. I was also a history teacher there. And I always began teaching the history of fascism and right-wing radicalism with a bang. I had a book with reports about SS camps. That was after the war, let’s say in 1957. And I read out reports of babies whose heads were smashed by SS men against posts and murdered. I even—, I had the class for two sessions that day, one German, one history. The German session was the first, but I transferred the history session to be the first. On an empty stomach, as it were. Then I asked—, they were totally shocked. I asked them: ‘Can you imagine how a *Volk* can go that far?’ I began to tell them how it started. The session lasted for several hours. But they talked about this session at home. And then I heard the reaction. An angry reaction! I called for a meeting with the parents. And what almost never happens,

happened: almost all parents were there, father and mother. A large group. But I had already heard what parents said at home. Some said: 'Can't you finally stop with this Nazi shit!' And things like that. I gave the parents a good talking-to, that evening. We all left peacefully but everyone was agitated. I showed them pictures. 'Our young people need to know about that! Otherwise, seducers will come again and they will lead them down the same path.' They must be immunised. It's how it was! We cannot just deny it. The issue of hostages came up in that same class. The topic was hostages. I told them that, one morning, I entered a Russian village with my company. There were six or seven people hanging from the gallows. Hanged by German soldiers. Then one of the students asked me: 'Herr W., what would you have done if you had been ordered to do that?'

Everyone was quiet. I was quiet, too! I stepped back behind the lectern, and then I said: 'It goes without saying that I would have never done that! I would not have followed that order. But that's easy to say today. Thank God I never had to face such a quandary.' At that the class was relieved! If I had reacted differently and said something like: 'Of course not!' nobody would have believed me.³⁷

121. Losing faith in Nazism: 'I felt like I'd been seduced and abused'

Josef We. (J.We.), born 1914 near Karlsruhe, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 95. Catholic. His father, a civil servant working for the post office, died in the First World War. His mother founded a cookery school and was in the National Socialist Women's League. After completing the *Abitur* in 1934, Josef We. studied at a university, during which time he was a member of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA). He was conscripted in 1937, serving until the end of the war. He served in the navy, and edited soldiers' newspapers. He became a journalist after the war.

Like Gerhard W. (see [excerpt 120](#)), Josef We. claims that he was seduced into believing in Nazism and that he changed his attitudes after the war, to the point of becoming actively involved in commemoration activities in the city of Karlsruhe and conducting and publishing research on the topic. He focuses his blame on Hitler. He pinpoints the moment at which his attitudes changed to finding out about Nazi crimes, which he alleges was only after the end of the war, when the Allies confronted the

German population with information about the concentration camps. In his journalistic work, he reported on Nazi trials, which may have allowed him to distance himself further from the 'Third Reich'.

L.H. When did you first find out about the mass murder of the Jews?

J.We. Through the Nuremberg Trials, the end of 1945. Yes.

L.H. It took that long until you found out?

J.We. No, I'm sorry, that's not right. The Americans shortly after they had occupied us here, they publicised in the newspapers and by radio what had happened in Auschwitz and so on. That was immediately after the Americans had occupied us, of course. Well, a few weeks later.

[...]

L.H. When you heard for the first time about the camps, the mass murder of the Jews, about the concentration camps, how did that affect you?

J.We. It was terrible. It was difficult to believe. Horrifying. It was completely horrifying. Soon after that I worked in Rastatt, at a newspaper, already in 1946, in the autumn.

L.H. No, we're now in '45. The war ended in '45.

J.We. You want to stay in '45.

L.H. No, only because you just said to me that you, already, before the Nuremberg Trials–

J.We. Yes, exactly, thanks to what the Americans were making public about it.

L.H. They made it public shortly after the end of the war.

J.We. Yes, let's say: when I came home. That was in June. They had probably already made it public before that. But when I came home, then I found out about it in June '45.

L.H. My question was: how did it affect you?

J.We. I already told you: it was–, I could hardly believe it. It was terrible. It finally–. Until then one had still said or perceived it as a great misfortune that the war was lost. But from then on one was glad that this ill-fated regime, which had committed such crimes, had collapsed. From then onwards. And that was only confirmed when I was at the war crimes trial in Rastatt, as a journalist. That was [...] what the Nuremberg Tribunal was, but for the French zone. There had been two KZs [concentration camps] in the Alsace. And former KZ guards from these camps, they stood trial before the court. I heard what happened there. It cemented such abhorrence and a complete lack of understanding

for this regime. And it was of course also a terrible shock, having believed in this regime for years.

L.H. That's when you broke with the regime?

J.We. Yes.

L.H. Did you feel that you had been seduced?

J.We. I felt like I'd been seduced and abused. I have also written about it that way. Seduced, in blind faith in the good of this regime. Seduced and abused. Abused also in that one had to go to war, and millions of people died. All because of that madman, Hitler. And as a consequence Germany was very severely punished, in that we lost very, very much, didn't we? When I think of East Prussia, of Silesia, and then of the many millions of people who were expelled. That was the great, bitter punishment. Naturally, that doesn't balance out the crimes committed before.³⁸

122. Lessons for post-war life: 'I lacked courage'

Ludwig P. (L.P.), born 1919 near Remscheid, Germany, interviewed over two days by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 91. Protestant. His father owned a bakery. Ludwig P. joined the Hitler Youth, was an apprentice at the local bank, and later served in the *Wehrmacht* where he rose to the rank of first lieutenant by the end of the war. He served on the Eastern Front in Poland (Białystok), Russia (Smolensk, Moscow), Belarus (Vitebsk), and Ukraine (Kyiv). He attained a doctorate after the war, and became a bank manager, then chairman and later president of a banking group.

Ludwig P. talks about civil, or civic, courage, which reflects an important part of the discourse and of political education in West Germany and present-day Germany. By positing that he lacked 'courage' at the time – that is, the courage to speak up and oppose Nazism – he implies that his inner attitudes or convictions were anti-Nazi, but merely not acted upon. Ludwig P. constructs himself as more courageous in his post-war life, which he portrays as a lesson he took from the Nazi period.

L.P. The question is always the same: I can't escape this loop because I know, that with the knowledge I had–, the question torments me: could I have brought about something? To influence something. To have done something. [...] I could not affect anything without ending up at the gallows. I lacked the courage for that. I learned after the war that there was something other, something higher

than courage and bravery in the face of the enemy. Putting your life on the line. That there is something higher, something more important. And that's civil courage. To have the courage in civilian life to dissent. I took that with me. That was my lesson. [...] I succeeded in transforming bravery – which is less than courage, bravery has to do with self-defence – into civil courage in my civilian life. Also, at the peak of my political, my banking life I met a woman, a beautiful woman, who said to me: 'Herr P., one of these days you will stick your neck out too far.' Because I never held back and always voiced my opinion. That had been my lesson, as a conclusion, from the time when I had to shut up, and kept my mouth shut, maybe because I did not have enough courage. But that was my lesson from the war. I didn't put up with anything any more. Even with my superiors. I created many a calamity for myself, for speaking up when I should have held my tongue and should have kept quiet also for tactical reasons. I'd like to add something to these thoughts: after that first winter, or on the march, something stayed with me, and I'll say it now. When I became a soldier, part of the training of a soldier of the German *Wehrmacht* dealt with the use of weapons in times of peace, in the barracks. In this context we had to learn by heart one of the paragraphs of the penal code. This paragraph was called: the self-defence paragraph.

L.H. Self-defence.

L.P. I fight back. Self-defence is the intent to protect yourself or someone else against damage from any sort of attack or counter-attack, on body, life, honour, or property. And I told you how, at the time, I shot at [enemy soldiers]. How they dropped. And I was looking for some self-justification on this march: that was self-defence. But I had my doubts. I thought: it's not true! We attacked them, and it was really the ones who attacked us who acted in self-defence. We invaded their country. They were not prepared for that. Since then, when I hear the term 'self-defence' I always think of that white field covered in deep snow, with the black dots that drew closer. That's when I was looking for self-defence as an excuse. I didn't need an excuse. I was protecting my own life. I shot others to stay alive. Had to shoot others. But I searched for a moral justification for that and couldn't find it.³⁹

Popular culture and historiography

The following three short excerpts give a flavour of the way in which both popular culture and non-fiction books can impact on, or be embedded in, interpretations of the past.

123. Rebel without a cause: ‘we didn’t know what we were doing’

Dieter Ba. (D.Ba.), born 1924 in Köslin in Pomerania (today Koszalin, Poland), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 86. His father was an agronomist with his own business. Dieter Ba. was in the Hitler Youth. After attaining the *Abitur*, he volunteered for the navy in 1942. He received submarine training in Königsberg (today Kaliningrad, Russia) and became a lieutenant on a submarine in the eastern Baltic Sea. He later retrained for the marines in 1944–5. He was captured by British troops in April 1945 and spent two years near Newcastle, in a POW camp for officers. Dieter Ba. completed an agricultural apprenticeship before commencing work for different airlines. See also [excerpts 8, 74, 99](#).

Dieter Ba. cites a film, *Rebel without a Cause* (which in German was called *Denn sie wissen nicht was sie tun*, literally ‘For they know not what they are doing’), to bolster his claim that *Wehrmacht* soldiers simply followed orders.

L.H. Thinking back to the ‘Third Reich’ and those times, those cruel times. One talks a lot about ‘perpetrators’. What is a perpetrator for you? How would you define ‘perpetrator’ in the context of the Nazi crimes?

D.Ba. I’d answer with the title of a film, and this film is called *Denn sie wissen nicht was sie tun* [*Rebel without a Cause*]. The James Dean film. Because they didn’t know what they were doing! And that is valid for a lot of people. We didn’t know what we were doing! We didn’t know. We followed orders. You must execute every order received from your superior. That is a Prussian virtue! You are forced to obey. Naturally that creates immense conflicts. There were not only good superiors. There were also evil, bad, wretched superiors.⁴⁰

124. Generation War: 'war brings about brutality'

Ferdinand Kr. (F.Kr.), born 1922 in Schelle (Šaľa), Czechoslovakia (today in Slovakia), interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) over two days in 2013 at the age of 90. Catholic. Ethnic German. He attended the *Gymnasium* and began to study medicine. He joined the SS but continued to study as assistant doctors were needed. He trained with an SS medical battalion in Stettin (today Szczecin, Poland) and studied in Gießen for four semesters to become a junior medical officer. Subsequently, he was an intern at a hospital in Schotten. Close to the end of the war, he disposed of his uniform and pay book, and was captured by US troops who took him to Homburg but did not realise that he had been in the SS. He was then at a displaced persons camp at Hoechst. When registering for a university course in medicine, he lied, stating he had been in neither the *Wehrmacht* nor the SS. See also [excerpt 95](#).

Ferdinand Kr. refers to the TV series *Generation War*, which was broadcast on German television to a mix of praise and criticism.⁴¹ He highlights the television series, which charted the lives under Nazism of a group of friends, as 'showing' the descent into brutality, even murder.

F.Kr. There were stories about highly ambitious officers, who were after getting a medal, or the highest [points to his neck] medal, that they were ruthless with their troops, that they simply sent them forward in hopeless situations! A commanding officer had to know that it made no sense at all when 50 per cent of the garrison is dead. What do I get out of it? Nothing at all! But they did it because they were furious, or God knows what, or drunk, or had no women, or so. Or they simply snapped, some did, didn't they? Because of the brutality. War brings about such brutality. Right now, there's a three-part series on German TV, about the war. How three generations experienced it. Rather harmless boys, who became murderers. I would have never thought that I'd kill a man. Some attacked each other and beat each other up, because they were frustrated.⁴²

125. Historian's book on *Wehrmacht* crimes: 'we never gave the commissar order to anyone in the regiment'

Dietrich B. (D.B.), born 1925 in East Prussia, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2009 at the age of 83. Catholic. He was in the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth. The son of a civil servant, he attended the *Gymnasium*, and

enlisted in 1943. He served in a tank regiment in the *Wehrmacht* in the West and in the East.

Dietrich B. was prompted into exploring the history of his regiment when confronted with the book on the ‘commissar order’ by historian Felix Römer, to ‘find out’ whether his regiment too murdered commissars.⁴³ Dietrich B. is currently in the process of writing his autobiography. He resents what he sees as collective guilt accusations levelled against Germans.

L.H. I wonder, Herr B., have you talked to your children about this terrible time and these experiences. Were your children interested? Did they want to tell others [about it]?

D.B. Oh yes, quite. They repeatedly asked that I write something down. Which I have: 240 pages, and there will be an additional 60. I’m finished, including up to Vienna, with my career and the whole time. You know, the beginning of these writings was of course the fact that I repeatedly found that according to the contemporary–, according to modern German historical research, groups of people are always collectively blamed. That’s what I told you at the beginning: the Junkers, the German soldiers in Russia, and so on. I am now working on determining if it’s true that my regiment, that in my regiment commissars were shot. There was the famous commissar order, and now there’s an outstanding book from [Felix] Römer, who checked every German unit very carefully to see how many reports there were of such activity. Now I have to look it over again for the regiment, but I continue to maintain–, and it’s also said by a former officer from that period: we never gave the commissar order to anyone in the regiment. Not in the division! In the regiment. I want to check that again, to look closely, and then I’ll write it down. That is, however, a more pressing question, because I feel such a close connection to this regiment. After all, they got me through the stupid war, didn’t they? Through all the gunfights. They watched out for me, and they were fantastic, all of them.⁴⁴

Confrontations

The Nazi past put a strain on some family relations, with children confronting their parents, or ‘Third Reich’ contemporaries feeling

resentful towards their own parents, or fearful of finding out what especially their fathers may have been involved in.

Apart from families, public debates, popular culture, media stories, and exhibitions can exert pressure on people to justify themselves. They can also offer new, or resonate with existing, interpretations.

The interview situation itself may pose a challenge that necessitates repositioning and explanations to an unknown and possibly unsympathetic interlocutor, which may lead to tensions, posturing, and unexpected admissions.

126. Intergenerational conflict: 'he simply didn't believe his father'

Peter S. (P.S.), born 1921 in Westphalia, interviewed by Cornelia Reetz (C.R.) in 2010 at the age of 89 (see [figure 15](#)). Catholic. His father was a civil servant who worked for the railways. Peter S. joined the Hitler Youth (*Segelflieger-HJ*) and completed the *Abitur* in 1940. He volunteered for the *Luftwaffe* in 1940 and was first deployed in August 1943 against British bombers. Between 1943 and 1945, he shot down 24 bombers and flew 100 missions for which he received several medals. He still meets with other veterans. By 1945, he was a lieutenant and commanded around 200 pilots and 10 planes in Oberschleißheim, where he ordered the surrender as US troops approached. He spent six months in US captivity and became a pilot after the war. He wrote a book about his experiences for his grandchildren in 2000.



Figure 15 Peter S. in his home. P.S. Video Testimony (040M), interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 19 July 2010. Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies, UCL Library Services. © ZEF Productions.

Peter S. characterises his conflict with his sons as typical of the generational divide seen with the so-called generation of '68, who confronted their elders about the Nazi past. He laments their lack of understanding about life under dictatorship, an argument shaped by the post-war discourse, especially since German reunification. Framing the conflict this way helps Peter S. deflect questions about his personal conduct and attitudes. His exasperation about defending himself against his sons' accusations suggests this is a sore point. He finds their lack of admiration hard to accept. His presence in Hungary during the deportation of Jews raises questions, which he pre-empts by claiming he thought the deportees were being sent to labour camps. This narrative highlights how the interpretation of the Nazi past is influenced by more recent history, such as his comparison of the Taliban to partisans in the Second World War, labelling both as 'freedom fighters'. Peter S. asks whether the tape is still running before sharing what he considers to be his 'provocative' views that the brutal treatment of captured German soldiers by partisans and others was self-inflicted and deserved given their actions against local populations, which does indeed set him apart from other veterans. At the same time, he also makes derogatory comments about Muslims and Islam. His willingness to record his statements possibly indicates a wish to have his perspective documented and understood. His reference to 'willing accomplices' likely indicates his awareness of Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.

- P.S. My sons aren't interested. They say: 'What you did was stupid.' They are right! They are more '68ers, my sons. But that's ok.
- C.R. Have you never talked to your sons about it?
- P.S. They asked when it came up at school. But they'd barely heard anything about that time at school. It's still the case today, the way I see it at my nearly 90 years of age. The reporting is not always clean and correct. It's very subjective and influenced by personal experience. It wasn't that simple, you see? One can't say there were 'willing accomplices' who only ever said 'yes!' It wasn't that simple! It was much more difficult and harder, back then, than how one perceives it today. Because of that, my sons said: 'Everything that happened between '33 and '45 was criminal!' That means we were criminals too. Of course! But it wasn't like that. You ended up in situations in which you had to make sudden decisions: this way or that way. And my decision in Oberschleißheim was easy. Germany was already occupied. [...] For me it wasn't difficult to say: 'Enough, it's over, raise up your hands!' And, yes. It's not so simple,

what happened back then. Even today, I still don't have answers to everything. How could we tolerate it that the synagogues were set on fire? If a church burns today, that affects the entire population! When the houses were set on fire, where our Turkish residents live, as happened in Solingen, all of Germany is up in arms! And rightfully so, in a democracy! But not in a dictatorship. You couldn't simply—. It would interest you perhaps, if I—. That is the question that my boys also posed: 'You knew about it! You heard about how the Jews were being deported.' Of course! People were continually being forced into the work camps. German women had to work in the arms factories. There were conductresses. There were female streetcar drivers. And the men went to the front. So they said: 'We need labour!' Then the Poles and the East Germans—. Oh, in the East, those, the Russians more or less by force, were gathered together and told: 'In Germany you'll have a great life! Come, work for us!' They then came. More or less voluntarily. And so it was, suddenly: 'The Jews must all go away.' 'Where will they go?' 'To the work camps in the East.' That's what they said! In the book, I also write—. [...] As a young lieutenant in aviation I got to know a nice young Hungarian woman who was off to university, and chatted with her a little, and [...] the [woman's] mother asked: 'Tell us, why were the Jews here in Steinamanger [Szombathely, Hungary],' that was the name of the place, Szombathely today, Steinamanger in Hungary, 'sent away?' I say: 'I didn't hear about that! What happened?' At the airfield I asked the commander, [...] I say: 'What's happening there? Where are the Jews being taken?' 'Yes,' he said, 'they're going to a work camp in the East.' The next day again to [the Hungarian woman]: 'Listen, I can answer your mother's question: They are going to a work camp.' 'Oh, they're going to a work camp.' For us, that was the end of it. But that these work camps were death camps, most German people, except perhaps some soldiers or the initiated, didn't know that. That they were in fact death camps. That came up time and again. I said to my sons: 'Auschwitz: I first heard about it after the war. I heard the name after the war. And it is shocking that six million Jews were gassed.' My eldest son, who is now 60 years old, he says to me: 'Even if you knew nothing about it, you are guilty!' How can you argue with that?

C.R. How, then, did you argue with that?

P.S. Not at all! He didn't understand me. He simply didn't believe his father. 'Even if you knew nothing about it, you're guilty!'

What could I say to that? I knew nothing about it! For me–, and I will say something provocative now! Is the tape still on? No?

C.R. Of course!

P.S. It's still on, fine. I am going to say something very provocative. For me, the Taliban are freedom fighters. It was the same with the partisans! I fought against the partisans. I saw the corpses, how they massacred German pilots in Serbia. And we were outraged: how can they do something like that! And then, after the war, already during the war, I said: why do they hate us? One thing is the upbringing, the religious fanaticism that has infected Muslims now, who really have an antiquated religion, you could say. With the hate, and then paradise as an answer to these things. But, basically, they want to liberate their land from the occupiers. The partisans wanted that as well! A night flyer, who landed and came under fire at Novi Sad in the war, describes that in his book. He took off again right away, with new ammunition, and said: 'This village, we're going to destroy it.' Then they took four Messerschmitt planes–. I also flew the Messerschmitt, but was not on that mission, luckily. They set the houses and huts on fire. And the people went into the woods. The young people managed it, the 18- or 19-year-old young men. And had to leave father, mother, and grandma behind, burning in the houses. What did they expect would happen when a German pilot was shot down, which happened to us, also over Serbia, over Novi Sad? They massacred us! They killed us right away. And do you know what we did? We flew without wearing any insignia, only wearing leather. And when we jumped, we spoke English. And said: 'I am English! I am a Royal Air Force flyer [sic].' Because the Royal Air Force also operated there!⁴⁵

127. Processing family history: 'it was a crushing disappointment'

Margarethe M. (M.M.), born 1916 in the Salzburg region, Austria, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 94. Her father worked for the Austrian railways as a member of the executive board. After attaining the *Abitur* in 1935, she taught religious education for two years. She got married, had children, and left paid employment. Her husband worked for the railways as a technician. He was a member of the NSDAP. After the war, she authored three books, novels and short stories.

Margarethe M. characterises herself as a Nazi sympathiser at the time who was married to a long-standing Nazi. She tells Holland that

she only started speaking to her children recently, suggesting her late husband was part of the reason why this had taken so long. She admits how disappointed she was at the end of the war, without going into further detail. But she indicates how much she and her husband had been in favour of National Socialism and the war. Her 'lessons' for younger people indicate a degree of continuity in her thinking as she is longing for more 'respect' for authority.

L.H. But your children came to you with this topic. You said before, one didn't talk about that. That one couldn't or didn't want to speak about it.

M.M. We only started talking about it recently. Only now! My son is already 70 years old. We only recently started talking about it. Everyone speaks more openly now. My husband isn't here any more, because if he was still alive, I believe we still wouldn't be talking about it.

L.H. So, when did the children start to ask questions about it?

M.M. Just now. The other one has been [abroad] for so long. Yes, and now and then, he mentions something, and I explain to him: '[Son], it was different at the beginning, not like you experienced it at the end.' I must always repeat that: we went into it with the greatest confidence and believed that it was now the right thing, and things will get better. But something like that—, we never thought of it. [...] [The other son] can't reconcile it. Our dad! He knew him. For the family, he was very protective and provided well for us. But he always had to have his way. Even now, they can't fully grasp that. I can understand that, because I was there, how trusting one was and how secure one felt. How we admired this person. Revered him! The people who will make things better. A golden age. And then the disappointment. It was terrible. Then everything fell apart. That was terrible. We didn't suffer physically, the way others did, who lost their lives. But it was a crushing disappointment. And a disappointment that one hasn't yet fully processed. I still don't want to join anything, commit myself to anything, because: who knows what's behind it?

L.H. That would be your warning to young people. What you would say to the youth, so that they—

M.M. Don't participate in anything. But that would also be wrong!

L.H. On the one hand, one criticises the young people, because they have too little respect for authority. But on the other hand, one

could say that the error that your generation made back then was that they had too much respect for authority. Because of that they let themselves possibly, how do you put it, be disappointed.

M.M. Yes, yes.

L.H. Is that true?

M.M. It is, of course, the youth today-. I have the impression that everything is too easy for young people today. They are lacking in respect! It's unbelievable, how-. My grandchildren are in high school. How they speak to the teachers now [makes gesture indicating insanity, waving her hand in front of her face]! That's also too much.

L.H. Too much?

M.M. Too much! My impression is it's gone too far the other way.⁴⁶

128. Grudge against parents: 'they didn't immunise me against the poison of Nazism'

Heinz K. (H.K.), born 1926 in Dresden, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 83. The family moved to Pirna in 1934. His father was a senior tax inspector in the civil service and national conservative in his political outlook. Heinz K. attended a *Realgymnasium* (science-focused secondary school) until 1943. He was a member of the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth and he became a youth leader. Following the Reich Labour Service (RAD), Heinz K. was conscripted into the *Wehrmacht* in spring 1944, joining the armoured infantry. Heinz K. first saw action in March 1945 at the Western Front, then in the Fulda/Werra region, serving as a runner. He fled the front close to the end of the war and was captured by US troops. He became a film critic after the war. See also [excerpt 2](#).

Heinz K. resents his parents – an 'apolitical' mother and a 'national conservative' father – for not having 'immunised' him against Nazism, which he fervently believed in at the time. This notion of 'immunisation' was a recurring topic in West Germany especially in relation to preventing a renewed rise of the far right. Of further note is how he owns the figure of the *Zeitzeuge*, the 'contemporary witness', which simultaneously enables proximity and distance, and carries authority by suggesting authenticity. We also see his sense of history being made, of him having been at its centre.

H.K. Although I am, like I said, a *Zeitzeuge* ['contemporary witness'], and was right in the middle of what was going on, for me it's still

remarkable how this National Socialism could cast a spell on an entire people. With very few exceptions. There were hardly any people who really resisted, except for a few communists. And the military resistance came only very, very late with [the] 20 July [1944 assassination attempt against Hitler]. Despite that, the fighting continued to the ruins of Berlin. Hitler Youth boys, 12, 13, 14 years old, fought, and with enthusiasm. One believed in a wonder weapon. [My] youth was very formative in that it was one of the most important times in German history, combined with the astonishment that it was possible. That was also related to something personal. My parents were, let's say–, at least my mother was a housewife, so, apolitical. My father was a finance official and politically–. He had probably voted German Nationalist and was an admirer of Hindenburg. But he was no Nazi. I still know that he, in 1938–, they approached him and asked him if, given his position as a civil servant, he would join the Party. He gave up his reservations. He wrestled with the issue and then, like most people, gave in. What I associate with this time: I always had a very good relationship with my parents. They gave me a happy childhood. But what I hold against them even today is that they didn't immunise me against the poison of Nazism. Against the persecution of the Jews which happened during that time.⁴⁷

129. Afraid to find out more about father's role in 'euthanasia':
'I don't have the courage to pursue that'

Christel W. (C.W.), born 1931 in the Ruhr area, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2010 at the age of 78. Her mother was from a wealthy family, while her father was a teacher of mathematics and biology at a secondary school (*Realschule*). After joining the NSDAP in 1933, his expertise in genetics secured his directorship of the NSDAP Office of Racial Policy. In this capacity, he gave talks about allegedly inherited diseases – for example, to nurses involved in the so-called 'euthanasia' murders. Her father was interned in Fallingbomel from 1946 to 1948. Christel W. studied history after the war and became a *Gymnasium* teacher.

The youngest of the narrators presented in this sourcebook, Christel W. condemns Nazism as a 'great wrong', including its Nazi hereditary health discourse and the 'euthanasia' murders. Despite her moral clarity on these matters, she felt unable to explore the specifics of her father's involvement. In part because she did not want to upset him,

and possibly also because she may have been afraid of what she would find out, which could have risked their relationship.

She argues that her father did his 'penance', through his internment after the war, and by being barred from his profession until 1952. Christel W. never asked her father about his involvement. Instead, she studied history to find out more about the past. Her historical training might have shaped her analysis of her father as a product of his cohort and generation.

C.W. But he had nothing to do with these terrible things that happened then in Auschwitz, and so on. But, as I said, he supported this insane project about a pure 'Aryan' German people! Yes, so obviously [it's] inexplicable, and I fear-, frankly, I don't have the courage to pursue that further. I don't know if anyone else in the family or otherwise is doing that. My father gave lectures about genetics to the so-called '*Braune Schwestern*' [Nazi organisation for nurses; literally, 'brown sisters' due to the brown uniform]. And the so-called '*Braune Schwestern*' – I found out about that only much later – had a lot to do with the question of 'euthanasia'. And what happened in the hospitals in connection with 'euthanasia'. To what extent-, unfortunately I never found one of my father's lectures. After '45, of course, some files were burned. I fear that he had lectured to these '*Braune Schwestern*' on genetics and the basic principles. [...] In any case, after '45, he belonged to the group of people that did penance for it. Not all Nazis did penance. Later, he was also a little bitter, as he noted how several Nazi big shots turned up in other offices after '45 and had a good reputation. My father had not only spent two years under terrible conditions in an internment camp after the war, but he was also demoted and was not allowed [to work] in schools until 1952 and had to work in a cement factory [until then]. [...] And then he had-, after '52 there was a law that denazified him, not as fellow traveller but as lesser offender, although he had been charged-, and could work in the schools again after '52, but not in his position as head of a *Realschule*, rather as a teacher, and only for the first two grades, the six- and seven-year-olds, because it was believed that he could not really influence them. He was allowed to teach again. He developed a kind of heart disease in this situation, and then retired relatively early, in '58. He was 62 years old, and he wasn't feeling at all well back then. We never thought that he would get well, physically,

anyway. Then he lived to be 89. My father never talked to us about how he participated, became guilty. He also would not say that he was guilty. He couldn't say that to us. We never dared to ask him. But he noticed that I taught history very differently. And he also knew that my husband did the same. [...] And that was a very difficult situation in our family until the end of [my father's] life. And that was the same thing in [my husband's] family. My father-in-law was also unable to speak of it.

L.H. Did you never ask questions?

C.W. At the beginning of my university studies, I tried, but [clenches her teeth] I barely dared to.

L.H. Because you didn't want to, or you didn't want to hear [the answers]?

C.W. No, because I didn't want to hurt him. Because I was afraid that he would say things that he didn't want to say. Because if he had wanted to, then he would have spoken to us, wouldn't he? He knew that we learned about, addressed, and researched these things at university. He would have spoken to us of his own accord. But the atmosphere was difficult, no doubt about it. Of course, for more than 18 years my parents were over 80 years old. And we don't like to argue with an elderly person. So, this not being able to speak is something, now with hindsight–, no, I don't blame myself. It wasn't possible. I didn't want to lose my father. He belonged to a generation, think of it, of the nineteenth century, of the empire. He grew up in the German Empire, [clears her throat] fought as a 17-year-old in the First World War, was twice badly wounded in the First World War. He belonged to a generation [...] which didn't have this openness that we have today, that you can shape your own life. He also couldn't tell his parents–, his children, as a father, couldn't say that he was guilty. That didn't work at all! This idea, he thought he would lose us if he admitted to it! A father of the nineteenth century was right! He was always right! But with this, he knew he wasn't right. No question! He also never defended himself. Never! He never defended what he had done. Never. I think that was the problem–, yes, to admit that was simply–. And he had probably even felt that he had paid for it. Which he did, very definitely. [...]

L.H. But if you really wanted to know, then you could have, without telling him about what you had found out, you could have gone to the archives.

C.W. I could have, yes. Yes, of course I could have done that. But I also didn't have that–, how should I put it? To me it was important to pass on what a great wrong it had been.⁴⁸

130. In denial about father's involvement: 'he did nothing'

Maria Ad. (M.Ad.), born 1925 in the Serbian part of the Banat region, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in 2011 at the age of 86. Ethnic German. Her family moved to Belgrade around 1931 and to Vienna in 1944. Her father was a photographer and served in the SS Prinz Eugen Division. Maria Ad. was in the League of German Girls (BDM) and worked for the *Wehrmacht*, helping to 'repatriate' ethnic Germans to Germany. See also [excerpt 87](#).

Similar to Christel W. (see [excerpt 129](#)), Maria Ad. never asked her father about his conduct during the war. Unlike Christel W., in an effort to preserve a positive image of her father, Maria Ad. is unable to contemplate her father's involvement in a division notorious for 'using terror tactics and extreme brutality against civilian populations suspected of harbouring and colluding' with partisans.⁴⁹ Perhaps she does not want to associate her father with her potentially traumatic experience of being forced to march, sing, and bear the flag during the hanging of alleged partisans (see [excerpt 87](#)).

M.Ad. He couldn't do much else, due to his injuries from the First World War. He was a talented photographer and writer. I have no idea what he was documenting. But he was conscripted–

L.H. Conscripted into–

M.Ad. He was!

L.H. And into which division?

M.Ad. Prinz Eugen Division. That's a famous–. Prinz Eugen was a historic figure. He was, I believe, Austrian. It's all so interwoven.

L.H. He didn't join the *Wehrmacht* but–

M.Ad. No, SS. They were the bad ones [laughs]!

L.H. What do you mean?

M.Ad. They were bad. [...]

L.H. Your father, could he choose–

M.Ad. He did nothing.

L.H. That was not my question. But when he was conscripted, did he report to them, or did they choose him? Could he go to the *Wehrmacht* or to the SS?

M.Ad. No. To us he–

- L.H. Who decided that?
- M.Ad. All ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia were conscripted into the Prinz Eugen Division. This division was set up for the ethnic Germans. Because they had to participate somewhere. I was still so young but-. When I read what he wrote-. They had no choice. They simply had no choice. The division was founded for ethnic Germans from Yugoslavia or Hungary. They were also part of it, the ethnic Germans. What exactly do you want to know?
- L.H. Where was your father? Where did he spend the war?
- M.Ad. Nowhere. [...]
- L.H. Where was he during the war?
- M.Ad. He remained in the country with the troops who helped to take everything away. And everyone. The younger ones were sent to the front. But down there, in Yugoslavia. Some of them died.
- L.H. So your father stayed home, or did he have to move out with his comrades of this SS division? Between '41 and '44 you were still in Belgrade, weren't you? Did you see your father during this period, or was he mostly gone?
- M.Ad. He was mostly gone. We got together, but not a lot.
- L.H. Mostly gone or-
- M.Ad. He often came to Belgrade when we were still there.
- L.H. The question is, was he more at home or more gone?
- M.Ad. More gone. He was more gone, but my mother, too. They were still mostly together during the early days.
- L.H. How did that happen that he could take your mother along?
- M.Ad. She was in Pančevo, that's where my father stayed-
- L.H. What was it called?
- M.Ad. Pančevo. That's a town on the Danube. My mother could be with him. But she couldn't join him when he was elsewhere, further away.
- L.H. And in Pančevo?
- M.Ad. He was not a fighter. He couldn't have done that any more. He couldn't have carried [the equipment]. He was after all-
- L.H. Because of the injuries from World War I.
- M.Ad. That too. But he weighed barely 50 kilograms. He was not a strong man.
- L.H. When was he born?
- M.Ad. How old was he when died? He was 74.
- L.H. 1874?
- M.Ad. No. Oh you mean when he was born! 1895.
- L.H. So in '41 he was already 47. Less than 50 years old.

M.Ad. He must have been older.

L.H. You think so?

M.Ad. Let me calculate! '85, er, '95 to '41, so he was close to 50.

L.H. 41 and five years, that's 46 years.

M.Ad. But it took a few years.

L.H. What?

M.Ad. Until we went away from there.

L.H. All I'm saying is: In '41 when the Germans invaded, this 'liberation', your father was 46 years old. When he joined the SS.

M.Ad. I can't calculate that now. But you can!

L.H. That's what it must have been. And your mother was with him?

M.Ad. Yes, she was often with him. The two of us, my sister and I, were in Belgrade and did our work.

L.H. When your father did the work, or the task he had at the time, reports, or—. How did you call it? As a photographer, or what did he do?

M.Ad. When he was gone.

L.H. Yes. Did he document, or—

M.Ad. He was always—. He always knew where we were. That was it. He always knew where we were. We didn't always know where he was. But he never lost sight of us. He always knew where we were, and our mother was often with him.

L.H. But what was his task? What was his job?

M.Ad. I don't know what they photographed and wrote about.

L.H. You said that he wrote everything down for the family. He wrote down his war experiences and the story of his life.

M.Ad. But what he did during this time, what he did then, nothing is mentioned [about that]. The time you talk about.

L.H. This time between '41 and '44. Did you ever ask him? I'm asking because you said earlier 'the bad ones'.

M.Ad. Which bad ones?

L.H. You said the SS were the bad ones. Maybe you meant it ironically.

M.Ad. Oh, you mean the SS! Well, if you know what happened in the war, and know something about the SS in general, not about this division, which wasn't a part of that. [...] Then you'll know what I mean by that.

L.H. I'm not that well informed about the situation in Yugoslavia. Therefore, my question to you: Did you ever ask your father what he did in the war?

M.Ad. No. I never asked him that. What he did while he was with the division. No. In any case they didn't do anything evil.

L.H. Pardon?

M.Ad. They certainly didn't do anything evil.

L.H. But you never asked him, you say.

M.Ad. No.

L.H. And one never asked because—. Why didn't you ask?

M.Ad. Never thought about it. We never thought that there could be any truth to that, when he was away.

L.H. But only because of that, Frau Ad.—. You're very interested in history, you already told me several times [and] I can see that! You are interested in history.

M.Ad. Yes.

L.H. Me too! And when one is interested in history one asks questions.

M.Ad. Yes.

L.H. My question to you is: Why didn't you ask your father more questions?

M.Ad. You know what? At the time I was 16, 17, 18 years old.

L.H. No, I'm talking about the time after the war.

M.Ad. Oh, after the war! No, not after the war. He wrote down everything he knew. What he knew and what happened. What else should we have asked about? No, I know what you mean. But there was nothing to that.

L.H. The question is why one doesn't ask.

M.Ad. Mother always knew. But us kids! She always knew where he was, and she was with him often. He worked in his profession. With photos.

L.H. What did he take photos of?

M.Ad. I don't know [laughs]. I don't know.⁵⁰

131. In defence of *Waffen-SS* honour: 'you insult me'

Oswald O. (O.O.), born 1924 in Belgium, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) over two days in 2012 at the age of 87. His father was active in the Flemish National Movement. Oswald O. was a member of the General Flemish Youth Association (AVNJ). He volunteered at the start of 'Operation Barbarossa' for a Dutch volunteer legion, the *Freiwilligenlegion Flandern*, which was incorporated into the *Waffen-SS*. He became a war correspondent and was wounded three times. He trained in Poland and East Prussia and fought in the East from November 1941. After attending an officer school in Bad Tölz in 1944, he was promoted to the SS rank of second lieutenant and led

a youth company at the end of the war at the Oder. Oswald O. lived in Germany under a false identity for four years but later returned to Belgium and served one year in prison. His father, who had worked for German counter-espionage, died in prison, following a conviction for denouncing partisans. Oswald O. worked for a construction company after his return to Belgium, later in politics, and since retirement he has been engaged in social work. See also [excerpt 55](#).

The following exchange between Holland and Oswald O. is fraught and tense, with Oswald O. appearing defensive. What is notable in particular is the performative nature of this interaction, with Oswald O. expressing his outrage at the suggestion that he served in a criminal organisation even if he and his unit may not have committed any crimes. Aware of the camera and potential future broadcast of the interview, he seems to be addressing not just Holland but also his former comrades, their families, and a broader audience, defending the 'honour' of his unit. Holland is conscious of the cinematic potential of the scene but aims to continue with the interview, oscillating between pressing and pulling back. This interaction highlights that interviews involve more than just the interviewer and interviewee; there is always an actual, imagined, or intended audience.

L.H. You are not ready to accept that you were a member of a criminal organisation, the SS.

O.O. No, no. Absolutely not!

L.H. To this day.

O.O. I reject that completely, yes. I say: [Konrad] Adenauer [Christian Democratic Union, Germany] and Schuman [*sic*; probably means Kurt Schumacher, Social Democratic Party, Germany] declared in public that the *Waffen-SS* were soldiers, like the others [that is, regular *Wehrmacht*]. You can say whatever you like! I'm not going to change my opinion, because it is my honest conviction. Because I went through so much at the front. Because I saw my comrades die at the front, because I lost many comrades. My Flemish comrades who had volunteered to fight. I won't let anyone take away the honour of these young men.

L.H. Is that the reason that you maintain your position, because of the honour of the comrades who lost their lives?

O.O. It's also my honour, isn't it! If it was a criminal organisation, then I too was a criminal. And I'm not a criminal; I never will be and I never was. No. You can talk however much you like. [But] that's taboo!

- L.H. I only ask questions, that is my sole task. Is that a topic you talked about a lot and argued about after the war? Did you have to state this position often?
- O.O. You are the first one who tells me this so openly! I don't accept that. I even feel a bit insulted by it.
- L.H. I'm only asking questions.
- O.O. Yes, yes. But the question is basically an insult for me.
- L.H. I am not here to insult you but to conduct a respectful conversation.
- O.O. Yes, yes, yes.
- L.H. Many people, many scholars, many legal professionals maintain that the SS was a criminal organisation. And you as a member of this organisation—. Whether you were aware of these crimes, that's a different question.
- O.O. But we didn't commit any crimes!
- L.H. You told me a little while ago, half an hour ago or more, that everyone is limited to a small area. One doesn't understand the bigger picture. Only afterwards, after some research, when one is a bit older, an adult, one reflects. That's why I ask—. You joined out of idealism, without wanting to be a criminal. But that doesn't mean, that's no guarantee, that you weren't a member of a criminal organisation.
- O.O. Well, then, I must ask you to stop these questions. You're insulting me. [...] I am outraged that you want to talk to me like that. We weren't criminals, my comrades weren't criminals. And I will, as long as I live, uphold the honour of my comrades. Do you understand? That's my final word! You leave my home now, or we stop. I am deeply insulted, because of your questions, your permanent questions and your persistence. I answered you honestly, and I will always be honest. But I cannot accept this insult from you. I am sorry.⁵¹

132. On guilt: 'complicity began with having gone there'

Karl-Heinz L. (K.L.), born 1921 in Mark Brandenburg, Germany, interviewed by Luke Holland (L.H.) in Berlin, Germany, in 2009 at the age of 88. The son of entrepreneurs attended the *Gymnasium*, was in the *Jungvolk* and the Hitler Youth, and served in the *Wehrmacht* and the SS. He served at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp from 1 April 1938 until 1 March 1939. See also [excerpt 63](#).

The following interaction between Holland and Karl-Heinz L. is also featured in the film *Final Account*. Here, Karl-Heinz L. ultimately

concedes that in his capacity as a guard at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, he was involved in imprisoning people. However, he does not delve into the implications of his thought that complicity turns into guilt, instead reassuring himself and Holland that this is why he 'got out'. Karl-Heinz L.'s stance can be seen as a post-war strategy to represent his past actions amid changed societal expectations. He mentions the Lidice massacre, which was the destruction of a village, and the killing of most of its inhabitants, in what is today the Czech Republic, as a reprisal for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in June 1942.

Karl-Heinz L. also emphasises the necessity of following orders. When asked by Holland if he would have followed an order to kick away the stools of three men at the gallows, as he had observed during the war, Karl-Heinz L. states that he would not have hesitated if ordered. Many veterans claimed after the war that obedience was absolute, which has been contested by the scholarship. It showed that soldiers and SS men had more agency and leeway, within certain limits, than had been suggested. It is important to note that we do not know whether soldiers were aware of this at the time. Their fear of serious consequences may have been real even if the consequences might not have been. Peer pressure also acted as a powerful motivation which is unsurprising given the extent to which soldiers depended on their comrades.

For the most part, Karl-Heinz L. speaks in a passive voice or the plural 'we', implying a lack of personal agency – apart from when he speaks about 'getting out' and in the hypothetical scenario of kicking away a stool.

- L.H. Looking back on the Nazi period, on the 'Third Reich'. Who was a perpetrator at that time?
- K.L. The enemy?
- L.H. No, a perpetrator. Who were the perpetrators back then?
- K.L. Yes, well, in our city, I wouldn't want to say that perpetrators—. No, they became perpetrators in that they accepted everything. They put up with everything.
- L.H. And you, Herr L.? Did you put up with everything?
- K.L. Yes! Yes, it was all—. And as I said: As the first information came in, in dribs and drabs, we said: 'No, that can't be!' We didn't believe it at all about Lidice. That can't be [true], that everyone in a village is murdered. Only because of a single person. That is too sinister. Then it turned out to be true.
- L.H. Do you acknowledge today—. Are you ready to acknowledge that you, as a participant, were also possibly a perpetrator?

- K.L. At the least we are accessories in the perpetration of others. One cannot accuse us of active perpetration. We didn't beat other people or imprison them or otherwise harm them. But we tolerated it.
- L.H. How can you maintain that you didn't imprison another human being? You were, as a guard, a member of the SS Death—
- K.L. A legitimate question! A very legitimate question. That is where complicity starts becoming guilt. It's why I got out.
- L.H. But when does complicity become perpetration?
- K.L. Complicity began with having gone there [Sachsenhausen]! Not having turned around right away. We didn't dare to do that! Yes. Everyone stayed. [...]
- L.H. Previously you described to me, in English and German, how you were present when three men were hanged, and that they kicked the stools out from underneath them. If someone had ordered you, if someone had said to you: 'Kick the stool away.' Would you have done it?
- K.L. Me? I was there.
- L.H. I'm asking you, if an officer had demanded that you—
- K.L. If an officer had ordered me to remove the stool, [then] the stool would have been knocked out of there! Of course. There are other ways to punish shoplifting or something like that. It doesn't have to be something like that.
- L.H. Herr L., thank you for answering my perhaps somewhat difficult questions.
- K.L. I didn't take a single word the wrong way! On the contrary.
- L.H. I'm sure of it. And I look forward to coming again and digging a bit deeper if you will allow me to.
- K.L. [In English] The earlier [*sic*], the better!⁵²

Notes

- 1 Trentmann, *Out of the Darkness*, xxv.
- 2 Stargardt, *The German War*, 7.
- 3 See, for example, Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives*.
- 4 Fulbrook, *Reckonings*, 232. For an overview of Nazi crimes trials in the three successor states, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Has justice been done?', <https://compromised-identities.org/has-justice-been-done> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 5 K.Se. Video Testimony (036M), 15 April 2010. On internment, see Schulte, 'Volksgemeinschaft hinter Stacheldraht'.
- 6 H.M. Video Testimony (053M), 29 November 2010.
- 7 H.F.L. Video Testimony (171M), 27 August 2012.

- 8 Mauthausen Memorial, 'Ebensee Memorial', <https://www.mauthausen-memorial.org/en/Ebensee/The-Concentration-Camp-Ebensee> (accessed 3 November 2024).
- 9 T.K. Video Testimony (086F), 19 March 2011.
- 10 T.K. Video Testimony (086F), 19 March 2011.
- 11 F.Kr. Video Testimony (213M), 20 March 2013.
- 12 R.Be. Video Testimony (010F), 23 July 2009.
- 13 H.Pa. Video Testimony (188M), 10 November 2012.
- 14 K.H. Video Testimony (134M), 25 June 2012.
- 15 D.Ba. Video Testimony (038M), 13 July 2010. On internment, see Schulte, 'Volksgemeinschaft hinter Stacheldraht'.
- 16 V.H. Video Testimony (148M), 7 March 2012.
- 17 M.D. Video Testimony (217M), 10 August 2013.
- 18 K.H. Video Testimony (134M), 25 June 2012.
- 19 K.E. Video Testimony (024M), 15 March 2010. On Jewish slave labour, see, for example, Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis*.
- 20 A.O. Video Testimony (059M), 14 January 2011.
- 21 E.F. & E.M. Video Testimony (124F2), 3 October 2011.
- 22 F.Wi. Video Testimony (138F), 21 February 2012.
- 23 W.A. Video Testimony (100M), 13 May 2011.
- 24 M.Bl. Video Testimony (228F), 9 December 2013.
- 25 K.A.S. Video Testimony (159M), 6 July 2012.
- 26 O.D. Video Testimony (001M), 7 October 2008.
- 27 K.B. Video Testimony (041M), 20 July 2010.
- 28 K.H.R. Video Testimony (051M), 3 November 2010.
- 29 H.H. Video Testimony (172M), 29 August 2012.
- 30 D.H. & L.K. Video Testimony (034F2), 14 April 2010.
- 31 F.S. Video Testimony (058M), 13 January 2011.
- 32 F.S. Video Testimony (058M), 14 September 2011.
- 33 O.D. Video Testimony (001M), 7 October 2008.
- 34 H.W. Video Testimony (013M), 27 July 2009.
- 35 G.Su. Video Testimony (133F), 15 November 2011. For a short clip, see the online exhibition *Compromised Identities? Reflections on perpetration and complicity under Nazism*, 'Film collection', 'Shame about a Nazi past', <https://compromised-identities.org/film-collection> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- 36 R.W. Video Testimony (157F), 4 July 2012.
- 37 G.W. Video Testimony (042M), 21 July 2010.
- 38 J.We. Video Testimony (029M), 18 March 2010.
- 39 L.P. Video Testimony (104M), 20 June 2011.
- 40 D.Ba. Video Testimony (038M), 13 July 2010.
- 41 See, for example, Benkert, 'Complicity on the small screen'.
- 42 F.Kr. Video Testimony (213M), 20 March 2013.
- 43 Römer, *Der Kommissarbefehl*.
- 44 D.B. Video Testimony (006M), 26 March 2009.
- 45 P.S. Video Testimony (040M), 19 July 2010.
- 46 M.M. Video Testimony (081F), 13 March 2011.
- 47 H.K. Video Testimony (048M), 30 October 2010.
- 48 C.W. Video Testimony (017F), 15 February 2010.
- 49 Zakić, *Ethnic Germans and National Socialism in Yugoslavia in World War II*, 210.
- 50 M.Ad. Video Testimony (121F), 19 September 2011.
- 51 O.O. Video Testimony (160M), 19 July 2012.
- 52 K.L. Video Testimony (014M), 21 August 2009.

Appendix: sources

All interviews listed below are part of the collection 'Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies', UCL, Library Services.

'Final Account: Third Reich Testimonies' is an archival project initiated and directed by Luke Holland (ZEF Productions Ltd) in association with UCL, the Wiener Holocaust Library, the Institut national de l'audiovisuel, France (Ina), and founding partners Pears Foundation.

- A.Jo. Video Testimony (212F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 18 March 2013.
- A.O. Video Testimony (059M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 14 January 2011.
- A.P. & G.P. Video Testimony (028MF) interviewed by Luke Holland on 17 March 2010.
- A.Tn. Video Testimony (023F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 12 March 2010.
- A.W. Video Testimony (045M) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 22 July 2010.
- C.W. Video Testimony (017F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 February 2010.
- D.B. Video Testimony (006M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 26 March 2009.
- D.Ba. Video Testimony (038M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 13 July 2010.
- D.H. & L.K. Video Testimony (034F2) interviewed by Luke Holland on 14 April 2010.
- E.B. Video Testimony (008F) interviewed by Luke Holland and Iris Wachsmuth on 21 July 2009.
- E.Ba. Video Testimony (011F) interviewed by Luke Holland and Caroline Goldie on 24 July 2009.
- E.F. & E.M. Video Testimony (124F2) interviewed by Luke Holland on 3 October 2011.
- E.F.J. Video Testimony (158F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 5 July 2012.

- E.J. Video Testimony (049F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 31 October 2010.
- E.K. Video Testimony (117M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 10 August 2011.
- E.S. Video Testimony (199F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 December 2012.
- F.E. Video Testimony (003M) interviewed by Luke Holland and Angela Huemer on 31 October 2008.
- F.K. Video Testimony (076M) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 23 February 2011.
- F.Ka. Video Testimony (216M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 7 August 2013.
- F.Kr. Video Testimony (213M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 20 March 2013.
- F.S. Video Testimony (058M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 13 January & 14 September 2011.
- F.Wi. Video Testimony (138F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 21 February 2012.
- G.Fl., H.V., & W.A. Video Testimony (098M2F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 12 May 2011.
- G.Ho. Video Testimony (021M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 12 March 2010.
- G.N. Video Testimony (019M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 10 March 2010.
- G.Su. Video Testimony (133F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 November 2011.
- G.W. Video Testimony (042M) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 21 July 2010.
- H.B. Video Testimony (022M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 12 March 2010.
- H.F.L. Video Testimony (171M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 27 August 2012.
- H.Fu. Video Testimony (247M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 5 November 2014.
- H.G. Video Testimony (132M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 12 November 2011.
- H.Go. Video Testimony (155M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 2 July 2012.
- H.H. Video Testimony (172M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 29 August 2012.

H.K. Video Testimony (048M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 30 October 2010.

H.La. & N.La. Video Testimony (219FM) interviewed by Luke Holland on 12 August 2013.

H.M. Video Testimony (053M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 29 November 2010.

H.O. Video Testimony (203M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 24 January 2013.

H.P. Video Testimony (072M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 17 February 2011.

H.Pa. Video Testimony (188M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 10 November 2012.

H.Po. Video Testimony (079F) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 25 February 2011.

H.Ro. Video Testimony (092M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 29 March 2011.

H.S. Video Testimony (061M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 January 2011.

H.Sa. & S.Mr. Video Testimony (206MF) interviewed by Luke Holland on 17 March 2013.

H.Sa. Video Testimony (206M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 31 January 2013.

H.Se. Video Testimony (135M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 8 December 2011.

H.Sf. Video Testimony (122M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 30 September 2011.

H.W. Video Testimony (013M) interviewed by Luke Holland and Iris Wachsmuth on 27 July 2009.

H.Wa. & H.C. Video Testimony (239F2) interviewed by Luke Holland on 5 March 2014.

H.Wn. Video Testimony (197M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 26 November 2012.

I.R. Video Testimony (141F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 29 February 2012.

I.Re. Video Testimony (223F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 4 October 2013.

J.L. Video Testimony (142M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 29 February 2012.

J.R. & A.R. Video Testimony (246MF) interviewed by Luke Holland on 21 May 2014.

J.V.B. Video Testimony (208F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 16 February 2013.

J.We. Video Testimony (029M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 18 March 2010.

K.A.S. Video Testimony (159M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 6 July 2012.

K.B. Video Testimony (041M) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 20 July 2010.

K.E. Video Testimony (024M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 March 2010.

K.H. Video Testimony (134M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 25 June 2012.

K.H.R. Video Testimony (051M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 3 November 2010.

K.K. Video Testimony (105M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 22 & 23 June 2011.

K.L. Video Testimony (014M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 21 August 2009.

K.R. Video Testimony (198M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 28 November 2012.

K.S. Video Testimony (032M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 12 April 2010.

K.Sch. Video Testimony (084M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 18 March 2011.

K.Se. Video Testimony (036M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 15 April 2010.

Lu.H. Video Testimony (176F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 18 September 2012.

L.P. Video Testimony (104M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 20 June 2011.

M.Ad. Video Testimony (121F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 19 September 2011.

M.Bl. Video Testimony (228F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 9 December 2013.

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M.U. Video Testimony (067F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 21 January 2011.

O.D. Video Testimony (001M) interviewed by Luke Holland and Caroline Goldie on 7 October 2008.

O.O. Video Testimony (160M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 17 & 19 July 2012.

P.H. Video Testimony (044M) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 22 July 2010.

P.S. Video Testimony (040M) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 19 July 2010.

R.Be. Video Testimony (010F) interviewed by Luke Holland and Iris Wachsmuth on 23 July 2009.

R.M. Video Testimony (015M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 16 December 2009.

R.Ob. Video Testimony (222F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 2 October 2013.

R.Sch. Video Testimony (165M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 19 August 2012.

R.W. Video Testimony (157F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 4 July 2012.

S.D. Video Testimony (012F) interviewed by Luke Holland and Iris Wachsmuth on 27 July & 14 August 2009.

S.F. Video Testimony (156M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 3 July 2012.

T.K. Video Testimony (086F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 19 March 2011.

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U.S. Video Testimony (075F) interviewed by Cornelia Reetz on 23 February 2011.

U.Se. Video Testimony (163F) interviewed by Luke Holland on 17 August 2012.

V.H. Video Testimony (148M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 7 March 2012.

W.A. Video Testimony (100M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 13 May 2011.

W.Pu. Video Testimony (007M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 2 June 2009.

W.S. Video Testimony (170M) interviewed by Luke Holland on 26 August 2012.

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'How do we approach testimonies by those complicit in mass violence in a way that is attuned to the historical context, the passing of time, and the needs of the present? This vital and timely sourcebook offers critical approaches to carefully curated excerpts of Luke Holland's interview collection. It challenges static interpretations of perpetrator narratives, foregrounding agency, memory, and the ethics of testimony. This will be an essential resource for scholars and educators working on Holocaust testimony and oral history.'

Susanne C. Knittel, Utrecht University

Conversations with Third Reich Contemporaries presents a selection of excerpts from a recently opened collection of filmed interviews conducted by British documentary filmmaker Luke Holland (1948–2020). Most of the interviewees were young adults when the war ended. Some of them, or their families, had benefited materially through 'Aryanisation', Party-facilitated careers, or exploiting forced labour. Others had enabled and enacted persecution or perpetrated violence, perhaps in anti-partisan warfare. They all built new lives in the three successor states of West Germany (FRG), East Germany (GDR), and Austria, and dealt with the Nazi past in different ways, including Holocaust denial, attempts at separating their lives from Nazi crimes, and reform.

The role played by 'ordinary Germans' in the 'Third Reich' and the Holocaust continues to stir debate. In the wider context of mass public engagement with the Holocaust and in light of new forms of racism, antisemitism, and prejudice, this compelling sourcebook raises critical awareness of important issues around representation, authenticity, and the co-production of narratives. It attends to the issues of how and by whom knowledge is produced, the contingency of life narratives, performativity, and pedagogy. By suggesting critical questions and providing a reading list, it is an urgent and effective tool for thinking and teaching.

Stefanie Rauch is Head of Collections at the Wiener Holocaust Library and Honorary Research Fellow at the UCL Institute of Advanced Studies.

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