

Research impact: making a difference

Understanding World War II through the eyes of German soldiers

Professor Sönke Neitzel used secret transcripts of German prisoners of war to create a unique portrait of the mindset of soldiers during WWII

What was the problem?

For many decades after the end of World War II (WWII), a broad popular narrative—reinforced through thousands of films and books—cast the German military as unthinking tools of Nazi ideology. Only in recent years has a more nuanced view emerged, as represented in films like *Downfall* and the recent television series *Generation War*, both of which attempted to convey the war from the point of view of ordinary Germans.

This recasting of the war from the German perspective has been largely based on individual memoirs, diaries and interviews, many of which emerged long after the war ended. However, it was generally assumed that, because of the totalitarian nature of the Nazi military, no comparable records existed that could reveal what those who were actually doing the fighting and killing, the German soldiers, thought and felt about the war and their role in it.

What did we do?

LSE Professor of International History Sönke Neitzel specialises in the history of war, especially the First and Second World Wars. In 2001 Neitzel discovered a new source for researching the Third Reich and its military machine: secretly recorded conversations of German prisoners of war (POWs) in British and American captivity. The reports, held in the National Archives in London and Washington, D.C., run to about 150,000 pages.

Unlike official documents or even private letters—which German soldiers knew would be reviewed and censored—the recorded chats of the German POWs represent candid, even casual, exchanges between comrades. Neitzel discovered that the war created its own very specific frame of reference, one in which violence quickly became perceived as normal, even a necessity. However, within this framework, Neitzel's research revealed that German soldiers in the main acted on the same patterns as in peacetime: they did their work and sought acceptance amongst their comrades.

Neitzel's research revealed that most soldiers were not interested in National Socialism or the 'new order' that Nazi leaders sought to impose upon Europe. Their worldviews, shaped by the violent exigencies of war, were largely shaped by the core group to which they belonged, their unit, their duty, the next battle, and their weapons of war.

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Critically, Neitzel's research underscored that for most German soldiers the Second World War was in the main a continuation of the First World War: bigger, probably more brutal, but in the end the same war for the same reason, which was defence of the Homeland against foreign aggression. That the Second World War was of a totally different character—emphasising ethnic cleansing, genocide and global conquest—was not reflected, even though many soldiers spoke casually, even gleefully, about raping and killing civilians and prisoners.

What happened?

In 2011, based on his National Archives research, Neitzel published *Soldaten: On fighting, killing and dying: The Secret Second World War Tapes of German POWs*. Written with social psychologist Harald Welzer, the book's launch was held at the German Consulates in New York and Toronto.

Soldaten was an immediate bestseller in Germany, where it spawned two theatre plays and a television documentary. It was published in the UK in 2012 and became the basis of a Channel 4 documentary. The book was also published in the US, Australia and Canada and to date has been published in 20 translations, receiving major press coverage and positive reviews around the world.

In 2013, Neitzel published *Tapping Hitler's Generals: Transcripts of Secret Conversations 1942-45*, based on British intelligence eavesdropping of high-ranking German officers held in captivity at Trent Park, in the London suburb of Cockfosters. Based on 167 transcripts, *Tapping Hitler's Generals* suggests that Nazi military leadership was deeply divided about National Socialism and Adolf Hitler's ability to lead Germany. It also suggests that military leaders were aware of many Nazi atrocities, including the summary slaughter of civilians and the extermination of European Jewry, though opinions were divided about the justification of such actions.

Based on his *Soldaten* work, Neitzel was asked by the German Federal Agency of Civic Education to write a core education text to be distributed to all German grammar schools as part of its *Informationen zur politischen Bildung (Information on Political Education)* series. In *Das Zeitalter der Weltkriege (The Age of the World Wars)*, Neitzel encouraged students to step back from the usual black-and-white narrative dominating recent German school education and to engage with a more ambiguous interpretation of the outbreak of the World Wars (the First in particular), the character and global dimensions of these wars, the war experience and the ways in which they have been remembered. The text was published in spring 2014, with a print run of 700,000 copies, and distributed to all grammar schools as well as institutions for adult education and the armed forces.



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