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Another Turn of the Tide?
World War II and the Writing of Military History
in West Germany 1945-2005

by

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Abstract

The 60th anniversary of May, 8, 1945 made it quite clear: There has been an increasing public interest in the history of the Second World War in Germany. This is to a large extent due to structural developments in historiography and the social, political, and cultural conditions of the writing of military history.

The conventional approach of war history had little to do with the standards and methods of academic historiography that in turn was hardly interested in war and military. While historiography on World War II was institutionalized in the 1950s it was the 1970s and 80s that saw first changes in perspective that have had a larger impact only since the 1990s. Growing concern with the social and the subjective side of the past, mostly on a regional level led to a fresh look at the war situation. "Military science" expanded on a large scale to include theoretical considerations, methodological approaches and the topics of a "new military history". At the same time World War II came into the limelight of academic research and teaching. This led to a broadened vision of a "total war" and its consequences that clearly meets while the demand of the public.

It remains to be seen, however, in how far the necessary debate of strategic bombing, flight and expulsion that lends itself to a narrative of German victimization can be integrated into the more complex picture of World War II.

When an even half century had passed since that day that saw an end to "total war" by total surrender many people thought that its 50th anniversary and the attention it gathered in Germany marked the peak of public interest and publications by historians

and would-be historians about the war. But the onslaught of media attention and the large number of commemorative activities that took place on the 60th anniversary in 2005, turned this belief on its head. The huge number of German publications, television programs and even movies that came out about World War II is the expression of and the response to the increase of a lively interest in the years 1939-1945.

What accounts for this rise in interest in the history of World War II? It is not merely due to the political rhetoric in a reunified Germany or to the mass media or market mechanisms trying to take advantage of a nice round number anniversary. My argument is that the broad interest in the history of World War II can best be explained by recent changes in the way that its history has been written. In this working paper I will examine these changes.¹ What were they? What caused them? And, maybe most importantly, where do we stand today? I suggest that we might be witnessing another "turn of the tide" in the way the "experts" look at the war, especially the role of Germans in the war.

Studying the history of historiography is not a senseless self-reflection, in particular when it comes to an event like World War II that was such a radical experience of change. Instead, it can help to define one's position and in the best scenario, it can foster the development of new perspectives. When we look back on the history of historiography we always find that the writing of history has been linked to the individual historical experiences of the person doing the writing.² Thus, two important aspects have to be taken into consideration: The first aspect we must take into account is the working conditions historians were dealing with – everything from the availability of source material, to the mere existence or non-existence of historical institutions to the accepted state of methodology at the time the writing took place. The second aspect we have to consider is the broader context in which this war research was being done: by this I mean the specific political and social conditions of

¹ This paper is the slightly revised version of a talk given at the Institute of European Studies, University of California, Berkeley, Oct. 24, 2005, at the Centers for German and European Studies, University of Minnesota / The Twin Cities, Minneapolis Oct. 20, 2005, and University of Wisconsin / Madison, Oct. 19, 2005. I am especially grateful to Gerald D. Feldman and Eric D. Weitz for giving me the opportunity to discuss my ideas. Many thanks go to Caroline M. Maguire (Eden Prairie, MN) for her painstaking and patient proof-reading of the original manuscript.

² On German historiography after 1945 see Winfried Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (Munich, 1989); Sebastian Conrad, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Nation. Geschichtsschreibung in Westdeutschland und Japan, 1945-1960* (Göttingen, 1999).

the time as well as the state of “discourse”. The main focus of the paper will be this first issue, that is, the historical working conditions and how they have changed over 60 years.

The central argument will be this: There has been a general direction of change in the historiography of World War II. That direction has been the convergence of what had earlier been considered the traditional domains of military science and historical science. I will therefore elaborate on this gradual change of perspectives and its consequences for recent research on World War II. When we look back on those last 60 years, we have to keep in mind, however, that at all times traditional and new methods, aspects and key terms can co-exist. Nevertheless, I have roughly divided these past 60 years (and therefore my paper) into three stages: I. 1945-1970, II. 1970-1990, III. 1990-2005. At the end of my exposition, I will elaborate on most recent trends and suggest perspectives for future world war research.

I. The role of source materials and the institutionalisation of historiography after the war, 1945-1970

In the period directly following the war, German historians had, at least initially, almost no official source materials to draw from. First, a great number of these sources were destroyed during the war. One particular loss was the army archives which fell victim to flames after the air raid on Potsdam. Also, the Nazis spared no effort in destroying incriminating files. In addition to this physical destruction, a great amount of source materials were taken from Germany after the war. Indeed, the Allies acted like the Germans did in France in 1940: they requisitioned German documents as spoils of war, in particular documents of the Foreign Office, of central Reich authorities, of the *Wehrmacht*, which is the German Armed Forces – the Army, Navy and Air Force. The relevant records were sent to Washington, to London or to Moscow. By the end of the occupation period in 1949, the American War Department alone had brought some 800 tons of mainly military files to Washington, D.C.. For the Allies it was important to have control over the interpretation of Germany’s recent past.³ They did not want to give German historians and former members of the

³ Astrid M. Eckert, *Kampf um die Akten. Die Westalliierten und die Rückgabe von deutschem Archivgut nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 2004); Astrid M. Eckert., „Bundesdeutsche

General Staff a second opportunity to provide historic answers to the question of war guilt in apologetic editions. This had been the case after the First World War when historians of the Reichsarchiv in Potsdam told the “official” history of the war (“*Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918*”), fighting in 14 volumes on an international level for the image of the German nation in the context of the question of war guilt and the Versailles Treaty, but also against the proponents of their own, democratic republic of Weimar.⁴

Instead, the Allies wanted to call the culprits to account. Therefore, they provided an extensive collection of source material that was used to base charges before the International Military Tribunal (IMT) in Nuremberg in 1945/46 and during the twelve so-called subsequent Nuremberg trials.⁵ The victorious powers took possession of masses of files in order to be able to prove the war crimes and the mass murder of European Jews in legal terms. They also used the evidence in their effort to re-educate the Germans, that is, to knock "militarism" out of them.⁶ Many of those documents were soon published and, therefore, began to become available to German historians that time.⁷

Thus, until the mid-1950s, the historiography of World War II had to rely on reports of participants, usually on personal memories of officers and generals. The history of the battles – this archetype of historiography! – remained a matter of those who had fought them or who at least came from a military background. It was not before 1956/58, that the first military files returned from the U.S. And it took ten years until this return was temporarily completed in 1968. When those documents were incorporated into the archives by institutions – a process which, by the way, has not yet been ended, especially as to the Soviet spoils of war – new fields of research on the war opened. However, in contrast to 1918, the German side lacked the institutional prerequisites to compile an official "world war work" ("*Weltkriegswerk*"). A general staff which might have fulfilled this task no longer existed for obvious reasons. A chair of military history was quite out of the question. Thus, the Federal

Souveränität und die Rückgabe der diplomatischen Akten“, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 17 (2005), 24-30.

⁴ See Markus Pöhlmann, *Kriegsgeschichte und Geschichtspolitik: Der Erste Weltkrieg. Die amtliche deutsche Militärgeschichtsschreibung 1914-1956* (Paderborn, 2002).

⁵ See as an introduction Michael R. Marrus, *The Nuremberg war crimes trial 1945-46: a documentary history* (Boston, 1997).

⁶ Dagmar Barnouw, *Germany 1945: views of war and violence* (Bloomington, 1999).

⁷ *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof* (Nuremberg, 1947-1949), reprint Munich 1984/89.

Republic lacked an equivalent to the monumental historical works as they were produced by the victorious powers at that time.

Nevertheless, in the course of the 1950s almost a dozen Ph.D. theses on the foreign policy and war policy of the Third Reich were written, especially at the University of Göttingen. Between 1960 and 1970, monographs (like those by Hans-Adolf Jacobsen on Nazi foreign policy and Andreas Hillgruber) could already rely on an extended basis of material.⁸ They are regarded as standard works even today.

The early 1950s also saw the foundation of research institutes and working groups in West Germany. They marked a change because now research could go beyond these kinds of individual efforts. In the formerly occupied western European countries institutes were founded in order to document the crimes of the occupation forces and their collaborators on the one hand, the heroism of resistance on the other. What is more, the predecessors of the Dutch NIOD, the Belgian CEGES or the French IHTP were expected to provide the first syntheses of national history of the war years.⁹ In West Germany, for the research of World War II, two institutions were to play an important role: First, the Institute of Contemporary History (*Institut für Zeitgeschichte* - IfZ) in Munich has held a leading position since 1949/50 in researching the most recent past, including the Third Reich and World War II.¹⁰

Second, the Military History Research Institute (*Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*, MGFA) in Freiburg/Breisgau was founded in 1957/58 as a central, that is, joint research institute of the Federal Ministry of Defence. Since 1967, the MGFA has published a specialized periodical: the *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* (MGM), since 2000 called the Journal of Military History (*Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, MGZ). What was its aim? According to an internal decree the journal was launched in order “to establish fruitful relations to the experts in Germany and

⁸ Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Nationalsozialistische Außenpolitik 1933-1938*, (Frankfurt/Main, 1968); see also Jacobsen's ideas on a history of the war: *Zur Konzeption einer Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkrieges, 1939 – 1945* (Frankfurt/Main, 1964); Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (ed.), *Entscheidungsschlachten des zweiten Weltkrieges*, 1960; Hans-Adolf Jacobsen and Hans Dollinger (eds.), *Der Zweite Weltkrieg in Bildern und Dokumenten*, 10 vols. (Munich, 1969). Andreas Hillgruber, *Kontinuität und Diskontinuität in der deutschen Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler* (Düsseldorf, 1969); Andreas Hillgruber (ed.), *Probleme des zweiten Weltkrieges* (Köln, 1967).

⁹ For a concise overview see Pieter Lagrou, « Historiographie de guerre et historiographie du temps présent: cadres institutionnels en Europe occidentale, 1945-2000 », in Comité international d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale (ed.), *The Second World War in the XXth century history* (Paris, 2000), 191-215.

abroad”, “to encourage the exchange the findings of research with institutions similar to the MGFA”, and to be “a useful source of information for those [in the German army] who teach military and war history.” Last but not least the MGM was meant to “encourage the interested public to concern onself with military history”.¹¹

The interested public? Initially this was a rather small number of people. Later, the editorial staff made no secret of the fact that at the beginning "the chorus of pessimistic voices was quite strong". Many Germans clearly considered the study of war and military as something “indelicate” (“*unfein*”) as Manfred Messerschmidt, the director of research at the MGFA from 1970 to 1988 once put it.¹² Small wonder that circles closely related to the military such as the “working group for defence research” (*Arbeitskreis für Wehrforschung*) helped publishing on the war.¹³ They were concerned with the edition of documents such as Halder’s war diaries or battle histories in recognition of the Wehrmacht soldiers’ accomplishments. For instance, the blurb of a 1962 work on the “campaign against Soviet Russia” read: “Soldierly achievements in war have their own yardstick. Basically, their value is independent of the goales of the ruling order of state and society. Every page relates the battlesome qualities of the *Ostheer* [the German army at the Eastern front] that had been asked too much of for years.”¹⁴

As to methods and contents, there was an initial contradiction, as Winfried Schulze has pointed out in his pioneering study on German historiography after 1945. The demands for a revision of the traditional German idea of history which had been voiced immediately after the end of the war soon ran contrary to the basic attitude of the historians who "under the impression of a stabilising state order saw less reason

¹⁰ Horst Möller and Udo Wengst (eds.), *50 Jahre Institut für Zeitgeschichte. Eine Bilanz* (Munich, 1999).

¹¹ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg i.Br., BW 7/410 (Dr. von Groote, Hausverfügung 130/65, 2.11.1965. The working title was “Mitteilungen zur Militär- und Kriegsgeschichte (MMK).” I am grateful to Bruno Thoß (Potsdam) for drawing my attention to this document.

¹² Quoted by Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann, „Militärsgeschichte in der Erweiterung. Konjunktoren, Interpretationen, Konzepte“ in Kühne and Ziemann (eds.), *Was ist Militärgeschichte?* (Paderborn, 2000), 9-46, 10.

¹³ See for example Andreas Hillgruber, *Chronik des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, ed. by Arbeitskreis für Wehrforschung (Frankfurt/M. 1966).

¹⁴ Franz Halder, *Tägliche Aufzeichnungen des Chefs des Generalstabes des Heeres 1939 – 1942*, ed. by Arbeitskreis für Wehrforschung, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, Alfred Philippi (Stuttgart, 1962-64); Alfred Philippi and Ferdinand Heim, *Der Feldzug gegen Sowjetrußland 1941 bis 1945 : Ein operativer Überblick*, ed. by Arbeitskreis für Wehrforschung (Stuttgart, 1962). („Soldatische Leistungen im Kriege haben ihren eigenen Masstaß. Ihr Wert ist von den Zielen der herrschenden Staats- und Gesellschaftsordnung im Grunde unabhängig. Seite um Seite des Buches berichtet von den kämpferischen Qualitäten des jahrelang weit überforderten Ostheeres.“) My translation, J.E.

for revisionism"¹⁵. Immediately after the war, historians had elaborated on what they called the "wrong track" (*Irrweg*) that German history had taken and that had led to the Nazi regime and the war. In the 50's, this concept was hardly mentioned any more. On the one hand, people distanced themselves from Nazi interpretations. But on the other hand they stuck to traditional topics and methods of political history. In the 1950s, German historical science was still to a large extent under the banner of a politically conservative historicism and its focus on major historical figures. The innovative concept of a broader "contemporary history" clearly was an exception to that rule, a "contaminant" in the body of historiography.¹⁶

What role did the war of 1939/45 play in this context? Historians dealt with the recent past against the background of their own experiences – which is evident in the reappraisal of their own military past in the history of divisions. Werner Conze, one of the founding fathers of social history, is a case in point. In 1953 he wrote a history of "his" 291st infantry division.¹⁷

For historians as well as for society at large "1945" stood for the "German disaster", which meant: the complete military defeat and thus the end of the German national state.¹⁸ Small wonder that most historians were primarily interested in the political and military events which had led to this disaster.

Anyhow: In addition to the analysis of the "totalitarian" Nazi rule and the early research of resistance to that rule, historiography of the Third Reich also focused on the warfare of its military. I think it is quite obvious to regard this interest in the military actions on the battlefields and in the functional elite of the German forces, the Wehrmacht, as a "consequence of the methodological primacy of foreign policy".¹⁹ However, historians also wanted to undermine the apologetic memoir literature with

¹⁵ Schulze, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft*, 302-3.

¹⁶ The „classical“ reference is Hans Rothfels, „Zeitgeschichte als Aufgabe“, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 1 (1953), 1-8; for a recent summary see Martin Sabrow, Ralph Jessen, Klaus Große Kracht (eds.), *Zeitgeschichte als Streitgeschichte. Grosse Kontroversen seit 1945* (Munich, 2003). The quote is from Hermann Graml and Hans Woller, „Fünfzig Jahre Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 1953-2003“, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 51 (2003), 51-87, 53.

¹⁷ Werner Conze, *Die Geschichte der 291. Infanterie - Division 1940-1945* (Bad Nauheim, 1953).

¹⁸ Friedrich Meinecke, *Die deutsche Katastrophe. Betrachtungen und Erinnerungen* (Wiesbaden, 1946).

¹⁹ Conrad, *Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Nation*.

an “objective” historiography.²⁰ They wanted to work against post war legends of the war and their narratives of glory, bravery and comradeship. Other aspects, in particular the mass murder of European Jews during the war, had to stand aside. These issues were separated, but they were not concealed. For instance, an early overview of "German History of the Recent Past 1933-1945", written in the mid-50s by Hermann Mau and Helmut Krausnick, members of the Institute for Contemporary History, has a chapter on "persecution" – followed by a chapter on "resistance".²¹

For West German historians it was important not to accuse the vast majority of Germans in general, both civilians and the military, of being responsible for the evils seen under Nazism. The narrative trick used to remove the mass of German soldiers from the historiographic line of fire is well known: Historians – and not only them – made an analytical distinction between Hitler’s Nazi dictatorship and the quasi neutral military instrument of his policy. The older *Reichswehr*, which had been “brought into line”, as a victim of Hitler; the *Wehrmacht* as a last refuge in the regime – these images characterized the narratives until the 1990s. Thus, it made perfect sense that German historians focused on the military aspects of warfare in the narrower sense without closer examining the ideological dimension. Where the *Führer* was responsible for military defeats because of his ignorance, historians could underline the German soldiers’ heroic performance, their readiness to make sacrifices as if nothing had happened. Usually, the war was described only from the view point of the German army, also in history books it was against the “enemy”.

Another methodological moment supported this one-sided approach: Those who proceeded from the premises of intentionalism had the history of World War II mainly circling around the person of the *Führer*. This Hitler centrism had two consequences: First, it was an appreciated argument to exonerate the Germans. Second, it made it seem unnecessary to look for long-term reasons for the war, that is aspects of social history or history of mentality reaching back into the 19th century. For a long time, the substance of world war historiography was: German soldiers and

²⁰ See as an example *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht 1940-45. Geführt von Helmuth Greiner und Percy Ernst Schramm*, ed. by Percy Ernst Schramm (Frankfurt/Main, 1961-65).

²¹ Hermann Mau and Helmut Krausnick: *Deutsche Geschichte der jüngsten Vergangenheit 1933-1945*. Mit einem Nachwort von Peter Rassow (Bonn, 1953).

the civilian population, too, were “victims” of the dictatorship and the war.²² The interdependency of war and holocaust was given more attention only in the late 1950s and during the 1960s. The trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem 1961 and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt/Main 1963-65 and 1965/66 moved the genocide into the spotlight.²³ In that context, numerous expert opinions were prepared in the Institut for Contemporary History (by Martin Broszat, Hans Buchheim and Helmut Krausnick in particular)²⁴. These opinions showed how the annihilation policy was organised and how it functioned.

However, a result of this legal action was that the interest was focused on the perpetrators, a small group of unscrupulous persons in charge. It seemed that the German society did not have much to do with that.

In East Germany – to add a side glance – the teleological approach of marxism-leninism determined the research on military history. It became part of the historical narratives of history in general that were used to legitimate the system. After the rearmement of the GDR in the 1950s military history had been established as a field of studies within the National People’s Army. Research at the Institute for Military History (*Militär-geschichtliches Institut*) that was founded in 1958 also started on the assumption that military history should go beyond the history of battles. From the marxist viewpoint World War II was considered mainly a result of social and economic conditions. The role of the military in times of war *and* peace was therefore the object of research.²⁵

II.

²² Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany*, Berkeley 2001

²³ See Peter Krause, *Der Eichmann-Prozess in der deutschen Presse* (Frankfurt/Main, 2002). Jürgen Wilke, *Holocaust und NS-Prozesse. Die Presseberichterstattung in Israel und Deutschland zwischen Aneignung und Abwehr* (Cologne, 1995).

²⁴ Martin Broszat, Hans Buchheim, and Hans Krausnick (eds.), *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, 2 vols. (Olten, 1965). Engl. *Anatomy of the SS State*, transl. by Dorothy Long; Marian Jackson (London, 1970).

²⁵ Reinhard Brühl, „Zum Neubeginn der Militärgeschichtsschreibung in der DDR. Gegenstand, theoretische Grundlagen, Aufgabenstellung“, *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 52 (1993), 303-22; Jürgen Angelow, „Zur Rezeption der Erbediskussion durch die Militärgeschichtsschreibung der DDR“, in: *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 52.1993, 345-57; idem, „Forschung in

A change in perspective, 1970-1990

In the 1970s and even in the 1980s, there was still a big gap between military science (*Militär- und Kriegswissenschaft*), and history in general.²⁶ War history or *Wehrgeschichte* (as the Nazis had called it for ideological reasons) remained mostly isolated from history as an academic field of research, in particular from social historical approaches and methods. This reserve between these two areas of historical research went both ways. For many university professors, military issues were something that had little to do with historical science, but much to do with sense-making and self-portrayal of the military. The new social history shied away from the military because initially social historians focused on other issues. What is more, macrosociological theories on how societies function were also not very helpful in analysing the phenomenon of war. Maybe the existence of a militarily institutionalized research provided a pretext for academic historians to neglect the military factors of history.

This is not inconsistent with the fact that since the late 1960s military historical studies had been prepared in the MGFA, the Military History Research Institute, works which in retrospect can rightly be regarded as trail-blazing.²⁷ On the contrary: The critical, professional examination of the *Wehrmacht's* indoctrination was published in 1969 by Manfred Messerschmidt, the MGFA's long-time Chief Historian. In the same year Klaus-Jürgen Müller provided his comprehensive study on

ungelüfteten Räumen. Anmerkungen zur Militärgeschichte der ehemaligen DDR“, in: Kühne and Ziemann (eds.), *Was ist Militärgeschichte*, 73-89.

²⁶ See Bernd Wegner, „Kriegsgeschichte - Politikgeschichte - Gesellschaftsgeschichte. Der Zweite Weltkrieg in der westdeutschen Historiographie der siebziger und achtziger Jahre“, in Jürgen Rohwer (ed.), *Neue Forschungen zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Koblenz, 1990), 102-129; Eckardt Opitz, „Der Weg der Militärgeschichte von einer Generalstabswissenschaft zur Subdisziplin der Geschichtswissenschaft“, in Hans-Joachim Braun and Rainer H. Kluwe (eds.), *Entwicklung und Selbstverständnis von Wissenschaften. Ein interdisziplinäres Colloquium* (Frankfurt/Main, 1985), 57-78; Rainer Wohlfeil, „Wehr-, Kriegs- oder Militärgeschichte?“, in *ibid.*, 165-75; see Rainer Wohlfeil, *Militärgeschichte. Zu Geschichte und Problemen einer Disziplin der Geschichtswissenschaft (1952-1967)*, in: *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* (52) 1993, 323-344.

²⁷ Ursula von Gersdorff (ed.), *Geschichte und Militärgeschichte. Wege der Forschung* (Frankfurt/Main, 1974), 7-13; Ursula von Gersdorff, „Die Arbeit des Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamtes (Stand Januar 1973)“, in *ibid.*, 75-175. Johann Christoph Allmayer-Beck, „Die Militärgeschichte in ihrem Verhältnis zur historischen Gesamtwissenschaft“, in *ibid.*, 177-199. Klaus A. Maier, „Überlegungen zur Zielsetzung und Methode der Militärgeschichtsschreibung im Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamt und die Forderung nach deren Nutzen für die Bundeswehr seit der Mitte der 70er Jahre“, *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* (52) 1993, 359-70.

the relation between Hitler and the German army.²⁸ Those individual cases are not typical of the relation between academic historical science and military history, including the research on World War II. At the same time the exceptional publications provided important impetus for a modernisation of military history. For the first time the role of women in both world wars became a topic, although the approach was less analytical and more documentary.²⁹ Two other studies must be mentioned here as early examples of academic historians dealing with war: Gerald D. Feldman's work on army, industry, and working class in World War I, originally published in 1966; as well as Jürgen Kocka's book on the German class society during 1914-18. However, both historians were mostly interested in the social and economic problems of the time rather than in the particularities of the war situation.³⁰

Ideas for a "civilised" history of war were also provided by a totally different side: the history of everyday life. Since the 1980s small-scale studies with their specific research tools gave an insight "from below" into society, last but not least a society at war. A military history of "ordinary Joe" portrayed ordinary people as acting subjects and suffering objects of the war.³¹ For example, the articles of a volume edited by the Institut for Contemporary History dealt with (mostly civilian) everyday life on a regional scale between the time of the battle of Stalingrad in 1943 and the currency reform in 1948 drawing the attention to the importance of the war as a cesure for social history.³² This kind of approach was directed not only against the older history of ideas and institutions; it also accused social and structural history of writing history with the people left out or of hiding the individual in the figures of population statistics.

²⁸ Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat. Zeit der Indoktrination* (Hamburg, 1969). Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *Das Heer und Hitler. Armee und nationalsozialistisches Regime 1933 – 1940* (Stuttgart, 1969, 2nd ed. 1988). The volume was published as part of the MGFA's series „Beiträge zur Militär- und Kriegsgeschichte“.

²⁹ Ursula von Gersdorff, *Frauen im Kriegsdienst 1914-1945* (Stuttgart, 1969).

³⁰ Gerald D. Feldman, *Army industry and labor in Germany, 1914 – 1918* (Princeton/N.J., 1966), trans. *Vom Weltkrieg zur Weltwirtschaftskrise: Studien zur deutschen Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte 1914 – 1932* (Göttingen, 1984); Jürgen Kocka, *Facing total war: German society, 1914-1918*, trans. from the German by Barbara Weinberger (Cambridge/Mass, 1984) (*Klassengesellschaft im Krieg. Deutsche Sozialgeschichte, 1914-1918*, Göttingen, 1973).

³¹ See Wolfram Wette, „Militärgeschichte von unten. Die Perspektive des ‚kleinen Mannes‘“, in idem (ed.), *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes. Eine Militärgeschichte von unten* (München, 1992), 9-47; Bernd Ulrich, „Militärgeschichte von unten“. Anmerkungen zu ihren Ursprüngen, Quellen und Perspektiven im 20. Jahrhundert“, in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22 (1996), 473-503.

³² Martin Broszat, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, and Hans Woller (eds.), *Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform: zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland* (München, 1988).

One of the long-term benefits of this change in perspective was the expansion of source materials. So far, many military historians grounded their work – implicitly or explicitly – on the methodological assumption that “objectivity” would best be achieved by spreading out a lot of source material, most notably the more or less official documents from within the military itself. This assumption was increasingly questioned in the 1980s. Military historians in West Germany – just like their counterparts in Western Europe³³ – were criticized for the positivism of their work. Now, so-called documents of self evidence (*Selbstzeugnisse*) or ego documents such as private letters or diaries emphasize the “determination” (*Eigensinn*) of the individual, his or her resistance, his or her response to the limited alternatives available during war time. The focus was shifted away from the political and military elite to social practices during war, on a lower level that is. A newly “discovered” kind of source material – even if it had to be treated with particular critical care – was the millions of letters to and from the front.³⁴ German historians followed their anglo-saxon predecessors who, since the 1970s, had been studying life at the front in an interdisciplinary approach. This approach included methods of the history of literature and those of cultural anthropology.³⁵ Initially, these methods were used for the wars of early modern times and the First World War, not so much for the Second.

At the same time, though, recollections of people living at that time, drew attention to the drastic experiences of the years 1939-45. The so-called "eye-witnesses" (*Zeitzeuge*) were interviewed on their personal past with the methods of Oral History.³⁶ (By the way: The term "eye-witness" has become a buzz word for the media when it comes to World War II. Nowadays, when it is hard to find a real "witness" of what happened 60 years ago, the sons and daughters of an eye-witness are sometimes presented as eye-witnesses themselves.)

The new, further-reaching approach on World War II was due to the conceptual extension of traditional military and defence history (*Wehrgeschichte*) into a new "military history". Researchers of the MGFA provided the ground work for this

³³ Lagrou, „Historiographie de guerre“.

³⁴ Peter Knoch, „Feldpost – eine unentdeckte Quellengattung“, in *Geschichtsdidaktik* 11 (1986), 154-171; idem (ed.), *Kriegsalltag. Die Rekonstruktion des Kriegsalltags als Aufgabe der historischen Forschung und Friedenserziehung* (Stuttgart, 1989).

³⁵ See as an influential example Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, 1975).

³⁶ The most important oral history project of this kind is Lutz Niethammer (ed.), *Lebensgeschichte und Sozialkultur im Ruhrgebiet 1930 bis 1960*“, 3 vols. (Bonn, 1983-85).

process. It was the national socialist war in particular that served to develop a modern way of writing military history. In its preface, an MGFA report of 1982 – at its 25th anniversary – reads as follows:³⁷

"Today, military history [...] has a complex meaning. It regards the military in war and peace in permanent interaction with politics and society, economy, armament and technology. In research and teaching, it therefore includes not only purely military items but also all factors relevant to things military. Due to the use of specifically historical research methods it has become part of historical science."

In this context, in 1979 the MGFA began to publish the series "Germany and the Second World War", *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*.³⁸ From the very beginning of this 10 volume series, the history of war was to be treated as a history of German society during the war. With the exception of the volumes on "operational history", social, economic and ideological aspects were also taken into consideration. This was the first major German work on the war in which this was done. For instance, the war is also analysed as a war of *weltanschauung* (world view): that is as an ideological campaign of the Nazi regime to reorganise Europe under "Arian" leadership in accordance with the regime's racist ideology.

Research on war was also influenced from a rather different angle. In the mid-80s the Historical Peace Research first made itself heard.³⁹ In 1984 the working group "Arbeitskreis Historische Friedensforschung" was founded. Its aim was to study „all the historical dimensions of the problem of peace". The moral impetus was clear: to prevent future wars, to restrict violence within a society and to foster a "just peace". The consequences of World War II play a prominent role in the debates of this

³⁷ Manfred Messerschmidt, Klaus A. Maier, Werner Rahn, and Bruno Thoß (eds.), *Militärgeschichte. Probleme - Thesen - Wege* (München, 1982), 8; for the goals and methods of military history see also the theses of an MGFA working group, „Zielsetzungen und Methoden der Militärgeschichtsschreibung“ in *ibid.* 48-59, originally *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 20 (1976), 9-17; Wilhelm Deist, „Militärgeschichtliche Forschung in Freiburg i. Br.“, *Verband der Historiker Deutschlands, Mitteilungsblatt* 1/1990, 22-25.

³⁸ *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vols. 1-9, ed. by the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, Stuttgart: DVA 1979-2006; trans. *Germany and the Second World War*, ed. by the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Oxford), vol. 1-7, vol 9/1 forthcoming 2006.

³⁹ Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Militärgeschichte als Friedensforschung! Einführung in die Dialektik der Wissenschaft von Krieg und Frieden* (Frankfurt/Main, 1981). See Jost Dülffer, „Historische Friedensforschung“, *Neue Politische Literatur* 35 (1990), 178-194.

working group. It has published its results in a yearbook since 1992.⁴⁰ This leads to my third chapter.

III.

The war, the public and "Military history in expansion", 1990-2005

Ultimately, it was only in the 1990s when military science expanded on a large scale to include theoretical considerations, methodical approaches and the topics of military history. Its representatives called it "military history in expansion".⁴¹ Also, it was only in the 1990s when World War II, which had previously been neglected by academic historians in debates on theory and methods, came into the limelight. To mark it off from the conventional version of the discipline it was also called "new military history". It was characterised by the following, now far-reaching developments: Historians drew on source material that did *not* originate in the military or bureaucracy. Thus, they also took into account the subjective interpretation of the war, i.e. the perception, the experience, and the memory of soldiers and civilians alike. As a consequence of the cultural and linguistic turns the epistemological interest focused on the language used to deal with "reality" and to construct, for instance, identities. Historians also drew on concepts of other disciplines such as cultural anthropology, sociology, or psychology. Finally, they broadened the range of topics of military history including questions asked by gender history, cultural history, or the history of everyday life, to name just a few.⁴²

⁴⁰ See its website: <http://www.akhf.de> (06/26/2006).

⁴¹ Kühne and Ziemann (eds.), *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*; see especially Thomas Kühne and Benjamin Ziemann, „Militärgeschichte in der Erweiterung. Konjunktoren, Interpretationen, Konzepte“, in *ibid.*, 9-46, and Anne Lipp, „Diskurs und Praxis. Militärgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte“, in *ibid.*, 211-227. See Klaus Naumann, „Neue deutsche Militärgeschichte - Ein Wegweiser“, *Mittelweg* 36 April (6), 64-67. Focusing on the early modern period: Ralf Pröve, „Vom Schmuttelkind zur anerkannten Subdisziplin? Die ‚neue Militärgeschichte‘ der Frühen Neuzeit. Perspektiven, Entwicklungen, Probleme“, *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 51 (2000), 597-612. Bernhard R. Kroener, „Wer den Frieden will, erkenne den Krieg. Wege, Irrwege und Ziele der Militärgeschichte in Deutschland“, in *DIE WELT* 24.5.1997.

⁴² For a literature survey see Thomas Kühne, „Der nationalsozialistische Vernichtungskrieg und die ‚ganz normalen‘ Deutschen. Forschungsprobleme und Forschungstendenzen der Gesellschaftsgeschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs“, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 39 (1999), 580-662,

Which developments external to historiography can account for this historiographical change? And what will be the consequences for today's and tomorrow's research on World War II? I would like to focus on three factors that I believe fostered this change and will continue to influence World War II research. The first refers to foreign policy, another deals with demography and the third with culture.

First, war returned to Europe and a shift in perspective came about when this happened. After over 40 years in which war was regarded by German society as something that was far off, something that took place in distant parts of the world, there was suddenly war in places such as the Balkans, the former Yugoslavia – places where Germans had previously vacationed. When the global political situation changed drastically since the early 1990s war became more immediate and more relevant to many Germans. Especially important here is the fact that for the first time in many years large segments of society approved of German military presence in countries outside of Germany. All of this caused a “historical tie” to take place. Thoughts about what was going on in the present were tied to memories of past war experiences. Of particular interest were the war against civilians – just think of the topic of strategic bombing, the *Luftkrieg* – as well as the problem of "winning the peace" after the defeat of the enemy.

The second factor deals with demography. In the 1990s, a new generation appeared. This younger generation was socialized in the 1970s and 1980s and thus much further removed from the events of the war. Instead of parents who were involved, or maybe even blamed, it was grandparents. This extra distance changed the perspective on the war. It is easier for this younger generation to ask questions. The controversy about the travel exhibition on the “Crimes of the German Army in World War II”, the so-called *Wehrmacht* exhibition of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research, has shown the explosive force hidden between the generations in this long put-off debate.⁴³ Against the backdrop of the change in society’s perception of war

and 40 (2000) 440-486. See also Jörg Echternkamp, Im Kampf an der inneren und äußeren Front. Grundzüge der deutschen Gesellschaft im Zweiten Weltkrieg, in *Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939 bis 1945. Erster Halbband: Politisierung - Vernichtung - Überleben*, ed. by Jörg Echternkamp (München 2004), S.1-92.

⁴³ Omer Bartov, Atina Grossmann, and Mary Nolan (eds.), *Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2002); for German literature see Hans-Ulrich Thamer, „Vom Tabubruch zur Historisierung? Die Auseinandersetzung um die "Wehrmachtausstellung"“, in Sabrow, Jessen, and Große Kracht (eds.), *Zeitgeschichte als Streitgeschichte*, 171-186.

due to the defence and foreign policy issues I just mentioned, this historical topic became even more explosive.

The final factor of change I want to mention is the one I said dealt with culture. Beginning in the late 80's there was a dynamic increase in public memory. There was momentum from "rounded" anniversaries following the laws of the mass media market. There were several fiftieth anniversaries: in 1989 the beginning of the war, in 1991 the attack on the Soviet Union, in 1993/94 the Stalingrad battle and finally in 1995 the end of the war. The 8th of May remained a disputed issue as a code of commemoration -- even ten years after the speech of the former president Richard von Weizsäcker, who had pleaded to think of this day as a "day of liberation" rather than defeat for Germans. I mentioned at the beginning of my paper the long-winded ways of commemoration around the 60th anniversary.

From a historiographical angle one might also point out the internal dynamics of history as a discipline. Historians competed against each other enforcing their claims to a hitherto neglected sector of the past.⁴⁴ Changes in the academic historical community were both reasons for and results of this development. The MGFA had just moved from Freiburg to Potsdam when (in 1995) the "military history working group" (*Arbeitskreis Militärgeschichte*) was founded. The objective of this group has been to expand the traditional range of political and institutional history. Its members, among them many younger historians have been striving to write military history - notably of the 19th and 20th centuries - using leading ideas and approaches that come from the history of economy, cultural history and gender history. With regards to military history, an explicit objective of the working group is "to develop this current and important field of historical science" since "it is hardly represented institutionally at German universities".⁴⁵

Indeed, the position of Chair of Military History (Potsdam) has only existed since 1996. It is an endowment of the Federal Ministry of Defence. For quite some time now, there has been no question of reservations between the older institutionalised military history and academic historical science. The convergence, as

⁴⁴ Dieter Langewiesche, „Kampf um Marktmacht und Gebetsmühlen der Theorie. Einige Bemerkungen zu den Debatten um eine neue Militärgeschichte“, in Kühne and Zimmermann (eds.), *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*, pp. 323-327.

I put it, of these two domains, has been accepted by all serious historians. This is true on both sides. At the universities, military as well as war – and this includes World War II – is a topic as any other. It has made its way into the textbooks. They introduce students to the topic of military, state and society as well as to the academic discipline of military history, its historiography and its institutions.⁴⁶ What is more, since 1999 there has been a special research centre at the University of Tübingen on the experiences of war. The Institut für Contemporary History is currently working on a project called "Wehrmacht under the Nazi dictatorship".⁴⁷

The MGFA where the potential for research on World War II has been reduced over the last years has published the 9th volume of its series "Germany and the Second World War" that was mentioned above.⁴⁸ The title of this volume is revealing: "The German war society 1939-1945". It is an attempt to do justice to this complex interrelation of social and cultural conditions and warfare from different perspectives. This is indicated in the subtitles of its two parts: "Politisierung – Annihilation – Widerstand"; "Ausbeutung – Interpretationen – Exklusion". The 20 authors take into consideration the results of current debates on theory and methodology in the writing of military history as well as the results of social and cultural studies on the history of World War II.⁴⁹ At least, it reflects the wide range of recent and current research topics such as: the experiences of war, esp. everyday life during the bombing; the holocaust as part of the war; the role of slave labour in the industry and on farms; the indoctrination of the *Wehrmacht* and forms of resistance; direct and indirect war

⁴⁵ See its website: <http://www.akmilitaergeschichte.de> (06/26/2006). See with a focus on the early modern times another working group: the *Arbeitskreis Militär und Gesellschaft in der Frühen Neuzeit*, www.amg.fnz.de.

⁴⁶ Jost Düllfer, „Militärsgeschichte für eine zivile Gesellschaft“, in Christoph Cornelißen (ed.), *Geschichtswissenschaften. Eine Einführung* (Frankfurt, 2000), 178-193, Jutta Nowosadtko, *Krieg, Gewalt und Ordnung. Eine Einführung in die Militärgeschichte* (Tübingen, 2003); Edgar Wolfrum, *Krieg und Frieden in der Neuzeit. Vom Westfälischen Frieden bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Darmstadt, 2003); Ralf Pröve, *Militär, Staat und Gesellschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* (München, 2006).

⁴⁷ Among its topics are German Supreme Commanders at the East Front (Johannes Hürter), front and phases of the German-Soviet war (Christian Hartmann), military occupation and the population in the Soviet Union (Dieter Pohl), Conventional War or war of world views? Warfare and fight against partisans in France (Peter Lieb).

⁴⁸ Jörg Echternkamp (ed.), *Die deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939-1945*, 2 vols., Munich 2004/05 (= *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 9/1-2). For recent monographs with different accents see Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der letzte deutsche Krieg 1939-1945* (Stuttgart, 2005); Michael Salewski, *Deutschland und der Zweite Weltkrieg* (Paderborn, 2005).

⁴⁹ See the introduction: Jörg Echternkamp, „Im Kampf an der inneren und äußeren Front“, *ibid.*, 1-91.

propaganda, including the movies; the function(ing) of the Nazi Party in war times; the meaning of nationalism at that time; as well as the occupation of Eastern Europe seen from "below".

One drawback of the volume, however, is that it is more or less written from a national perspective which really has been the case with the whole series. This leads me to three suggestions for possible improvements in historical research on World War II.

IV.

The future of the past of the Second World War, the concept of "total war"

It is true that there is hardly a historical phenomenon that crosses borders to the degree that war does. War is by definition "transnational". Nevertheless, the history of World War II has often been forced into the scheme of national history. So, I would like to argue that a globalization, or at least Europeanisation of world war history in accordance with the fulfilment of the methodological requirements I mentioned above offers several advantages: It would point out the various specific chronologies of the war, its different starting points and endings. It will help to study the construction of the *one* World War and ask for the advantages and limits of this idea.

The second improvement in historical research that I would like to see is World War II serving as a source for case studies on cross-era issues. Now, this period is analyzed almost solely in its own context. As far as I can see, an important task will be to analyse the events of the period of 1939-45 in a further-reaching diachronic context. The formula of the "era of world wars" points in this direction, since it helps to look at both WW I and World War II as well as the inter-war period. Another approach might be a historical sociology of violence.⁵⁰ But totally different questions like those that are in a narrow sense military ones e.g. strategic issues are also

⁵⁰ Kühne and Ziemann, „Militärsgeschichte in der Erweiterung“.

feasible. At the annual meeting of the military history working group, topics of such analyses in longitudinal sections were: war captivity, occupation role, heroism, the horrors of war, or the relationship between war and gender.

My final suggestion for improved historical research would be to link “real” experiences of war to the public memory of war. Now, the history of World War II is a field of the “policy of dealing with the past”. For quite some time, scientific debates, which have entered the public through the feature pages of newspapers, have focused more on the history of the past of a historical event than on the event itself. The dispute is about discourses, the right place of the war in the commemoration culture of the Germans and thus of German historical science. Often enough, works on public recollections are detached from experiences. Even if one issue cannot be directly derived from the other, the individual war experience of a person makes him or her susceptible to certain war reminiscences.⁵¹

So I made three suggestions for further research: the transnational perspective, cross-era issues, and linking experience and memory). These suggestions relate to a concept that has become pivotal for the study of World War II: the concept of total war.

To put World War II in a comparative perspective: that was the aim of the concluding conference of a series of conferences and volumes on “total war”, reaching back to the American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification in the 19th century.⁵² For some it seems to be common knowledge, but to define the Second World War as “total war”, or more precisely as “the paradigmatic instance of total war” has far reaching methodological ramifications. As the editors point out in their introduction, these ramifications concern most of all the narrative logic of the writing of World War II history. Let me briefly remind you of some aspects.

⁵¹ This was one of the goals of a conference in Paris, April 3-4, 2006, organized by the German Historical Institute in Paris and the MGFA on “Experience and Memory. The Second World War in Europe”. The results will be published by Jörg Echternkamp and Stefan Martens in 2007.

⁵² Roger Chickering, Stig Förster, and Bernd Greiner (eds.): *A World At Total War. Global Conflicts and the Politics of Destruction, 1937-1945* (Cambridge, 2005). For the approach see also the other volumes of this conference series: Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler (eds.), *On the Road to Total War. The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871* (Cambridge, 1997); Manfred F. Boemeke (ed.), *Anticipating Total War. The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914* (Cambridge, 1999); Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds.), *Great War, Total War. Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 2000); Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds.), *The Shadows of Total War. Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, 2003).

To begin with, rather than defining “total war” as such historians have used this concept pragmatically as an “ideal type” in the sense of Max Weber. This model is characterized by the following ingredients: Total war assumes “the commitment of massive armed forces to battle, the far reaching mobilization of industrial economies in the war effort, and hence the disciplined organization of civilians no less than warriors [...]. It also encouraged the radicalization of warfare, the abandonment of the last restraints on combat [...] governments pursue extravagant, uncompromising war aims; and they justify these goals through the systematic demonization of the enemy.” Finally, total war is marked by “the systematic erasure of basic distinctions between soldiers and civilians”. In a total war, “civilians become legitimate if not preferred targets of military violence.”⁵³

Measured against these elements, World War II came closer to this ideal type than any other conflict. I do not have to elaborate on this any further. However, the problem is that this extreme proximity to the ideal has provided a sort of “master narrative” of modern military history, as they permeate textbooks since 1945. The authors themselves are well aware of the risks in telling a rather teleological story of warfare, leading from the Civil War to World War II in an ever-closer approximation of the ideal type. But can World War II really be understood as the end, the goal of 150 years of military history? The term “totality” is especially misleading since it implies the idea of fulfilment. We all know the shortcomings of such a teleological approach. We would not do justice to the various historical forms of war if the implicit question is: To what degree do they anticipate World War II?

But there is another reason to be cautious when calling the Second World War a “total war”. More recent historical studies have also pointed out the limits of its wide spread totality in terms of a) geographical expansion, b) the destruction of civilian life, c) economic mobilization – with Germany or the US as a case in point, as Richard Overly and others have shown. Also, d) the mobilization of armed forces was restricted by traditional gender roles, POWs were treated more or less in accordance with international law – save the Eastern Front, of course. And finally, World War II was “less total” than its predecessor as far as life on the German “home front” is concerned. Normal life was far less disrupted than in WW I, as the result of a Nazi

⁵³ Roger Chickering and Stig Förster: “Are we there yet? World War II and the Theory of Total War”, in Chickering, Förster and Greiner (eds.) *A World At Total War*, 1-31, 2.

policy which had learned the lesson, and due to the exploitation of the occupied countries.

These two flaws: the teleological bias and the empirical restraints of “totality”, has led Stig Förster and others to present a second theoretical approach, if not an alternative to that master narrative. “Total war” can also be addressed “as a narrower, more concrete phenomenon whose meaning and contours emerged in a specific historical context”, i.e. the interwar period and the Second World War itself. It was in the professional and popular discourse of the 20s and 30s that the term “*Der totale Krieg*” (Ludendorff) or la guerre totale emerged. At the core of this new vision of a future war was, by the way, the impact of strategic airpower. Small wonder, that recent research on the “total war” also implies the analysis of its meaning.⁵⁴ The Great War turned out to be the reference point of the total war in anticipation of another world war. At least in German discourse, the Second World War was understood as the fulfilment of earlier trends.

Now, according to this narrower concept of “total war”, as Chickering, Förster and Greiner argue, it began at the time when contemporaries called it that way in an effort to mobilize the home front to new extremes. As a consequence, the emphasis of the concept is now on the new role of civilians. Those who used to be non-combatants had become a central force and target of the War. It therefore seems clear to me that writing the history of 1939-45 must go beyond the military, diplomatic, and political dimension of the war. Instead, historians have to pay particular attention to its social and cultural aspects. World War II can thus be conceived as a war against civilians. It was between 1937 and 1945 that violence against non-combatants became “the hallmark of total war”.⁵⁵ On the one hand, the extreme death toll – higher than that of soldiers – was due to the technological development. Strategic airpower could be directed against civilian targets. On the other hand, that terrible loss of civilian life derived from cultural, ideological and political factors that made the annihilation of entire groups possible. At the interface of modern military history and holocaust studies it becomes shockingly clear that war and genocide were inextricably linked.

⁵⁴ Stig Förster (ed.), *An der Schwelle zum Totalen Krieg: Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft* (Paderborn, 2002).

⁵⁵ Chickering, Förster, and Greiner, “Are we there yet?”, 11.

Whether historians choose the broader reading of total war as an ideal type or the narrower, “nominalist” approach: Both lend themselves to transnational studies of the dimensions of World War II, to a diachronic perspective, and to the study of experience by soldiers and civilians alike.

V.

The new inclusiveness

The sheer amount of publications on World War II this year proves that Germans do not consider this matter closed. No *Schlußstrich*, no “final stroke”. The emphasis, however, is shifting again. It is true, researchers and the public focus on National Socialism, on those who took advantage of it, as well as of those who executed its racist policies. But you can hear a growing number of voices of Germans that consider themselves as victims: victims of the war, of allied strategic bombing and expulsion from the former German territories in Eastern Europe.⁵⁶ Following W.G. Sebald's critique of leaving out the air war from the literature of the postwar period the discussion was animated by Günter Grass's novella “Crabwalk” on the sinking of the “Wilhelm Gustloff” by a Russian submarine and the ensuing death of about 3000 German refugees in January 1945, and the book “Der Brand” by the journalist Jörg Friedrich of the impact of Allied strategic bombing on German civilians.⁵⁷

Clearly, since unification, there is an increasing ‘inclusiveness’ with regard to victims and perpetrators of World War II and the Nazi regime in general.⁵⁸ We also notice a „new homefront perspective“. The end of the Cold War has set a crucial

⁵⁶ Robert G. Moeller, "Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of the Second World War," *History and Memory* 17 (2005), 147-194; Lothar Kettenacker (ed.), *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940 – 1945* (Berlin, 2003); Bill Niven (ed.), *Germans as victims. Remembering the past in contemporary Germany* (Basingstoke, 2006).

⁵⁷ W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur* (München, 1999); Günter Grass, *Crabwalk*. Trans. from the German by Krishna Winston (London, 2003); Jörg Friedrich, *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940 – 1945* (Munich, 2002). See Dagmar Barnouw, *The War in the Empty Air: Victims, Perpetrators, and Postwar Germans* (Bloomington, 2005).

⁵⁸ Bill Niven, *Facing the Nazi past: United Germany and the legacy of the Third Reich* (London, 2002), 5.

starting point for our understanding of these broader trends of German memory. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall Germans lost an impediment to a more forthright confrontation with the wartime experience. No longer they had to shift responsibility for it onto each other. In my eyes, this has a lot to do with the change of generations I mentioned. People who were adults during the war are hard to find. As the German historian Norbert Frei put it in his recent collection of articles on the impact of the Nazi past⁵⁹: It is time to say goodbye to the contemporaries.

In recent times, another generation has spoken up: the so-called *Kriegskinder*, those men and women who were born in the 1930s or even 40s and lived through the war as children. This might mark what Frei terms a “turn of the tide”. The new debate on Nazism and on the war that was at its core seems to be characterized by a “competition of victims”. As to the writing of history this means a growing number of books on the aspects of Germans suffering: especially on strategic bombing, on flight and expulsion.⁶⁰ Some historians have a particular interest in regional and local history in this context. Others rely on autobiographies or interviews with eyewitnesses.

To sum up, it took a rather long time for West German historians to deal with the Second World War properly, that is according to the standards of historical science and from various perspectives. The “convergence” as I called it has led to new studies that meet the demand of a new generation. The new, broadened vision of the past, I argue, stimulates and partly accounts for the public’s interest in the war. Its history should be integrated into the larger picture that social and cultural historiography has drawn. It all depends on properly weighing German suffering and hardship linked most notably to the end of the war without necessarily adopting wholesale a new victimization myth.⁶¹

War as a complex phenomenon and the military as a social formation, both inextricably linked to and constantly interacting with developments in society, economy, culture, and politics: if the topic of modern military history is defined that way, it can make valuable contributions to history in general and to the history of

⁵⁹ Norbert Frei, *1945 und wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* (München, 2005).

⁶⁰ Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der Bombenkrieg 1939 – 1945* (Berlin, 2004). Stefan Aust and Stephan Burgdorff (ed.), *Die Flucht. Über die Vertreibung der Deutschen aus dem Osten* (Stuttgart, 2002).

World War II in particular. In return, structures and changes in society and the state could not be accounted for with the military factor left out. A separation of the spheres would clearly be disadvantageous for both sides. It remains to be seen, however, whether military history in Germany will continue to be an academic topic for graduate classes, exams, or dissertations, and whether the militarily institutionalized history will not restrict itself again to a presumable sphere *sui generis* ignoring the epistemological and methodological developments of the last decades and the enlargement of the concepts, topics, and source materials of military history linked up to its modernization.

⁶¹ Jörg Echternkamp, *Kriegsschauplatz Deutschland 1945. Leben in Angst, Hoffnung auf Frieden: Feldpost aus der Heimat und von der Front* (Paderborn, 2006, in print).