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Frank Biess: Homecomings

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Impending Defeat: Military Losses, the Wehrmacht, and Ordinary Germans

The onset of the postwar period coincided only in a very literal sense with the unconditional surrender of the German military on May 8, 1945. Long before the end of the war, ordinary Germans had begun to experience the consequences of defeat. The decisive defeats of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern front and in North Africa in 1942–43 not only set in motion a social transformation from “Stalingrad to the currency reform,” but also ushered in a period of “brutal peacemaking” that extended far into the postwar period.¹ Impending defeat brought back to ordinary Germans the massive and unprecedented violence that they had previously meted out to the nation’s victims all over the European continent. Civilian and military casualties figures on all sides exploded during the last two years of the war. German casualties took a sudden jump with the defeat of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad in January 1943, when 180,310 soldiers were killed in one month. Among the 5.3 million Wehrmacht casualties during the Second World War, more than 80 percent died during the last two years of the war. Approximately three-quarters of these losses occurred on the Eastern front (2.7 million) and during the final stages of the war between January and May 1945 (1.2 million).²

Apart from the dramatic surge of casualty figures, Stalingrad also brought to the fore a problem that was to preoccupy Germans long after Soviet troops had raised the Red Flag on the Reichstag in May 1945: soldiers missing in action and POWs in Soviet captivity. The problem of German MIAs and POWs became one of the key links between the last years of the war and the postwar period.³ After 1943, MIAs and POWs represented an increasingly large segment of German military losses. In part, this was a result of the military leadership’s deliberate practice of downplaying German casualties and ascribing them to the category of MIAs.⁴ At least since 1943, moreover, casualties could often not be confirmed with final certainty. As a result, MIAs accounted for more than 40 percent of all German losses on the Eastern front in 1943 and close to 60 percent in 1944. At the end of the war, the total number of soldiers missing in action amounted to 1.5 million. According to recent estimates, half of them had died on the Eastern front, the other half in Soviet captivity.⁵ As with the MIAs, the growing number of German POWs in Allied or



Figure 1. German POWs in Berlin being marched off into Soviet captivity (April/May 1945). German casualty figures escalated during the final stages of the war, and most German POWs were captured during this period. (Courtesy of Landesbildstelle Berlin.)

Soviet captivity represented another widely visible reminder that the war's fortunes had turned against the Third Reich. Whereas the Wehrmacht had captured millions of Soviet POWs during the early stages of the war, approximately 110,000 German soldiers fell into the hands of the Red Army at Stalingrad. But most of the more than three million German POWs in Soviet captivity were captured during the last months of the war in eastern Prussia and Kurland (200,000–250,000), in eastern Germany and Poland (800,000), in the Berlin area (330,000), and in Bohemia (630,000). The largest segment of approximately eight million German soldiers, however, managed to avoid Soviet captivity and ended up in the custody of the Western allies, often after a panic-stricken effort to reach British and American lines.⁶

This chapter analyzes official, popular, and private responses to rising military losses after Stalingrad. It inserts the hitherto largely neglected issue of German MIAs and POWs into the larger story of the German transition from war to the postwar period. Official and popular reactions to the increasing number of MIAs and POWs reveal much about ordinary Germans' confrontation with impending defeat. The liminal status of MIAs and POWs threatened to undermine the Nazi cult of heroic death,

and it inspired family members to search for alternative vision for the future that no longer centered on an increasingly unlikely “final victory” but on a reunion with a missing or captured soldier. These “privatized” responses to impending defeat were based on predominantly female experiences on the home front, and they generally did not extend to (male) soldiers on the front. Even though Nazi authorities took this “private” dissent very seriously, it ultimately did not challenge the Nazi regime’s remarkable ability to hold on to power in the face of certain defeat. The Wehrmacht’s tenacious resistance up to the last minute not only produced the escalating casualties on all sides but also allowed for the continuation of the Holocaust up until May 8, 1945. My argument does not seek to divert from this important historical reality, nor does it attempt to belittle the considerable popular support that large segments of ordinary Germans extended to the Nazi regime, even though this consensus began to erode after Stalingrad.

What requires explanation, however, is not just the failure of popular resistance before defeat but also its complete absence *after* the war’s end in 1945. Despite Allied and Soviet expectations to the contrary, ordinary Germans did not offer any sustained resistance to military occupation in the aftermath of total defeat.⁷ The absence of any popular allegiance to National Socialism after 1945 points to processes of popular disengagement from it that originated in the last years of the war. The chapter demonstrates how popular responses to growing losses during the last two years of the war anticipated confrontations with total defeat after 1945. It also stresses the significance of the Christian churches in shaping this transition from war to postwar. Despite their strong ideological support for the war in the East, Germany’s religious institutions provided an alternative set of meanings for coping with uncertainty and loss after 1943; in so doing, they forged interpretive patterns that then assumed even greater significance in the postwar period. The chapter thus offers an essential prehistory to the protracted aftereffects of war and defeat that form the central subject of this book.

OFFICIAL AND POPULAR RESPONSES TO RISING LOSSES

The rising casualty figures on the Eastern front posed new challenges to the political and military authorities of the Third Reich and transformed popular attitudes toward the war. Different kinds of casualties, however, prompted a variety of official and popular responses. In a straightforward manner, the Nazi regime incorporated the increasing number of fallen soldiers into its political mythology. In the aftermath of Stalingrad, the dead Wehrmacht soldier replaced the “old fighter” as the central object

of the Nazi cult of the fallen hero.⁸ Death on the battlefield became the ultimate sacrifice for the promised “final victory.” This myth of the “fallen hero” served to extract new sacrifices from civilians and soldiers alike. In line with the more general “participation” of the Third Reich during the last years of the war, Nazi Party officials took over the business of communicating German losses to bereaved family members beginning in July 1942.⁹ For the Nazi Party, increasing German losses did not signal the necessity to end the war but rather represented a means for further mobilizing the population. Ultimately, Hitler and the Nazi regime categorically refused to even conceive of a compromise peace as had been concluded in the aftermath of the First World War. Instead, the Nazi leadership set in motion an escalation of violence against internal and external “enemies” and ultimately orchestrated the nation’s own self-destruction.¹⁰

It is difficult to assess how ordinary Germans responded to this official call for even greater sacrifices and, eventually, collective suicide in the face of rising casualties. Even if they subscribed to other key ingredients of Nazi ideology, many front soldiers resisted specific National Socialist interpretations of death and dying. Family members found little solace in the official portrayal of their relatives as fallen heroes. Even before Stalingrad, death announcements tended to omit the “*Führer*” from the standard line that a soldier had died for “*Führer*,” “*Volk*,” and “*Fatherland*”; and family members of fallen soldiers often refused to give the “Hitler salute.” In the face of deep personal loss, the Hitler myth began to crumble.¹¹

At the same time, German soldiers and civilians exhibited a remarkable tenacity during this period. Until the very end, large sections of the German population simply denied the possibility of defeat. As Robert Gelately has argued, despite numerous signs of disintegration and dissolution, “many people, and not just the died-in-the-wool Nazis, showed themselves anxious to interpret events in the most optimistic way possible.”¹² Nazi Party membership actually rose from 6.5 million to 8 million between 1943 and 1945. For many ordinary Germans, the realization that past sacrifices and losses might have been in vain was simply too painful to accept.¹³ In April 1942, Martha S., a sixty-six-year-old widow, denounced to the Gestapo the soldier Herbert N., who had told her that the war was lost. As the motive for her denunciation, she explained that “it would simply be inconceivable to experience that all the sacrifices of this war would have been in vain.”¹⁴ Like Martha S., large sections of the German population were incapable of conceiving of a future beyond Hitler and National Socialism despite increasing casualties.¹⁵ Rising death tolls on the Eastern front thus did not prompt opposition and resistance to the Nazism. Instead, collective experiences of loss bound ordinary Germans to the regime or fostered, at best, widespread apathy and depression.¹⁶

In contrast to fallen soldiers, the liminal position of MIAs and POWs between active soldiers and mythical fallen heroes rendered these casualties more difficult to incorporate into the political mythology of Nazism. The widespread uncertainty about an increasing number of soldiers missing in action ran counter to the finality of official tales of heroic sacrifice. Likewise, captivity signaled the individual's desire for—as well as the actual possibility of—survival and thus threatened to undermine the National Socialist myth of heroic death. Consequently, the Wehrmacht command never prepared German soldiers for captivity, nor did the Nazi leadership ever try to integrate this possibility into its worldview.¹⁷ Initially, the regime even tried to deny that any German soldiers had fallen into Soviet captivity at Stalingrad. The official Wehrmacht proclamation on Stalingrad from February 3, 1943, asserted that the members of the Sixth Army had “fought to the last bullet” and had died a heroic death “so that Germany will live.”¹⁸ The decision of the commander of the Sixth Army, General Paulus, to go into Soviet captivity rather than to commit suicide infuriated the Nazi leadership. Shortly after the surrender at Stalingrad, Goebbels noted in his diary the “depressing news that Paulus and fourteen of his generals had fallen into Bolshevik captivity.”¹⁹ Some days later, he worried that “it would be the most severe shock to the army's prestige that we have experienced during the entire National Socialist regime” if “several German generals had indeed voluntarily entered Bolshevik captivity.”²⁰ As Goebbels's reaction makes clear, the liminal nature of German MIAs and POWs threatened to “pollute” the purity of the National Socialist “all or nothing” logic.²¹

Such concerns over detrimental influences emanating from Soviet captivity were further aggravated by the founding of antifascist organizations among German POWs in Soviet captivity: the National Committee for a Free Germany (NKFD) in July 1943 and the League of German Officers (BdO) in September of the same year.²² The existence of these organizations turned Soviet captivity into an even more delicate political issue for the Nazi regime. By trying to win over German soldiers for the struggle against Hitler and National Socialism, these organizations gave Soviet captivity a more explicitly political dimension. The Army High Command (OKW) and the Nazi leadership took these organizations very seriously and were concerned about their negative propagandistic impact on both front and home front.²³ In National Socialist memory, the NKFD and the BdO evoked the specter of 1918 and of defeat not on the battlefield but through a “stab in the back”—this time not by a revolutionary home front but by “treacherous” generals such as Walter von Seydlitz, one of the founding members of the BdO.²⁴ As a result, the Nazi regime simply denied, until early, 1944, the existence of the BdO and of Seydlitz's participation.²⁵ When news about the NKFD and the BdO was confirmed

through Soviet flyers and radio broadcasts, the Nazi regime engaged in extensive counterpropaganda and denounced both organizations as the creation of “Communist emigrants, mostly of the Jewish race.”²⁶

Popular concerns about the increasing number of missing and captured soldiers also entailed the potential of drawing ordinary Germans away from the regime’s insistence on a “final struggle.” Among family members of MIAs, the existential uncertainty about the fate of a missing relative produced, above all, a massive desire for information. Official statements that a “segment of the missing comrades in the Soviet Union has died a heroic death for the fatherland” appeared premature to many family members and failed to alleviate their nagging concerns about the fate of relatives missing on the Eastern front.²⁷ In contrast to the depressing certainty of an official death notification or the uncertainty of having a relative classified as MIA, captivity—even Soviet captivity—clearly represented “good news.” “I wish Kurt were in Russian captivity; it would be better for him than to have died a heroic death for nothing,” wrote the brother of a soldier missing in the East to his mother in June 1943, and, in so doing, willingly or unwillingly undermined the Nazi myth of heroic sacrifice.²⁸ Throughout the last years of the war, family members of MIAs and POWs confronted the political and military authorities with pressing demands to account for the fate of their sons, brothers, or husbands. In addition, they also began to develop their own activities that served one primary goal: to discover reliable information about the fate and the living situation of a son, brother, or husband. Sooner or later, these efforts brought them into contact with the main official agency for registering and communicating war losses, the Wehrmacht Agency for War Losses and POWs (Wehrmachtsauskunftsstelle für Kriegsverluste und Kriegsgefangene, WAST).

THE SEARCH FOR MISSING SOLDIERS:

POPULAR RUMORS ON THE HOME FRONT

The task of the WAST was to record all German losses—casualties, missing soldiers, and prisoners of war—and to provide Wehrmacht agencies as well as individual family members with information about German losses.²⁹ The massive losses at Stalingrad prompted the establishment of a separate “working agency” (*Abwicklungsstab*) that was supposed to determine the identities of the fallen soldiers at Stalingrad. While the “working agency” did not engage in active search operations for missing soldiers, it extensively communicated with family members in order to establish the location and date of the last news of each missing soldier.³⁰ After additional losses in northern Africa and on the Eastern front in

June 1944, its responsibilities were extended to all German casualties that could no longer be reported by military units themselves.³¹ The skyrocketing casualty rates during the last stages of the war, however, meant that an increasing number of Wehrmacht soldiers were reported as “missing in action” without any more definitive information. Other losses were left unclassified after contact between family members and soldiers on the front had simply ceased to exist. Hitler’s failure to conclude any agreement with the Soviet Union regarding the exchange of information about POWs further aggravated this situation.³² As a result, family members were left in a state of fundamental uncertainty that often lasted into the postwar years.³³ The false postwar rumors about “missing divisions” in the East or hundreds of thousands of German POWs languishing in “secret camps” in the Soviet Union originated in this basic uncertainty about MIAs and POWs during the last years of the war.³⁴

The Nazi regime not only failed to alleviate these popular anxieties but also deliberately concealed available information about MIAs and POWs. While the Nazi leadership was very much aware of the popular discontent that might originate from family members of MIAs and POWs, Goebbels and the propaganda ministry were even more concerned about hostile propaganda emanating from enemy sources.³⁵ The WAST shared information about MIAs and POWs gleaned from enemy sources only if family members directly contacted the agency.³⁶ In addition, the Nazi regime undermined the few existing avenues for establishing contact with German POWs. From August 1942 on, some German POWs managed to write letters and postcards to their relatives in Germany. But most of this mail from Soviet captivity never reached the intended recipients. The Reich Security Main Office (RSHA)—the administrative center of the Nazi security and terror apparatus—ordered that all mail from Soviet POW camps be held back by the censorship office (*Auslandsbriefprüfstellen*) for “state political reasons” (*staatspolitische*) and forwarded to the RSHA for further evaluation. By October 1943, an RSHA report listed seven thousand such letters from Soviet captivity; the total number for the entire duration of the war is estimated to be twenty thousand.³⁷ The authorities never notified family members of these letters and postcards. The potentially detrimental propagandistic impact of news about the survival in Soviet captivity took precedence over the existential worries and grief of family members of MIAs and POWs.

The regime’s (dis)information policy prompted widespread popular discontent among relatives of missing soldiers. From the defeat at Stalingrad virtually to the end of the war, they suspected military and political authorities—correctly as it turned out—of withholding information about the number and identity of missing soldiers and POWs.³⁸ In December 1943, military authorities in Dresden reported that families of missing

Stalingrad soldiers felt “not sufficiently supported, and even abandoned or almost betrayed” by the political and military authorities. The report estimated that the number of affected persons in that army district alone amounted to more than one hundred thousand. In light of the “serious general situation,” this “loss of confidence in the Wehrmacht among wide sections of the population” entailed “serious dangers.”³⁹

As a result of their frustration with official efforts to provide information, family members began to undertake their own efforts at investigating the fate of missing soldiers and POWs. One potential source of information consisted of Soviet flyers listing the names of alleged German POWs. Although the Army High Command asserted that the names on these flyers were probably forged or belonged to soldiers who had actually been killed on the Eastern front, family members of missing POWs nevertheless regarded them as a valuable source of information.⁴⁰ In March 1943, for example, Karl R. brought home with him a Soviet flyer encouraging soldiers to inform the families of missing soldiers that their loved ones were in Soviet captivity and that they were “doing well” (*sind wohllauf*). His parents subsequently contacted the families of several soldiers listed on the flyer, who then spread the information even further. When this communication was eventually intercepted by the Gestapo, Karl R.’s mother explained that her actions had been motivated by her own loss of two brothers in the First World War and of her youngest son Kurt’s death on the Eastern front in 1942. “I wanted to help the affected persons, and I felt sorry for them that they did not have any news of their relatives.” The “good reputation” that Frau R. had earned in the eyes of the Gestapo through her service in Nazi welfare organizations as well as her role as bloc leader of the local branch of the Nazi Women’s League saved her from prosecution. But her case illustrates how private experiences of loss fueled empathy with other (German) losses and led even otherwise loyal Germans to transcend the codes of acceptable behavior in Nazi Germany.⁴¹

Soviet radio broadcasts represented an even more readily available, though also illegal, source of information about MIAs and POW. With the beginning of the war in September 1939, listening to foreign radio became a criminal offense punishable with several years in prison.⁴² The threat of persecution, however, did not prevent family members from resorting to this news source, even if they were otherwise loyal to the Nazi regime. A report from June 1943 stated that “undoubtedly, a large number of faithful National Socialist Germans are listening to the Russian radio station night after night hoping to receive any news about missing soldiers.”⁴³ Ever concerned about hostile influences on the “people’s comrades,” Goebbels worried that this illegal practice might leave “political traces” among family members of missing soldiers.⁴⁴ The case

of Fritz M. illustrates just how widespread this practice had become by the spring of 1943.⁴⁵ A World War I veteran and former SPD member who also suffered from multiple sclerosis, Fritz M. began to listen to Soviet radio broadcasts in January 1943 and then sent forty-six letters to relatives of German POWs. Because he signed the letters with his real name and address, the Gestapo eventually arrested him in May 1943.⁴⁶ In addition, the Gestapo also traced the recipients of his letters, who were hard pressed to explain why they had not reported these communications earlier. One woman declared that she had already received thirteen such letters regarding the fate of her husband from different sources.⁴⁷ In October 1943, Fritz M. was charged with having engaged in “Communist propaganda” by countering the “common assumption . . . that German soldiers in Russian captivity were treated badly” and by telling family members “that the allegedly missing German soldiers were in captivity and doing well.” This, the Gestapo asserted, was tantamount to undermining the “morale of the troops on the front.” As a result, Fritz M. was sentenced to two years in prison.⁴⁸

Family members not only sought information about MIAs and POWs, they also began to contact each other and shared the scarce bits of information that were available. The months after Stalingrad saw the emergence of an entire subculture of informal networks among family members of missing soldiers. In a liberal-democratic or even authoritarian system, these networks would have represented the preliminary stages of legitimate interest-group formation.⁴⁹ Yet within the context of the Nazi dictatorship, these informal contacts assumed a subversive quality. They promoted a plethora of rumors about the fate of MIAs and POWs in order to compensate for the deficiencies of officially available information.⁵⁰ Such rumors represented a less than public countersphere in which it was possible to articulate alternative responses to impending defeat. When the war assumed a more personal meaning for an increasing number of ordinary Germans, official and private visions for the future began to diverge. Rumors and informal networks among family members of missing soldiers pointed to a gradual erosion of the popular consensus on which the war had rested since the early military triumphs in 1939–40.

The most prominent of these rumors centered on the former commander of the Eighth Army Corps of the Sixth Army, Generaloberst Walter Heitz. At Stalingrad, Heitz had lived up to his reputation as one of the most loyal Nazi generals by threatening to execute everybody who surrendered to the Red Army.⁵¹ Yet on January 31, Heitz himself capitulated to Soviet forces and even managed to write a letter from a Soviet POW camp, which reached his wife Gisela in April 1943 due to a mistake of the censorship office in Vienna. After Frau Heitz had inquired with several agencies as to how to respond to her husband’s letter, the OKW

finally referred her to the WAST while also cautioning that “due to the completely negative attitude of the Soviet Union, there have been no agreements whatsoever regarding contact with German POWs in the Soviet Union.” Yet, as it did with all such requests, the WAST never attempted to contact Heitz or any other German POW in Soviet captivity but rather forwarded Frau Heitz’s letter to the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) in Berlin.⁵² Rather than seeking to explore the possibilities for communication with German POWs, the military leadership intentionally deceived family members of missing soldiers and relied on the security organs of the Third Reich to suppress such communications.⁵³

Official repression notwithstanding, the Heitz letter quickly became the stuff of popular rumors and informal communications. Frau Heitz began to pass on the news about her husband to other wives of missing soldiers. Some months later, she reported that she had received “hundreds of inquiries” regarding this matter.⁵⁴ Hedwig Strecker, another general’s wife, managed to establish similar contacts with her captured husband and passed on the information to other family members of missing soldiers.⁵⁵ The Heitz rumor gained new currency as a result of an ever increasing number of missing soldiers in 1944. In February, the father of a missing Stalingrad soldier portrayed Heitz as a liaison person for MIAs and POWs in the East. He developed a questionnaire that family members were supposed to send to Heitz through the WAST.⁵⁶ The collapse of Army Group Center in June 1944 promoted further rumors surrounding General Heitz, who, at that time, was no longer alive.⁵⁷ In June 1944, for example, Claire R. inquired with military authorities whether it was possible to receive information through General Heitz about her husband, who had been reported missing since January 1943.⁵⁸ In response to persistently high numbers of inquiries, the Army High Command finally issued a statement in which it firmly denied the possibility of learning about missing soldiers in the East through Generaloberst Heitz. From that point on, inquiring family members received a form letter indicating that “not in a single case was it possible to confirm the receipt of a letter sent from Germany by a German POW in the Soviet Union,” thus discouraging any further requests.⁵⁹ Still, military and political authorities never succeeded in suppressing these inquiries, and the Heitz rumor accompanied the fighting almost until the end of the war.⁶⁰

These informal communications about MIAs and POWs threatened to undermine the ideological cohesion of German society. By stating that “no officer has committed suicide up to the very end,” the letters circulating among family members of Stalingrad soldiers flew in the face of the myth of heroic sacrifice.⁶¹ These rumors carried the danger that a growing number of ordinary Germans might follow the example of highly decorated Wehrmacht generals and simply refuse to die a heroic death for the

sake of an increasingly elusive “final victory.” This was all the more true since these letters also established the possibility of survival in Soviet captivity and asserted that German POWs “must be treated by the Russians over there fairly humanely.”⁶²

Besides the figure of General Heitz, family members of missing soldiers also placed high hopes on neutral countries as potential intermediaries between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In March 1943, one affected “family father” of a missing Stalingrad fighter even contacted the Führer’s headquarters and suggested the use of a neutral power in order to encourage Russian officials to release the names of fallen and captured Wehrmacht soldiers.⁶³ Other rumors speculated that the Vatican had offered to establish contact with ninety thousand German POWs in the Soviet Union, yet the German government had rejected this offer.⁶⁴ The German embassy in Turkey and the Turkish branch of the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, also featured prominently in rumors about German POWs in Soviet captivity. Letters circulating among family members stated that it was possible to contact German POWs in the Soviet Union through the German embassy in Ankara. This rumor was based on at least one case in which the German ambassador to Turkey and former chancellor Franz von Papen had personally confirmed the internment of a German soldier in Soviet captivity.⁶⁵ Within a short period of time, however, this information spread like wildfire and led to hundreds of inquiries with the German embassy and the Red Crescent in Turkey, sometimes even with the encouragement of local Nazi Party leaders.⁶⁶ At the same time, family members exhibited considerable frustration that officials did not support them in their endeavors to find information about missing loved ones. When her inquiry to the Red Crescent was returned without any response about her missing fiancé in April 1943, Irmgard D. bitterly complained to the OKW in Berlin: “Why should we not make an inquiry [through the Red Crescent]? At least one should be allowed to try!” Frustrated about the lack of an official reply to her query, she charged that such ineffective and useless communications were detrimental to “total war,” in which “every working hour is needed.” As in earlier cases, this woman quite easily reconciled her frustration with the regime’s (dis)information policy regarding MIAs and POWs with a public commitment to the war effort.⁶⁷ Still, like the Heitz rumor, the persistence of the “Turkey rumor” through the last two years of the war underlined the massive popular desire for information about MIAs and POWs.⁶⁸

Informal networks among family members of MIAs and POWs also gave voice to private visions for the future that increasingly diverged from those of the Nazi regime. One letter reporting rumors about contacts with POWs in the Soviet Union took them as an inspiration to “look into the future with much more hope and to expect a good ending.”⁶⁹ This hope

for a positive outcome, however, was no longer predicated on the expectation of a “final victory” in the distant and indeterminate future.⁷⁰ Instead, family members began to define their expectations for the near future in primarily private terms. They were hoping for a quick conclusion to the war that would presumably result in a reunion with their captured or missing husbands, sons, and brothers.⁷¹ “If only this war were finally over, and those poor people were freed,” wrote one family member of a German POW.⁷² The same popular sentiment was reported in March 1943 from Bensheim an der Bergstrasse in March 1943, a military district with a particularly high concentration of relatives of Stalingrad fighters. This report noted an increasingly “defeatist tendency” among the population that manifested itself in frequent expressions of the wish “that the war will be over soon.”⁷³ Here, private concerns over family cohesion gave rise to the imagination of alternative futures that superseded the Nazi regime’s scenario of national sacrifice. Within the admittedly limited milieu of family members of former Stalingrad fighters, the congruence between private interests and Nazi expansionary policies began to split apart in the spring of 1943.⁷⁴ The potentially highly subversive quality of these hopes for a compromise peace is manifest in the fact that they were also adopted in flyers of the White Rose, the Munich-based resistance organization whose student members were caught in February 1943 and executed a few months later.⁷⁵

In most cases, however, widespread dissatisfaction over the Nazi regime’s failure to account for missing soldiers and POWs did not translate into opposition to the regime. These concerns, after all, often remained highly individualized and limited to one specific issue, and they were generally not linked to nonconformist viewpoints. In some cases, criticism of official information policy even went along with an affirmative stance toward Nazism. Moreover, as Detlev Peukert has argued, widespread rumors did not necessarily indicate the existence of broad-based popular opposition to the regime, but rather represented an extreme “fragmentation of public opinion,” which disintegrated into several subspheres. The increasing discrepancy between public statements and private communications had a disorienting effect that ran counter to goal-oriented opposition and resistance.⁷⁶ While family members engaged in myriad activities to investigate the fate of missing relatives, these activities remained scattered and devoid of a more unified political direction.

Moreover, the security organs of the Third Reich were highly successful in preventing such private communications from coalescing into political opposition. To be sure, family members of missing soldiers enjoyed, unlike those groups excluded from the Nazi racial community, significant protective barriers. Yet the threat of repression remained always present, and often a mere admonition by a Gestapo officer or SS man sufficed to

convince a family member of a missing soldier to cease all independent activities. In addition, the Gestapo and the SD (Sicherheitsdienst), the intelligence division of the SS, also benefited from close cooperation with Wehrmacht agencies, and vice versa, in prosecuting these activities. The “working agency” for Stalingrad and the counterintelligence division of the Wehrmacht, the Abwehr, regularly exchanged information about the activities of family members of missing soldiers with the Gestapo and the SD.⁷⁷ Finally, the security organs of the Nazi regime drew on the willing collaboration of individual Germans. This was, for example, the choice of the Field Marshal Paulus’s wife and brother, who denounced a letter from Soviet captivity as “propaganda for Russian captivity” and reported it to the authorities.⁷⁸ In so doing, they replicated the general’s own disastrous commitment to the National Socialist ideals at Stalingrad.

The personal nature that gave popular concerns about MIAs and POWs their urgency also limited their potential political significance. For the most part, these concerns remained confined to the immediate range of one’s own kin. Increasing losses and uncertainty did not open up ordinary Germans to larger questions of politics and morality but instead fostered a narrowing of one’s perspective to the exclusive focus on the survival of the family. This “inward turn” was far from innocent. Given widespread knowledge about the Nazi regime’s genocidal policies, the focus on one’s own personal grievances facilitated a virtually complete moral and emotional disengagement from the victims of Nazism precisely at the moment when the regime unleashed its most destructive energies. Ordinary Germans’ increasing self-referentiality and desire for peace did not just reflect a basic indifference toward the victims of Nazism but could also go along with a persistent belief in central aspects of anti-Semitic propaganda.⁷⁹ These popular responses to impending defeat also anticipated postwar Germans’ denial of empathy with the victims of Nazism that so shocked outside observers like Hannah Arendt.⁸⁰

This blocking out of the fate of Germany’s victims did not constitute the only possible popular response to the mounting losses during the last years of the war. The remarkable, albeit highly unusual, case of Dr. Christian Schöne illustrates the range of popular responses to the increasing number of MIAs and POWs, which reached from fantasies of revenge to outspoken empathy with Germany’s victims.⁸¹ It also illuminates that these responses left, at least in part, room for an individual’s choice and volition. Schöne was a medical doctor who headed a small military hospital near Frankfurt an der Oder. When his brother Konrad Schöne was reported missing at Stalingrad in January 1943, Christian Schöne began to participate in the informal network of family members of missing soldiers and, in March 1943, started to send out chain letters to other family members of MIAs in which he recounted his activities to research the fate

of his missing brother. In the first letter, he told of his efforts to contact former members of the German embassy in Moscow as well as the Swiss and Swedish representative in Berlin, hoping that these neutral countries would be able to “help people who got into a difficult situation through no fault of their own.”⁸²

Up to this point, Schöne’s efforts did not differ significantly from similar activities by family members of missing soldiers. Yet in a third chain letter sent out on 3 May, 1943 (the birthday of his missing brother), Schöne made a most unusual rhetorical move: he linked the fate of German MIAs to the killing of Jews on the Eastern front. Schöne recounted suggestions from other family members of missing soldiers to take revenge on the “6–7 million Jews in our hands” if Moscow’s “Jewish rulers were to harm our captured soldiers.”⁸³ This proposal reflected the popular acceptance of the Nazi regime’s genocidal logic that blamed and punished Jews for German military losses. Unlike other family members of missing soldiers, Schöne, however, was adamantly opposed to such fantasies of revenge. Instead, he reported in his chain letter that Soviet Jews “have already been shot by us in numbers for which the pits of Katyn would be insufficient.” He related that his missing brother had told him of the killing of sixty-four thousand Jews, including women and children, from Kiev and that he knew from an SS man, who had participated in 150 executions per day, that these killings were still going on. Rather than advocating reprisals against Jewish victims, Schöne feared that “our prisoners will have to pay the price for this.” In addition—and this was the truly significant part of his letter—he declared that mass murder was dishonorable and unmoral, and thus demanded that these “morally reprehensible” actions cease. As a result, he encouraged the recipients of his letter to confront official party, state, and military authorities with two demands: first, petitioners should insist that “responsible military experts” lead the military operations in order to prevent another Stalingrad, and second, insist upon an end to the killing of the Jews.

This was a remarkable intervention. Schöne’s letter clearly bespeaks the extensive knowledge about mass killings of Jews in the East that was available inside Nazi Germany by early 1943, as well as the different conclusions that contemporaries drew from this knowledge.⁸⁴ In contrast to many ordinary Germans’ moral disengagement or sense of revenge, Schöne’s personal concern for his brother did not lead him to ignore or deny what was happening at the same time to the victims of Nazi Germany. Instead, his personal loss enabled him to empathize with Jewish victims and to move toward a morally grounded opposition to National Socialism. Second, the outcome of the case was just as surprising as the letter itself. In November 1943, a military court tried Schöne for his activities but meted out a relatively mild sentence of one year in prison. Signifi-

cantly, the verdict never questioned the truth of Schöne's assertions about mass killings on the Eastern front, but simply argued that these utterances threatened to subvert German morale. This ruling might have constituted an exception in the otherwise increasingly lethal military justice system. But the court might also have feared the negative propagandistic impact of punishing more harshly a member of the "national community" for his concern for his missing brother. Schöne survived war and dictatorship but died in March 1947, shortly before his brother was able to send a postcard from a POW camp in Siberia.⁸⁵

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT SOVIET CAPTIVITY AND WEHRMACHT MORALE

The proliferation of informal networks among family members of missing soldiers fueled official concerns that these rumors might spill over to the front itself and undermine the morale of the troops. Partly to counter these proliferating rumors about Soviet captivity, Wehrmacht and party agencies undertook extensive efforts to compile information about the situation and treatment of German POWs. Such knowledge about Soviet captivity was important to military and political officials also in light of intensified NKFD propaganda that openly encouraged German soldiers to desert.⁸⁶ The credibility of NKFD efforts centrally depended on the perception of Soviet captivity among Wehrmacht soldiers. For only if German POWs had a decent chance of survival did captivity appear as a legitimate alternative to service in Hitler's army. A positive portrayal of Soviet captivity as "the shortest way home" thus formed a key element in NKFD propaganda.⁸⁷ As a "countermyth" to the National Socialist myth of heroic sacrifice, NKFD propaganda promised German soldiers an alternative time horizon. Whereas National Socialist authorities like Hermann Göring in his crucial speech on 30 January, 1943 gestured toward redemption in the long and indeterminate future ("in a thousand years, every German will still speak of this battle"), the NKFD portrayed the defeat at Stalingrad as the prehistory to liberation through the Red Army in the foreseeable future.⁸⁸

Official efforts to investigate the treatment and conditions of German POWs in the Soviet Union drew on three types of sources: interrogations of captured Soviet soldiers, reports of escaped or liberated German POWs, and evaluations of Soviet propaganda.⁸⁹ Their interest in accurate information notwithstanding, military and political authorities processed this information through the lenses of racist and anti-Semitic stereotypes.⁹⁰ Military officials, for example, discredited the account of a captured Russian pilot by concluding that "he was Jewish" and made a "dishonest (*verschlagene*) impression."⁹¹ In another case, a captured female

Soviet soldier was interrogated several times until her revised account approximated preconceived notions of atrocities by “Jewish officers” in the Red Army against German POWs.⁹² Such stories of alleged Soviet atrocities also featured prominently in two confidential reports on POWs in Soviet captivity that were compiled by the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) and the Wehrmacht counterespionage division Fremde Heere Ost in 1944. These reports told of political selections by “NKVD commissars, German emigrants, and Jews” who separated “fascists” from “anti-fascists” and “Communists” among German POWs. They reported frequent executions and mass deportations to Siberia in “cattle trains that resembled animal cages,” which then led to “mass death.”⁹³ While recent research indicates that shootings of German POWs did occur occasionally, German POWs were not subjected to a policy of deliberate annihilation.⁹⁴ Instead, the military and political authorities of the Third Reich projected their own practices of genocidal warfare onto their Soviet enemy. Reports of political selections, executions, and mass deportation of German POWs in Soviet captivity legitimized the similar criminal transgressions by German SS and regular army units in the war of annihilation on the Eastern front.⁹⁵ They also anticipated postwar tendencies to use the Jewish experience as a narrative frame for German suffering.⁹⁶

Both reports also conceded that Soviet treatment of German POWs had improved considerably, largely as a result of Soviet efforts to exploit the labor force of German POWs. According to the Wehrmacht report, German POWs were “treated relatively well when they reached the camps,” while the RSHA report granted that “the Bolshevists” have recently tried “to integrate the POWs as quickly as possible into the work process” and “to exploit this workforce as long as possible.” Finally, both reports revealed officials’ concerns regarding the susceptibility of German POWs to the activities of the NKFD. While the Wehrmacht report came to the conclusion that “only a very small number of German POWs decide to participate in the treacherous activity of these elements,” the RSHA evaluated the political loyalty of German soldiers in captivity much more skeptically. “Most prisoners,” the RSHA report stated, “sooner or later succumb to these influences.”⁹⁷

These confidential findings were highly explosive. Just as popular uncertainty about soldiers missing on the Eastern front threatened to subvert morale on the home front, this information about improved conditions in Soviet captivity raised official anxieties about the cohesion among soldiers on the front. Impressionistic evidence suggests that these concerns were not completely unfounded. In May 1943, a soldier writing from the front reported that “for some time, Russian captivity has sounded a bit better than earlier.” In January 1944, another soldier reckoned that “the Russians no longer shoot all the injured POWs. They probably need them

too.”⁹⁸ The possibility of Soviet captivity as an alternative conclusion of the war also emerged in communications between soldiers on the front and family members on the home front. In September 1943, Margareta K. wrote to her thirteen-year-old son that his father was in Russian captivity, adding—and this was the phrase that caught the attention of the Gestapo—that her husband had always maintained that “he would rather be in captivity than have his bones shot to pieces.” When interrogated by the Gestapo, Margareta K. vehemently denied that her husband had ever expressed any intention to desert, even though she conceded that his last letter from August 1943 indicated an increasing unwillingness to continue fighting because “he had been through so much already.”⁹⁹

An order by the head of the OKW, Wilhelm Keitel, from January 1944 prohibiting any statements regarding the allegedly good treatment of German POWs indirectly confirmed the increasing prevalence of such sentiments among Wehrmacht soldiers.¹⁰⁰ Nazi propaganda about Soviet atrocities also became less credible the longer the war lasted. When the propaganda ministry evoked the violent transgressions of the advancing Red Army in eastern Germany in 1944–45, ordinary Germans reportedly refused to believe these stories of Soviet atrocities precisely because they were played up so strongly in Goebbels’s propaganda.¹⁰¹ At least to a segment of ordinary soldiers, Soviet captivity no longer appeared as an utterly horrifying conclusion to the war, equal to or even worse than death. This assumption is borne out by the extremely high number of soldiers who were either reported missing in action or captured by enemy forces on the Eastern front during the last stages of the war. It is well known that rumors about the good treatment in British or American captivity contributed to the mass surrender of German forces on the Western front.¹⁰² But beginning in the second half of 1944, voluntary surrender or at least a more passive refusal to fight also began to constitute a mass phenomenon on the Eastern front.¹⁰³

Despite these indications of soldiers’ searches for an exit from the war, the salient fact about the Wehrmacht during the last years of the war was not dissent and disintegration but remarkable cohesion. Historians have struggled to explain this behavior of ordinary soldiers, which, from today’s perspective, seems difficult to fathom. The acceleration of terror and repression during the final stages of the war certainly contributed to the Wehrmacht’s tenacity. A dramatic expansion of military justice led to the execution of more than twenty thousand German soldiers.¹⁰⁴ The Nazi regime, moreover, also sought to sever subversive communication between front and home front by extending punishment, including execution, to family members of successful deserters.¹⁰⁵ In November 1944, an order by the Wehrmacht High Command formally held family members liable “with property, freedom, or life” for the desertion of a son, brother,

or husband.¹⁰⁶ Similarly radical measures were adopted against the families of German POWs who were suspected of collaborating with Soviet authorities. As early as January 1942, the Gestapo began to investigate the backgrounds of soldiers whose names appeared on Soviet flyers.¹⁰⁷ If it became known that individual German POWs had joined the NKFD, the Reich Security Main Office began to check their political backgrounds and family situation.¹⁰⁸ Wehrmacht agencies closely cooperated with the SS and SD in prosecuting cases of disloyalty among German soldiers in Soviet captivity.¹⁰⁹ In 1944, especially after the failed conspiracy against Hitler on July 20, the regime also began to prosecute and arrest family members of Wehrmacht officers who had joined NKFD and BdO. The wife of General Seydlitz was forced to divorce her husband.¹¹⁰ Confirming the close link between desertion and Soviet captivity, these provisions were finally extended to all alleged “traitors” in captivity, thus making family members responsible for the conduct of German POWs.¹¹¹ By turning its destructive forces against Germans themselves, the Nazi regime revealed its final inability to provide perspective and meaning to the German population in the last stages of the war.

Terror and coercion alone, however, do not suffice to explain the ferocity with which ordinary soldiers fought to the end of the war. By 1943, the Wehrmacht had indeed become Hitler’s army, and the bulk of its leadership as well as large segments of ordinary soldiers had come to share the ideological assumptions that drove the war of annihilation on the Eastern front.¹¹² Besides ideological indoctrination “from above,” more recent interpretations assign more agency to ordinary soldiers’ own motivations during the final stages of the war. To explain ordinary soldiers’ purpose and commitment, historians have invoked a perverted sense of “comradeship,”¹¹³ an unbroken emotional investment in the “myth of the Führer,”¹¹⁴ or a desperate effort to hang on to communal bonds in the face of defeat, a “catastrophic nationalism.”¹¹⁵ This historiography, then, makes clear that Soviet captivity did not represent a viable alternative to most Wehrmacht soldiers. Rumors about improving conditions in Soviet captivity ultimately did not supersede soldiers’ own cultural and often racist sense of superiority over “the Russians,” which prevented them from voluntarily surrendering to the Red Army.¹¹⁶ In addition, many soldiers must have witnessed the mass death of Soviet POWs in German captivity during the early stages of the war.¹¹⁷ Here too, German soldiers’ own guilty conscience lay behind their own fears of “revenge” if they ended up in captivity.¹¹⁸ For these reasons, “Siberia” did not seem like an acceptable outcome for many ordinary soldiers, and hence, they continued to fight. In the end, official anxieties about collapsing Wehrmacht morale proved unfounded, and most German soldiers followed the Nazi regime into total defeat.

Popular responses to the increasingly personal quality of the war thus diverged on front and home front. For civilians, the “privatization” of the war implied an inward turn and an almost exclusive focus on kinship relations. For the vast majority of soldiers, by contrast, the same process often inspired an ethics of ferocious fighting that militated against voluntary surrender as an alternative conclusion to the war. The Nazi regime’s most important achievement during the last years of the war resided in its ability to mobilize ordinary soldiers’ personal motivations for its own self-destructive logic. It was precisely this increasingly “personal” quality of the war—combined with an utter dehumanization of the enemy—that accounted for its increasing lethality on all sides.

These diverging responses to increasing losses shaped postwar confrontations with total war and total defeat. The gradual and partial disengagement from National Socialism among family members of MIAs and POWs, as well as their focus on a private future centered on the family, provided emotional and experiential bridges across 1945. Informal communications among family members over the fate of MIAs and POWs also anticipated the postwar discourse on German victimization that completely severed German losses from previous German aggression.¹¹⁹ Women’s prominence in these informal networks on the home front also points to the gender-specific dimension of this particular transition from war to postwar. Ironically, the National Socialist emphasis on women’s significance in the private sphere ultimately turned against Nazism itself: during the last years of the war, the family (and kinship relations more broadly) constituted a repository of alternative futures that fostered a disengagement from National Socialism.¹²⁰ This was true despite women’s prominence in the war industry and air-defense battalions.¹²¹ Postwar memories of women’s experiences blocked out their significant participation in the war effort as well as their willful ignorance of Nazi genocide. Instead, these memories drew on predominantly female experiences of personal loss and private resilience, which then were easily transformed into national narratives of German innocence and victimization.¹²² By contrast, the parallel male experience of fighting to the end was much more difficult to incorporate into postwar memories of defeat, not the least because it was a narrative of abysmal failure on both the individual and the collective level. The collapse of the Nazi regime paralleled the failure of German men to protect the homeland and their families against the Red Army. This absence of an adequate male narrative of the war’s ending also deprived any potential postwar resistance to the victors of its ideological basis. It also meant, as the ensuing chapters of this book will demonstrate, that the rehabilitation of the male narrative of war and defeat became one of the central ideological projects of postwar reconstruction in both Germanys.

THE ROLE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

The Christian churches crucially shaped this process of a gradual distancing from the Nazi regime among civilians at home and—to a much lesser extent—among soldiers on the front. As the last semiautonomous institution of the Third Reich, the churches alleviated the crisis of meaning that had opened up as a result of increasing losses since Stalingrad. Church organizations responded to ideological and emotional needs of the population that the Nazi regime increasingly left unsatisfied. Given the churches' historic role of providing a space, albeit highly confined and regulated, for action specifically for women, church organizations were well suited for articulating specifically female concerns regarding missing or captured soldiers. The churches addressed fundamental experiences of uncertainty and loss and, in so doing, prefigured confrontations with the consequences of total defeat in the postwar period. In this way, the churches represented a crucial institutional and discursive link between the last years of the war and the postwar period.

Two Christian welfare organizations illustrate the churches' role in the transition from the war to the postwar particularly well: the Catholic Church War Aid (Kirchliche Kriegshilfe) and the Protestant Aid Society for POWs and Internees (Evangelisches Hilfswerk für Kriegsgefangene und Internierte, EHIK). Initially closely linked to the Nazi war effort and highly supportive of the ideological crusade against Bolshevism, both organizations undertook extensive efforts to help ordinary Germans in coping with rising military losses beginning in 1943. They also continued to exist nearly unchanged after 1945 and assumed crucial roles in caring for MIAs, POWs, and returnees as well as their family members in postwar Germany.

The Catholic Kirchliche Kriegshilfe was formed within the Catholic Caritas and was initially responsible for providing religious literature to fifteen thousand Catholic soldiers, military chaplains, and theology students.¹²³ Until 1943, it was headed by Heinrich Höfler, who was subsequently drafted into the army and interned by the Gestapo in Berlin between June 1944 and May 1945. The explicit purpose of the EHIK, by contrast, was religious care for Protestant POWs and internees. Bishop Theodor Heckel, who, since 1934, also had headed the Foreign Office of the German Protestant Church, presided over the EHIK throughout the Nazi period.¹²⁴ From the beginning of the war, both organizations had lent crucial ideological and logistical support to the Nazi war effort. This was especially true after the onset of the National Socialist “crusade” against Bolshevism in June 1941. In his “letters to comrades,” Heinrich Höfler wrote in October 1941:

In the land of the Red Star, you German soldiers have witnessed the invasion of a demonic power into the realm of history. The devilish evil and the terrifying bestiality that has been experienced in the East remains in your memory as a historical lesson on the . . . culturally destructive effect of a fanatical hatred and destructive will against Christian thinking, Christian symbols, and popular traditions.¹²⁵

Bishop Heckel also preached a fervent anti-Bolshevism in public speeches as well as in individual communications with soldiers on the front, in which he often referred to his own front experience during the First World War.¹²⁶ Christian affinities to National Socialist ideology were not limited to a shared anti-Bolshevism but also derived from the Catholic hope for the coming of a new *Reich* or from the national Protestant emphasis on obedience to state authorities. Finally, the boundaries between a religiously motivated, traditional anti-Judaism and Nazi racial anti-Semitism always remained fluid.¹²⁷ Sermons for Catholic priests serving on the Eastern front sent out by the Kirchliche Kriegshilfe, for example, evoked biblical anti-Semitic motifs that provided legitimacy to the racial war of annihilation in the East.¹²⁸ Heckel articulated his anti-Semitism even more explicitly by denouncing the “Jewish clique in the United States” in a letter to a Protestant minister serving on the Eastern front.¹²⁹

Despite this congruence between Nazi ideology and the Christian churches, both the Kirchliche Kriegshilfe and the EHIK came into conflict with the regime during the final years of the war. Höfler was interned by the Gestapo because he was accused of giving secret military details to the Vatican.¹³⁰ And even Heckel, whose affinity to Nazism was much stronger than Höfler’s, ultimately clashed with the Nazi leadership over the efforts of the SS to push back the influence of the church in the occupied territories in the East.¹³¹ These conflicts with the regime allowed both organizations to portray themselves as having remained immune to National Socialism, thus conveniently bracketing their earlier affinity to it.¹³² While this postwar narrative of resistance was grossly exaggerated and, indeed, a myth, the last few years of the war did see an increasing divergence between Christian and National Socialist responses to mounting losses and impending defeat. In particular, the ever-increasing losses on the Eastern front (including MIAs and POWs) since the defeat at Stalingrad produced massive popular desire for consolation and meaning that the Christian churches were able to exploit. After years of decline, church membership soared, especially among family members of fallen soldiers.¹³³ During the last two years of the war, more and more ordinary Germans turned to Christian rituals of mourning again.

This new popularity of the churches did not remain hidden from the watchful eye of Nazi authorities. In the aftermath of Stalingrad, SD ob-

servers noted the popular appeal of Christian commemorations of fallen soldiers, which “sought to surpass National Socialist commemorations of the fallen hero in every respect.” According to the SD, the Catholic Church, in particular, developed “extraordinary creativity in honoring the dead.” Priests offered special sermons for fallen and missing soldiers, to which family members were personally escorted. The church established symbolic graves for dead soldiers—even for those soldiers who had left the church. In Göttingen, the local church community set up a specific altar that displayed a red candle for each fallen soldier and a green candle for every three soldiers missing in action.¹³⁴ Gestapo officials reported similar church activities in the wake of Stalingrad. At a special sermon for Stalingrad fighters, a Catholic priest read aloud a letter from one of them; the content was reportedly “so terrible” that “most of the audience began to cry.” “This,” the local propaganda chief commented, “is not the right way to prepare our countrymen (*Volksgenossen*) for a total war.”¹³⁵

The popularity of church commemorations filled the ideological void that resulted from the disintegration of the National Socialist myth of heroic sacrifice. Unlike the cult of the fallen hero, the Christian concept of suffering as a precondition for redemption was not tied to a National Socialist victory. Instead, the Christian notion of sacrifice—based on the model of the crucifixion of Christ—assumed a redemptive quality independent of the outcome of the war.¹³⁶ A Catholic sermon for Easter 1944 sent out by the Kirchliche Kriegshilfe, for example, explicitly rejected the notion that a final victory would ultimately justify sacrifices in the present. By contrast, the sermon argued that loss of a relative could never be compensated for by earthly gains but that true consolation could only be found in “God’s eternal love.”¹³⁷ Given the approaching Allied armies on all fronts, belief in religious salvation may have been easier than increasingly desperate hopes for a final victory. In fact, the (self-) destructive energies unleashed by the regime during the final stages of the war suggested that the collapse, not the ultimate triumph, of the Nazi regime was the precondition for the “return to God.” These divergences in Christian and National Socialist interpretation of loss and suffering, then, also paved the way for the Christian interpretation of war and defeat in the postwar period. The Nazi regime now appeared as the epitome of a secular turn away from God and religion in the modern world, whose collapse was to usher in a new era of re-Christianization.¹³⁸

The renewed appeal of the Christian churches during the last years of the Third Reich not only resulted from a rather desperate turn toward religion in the face of impending defeat. It also derived from the fact that church organizations like the Kirchliche Kriegshilfe and the EHIK addressed fundamental experiences of uncertainty and loss to which the Nazi regime no longer gave satisfying answers. This was true especially

regarding the fates of German MIAs and POWs. The Catholic Easter sermon for 1944, for example, included a “prayer for missing soldiers,” which sought to console family members who were anxious about missing loved-ones.¹³⁹ While the prayer appealed to God’s power to comfort the missing soldier wherever he might be, it also addressed the possibility that he might no longer be alive and thus pleaded for the salvation of his soul. Through sermons and prayers, church representatives sought to alleviate popular concerns that the military and political leadership of the Third Reich tended to ignore or to address in a cursory and formal fashion.

This was also the function of a series of letters that Bishop Heckel sent to family members of MIAs and POWs. The EHIK established contact with ministers and theology students in Western captivity and then sought to provide these individual POWs with religious literature. As a result, an extensive correspondence emerged among the EHIK in Berlin, family members of POWs, and individual POWs from places as far away as Canada or New Zealand.¹⁴⁰ The EHIK, to be sure, was unable to establish similar contacts with German POWs in Soviet captivity. Still, family members of missing soldiers in the East frequently contacted the EHIK and Bishop Heckel personally, seeking to explore every possible option to gain information regarding their missing relatives. While Heckel and EHIK were unable to provide any more information than official state or Wehrmacht agencies, they responded with very personal, individual letters that sought to take seriously the desperate uncertainty of the predominantly female letter writers.¹⁴¹ In one case from May 1943, the EHIK representative, for example, encouraged the letter writer not to abandon hope that “over the course of the war, there will be a possibility to conduct detailed investigations regarding the fate of German POWs in Soviet captivity.”¹⁴² These letters assumed a very different tone from official statements by Wehrmacht and party authorities, which tended to perceive the activities of family members of missing soldiers and POWs as a nuisance at best, as propagandistic subversion of morale at worst. Church organizations like Heckel’s EHIK thus provided solace and support where the regime offered increasingly unconvincing propaganda. In so doing, these organizations sought to bridge the chasm that had opened up between the Nazi regime and ordinary Germans as a result of the rising German losses since 1943.

These semiofficial communications between church organizations and ordinary Germans anticipated the discursive communities that were to shape postwar confrontations with war and defeat. They gave expression to German losses, yet, unlike the Nazi propaganda, they did not seek to use these painful experiences for further mobilization. At the same time, these communications reflected ordinary Germans’ increasingly narrow and selective perception of external reality. They separated private pain

from previous German aggressions and thus dehistoricized and decontextualized German losses. Long before the collapse of the Nazi regime, these conversations prefigured the postwar proclivity of ordinary Germans to see themselves as the true victims of war and dictatorship.

The ascendancy of the Christian churches during the last years of the war thus gave the popular disengagement from National Socialism a distinct meaning. In particular, it promoted a crucial shift in the meaning of “sacrifice”: from an active sacrifice for “final victory” that had been dominant in the National Socialist imagination to a more passive endurance of suffering that was compatible with Christian discourse. The postwar concept of “the victim” as an all-encompassing personal and collective identity represented the most important product in this discursive shift, and both East and West German postwar societies drew on this shift in their confrontations with total defeat after 1945.¹⁴³ At the same time, this period also gave rise to more redemptive narratives, which then informed postwar reconstruction in East and West. In the East, the NKFD narrative of liberation and conversion to antifascism through Soviet forces provided one of the central legitimating narratives of the postwar period. In the West, by contrast, the Christian concept of redemption through suffering assumed key significance for postwar efforts to move beyond defeat.