

Justifying Murder: Performativity in the Letters of Sergeant Mathias Müller, Police Battalion 309 (1941/42)

Introduction

The German-Soviet war from 1941-1945 was one of the most brutal and devastating episodes in military history. Extreme violence against civilians and mass murder of the Jewish population were integral parts of German warfare in the East. Personal testimonies of perpetrators produced close to the events like letters or diaries are not available in abundance. For obvious reasons many of them are also not very explicit about the atrocities. However, the performativity of the language reveals more meaning than is visible on the surface of the texts. This will be demonstrated in the example of the correspondence of the German policeman Mathias Müller. Careful examination of his letters can help us to understand how a perpetrator of war crimes dealt with his experiences in his practice of letter writing. Müller served in Police Battalion 309, which conducted mass executions of Jews and anti-partisan warfare in occupied Soviet territory from 1941 until his death in March 1942. During this period Müller wrote more than one hundred letters to his wife Meta.¹ A ‘thin description’ of the correspondence limited to what is actually said in the letters would probably yield the conclusion that Müller simply remained silent about what he and his unit did in the East. In contrast, as I show in this article, a ‘thick description’, that reads ‘between the lines’ and identifies narrative strategies across the series of letters leads to other conclusions.² I argue that Müller’s experiences and emotions not only left traces in his letters, but that he reacted to the challenges he faced by effectively justifying what he did without mentioning the justification’s object: mass murder. There is a significant *performative* dimension in this correspondence; ie. what he *did* with his words. I demonstrate that this performative dimension made references to the unspeakable and can be understood as attempt to justify murder to both himself and his wife. This suggests that for

¹ Hoover Institution, Muller (Matthias) correspondence 1938-1943, 1 manuscript box (no folders, letters uncatalogued and unsorted, mostly still in envelopes). Mind the different spelling of the archival holdings. Since all the letters cited in this article belong to this holding, subsequently I will refer to Müller’s letters to Meta just by “MM”. Other letters are referred to with names of writer and addressee.

² I am borrowing the concept of ‘thin’ and ‘thick description’ here from Gilbert Ryle’s theory of action and their analysis. See Gilbert Ryle, *The Thinking of Thoughts: What is ‘Le Penseur’ Doing?*, in: Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers*, vol. 2, Collected Essays 1929-1968, London, 1971, pp. 480-496, pp. 484f., 487.

Müller, letter writing was part of a set of discourses and practices enabling him to function as an executioner.

Quentin Skinner suggests that Austin's speech act theory can contribute useful tools to historians' methodological repertoire. Skinner is mainly interested in reconstructing the discursive context in which influential philosophical and political texts operate and how particular texts operate as parts of a larger process of communication.³ However, as I show in this case study, speech act theory can also be used to make visible in letters what is not said explicitly, but is nevertheless *meant* or *alluded* to. Allusion is a good example of something which cannot be said explicitly without failing the speech act.⁴ It is worth noting that there are different types of speech acts. Some refer to social conventions and cultural codes and are rather unambiguous; others like allusions (or e.g. indirect insults) rather refer to contexts, situations and individual dispositions. Due to the nature of the latter, there is no definite proof that these speech acts were *intended* or that they were successfully *taken up*.⁵ It is this second form of performatives we can see in Müller's writing practice. His attempt to justify murder is based on allusions.

In addition to drawing on speech act theory, the interpretation I present in this case study makes use of some common sense psychological considerations as all interpretations of human behaviour do, but also of some more sophisticated concepts. Changes in writing style, rhythm, hand-writing, or mistakes in grammar and spelling are often interpreted as indications of emotional imbalance, especially if they correlate with sensitive topics like death, killing or fear.⁶ Emotional imbalances can also result in 'slips of the pen' where authors say more than they usually would or talk about something they usually would remain silent about.⁷ Rather than understanding these textual marks in Freudian terms as effects of the 'unconscious', I prefer to interpret these as indicating temporary breakdowns of an author's 'mental compartmentalization'. As Davidson argues, mental compartmentalization allows individuals to hold inconsistent or even contradictory beliefs and desires or to play different roles in different contexts.⁸ Compartmentalization is very noticeable in Müller's correspondence. At

³ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1: Regarding Method, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 103-127, esp. p. 124.

⁴ Quentin Skinner, 'Conventions and the Understanding of Speech Acts', in: *The Philosophical Quarterly* 20, 79 (1970), pp. 118-138, p. 127f.

⁵ Skinner, *Visions*, p. 109.

⁶ Isa Schikorsky, 'Kommunikation über das Unbeschreibbare. Beobachtungen zum Sprachstil von Kriegsbrieffen', in: *Wirkendes Wort: Deutsche Sprache und Literatur in Forschung und Lehre* 42, 2 (1992), pp. 295-315, p. 302.

⁷ Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle. Emotional Survival in the Great War*, Manchester, 2009, pp. 20-21.

⁸ Donald Davidson, 'Paradoxes of Irrationality', in: Donald Davidson, *Problems of Rationality*, Oxford, 2004, pp. 169-187, p. 181; Carolin Showers, 'Compartmentalization of Positive and Negative Self-Knowledge: Keeping

times, he goes as far as completely cutting out the war – which is quite common in the genre of soldiers' wartime letters.⁹ However, at times this mental compartmentalization breaks down and these temporary breakdowns correlate in time with the unit's mass killings.

This case study draws on and contributes to existing research in two main sub-disciplines. The first is perpetrator studies, which attempt to explain the lethal performance of 'ordinary men'. In this field there has been a general tendency to move away from rather simplistic concepts like 'radical antisemitism' or 'willingness' towards more situational, contextual, and socio-psychological models. Peer pressure, camaraderie, group dynamics, or 'frames of reference' have become central to understandings of extreme collective violence.¹⁰ Most recent studies of perpetrators focus on the specific soldier communities emerging in wartimes and the internal relationships within them. Soldiers' contacts with relatives and friends at home are usually absent.¹¹ A second field of studies is the research on soldiers' letters (e.g. the *Feldpostforschung*) which has been thriving since the 1980s. Many scholars of this sub-discipline have emphasised the significance of wartime correspondence for keeping up morale, seeking emotional support.¹² What Müller does with words in parts of his correspondence suggests his wish for emotional support and protection of his reputation in the eyes of his wife. It can be viewed as what Goffman calls a 'face-keeping' exercise.¹³ But his letters also show similarities with those analysed by Müller and Kipp which convincingly suggest that soldiers prepared themselves for the war of annihilation by reproducing dehumanizing discursive patterns about the 'East', the Jewish and Slav populations.¹⁴

Bad Apples out of the Bunch', in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62, 6 (1992), pp. 1036-1049, p. 1037.

⁹ Schikorsky, 'Kommunikation', p. 300f.; Martin Humburg, *Das Gesicht des Krieges: Feldpostbriefe von Wehrmachtssoldaten aus der Sowjetunion, 1941-1944*, Opladen, 1998, p. 65; Klaus Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten – nationalsozialistischer Krieg? Kriegserlebnis – Kriegserfahrung, 1939-1945*, Paderborn, 1998, pp. 31-35.

¹⁰ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution*, New York, 1992, p. 188; Harald Welzer (unter Mitarbeit von Michaela Christ), *Täter: Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden*, Frankfurt/Main, 2006, p. 212; Harald Welzer & Sönke Neitzel, *Soldaten: Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*, Frankfurt, 2011, pp. 16ff.; Felix Römer, *Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht von Innen*, München, 2014, p. 468.

¹¹ An exception which discusses the role of women and their expectations regarding the soldiers' masculinity is: Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft: Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen, 2006, pp. 152-155.

¹² Humburg, *Gesicht*, pp. 59-72, Hester Vaizey, *Surviving Hitler's War: Family Life in Germany, 1939-1948*, Basingstoke, 2010, p. 57.

¹³ Erving Goffman, 'On Face-Work. An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction', in: Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual. Essays on face-to-face Behaviour*, New York 1967, pp. 5-45, pp. 6, 12, 16.

¹⁴ Sven Oliver Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten und ihre Feinde. Nationalismus an Front und Heimatfront im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Frankfurt/Main, 2007, pp. 24, 234-239; Michaela Kipp, '„Grossreinemachen im Osten“. Feindbilder in deutschen Feldpostbriefen im Zweiten Weltkrieg', Frankfurt/Main, 2014, pp. 377-408.

The letters of German soldiers in the Second World War usually have been studied in large samples with the aim of finding representative patterns.¹⁵ For all their merits, these studies of large samples tend to produce rather thin descriptions of soldiers' correspondences because analysis is limited to what is actually said in the letters; the how of what is written or which narrative strategies structure single or series of letters is usually beyond their scope. The soldiers are generally treated just as sources of information rather than as authors. This is even true of case studies about perpetrators' correspondences or diaries, which mostly focus on the degree of soldiers' openness about what happened in the East or use them as additional sources of information.¹⁶ Case studies based on thick descriptions of writing practices are, of course, less representative than those based on larger samples. However, as I hope to show in my analysis of Muller's correspondence, they gain in depth what they lose in scope.

The War in the East and the Police Battalion 309

'Operation Barbarossa', the German attack on the Soviet Union commenced on 22 June 1941. From the onset this was a war of annihilation. The Soviet state was to be destroyed and Soviet society was to be decapitated by killing political and socio-cultural elites. The Slavic members of the population had to be converted into 'helots' for German settlers, while the Jews as the alleged backbone of Bolshevism had to be eliminated because they had no place in the National-Socialist plan for the East. The German advance was only halted in late 1941 and brought almost half of European Russia under the control of the Wehrmacht and SS. This huge conquered territory then became the operational ground of Einsatzgruppen, police battalions, as well as security divisions and regular Wehrmacht units. Their combined task was to control and cleanse the occupied territories. Occupational policies, anti-partisan warfare, and the first

¹⁵ Ortwin Buchbender, *Das andere Gesicht des Krieges*, München, 1982; Wolfram Wette, *Der Krieg des Kleinen Mannes: eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, München, 1992; Humburg, *Gesicht*; Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten*; Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten*; Kipp, *Grossreinemachen*.

¹⁶ See e.g. Ludwig Eiber, '...ein bißchen die Wahrheit': Briefe eines Bremer Kaufmanns von seinem Einsatz beim Reserve-Polizeibataillon 105 in der Sowjetunion 1941', in: 1999: *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* 6, 1 (1991), pp. 58-83; Letters of the SS-Obersturmführer Karl Kretschmar (SK 4 a), in: Ernst Klee, Willi Dreßen, Volker Reiß (Eds.), *"Schöne Zeiten": Judenmord aus der Sicht der Täter und Gaffer*, Frankfurt/Main, 1988, pp. 154-161. Wartime diaries: Felix Landau, *Tagebuch des SS-Hauptscharführers F. Landau über seine Tätigkeit in Dohobycz, 1941-1944*, Ramat Gan 1963; Peter Lieb, 'Täter aus Überzeugung? Oberst Carl von Adrian und die Judenmorde der 707. Infanteriedivision 1941/42 – Das Tagebuch eines Regimentskommandeurs: Ein neuer Zugang zu einer berühmigten Wehrmachtsdivision', in: *Vierteljahreshefte zur Zeitgeschichte* 50 (2002), 4, pp. 523-557. Rather an exception represents: Nicholas Stargardt, 'The Troubled Patriot: German *Innerlichkeit* in World War II', in: *German History* 28, 3 (2010), pp. 326-342.

stage of the Holocaust became blended into each other.¹⁷ The murder of the Jewish population began almost immediately after the first German attack at the end of June 1941. In the first weeks German forces carried out mass executions; and there were also pogroms called ‘self-cleansing operations’, which were conducted by parts of the local population encouraged and assisted by German forces. Initially due to the deliberate vagueness of orders, the practice of mass murder was rather unsystematic. From August 1941, however, the murder of Soviet Jews became more systematic and larger in scale. From then on, not only adult male Jews were killed, but also women and children, and the process turned into wholesale annihilation. By the end of 1941 an estimated half million Jews had been murdered in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union.¹⁸

The police battalions sent to the occupied territories in the East were specialised units. They consisted of policemen used to dealing with ‘unruly civilians but also trained for war and occupation.’¹⁹ In contrast to the Einsatzgruppen, these police units were not extermination forces per se. However, depending on their deployment, some police battalions became heavily engaged in systematic mass murder and reserve police battalion 101 is a notorious example of this. Police battalions were usually at the disposal of Himmler’s SS and a ‘Higher SS-Police Leader’, but some units were also subordinated to the *Wehrmacht* and operated close to the front.²⁰ These were usually the ‘300er’ Battalions, which consisted of younger policemen aged around thirty like Müller who would be more capable of combat than those in the ‘100er’ battalions who were usually in their late thirties and early forties.²¹

During its whole operational history in the Eastern war, police battalion 309 was subordinated to the *Wehrmacht*. They crossed the German-Soviet border in the early hours of 22 June 1941 as part of the 221 security division. On 27 June 1941 the unit arrived in the city

¹⁷ Jürgen Matthäus, ‘Operation Barbarossa and the Onset of the Holocaust, June-December 1941’, in: Christopher Browning (with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus), *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish policy, September 1939-March 1942*, Lincoln, 2005, pp. 244-308, p. 251.

¹⁸ Peter Longerich, ‘From Mass Murder to the ‘Final Solution’: The Shooting of Jewish Civilians during the First Months of the Eastern Campaign within the Context of Nazi Jewish Genocide’, in: Bernd Wegner (Ed.), *From Peace to War. Germany, Soviet Russia and the World, 1939-1941*, Oxford, 1997, pp. 253-275, p. 254.

¹⁹ Edward B. Westermann, *Hitler’s police battalions. Enforcing racial war in the East*, Lawrence, 2005, p. 77f.; Ian Rich, *Holocaust perpetrators of the German police battalions. The mass murder of Jewish civilians, 1940-1942*, London, 2018, p. 51-74.

²⁰ Edward Westermann, ‘Himmler’s Uniformed Police on the Eastern Front: The Reich’s Secret Soldiers, 1941-1942’, in: *War in History* 3, 3 (1996), pp. 309-329, p. 314; Ben Shepherd, *War in the Wold East. The German Army and Soviet Partisans*, Cambridge, Mass., 2004, p. 51.

²¹ Browning, *Origins*, p. 230; Shepherd, *War*, p. 54; Westermann, *Police battalions*, p. 186. The men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 were on average 39 years old. Browning, *Ordinary men*, p. 48. There are some data available about the personnel of the Police Battalion 309’s 1 company in 1941: 50 per cent of the policemen were between 25 and 29 years old, 47 per cent belonged to the cohort of 30 to 35. BArch R20/58, Polizei-Bataillon 309, 1. Kompanie, O. U., den 26. Mai 1941., Bl. 14.

of Bialystok and committed one of the first major anti-Jewish massacres in the East.²² It is worth noting that the '309ers' do not seem to have needed any process to become used to committing mass murder—in contrast to Browning's findings in the case of the 'ordinary' men of police battalion 101.²³ Just five days after the war had started, on the same day that they entered Bialystok, the 309ers engaged in a frenzy of killing. Even if they had become used to violence and brutalization during their deployment in the German occupying regime in Poland, the qualitative shift in their behaviour is striking.²⁴ The killing seems to have started shortly after arrival and throughout the day policemen hunted down the Jewish inhabitants and shot many of them on the spot. There seems to have been no need to overcome any inhibitions and orders don't seem to have been necessary; members of the unit seem to have acted on their own following the initiative of lower-ranking officers and NCOs. The killings continued for several hours and culminated in an act of utmost savagery. The policemen herded several hundred Jews into the main synagogue, under the command of Lieutenant Heinrich Schneider, and then set fire to the building. The Jewish victims either burned alive, died of suffocation, or were shot down by the surrounding police when they tried to escape through the windows.²⁵

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that police battalion 309 went berserk in Bialystok. But it is also worth noting that their actions were rather exceptional, in relation to the 309ers usual conduct and in relation to the actions of German forces in general. Both the SS-leadership and commanders on the ground normally aimed at more organised and 'orderly' forms of mass murder, and they usually succeeded. Turning mass murder into a kind of professional work process was one important element in achieving on-going lethal efficiency.²⁶

The operational history of police battalion 309 in the weeks of the invasion after the Bialystok massacre is quite complex and difficult to trace from the army files. But it is clear that as the unit moved East, it played an important role in murdering large parts of the Jewish population in Belorussia in July and August 1941.²⁷ Subsequently the battalion followed the

²² Heiner Lichtenstein, *Himmlers grüne Helfer. Die Schutz- und Ordnungspolizei im »Dritten Reich«*, Köln, 1990, pp. 69-96; Stefan Klemp, 'Kölner Polizeibataillone in Osteuropa: Die Polizeibataillone 69, 309 und 319 und die Polizeireservekompanie Köln', in: Harald Buhlan & Werner Jung (Hg.), *Wessen Freund und wessen Helfer? Die Kölner Polizei im Nationalsozialismus*, Köln, 2000, pp. 277-298, pp. 279-284; Shepherd, *War*, pp. 66-69.

²³ Browning, *Ordinary men*, p. 188.

²⁴ Westermann, *Police battalions*, pp. 162; Rich, *Holocaust perpetrators*, pp. 76, 84, 91.

²⁵ Westermann, *Police battalions*, pp. 174f.; Peter Longerich, *Holocaust: The Nazi Persecution and the Murder of the Jews*, Oxford, 2010, p. 203. For more details see Wolfgang Curilla, *Die deutsche Ordnungspolizei und der Holocaust im Baltikum und in Weissrussland, 1941-1944*, Paderborn, 2006, pp. 511-518.

²⁶ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, p. 161; Welzer, *Täter*, pp. 136-142.

²⁷ Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944*, Hamburg, 1999, p. 540; Christian Hartmann, *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg. Front und militärisches Hinterland 1941/42*, München, 2009, p. 680.

advancing armies of the army group centre into Central Russia and was later deployed in the fourth army and second tank army and subordinated to army rear commands (*Korück*) 580 and 532 respectively. In autumn 1941 the battalion arrived in the region of Bryansk where it would stay until its withdrawal in May 1942.²⁸ While in the more Western parts of occupied Soviet territory Holocaust and anti-partisan warfare often became blurred, this was less the case in central Russian areas where almost no Jews had lived before the war. In these territories, the 309ers were mainly engaged in anti-partisan warfare. Therefore, compared to other police battalions the involvement of the ‘309ers’ in the Holocaust was very intensive but quite short-lived.²⁹

The Man, his Wife, and the Letters

The ‘real’ Mathias Müller is a shadowy figure who can only be glimpsed through the lines of his letters. He was born in Bonn in 1913 and would have been 28 by the time he took part in the Bialystok massacre. Apart from his profession, we know nothing about his or his wife’s socio-economic background. Müller referred to himself as a police officer (Schutzmann),³⁰ and his age and rank as sergeant in the late 1930s suggest he hadn’t been particularly successful in terms of his career. However, the form and content of his letters point to middle-class aspirations. He makes a number of references to the cultural life of Bonn, for example, remarking at one point that a particular opera has not often been staged in the city.³¹ Even if policemen were often of rather humble social origins and not overly well paid, they nevertheless enjoyed a great deal of security which kept them apart from the lower and working classes.³² Müller seems to be a good example of personal identification with respectable society. The letters’ outer appearance, his frequent apologies for ink stains, crossed out words and the fact that he sometimes had to write with a pencil instead of a proper pen all suggest that Müller saw himself not only as a man of order and ‘propriety’ by profession, but also in private life.³³ In terms of his worldview and political attitudes, it seems quite telling that the above-mentioned Lieutenant Heinrich Schneider, nick-named ‘Pipo’ was the only member of

²⁸ The operational history of the Police Battalion 309 is meticulously described in Curilla, *Ordnungspolizei*, S. 508-526.

²⁹ See e.g. for Police Battalions 105 and 303: Karl Schneider, “*Auswärts eingesetzt*”. *Bremer Polizeibataillone und der Holocaust*, Essen, 2011; Edward B. Westermann, ‘Ordinary Men’ or ‘Ideological Soldiers’? Police Battalion 310 in Russia, 1942’, in: *German Studies Review*, 21, 1 (1998), pp. 41-68.

³⁰ MM, 1 September 1941.

³¹ MM, 28 December 1941.

³² His-Huey Liang, *The Berlin Police Force in the Weimar Republic*, Berkeley, Cal., 1970, pp. 57-63.

³³ MM, 4 October 1941; 22 October 1941; 23 November 1941; 9 January 1942.

Battalion 309 who Müller refers to by name in his letters. He obviously considered Schneider to be a friend as well as a professional comrade. Schneider once even wrote an annex in one of Müller's letters, which was completely exceptional and demonstrates the closeness of the two men. In this annex Schneider uses the less formal 'Heinz' instead of 'Heinrich' and his words convey a laddish familiarity.

*“Dear Meta! Many thanks for the ‘promotion’ to captain. However, I am surprised about the label ‘robber’. We are still civilised and take a bath every eight days. Regards, Heinz Schneider.”*³⁴

Schneider was notorious in the battalion for his anti-Jewish actions. Quite often he seems to have taken the initiative to hunt down and murder Jews and partisans without orders from his superiors, and members of the battalion seem to have willingly participated in his actions or attended them as spectators.³⁵ The fact that Schneider's reputation as a 'Jew-hunter' does not seem to have irritated Müller and that their friendship lasted until Müller's death give us some indication about his attitudes towards Jews and the war of annihilation in the East.³⁶ Apart from the letters, only Müller's NSDAP membership card gives us some additional information about him.³⁷ He became a party member in 1940, which seems rather late for a policeman and may suggest that this was an opportunistic step.³⁸ Nevertheless, his letters reveal that he fully embraced Nazi ideology and German war aims in the East.³⁹ Sometimes single sentences speak volumes; for example, in one letter Müller comments on the news of the death of Udet and Mölders: *‘The Fuhrer must have been very upset about this.’*⁴⁰

Before the war in the East, Müller had already participated in the occupation of the 'Sudetenland' in 1938.⁴¹ By 1940 he was serving in the newly created police battalion 309 and

³⁴ MM, 12 June 1941. Part of the reason for this may be the fact that Müller as a platoon leader (*Zugführer*) did hesitate to familiarize with his subordinates too much and was keeping his social relations at eye level. 'Pipo' is mentioned in seven letters, sometimes even called 'Pips'. In the letter from 12 August 1941 Müller conveyed Schneider's greetings to Meta after she obviously had sent him greetings in a letter before.

³⁵ Curilla, *Ordnungspolizei*, p. 520. In general, 'execution tourism' was a quite frequent phenomenon on the Eastern Front. Welzer/Christ, *Täter*, p. 133.

³⁶ Müller mentions Schneider in very friendly tone in two of his late letters: MM, 4 February 1942; 22 February 1942.

³⁷ BArch Berlin (former Berlin Document Centre), NSDAP-Gaukartei, No. 7446998.

³⁸ Almost two thirds of all German policemen in 1941 were members of the party and party membership was important for advancement. Westermann, Himmler's Uniformed Police, p. 312f.

³⁹ This becomes apparent in several letters on a very regular basis when Müller writes about 'Germany's fate', the '*Führer's* wisdom', etc., e.g. MM, 23 June 1941; 5 July 1941; 7 July 1941; 8 August 1941; 27 September 1941; 23 November 1941.

⁴⁰ MM, 23 November 1941.

⁴¹ MM, 31 October 1938, where Müller gives on the envelope the sender's address: Neu Titschein, Mähren, 2. Pol. Regt. III. Bat. 11 mot. Div. In the letter he refers to the fact that the population of the villages in the territories given to the Germans did not speak German and made a very poor impression. In the occupation of the 'Sudetenland' did not only take part units of the *Wehrmacht*, but also police forces and *Einsatzgruppen*.

deployed with his unit to Poland.⁴² Müller's last letter is dated 3 March 1942 and was written shortly before his company was deployed to the village of Radutino for an anti-partisan operation. In Radutino the policemen faced many more and much better equipped partisans than expected.⁴³ German commanders were quite aware that the quality of partisan warfare in occupied areas had changed during the winter of 1941/42. Orders had been given that only companies reinforced by auxiliary forces were to conduct operations.⁴⁴ It seems, however, that the commanders on the ground still struggled to adjust to these changes in orders and the situation on the ground. The partisans in Radutino were militarily well-led and they managed to separate and encircle one platoon from the rest of the company. After the German policemen lost their light artillery and machine guns due to technical failures the partisans scored a swift victory. Müller's company alone lost a quarter of its men and Müller was among the casualties whose bodies had to be left behind.⁴⁵ Despite the fact that he was listed among those killed in action in the combat report, in April 1942 his wife Meta had still received no news of his death.⁴⁶

Meta (née Kau) is an even more shadowy, but almost more interesting, character than Müller. She seems to have been a rather independent woman compared to most of her female peers in Nazi Germany at that time.⁴⁷ In the 1930s she had spent considerable time in England and returned to Germany because of the war scare during the 'Munich Crisis' of September 1938. Her anglophile propensity caused some tension in her family and in one letter from England she felt compelled to reassure her relatives with the words: "...my heart is German and will always be...".⁴⁸ After she returned to Germany she continued corresponding with her

(operational units) which 'cleansed' the territory from 'political unreliable elements'. See Research Institute for Military History, Potsdam (Ed.), *Germany and the Second World War*, vol. 5, Bernhard R. Kroener, Rolf-Dieter Müller, Hans Umbreit, 'Organisation and Mobilization of the German Sphere of Power, Part I, Wartime administration, economy and resources 1939-1941', Oxford, 2000, pp. 24-32. A letter addressed to Meta from the 21 August 1939 finds Müller in Berlin where he spent his holidays. Since there are no letters between this one and May 1940 it is probable that he returned to the Rhineland and was together with Meta.

⁴² Klemp, 'Polizeibataillone', p. 279f.

⁴³ This was due to support of partisan units by the Red Army, supply by airlifts etc. Westermann, *Police battalions*, p. 187f.; Shepherd, *War*, p. 110.

⁴⁴ Because of the loss of whole units in reconnaissance operations single platoons should no longer act on their own, but only whole companies enforced by machine gun detachments and light artillery. BArch RH-23-22, Anlageband II zum Kriegstagebuch des Korück Pz.A.O.K. 2, 8.2.42 – 31.3.42, Kdt. d. rückw. Armeegebiet Pz.AOK 2, Kdt. Brjansk und Ordshonikidsegrad Br.B. Nr. 36/42 geh. O.U., den 8. März 1942, Bl. 82-84, Bl. 83.

⁴⁵ BArch RH-23-22, Anlageband II zum Kriegstagebuch des Korück Pz.A.O.K. 2, 8.2.42 – 31.3.42, Pol. Batl. 309, 3. Kompanie, O. U., den 12. März 1942, Gefechtsbericht der 3./309 am 11. 3. 1942, Bl. 94-98, Bl. 97.

⁴⁶ Gerhard Metz to Meta Müller, 16 April 1942.

⁴⁷ Meta was eager to have a job and she also wanted to learn to drive a car. MM, 14, 15, 16. August 1941; 24 August 1941; 24 February 1942.

⁴⁸ "...mein Herz ist deutsch und wird es immer bleiben...". Meta an Familie Kau, letter without date (1938).

English friends and received the last letter from England shortly before the attack on Poland.⁴⁹ This suggests that she wasn't a convinced National-Socialist unlike Müller's sister Hanne who ended one of her letters with the words:

*“For now Mathias, farewell, and beat the reds wherever you can. There is only one solution: get rid of such damned beasts. Victory and Salvation [Sieg und Heil – F. S.], yours, Hanne.”*⁵⁰

The fact that Müller included Hanne's letter in the envelope with one of his own letters to Meta seems significant. His comment “...how nicely she writes to me.”⁵¹ may well have been an allusion to Meta's lack of enthusiasm.

We do not know how Meta reacted because Müller destroyed her wartime letters on a regular basis and shortly before his death he wrote “...nobody should read our letters...”⁵² It is clear that he considered their letters as form of living conversation which had great value in the present but were not for posterity. While this leaves us with only half of the correspondence, it also suggests that Müller had little reason to censor himself because he expected his wife to destroy his letters.⁵³ Meta, however, seems to have kept all of Mathias' letters, including small notes he added to parcels, and she even seems to have ironed some of them. Because of her diligence, the set of Müller's letters seems nearly complete which is important for my structural analysis in this case study.

Meta's wartime voice only resonates in Müller's letters when he refers to topics brought up by her, answers her questions or declines to do so. There are few clues, however, about how she responded to the war in general or Müller's role in particular. Nevertheless, there is one incident when she obviously expressed her horror about some photographs Müller had asked her to develop.⁵⁴ The letter does not say what the photos showed, but it is quite probable that they were snapshots of executed 'partisans'. This was a very typical practice at the time and Müller and his comrades must have had plenty of opportunities to produce such 'trophies'.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Mary [surname unknown] to Meta Kau, 22 August 1939.

⁵⁰ Hanne to Mathias Müller, Treysa, 21 July 1941. Female expectation of 'hardness' and encouragement to it in anti-partisan warfare seems to have been a quite common phenomenon. See Kühne, *Kameradschaft*, p. 154f.; For similar reactions like Hanne's see Kipp, *Grossreinemachen*, pp. 234-235.

⁵¹ MM, 5 August 1941.

⁵² MM, 16 February 1942.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Snapshots of the victims of atrocities were a rather common genre of soldiers' war photography. See Nicholas Stargardt, *The German war: a nation under arms, 1939-1945: citizens and soldiers*, New York, 2015, 168f, 172, 233. See also Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (Hg.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944*. Ausstellungskatalog, Hamburg, 2002, pp. 109-122. In this respect soldiers were much more outspoken about the war in pictures than in the written word. Regarding 'trophy collecting' see also

This incident and Müller's obvious worries about it indicate that Meta's expectations set limits to what and how he could write about his experiences. And this could be one reason why he had to resort to allusions.

Silences, traces of emotional imbalances, and allusions in Müller's letters

Müller's letters are no exception to the general rule that wartime correspondence was overwhelmingly private in character and tended not to mention the horrors of war or the murder of the Jewish population.⁵⁶ Soldiers' letters are generally highly selective and in several respects even 'silent' documents.⁵⁷ The reason for this was not military censorship, which was neither comprehensive nor particularly intimidating.⁵⁸ Rather these silences seem to reflect masculine chivalry, the wish not to disquiet the addressees, or simply the limits of soldiers' ability or willingness to express their experiences in writing. Consequently, breaking the silence about atrocities and references to normally 'taboo' topics are not only interesting in themselves, they also indicate emotional imbalances on the part of the author.⁵⁹ We find several occurrences of this sort in Müller's letters, which can be correlated to certain activities and different operations of police battalion 309.

Stage 1: The Bialystok Massacre

We know that Müller was not only present in Bialystok during the massacre that took place on 27 June 1941, as a member of the third company he must have been at the centre of events. Yet Müller says nothing about the massacre in his letter dated that day. Moreover, his 27 June letter conveys such normality that it is hard to believe it was written by someone who had just taken part in mass killing: Müller is happy that he has received confirmation of his promotion and about the victories of the German forces; no cloud seems to darken his personal sky.⁶⁰ Of course, it is possible that the letter is misdated—which occasionally occurs in the series.⁶¹ But a more plausible reason for the normality of the letter is that Müller wrote it in the morning *before* the massacre, which we know began in the afternoon. There are at least two reasons for

Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing. Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare*, New York, 1999, pp. 25-31, esp. p. 26.

⁵⁶ Roughly 90 percent of Müller's letters consist of 'private conversation' which sometimes could one make forget about the fact that he was at war. In this respect Müller's letters are quite representative for the genre in general. See Humburg, *Gesicht*, p. 65; Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten*, pp. 31-35; Vaizey, *Surviving*, 44f.

⁵⁷ Kühne, *Kameradschaft*, p. 70; Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten*, p. 28; Stargardt, *German war*, p. 168, 170f.

⁵⁸ Kipp, *Grossreinemachen*, p. 247.

⁵⁹ Schikorsky, 'Kommunikation', p. 299, 304; Roper, *Secret War*, p. 20; Humburg, *Gesicht*, p. 62.

⁶⁰ MM, 27 July 1941.

⁶¹ In at least two cases Müller was mistaken about the month, but this is a rather rare occurrence in his practice of letter writing.

assuming this was the case. In a letter from late September Müller describes his usual state after taking part in an ‘operation’.⁶²

*“During the day the operations are conducted and drastic, merciless action is taken. If one sits in the digs again, at first one has to gather oneself to erase from memory all that had happened during the day. The nerves and everything have been so strained that it takes a while until one is able to think clearly again.”*⁶³

Müller may have been a merciless killer, but these words suggest that he was neither enjoying killing nor was finding it easy.⁶⁴ Moreover, it seems implausible that by late September, after spending three months of violence and murder in Russia, he should have become less accustomed to lethal action. Given the way he describes the after-effects of ‘operations’, it is difficult to imagine that he would not have been affected in a similar or much stronger way by the savage events in Bialystok.

The second reason for assuming that Müller’s 27 June letter was written before the massacre is found in the letter of 1 July which was definitely written *afterward and shows clear signs of emotional disturbance* (as discussed below). It is again possible that one or two letters in the collection are missing, either due to accident or because Meta destroyed them precisely *because* they dealt with the events in Bialystok. However, this latter possibility seems implausible given the discursive pattern of Müller’s letters:⁶⁵ atrocities are simply not part of his discourse: they are literally ‘indescribable’.⁶⁶ While the break in the correspondence after 27 June was rather long given that Müller typically wrote a letter every other day, this can be explained by the fact that his battalion left Bialystok shortly after the massacre and was on the move for the next few days. This would have given him little time to write, or the opportunity to make up his mind how he would deal with what he had experienced. In contrast to the

⁶² I tried to translate Müller’s letter as close to the original as possible which sometimes results in rather awkward English. By German standards Müller does not write on a literary level, but rather simple German with many phrases that are difficult to translate.

⁶³ MM, 27 September 1941.

⁶⁴ In this respect Müller would have been in good company because there are indications that many soldiers did not take their murderous tasks easy. The police battalion 322, e.g. had an “unusual high number of ill soldiers” when in August 1941 the unit was facing a larger execution. Andrej Angrick, Martina Vogt, Silke Ammerschubert, Peter Klein, “Da hätte man schon Tagebuch führen müssen”: Das Polizeibataillon 322 und die Judenmorde im Bereich der Heeresgruppe Mitte während des Sommers und Herbstes 1941, in: Helge Grabitz, Klaus Bästlein, Johannes Tuchel (Hg.), *Die Normalität des Verbrechens: Bilanz und Perspektiven der Forschung zu den nationalsozialistischen Gewaltverbrechen. Festschrift für Wolfgang Scheffler zum 65. Geburtstag*, Berlin, 1994, pp. 325-384, p. 342. See also Browning, *Ordinary men*, p. 170-171; Welzer/Christ, *Täter*, p. 106.

⁶⁵ The only trace of the events in Bialystok in Müller’s correspondence is the remark to a photograph he had sent to Meta which shows Müller with his comrades lined up for the inspection of a general (probably Major General Pflugbeil, the commander of the 221st Security Division) who praised the battalion for its accomplishments in the battle for Bialystok. MM, 27 September 1941.

⁶⁶ Schikorsky, ‘Kommunikation’, p. 304. A similar example is the soldier ‘Michael B.’ mentioned in Kipp, *Grossreinemachen*, p. 404.

normality of the letter he wrote on the morning of the massacre, the letter dated 1 July marks significant changes in Müller's writing practice:

*"The Russians are an ill-assorted rabble. All possible races and types of people. Europeans, Asians etc. One could get really scared of these faces. And then the coward[ly] and malicious way of warfare. We roamed through country roads, villages, and huge woods and everywhere we got the same picture. Always we were shot in the back. The worst were the snipers in the trees. The shooting came from all directions and nobody knew where from. I can tell you, we had to be on the alert. With my M.G. I shot into the trees so the branches just split away. Everything that was sitting in the trees were Mongols. Completely animalized people."*⁶⁷

This letter is interesting for several reasons. It is the first time that Müller refers to violence, but he is referring mainly to the violence and 'malicious' ways of the enemy's warfare. His company's acts of violence appear as pure 'defence' against alleged non- or half-human enemies. In this letter, Müller also picks up elements of the well-known 'sniper' discourse (*Heckenschützen*) that dates back to World War I and German representations of the occupation of Belgium. This sniper-discourse was already manifest during the 1939 invasion of Poland and intensified during and after 'Operation Barbarossa' in the wider context of anti-partisan warfare in the East.⁶⁸ The military leadership and commanders on all levels made their soldiers aware of the 'sniper' threat and many soldiers reproduced this discourse in their letters.⁶⁹ Major Weis, the commander of Police Battalion 309, produced a brief report about the unit's actions in Bialystok for his superiors, which summed up the events as counter-measures against 'snipers'. This very short, clumsy text reiterates both *Heckenschützen* and *Baumschützen* twice, as if the author felt the desperate need to nail down the operation's rationale as an act of 'self-defence'.⁷⁰ It is likely that this rationale had been conveyed to the 309ers in the commanders' daily orders and speeches.⁷¹ The official rhetoric was also useful

⁶⁷ 'Die Russen selbst ist ein zusammen gewürfelter Haufen. Allerlei Rassen und Menschentypen. Europäer, Asiaten u. s. w. Also man könnte vor den scheusslichen Gesichtern direkt Angst bekommen. Dann noch das feige und hinterhältige Kriegführen. Wir sind an Landstrassen, Dörfern und durch riesige Wälder gestreift und erlebten überall dasselbe Bild. Man schoss stets aus dem Hinterhalt auf uns. Am schlimmsten waren die Baumschützen. Es schoss aus allen Ecken und man wusste nicht woher. Ich kann Dir sagen, da hiess es aufpassen. Mit meinem M. G. habe ich in die Bäume geschossen, dass die Äste nur so splitterten. Alles was in den Bäumen sass waren Mongolen. Ganz vertierte Menschen.' MM, 1 July 1941.

⁶⁸ Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten*, pp. 187-194; Kipp, *Großreinemachen*, p. 377. For the prehistory of this discourse see John Horne & Alan Kramer, *German atrocities, 1914: a history of denial*, New Haven, 2001, pp. 89ff., 406-409.

⁶⁹ Examples: Walter Kempowski, *Echolot. Barbarossa '41. Ein kollektives Tagebuch*, München, 2002, pp. 23, 59, 74, 98 120, 122, 141; Eiber, "...ein bißchen die Wahrheit", pp. 58-83.

⁷⁰ BArch RH-26-221-20. Sich.Div.221 – Ia, Kriegstagebuch – Anlagen Band V z. K.T.B 2 vom 12. 5. – 7. 7. 41. Polizeibataillon 309. Ia, O.U., den 27. Juni 1941, Bl. 187: An Sicherungsdivision 221, Abt. Ia. Betrifft: Abendmeldung. Bezug: Befehl der Sich.Div. 221 Abt. Ia Nr. 440/41.

⁷¹ Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten*, p. 114; Kipp, *Grossreinemachen*, p. 377.

in private correspondence and gave Müller the opportunity to justify his actions without even mentioning them. We might also say that here we see the self-referential dimension of letter writing: the author partly ‘speaks’ to himself as a strategy of self-affirmation and reassertion.⁷² Subsequent letters demonstrate that there was indeed some work for Müller to do in this area.

Stage 2: State of emotional emergency

Müller’s letter from 2 August 1941 represents another rupture in his correspondence. It differs significantly from preceding letters in form and content. Usually Müller wrote letters two pages long and used all the space on both sides of the paper. This time his letter was longer, but on page three there is a break, which suggests he was either running out of topics or he had no time to continue. There is a new paragraph (which is unusual in his writing) and it is written in a very different style that barely conceals his emotional agitation. The following extract is worth analysing in detail.

‘Meanwhile we moved on and went through a great deal. Here in the large forests a lot of Russians hid and they waged a malicious war behind our backs. We are searching the forests for the gangs and often you cannot go further because they shoot so much. However, there is no pardon given to them. From the highest trees we track them down [1a]. Those are not soldiers any more, they are rather like animals. Once we get them, we make short shrift of them [1b]. The same with the Jews [1c]. This gang will also be in for a nasty surprise [1d]. In the villages and the cities they are overall in the majority. With the Russians as with us they attempted to get on the right side. But we are just waiting for that to be able to collar them [1e]. The ~~Russians~~^{Jews [2]} have a lot to answer for [1f].’⁷³

⁷² Humburg, *Gesicht*, p. 71.

⁷³ ‘Nun sind wir wieder weitergerückt und haben da so allerhand wieder erlebt. Hier in den grossen Wäldern haben sich viele Russen versteckt und führen dort im Rücken von uns ~~allerhand~~ einen hinterhältigen Krieg. Wir suchen in den Wäldern die Banden und oft kann man kaum vorwärts kommen so schiessen die Brüder. Es gibt aber für die kein Pardon. Aus den höchsten Bäumen holen wir sie runter. Das sind keine Soldaten mehr, dass sind schon mehr Tiere. Wenn wir sie haben wird kurzer Prozess gemacht. Genau mit den Juden. Die Bande wird auch noch ihr Wunder erleben. In den Dörfern und Städten sind die überall in der Mehrzahl vorhanden. Bei den Russen hatte sie sich genau wie sie es jetzt bei uns versuchen wollen lieb Kind gemacht. Aber das wollen wir ja nur sehen damit wir die Brüder gleich beim Schlawitschchen kriegen können. Die ~~Russen~~^{Juden} haben viel auf dem Gewissen.’ MM, 2 August 1941. There is a certain difficulty with this letter because Müller also dated another letter on the 2nd August. This letter entails congratulations to Meta’s birthday and is written in a completely different manner than the second part of the letter under scrutiny. Rarely, but sometimes Müller dated letters wrongly, e.g. erring in the right month, or did not date a letter at all. Judging from the outer appearance, colour of ink and paper, the letter looks more similar to those written in July. This would make sense because the content probably refers to events that took place in July. If, however, the letter was written earlier or only partly finished on 2nd August or even withheld until this day because Müller was not sure, whether to send it or not, then, given its problematic content, it remains somehow a mystery why of all times he chose Meta’s birthday to send the letter. Since not all envelopes survived it is also unclear, whether both letters dated on 2nd August had been sent together.

First of all, it is interesting that Müller uses many active formulations ('we do/have...') instead of more passive constructions ('it has been done/one does...') which are more common in German than in English and a convenient linguistic device for neutralizing information and denying personal involvement.⁷⁴ We can separate eight steps on two different time levels (1a-f and 2) where (1) refers to the writing process and (2) to the proof reading and revision:

(1a) Once again, Müller resorts to the concept of 'tree-snipers' and their 'malicious' approach to warfare.

(1b) He reinforces his point by dehumanizing the enemy as 'animals', which was a widespread pattern also on the German home front and turns 'making short shrift' of them into a legitimate self-defence.⁷⁵

(1c) He then makes clear that what applies to the Russian snipers also applies to Jews. In this implicit equation of snipers and Jews we see one of the most powerful discursive patterns used in the German war of annihilation in the East.⁷⁶ Moreover, the sentence (*Das Gleiche mit den Juden*) is remarkable in form and content. It is the first time Müller mentions Jews in his letters at all. He implies that he and his comrades make short shrift of them but avoids writing this explicitly. In this paragraph the rhythm of language changes and becomes dynamic. The sentences are much shorter than usual for Müller; they unfold like hammer blows, becoming shorter and shorter until they end in an elliptic sentence. Producing ellipses in this way is an indication that an author hesitates to address something directly.⁷⁷

(1d) He makes a prophecy about the Jews' fate and he gives the addressee to understand that he *knows* what will happen. Once again he conceals the meaning behind a rather uncompromising phrase '...be in for a nasty surprise' (...*ihr Wunder erleben*);

(1e) He gives a kind of a rationale for the Jews' fate: their sheer numbers, presence, and ways of 'ingratiating' themselves. This obviously refers to German discourses about 'the Jew' and their alleged 'parasitic' ways of living among other peoples.⁷⁸ However, until this point in the letter, Müller says nothing about any 'malicious' Jewish activities which would justify 'making short shrift' of them.

⁷⁴ Passive language was a very widespread technique to conceal agency – in military, but also in private communication of soldiers. Schikorsky, 'Kommunikation', p. 304; Kipp, *Grossreinemachen*, p. 407.

⁷⁵ Stargardt, *German war*, p. 163.

⁷⁶ Mark Edele & Michael Geyer, 'States of Exception: The Nazi-Soviet War as a System of Violence, 1939-1945', in: Michael Geyer & Sheila Fitzpatrick (Eds.), *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism compared*, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 345-395, p. 354.

⁷⁷ Schikorsky, 'Kommunikation', p. 304.

⁷⁸ Wolfgang Benz, 'Von der "Judenfrage zur Endlösung": Zur Geschichte mörderischer Begriffe', in: Wolfgang Benz (Ed.), *Feindbild und Vorurteil: Beiträge über Ausgrenzung und Verfolgung*, München, 1996, pp. 89-114, p. 113.

(1f) He returns to ‘the Russians’ as those who ‘have a lot to answer for’. In German, Müller’s words make clear references to the concept of criminal responsibility which implicitly turns the Germans into executioners of higher justice. This fits perfectly with his tendency to frame his activities in the East as ‘policing’ and making order.⁷⁹

(2) He does his proof readings. He spots the last sentence, crosses out ‘Russians’ and replaces the word by ‘Jews’. From the original it is clear that Müller did this correction after he had finished the letter, since there is no space between ‘Russians’ and the following word, and since ‘Jews’ has been written between the lines.

Looking at the subsequent passages of the letter seems to shed some light on what happened between (1f) and (2). Müller goes on to describe an encounter with two Soviet German nationals⁸⁰ who told him their story: they had been arrested by the Soviet Secret Police (NKVD) because they had German books in their homes. In contrast to many other NKVD-prisoners they were freed by German troops before the NKVD agents were able to execute them. However, in the meantime their families were deported to Siberia. Müller lived in one of these men’s house for a short time and he writes that he had been utterly horrified by this story,⁸¹ as the following passage (1g) shows:

‘All this all over the place instigated by the Jews. [...] Nobody should say that the Jews who did that have left and the poor Jews that are still here are harmless. There is no difference one made another aware of this and that and then the Jewish commissar came and gone was the one or another. The Jews finally will be paid back. Equally those who stir up hatred for war in England and America. The Führer said, when there will something happen again in Europe, then the end and the annihilation of the Jewry begins. It has begun, everybody can be sure about that.’⁸²

⁷⁹ Professionalism was a very common way of framing experiences in the East. The idea that one just did a job and did it well seems to have been a very powerful way for many soldiers to ‘neutralize’ the horrors of war. Alf Lüdtke, ‘War as Work. Aspects of Soldiering in the Twentieth Century Wars’, in: Alf Lüdtke & Bernd Weisbrod (Eds.), *No Man’s Land of Violence. Extreme Wars in the 20th Century*, Göttingen, 2006, pp. 127-151, p. 146.

⁸⁰ ‘Volksdeutsche’: citizens of other states with German ancestors or people the Nazi-regime considered to be suitable for ‘in-rooting’ into the ‘body of the German people’. For the practices of ‘Germanification’ see Gerhard Wolf, *Ideologie und Herrschaftsrationalität. Nationalsozialistische Germanisierungspolitik in Polen*, Hamburg, 2012, pp. 165-191.

⁸¹ In a later letter Müller referred to some photographs he took from these men and other people whose spouses, children or relatives had been deported. MM, 22 August 1941.

⁸² ‘All das haben überall die Juden angezettelt. [...] Nun soll keiner sagen, die Juden, die das gemacht haben sind weg und die armen Juden die noch da sind, sind harmlos. Es gibt das keinen Unterschied einer machte den anderen auf das und das aufmerksam und dann kam der jüdische Kommissar und weg war der und der. Den Juden wird nochmal alles heimgezahlt. Auch denen die in England und Amerika stets weiter zum Kriege hetzen. Der Führer sagte ja, „wenn in Europa nochmal sich etwas ereignet, dann beginnt der Untergang und die Vernichtung des Judentums“. Es hat begonnen, darauf können sich alle verlassen.’ MM, 2 August 1941.

This passage is difficult to translate because Müller's language becomes grammatically scrambled. He literally seems to have written himself into a state of fury and his explicitness about the Jews' fate is striking.⁸³ He finally gives 'the Jew' evil agency: led by the 'Jewish commissar,' Jews denounced others and consequently 'have to answer for' what happened to the wives and children of the Soviet German nationals.⁸⁴ The inner logic of this second part of the letter is quite intriguing and revealing. Müller refers to mass executions of Jews at a point in time when he did not have a proper justification for it (1c). He then recalls the story of the two Soviet German nationals (1g), which in his perspective provides a proper justification. Doing his proofing he returns to (1f) and changes 'Russians' to 'Jews' (2). However, he did not change the word 'Russians' in one of the following sentences which says that 'the Russians' deported the children and the wife. This seems odd at first glance, but nevertheless makes sense, since the Soviet state, after all, was mainly represented by 'the Russians' who executed orders from 'the Jewish commissars'. And it is also clear that for Müller, the Jews were not the only enemies in the East.

Now we can infer with more certainty what happened between (1a-g) and (2). For reasons I discuss later, Müller's wall of silence suddenly breaks in the process of writing. Writing letters to a certain degree is like talking: 'slips of the tongue' can also happen in writing.⁸⁵ And the changing rhythm in Müller's language suggests that he was not completely in control. Having filled half of a new sheet of paper, he probably was running out of neutral or uncompromising topics. Judging from his writing practice as a whole, he still would have to fill one and a half pages. So, he turned to military matters and it seems that he then wrote more than he originally intended. The equivalence between partisans and Jews was deeply engrained and suddenly the words about the murder of the Jews were on paper. Since he was already at the end of the third page of his letter his 'slip of the pen' was difficult to correct given that he never crossed out more than one word, and paper and ink were precious. So, he corrected the text by seeking and finding a justification for murdering Jews which he would usually have been silent about: 'The Jews have a lot to answer for'.

⁸³ The persecution of the Jews was mentioned rather rarely in soldiers' letters, in general; and when it was mentioned the writers usually only referred to single events or even just details which were not put into context. Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten*, pp. 119f., 203f.; Humburg, *Gesicht*, p. 203.

⁸⁴ There is a striking resemblance of this thought and what the Commander of a German Wehrmacht unit in Minsk wrote in a report: that the Jews 'by denunciation extinguished all intellectuals and kept the Belorussian population in fear'. See Lieb, 'Täter aus Überzeugung', p. 537.

⁸⁵ The fact that letter writing is considered to be a kind of conversation with other means may support this view. See Roper, *Secret Battle*, p. 21. Michaela Kipp mentions another example for a 'slip of the quill' of a German soldier: "The Jews experience a fiasco, as one hears. They are all drawn together and resettle, and are made useful for the soil. Dear me, Bobi, what are we talking about?" Kipp, *Grossreinemachen*, p. 240.

Contrary to the bulk of German soldiers in the East, Müller seems to have had a clear idea about the genocidal character of the operations he was participating in quite early on.⁸⁶ As the above quote shows, he knew and recalled what Hitler had said in several speeches referring to the end of European Jewry, and he had become aware that it was not an empty prophecy.⁸⁷ In his letter from 2 August Müller constructed a scenario of threats, crimes, and guilt in the East setting Russians and Jews as the central protagonists. The whole construct has a performative force that suggests that the Germans actions were an 'appropriate reaction'. In other words, Müller constructs a justification for the murder of those who allegedly were at the root of the 'evil' in the East. Three days later we see him doing it again in his letter of August 5th:

*'The most lasting impression I received on the first day of combat. I found 5 German comrades who had been killed shortly before. It is impossible to describe how the [my] heart beat up to the neck, so moved was one by this. One of them just wanted to dress a comrade's wounds, and despite the fact that as a paramedic he wore a red cross the reds slaughtered down all three survivors and cut their throats. Yes, my little wife, it was terrible. Today everything is all the same; you see a lot and only think of the poor comrades. However, what I did experience at dusk of the first day of combat is always with me in my thoughts. Maybe it was good that one already on the first day experienced something like that, then, one has immediately another fighting spirit. All of my comrades were confronted with similar scenes. It had a big impact and we took ruthless action against the Reds and the Jews. Everything was paid back double and threefold. We do not leave anything unpunished. Now, darling, do not be mad that I write something to you that I absorbed as the strongest experience.'*⁸⁸

Müller's excuse for writing about his 'strongest experience' is as telling as a sentence he wrote in the 2 August letter before his concluding remarks on the end of Jewry: '*I hope the latter was of interest to you.*'⁸⁹ Judging from this and the phrase '*...do not be mad...*' in his next

⁸⁶ Another exception of the rule was the policeman Helmut Gieschen who sensed the complete annihilation of the Jews likewise in August 1941. See Stargardt, *German war*, p. 234. Regarding the bulk of soldiers see Michaela Kipp, 'The Holocaust in the Letters of German Soldiers on the Eastern Front (1939-44)', in: *Journal of Genocide Research* 9, 4 (2007), pp. 601-615, p. 603.

⁸⁷ *'...if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevizing of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!'* Adolf Hitler, 30 January 1939, in: Max Domarus, *Hitler: speeches and proclamations, 1932-1945. Translated from the German by Mary Fran Gilbert*, 4 vols., Wauconda, IL, 1990-1997, vol. 3, p. 1449. Hitler repeated this prophecy several times, but only once until August 1941 in his speech on 30 January 1941. See Ian Kershaw, *The "Hitler myth": image and reality in the Third Reich*, Oxford, 1989, p. 243. Consequently, Müller could also have referred to the speech of 30 January 1941. See Domarus, *Hitler*, vol. 4, p. 2367.

⁸⁸ MM, 5 August 1941.

⁸⁹ MM, 2 August 1941.

letter dated 5 August, one could conclude that Meta was not very responsive to the darkest side of the war in the East: taking ‘*ruthless action against the Reds and the Jews*’, paying back everything ‘*twofold and threefold*’. As mentioned earlier, she also did not approve of photographic trophies. And maybe because of this that Müller resorted to another, much more common element of soldiers’ Eastern discourse: mutilation. We find this element in many other correspondences.⁹⁰ Mutilations did not only ‘prove’ the enemy’s maliciousness, but also served to legitimise atrocities and provided a *carte blanche* for revenge.⁹¹ Since mutilations occur in most wars and otherwise inflicted injuries easily can be interpreted as mutilations, everything depends on discursive disposition. What in 1940 in the Western campaigns had been viewed as an ‘excusable exception’, in the East became had come to be seen as the norm and rule.⁹²

Interestingly in this passage, Müller reveals just how selective his practice of letter writing was. If it is true that the mutilations occurred on the first day, and if it is also true that it was one of his ‘strongest experiences’ during the campaign, he obviously concealed this behind a wall of ‘normalcy’, which betrayed his own emotions. Something extraordinary must have happened around the end of July to explain this sudden collapse in his compartmentalisation.

The files of security division 221 demonstrate that in July 1941 police battalion 309 was deployed to the forest of Bialowieza, where the Germans conducted a large ‘pacification’ (*Befriedung*) and ‘cleansing operation’ (*Säuberungsaktion*),⁹³ which involved the ‘evacuation’ of villages and the transfer of male Jews to the Hajnowka camp.⁹⁴ ‘Cleansing’ and ‘evacuation’ are examples of the style of German military language that usually concealed the brutal and lethal character of operations behind the front lines using technical terms. Even the more neutral concept ‘pacification’, however, usually indicated the use of extreme violence, from the destruction of whole villages to the summary execution of inhabitants.⁹⁵ Soldiers also tended to use these neutralising concepts in their letters;⁹⁶ Müller himself preferred *Aktion*,

⁹⁰ Latzel, *Deutsche Soldaten*, p. 189.

⁹¹ Truman Anderson, ‘Die 62. Infanterie-Division. Repressalien im Heeresgebiet Süd, Oktober bis Dezember 1941’, in: Martin Cüppers, Jürgen Matthäus, Andrej Angrick (Eds.), *Naziverbrechen: Täter, Taten, Bewältigungsversuche*, Darmstadt, 2013, pp. 297-314, p. 303.

⁹² Edele/Geyer, ‘States of Exception’, p. 373.

⁹³ BArch RH-26-221-19. Sich.Div. 221 – Ia – Anlagen z. K.T.B. 2, Band IIIa v. 6.5. – 13.12.41. Tagesmeldung 16.7.1941, Bl. 106; Tagesmeldung 11.7.1941, Bl. 96.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Tagesmeldung 10.7.1941, Bl. 95.

⁹⁵ Shepherd, *War*, p. 84-107, 128. Even less fierce operations quite often ended with the shooting of some “suspicious individuals” who usually allegedly “tried to escape”. This suggests a report from the files of the 221st Security Division which describes a routine “operation” in a Russian village. BArch RH-26-221-21, Sich.Div.221 – Ia – Anlagen zum K.T.B. 2 Bd. 4b v. 7.7. – 3.10.41, Kommando: Leutnant d. Schp. Danert. Im Felde, den 29.8.1941. Bericht. Betr.: Streife nach Radutitschi, Daragonowo (o.P.).

⁹⁶ Schikorsky, ‘Kommunikation’, p. 305.

which almost completely obscures any information about what actually happened. In fact what happened in July 1941 was that the majority of the Jewish population in the conquered Eastern parts of Belorussia were murdered – and Police Battalion 309 was part of this genocidal operation.⁹⁷

This operation and the way it was implemented had an important consequence. What happened in Bialystok had probably been the most brutal murder the unit's members committed, but given its wild and erratic character the massacre possibly could be dealt with and rationalised as an exception. The July campaign was less exceptional in terms of the savageness and number of people murdered in single operations, but executions were conducted in a more regular and systematic way. Killing tended to become work or everyday routine (*Tötungsarbeit*) and this deprived the killers of compartmentalising their experiences and the possibility of locking away their memories of killing in a mental 'dark chamber' separate from their self-representation. This might explain why Müller could keep silent after Bialystok, but not after the beginning of systematic mass murder, and why he developed an increasing need to justify his actions and a need for emotional support from his wife.

The question of whether Müller's response to his experiences was typical or not is impossible to answer, since we lack a proper basis for comparison. This is because some soldiers were much more involved than others in the darkest facets of the war of annihilation; and any single set of correspondence, such as Müller's, is obviously unrepresentative of the totality of German soldiers in the East.⁹⁸ However, it is at least possible to demonstrate that other soldiers turned to their relatives in letter-writing in a similar way to Müller. There are some examples in letters by soldiers who participated in or were witnesses of anti-Jewish violence following the discovery of the NKVD-massacres in Lemberg, Tarnopol and other places in Western Ukraine and Eastern Poland.⁹⁹ This is what I will call a 'Lemberg experience'. The following extract from a letter by Franzl exemplifies this discourse.

I am just returning from the laying out of our comrades of the air-force and mountaineers who had been captured by the Russians. I have no words to describe it. The comrades are hogtied; ears, tongues, noses and genitals are cut off – that's the state we found

⁹⁷ Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p. 540; Hartmann, *Wehrmacht*, p. 680.

⁹⁸ Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten*, p. 25; Kipp, *Großbreinemachen*, p. 36.

⁹⁹ Surprised by the German attack and the speed of the German advance in many places the NKVD-personnel killed all their political prisoners before they fled eastwards. These massacres were exploited by German propaganda and they served as legitimation for the following mass murder of Jewish inhabitants. See Alexander V. Prusin, A "Zone of Violence": The Anti-Jewish Pogroms in Eastern Galicia in 1914-1915 and 1941, in: Omer Bartov & Eric D. Weitz (Eds.), *Shatterzones of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Empires*, Bloomington, 2013, pp. 362-377; Kai Struve, 'Tremors in the Shatterzone of Empires: Eastern Galicia in Summer 1941', in: *ibid.*, pp. 463-484.

them in the basement of the court building of Tarnopol, and additionally we found 2000 Ukrainians and ethnic Germans mutilated in the same way. [...] Until now we blew 1000 Jews to Kingdom come, but this is not enough for what they committed. The Ukrainians told us that the Jews held all leading positions, and that they had a real feast with the Soviets when the Germans and Ukrainians were executed. I pray, dear parents, make this public, also father in the local party cell.¹⁰⁰ Should there be any doubts, we will provide photographs. There cannot be any doubt. Greetings, your son Franzl.”¹⁰¹

It should be noted that ‘Franzl’ took a leap of logic in a similar way like Müller: the agency of the ‘Russians’ is supposed to *prove* the guilt of the ‘Jews’. And it seems that involved in the massacre he faced similar problems to Müller: the ‘frames of reference’ prevailing in his unit did not provide sufficient legitimation. It is quite telling that Franzl uses the word ‘doubt’ twice in his last sentence. So, he turned to his parents for emotional support and seeks to justify murder in the face of alleged ‘Jewish-Bolshevik evilness’.

A letter home by Wehrmacht Lieutenant Walter Melchinger provides another example of justifying murder:

“The Jews have to excavate the poor victims out of the mass graves with bare hands to be shot afterwards. The rightful retaliation. The poor Ukrainians know the culprits. Well, how do you think now about your Walter in this murder and madness? The smell of corpses is terribly strong, the continuously shot Jews are piled up. As much as you might wonder, I stand next to it coldly. Most of all I am moved by the hate for the murderers. Do not think the war makes rough and numb. It is just the law of war to accept the events as having happened. It is the overpowering necessity of life. Death has to be because life has to be, the fallen comrades gave their lives for those of their wives and children. The Jews theirs for purity and decency without which life is impossible.¹⁰² And the murdered Ukrainians? We do not live in a paradise. There will always be Good and Bad. Let us be grateful that we fight for the Good to extinguish the Bad. With us the new time is marching.” The letter continues with the reassurance that he is still receptive to beauty, that he had found two volumes of Grillparzer’s poetry in a once

¹⁰⁰ Lowest local branch of the NSDAP.

¹⁰¹ “Ein unbekannter Soldat, Tarnopol, 6. Juli 1941” in: Kempowski, *Echolot*, pp. 260-261. This letter is kind of a celebrity. Subsequently its type-written copy had been published as a facsimile in the Exhibition ‘War Crimes of the German Wehrmacht’. See Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, p. 121. The letter, indeed, had been duplicated and distributed among the members of the Viennese party organization. Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten*, p. 225f.

¹⁰² ‘Die Juden das ihrige für die Sauberkeit und Anständigkeit, ohne die das Leben nicht möglich ist.’

beautiful Polish castle, and that in the evening he read the poem ‘Des Meeres und der Liebe Wellen’.¹⁰³

In this extract, Melchinger is quite open about the massacres he probably had been involved in. However, he describes his own role in what he calls “madness and murder” as a mere observer of ‘rightful retaliation’ and ‘necessity’. Claiming a passive role for himself he goes so far as to describe the murder of Jews as their own active doing and as if they are giving themselves in the form of a sacrifice. In Melchinger’s case the whole letter is a plea for his reputation as a civilised and cultivated person. Overall, the performative message of not having become ‘rough and numb’ resonates throughout the text. Melchinger is more concerned that the addressee believes in his personal decency than the alleged guilt of Jews. His proof is his persisting ability to enjoy poetry. While we might strongly suggest that Melchinger’s plea refers to his active involvement in the massacres, soldiers also seemed to have felt the urge to justify what they observed and were part of. The following extract from a letter by Private F. further illustrates this.

‘There you become witness of Jewish, Bolshevik atrocities as I would not have thought them to be possible. Yesterday we came through a larger city, passing a prison. Already from some distance it smelled terribly of corpses. When we got closer it was almost unbearable. Inside were 8,000 dead captured civilians, beaten to death, murdered, by no means shot, a bloodshed that the Bolsheviks committed shortly before their departure. In another city quite similar cases, maybe even more atrocious ones. Dangerous is the sniperhood [Heckenschützentum – F. S.] to whom yesterday an SS regiment commander fell victim. The murderer is supposed to have been a Jew. You can imagine that this screams out for revenge which is also duly conducted.’¹⁰⁴

Here a ‘Lemberg-experience’ is combined with the sniper motif illustrated with a concrete example. Interestingly, both elements are underpinned explicitly by rumours: *allegedly* there had been more atrocious cases in others cities, and the sniper *presumably* was a man of Jewish origin. Nevertheless, the author jumps from this to an *unambiguous* conclusion – revenge. Here, the author leaves open whether he actively took part in these ‘retaliatory’ acts, but the performative force of his words strongly suggests that his addressee will see them as completely justified, if not necessary- as in the case of Müller’s correspondence.

¹⁰³ Kempowski, *Echolot*, Der Leutnant Walter Melchinger 1908 – 1943, Ukraine’, 5 July 1941, p. 245.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., ,Der Gefreite F., im Osten’, 3 July 1941, p. 200.

There are other examples of perpetrators who did not conceal their lethal agency, and sometimes even proudly boasted about their participation in the ‘end of Jewry’, or the killing of women and toddlers.¹⁰⁵ From research on violence we know that people have very different propensities for violence – and therefore probably have different needs in relation to justifying their actions or seeking emotional support.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the addressee largely determines how perpetrators can talk about their experiences and actions. Müller seems to have had difficulties with this, which makes his case particularly interesting. For soldiers like him, letters were often more than just a medium of communication, but part of enabling structures for lethal action. What German soldiers *believed* to have seen in Lemberg and other places with their own eyes or from rumours served as confirmation of the existing ‘anti-Jewish/Bolshevik’ discourse.¹⁰⁷ Of course German propaganda also contributed to this, but there is some indication that many soldiers did not blindly believe propaganda and quite often took it for what it was: propaganda.¹⁰⁸ Personal experiences or what soldiers ‘saw with their own eyes’ psychologically is taken to be more certain than any other form of ‘second-hand knowledge’ and this can be used to strengthen an argument.¹⁰⁹ In Müller’s particular case we see that he sought and constructed a personal version of a ‘Lemberg-experience’ in his letter of 2 August 1941. And it is clear that the *personal* character of this experience made a difference for him and qualified it as a foundation for legitimizing murder.

Stage 3: Habituation to extreme violence

In the course of August 1941, Müller’s dealing with violence once again changes considerably. These changes are exemplified by the following three excerpts from letters written between mid and late August:

(1) *“The more a little wife knows the more she worries. Look, I am still bright and merry and this is probably what you are most interested in. Anything else is too horrible for a soft female heart. I don’t want you to give yourself such horrible thoughts. So honey you do understand*

¹⁰⁵ The SS-Lieutenant Kretschmar: partly published in Ernst Klee/Dreßen/Reiß, “*Schöne Zeiten*”, pp. 154-161; see also Frank Werner, “‘Hart müssen wir hier draußen sein’. Soldatische Männlichkeit im Vernichtungskrieg 1941-44’ in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 34 (2008), pp. 5-40, p. 34; An anonymised salesman from Bremen: Eiber, „Ein bißchen die Wahrheit...“, p. 73; The police secretary from Vienna Walter Mattner: Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, pp. 588f., Stargardt, *German war*, p. 166f., 170.

¹⁰⁶ Randall Collins, *Violence: a Micro-Sociological Theory*, Princeton, 2008, pp. 370ff.

¹⁰⁷ Stargardt, *German war*, p. 164. On rumours and their quality as a medium of communication see Jörg Baberowski, ‘Die Diktatur der Gerüchte. Einleitung’, in: Rumours and Dictatorship, *Journal of Modern European History*, 10, 3 (2012), pp. 315-319, p. 316.

¹⁰⁸ Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁹ For the difference between ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ and ‘knowledge by description’ see Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford, 2001 [1912], p. 25f. or William James, ‘The Tigers in India’, in: William James, *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, pp. 199-202.

me, don't you, if I do not write so much about that. A soldier does his duty and keeps his silence."¹¹⁰

(2) *"One does one operation after the other. Almost gets no sleep. Then, here and there Russians pop up in the woods and once again we are on our way to render them harmless. What happens there, be it in a city, in a village or a forest you can probably imagine."*¹¹¹

(3) *"What one experiences on an everyday basis is nothing it does not stay long in one's memory. War is a tough craft and I know darling that you are not interested in all that the war presents one here."*¹¹²

In (1) Müller refers to the horrible facts of the war, but at the same time declares that he will no longer write about them. The combination of 'soldier's duty' and 'silence' he uses fits perfectly into the pattern of 'military masculinity' which spares women the horrors of war.¹¹³ Excerpt (2) indicates that the reason for this silence is neither the fact that these things are too horrible for Meta nor that Müller subscribes to soldier's chivalry as said in (1), but because Meta now allegedly knows what happens in her husband's war. Whether she really was able to imagine what happened might be questionable, but at least she knew about it in an abstract way. Excerpt (3) suggests that Müller had undergone a process of habituation. One operation follows another (2) and merges together in a way that single events cannot really be kept apart in his memory (3). This could be just an easy excuse for silence, but also the consequence of psychological suppression and successful compartmentalization. What 'operations' usually meant becomes quite clear from the fact that in one letter he found it noteworthy that he just came back from an operation which 'went on quite peacefully'.¹¹⁴ As already mentioned Müller does not seem unaffected by the usual 'non-peaceful' character of these events. There was, indeed, something to suppress. In any case, the difference between early and late August is clear in the content and also in the form of his writing. In the excerpts (1)-(3) Müller's language shifts from active forms to the more passive 'one' which almost makes his Ego and agency, and consequently his responsibility, disappear. This linguistic normalization seems to reflect the process of habituation to extreme violence he underwent during August.

¹¹⁰ MM, 10 August 1941.

¹¹¹ MM, 24 August 1941.

¹¹² MM, 30 August 1941.

¹¹³ Schikorsky, 'Kommunikation', p. 305.

¹¹⁴ MM, 2 October 1941 (according to postmark, letter not dated).

In subsequent letters, Müller does not refer to his own violent agency any more. Once again violence is only the violence of the enemy. We find a typical example in a letter from early September:

*'Yes, here in the East is great sacrificing, so that those who come after us can live. One sees it oneself how all the comrades are embedded, and then the very young faces. In the war one gets hardened and here one experiences how the young lads in the hail of shells become men.'*¹¹⁵

From September 1941 onwards Müller increasingly refers to the fact of 'being hardened' by the war.¹¹⁶ While there are other words or phrases relating to the semantic field of 'masculinity' in Müller's earlier letters, words like 'hard' or 'hardened' and a language more openly referring to masculine patterns only began to appear in this third stage. In the larger context of Müller's correspondence this makes perfect sense, but it slightly runs against the findings of other historians that 'military masculinity' was a discursive element underlying war correspondence from the outset and an enabling structure for extreme violence.¹¹⁷ In Müller's letters this pattern only emerged *after* probably the worst crimes that his unit committed had taken place. He resorts to the language of being hardened only at certain stage of his combat experience, and he was not the only example.¹¹⁸ Moreover, the way he writes about becoming hardened seems to refer to the increasing hardships and dangers that he and his comrades faced rather than to increasing habituation to enacting extreme violence. After all, in September 1941 Police Battalion 309 went closer to the front in the region of Bryansk¹¹⁹ where there were almost no Jews but where the unit confronted a much more significant partisan movement. Furthermore, in September the consequences of German occupation policies became increasingly palpable. The Soviet soldiers in the rear of the German army who had evaded being taken prisoner of war had become aware that surrender was no guarantee of survival. They turned from soldiers separated from their units into real partisans and the Germans no longer just hunted them, but became hunted as well. This was not yet the organized partisan

¹¹⁵ MM, 2 September 1941.

¹¹⁶ MM, 2 September 1941; 23 September 1941; 23 December 1941; 1 January 1942; 9 January 1942; 4 February 1942; 24 February 1942.

¹¹⁷ Werner, 'Männlichkeit', p. 38; Müller, *Deutsche Soldaten*, pp. 159; Kühne, *Kameradschaft*, p.70f. Of course, this does not mean that these authors are wrong with their observation that 'military masculinity' was embedded in German culture long before the war, but maybe the active reference to this discursive pattern in soldiers' correspondence was more dynamic than they suggest.

¹¹⁸ Stargardt, *German war*, p. 209f.

¹¹⁹ In his letter from 6 September 1941 Müller mentioned that the unit was subordinated to another Army Corps. The battalion now operated in the rear of the 2nd Army under the command of *korück* 580 and had to secure transport in the region of Chernigov. BArch RH-23-171, Kommandant rückw. Armeegeb. 580. Kriegstagebuch VI, begonnen: 11.9.41, abgeschlossen: 5.12.41, Bl. 6-8.

warfare that German forces would confront from early 1942 onwards. But it was nonetheless a significant shift¹²⁰ and meant that members of police battalion 309 now faced more combat and dangers themselves.

In October 1941 Müller begins to mention partisan activity, he even describes an ambush that forced his unit to withdraw and to abandon their vehicles and equipment:

*'One time it was that suddenly we were in the midst of Russians and did not know how this was possible. We were only fifteen men and it was impossible to establish how many the others were. We had to leave our truck and everything behind. All over it was teeming with Russians, it was crazy.'*¹²¹

Müller's description of partisan activity does not convey the real danger it posed for German troops and his unit. He rather plays it down and presents anti-partisan warfare as a form of hunting: an activity not without any danger for the hunter, but usually an asymmetrical affair.¹²² This is emphasised by his use of 'teeming', which implicitly equates the Russians with vermin. One might infer that his platoon was close to being wiped out in the situation described in the quote, but his language is quite at odds with this. Nevertheless, it seems clear that in autumn 1941 things changed for Müller and his comrades. First of all, as in other cases, probably a process of habituation to extreme violence had set in and changed their attitudes and ways of recognition and self-reflection.¹²³ At the same time the policemen became more exposed to dangers themselves as partisan attacks intensified. In addition the weather became significantly worse and temperatures fell sub-zero in October. The Blitzkrieg had failed and the German soldiers who had only been equipped for a short summer campaign had to come to terms with the fact that they would spend the winter in Russia. Personal and collective hardships increased and this may also have contributed to the fact that Müller felt less and less compelled to reflect on his participation in the murder and destruction in the East. From October 1941 onwards he obviously managed to compartmentalise murdering civilians. Only once in January 1942 he rather parenthetically mentions that *'...one operation starts after the other...'* as an excuse for not having been able to write on a regular basis for some time.¹²⁴ In

¹²⁰ Shepherd, *War*, p. 97; Hartmann, *Wehrmacht*, pp. 720-733.

¹²¹ MM, 22 October 1941.

¹²² In one letter he mentioned Göring's huntings in the forrest of Bialowiza and adds: "we were also hunting there, but for Russians". MM, 23 September 1941.

¹²³ For this process of habituation see Welzer, *Täter*, p. 164.

¹²⁴ MM, 4 January 1942.

sum, it seems that routine and habituation had finally replaced the state of emotional emergency of early August.¹²⁵

Conclusion

At first glance, Müller's letters seem to tell us not much about the atrocities he had been involved in Germany's war of annihilation in the East. Overall he rather successfully kept up a mental compartmentalization that allowed him to produce a positive self-representation as a loving husband and a brave, decent soldier engaged in a just war. He kept face in view of mass murder and killing not only of men, but also of women and children. And, he probably did so because of his wife's disposition and attitudes. However, as this analysis of Müller's correspondence has demonstrated, a 'thick description' of his writing practice reveals that this wall of silence broke down from time to time. Obviously Müller felt compelled to justify what he and his comrades did. The massacre of Bialystok in June 1941 prompted him to adopt the sniper-discourse and the familiar trope of the 'malicious Asiatic' warfare of the enemy. The transition to systematic mass murder of the Jewish population of Belorussia in July and August seems to have urged him to work harder on shoring up his self-representation as a decent person. Now, it had become clear that radical rhetoric was turned into radical action. No Jews were to survive in the German sphere of power. During this period we see that, whether consciously or not, Müller constructed a personal 'Lemberg-experience'. The alleged intrinsic identity of Jews and Bolsheviks coined as Jewish-Bolshevism served as premise for a crude Nazi-syllogism: Jews could and *should* be held responsible for whatever crimes representatives of the Soviet state committed. In this logic the NKVD-massacres in Lemberg and other places were interpreted as essentially Jewish atrocities. Moreover, following the logic of national-socialist ideas about race and people's community, responsibility for these atrocities was interpreted as a *collective* one of the Jewry *as a whole*. Consequently, some soldiers involved in the annihilation in the East jumped in their correspondences from the crimes of Soviet functionaries to the wholesale murder of the Jewish population. Müller's 'Lemberg-Experience' is just a variation of this practice and enables him to construct an argument and a justification for his own involvement in mass murder. It is noteworthy, however, that all this occurs in the form of suggestive allusions making use of the performative power of his words. Murder remains unspoken, but is implicitly justified. Speech act theory helps to make this

¹²⁵ This fits into a general trend which had been established by researchers: From autumn 1941 onwards habituation and desensitization become palpable in most soldiers' letters. See Humburg, *Gesicht*, p. 211f.

visible and enhances the interpretative dimension. While it is impossible to determine whether Müller did this mainly for himself or to gain understanding and emotional support from his wife, or both, it seems clear that Müller's actions in the East were both 'unspeakable' and at odds with his ideal self-representation. For other soldiers they were not, and it should be no surprise that there is more than one type of perpetrator. Whether Müller's ability to uphold his mental compartmentalisation is a widespread phenomenon among perpetrators, and whether resorting to justification by implication and the use of the performative power was a common practice goes beyond the scope of this article. But it appears to be worth reading documents like Müller's correspondence more closely to reveal the more implicit and subtle dimensions of their meaning.