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*German Military Occupation in Northern France 1914-1918*

Studies on the German occupation of Northern France during World War I are rare on the international level. This academic disregard forms a sharp contrast to the contemporaries' perception: Certain aspects of the occupation substantiated the allied accusation of German barbarism in warfare, found their way into the *Versailles Treaty*, and therefore had a strong impact on the international political climate during the war and well into its aftermath. Today, mostly French historians pay closer attention to this particular chapter of the conflict. Yet, there still is no book-length scientific analysis on this subject. Moreover, all existing studies focus on the occupation from the civilians' point of view and are mainly based on ego-documents of the local population, such as diaries and letters. The perspective of the German occupiers, though, is hardly considered at all and thus remains obscure.

This dissertation project wants to fill this historiographical gap. Hence, it concentrates on those aspects of the occupation which cannot be explained by the French sources only – that is, the German plans behind the occupation, its internal administrative organisation and the strategies applied. Its main focus is on the levels of decision-making, meaning the different German military authorities responsible for the administration of the occupied territories. The project's central question is that of the military occupiers' treatment of the local population, which not only comprises measures like forced labour and deportations, but also the economic exploitation of the occupied areas. These occupation practices are analysed in different stages – from their planning and potential modification to their actual realization – and on different levels – from the German military staff in charge of the actual administration on site to their direct and indirect superiors. Through the analysis of different levels of decision-making it is possible to trace divergent ideas concerning the occupation practices among the German military. Thereby, a special interest is taken in the interaction between occupiers and local population, which particularly involves the questions to what extent the population's conduct influenced the occupiers' policies and actions, and what role respective mentalities, self-perceptions and concepts of the enemy played in this context.

By trying to understand the occupation primarily from the point of view of different military echelons in charge of the occupied territories, this project hopes to find out about the internal logic of the German occupation policies. While it is often argued that these policies

gradually and inevitably moved towards totalization, one core thesis of this study is that a linear radicalization process can be identified primarily for the economic exploitation, and that with regard to other measures it is probably more accurate to speak of cycles of escalation. Force and compulsion occurred in specific contexts, often grounded on a fatal dynamic, and did not follow a big master plan. More importantly, radicalization processes could be reversed under specific circumstances. – Ultimately, both motives and practices of the German occupiers were well more complex than often implied in the already existing studies. In fact, their often ambivalent or even contradictory character also raises questions concerning the German conduct of war in general and opens new perspectives for comparative studies on war and occupation.