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“It is not un-German to love Paris”: *Wehrmacht* Perceptions of Paris and the French during the Second World War

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On 14 June 1940, the streets of Paris were quiet. German troops entered the capital practically unopposed.¹ This fact alone distinguishes the final days of the battle of France and the subsequent occupation from previous conflicts between France and Germany. France’s official capitulation on the 24 June 1940 marked the beginning of four years of German occupation in northern and western France,² a time often reconstructed by popular French imagination as the darkest times of the war. The experiences of Germans, however, tell a vastly different story; German soldiers stationed in Paris actively interacted with French culture, Germans on the home front idealized the city as a welcome escape from their wartime lives, and Nazi officials spoke openly about their admiration for the French capital. Like many other elements of Nazi ideology, attitudes towards France and French civilians during the occupation were rife with contradictions; Nazi leaders praised France as a cultured nation with a rich history that was to be studied and respected by the German people. Simultaneously, however, they emphasized the backwardness and immorality of French culture, actively painting their hereditary enemy as shallow and immoral. As the capital of France, Paris became the focal point of these contradictions, representing both sophistication and degeneracy.

¹ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis Led German from Conquest to Disaster* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 132–33.

² *Ibid.*, 133.

This paradox, typical of Nazi ideology, reveals the numerous discrepancies between official propaganda and reality on the ground.

German animosity towards France was woven into the very foundation of the nation. The unification of Germany took place after the Franco-Prussian war in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles in 1871, and hostile feelings were further exacerbated by the events of the following decades. Germany's defeat by France in 1918 and the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles the following year consolidated the popular image of France as the hereditary enemy of Germany. As a consequence of the Treaty of Versailles, the Weimar Republic was crippled from its infancy by reparation payments to France and other allied nations. Adolf Hitler and the NSDAP came to power partially on a platform that promised to correct the injustices of Versailles, and while this element of revenge was not the only appeal of the Nazis, Hitler's successful demonization of the French provides some indication of popular sentiments towards them in late Weimar Germany. After 1933, official German policy towards France remained negative,³ and was heavily focused on espionage and general feelings of mistrust.⁴

The French declaration of war immediately following the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 marked the beginning of a new phase of Franco-German relations. The following spring, France quickly collapsed under the force of the German invasion. German troops entered Paris practically unopposed on 14 June 1940 and the official surrender of France occurred a little over a week later, with Hitler completing his

³ For an incident of this policy, see Michèle C. Cone's article, "French Art of the Present in Hitler's Berlin," *Art Bulletin* 80, no.3 (1998): 555–67.

⁴ Bertram M. Gordon, "Warfare and Tourism: Paris in the Second World War," *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 618.

humiliation of French officials by insisting that the armistice be signed in the same railway car at Compiègne as the German capitulation in 1918.⁵ This armistice divided France into an occupied zone in the north and west and a nominally independent area in the south and east under the control of the Vichy puppet government.⁶ The occupation of France marked the beginning of an unprecedented wartime relationship between France and Germany; in previous wars, while German troops had been stationed on French soil, they had remained only briefly (as in 1870–71) or had been immobilized in the trenches of Northern France. Now, German soldiers were free to move about France and experience its culture, monuments, and people.

Until recently, historians accepted that while Hitler and the Nazis fought a war of barbarization on the eastern front and committed unimaginable crimes, their treatment of the French largely conformed to the conventions of warfare. Christopher Neumaier, however, argues against this interpretation. He cites the dramatic increase in reprisal policy against acts of political resistance between 1941 and 1942 as evidence that the German attitude towards the French was not as innocuous as it is traditionally portrayed. According to Neumaier, a comparatively polite German attitude towards the French was conditional on their continued cooperation, and the perceived increase of resistance activities after 1941 correlated positively with German retribution.⁷ While Neumaier documents the inarguably sharp increase in German executions of French civilians, the causality of this increase is not directly related to the German perception

⁵ Richard J Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 132–33.

⁶ Richard J Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 133.

⁷ Christopher Neumaier, “The Escalation of German Reprisal Policy in Occupied France, 1941–1942” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no.1 (2006): 116–17.

of the French; the vast majority of those executed or imprisoned were established communists, overt political enemies, or ethnic Jews. While this distinction *does not* excuse the Nazis' crimes in France or deny the incredible suffering of millions of French (especially Jews and others persecuted by Nazi ideology under Hitler), it remains an established truth of Nazi racial ideology that the French were racially and culturally superior to Germany's eastern neighbours, and as such it was not the goal of the Third Reich to eliminate them as a race or nationality.⁸

Throughout the occupation, to be posted in Paris or to visit on holidays was seen as a welcome reprieve from the brutal fighting conditions of the other fronts of the war. Members of the *Wehrmacht* stationed on the eastern front subscribed disproportionately to the German travel magazine *Deutscher Wegleiter für Paris* because it allowed them a mental escape from their harsh realities.⁹ Attempting to capitalize on this desire, the Nazi organization *Jeder einmal in Paris* [everyone in Paris once] aspired to offer a holiday in Paris to every member of the German military.¹⁰ Although this goal was never achieved, the numbers of soldiers who were able to visit Paris is surprisingly high: *Wegleiter* claimed that one million tourists, albeit not all soldiers, participated in their Paris excursions.¹¹ The German government openly encouraged soldiers to tour Paris and experience its cultural and historical brilliance; sites frequently sanctioned by official government-organized tours included Napoleon's tomb at *Les Invalides*, *Place de la*

⁸ Bertram M. Gordon, "Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II" *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 633.

⁹ Melanie Gordon Krob, "Paris through Enemy Eyes: The Wehrmacht in Paris 1940-1944" *Journal of European Studies* 33, no.1 (2001): 3.

¹⁰ Gordon M. Bertram, "Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II" *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 622.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 621.

Concorde, l'École Militaire, Montmartre, Notre Dame Cathedral, and many other quintessentially French locations.¹² *Kraft durch Freude* coordinated tours to similar sites in occupied Paris under the premise of promoting understanding between the French and the Germans.¹³

Popular perceptions of France are perhaps most accurately captured in the observations of *Wehrmacht* soldiers stationed in Paris. Through journals, fictionalized accounts, photographs, and letters, members of the *Wehrmacht* recorded their experiences in the city of lights. In her 2001 article, “Paris through Enemy Eyes: The *Wehrmacht* in Paris 1940–1944,” Melanie Gordon Krob provides a fascinating cross-section of first hand observations of soldiers stationed in the French capital. According to Krob,

[t]he German military and occupying forces in France in 1940–4 saw Paris as much more than a conquered capital; Paris was an experience, one which touched every German personally and transformed many politically and culturally as well.¹⁴

For the soldiers stationed in Paris, the city seemed to epitomize the best of European culture as well as the future of Germany. The splendor of the capital captivated many members of the German army, and inspired naval officer and future author Lothar-Günther Buchheim to write that “Paris was the sparkling city between the war fronts; between the Atlantic ocean front and the bomb front, Germany. ‘Paris’—symbol for hope and

¹² Ibid., 622–23.

¹³ Gordon M Bertram, “Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II” *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 622.

¹⁴ Melanie Gordon Krob, “Paris through Enemy Eyes: The *Wehrmacht* in Paris 1940–1944” *Journal of European Studies* 31, no.3 (2001): 3.

survival.”¹⁵ Buchheim was not alone in expressing his admiration for the city: German infantryman Hans Joachim Kitzing, who was among the first troops to occupy Paris on 14 June 1940, wrote that “[a]lthough Paris was not pre-war Paris, it was still Paris, and its magic had its effect on a foreign visitor.”¹⁶ Paris was, to many soldiers, “a second spiritual fatherland.”¹⁷

France as “the land of romance and sex,” as well as high culture, superior food, and “the good life” in general was undeniably both experienced and propagated by the *Wehrmacht* and other visitors to Paris during the war years.¹⁸ German authorities strictly monitored brothels in Paris, with specific locations designated for exclusive use of the *Wehrmacht* and others for German officers. The preoccupation with controlling the spread of venereal diseases among the German army was unsuccessful: diseases spread rapidly among troops in spite of regulations.¹⁹ Furthermore, many German soldiers found French lovers and mistresses; *Wehrmacht* officer Ernst Jünger recorded in his diary that “Paris offers you these kinds of meetings, almost without you having to seek them.”²⁰ Jünger recorded his relationships with a series of Parisian women in his diaries and, while motivations for and durations of these types of relationships are difficult to estimate, he was certainly not alone in his liaisons with French women: estimates for the total number

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ Quoted in Melanie Gordon Krob, “Paris through Enemy Eyes: The *Wehrmacht* in Paris 1940–1944” *Journal of European Studies* 33, no.1 (2001): 5.

¹⁷ Quoted in Bertram M. Gordon, “Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II: *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 627.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 618.

¹⁹ Phillipe Burrin, *Living with Defeat: France under the German Occupation 1940–1944* (London:Arnold, 1996), 203–04.

²⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 205.

of children born to French women fathered by German soldiers range from fifty to seventy thousand.²¹

Like members of the *Wehrmacht* and tourists in Paris during the war, Nazi officials spoke openly of their attitudes towards France and the French. Hitler himself expressed open admiration for Paris and sought to model his future Germania (a renovated and glorified Berlin) on the French capital.²² Although the French declared Paris an open city before the signing of the armistice, Hitler had already issued orders to avoid its destruction, seeing it as a German “responsibility...to preserve undamaged this wonder of Western civilization.”²³ Hitler was the first public Nazi figure to tour Paris after Germany’s victory: his visit on 23 June 1940 included stops at Napoleon’s tomb, *Trocadéro*, and the Paris Opera.²⁴ Paris embedded itself firmly in Hitler’s mind: he told his companions that Paris had “always fascinated” him and that he was glad to have experienced its “magical atmosphere.”²⁵ Joseph Goebbels’ visit to Paris, which occurred shortly after Hitler’s, included many of the same stops. He recorded mostly positive impressions in his journals. In true Nazi fashion, tourist circuits during the occupation were modeled largely on the stops made by Hitler and Goebbels.²⁶

Attitudes towards Paris and the French, however, were not exclusively positive. In spite of the German *Wehrmacht*, Nazi officers, and civilian tourists expressing delight with their

²¹ Ibid., 207.

²² Melanie Gordon Krob, “Paris through Enemy Eyes: The Wehrmacht in Paris 1940–1944” *Journal of European Studies* 31, no.3 (2001):11–12.

²³ David Pryce-Jones, *Paris in the Third Reich: A History of the German Occupation, 1940–1944* (London: Collins, 1981), 13.

²⁴ Bertram M. Gordon, “Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II” *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 620.

²⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 620.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 620–22.

experiences in Paris, official German policy remained decidedly anti-French. Censorship laws prevented the publication of overtly Francophile material,²⁷ and France was presented in official publications such as *Deutscher Wegleiter für Paris* as a backwards nation that required German rehabilitation.²⁸ The Nazi government actively worked to re-educate the French about their new place in the Greater German Reich, funding a series of exhibitions in Paris aimed at emphasizing the common enemies and problems shared by France and Germany. Exhibitions denounced Freemasons, Jews, and Bolsheviks as the source of many problems, as well as informing the French that their future was inexorably intertwined with that of Germany. These exhibitions also sought to reshape the French perception of themselves as the cultural, artistic, and social leaders of Europe, emphasizing instead their subordinate nature to their German superiors. These exhibitions attracted hundreds of thousands of people to each event.²⁹

In addition to these exhibitions, the Nazis sought to bring the people of Paris and the larger French population in line with German culture through the arts, particularly theatre, literature, and music. The German Institute in Paris was responsible for this re-education. While the Germans experienced limited success with theatre and literature, German music became increasingly popular in Paris during the occupation. Between May of 1942 and July of 1943, thirty-one concerts showcasing German composers occurred in Paris. These concerts were

²⁷ Melanie Gordon Krob, "Paris through Enemy Eyes: the Wehrmacht in Paris 1940–1944" *Journal of European Studies* 31, no.3 (2001): 19.

²⁸ Bertram M. Gordon, "Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II" *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 622.

²⁹ Phillippe Burrin, *Living With Defeat: France Under the German Occupation 1940–1944*, (London: Arnold, 1996): 292–94.

highly popular among Parisians, in spite of warnings from the French resistance that music was a powerful propaganda tool.³⁰

The German Institute also coordinated a series of lectures intended for the “educated” population of Paris. These lectures included topics ranging from literature to economics, history, and even medicine. All of these lectures featured notable German speakers and emphasized Nazi ideas. Lectures were wildly popular: by 1942, an estimated 25,000 people attended lectures in Paris alone. Furthermore, approximately 100,000 French men and women actively attempted to learn the German language.³¹ When viewed in terms of the re-education of the French people, both the lecture series and the influx of German arts and culture in Paris foreground the contradictions inherent to the Nazi attitude towards Paris and the French: while Parisian culture was admired by most and respected by many, it nevertheless was subjugated to the same *Gleichschaltung* [“coordination”] undergone in Nazi Germany itself in the 1930s.³²

In spite of Hitler’s, Goebbels’, and other party members’ positive impressions of Paris, official German attitudes towards French visual arts during the war present an excellent example of the open contradictions of Nazism. Nazis acknowledged the validity of the contemporary Parisian art world by allowing both Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse—artists officially labeled as “degenerate” by the Reich—to continue to work, as well as extending an official invitation for Matisse to visit Germany in 1941.³³ Nazi officials, especially Hitler, Goebbels, Rosenberg, and Goering, demonstrated special interests in claiming French

³⁰ Phillipe Burrin, *Living with Defeat: France under the German Occupation 1940–1944* (London: Arnold, 1996): 296–98.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 305.

³² *Ibid.*, 297–98.

³³ Bertram M. Gordon, “Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II” *Annals of Tourism Research* 25:3 (1998), 626.

works of art for their personal collections as well as for German museums. By 1942, Goering had acquired a substantial collection of art from French museums, including works by Renoir, Degas, Manet, and Cézanne.³⁴ Goering openly acknowledged the illegality of his possession of these works, saying:

occupied France is a conquered country. In old days things were simpler, there was plundering, whoever conquered a country could do what he liked with its wealth. Now they do things more humanely. For my part I go plundering.³⁵

This wide-scale looting of French art by German officials is symptomatic of their larger regard for French culture and their recognition of its value; while the French may have been undeniably inferior to the Germans according to Nazi ideology and the political history of the Reich, even Nazi officials could not deny the rich cultural history of their western neighbours. Paradoxically—and perhaps spitefully—while many great works of art were pilfered by Germans, significant numbers were also destroyed; on 27 May 1943 alone, upwards of five hundred works by artists including Picasso were burnt.³⁶

Perhaps the most striking example of German fondness for the delights of the French capital and the paradoxical relationship between official anti-French policy and popular sentiment was the direct refusal to obey Hitler's order to destroy the city during the retreat of 1944. General Dietrich von Choltitz, head of the German forces in Paris, recognized that he

³⁴ David Pryce-Jones, *Paris in the Third Reich: A History of the German Occupation, 1940–1944* (London: Collins, 1981), 90.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

would be unable to hold the city but also saw the idea of its destruction as criminal. General Hans Spiedel also ignored similar orders to bomb Paris from above.³⁷ Hitler himself internalized this contradiction; although he ordered Paris to be burnt to the ground, he also acknowledged that he was “happy that [they] did not have to destroy Paris. As much inner calm as [he] experienced when [he] decided to destroy St. Petersburg and Moscow, that is how much pain [he] would have felt at the destruction of Paris.”³⁸ As Kurt Scheffler, a journalist and later an author and memoirist, concluded:

It is not un-German to love Paris. To hate it would be un-German... We arrive as pupils in this wonderfully rich city, and leave enriched, reverent, and, as such, better, more sensitive and more thoughtful. Better, one could even say, more German.³⁹

The irony of becoming “more German” by absorbing the cultural delights of Paris, a city that stands, even today, as a strong symbol of France and French culture, is unavoidable. In many ways, occupied Paris succeeded in pulling at the loose threads of Nazi ideology and exposing the numerous aporia of National Socialist thought. While official German policy remained decidedly anti-French during the occupation, many of the same officials who determined this policy praised Paris and its culture, collected French works of art, and dreamt of Paris as a symbol of Germany’s glorious future. Members of the *Wehrmacht*, who

³⁷ Bertram M. Gordon, “Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II” *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no.3 (1998): 629.

³⁸ Quoted in Melanie Gordon Krob, “Paris Through Enemy Eyes: The Wehrmacht in Paris 1940–1944” *Journal of European Studies* 31, no.3 (2001): 22.

³⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 22.

were expected to subjugate the conquered city, instead fell in love with its attractions and its people, many of them remembering that “it [was] painful to leave Paris.”⁴⁰ These contradictions, above all else, reveal the irreconcilable differences between inanimate ideology and reality on the ground. Once it had become apparent that the allies would reclaim Paris in 1944, the Nazis chose to make their final stand in *l'École Militaire*, a building holding significant historical value to the French, under the assumption that the allies would not fire on such a monumental target: they were wrong.⁴¹ While this strategy was unsuccessful, it clearly and ironically demonstrates the paradoxes of German attitudes towards Paris during the occupation.

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⁴⁰ Quoted in Melanie Gordon Krob, “Paris through Enemy Eyes: The Wehrmacht in Paris 1940–1944” *Journal of European Studies* 31, no.3 (2001): 7.

⁴¹ “Paris: Vive la Liberation” *Independent*, 30 August 2008. Travel section.