Introduction

In the verdant woods outside Cherbourg in Normandy, walkers sometimes stumble on a mysterious site. Almost overgrown by weeds, brambles, and moss, a large concrete rectangle lies hidden among the trees. It is about twenty metres long and ten wide, full of water and trailing vines. Along each end of the structure are four evenly-spaced blocks with angled tops. They look like short podiums that have been turned around so that their top surface slants towards the water. These blocks give the first clue to the structure's purpose, for they look as though they were designed as diving platforms for racing swimmers to take flight. A closer look reveals that they are in fact starting blocks, for the structure is an open-air swimming pool, nestled deep in a valley and fed by a local stream. According to a chiselled marking nearby, the pool was built by the German army and inaugurated in 1942, midway through the occupation of France. Not far away, a small house-like building, a pillbox with loopholes in the sides, stands guard over the site that was located near a German encampment.[1]

The swimming pool is a curiosity, one of thousands of concrete structures dating from World War II that still mark the landscape of France. Many such structures are bunkers, gun emplacements and observation posts that line especially the English Channel and Atlantic coasts. Some are in farmers' fields, others in towns and villages, and still more on beaches, where they are slowly sinking into the sea. Remnants of the German defences are everywhere, though they are left out of most visitors' beach photographs, and rarely appear in any but the most specialised tourist guides.

The swimming pool is in many ways a stranger sight, and one that raises more troubling questions. Rather than conjuring up expected

[1] The site is near Sideville, Manche. Difficult to find, it is described here: Thierry Dubillot, "La piscine aux Allemands veut se faire oublier," *Ouest France*, 26 September 2013, www.ouest-france.fr/la-piscine-aux-allemands-veut-se-faire-oublier-92375.

images of armed watchfulness or the heated exchanges of battle, it suggests leisure, relaxation, and even fun. A first visit to the site is jarring because it draws attention away from the obviously warlike and exploitative aspects of military occupation and invites one to think of occupiers in a different light. As they exercised or rested by that pool, enjoying its cool water on a summer's day in pastoral Normandy, what were these soldiers thinking? How did they conceive of defeated France, and what did they imagine they were doing there as World War II went on?

The pool is a reminder that for four years, German soldiers not only stood guard over and fought in France, but also lived their lives there. They were trained and equipped first to invade Britain and, when that proved impossible, they fortified France and prepared to respond to the Allies' inevitable attempt to reconquer the European continent. Some men acted directly to claim local resources, to crush opposition, to oppress, persecute and deport France's Jewish population, and to track down and murder members of the resistance. Others condoned these actions. Some took on administrative tasks, managing the army itself and France's occupation by overseeing government and industry to ensure the maximal exploitation of economic and labour reserves. Some men were posted to France for weeks; others stayed for months and even years, interspersed with tours of duty to other Fronts.

As part of the larger history of National Socialist (Nazi) expansionism and oppression in World War II, the combat experiences of German soldiers are relatively well documented. The same is true of Germany's role in persecuting France's Jewish population, and of Adolf Hitler's efforts to exploit the land and its labour force. However, we know much less about German occupiers' everyday activities beyond combat, especially when it comes to men who were not top-level administrators. What were the attitudes of ground-level occupiers, and how did these shape the way the occupation unfolded? How did soldiers approach occupying a place that, to many men, seemed deeply attractive, and offered unprecedented opportunities for consumption, leisure and sightseeing? Although some occupiers harboured scorn for France that was nourished by National Socialist propaganda, most also recognised that they were fortunate to be stationed in a country that seemed remarkably calm and "peaceful." Better still, France offered a panoply of pleasures that victorious incoming soldiers found easy to access. Soon after the 1940 invasion ended, for instance, an exhilarated occupier, Kurt F., wrote home to his parents about the fabulous food and drink he was enjoying, and commented that "when it comes to provisions, we live here like the Lord

God in France."[2] Although the exact origins of the German phrase F. used, "*leben wie Gott in Frankreich* " ("living like God in France") are unclear, in everyday parlance, it describes taking advantage of the good life. The term is a cliché, but it was frequently used by soldiers during the occupation, sometimes to the frustration of the military authorities. Freighted with aspirational, idealising qualities, it encapsulated many men's approach to France – a place where it seemed possible, if only for a few hours, to relish simple joys and get away from the war.[3]

From the summer of 1940 onwards, occupiers visited and enjoyed France's varied landscapes, consumed French goods, and profited from the country's many opportunities for leisure and pleasure. They also took vast numbers of photographs, developing through these and their letters, diaries, and even publications, a narrative about the occupation that depicted Germans not as barbaric oppressors, but as welcome guests. In this narrative, the occupiers were open-minded, culturally sophisticated visitors, whose wartime victories had confirmed the superiority of their National Socialist worldview, and whose leadership would help the French, weakened, degenerate and abandoned by their leaders, become junior members of a Nazi-dominated Europe.

With the loss of the war, this narrative was rightfully consigned to the proverbial dustbin of history, but some of its elements proved remarkably long-lasting. Even today, in casual conversation in France, the occupiers' behaviour is often described as having been "correct."[4] Among both the French and the Germans, the occupation is remembered as relatively "gentle," despite its well-documented and omnipresent exploitation. The violence and brutality of its final phase are viewed as the exception rather than the rule.

In light of these notions, we might ignore the "softer" aspects of the occupation, dismissing them as frivolous or shying away from them as misguided efforts to hold a genteel fig leaf over the "real," brutal face of Hitler's war. Yet doing so would be a mistake, for wars consist not only of combat, but also of administration and occupation, of brief moments of leisure and pleasure, of the men behind the lines as well as those

[2] Kurt F., 1 July 1940, (DTA: 270/1). F. was born in Bremen in 1909, studied pharmacy and worked in a chemical factory in Berlin before being called up. He fought in the West in 1940, remained in France as an occupier until June 1941, fought in the Soviet Union for two years, was wounded, and, after a period of convalescence in 1943, was posted back to France in 1944. He died at Sourdeval, Manche on 8 June 1944.

[3] Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: In Search of the German Occupation 1940–45* (London: MacMillan, 2002), 71; Ludger Tewes, *Frankreich in der Besatzungszeit 1940–1943* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1998), 388.

[4] Tewes, *Frankreich*, 388.

at the front. As Craig Gibson has emphasised in his book on British soldiers in France in World War I, "the soldier's experience of soldiering needs to be defined rather more broadly than his experience of combat."[5] Examining the lives of men behind the lines, their leisure and pleasures, the experiences and worldviews of occupiers, reveals a different and more complex face of conflict.

Furthermore, what happens away from the front-lines and in occupied areas can, and does, influence the course of major events. Managing occupations, and above all, managing occupiers, are challenging and important tasks. A more nuanced and three-dimensional picture of German policy towards occupied France emerges when one takes into account the complexities of managing an occupying army of between 35,000 and nearly 100,000 men, depending on the time period.[6] This book offers a corrective to high-policy-focused standard accounts by rendering ground-level occupiers visible and bringing their role in shaping the occupation of France to light.

Occupiers from the highest officers down to the lowest-ranking privates found France remarkably appealing and sought to make the most of its opportunities for leisure, consumption, and even tourism while they could. They lived, in a very real sense, between the pillbox and the swimming pool, between violence and leisure, between their duties as combatants, and the pull of the good life. The tension that this occasioned played itself out in thousands of individual choices between indifference and possessive entitlement, proximity and distance, restraint and brutality, that coloured the occupation's every facet.

To investigate soldiers' roles as occupiers, and how their approaches and behaviour shaped the occupation, the book asks three levels of question. The first level has to do with occupation experiences. Although it is generally recognised that officers, particularly the top brass in Paris, lived well, to what extent was this true of lower-ranking troops beyond the capital? How did ground-level soldiers approach occupation, and what was it like to be in France as an occupier? To answer these first questions, the book analyses occupiers' experiences, demonstrating notably that leisure, consumption and tourism were integral to the project of occupation. Sources such as letters and diaries, as well as amateur

[5] Craig Gibson, *Behind the Front: British Soldiers and French Civilians, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 21.

[6] These numbers refer to men under the command of the Militärbefehlshaber Frankreich. The low figure dates from summer 1942, while the high figure corresponds to the period just before the Allied landing in Normandy. See discussion of numbers in Peter Lieb and Robert O. Paxton, "Maintenir l'ordre en France occupée: Combien de divisions?," *Vingtième Siècle* no. 112 (2011): 124–5.

photographs, offer new perspectives on how occupiers saw themselves and understood their role.

Delving deeper, the book explores, secondly, how Hitler's regime instrumentalised soldiers' activities. It lays out a circular dynamic of appropriation and reappropriation in which official propaganda picked up and exploited impulses from soldiers, who then drew on propaganda themes in their own visual and written productions, which in turn became sources for new propaganda initiatives. Soldiers' initial leisure, consumption, and tourism-based approach to occupation was allowed to persist because these activities offered numerous advantages to the regime. Suggesting that Germans were doing nothing more than enjoying France, admiring its monuments and appreciating its food and consumer goods raised a smokescreen of civility that helped to hide the occupation's exploitative core.[7] Occupiers' enjoyment of France, which was shared through letters, images and shipments of goods to their families at home, lubricated overall consent for Hitler's rule. Above all, allowing France to persist as a comparatively "peaceful" place enabled its ongoing use for rest and relaxation, regrouping and retraining tattered units from the Eastern Front. A period of time spent recuperating in France became arguably one of the most common wartime experiences for soldiers, and the respite offered by leisure, consumption, and tourism in France thus undergirded violence and brutality elsewhere.

If allowing for leisure and pleasure offered advantages, these activities also threatened to become liabilities over the longer-term. Maintaining a balance between benefit and risk, a growing challenge, is explored through three separate problems in the third level of analysis. The first problem had to do with differences between relatively comfortable France and the unprecedented horror of the Eastern Front; the second was linked to growing resistance activity, and the third stemmed from differences in culture between long-term occupiers and incoming troops in 1944. All three problems threatened to destabilise the occupation and forced a reevaluation of the desirable balance between leisure and violence in occupied France.

While occupiers in the West were relaxing and taking in the pleasures of France, from June 1941 onward, soldiers in the East were facing some of the most difficult and brutal fighting Germans had ever seen. Looking

[7] "Smokescreen" is employed in the sense used by Birthe Kundrus, who cites the importance of the Nazi regime's "smokescreen of solicitude" in ensuring popular consent for Hitler's rule. "Greasing the Palm of the Volksgemeinschaft? Consumption under National Socialism" in *Visions of Community in Nazi Germany: Social Engineering and Private Lives*, ed. Martina Steber and Bernhard Gotto, 2014, 166–9.

westwards, men on the Eastern Front were justifiably envious, and they came to believe that their own difficulties were being aggravated by lazy, relaxed attitudes in rear areas, especially in France. Many soldiers had already spent time in France, and some like Kurt F. made direct comparisons between their experiences there and the terrible conditions they faced in the East. Such comparisons were never advantageous to the French occupiers, and a widespread belief arose that troops in the West were becoming soft; feminised by living too well for too long a time. In their letters, men in the East complained about the *Etappengeist* (spirit of the rear) as opposed to *Kampfgeist* (fighting spirit) of men in France, and described them as "*westweich*," soft (*weich*) from being too long in the West.

The notion that soldiers in the West were going soft led to repeated attempts to reduce administration staff and to limit the amount of time individuals spent in France. Younger, fitter administrators were rotated out for compulsory spells in the East, and a special commission on rationalising manpower was sent to France to comb through the administration, root out inefficiencies and redeploy as many fit men as possible to the front-lines. Taking soldiers' mobility into account and viewing the French occupation not in isolation, but as part of a much larger European conflict, new themes like these emerge.

A second problem that made it difficult for administrators to decide how to "pitch" the occupation was that from mid-1941, resistance groups stepped up their attacks on German forces. Facing demands from Berlin to respond harshly, the Militärbefehlshaber, Otto von Stülpnagel, prevaricated. Cracking down on resistance activities would upset a delicate equilibrium in France. Not only would it make the French less willing to collaborate with Germany, but it would also get in the way of the country's continued exploitation both through "hard" forms of despoilment and through the "soft" methods of leisure, consumption, and tourism. In his self-justifying resignation letter to General Wilhelm Keitel in February 1942, Stülpnagel underlined that he had always striven to maintain "calm and order" in France in order to exploit the country "in the most useful and extensive way" for the German war effort.[8] "Calm and order" were necessary for extensive exploitation and, despite Stülpnagel's efforts, the challenge of finding a balance between stability and repression troubled the occupation to its bitter end. It affected not only the fraught relationship between Paris and Berlin, but also interactions between different levels of the occupation

[8] MBH to Keitel Nr. 11/42, 15 February 1942 (BArch: RW 35/1).

apparatus and incoming troops when the German presence in France was contested on the battlefield in 1944.

Occupiers' main tasks had always been to exploit French resources while defending French territory against opponents of the occupation and Allied attack. Most of the time, this meant exercising, watching and waiting, but in June 1944, American, British and Canadian forces landed on the beaches of Normandy. Recognising that war in western Europe came nowhere near the levels of violence that were commonplace in the eastern Europe, historians debate the degree to which the battle in France in 1944 was fought conventionally, or was ideologically driven. For the most part, units proceeded conventionally, but there were moments of excessive violence and atrocities against civilians. In the most detailed analysis of anti-partisan fighting and combat in France to date, historian Peter Lieb shows that the worst atrocities in France were committed by SS units, and that beyond these groups, regular army forces that had experienced difficult rear-guard action and anti-partisan warfare on the Eastern Front tended to behave most brutally.[9] Beyond these explanations, which suggest that levels of brutality were determined by the combat experiences of the troops and their ideological conviction, how did the experience of having been an occupier shape soldiers' tendency (or not) towards extreme violence? In some cases, Bertram Gordon has suggested, the closer, deeper knowledge of France that longer-term occupiers enjoyed seems to have served as a brake on violence.[10] There was a noticeable difference in culture between occupation administrators, many of whom were older men who had been brought in from civilian posts, and younger incoming troops.[11] While the former had spent months, if not years, in one place, and generally sought stable relations with local people to facilitate smooth exploitation, the principal task of the latter was making war. Active troops, notably those recently arrived in the West, were often scornful of longer-term occupiers. In 1944, the widespread perception that occupiers in the West were going soft, developed into a World War II equivalent of the "stab-in-the-back" myth that was retailed in the interwar period to explain Germany's 1918 loss. Now, the notion that occupiers were *westweich*

[9] Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg?: Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 2007). See historiographical discussion later in this introduction.
[10] Bertram Gordon, "Warfare and Tourism: Paris in World War II," *Annals of Tourism Research* 25, no. 3 (1998): 628–31, 633.
[11] Thomas J. Laub, *After the Fall: German Policy in Occupied France, 1940–1944* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 44–5.

shaped interpretations of new setbacks in France and elsewhere. This perception may also have spurred on greater violence among some men arriving in France in the desperate 1944 efforts to shore up German defences and retain Hitler's western prize. Viewing troops in the West as soft made it easier for incoming men, particularly members of Waffen-SS and elite units, to turn to extreme methods to show that, unlike the occupiers, they were "hard" and knew how a "real" war should be fought.[12] In examining responses to three sets of problems, therefore, the third level of analysis takes up questions about the interaction of leisure and violence, suggesting that, while a closer relationship with France fostered through leisure and pleasure sometimes held back violence, at other times the idea that some men were enjoying themselves excessively drove others to violent acts.

As it explores three levels of questions about occupiers' approaches and experiences, the management of these experiences, and the effects of "soft" interactions with France on the course of the war, the book addresses three broad historical fields: the history of the German occupation of France; the history of tourism, consumption, and leisure; and the history of Nazism and World War II. In terms of the first, it brings ground-level occupiers into an account that has hitherto been dominated by the policy-making activities of elite administrators in Paris. The need to ensure that occupying soldiers felt satisfied and France remained available as an essential rest area for front-line troops shaped the occupation throughout. Uncovering the everyday experiences of occupying a country that was viewed, before the war, as a virtual equal and an attractive destination complicates the standard picture of the occupation years. A focus on ground-level soldiers also brings out their mobility, and the permeability of France as part of a much larger European and global war.

Second, by considering occupying soldiers as tourists, and as consumers of goods and leisure opportunities, the book adds depth to the history of tourism, consumption, and leisure in wartime. It argues that pastimes such as sightseeing and photography served as crucial tools for coming to terms with France and one's role as an occupier. Such activities were also instrumentalised by the regime to increase support for

[12] See Ch. 7, Lieb, *Konventionneller*, 383, 506. On "hardness," see Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft. Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 142, 148–53; Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten: Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt, M: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2012), 387–8.

Hitler's dictatorship. Historians of Nazism often raise questions about consent, and in that context, this research demonstrates how leisure and consumption, especially in western-occupied areas, contributed to maintaining soldiers' morale and became part of the larger reward system of the Third Reich.

Finally, one of the most significant debates about Nazism and World War II concerns the nature of the war Germans fought – whether, and to what extent, it was conventional or ideologically driven. Looking at France, specifically, and focusing on ground-level soldiers' attitudes, this book interrogates the character of the war in the West, and identifies factors that may have served either as precipitants or as brakes on violence. It explores not only the overt, but also the underlying types of violence present during a military occupation, turning attention to these more subtle forms alongside the open hostility that characterised German actions in France, especially after 1943.

The scholarship of the German occupation of France is marked by a divide between research about Germany's role in France, on the one hand, which tends to focus on high policy and, on the other hand, works about France and French life during the occupation which, though they may use a social and cultural-historical approach, attend primarily to the French, leaving German soldiers, as historian Philippe Burrin has put it, "a faint shadow in the background."[13] This book cuts across this framework, offering the first social and cultural history of the occupation of France that gives depth and colour to ground-level occupiers.

Historians who have studied the occupation from a German point of view have done so primarily by elucidating the workings of the Militärbefehlshaber in Paris (MBH): his staff, their relationships with other instances in Paris, and their conflicts with Berlin. Hans Umbreit's work marked out this path in the 1960s, and two valuable recent contributions,

[13] Burrin linked this tendency to the new focus on France brought about by the publication of Robert O. Paxton's landmark work *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944*. "Writing the History of Military Occupations" in *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 77–8; Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York: Knopf, 1972). Examples include David Drake, *Paris at War: 1939–1944* (Harvard University Press, 2015); Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Ronald C. Rosbottom, *When Paris Went Dark: The City of Light under German Occupation, 1940–1944* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2014). Cf. Talbot Imlay, "The German Side of Things: Recent Scholarship on the German Occupation of France," *French Historical Studies* 39, no. 1 (February 2016): 185; Julia S. Torrie, *"For Their Own Good": Civilian Evacuations in Germany and France, 1939–1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 9.

by Allan Mitchell and Thomas Laub, do not fundamentally challenge this paradigm.[14]

Laub's study of German policy-making offers an insightful and thorough top-down analysis of decisions made in Paris. With the exception of high-level administrators, however, the military appears as a monolith, and lower-ranking soldiers are largely absent. The focus on high policy means that this book tends to overlook the extent to which the need to "manage" ground-level troops in France, and Europe-wide, influenced policy making. Arguing that "left to its own devices, the military administration established a standard of conduct that was undoubtedly severe but largely unadulterated by Nazi ideology," Laub views the Militärbefehlshaber as defending a traditional style of warfare between nation states against the racially-charged understanding of war favoured by Hitler and his closest allies.[15] Understandably, since ground-level occupiers are not his focus, Laub tells us little about how occupying soldiers experienced the occupation, how and to what degree their attitudes and needs coloured it, and what role this occupation played in the larger pursuit of the war.

Mitchell, for his part, focuses on Paris and offers a compelling analysis especially of economic issues and the organisation of German policy against French Jews. Unlike most accounts, Mitchell's includes brief consideration of soldiers' everyday activities such as tourism, visits to restaurants, and German cultural productions, all of which he interprets as attempts to retain a sense of normalcy and show that Germans were "comfortably in charge" in France.[16] On the whole, Mitchell's work, which also highlights the daily interactions of French and German administrators, offers a well-rounded picture of occupation, but his focus on Paris is limiting, and occupiers' leisure activities deserve more attention, for they went well beyond simply retaining a sense of normalcy to have a major impact on the running of the occupation itself.

German high-policy decisions and events in Paris mattered, of course, but they took place within a broader context. That context included the relationship among German offices in Paris, between Paris and Berlin, and also between Paris and ground-level occupiers spread across France. Troops on the ground were the foundation of a kind of pyramid that

[14] Laub, *After the Fall*; Allan Mitchell, *Nazi Paris: The History of an Occupation, 1940–1944* (New York: Berghahn, 2008); Hans Umbreit, *Der Militärbefehlshaber in Frankreich 1940–1944* (Boppard am Rhein: H. Boldt, 1968).
[15] Laub, *After the Fall*, 17. [16] Mitchell, *Nazi Paris*, 123.