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Christian Packheiser, Heimaturlaub. Soldaten zwischen Front, Familie und NS-Regime, Göttingen (Wallstein) 2020, 533 S., 45 Abb. (Das Private im Nationalsozialismus, 1), ISBN 978-3-8353-3675-9, EUR 36,00.

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In this excellent history of everyday life, Christian Packheiser explores the fascinating history of soldiers on military leave during the Second World War from the often-divergent perspectives of institutions of the Nazi regime, the soldiers themselves, and their families. His very wide-ranging source base includes records and diaries of Nazi policy makers; attitude reports of the Sicherheitsdienst; representation in films, newspapers, and novels; pay books of ordinary soldiers; Nazi and Allied questionnaires; civil divorce records; as well as private correspondence, photographs, memoirs, and diaries. Rather than seeing military leave simply as a basis for political control or internal exile, Packheiser convincingly interprets it as a crucial locus for conflict and negotiation between state and society, public and private, norm and practice, expectations and experience (p. 460). The author shows that these allegedly private spheres were deeply embedded in the Nazi culture, economy, politics, and society of war.

The Nazi regime designed leave in the Second World War in part to avoid and undo the mistakes of the First. They sincerely feared that the home front could undermine military discipline and promote defeatism. As the point of intersection between the home and war fronts, military leave thus came to represent »the stability of the entire war community« (p. 460) both in the imagination and practice of the Nazi regime. It used politically indoctrinated returning soldiers as propaganda multipliers to undergird popular support for the war. It shifted resources from the war effort to the private consumption of returning soldiers – even increasing them after 1943 for families suffering from air raids. »The leadership«, Packheiser argues, »raised the harmony and quality of the soldiers' relationships to public policy [Staatsräson]« (p. 463).

Packheiser uses pay books and questionnaires to assess the scope and scale of leave quantitatively. He guardedly suggests that soldiers may have returned home on average about every six or seven months. Soldiers on the front lines tended to visit home less frequently for longer durations, while soldiers serving behind the lines tended to return home more frequently for shorter durations. Leaves were also more frequent and waiting times shorter before the Summer of 1941, because many were cancelled during Operation Barbarossa. 1943 marked another turning point. Leaves still continued to the end of the war but were increasingly justified in terms of convalescence or Allied bombings. By contrast,

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Allied soldiers, who also fought much further from home, tended to have less leave time and less ability to return home during it.

Packheiser correctly recognized that, even though leave formally began at the borders of the Reich, the trip itself allowed for a transition from their roles as obedient soldiers and loyal comrades to those of loving husbands and fathers. A chaotic assemblage of institutions both served and supervised the soldiers on their way home. They provided enjoyable amenities, cultural and sporting activities, and sight-seeing opportunities as well as »massive propagandistic accompaniment« (p. 461) and bureaucratic rules and punishments. Especially after 1942, these organizations competed not just to entertain the returning soldiers but to ensure discipline, avoid desertion, and preserve their fighting spirit in the face of civilian enticements. During the trip, soldiers on leave often experienced threats from partisans and air raids; they also observed the inhumane consequences of Nazi policies along the way. These experiences were thus fresh in their mind when they arrived back home.

Moreover, they brought home large quantities of goods that they purchased, requisitioned, or simply plundered from the territories they occupied. In supplying the home front with resources extracted from the occupied territories, returning soldiers essentially adopted the exploitative and exterminatory principles of the Nazi war economy and strategy. The regime encouraged this rapacious behavior as a form of familial compensation for the deprivations of war and to strengthen the solidarity of the home and war fronts. These practices in turn fostered expectations for peacetime consumption, prosperity, and family harmony after the war.

The regime actively employed propaganda both to stage their arrival and shape their behavior while home. The returning soldier served as a public embodiment of loyalty and perseverance while also meeting the soldier's private needs for escape and autonomy. In entertaining stories, soldiers were depicted with new strengths of character acquired through war that merged military virtues with civic, familial, and private ones. These ideal soldiers were supposed to protect their families by keeping the brutality of the war to themselves at the same time that they were allegedly longing to return to the front to avoid missing important battles. At home, the regime organized public receptions and special programs with great honors.

Indeed, the regime wanted the soldier to maintain his appearance and wear his uniform as a symbol of support for the war. In family photographs, however, soldiers often appeared in civil clothing while sitting on their balcony or taking a walk. Some soldiers chose to lay claim to the status of the courageous warrior by wearing their uniform and medals in public even though they also criticized the unjust distribution of military decorations. A stubborn insistence on spending the entire leave with one's spouse could be justified in terms of contributing to the regime's population

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politics. In their political implications, soldierly unruliness could thus have both conformist and nonconformist implications – even at the same time.

These political contradictions are particularly visible in the *Betreuung* provided to the soldiers on leave. This term refers both to material and spiritual care in the form of priority access to entertainment, food, restaurants, transportation, and vacations as well as many forms of supervision and control ranging from the requirement to report to officials for registration to visits from notables to thank the soldiers for their service, and even to denunciations by neighbors to the local Block Wardens to ensure political conformity. In effect, »the military and the party« enjoyed »uninterrupted access to the soldier on leave« (p. 254). Yet the regime repeatedly struggled to coordinate and standardize the independently developed initiatives of competing institutions. Soldiers on leave were often recruited as public speakers. Yet the regime sometimes provided time off from work for the wives of soldiers on leave by replacing the women with foreign workers. When soldiers then preferred to stay home rather than attend public events, representatives from the local Party or local notables responded with home visits. Authorities even intervened when soldiers ran into problems with rent or maintaining a family business, again conflating »private life and public interest« (p. 283).

At the same time, Packheiser understands that soldiers on leave served as crucial channels for communication between the war and home fronts. The regime tried to use them to support the war effort, but the more official propaganda departed from reality, the more people at home preferred to trust the informal reports of soldiers. Soldiers spread information about war crimes and air strikes as well as serving as multipliers for propaganda produced by the Allies, resistance groups, or even German religious institutions. But it would be a mistake to view the resulting court cases simply as an effort to police the private sphere. Packheiser notes the role of denunciation in serving both ideological and instrumental purposes as well as resulting in both the privatization of public matters and the publicization of private affairs. Yet most transgressions which made their way to the legal system concerned taking unapproved leave or overstaying it. Increasing with the air raids, these incidents were driven mostly from a desire to recapture experiences of private life, not oppose the war effort.

Another challenge related to the contradictory systems of socialization in military and civil society as well as feelings of alienation from both. Packheiser could hardly summarize the wide-ranging responses to such challenges by millions of individuals. Yet he notes that ego documents typically focused more on expectations of overcoming separation; and they either self-censored disharmonious experiences or struggled to put divergent experiences into words. Especially after the attack on the Soviet Union, the regime used economic, legal, political, propagandistic, and social measures to encourage soldiers on leave to redress decreased birth rates and stabilize marriages — and punish those

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who did not. Yet wives were expected to quietly carry the burden of the soldier's feelings of alienation and husbands to present the image of a heroic warrior. In negotiating these interpersonal challenges, Packheiser argues, most families were able to integrate or at least accommodate these competing needs and expectations.

For this reader, the most interesting part of the book lies in the critical assessment of the leave experiences themselves. Here Packheiser wisely tempers ego documents like letters and diaries with court cases on divorces relating to leave due to extramarital affairs, spousal abuse, personality conflicts, mental illness, alienation, and other stressors relating to the war. In the latter, the Nazi legal system justified its judgements in terms of eugenic reproduction, the war effort, the compensatory recovery for the soldiers, Nazi morality, and other political goals. Yet the defendants and plaintiffs, the author insists, also used Nazi principles »as much for defense as in the pursuit of self-interest – independent of their truth content« (p. 457).

As for letters and diaries, their wide range of evidence defies easy synthesis; and most describe only vague hopes for a normal everyday life. Still, many express specific wishes: for physical needs, including coded longing for sexual encounters; the restoration of interpersonal relationships; as well as cultural activities and family vacations. Since physical needs tended to be addressed before cultural ones, such long lists of planned activities could not be realized in such a short time, so they often relied upon Nazi institutions to provide them with the needed resources. Still, many were disappointed by all that they could not accomplish or when their private lives did not correspond to expectations. Family members responded by subordinating their needs to those of the returning heroes, including temporarily restoring traditional roles of gender, sexuality, and parenting.

Yet uncertainty or even strife arose in the face of changes and challenges to these established roles, such as when the children or the wife refused to cede some of their newfound autonomy. Disappointment could create political difficulties for the regime; but Packheiser correctly notes that the plans themselves represented a reassertion of private control over their everyday lives. Even this temporary return to normalcy thus helped to preserve the fighting spirit of the German people.

In their often-cryptic retrospective assessments of their experiences in these documents, soldiers often associated the future stability of their families with military victory. This rhetorical strategy struck this reader not only as validating Nazi politics but also as understandable in a total war. This chimera seemed to give the soldier more control over their lives by providing a seemingly viable set of actions that would ultimately protect their loved ones. Packheiser thus argues that even short periods of leave functioned like an »oasis in the desert« (p. 440) by restoring hope for a better outcome for their everyday struggles.

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Military leaves »fell in line with the family politics of the Nazi leadership« (p. 449) because they restored not only a sense of privacy and normalcy within the family in terms of gender, sexuality, work, and reproduction but also consumption: this fantasy promised a continuation of the Nazi wartime economy in the postwar era, including prosperity, consumption, and even travel for Aryan families, through victory (p. 443). To be sure, some letter writers and diarists »left out the detours of the present« (p. 442), meaning their collaboration in a brutal war of extermination and conquest. Yet others explicitly connected their future happiness to the geopolitical goals of the Nazi regime for Lebensraum. Even the soldiers who began to criticize the regime in the final months of the war did so without challenging these expectations for the postwar rewards. Packheiser argues that this fantasy effectively harmonized their private lives »with the victorious conclusion to the war« (p. 444) and thus with the most essential elements of Nazi politics for families in the *Kriegsgemeinschaft* (p. 467).

At a minimum, then, the regime was successful in convincing many ordinary Germans that wartime sacrifices gave them a right to compensation in terms of leave and all of the benefits associated with it. Especially in war correspondence, the authors wrote through »regular cycles of anticipation, presence, and renewed waiting« for leave (p. 467). During each of these phases, the authors recalled the normalcy of their everyday lives from the past, laid claim to both privacy and prosperity in the present on the basis of wartime sacrifices, and fantasized a full realization of these good times in the future. To be sure, these expectations were repeatedly postponed further into the future; but each time they were deferred, the authors accustomed themselves and their loved ones to both postponement and perseverance. Over time, victory became the accepted »precondition for the desired return to civilian life with a simultaneous improvement to their standard of living« (p. 464). The Nazi regime and its »Aryan Volk« effectively agreed to trade perseverance now in exchange for the »›fruits‹ of victory« (p. 461) later – either in full or to some minimum degree (p. 465). Indeed, Packheiser's exhaustive research shows that this consensus was generated both by conformist and nonconformist behavior and only reinforced arguably by impending defeat. Ironically, it took total defeat and a Cold War to finally realize this Nazi fantasy for German prosperity.

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