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East Belgians in the *Wehrmacht* and the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, 1940–1945. Biographical Turning Points and Adaptive Stances in the Beck-Peissen Family

1 Historical Context

On 10 May 1940, the German Army invaded Belgium. Within the next few weeks, Nazi Germany annexed the territory of Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith, as well as ten other Belgian municipalities, which had never been part of Prussia. From 1 September 1940 on, German laws were applicable.¹ The inhabitants of this area, whom the Nazis considered to be *Volksdeutsche*, were given German nationality one year later and were henceforth recruited for the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (RAD) and the *Wehrmacht* – as was the case in Luxembourg, Alsace and Moselle.² However, the state of war did not revoke their Belgian nationality, so the inhabitants in fact had two valid nationalities, often without being aware of this.

1 For further context see Martin R. Schärer, *Deutsche Annexionspolitik im Westen: Die Wiedereingliederung Eupen-Malmedys im zweiten [sic] Weltkrieg* (Bern: Herbert Lang/Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1975); Carlo Lejeune, Christoph Brüll and Peter M. Quadflieg (ed.), *Grenzerfahrungen: Eine Geschichte der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens. Vol. 4: Staatenwechsel, Identitätskonflikte, Kriegserfahrungen (1919–1945)* (Eupen: GEV, 2019) and the virtual exhibition *Time Strata: Prospecting an In-Between: East Belgium 1920–2020*, by Philippe Beck, Christoph Brüll, Andreas Fickers and Vitus Sproten, in collaboration with Carlo Lejeune (Belval/Eupen: C²DH/ZOG, 2020), online: timestrata.be (31 August 2023).

2 For further context see Peter Quadflieg, „Zwangssoldaten“ und „Ons Jongen“: *Eupen-Malmedy und Luxemburg als Rekrutierungsgebiet der deutschen Wehrmacht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Aachen: Shaker, 2008); Philippe Beck, Christoph Brüll and Peter M. Quadflieg, „Weltkriege in der Region. Militärdienst und Kriegserfahrungen als Lebenserfahrungen,“ in *Grenzerfahrungen*, ed. Lejeune, Brüll and Quadflieg, 140–169; Frédéric Stroh and Peter M. Quadflieg (ed.), *L'incorporation de force dans les territoires annexés par le IIIe Reich, 1939–1945/Die Zwangsrekrutierung in den vom Dritten Reich annektierten Gebieten, 1939–1945* (Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2016); Nina Barbier, *Malgré-elles: Les Alsaciennes et Mosellanes incorporées de force dans la machine de guerre nazie* (Paris: Tallandier, 2022).

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In 1940, around 86,600 people lived in Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith, with a gender ratio of 50/50.³ During the war, 2,661 men served in the Belgian army,⁴ whereas around 880 volunteered for the *Wehrmacht*, SS or other Nazi organisations. From 1 October 1941 on, approximately 8,000 men were conscripted into the German Army. Between 3,200 and 3,400 of them, i.e. 39%, died or were reported missing.

Resistance was rather low in Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith compared to Alsace, Moselle, Luxembourg or the 10 other Belgian municipalities annexed by Nazi Germany.⁵ Fewer people were refractory to German military service and a smaller proportion of the population joined an actual resistance movement. Historian Carlo Lejeune has suggested there were 430 draft dodgers from Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith, and 624 for the other 10 annexed Belgian municipalities, including Kelmis/La Calamine, where 96 soldiers refused to wear a German uniform.⁶ The number of soldiers from East Belgium who deserted from the German Army over the course of the war is unknown to this date. Based on the available source material, this is hard to verify and needs further investigation.⁷

Several factors explain these numbers. First, it must be noted that the territory had only become part of independent Belgium in 1920, after 105 years of being part of Prussia, which itself had been preceded by a French period of 20 years.⁸ The exacerbated nationalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had left profound marks on many families, where men had fought in the German imperial army in 1870/71 and during the First World War.⁹

3 Schärer, *Deutsche Annexionspolitik* 1974, 86.

4 See Carlo Lejeune, *Die Säuberung*, vol. II: *Hysterie, Wiedereingliederung, Assimilierung* (Büllingen: Lexis Verlag, 2007), 180, and Beck, Brüll, Fickers and Sproten, *Timestrata.be*, <https://zeitschichten.be/en/perspectives/wie-erlebten-die-ostbelgier-den-krieg> (31 August 2023).

5 Frédéric Stroh, “Refus et résistance face à l’incorporation de force à l’Ouest et leur répression: Eupen-Malmedy, Luxembourg, Alsace, Moselle”, in *L’incorporation de force*, ed. Stroh and Quadflieg, 41–60, 47.

6 See Lejeune, *Die Säuberung*, vol. II, 180, and Beck, Brüll, Fickers and Sproten, *Timestrata.be*, <https://zeitschichten.be/en/perspectives/wie-erlebten-die-ostbelgier-den-krieg> (31 August 2023).

7 New insights may be provided by the recently discovered files of the district of Verviers, which retrace the whereabouts of over 5,000 people who disappeared or died. In fact, half of the files concern *Wehrmacht*-soldiers from Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith, some of whom were executed by German forces, because they deserted or were part of a resistance network.

8 Between 1794 and 1815, Eupen, Malmedy and Sankt Vith were districts within the Ourthe Department. Before 1794, these territories had been part of different entities within the Spanish and Austrian Netherlands.

9 After 1920, the memory of the ‘Great War’ was, to some extent, a problem in the area. See Beck, Brüll and Quadflieg, “Weltkriege in der Region”; Max Neumann, *Gestorben für das Vaterland. Die Kriegerdenkmäler des Ersten Weltkriegs in den Kantonen Eupen, Malmedy und Sankt Vith (1918–1940). Zeugen eines Identitätskonflikts* (Brussels: General State Archives, 2017); Philippe

Second, the entire period between the two world wars was deeply marked by tensions between two poles in East Belgium. On the one hand, there were those who contested the so-called ‘public expression of opinion’, which had sealed the cession of the Prussian *Kreise* of Eupen and Malmedy to Belgium. They advocated for a real referendum, and many hoped for a return to Germany. On the other hand, there were the inhabitants who had accepted their fate within the new fatherland for a series of different reasons, whether ideological, political, economic, cultural or personal in nature. Some were deeply disappointed by the aggressive politics of war led by the Empire. Many soldiers had died or come home wounded, shell-shocked, and disillusioned. Some had become proud Belgians. For some people, it was a clear advantage not to be part of a country which had lost the war and was being held responsible for millions of deaths. The majority of the inhabitants of Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith, however, did not choose a “side”; they simply wanted to get on with their lives. If necessary, they took *adaptive stances*, in order to be able to continue their lives without too much trouble.¹⁰

Adaptive stances also dominated the population’s reactions on 10 May 1940. Some fled. Many stayed. Some were arrested. Some died in custody. A significant number cheerfully welcomed the German Army, but many others remained silent observers.

When men and women were conscripted into the RAD and the *Wehrmacht*, few decided to dodge or join the Resistance. In this context, it must be noted that conscientious objectors and resistance fighters were exposed to great danger and had to live hidden underground. Indeed, the *Kriegssonderstrafverordnung* on the *Zersetzung der Wehrmacht* and the Führer’s Decree of 14 April 1940 demanded the death penalty in cases of desertion, and often also for conscientious objection to military service.¹¹ In many cases, Belgian resistance organisations and various networks of priests offered protection.

Beck, *Umstrittenes Grenzland. Selbst- und Fremdbilder bei Josef Ponten und Peter Schmitz, 1918–1940* (Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2013), 157–180; Andreas Fickers, „Gedächtnisopfer: Erinnern und Vergessen in der Vergangenheitspolitik der deutschsprachigen Belgier im 20. Jahrhundert,“ in *zeitenblicke* 3 (2004), Nr. 1.

¹⁰ See also Andreas Fickers and Christoph Brüll, “Ein Experiment kollektiver Gewissensprüfung. Situativer Opportunismus und kumulative Heroisierung”, in *Grenzerfahrungen*, ed. Lejeune, Brüll and Quadflieg, 8–39.

¹¹ See Dieter Knippschild, “Deserteure in der Deutschen Wehrmacht”, in Norbert Haase and Paul Gerhard (ed.), *Die anderen Soldaten. Wehrkraftzersetzung, Gehorsamsverweigerung und Fahnenflucht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), 123–138, here 127–128; Stroh, “Refus et résistance”, 54.

Nevertheless, the proportion of resistance movement members was higher in the ten other annexed municipalities, in Kelmis and also in Malmedy, than in the German-speaking municipalities of the Belgian Eifel and the district of Eupen. Language skills can partly account for this situation, for poor proficiency in French could have easily foiled a flight towards territory in the west.¹²

Many East Belgian *Wehrmacht* soldiers were sent to the Eastern front, mainly out of military ‘necessity’. Following the arrival of allied troops from overseas, September 1944 saw the liberation. With the Battle of the Bulge, however, the war returned to the area of Malmedy and Sankt-Vith. The territory was eventually re-integrated into Belgium at the end of the war theatre in Europe.

2 Methodological Approach

This short overview shows that the period between 1919 and 1945 is a key chapter in the history of East Belgium, which has been the subject of numerous publications and research projects.¹³ Yet the individual perspective, which gives a more personal insight into people’s lives, has not always been given credit.¹⁴ Not until 2017 did academic research take a serious interest in a biographical approach to this period. For volume 4 of the book series *Grenzerfahrungen* (2014–2023), the authors, including the author of the present contribution, decided to delve into their own family histories.¹⁵ From a methodological point of view, historians Andreas Fickers and Christoph Brüll refer to Uwe Schimank’s concept *situativer Opportunismus* (‘situation-based opportunism’)¹⁶ to explain the actions, reactions and non-actions of individuals at certain turning points of history or in their lives. Because of the negative connotations of the word ‘opportunism’ in everyday

12 Stroh, “Refus et résistance”, 48.

13 A critical overview is given by Christoph Brüll and Carlo Lejeune in “Geschichtsschreibung als Spiegel des Zeitgeists. Von der Vereinnahmung der Geschichte zur Europäisierung der Erinnerungskultur,” in *Grenzerfahrungen*, ed. Lejeune, Brüll and Quadflieg, 366–389.

14 Pioneers in the 1980s were journalists Maurice De Wilde (*De Kollaboratie*, BRT, 1985) and Heinrich Toussaint, editor in chief of the newspaper *Grenz-Echo* (*Verlorene Jahre* [Eupen: GEV, 1987]; *Bittere Erfahrungen* [Eupen: GEV, 1988]), who collected individual testimonies. Over the years, several documentary films and theatre plays followed depicting or largely integrating individual war experiences (Dietrich Schubert, *Verzeihen ja, vergessen nie*, 1994 and *Mathi Schenks letzte Reise nach Polen*, 2002; Christoph Bohn, *The Boy’s Gone*, 2012; Serge Demoulin, *Le Carnaval des Ombres*, 2012; Julien Kartheuser, *Backes*, 2024).

15 The stories are presented and contextualised in Brüll and Fickers, “Ein Experiment”.

16 Uwe Schimank, *Die Entscheidungsgesellschaft. Komplexität und Rationalität in der Moderne*, (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), 242–244.

language, we prefer the phrasing *adaptive stances* or *strategies*. The concept can help to explain the different attitudes of many towards the *Wehrmacht* and RAD in the different border areas annexed by Nazi Germany.

Research for the present contribution is based on ego-documents from the author's own family archives. Complementary information was gathered from personal files at the Archives Service for War Victims in Brussels, at the Belgian Armed Forces documentation centre in Evere, at the *Bundesarchiv*, documents kept at CEGESOMA, and at the Resistance Museum in Brussels.

The personal files of the Archives Service for War Victims are a relevant source regarding the case studies of soldiers from East Belgium. These files were created after the war by the Ministry of Reconstruction and later the Ministry of Public Health. They consist of applications by citizens (among them former conscripts, prisoners or remaining family members) to obtain a particular status: as a political prisoner, a resistance fighter, or a person forcefully conscripted into the German army or labour service, to name but a few.¹⁷ Obtaining a verified status was sometimes linked to financial compensation. The files typically contain official documents, testimonies and other elements of proof, which allowed the commissions in charge to evaluate the different requests and to reach a decision. In the case of former soldiers from the German army, the files often include an excerpt from the *Wehrstammrolle* from the *Deutsche Dienststelle* (WASt).

Further useful sources related to the Beck family were the personal military files kept at the Belgian Armed Forces documentation centre in Evere, as well as the archives of the resistance newspaper *Bec et Ongles* kept at CEGESOMA and the Resistance Museum in Brussels. Finally, the German federal archives and the US-National Archives were also contacted.

When the aforementioned editorial group of East Belgian historians decided to analyse their own family histories, they admittedly had rather poor knowledge of their respective ancestors' whereabouts and actions during the war. In most cases, silence had been, for many decades, the key to implicitly maintaining *social peace*. This was also the case within the Beck-Peissen family from Eupen, which will be at the centre of this contribution.

The following section will provide a deeper look into the lives of Matthias Beck (1922–2002) and Hildegard Peissen (1924–2007) with the help of a photo album created by the couple, containing photos of their respective war and RAD experiences between 1941 and 1944. Art historian Petra Bopp and historian Sandra Starke gathered a considerable number of such *Wehrmacht* photo albums, parts of which

17 A critical overview of this source material is given in *Papy, était-il un héros?* dir. Fabrice Maerten (Brussels: Racine, 2018).

were presented in the exhibition *Fremde im Visier* and the accompanying catalogue.¹⁸ Cultural studies scholar Helmut Lethen's reflections in his contribution about the transfer of private photographs from an album into a public space were also of interest. Anke Kramer and Annegret Pelz's *Album. Organisationsform narrativer Kohärenz* and Martha Langford's *Suspended Conversations. The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* were helpful to give a general context. Finally, delving into family memory also bears important sociological aspects, which have been the focus of Harald Welzer's and his colleagues' studies, and which will be referred to later.¹⁹

3 The Photo Album *Unsere Dienstzeit*

3.1 General Context

It was common for recruits of the *Wehrmacht* and the RAD to create a photo album or diary documenting their time of service. Such albums are collections of personal memories, which in their organisation also helped to construct meaning.²⁰ They are, as Petra Bopp states, "individually constructed spaces of memory for an entire generation". Even though "memories are incomplete and always historically inaccurate, [. . .] they reveal the visual testimonies of a generation, their view of the war, their mentality, and the way they lived."²¹

The album presented below is one such example, with at least two singularities: (1) it combines in one album photos from a couple, which (2) came from an annexed border territory. We shall see below to what extent it fits into the general collection of albums analysed by Bopp, and in which other aspects, apart from the two singularities just mentioned, it stands out.

18 Petra Bopp, *Fremde im Visier – Fotoalben aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Bielefeld: Kerberverlag, 2012 [2nd ed.]).

19 Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller and Karoline Tschuggnall, „Opa war kein Nazi“. *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2021 [10th ed.]); Harald Welzer (ed.), *Der Krieg der Erinnerung: Holocaust, Kollaboration und Widerstand im europäischen Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2007).

20 Anke Kramer and Annegret Pelz (eds.), *Album. Organisationsform narrativer Kohärenz* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013); Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations. The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Quenn's University Press, 2021).

21 Bopp, *Fremde im Visier*, 10.

3.2 History of the Album and Family Background

The album was created by the couple Matthias Beck and Hildegard Peissen at the end of the war, or shortly after it had ended. Both came from parents who adopted a critical stance towards National Socialism and had a positive attitude towards Belgium. Nonetheless, both children accepted their recruitment into the *Wehrmacht* and the RAD. What was their scope of action? Did they take an adaptive stance?

Matthias was 18 years old when his hometown was annexed by Nazi Germany. One year later, he was among the first East Belgians to be recruited by the *Wehrmacht*, as the photo album documents. As a member of an anti-aircraft unit, he was sent to the Eastern front, and in 1944 to Normandy, where he deserted. He eventually managed to join his parents, who had fled to Brussels. These are the elements of Matthias' war time story that were published in 1982 by local historian Guillaume Massenaux, in a short text about Nikolaus Beck.²² His wartime experiences will be further analysed below in relation to the photo album.

Matthias was the only child of Maria Breuer (1895–1971) and Nikolaus Beck (1896–1966). His father had been a German soldier in the First World War²³ before becoming a Belgian citizen in January 1920 under the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. From this moment on, he started working for the city administration.²⁴ In the 1930s, Nikolaus and his wife sent their son, Matthias, to school in Dolhain and Verviers, so that he could improve his second language skills. The parents hoped that a high degree of proficiency in French would open up better job opportunities. It is not known whether they also had any ideological reasons for this choice.

In 1938, Nikolaus Beck joined the newly founded party *Demokratischer Heimatblock*, whose programmatic goal was to “unite the ‘true’ *Heimat* loyalists,” as the *Grenz-Echo* reported.²⁵ This referred to the citizens who stood up “for a peaceful development of [their] *Heimat* under the present state regime and for the most diligent cultivation of [their] inherited culture”. In this sense, the party stood for the safeguarding of German culture and language in Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith, but openly positioned itself against the *Heimattreue Front*, which was

²² Guillaume Massenaux, *La résistance à Baelen et Membach: 2 des 10 communes illégalement annexées pendant la guerre 40–45: les réfractaires à la Wehrmacht* (Baelen: Administration communale de Baelen, 1982), 27.

²³ Massenaux, *Résistance*, 27. Massenaux mentions that Nikolaus Beck was “*invalide*”, which means that he must have been injured. However, no further information regarding his First World War experience is known.

²⁴ “Botenmeister Nikolaus Beck tritt in den Ruhestand”, in *Grenz-Echo*, 1 June 1961, 3.

²⁵ “Ein Demokratischer Heimatblock”, in *Grenz-Echo*, 10 December 1938, 2.

supported by the NSDAP and fought for a return of the territory to Germany. In March 1939, after a close election result (*DH*: 3,723 votes; *HF*: 3,922 votes, out of a total of 8,925 votes), both parties had to work together within the city council. As this project became difficult, the *DH* addressed a letter to the mayor, repeating its desire for a peaceful and “brotherly” collaboration of citizens for the sake of the *Heimat*, no matter which party they belonged to.²⁶

Following the annexation of the border region by National Socialist Germany in May 1940, Nikolaus Beck resigned from his position at the municipality. As a consequence, the family had to give up their council flat opposite the town hall. After a spell in Welkenraedt, the couple decided to move to Brussels, where Nikolaus worked at the Ministry of the Interior.²⁷ According to various testimonies in his personal file at the Archives Service for War Victims, he was recruited by a colleague in January 1942 for a resistance group, whose monthly underground journal *Bec et Ongles* he then secretly printed in his office and helped to distribute until the liberation in September 1944.²⁸ The editors confirm in the final issue that the journal was printed inside the Ministry.²⁹ Within that issue, it is also revealed that a collaborator handed over stolen copies of the periodical to the Gestapo: “The most serious alarm was caused by the handing over to the Gestapo of several issues stolen from the post office by a sinister Rexist. Moreover, this traitor had announced that he knew where the ‘stuff’ came from.”³⁰ This may explain the anecdote told by Nikolaus Beck and published by Massenaux: one day, his of-

26 State Archives in Eupen, inventory Stadt Eupen Neuzeit, classification number 22/17/8, letter of the *Demokratische Heimatblock* to the mayor, 29 March 1939, signed by. H. Cormann, R. Weisshaupt, J. Bartholemy, K. Weiss, E. Schlembach, A. Michel.

27 “Botenmeister Nikolaus Beck”.

28 Archives Service for War Victims [ASWV], PC608609/348, III-Enquête, personal file Nikolaus Beck (born 31/05/1896 in Eupen) to obtain the status of “*Résistant par la Presse Clandestine*”; *Bec et Ongles*, n° 30, September 1944 (“*Numéro d’adieu*”), 3, available online: <https://warpress.cegesoma.be/fr/node/40115> (31 August 2023). As his personal file of “*Résistant par la Presse Clandestine*” indicates, he was part of a consistent resistance network. His close collaborators were: Lt. Josef Otten (Welkenraedt, founder and editor in chief of *Bec et Ongles*, who worked at the Ministry of the Interior 1940–1944); Martin Gilles (clerk in the Ministry’s office, where the paper was printed); Jacques Wasteels (Ministry, member of the *Armée Secrète*); Joseph Neumann (Eupen, „membre de la [sic] S.R.A.“ [= Service de Renseignements et d’Action, ‘Intelligence Service’]); and Rodolphe Luts (Eupen, Municipal secretary, worked 1940–1945 for the governor of the Province of Brabant in Brussels) (Source: ASWV, PC608609/348). Further research revealed that Jean Joseph Otten was adjutant of the “Janvier” intelligence service and Joseph Neumann a member of the intelligence service “Luc-Marc”, see *Memorial volume intelligence and action agents*, ed. Roger Baron Coeckelbergs et al. (Antwerpen: Apeldoorn/Maklu, 2015), 656 and 665.

29 *Bec et Ongles*, n° 30, 3.

30 *Bec et Ongles*, n° 30, 3.

fice was surprisingly inspected by Flemish collaborators. He yelled at them in German with a commanding tone: “What do you want?” Taken aback, the ‘black’ inspectors asked no further questions and withdrew.³¹

In August 2023, their granddaughter Irmgard shared with the author the memory that the couple had had “a good life” in Brussels.³² They were not alone, for they had fled along with other people from Eupen, among them the former mayor Hugo Zimmermann. Her grandmother enjoyed reading Flemish magazines, such as *Het rijk van de vrouw* (“The domain of the woman”), which contained recipes and household tips, and she even continued her subscription when they returned to Eupen after the war. Her husband was then offered a better position, due to his resistance activity. However, he refused, asking for a decent position for his son in exchange, who then became a registrar at the municipality of Eupen, where he remained in service until his retirement.³³

Hildegard Peissen was 15 years old when German troops invaded Belgium. Her father Heinrich (1887–1948) was a plumber and died shortly after the war, leaving behind a wife and three children. According to family memory, he was also known for his critical stance towards National Socialism.³⁴ This regularly caused conflicts with his German brother-in-law, Martin Zillessen from Erkelenz. When Zillessen came to visit his relatives in Eupen and saluted “*Heil Hitler!*”, Heinrich Peissen deliberately replied “*Guten Tach!*”. He took pleasure in provoking the committed National Socialist: he bought himself a Jewish hat, which he put on during another visit, in order to annoy his brother-in-law. Later, Heinrich Peissen kept a small suitcase ready at the back window, so that he could escape as quickly as possible in case of emergency. He feared denunciation (by his brother-in-law or by others) because of his resolutely anti-Nazi stance. Another explanation for his increasingly cautious behaviour may be that he feared being recruited by the *Wehrmacht*. In fact, he had been examined in September 1943 for military service. However, on 15 April 1944 he was deemed “unfit for service”.³⁵

On the basis of this story, handed down orally, we may assume that Heinrich Peissen did not appreciate his 18-year-old daughter leaving for forced labour on 30 April 1943. Like many other young men and women, it was the first time that

³¹ Massenaux, *Résistance*, 27.

³² Zentrum für Ostbelgische Geschichte [ZOG], AZS – 021, Interview with Irmgard Wintgens-Beck (born 1946) conducted by Philippe Beck on 29 August 2023.

³³ Memory shared by Irmgard Wintgens-Beck in 2007 and written down in Philippe Beck, “Beck-Peissen” (Brussels/Eupen, 2017–2023), unpublished document.

³⁴ The following story has been told several times by his granddaughter Irmgard Wintgens-Beck and written down in Beck, “Beck-Peissen”. It was shared again in ZOG, AZS – 021.

³⁵ ASWV, d48984, personal file Heinrich Peissen (born 12th December 1887).

she left home. For their *Pflichtjahr* ('compulsory year'), the women were generally transferred to remote areas of the "*Reich*". Their experiences were multifarious: "Some were thrilled by the experience of being far away. Others had a hard time. Some had fanatical National Socialists as superiors. Others had surprisingly humane encounters."³⁶ For others still, this was a welcome adventure, which they enjoyed. But Hildegard Peissen was not the adventurous type.

The photo album was at first kept in a drawer with other family photos. Daughter Irmgard remembered in an interview with the author that she must have first seen it as a teenager.³⁷ However, she did not remember her parents commenting on the photos. At a later moment, the album was transferred to the attic, where the grandchildren discovered it as late as 2007.

3.3 Family Narrative and Positionality of the Author

Beyond the family background, it is relevant, from a sociological point of view, to consider the family narrative as it has been shared over the generations, and as pointed out in the critical study, "*Opa war kein Nazi*".³⁸

All remaining family members agree that there was hardly any "conversational remembering"³⁹ as such. Regarding Matthias' war experience, two aspects have been handed down to the children and grandchildren: Everyone remembers the scar on his head and the story of his desertion in Normandy. Several grandchildren remember their grandfather showing them the scar, the result of a piece of shrapnel which had pierced his helmet. The story of his desertion, which his daughter Irmgard had long known of, was told to the author as late as 2007 by Hildegard, five years after her husband's passing. She said that he had kept his Belgian identity card with him,⁴⁰ which had worried her a lot at the time. She remembered that she was afraid he might get into trouble for this. According to her, as he was fluent in French, he was asked by his superior to go looking for food. One day he did not return to his unit. He had deserted and found sanctuary in a convent, where he did some gardening for two months. He was eventually able to return home with the help of Belgian troops. She finished the story from

36 "New duties as citizen of the Reich" in Beck, Brüll, Fickers, Sproten, *Zeitschichten*, <https://zeitschichten.be/en/perspectives/wie-erlebten-die-ostbelgier-den-krieg> (31 August 2023).

37 ZOG, AZS-021.

38 Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall, "*Opa war kein Nazi*".

39 Compare Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall, "*Opa war kein Nazi*", 18.

40 He was not the only East Belgian to do so. See e.g. the story of Jakob Bosch in Heinrich Tous-saint, *Verlorene Jahre* (Eupen: GEV, 1987), 75–79.

her perspective as a fiancée waiting at home: “On 17 September [1944], the day of Saint Hildegard, the bell rang. I went to open the door, and there he was. At first, I did not recognise him. He had gained weight. When he told me his story, he said that the nuns had fed him well: ‘When I asked for a second beef steak, they gave me one.’”⁴¹

In the interview conducted in 2023, Matthias’ daughter stressed that his desertion had been a “very brave” act.⁴² But she also shared a third aspect of his war story, which had not been handed down to the grandchildren: “He has seen some of his comrades practically torn to shreds on the battlefield,” which had had a traumatic impact on him.

Regarding Hildegard’s RAD experience, most family members remember her mentioning that she had to go east for a year of forced labour, that leaving home had been difficult for her, and that she had broken her arm. The RAD had always remained a traumatic memory: “As a young girl I had to go far away into a foreign country all alone! No, my boy, this was not fun . . .”⁴³

Memories concerning the Second World War have not been prevalent within the Beck-Peissen family. In the eyes of the five grandchildren, the image of their grandparents for this period contains just the few elements mentioned. Conversations about this period were very scarce, and the photo album was never discussed before the deaths of their grandparents. Compared to the German families interviewed by Harald Welzer and his colleagues for their study “*Opa war kein Nazi*”, the Beck-Peissen family narrative is much thinner. Yet, the comparison has its limits because that study focuses on selected stories linked to the memory of the Holocaust and its actors – aspects, which are absent from the Beck-Peissen family. Hence, it is not surprising that this East Belgian couple has not been the object of “cumulative heroism”, as is the case for many German grandparents in the above-mentioned study.⁴⁴

Regarding “outside triggers” mentioned in the same study,⁴⁵ i.e. books or films which may have influenced the plot of the family narrative, it must be said that none of the grandchildren recalls any war literature or films their grandparents were interested in. Only daughter Irmgard remembers two films from 1959: *So weit die Füße tragen*, a six-part television film based on the novel of the same name by Josef Martin Bauer about a German prisoner of war who escapes from

⁴¹ Beck, “Beck–Peissen”.

⁴² ZOG, AZS-021.

⁴³ Beck, “Beck-Peissen”.

⁴⁴ See also Harald Welzer and Claudia Lenz, „Opa in Europa: Erste Befunde einer vergleichenden Tradierungsforschung“, in Welzer (ed.), *Krieg der Erinnerung*, 7–40, here 34.

⁴⁵ Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall, „*Opa war kein Nazi*“, 105–110.

an East Siberian prison camp after the war, and *Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben*, based on the eponymous novel by Fritz Wöss, which focuses on the Battle of Stalingrad. It is worth noting that the latter focusses on the German soldiers of the 6th Army as victims and that it contains critical stances towards the war in general. But it can also be viewed as a depiction of the “innocent *Wehrmacht*”-myth and as an example of a “seduction narrative”, according to which “the Germans were seduced and betrayed by Hitler and his elite”.⁴⁶ In any case, scenes like those of the railway track demolitions by partisans, of heavy bombings or of severely wounded comrades must have echoed Matthias’ experience. However, it is not known how he perceived the film. We can only say that the few elements of his story as it has been handed down have been confirmed by the archive material. In this case, the war experience was not interpreted in the light of fiction.

Nevertheless, the oral family story can be labelled as a “victim/hero narrative”: Matthias Beck and Hildegard Peissen were both recruited against their will and injured during their service, and Matthias eventually deserted. Since this paper deals with the author’s own grandparents and since the (unconscious) “loyalty ties” within a family can be very strong,⁴⁷ we shall pay particular attention to aspects which might challenge this narrative. Analysing this photo album, which was obviously destined for personal use only within the family or between the couple themselves, might *render visible* as yet unknown aspects of the war on the Eastern front, in a similar way as the private photos that were made public in the framework of the *Wehrmacht*-exhibition did. Here, they are taken out of the *family frame* (Marianne Hirsch).⁴⁸

3.4 Presentation and Visual Analysis

The Beck-Peissens compiled an album themselves, instead of purchasing one of the types that were sold in stores, often displaying NS insignia on the cover and containing a quote by Hitler, Göring or some other Nazi personality on one of the first pages. The reasons for this were presumably both ideological and financial. Also, it did not contain a handwritten *Führereid*, added by many soldiers.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ See Michael Elm, “The Making of Holocaust Trauma in German Memory: Some Reflection about Robert Thalheim’s Film ‘And Along Come Tourists’”, in Haim Fireberg and Olaf Glöckner (eds.), *Being Jewish in 21st-Century Germany* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2015), 33.

⁴⁷ Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall, „Opa war kein Nazi“, 64.

⁴⁸ Helmut Lethen, “Schrecken und Schatten des *family frame* in Brieftaschen, privaten Sammlungen und öffentlichen Ausstellungen”, in Kramer and Pelz (eds.), *Album*, 156–167, here 158.

⁴⁹ Compare Bopp, *Fremde im Visier*, 29, 36–39.

Their photo album is entirely handmade, 26 x 16 cm, totalling 36 pages with 118 small photos, most of which are standardised 9 x 6 cm in size. Only three are post-card-sized (p. 1 and p. 27). All photos can clearly be dated to between October 1941 and the summer of 1944.



Picture 1: Cover of the photo album “Unsere Dienstzeit”.

Hildegard Peissen created the album from scratch. The cardboard cover is wrapped in black cloth, the title embroidered in red: *Unsere Dienstzeit* (‘Our period of service’) (Picture 1). The same red thread was used for the binding. The inside consists of thin paper; coloured threads are sewn around the borders of every page, each of which contains several photos. Some of these are accompanied by a short comment or description (sometimes covered by the picture itself). Some photos have a caption at the back, which has been taken over or adapted in the album. The latter were written by both Matthias and Hildegard, as comments in the first person and slightly different handwritings in each part of the album indicate. From this we may conclude that the couple compiled the album together.

The first and larger part of the album is dedicated to Matthias’ military service in the German army. Presumably, several soldiers took pictures and shared them among comrades afterwards. This is evidenced by the fact that various kinds of photo paper and black and white tints are visible, and the fact that Matthias is himself depicted in most of the photos.

The first photo shows Matthias Beck wearing a *Luftwaffe* uniform, as the flying eagle patch on his chest indicates (Picture 2). Indeed, he was part of an aircraft defence unit. The rear indicates: “Am 1. Oktober 1941 wurde ich Soldat.” (‘I became a soldier on 1 October 1941.’). This means that he was among the first conscripts from Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith. By decree of the Reich Ministry of the



Picture 2: Album page 1.

Interior of 23 September 1941, the inhabitants of the annexed region had been granted German citizenship, and one of the immediate consequences of this was the conscription into the RAD and the *Wehrmacht*.⁵⁰

The second photo depicts Matthias Beck with a friend from his hometown. On the next page we see a group photo of his unit, taken on their ‘first day of leave’ (*Erster Ausgang!*) (Picture 3). The next images show the soldiers exercising in Lübeck. We see anti-aircraft-guns, soldiers digging trenches, as well as landscapes and moments of spare time and relaxation. These pages, depicting the soldiers’ everyday lives, are typical of such albums.⁵¹



Picture 3: Album pages 2–3.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Beck, Brüll, Quadflieg, “Weltkriege”, 140–169.

⁵¹ See Bopp, *Fremde im Visier*, 33.



Picture 4: Album pages 6–7.

The following pages show Matthias and other soldiers in pyjamas near the Nien-dorf hospital, “*Kurz nach der Genesung*” (‘shortly after recovery’), where some had a visit from their comrades and enjoyed free time at the beach (Picture 4). Everyone seems to be in a good mood in the photos, suggesting that their injuries or illnesses had not been too serious.

Occasionally, the soldiers would go for a photo shoot with a professional photographer, as the quality and setting of certain pictures clearly reveal. Prints of these photos were sometimes sent back home to the family, or to friends, creating “a bridge between front and *Heimat*”,⁵² just as letters and books did. But they were also of interest to create personal visual memories.

When Matthias Beck returned to his unit in the winter of 1943, he was sent east, as the handwritten captions reveal (e.g. “*Polotzk [today Belarus] im Winter 1943*”, see Picture 5). The photos suggest a difficult and probably tiresome journey through mud and snow. At some point, the soldiers dug trenches and disrupted electrical cables and lines of communication (the caption reads “*Leitungsstörung*”).

They were fulfilling their duty as German soldiers. We also see one result of their activities as an anti-aircraft-unit: a shot-down Douglas-Boston, with the soldiers posing on the plane wreck (Picture 6). Other photos and comments indicate that they were on the lookout for partisans (Picture 8). These photos will be analysed more closely below.

In between these photos of warfare, other pictures give insights into the soldiers’ free time: when the weather was good, they took a swim in the river Dniester,⁵³ went on a motorbike tour, or visited a cemetery of honour.

⁵² Bopp, *Fremde im Visier*, 17.

⁵³ The album indicates “Dnjester”. However, the Dniester does not run through Belarus. The river may well be the Dnieper.



Picture 5: Album pages 14–15.



Picture 6: Album pages 18–19.



Picture 7: Album pages 16–17.

Some photos are of interest because they are traces of the soldiers' encounters with the local population, i.e. with people from a culture and language unknown to them (Picture 7). The corresponding handwritten comments are testimonies of the soldiers' integration of foreign words into their native language: The young women are labelled as "*Panjenkas*", a word meaning "Miss" (used by Germans at the time, though more often with the meaning "girl"). It was of course a typical and easy word to be picked up by the German soldiers.⁵⁴ The caption for a photo of a woman with a headscarf reads: "Eine holde Fee aus Russlands-Steppe [*sic*]", 'A lovely fairy from Russia's steppes'.

One picture shows a young boy, who is labelled in the caption as "*Ein kleiner Iwan!*". "Iwan" was a typical Russian first name commonly used by Germans to designate Russians.⁵⁵ It did not necessarily have a negative connotation, even in the general context of war. In specific cases though, it could be used derogatively to designate the Russian "enemy". As Katherina Filips emphasises: "In some instances, the same word assumed a new importance and took on a new emotional if not lexical significance, depending on the circumstances." Words are always bound to their context. In this case, it is unlikely that a young boy was viewed by the photographer or the creators of the photo album as an enemy. Moreover, the back side of the picture says: "*Was hältst Du von diesem kleinen Stromer? Ich finde ihn reizend*", 'What do you think of this little toddler? I think he's lovely'.

It should be mentioned that the soldiers generally had only stereotypical knowledge of the people they encountered, and they were confronted with a rural lifestyle that seemed 'poor' and 'primitive' to them.⁵⁶ Moreover, Nazi propaganda presented Russians as a 'primitive' and 'uncivilised race'. From the photos and their comments, it is not possible to conclude if the soldiers from this particular FLAK-unit viewed the local population in such terms.

In comparison to other albums analysed by Bopp, we can note that the depictions of Russian village life in the album do not contain any explicitly derogative elements or cynical comments.⁵⁷ Matthias seems to have met the local population with a certain "ethnographic" curiosity. There are no traces of racism, anti-Semitism, or feelings of superiority.

54 Katherina Filips, "Typical Russian Words in German War-Memoir Literature" in *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Winter 1964), 407–414, 409.

55 Filips, "Russian Words", 412.

56 See Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2009), 127–128.

57 See Bopp, *Fremde im Visier*, 69–94.

Other photos and their comments give insight into the perception of manhood at this time: it was important for a man to become a soldier, to wear a uniform, to work and not to complain about the difficulties encountered. Hence, they look proud in their uniforms, doing hard physical work. Men who tried to escape military service were often considered to not be “real men”, as cowards, no matter what personal or ideological motives drove them to escape. The photos also convey a sense of adventure linked to the last stage of coming-of-age. Most of these young men were leaving their homes for the first time, and discovered new territories and cultures.

The slightly humorous tone perceived in some comments was something Matthias Beck was known for within the family and among friends and colleagues. A good example is the comment below the last picture of the first part of the album, a postcard of the *Maison du Sacré Cœur* in Deauville, Normandy (Picture 8):



Picture 8: Album pages 26–27.

“Hier war ich zwei Monate versteckt nachdem ich mich in Frankreich dünn gemacht habe” (‘Here I was in hiding for two months after I silently escaped in France’), the caption reads. This is the only page that refers to his desertion, which will be discussed in detail below.

What follows are three photos of the young couple as fiancés (Picture 9). They were taken in front of Hildegard’s father’s shop on Bergstraße 46 (named Adolf-Hitler-Straße at that time) and at the viewing platform *Moorenhöhe* in Eupen. The gorget patches on Matthias’ uniform indicate that these photos were taken before the photos on the previous pages;⁵⁸ they thus disrupt the chronology (probably) respected so far. The photos of the young couple were placed here to create a link between the two parts of the album.

58 See *Handbook on German Army Identification* (Washington: War Department, 1943), 38.



Picture 9: Album pages 28–29.

The second part of the album is dedicated to Hildegard Peissen's experience as a "maid" of the RAD. The first photos show the camp of Grodden (Grodziczno, south of Gdansk) and a portrait of her 'After eight days', in which she wears the RAD-brooch (Picture 9). The following photos depict the obligatory flagpole, the *Lagerführerin* and the other *Arbeitsmädchen*.



Picture 10: Album pages 32–33.

Gardening and water pumping were clearly the main tasks of the group of women working there (Picture 10). The RAD service also included so-called *Außendienst* ('field service'), which Hildegard completed serving on a large farm in Löbau (Saxony). The last photo documents a broken arm, probably due to a work accident (Picture 11).

These last pages contrast with most of the other albums that Bopp analysed. She observed that "[t]he individuality of the war narratives and the personal fates often become manifest on the last album pages. Death, injury or imprisonment bring the

pictures to an abrupt end, leaving empty pages. The group picture with the family symbolises the return home; photos of reunions with comrades prolong the war album into the 1950s.⁵⁹

It is not known whether Hildegard's broken arm put an end to her RAD service. In Matthias's case, his desertion – something barely mentioned in other albums – and the postcard of his hiding place mark the end of his photographic memories. The reunion photos of the couple chronologically precede his desertion. There are none at the end, which might indicate that they considered their times of service as a thing of the past. There are no photos of reunions with comrades, either. These most likely did not take place, due to the particular situation in East Belgium, where returning *Wehrmacht* soldiers had to face different forms of purges, and often imprisonment.⁶⁰ Finally, there are no empty pages. Paper was expensive after the war, and the couple had most likely calculated the number of sheets for the album.



Picture 11: Album page 36.

3.5 The Photo Album as a Historical Source

As with any other source material, these photos must be critically reviewed.⁶¹ First of all, within an external source criticism, the following questions must be asked for each photo:

⁵⁹ Bopp, *Fremde im Visier*, 11. My translation.

⁶⁰ See Lejeune, *Die Säuberung*.

⁶¹ The following questions have been expanded on from the base delivered by Benoît Majerus, "L'utilisation de la Photographie dans la Wehrmachtsausstellung: Rendez-vous Manqué entre l'histoire et la Photographie", in *CHTP-BEG*, n°8 (2001), 367–384, here 371

- Is it an original print?
- Is it an unaltered print from the original negative?
- Who was the photographer?
- Where was the photo taken?
- Is the caption contemporary?
- Who has been keeping the photo?

Within the internal source criticism, we need to answer the following questions:

- What do we see in the photo?
- For what reason was the photo taken?
- Were the people depicted aware of being photographed?
- Does it convey a message intended by the photographer?
- Is the photo objective?

In the present case, we may assume that most photos contained in the album are original and unaltered prints from the negatives. In fact, the small size, the quality of the photos, and the context of the shots all indicate that most of the photos were taken with a small and easy-to-use camera, and that no enlarger was used for the prints. As mentioned above, the various soldiers and RAD women were probably the authors, and exchanged prints afterwards. There are two exceptions: the settings of a few photos (on pages 1, 11, 29 and 31) indicate that they were very likely taken in a photo studio, whereas the photo of the *Sacré Cœur* convent (Picture 8) is a postcard (the front side mentions Edition G. Petitpierre, Trouville). It was probably either bought by Matthias or given to him. Having deserted, it is only logical that he did not take a photo of his place of hiding.

The two photos showing the FLAK-unit posing on the plane wreck (Picture 6) seem to have been cropped. They are the only ones without white borders, and their edges are uneven, indicating cutting. Were these photos only cropped to “zoom in” on the soldiers depicted? Or was there something to hide? Or were the borders just slightly cut, so that the photos could fit into the album (or into a wallet, before they ended up in the album)? There is no answer to these questions.

The different shooting locations are generally mentioned in the handwritten captions, which were added when the album was compiled. In most cases, they were copied from the notifications on the backs of the photos, which were probably added shortly after the prints were received from the corresponding soldiers or RAD maids. One photo (Picture 2) contains an imprint with the name of a photo studio in Eupen. The very first photo (Picture 2) has two comments on the rear, written with two different pens. One comment indicates that the photo was first (meant to be) sent to a friend: “*Zur Erinnerung an meine Dienstzeit / Dein Freund Mathieu Beck*”, ‘In memory of my military service / Your friend Mathieu

Beck'. Matthias eventually did not send the photo, or retrieved it later adding a message now destined to himself and his family: "*Ich wurde Soldat am 1. Okt. 1941*", 'I became a soldier on 1 Oct. 1941'.

A description of the photos has already been provided in the previous section. At this point, it should be added that most pictures were staged: the people depicted pose, or are at least aware of being photographed. The aim of these photos was to create memories. They were primarily intended for the soldiers and RAD women who shot them and for their family, friends and comrades, to whom they sent some of them. They contained the implicit message that they were alive and well, and, moreover, indicated or explicitly revealed their whereabouts. In this sense, they also had the purpose of documenting this period of their lives. As for the album as a whole, it was primarily intended for the creators themselves. They might have shared it with their parents, and possibly select friends and former comrades, but not with their grandchildren, as mentioned above. It was kept in the Beck-Peissen's home until 2007, after which it became part of the private archive of Irmgard Wintgens-Beck.

The question of whether the photos are "objective" requires further discussion, because taking, developing, printing, displaying and archiving photos all imply various selection processes. A photo is not simply or necessarily a reflection of reality, although it always shows a "fragment of truth", as Siegfried Kracauer once put it. It shows something that was in front of the photographer's lens at some point. One of the main purposes of photography is to document reality and life, and to attract attention to things that are hardly (consciously) visible or difficult to access for the general public.⁶² In this sense, a photo generally draws attention to the elements depicted. Yet, each photograph shows only what is contained in the frame, i.e. what the photographer decided to frame at a given moment in time. This is a *first selection*. It is, in fact, a double selection, for the photographer also decides on the exact moment that will be captured. A *second selection* is operated when the film is developed: not all films are eventually processed. Many are forgotten or lost, some are damaged and involuntarily exposed to light. The printing process is linked to a *third selection*: not all photos are printed, and some are printed several times, in some cases with (slight or major) alterations. The persons archiving the photos make a *fourth selection*, for they might, for various reasons, not keep all the photos that were on the film. They might leave some out, and add others from other sources (friends, comrades) – which was obviously the

⁶² See André Rouillé and Jean-Claude Lemagny (ed.), *Histoire de la photographie* (Paris: Larousse-Bordas, 1986); André Rouillé, *La Photographie, entre document et art contemporain*, "Folio Essais" (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

case for this photo album. This leads us to the *fifth and final selection*, which is operated by the person(s) compiling the photo album. Not only do they choose which photos will make it into the album, they also organise them, thus creating associations and possibly new meanings. Sometimes, the author of the album adds captions, which will allow the identification of persons, places or events. In this way, photo albums are conscious creations of memory.

The photos within the Beck-Peissen album are memorial documents of their lives between October 1941 and August 1944. They document travels, military actions, everyday life, encounters with the local population, work, illness, injury, desertion. Some implicitly convey a sense of adventure, curiosity, and discovery.

3.6 Challenging the Victim Narrative

Due to the inherent nature of photography, many things are not shown. These are, of course, hard to guess. Yet, some photos give rise to questions linked to the soldiers' actions. A good example are those of the shot-down plane. We see the soldiers proudly posing on the wreck. But what happened to the pilot(s)? Did they manage to eject and open their parachute in time? Did they survive? Were they made prisoners? And what was cut away from the photo?

Regarding the photos of the soldiers with the local population, we wonder: how did they interact? How did the young soldiers behave towards the local women?

Two photos entitled "*Auf Partisanenjagd*", 'Hunting partisans' (Picture 12) raise further questions about the soldiers' relations with the local population. The first photo shows a group of soldiers in civilian clothes standing next to a raised hide. The second photo shows one of the soldiers next to the same hide and a train. The caption '*hunting* partisans' indicates that the 'enemy' was, in line with typical war propaganda, dehumanised and considered as an animal to be hunted down. In the specific context of partisan warfare (see below), we must wonder to what extent the soldiers had been influenced by war propaganda, and, more specifically, Nazi ideology.

Neither the location nor the date of these two photos are known. Below them is a portrait of Matthias with the caption 'Witebsk cemetery of honour'. It is impossible to tell if the two photos above were taken in the same area and during the same period. Some photos on the previous pages were taken in winter, whereas the 'hunting partisans' photos show very lightly-dressed soldiers, indicating warm temperatures. They must have been taken at another moment.



Picture 12: Focus on album page 26.

Nevertheless, these photos need particular attention, given the context of the partisan war in the Soviet Union.⁶³ Following the German invasion, Stalin had called on the population in the occupied territories to organise a full-scale war in the enemy's Hinterland.⁶⁴ Between 1941 and 1944, over half a million Soviet civilians joined the war against the *Wehrmacht* and its allies. With numerous acts of sabo-

⁶³ See *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944*, ed. Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2021 [3rd ed.]), chapter “Partisanenkrieg”; Lutz Klinkhammer, “Der Partisanenkrieg der Wehrmacht 1941–1944”, in *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität*, Sonderausgabe, ed. Rolf-Dieter Müller and Hans-Erich Volkmann (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2012), 815–836; Timm C. Richter, “Die Wehrmacht und der Partisanenkrieg in den besetzten Gebieten der Sowjetunion”, in *Die Wehrmacht*, ed. Müller and Volkmann, 837–856; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2009); Dieter Pohl, *Nationalsozialistische Verbrechen 1939–1945*, (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2022); Majerus, “Photographie”; Wolfram Wette, *Die Wehrmacht: Feindbilder, Vernichtungskrieg, Legenden* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2002).

⁶⁴ The following short overview is based on Thomas Jander, “Der Partisanenkrieg in der Sowjetunion”, in *Lebendiges Museum Online (LEMO/DHM)*, 15 May 2015, <https://www.dhm.de/lemo/kapitel/der-zweite-weltkrieg/kriegsverlauf/partisanenkrieg-im-osten.html> (31 August 2023).

tage committed during the Rails War,⁶⁵ the partisans considerably impaired the lines of communication and, thus, the supply of personnel and equipment to the German troops. Massive-scale German retaliatory measures, mostly led and executed by the SS and HSSPF, and sometimes assisted by local auxiliaries and *Wehrmacht* troops, resulted in an estimated 300,000–350,000 deaths in Belarus.⁶⁶

The voluminous catalogue of the exhibition *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* includes long lists of German “*Großaktionen*”, ‘large-scale operations’ against partisans, which took place in 1941, 1942, 1943 and 1944 in Belarus, several times mentioning the cities of Polotsk and Witebsk,⁶⁷ which are the only two Belarusian place names mentioned in our photo album. However, as some of the pictures are undated, no clear conclusions can be drawn. The second photo might indicate that the soldiers did take part in counter sabotage operations during the Rails War.

If they were indeed involved in the partisan war, it is worth noting that, as German soldiers, the members of this FLAK-unit would have lived in constant fear of partisan attacks when moving into new territory, and had to act accordingly to protect their own lives.

Ultimately, the following questions remain unanswered: did they find any partisans? If so, did they shoot them? Did they hang them? Did they take them prisoner? Did they surrender? Were they disarmed and dismissed? What room for manoeuvre did the soldiers have? Why were these photos included in the album? Out of pride? Or does their presence simply indicate that nothing tragic happened? In any case, these photos challenge a simplistic victim or hero narrative.

3.7 Challenging the Hero Narrative

Matthias’ personal files at the Archives Service for War Victims provide details about his military career, his injury and, eventually, his desertion. The documents confirm that he began his service as a gunner in an anti-aircraft unit⁶⁸ in Barth/

⁶⁵ The “Rails War” refers to a series of operations carried out in 1943 by partisans in German-occupied Belarus and Ukraine with the intention of disrupting German logistics by destroying rail lines, thus preventing the arrival of new equipment and manpower to the front. See e.g. Geoffrey Jukes, *World War II: the Eastern Front, 1941–1945* (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, 2010), 51–52.

⁶⁶ *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, 429, 429–505.

⁶⁷ *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, 454–455.

⁶⁸ Allocation according to WAST data in ASWV, IF670090, personal file Matthias Beck (born 1 February 1922) to obtain the status “Dienstverpflichteter in der Deutschen Armee” (‘Forcefully conscripted into the German Army’). German text: 1 October 1941: *Stabsbatterie / Leichte Flak Ersatzabteilung 91*; 21 March 1942: 4. *Batterie/Flak-Artillerie-Schule II*; 7 April 1942: *Reservelazar-*

Pomerania, with which he was dispatched to Belarus.⁶⁹ The gorget patches indicate that Matthias rose over the years to the rank of corporal (*Gefreiter*) and, finally, to lance corporal (*Obergefreiter*).⁷⁰ The files do not mention any German military decoration. He appears to have been automatically promoted over time. An excerpt from the *Wehrmachtauskunftsstelle* (WASSt) indicates the different stages of the first part of his service⁷¹:

- 01.10.1941 Staff Battery / Light Flak Replacement Division 91
- 21.03.1942 4th Battery/Flak Artillery School II
- 07.04.1942 Reserve hospital II Lübeck. Shell splinters in the shoulder and back of the head
- 24.04.1942 Niendorf reserve hospital
- 06.06.1942 Discharge from the military hospital. 3 months garrison

On 28 March 1942, Matthias was injured during an air raid. With shell splinters in his left shoulder and in the back of his head, he was admitted to Lübeck's Reserve Hospital II on 7 April. At the end of the month, he was transferred to the Niendorf reserve hospital. These spells in hospital are documented by corresponding photos (see above). According to family history, the shrapnel could not be removed and would remain for the rest of his life, sometimes causing severe headaches.

The WASSt also indicates that his first home leave was in June 1943, which is the moment the three photos with his fiancée were taken, i.e. shortly after she had started her labour service.

His desertion is also attested: after the war, around 1948, Matthias Beck had introduced a request for the official status of "Refractory Soldier of the German Army", in the hope of receiving some kind of recognition of his situation and compensation from the Belgian state for his years of service in the *Wehrmacht*. As his own testimony reveals, he knew that he was not precisely a "refractory soldier", but a "deserter". The category for "Forcefully recruited by the German Army" did not exist until 1974. Thus, he took an adaptive stance and introduced the request for a status that came closest to his actual situation. When interrogated by the

ett II Lübeck. Granatsplitter in der Schulter und am Hinterkopf; 24 April 1942: Reservelazarett Niendorf; 6 June 1942: Entlassung aus dem Lazarett. 3 Monate Garnison.

⁶⁹ ASWV, R536858/24495, personal file Matthias Beck (born 1 February 1922) to obtain the status "Refractory soldier of the German Army".

⁷⁰ Career according to collar patches on the photos. See *Handbook on German Army Identification*, 38.

⁷¹ Allocation according to WASSt data in ASWV, IF670090.

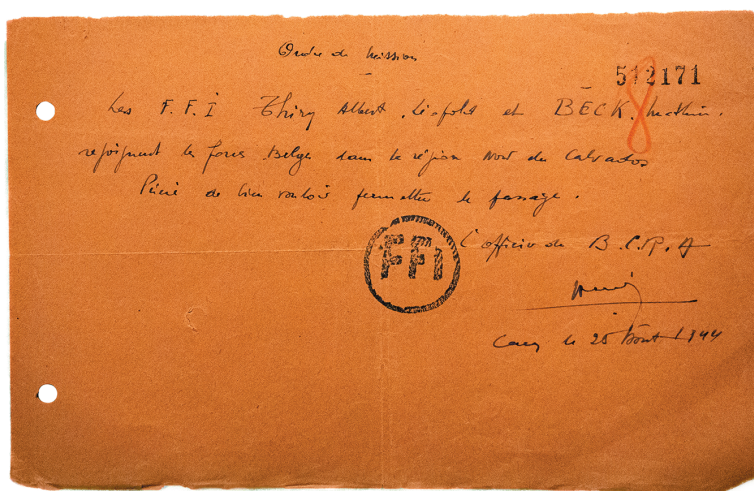
police in 1952, he explained that he protested on three occasions against his conscription in 1941, and that he eventually deserted in January 1944:

It is true that I asked at the time, I think around 1948, for recognition as a Wehrmacht refractory. In fact, I am not a refractory in the sense of the word, but a DESERTER. In fact, when I received an order to join, I wrote to the Wehrmacht Oberkommando and to the Montjoie recruitment office, and even to the American Consulate in Cologne, claiming to be born Belgian. I tried to get the latter to intervene because in 1941, there was no Belgian consulate in Germany. As a response, I received a formal summons to carry out my order to join under penalty of more serious sanctions and prosecution. I then entered the service of the Wehrmacht in the first days of October 1941, which represented the very first contingent of draftees from our region. I was assigned to the *air defence*. After six weeks of instruction, I was sent to the Russian front, where I stayed for three years.⁷² In January 1944, our company was sent to France. At the first opportunity, i.e. 8 days after my arrival in France, in January 1944, I deserted. I made contact with the F.F.I. [Forces françaises de l'intérieur], with whom I lived for a few months in the countryside. After the landing, I waited for the Liberation by taking refuge in the sisters' convent in Trouville-Deauville. After the passage of the allied troops, in this case the Belgian troops, I followed them into Belgium, all the way to Brussels. I then went to see my parents, who were in Brussels at the time, where they had taken refuge in 1941. I would like to add that after my desertion, I was sentenced to death by a German Feldgericht. As a witness I quote the name ZIMMERMANN, Henri, who reported this fact to me on his return [. . .].⁷³

72 It was rather around two and a half years, according to the dates indicated in different other sources. Moreover, this period does not match, if he was sent to Normandy in January 1944.

73 ASWV, R536858/24495, testimonies Matthieu Beck and Henri Zimmermann, Pro-Justitia, police station Eupen, 21 February 1952. Original text: "Il est exact que j'ai demandé en son temps, je crois vers 1948, la reconnaissance comme réfractaire de la Wehrmacht. Au fond, je ne suis pas réfractaire au sens du mot, mais bien DESERTEUR. En effet, au reçu d'un ordre de rejoindre, j'ai par écrit fait valoir ma qualité de Belge né à l'Oberkommando de la Wehrmacht et au bureau de recrutement de Montjoie, et même auprès du Consulat américain à Cologne. J'ai voulu faire intervenir ce dernier du fait qu'il n'y avait pas en 1941 de Consulat belge en Allemagne. Comme toute réponse, j'ai reçu une sommation formelle d'exécuter mon ordre de rejoindre sous peines de sanctions et poursuites plus graves. Je suis alors entré au service de la Wehrmacht dans les premiers jours du mois d'octobre 1941, ce qui représentait le tout premier contingent d'incorporés de force de notre région. J'étais versé à la D.C.A. [défense contre l'aviation]. Après 6 semaines d'instructions déjà, on m'expédiait au front russe, où je suis resté pendant 3 ans. En janvier 1944 notre compagnie fut envoyée en France. À la première occasion qui fut m'offerte, c.à.d. 8 jours après mon arrivée en France, soit donc en janvier 1944, j'ai déserté. J'ai pris contact avec les F.F.I. [Forces françaises de l'intérieur], avec lesquels j'ai vécu pendant quelques mois en campagne. Après le débarquement, j'ai attendu la libération en me réfugiant au couvent des sœurs à Trouville-Deauville. Après le passage des troupes alliées, en l'occurrence les troupes belges, [je les] ai suivis jusqu'en Belgique à Bruxelles. Je me suis alors rendu chez mes parents, qui se trouvaient alors à Bruxelles, s'étant réfugiés eux aussi en 1941. Je tiens à ajouter qu'après ma désertion, j'ai été condamné à mort par un Feldgericht allemand. Comme témoin je cite le nomme ZIMMER-

His desertion and the contact with the FFI and allied troops were indeed confirmed by a document from the FFI entitled “*Ordre de mission*” (‘mission order’), (Picture 13), as well as by Henri (Heinrich) Zimmermann, who was also interrogated by the police: “*Durch diese Desertation wurde BECK ohne weiteres zum Tode verurteilt.*” (‘As a result of this desertion, BECK was sentenced to death without further discussion.’) He added: “*Diese Entscheidung wurde dem Bataillon ganz öffentlich und feierlichst bekannt gemacht.*” (‘This decision was made known to the battalion publicly and most solemnly.’)⁷⁴ Unfortunately, there is no archival trace of the written protests sent to the recruitment office in Montjoie, to the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces, and the US consulate in Cologne.⁷⁵



Picture 13: “Ordre de mission” from French resistance signed by an intelligence officer of the *Bureau Central de Renseignements et d’Action* (BCRA) (‘Central Bureau of Intelligence and Operations’) in Caen and dated 25 August 1944, stating that Matthieu Beck was part of the FFI (ASWV, R536858/24495, photo: Philippe Beck).

MANN, Henri, qui m’a d’ailleurs rapporté ce fait à son retour [. . .].” All capitalised words are as such in the original text.

⁷⁴ ASWV, R536858/24495, testimonies Beck and Zimmermann, 21 February 1952.

⁷⁵ An in-depth search on Invenio (*Bundesarchiv*) did not yield any results regarding these documents. David A. Langbart from the US National Archives at College Park, MD kindly replied to my request on 17 November 2022 with the following mail: “RG 84: Records of Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State includes the extant files of the U.S. embassy and consulates. We searched the files of the U.S. consulate in Cologne relating to the protection of foreign interests. We located no files on or references to any person with the name Matthias/Matthieu Beck.”

Apparently, Matthias Beck deliberately chose to give his testimony in French, his second language, probably because it was the native language of the interrogating police officer. Matthias might also have wanted to come across as a ‘good Belgian’ in this period of suspicion after the war, or he chose French because he had mastered the language and was simply pleased to speak it – or all three of these reasons. As his own testimony already foreshadowed, he did not obtain the status “Refractory soldier of the German army”, as he had worn a German uniform and, hence, did not fulfil all the requirements. In 1978, he did, however, fulfil all the conditions to obtain the status of “Dienstverpflichteter der deutschen Armee”, ‘Forcefully conscripted into the German army’, which had eventually been created four years before.⁷⁶

On closer examination of the available source material, Matthias’ testimony from 1952 is problematic. As mentioned above, the comments written on the back of some photos in the album are difficult to access, because they have been glued onto the pages. Nevertheless, the back of one picture indicates: (Picture 14): “Feuerstellung an der . . . Orscha-Smolensk während der 5. Abwehrschlacht im März 1944”, ‘Firing position at the . . . Orscha-Smolensk during the 5th defensive battle in March 1944’. The date is readable. This means that either the indication behind the photo is incorrect, or that Matthias provided the police with wrong information. The location of the 91. *leichte Falkersatzabteilung* in January–March 1944 could not be traced.⁷⁷ The only indication present in one of Heinrich Zimmermann’s files at the Archives Service for War Victims is in the report written by his doctor in 1970 (!), which states that the division was moved to Normandy on 6 June 1944.⁷⁸ Whether they were moved on D-Day is questionable. The files state that Zimmermann, still in German uniform and involved in the Battle of the Bulge, was taken prisoner by American forces and was not released until 1 August 1945, and that he claimed to have light, long-term injuries due to the rough climate in Russia and his custody in the open-air prison camp.⁷⁹

In fact, in a previous document, i.e. an enquiry form to obtain the status of “Refractory Soldier” dated 1 July 1949, Matthias Beck had indicated 12 May 1944 as

⁷⁶ See ASWV, IF670090 and “Loi du 21 novembre 1974 portant sur le statut de l’incorporé de force dans l’armée allemande et de ses ayants droit”, in *Pasinomie* 1974, 1084–1087, available online: <https://zeitschichten.be/en/documents/424> (31 August 2023). For the context of creation of the law see zeitschichten.be/en/explorations/forced-recruits (31 August 2023).

⁷⁷ Karl-Heinz Hummel only gives information from the summer of 1944 on, when the 91. *leichte Flakersatzabteilung* was based in Zingst. See *Die deutsche Flakartillerie, 1935–1945: Ihre Großverbände und Regimenter* (Zweibrücken: VDM, 2010), p. 454–455.

⁷⁸ ASWV-p500609, Heinrich Zimmermann (born 1 December 1922).

⁷⁹ ASWV-d264395, ASWV-IF 672039, ASWV-p500609. He mainly complains about nightmares (post-traumatic stress disorder) and a loss of strength in his wrists.

the date of his desertion,⁸⁰ which in the light of the photo album analysis seems more plausible than January 1944. Why then did he communicate a different date to the police in 1952? The most likely explanation is that he hoped to gain a better chance to obtain compensation from the state. As mentioned above, there was no solution for the *Wehrmacht* soldiers from East Belgium until 1974.



Picture 14: Album pages 22–23. Page 22: Below the photo on the left is written “Winter 1943–44”. Page 23: the photo in the top right has a handwritten comment on the back dating it to March 1944.

4 Ego-Documents from East Belgian RAD Women

The 1974 law creating the status of “Dienstverpflichteter der deutschen Armee” also took into account the women who had fulfilled their labour service. Hildegard Peissen obtained this status in 1982.⁸¹ However, the file is rather thin, and the information therein has presumably been copied from the photo album. Here too, the album was a complementary source, which (subjectively) reveal elements beyond her personal file at the Archives Service for War Victims.

A comprehensive collection of memories of conscripted women from Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith, like the one entitled *Malgré-elles* by French author and director Nina Barbier⁸² for Alsace and Moselle, does not exist. However, there are a few ego-documents, such as the ones presented here, as well as audiovisual testimonies

⁸⁰ ASWV, R536858/24495, Formulaire de Renseignement, Demande de reconnaissance de la qualité de Réfractaire à la Wehrmacht, Eupen, 1 July 1949.

⁸¹ ASWV, IF672105, personal file Hildegard Peissen (born 26 June 1924) to obtain the status “Dienstverpflichtete in der Deutschen Armee”.

⁸² Barbier, *Malgré-elles*.

recorded in recent years by the Centre for East Belgian History (*Zentrum für Ostbelgische Geschichte*).⁸³ More ego-documents might be found in personal archives.

Inge Gerckens-Schmitz (1923–2019) from Eupen mentioned that she had mixed memories of her RAD service, which began in October 1941. She was also among the first conscripts from her town, and is yet another example of a young woman from an openly “pro-Belgian” family. Her father was the antimilitarist writer and journalist Peter Schmitz, who had been active for allied secret services until his untimely death in 1938.⁸⁴ In her unpublished memoir “Grenznah”, written at the end of the 1990s, she complains about the strict discipline and about fanatical National Socialist women, but she also highlights humane encounters. Presumably due to the activities of her father, she was subjected to an extended period of service until the end of the war, when she witnessed the bombing of Nuremberg in 1945:

We squatted in our barracks. I was so frightened I choked with fear, and then it happened. A firebomb hit our wooden barrack, which immediately went up in flames. Marthe and I rushed outside – no alternative but to go for it. Marthe was hit by a burning wooden plank; she was killed instantly. The embers burned my hair (which never grew back!). The girls ran screaming to the gate. This was hell!⁸⁵

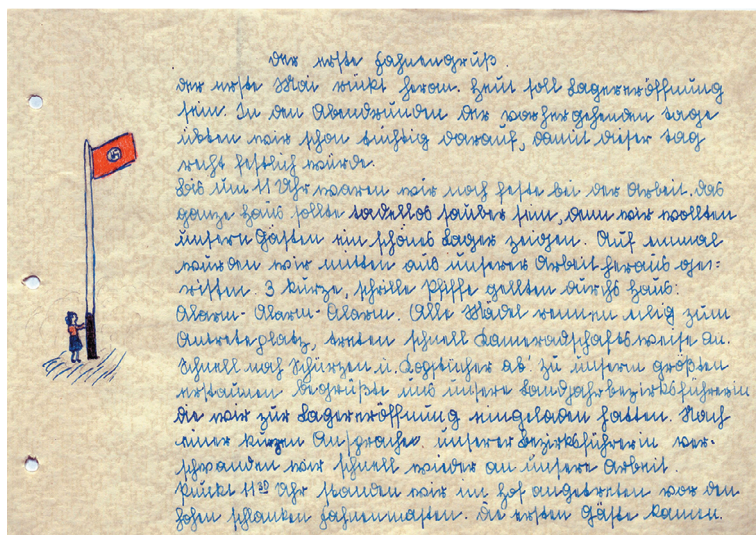
The journal of Bertha Ludwigs (1927–2018), on the other hand, kept at the State Archives in Eupen, is an example showing that labour service could also be a positive experience. In a photo album and diary created by the young woman in 1941, she wrote in anticipation of the “first flag salute”: (Pictures 15–16): “Der erste Mai rückt heran. Heute soll Lagereröffnung sein. In den Abendrunden der vorhergegangenen Tage übten wir schon tüchtig darauf, damit dieser Tag recht festlich würde.”⁸⁶ (‘May Day is approaching. The camp is to open today. We practised hard during the evening rounds the previous days to make sure this day would be quite festive.’) On the flag salute, she writes:

⁸³ For an inventory of audiovisual testimonies see the website of the *Zentrum für Ostbelgische Geschichte*: www.geschichte.be/zeitzeugen (31 August 2023).

⁸⁴ See Beck, *Umstrittenes Grenzland*, 383–420, or Philippe Beck and Etienne Verhoeyen, “Agents Secrets à la Frontière Belgo-Allemande: Des Services de Renseignements Alliés et Allemands entre 1920 et 1940 dans la Région d’Eupen”, in *Cahiers d’histoire du temps présent = Bijdragen tot de eigentijdse geschiedenis*, n° 21 (Brussels: CEGES/SOMA, 2009), 93–134.

⁸⁵ Inge Gerckens-Schmitz, “Grenznah” (Eupen, 2000). Original text: „Wir hockten in unserer Baracke, vor Angst hatte ich ein Würgen im Hals und dann geschah es: Unsere Holzbaracke wurde von einer Brandbombe getroffen, sie brannte lichterloh. Marthe und ich stürzten nach draußen, nichts wie weg. Marthe wurde von einem brennenden Holzplanken getroffen, sie war sofort tot. Die Glut versengte meine Haare, (die nie mehr nachwuchsen!) schreiend liefen die Mädchen zum Tor, es war die Hölle!“

⁸⁶ State Archives in Eupen, Souvenir album of Bertha Ludwigs (1927–2018).



Pictures 15–16: Souvenir album of Bertha Ludwigs (1927–2018) (State Archives in Eupen).

A song was belted out: Where we stand, loyalty stands . . . ! Poems and slogans followed, intended to tell us what the flag means to all of us. And then came the command: Attention! Hoist the flag! And we looked up to the flags with bright eyes, as they rose for the first time in the fresh morning wind. Our district leader puts this day in our hearts with serious, admonishing words, telling us how proud we can be that we are RAD maidens and that we can do our

bit for the big picture. A brief address by the mayor of the village and national songs brought the first flag salute to a close. It was probably the most beautiful day we had in the camp.⁸⁷

Here, a further look into the family history and the war victim files would be required to provide a broader context. The examples presented here show that the experiences of East Belgian RAD women need further investigation on the base of the available source material.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Biographical Turning Points, Scopes for Action and Adaptive Stances

The annexation of East Belgium by Germany in 1940 and the conscription of Matthias Beck in 1941 had direct consequences for the family. On 10 May 1940, the *historical turning point* coincides with a *biographical turning point*. The parents, as well-known “pro-Belgians”, chose to abandon their home and move to occupied Brussels, where Nikolaus became active in a resistance network. This also marks the separation from their only child, Matthias, who was prevented from crossing the border.

1 October 1941 is another clear biographical turning point for Matthias Beck and Hildegard Peissen. As Matthias is conscripted into the *Wehrmacht*, their wedding projects are put on hold. According to the memories of their daughter, he said back then to his fiancée: “Who knows whether I’ll come back.”⁸⁸

Not until the liberation of Brussels on 3 September 1944 was Matthias able to reunite with his parents. In mid-September, the family finally returned to Eupen, where Matthias went to see his fiancée two days later. They finally celebrated their wedding in August 1945. Hence, the historical turning point of the liberation also had a direct impact on the biographies of the family members.

⁸⁷ Original text: “Ein Lied klingt auf: Wo wir stehen steht die Treue . . . ! Gedichte und Sprüche folgen, die uns sagen sollen, was die Fahne uns allen bedeutet. Und dann kommt das Kommando: Achtung! Hisst Flagge! Und mit leuchtenden Augen sehen wir zu den Fahnen auf, die sich nun im frischen Morgenwind zum erstenmal emporschwingen. Mit ernsten, mahnenden Worten legt uns unsere Bezirksführerin diesen Tag ans Herz, sagt uns, wie stolz wir sein dürfen, daß wir Landjahrmädel sind und daß wir ein ganz klein wenig zum großen Ganzen beitragen dürfen. Eine kurze Begrüßung durch den Bürgermeister des Dorfes und die Nationallieder beenden den ersten Fahnengruß. Das war wohl der schönste Tag, den wir im Lager erlebten.”

⁸⁸ Beck, “Beck-Peissen”.

The method of combining ego-documents, other archive sources, and family history has given a deeper insight into the scope the various protagonists had and which adaptive stances they took when they had to face major turning points:

- As a consequence of the annexation, Nikolaus Beck refused to continue his work at the municipality. Moreover, he and his wife decided to move to Welkenraedt, and eventually to Brussels, where he chose to join a resistance group. The motivation behind these decisions was clearly ideological. As a member of the *Demokratischer Heimatblock*, he was an opponent of National Socialism and wanted Eupen-Malmedy-Sankt Vith to remain a part of Belgium.
- Matthias Beck's attempt to follow his parents to Brussels failed, and his attempts to avoid conscription into the *Wehrmacht* were in vain. Under pressure, he took an adaptive stance and eventually complied. He might have hoped for a short war, just like many others did, but ended up living the life of a German soldier for over two and a half years. Based on the photo album, he seems to have behaved like a regular German soldier on the Eastern front. As member of an anti-aircraft-unit, he formed part of a group that shot down planes and defended German positions. The men also seem to have been confronted with the presence of partisans in their area, as one photo caption shows. How much scope did the soldiers have in this situation? Were they actively involved in the partisan war? These questions must remain unanswered. Nevertheless, they challenge a simplistic victim/hero narrative.
- In 1944, Matthias finally seized the occasion to desert in Normandy, even though, if caught, the consequence would have been the death penalty.⁸⁹ His scope was different now: such an act would have been much riskier in the east, where he did not speak the language and where he was far from home, whereas in northern France, he was much closer; he spoke French and had proof of his Belgian citizenship. Moreover, he might have seen beforehand the possibility of contacting the French resistance. The circumstances were clearly different and more favourable for desertion in 1944.⁹⁰

The apparently contradictory information regarding the date of his desertion, as revealed by the photos and one of his personal files at the Archives Service for War Victims, may also reflect an adaptive stance; since there was no status and compensation for former East Belgian *Wehrmacht* soldiers

⁸⁹ The fate of certain executed deserters and resistance fighters is documented in Philippe Beck and Nicholas Williams, *Gerettete Erinnerung: Vergessene Kriegsschicksale aus der Provinz Lüttich/Mémoire sauvée: Destins de guerre oubliés de la province de Liège*, Eupen, ZOG, 2022. Online version: <https://gerettete-erinnerung.geschichte.be> (31 August 2023).

⁹⁰ See also Stroh, 46 and 52.

after the war, he decided to try to obtain the status of refractory soldier, even if this implied stretching the truth a bit.

- For Hildegard Peissen, there are no known acts of resistance in any form. The family assumes that she was afraid of legal consequences. She, too, took an adaptative stance towards the circumstances, travelling hundreds of kilometres into unknown territory. After the war, she became in some way an archivist, in the sense that she created a photo album of these “years of service”. The creation of the album can also be considered as a sign of a biographical turning point, a point where the Second World War had become history, where these photographic memories could be archived and put in a drawer.

5.2 Challenging the Base Narrative

The “base narrative”⁹¹ of East Belgium’s history during the annexation had long been dominated by stories of victims: victims of the annexation, forcefully recruited men and women, fallen soldiers, victims of the Battle of the Bulge . . . Less convenient elements, such as active participation in the National Socialist system or involvement in any kind of killing, had generally been cut out. Not until the late 1980s and early 1990s did historiography in various European countries shed a more differentiated light on this part of history.⁹² This has also been the case in East Belgium.⁹³ Today, the so-called “forcefully recruited” by the *Wehrmacht* are no longer solely seen as victims. This literature has opened the path for more differentiated views on both individual and family biographies. The present study has shown that a critical analysis of a photo album can provide new insights, and that it may challenge, on a collective level, the “base narrative”, but also, on the individual level, the simplistic victim and hero narratives that run through families.

As mentioned at the beginning of this contribution, there was neither “family storytelling” nor collective remembering within the Beck family regarding these war experiences. According to Massenaux, Nikolaus Beck gladly told the anecdote of when he rid himself of the collaborators who wanted to check on his activity at the Ministry in Brussels. However, his granddaughter and great-grandchildren only

⁹¹ Welzer and Lenz, “Opa in Europa”, 17.

⁹² Welzer and Lenz, “Opa in Europa”, 17–27.

⁹³ For a critical overview of scientific literature see Lejeune and Brüll, “Geschichtsschreibung als Spiegel des Zeitgeists”, 366–391.

know this story from Massenaux's publication. Only then did it become part of very occasional family storytelling. Granddaughter Irmgard stressed that he never boasted about his resistance activity,⁹⁴ nor was it mentioned during the funeral service or in the local newspaper, as it has frequently been the case for former resistance members in the rest of the country. While, especially in the French-speaking part of Belgium, families stress their ancestors' membership in the Resistance and decorate graves accordingly with a commemorative element, such features are almost absent in East Belgium.

In 2007, Irmgard Wintgens-Beck shared her memory with the author that Heinrich Toussaint, editor-in-chief of the *Grenz-Echo*, had wanted to include Matthias' story in his articles and books about war destinies published in the 1980s,⁹⁵ but that her father had refused. According to her memory, this was because one of his comrades from Eupen had wanted to desert with him and was closely watched after his friend's disappearance. This can only have been the above-mentioned Heinrich Zimmermann, for he was the only other soldier from Eupen in this division. It is all the more plausible, as the latter had been traumatised by his further war experience and his imprisonment. Matthias might not have wanted to stir up his comrade's painful memories. Another further, possible explanation of Matthias' refusal is that he remembered his false testimony (if this was indeed the case) from 1952 – which had been confirmed by Zimmermann's testimony, something he did not want to stir up either.

The analysis of the Beck-Peissen photo album sheds new light on the family history, and on the war experience of East Belgian soldiers in general. A victim or hero narrative is often not as simple as it is remembered. In particular, the photos referring to the presence of partisans on the Eastern front raise questions regarding the participation of East Belgian *Wehrmacht* soldiers in war crimes. They contribute to challenging the commonly spread narrative of East Belgian soldiers as victims.

Regarding East Belgian RAD women, the case of Hildegard Peissen shows that women could also obtain the status "Dienstverpflichteter der deutschen Armee", a fact which has been overlooked in this field so far and which opens up new research perspectives. These can be all the more interesting when there is other source material available, such as the ego documents presented above.

94 ZOG, AZS – 021.

95 Toussaint, *Verlorene Jahre; Bittere Erfahrungen*.

5.3 Many Different Stories

The destinies presented here are just a few among many different stories. Some men and women from East Belgium were proud to follow their conscription orders. They had German-nationalist feelings, felt they were doing their duty, or wanted to correspond to common images of manhood or womanhood at the time. For some, it was a welcome adventure allowing them to see other parts of the world. Others escaped from the German army or labour service and went into hiding. Some deserted. A small number became members of a resistance network. Others still adapted their stance in order to avoid problems, or were forced to do so and tried to manage their situation as best as possible. The latter presumably represent the majority among the conscripts from the various border regions that are the subject of research in this volume.

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