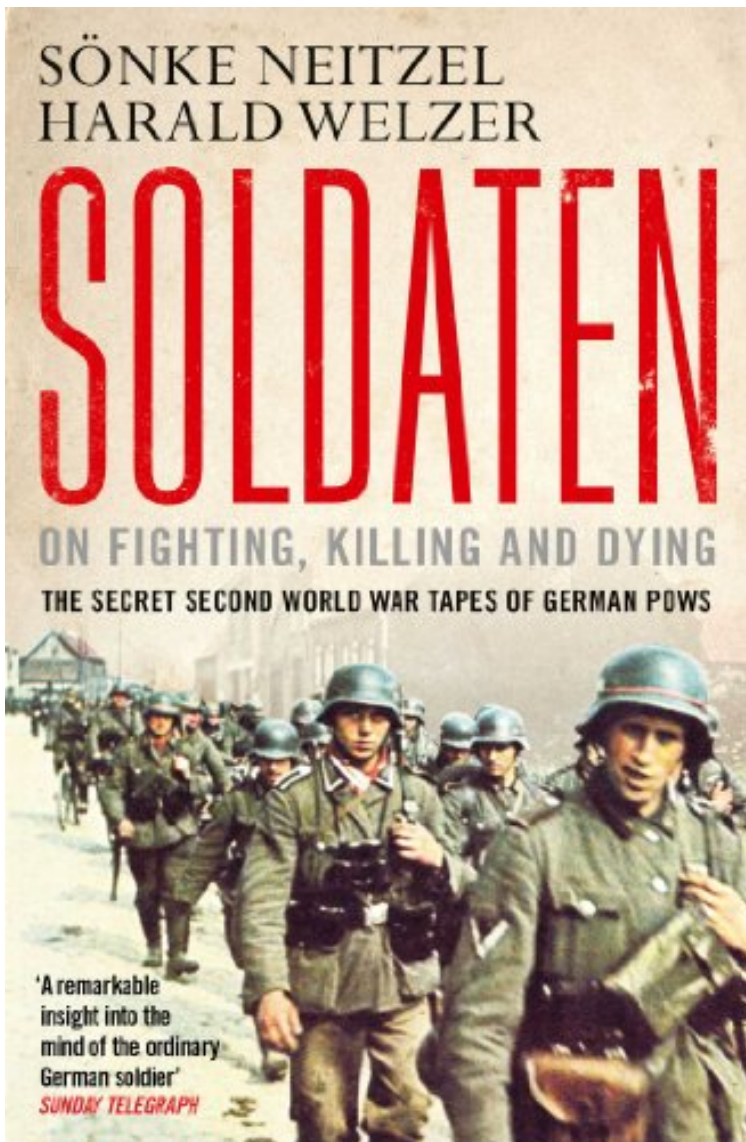


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Soldaten - On Fighting, Killing and Dying: The Secret Second World War Tapes of German POWs (English Edition)



Par Sonke Neitzel, Harald Welzer
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn November 2001, as the world still reeled from the attack on the Twin Towers, German historian Sonke Neitzel discovered an extraordinary cache of documents from the Second World War. The documents were the transcripts of German prisoners of war talking among themselves in prisoner of war camps, and secretly recorded by the allies. In these apparently private conversations the soldiers

talked freely and openly about their hopes and fears, their concerns and their day-to-day lives. With a banality and ease which to the modern reader can appear shocking, they also talked about the horrors of war -- about rape, death and killing. Sonke Neitzel shared the material with renowned and bestselling psychologist Harald Wezler and they set about trying to make sense of the vast piles of documents, the hours of transcripts. The result is *SOLDATEN*, a landmark book which will change the way we look at soldiers and war, and is as relevant to our modern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as it was to the soldiers of the German Army in 1945. Published to huge acclaim and controversy in Germany it was a number one bestseller there and reignited the debate about the banality of evil under the Nazi regime.

Excerpted from the Hardcover Edition *What the Soldiers Discussed* I heard of a case of two fifteen-year-old boys. They were wearing uniform and were firing away with the rest. But they were taken prisoners. A corporal in hospital told me that. They were wearing soldiers uniform, so what could one do. And I myself have seen that there are twelve-year-old boys in the Russian Army, in the band, for instance, wearing uniform. We once (captured) a Russian military band and they played wonderfully. It was almost too much for you. There was such depth of feeling and yearning in their music; it conjured up pictures of the vastness of Russia. It was terrific, it thrilled me through and through. It was a military band. To get back to the story, the two boys were told to get back westward and to keep on the road. If they tried to run into the woods at the first bend of the road they would get a bullet in them. And they were scarcely out of sight when they slunk off the road, and in a flash they had disappeared. A large detachment was immediately sent to look for them, but they couldn't find them. And then they caught the two boys. Those were the two. (Our people) behaved well and didn't kill them there and then, they took them before the C.C. [concentration camp] again. Now it was clear that they'd done for themselves. They were made to dig their own graves, two pits, and then one of them was shot. He didn't fall into the grave, he fell forwards over it. The other was told to push the first one into the pit before he was shot himself. And he did so, smiling a boy of fifteen! There's fanaticism and idealism for you!

This story, as told by Staff Sergeant Schmid on June 20, 1942, typifies how the soldiers talk in the protocols. As in all everyday conversations, the speaker repeatedly changes the subject, following a chain of associations. In the middle, when Schmid is talking about music, it occurs to him how much he enjoys Russian music, whereupon he briefly describes it before continuing his narrative. Schmid's anecdote begins harmlessly enough, but turns truly horrific at the end with the execution of the two young Russian soldiers. The narrator reports that not only were the two youths murdered, they were made to dig their own graves. The execution runs into a complication, and that leads to the eventual moral of the story. The young soldier about to be killed proves fanatic or idealistic, eliciting the staff sergeant's admiration. At first glance what we have here is a spectacular combination of topics: war, enemy soldiers, youths, music, Russian expanses, crimes against humanity, and admiration for one's adversary that don't seem to cohere. Yet they are narrated in a single breath. That is the first thing we need to recognize. The stories we will be examining in this book deviate from what we expect. They were not intended to be well rounded, consistent, or logical. They were told to create excitement, elicit interest, or provide space and opportunity for the interlocutor to add commentary or stories of his own. In this respect, as is true for all everyday conversations, the soldiers' stories tend to jump around in interesting ways. They are full of ruptures and sidebar narratives, and they aim to establish consensus and agreement. People do not converse solely in order to exchange information but to create a relationship with one another, establishing commonalities and assuring themselves that they are experiencing one and the same world. The soldiers' world is that of war. That is what makes their conversations seem so extraordinary to readers today. For the soldiers themselves, they were perfectly normal. The brutality, harshness, and absence of emotion of war are omnipresent, and that is what is so disturbing for us reading the dialogues today, more than sixty years after the fact. Involuntarily, we can only shake our heads in dismay and frequent incomprehension. Yet in order to understand the world of these soldiers, and not just our own world, we need to get beyond such moral reactions. The matter-of-factness with which extreme acts of brutality are related shows that killing and the worst sorts of violence were part of the narrators and audiences' everyday reality. The POWs discussed such topics for hours on end. But they also conversed about airplanes, bombs, radar devices, cities, landscapes, and women:

Miller: When I was at Kharkiv the whole place had been destroyed, except the centre of the town. It was a delightful town, a delightful memory! Everyone spoke a little German they'd learnt it at school. At Taganrog, too, there were splendid cinemas and wonderful cafes on the beach. We did a lot of flying near the junction of the Don and the Donetz.... Its beautiful country; I travelled everywhere in a lorry. Everywhere we saw women doing compulsory labour service.

Faust: How frightful!

Miller: They were employed on road-making extraordinarily

lovely girls; we drove past, simply pulled them into the armoured car, raped them and threw them out again. And did they curse! Male conversations are like this. The two soldiers protocolled here, a Luftwaffe lance corporal and a sergeant, at times describe the Russian campaign like tourists, telling of delightful towns and memories. Then, suddenly, the story becomes about the spontaneous rape of female forced laborers. The sergeant relates this like a minor, ancillary anecdote, before continuing to describe his trip. This example illustrates the parameters of what can be said and what is expected in the secretly monitored conversations. None of the violence related goes against his interlocutors expectations. Stories about shooting, raping, and robbing are commonplace within the war stories. Rarely do they occasion analysis, moral objections, or disagreements. As brutal as they may be, the conversations proceed harmoniously. The soldiers understand one another. They share the same world and swap perspectives on the events that occupy their minds and the things that they've seen and done. They narrate and interpret these things in historically, culturally, and situatively specific frameworks of reference. Our aim in this book is to reconstruct and describe these frameworks in order to understand what the soldiers world was like, how they saw themselves and their enemies, what they thought about Adolf Hitler and Nazism, and why they continued fighting, even when the war seemed already lost. We want to examine what was National Socialist about these reference frameworks and to determine whether the largely jovial men in the POW camps were indeed ideological warriors who set out in a war of annihilation to commit racist crimes and stage massacres. To what extent do these men conform to the category, popularized by Daniel Goldhagen in the 1990s, of willing executioners? Or, alternatively, do they more greatly resemble the more differentiated, morally ambiguous picture of Wehrmacht soldiers that has emerged from the popular historical exhibits by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research and countless historical examinations? Today's conventional wisdom is that Wehrmacht soldiers were part of a gigantic apparatus of annihilation and thus were participants in, if not executioners of, unparalleled mass murder. There is no doubt that the Wehrmacht was involved in criminal acts, from the killing of civilians to the systematic murder of Jewish men, women, and children. But that tells us nothing about how individual soldiers were involved in such criminality, or about the relationship they themselves had toward their deeds whether they committed crimes willingly, grudgingly, or not at all. The material here gives detailed information about the relationships between individuals and their actions and challenges our common assumptions about the Wehrmacht. One fact needs to be acknowledged. Whatever they may encounter, human beings are never unbiased. Instead, they perceive everything through specific filters. Every culture, historical epoch, or economic system in short every form of existence influences the patterns of perception and interpretation and thus steers how individuals perceive and interpret experiences and events. The surveillance protocols reflect, in real time, how German soldiers saw and commonly understood World War II. We will show that their observations and conversations are not what we would usually imagine in part because they, unlike we today, did not know how the war would end and what would become of the Third Reich and its Führer. The soldiers future, both real and imaginary, is our past, but for them it was an unfinished book. Most of the soldiers are scarcely interested in ideology, politics, world orders, and anything of that nature. They wage war not out of conviction, but because they are soldiers, and fighting is their job. Many of them are anti-Semites, but that is not identical with being Nazis. Nor does anti-Semitism have anything to do with willingness to kill. A substantial number of the soldiers hate the Jews but are shocked at the mass executions by firing squads. Some are clear anti-Nazis but support the anti-Jewish policies of Hitler's regime. Quite a few are scandalized at hundreds of thousands of Russian POWs being allowed to starve to death, but do not hesitate to shoot POWs themselves if it seems too time-consuming or dangerous to guard or transport them. Some complain that Germans are too humane and then tell in the same breath and in great detail how they mowed down entire villages. Many conversations feature a lot of boasting and chest-puffing, but this goes well beyond today's males bragging about themselves or their cars. Soldiers frequently seek to rack up points with tales of extreme violence, of the women they raped, the planes they shot down, or the merchant ships they sank. On occasion, we were able to determine that such stories were untrue and intended to make an impression, even by relating, for instance, how they sank a ship that was transporting children. That is beyond the pale today, but the parameters of what could be and was said then were different from what obtains today, as are the things which they hoped would elicit admiration and respect. Acts of violence, back then, belonged to that category. Most of the soldiers stories may initially seem contradictory, but only if we assume that people act in accordance with their attitudes, and that those attitudes are closely connected with ideologies, theories, and grand convictions. In reality, people act as they think is expected of them. Such perceived expectations have a lot less to do with abstract views of the world than with concrete

places, purposes, and functions and above all with the groups of which individual people are a part. To understand and explain why German soldiers waged war for five years with a ferocity still unparalleled today, causing an eruption of violence that claimed 50 million lives and decimated an entire continent, we have to see the war, their war, through their eyes. The following chapters will be concerned in detail with the factors that influenced and determined the soldiers perspective, their frames of reference. Readers who are not interested in Nazi and military frames of reference and are more curious about the soldiers narratives and discussions about violence, technology, extermination, women, or the Fhrer should proceed directly to page 44. After we have given a detailed account of the soldiers views on fighting, killing, and dying, we will compare war as waged by the Wehrmacht with other wars, thereby elucidating what was specifically National Socialist about World War II. This much we can reveal in advance: the results of this examination will often be unexpected. Seeing the War with Soldiers Eyes: Analyzing Frames of Reference Human beings are not Pavlovian dogs. They dont react with conditioned reflexes to predetermined stimuli. Between stimulus and reaction, something highly specialized happens which epitomizes human consciousness and which distinguishes our species from all other forms of life. Humans interpret what they perceive and on the basis of interpretation draw conclusions, make up their minds, and decide what to do. Belying Marxist theory, human beings never act on the basis of objective conditions; nor do they act, as disciples of rational choice theory long wanted us to believe, solely with an eye toward cost-benefit calculations. Waging war is neither the only logical result of cost-benefit analysis nor a necessary consequence of objective circumstances. A physical body will always fall according to the laws of gravity and never otherwise, but whatever human beings do they could always have done differently. Nor do magic entities such as mentalities make people behave a certain way, although psychological structures no doubt influence what human beings do. Mentalities precede but do not determine decisions. Even if peoples perceptions and actions are bound up with social, cultural, hierarchical, and biological or anthropological circumstances, human beings always enjoy a certain freedom of interpretation and action. But the ability to interpret and decide presupposes orientation and knowledge of what one is dealing with and what consequences a decision can have. And a frame of reference is what provides orientation. Frames of reference vary drastically according to historical periods and cultures. Orthodox Muslims, for instance, categorize suitable and unsuitable sexual behavior within a completely different framework from that of secular inhabitants of Western society. Nonetheless, no member of either group is able to interpret what he sees outside references not of his own choice or making. They influence, guide, and even steer his perceptions and interpretations. That is not to say that transgressions of a preexisting frame of reference do not occur in special situations. It is possible to observe or think something new. But this is relatively seldom the case. Frames of reference guarantee economy of action so that most of what happens can be sorted within a familiar matrix. That makes things easier. People called upon to act dont need to start from the very beginning with the question: what is actually going on here? In the vast majority of cases, the answers to this question are preprogrammed and accessible, saved in a corpus of cultural orientation and knowledge. Most everyday tasks are taken care of by routines, habits, and certainties, and that saves individual human beings a colossal amount of work. Thus when we want to explain human behavior, we first must reconstruct the frame of reference in which given human beings operated, including which factors structured their perception and suggested certain conclusions. Merely analyzing objective circumstances is inadequate. Nor do mentalities explain why someone did a specific thing, especially in cases where members of a group whose minds were all formed the same way arrive at entirely different conclusions and decisions. This is the systemic limit upon theories about ideological wars and totalitarian regimes. The question always remains: how are world views and ideologies translated into individual perceptions and interpretations and how do they affect individual behavior? In order to understand those things, we analyze frames of reference as a way of reconstructing the perceptions and interpretations of people in specific historical situations, here German soldiers during World War II. Revue de presse 'These extraordinary bugged conversations reveal through the eyes of German soldiers with stark clarity and candor the often brutal reality of the Second World War, providing remarkable insight into the mentality and behavior of the Wehrmacht.' Sir Ian Kershaw, author of Hitler: A Biography 'Historians often dream of being able to eavesdrop on history, but few can hope to obtain such spectacularly direct access as that presented in this major addition to the literature on the second world war' Observer 30/9 'Soldaten makes for a compelling read In Soldaten, already a best-seller in Germany, historian Sonke Neitzel and psychologist Harald Welzer detail just some of the declassified transcripts of 13,000 prisoners of war committed to wax disc between 1941-45 in Britain and the US. Be warned, there is much

to unsettle the stomach in these horrific accounts Painfully graphic examples of sex crimes and mass executions are plentiful, both inside and out of concentration camps It is easy to see why Soldaten did so well in Germany. Readers of the translated edition can still appreciate the impact of the extracts themselves' Marco Giannangeli, Sunday Express 7/10'A remarkable and incontrovertible insight into the mind of the ordinary German soldier'James Owen, Sunday Telegraph 14/10'Peppered with vivid, and often shocking, stories told by the soldiers, sailors and airmen themselves If there is one lesson to be learned from these transcripts, it must be a respect for the dreadful forces we unleash whenever [the normal laws and constraints of society] are removed' Keith Lowe, Financial Times 13/10-14/10