Introduction
A Concept from a Different World

"Comradeship" – this is a "notion from a different world," said the German magazine *Der Stern* (The Star) in 1999, echoing the sentiments of a group of high school students at a meeting with German World War II veterans. The dialog proved to be a difficult one. The kids wanted to know why the soldiers had joined Hitler's army, the Wehrmacht, and why they had participated in Hitler's terrible war instead of just deserting or staying at home. The ex-servicemen – all of them of the generation of the students' grandparents – scarcely understood the question. "That would have meant betraying our comrades in arms," they argued, unable to put across to the young Germans the sacrilege they would have committed by deserting. The students had their own ideas about why the generation of their grandparents had gone to war. "There were clearly enough soldiers who just enjoyed bumping people off," said one of the students.[1]

Pacifist sentiment had grown in Germany since the end of the Second World War, but at the end of the twentieth century it mushroomed faster than ever before. Germans, just like most of their European fellow citizens, had not experienced war in half a century. Compulsory military service was formally suspended in Germany only in 2011. This break from an almost two hundred year old tradition was the long-delayed consequence of German society's increasing disdain for soldiers and soldiering. Antimilitarism had been known in Germany before but only in the last two decades of the twentieth century did it dominate the mind-set of Germans. "Soldiers are murderers," the German left-wing journalist Kurt Tucholsky had claimed in 1932. He was put on trial for it, and Germans in the 1980s still faced prosecution when repeating the Tucholsky quote in public. But in 1995, German judges changed their minds, in accordance with the shift in public opinion. Calling soldiers "murderers" was no longer illegal, and so Tucholsky's phrase was widely used to denounce soldiers in general, and to blur the difference between killing combatants and murdering civilians.

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In fact, two spectacular events in 1995 seemed to support this equation of soldiers and murderers: the genocidal wars in former Yugoslavia, and the Wehrmacht exhibition of the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. Europeans were shocked by the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. It belied the illusion that the continent had overcome war permanently. The lesson Germans drew from the explosion of violence at their front doors was to condemn any kind of military action as evil. In summer 1995 the Srebrenica massacre showed how easily war descends into genocide. A few weeks before, the exhibition "War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944" had opened in Hamburg. For the first time, the entire German public recognized that their ancestors had been involved in an even more evil war – in war crimes and eventually in genocide, committed not only by a few SS men but by ordinary Germans. To be sure, public memory in Germany had never left any doubt of German responsibility for the Holocaust and other mass crimes in Europe, but this discourse on the Nazi past had limited the responsibility to certain core groups of perpetrators, the Nazi elite, the SS, the leadership of the Wehrmacht, or just pathological sadists, and thus distracted attention from ordinary Germans' complicity in the crimes. Attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors, the 1995 exhibition destroyed the myth of the innocence of ordinary Germans in the Third Reich. Amateur photos of the mass shootings of the Jews in the East documented that ordinary German soldiers had *witnessed* the Holocaust and that these soldiers had approved or even *enjoyed* what they saw – and what they did. High school and college students visited the exhibition, looked at the photos, and sometimes recognized their own beloved grandpas shaving the beards of Jews or applauding their public humiliation. Even those who did not recognize their own relatives were left wondering what their grandfathers, or fathers, had done during the war – whether they were "murderers among us."[2]

The former soldiers, all of them as old as the students' grandfathers, were embarrassed, upset, and shocked by such representations of what they considered honorable service to their country. It certainly was not lust for violence that had driven them but selfless duty, and there was no pleasure but only suffering and sacrifice, they pretended. And there was comradeship. Comradeship, as they remembered it, was the human side of the war, the counter to aggression, destruction, and inhumanity, the proof that they had not been the monsters depicted in the exhibition, and subsequently by German youth. "Comradeship and solidarity within the platoons and companies" as well as the "devotion to Volk and fatherland" – altruism, not sadism – gave the soldiers "the emotional strength and the morals to fight their fight," one Wehrmacht veteran

explained in one of the many letters to the editors of German news-papers published during spring and summer 1995 in response to the accusations of the Wehrmacht exhibition. And this campaign went on for years. In the papers, not only the veterans themselves but also their widows and former comrades, occasionally even their children, took out advertisements urging the German public to honor the selfless attitude of the German World War II soldiers, who had, as the ads claimed, given or risked their lives in order to save those of their wounded comrades.[3]

In fact, the German World War II generation was much more divided over the meaning of comradeship than these voices suggest. On the one hand the members and leaders of the veterans' associations who enthused about it. One of them – a former officer of the Fallschirmpanzerdivision (Paratrooper Panzer Division) Hermann Göring, born 1915 – responded to my research project with a comment that it would "put finally on record for future generations what has really driven us, the generation that is about to pass away."[4] But there were less enthusiastic responses as well. A former war correspondent (*Propagandaberichterstatter*) and Waffen-SS officer, who after the war became one of the most popular German screenwriters and did not shy away from publishing a rather apologetic memoir of his war experiences, doubted that a historian such as I could ever understand the concept of comradeship. "Kameradschaft," he said, "is a concept that only continues to exist as an empty notion, it is detached from its meanings, hovers somewhere in the air, available for dissection on a desk." Members of the postwar generations could never grasp the meaning of comradeship, he claimed. Even former soldiers used the term "without knowing that they devaluate the term just by using it," he continued. And, he added, "You certainly wouldn't know either, unless you had an idea of what it means, how you feel, if you are in a landscape of death together with somebody else . . . this poor sod next to you." Born into such an "entirely unnatural mode of being," comradeship is a concept, he said, that shyly seeks to protect its "intimacy." A mystic or even holy concept, in other words, that cannot be analyzed but only experienced. German society in the 1990s, however, "no longer bore any understanding for the entire war thing," there was no chance for the concept of comradeship to be understood.[5]

A different type of indignantly critical feedback on my book project came from my father. Born in 1925 into a social democratic family, he was conscripted at the age of eighteen into an infantry division of the Wehrma-cht that went into Soviet captivity in May 1945 in the Courland Pocket. He was one of those ex-servicemen who always looked back disdainfully at his forced service. He had never joined any of the veterans' associations or meetings, had never tried to stay in touch with any of his comrades.

In his view, the sacred aura of comradeship as evoked by veteran activists was simply a lie. There was not much comradeship at all, he insisted, rather the opposite. When the Courland Army surrendered to the Soviets, the commanding officer of his battalion got into his car and escaped to Germany – letting his men face their fate; few of them survived; the CO, however, got home safely, as my father learned after returning from Soviet captivity.[6]

None of these assessments should be discarded out of hand. In fact, they correspond to academic disputes about the fighting morale, the emotions, ideologies, and behavior of the Wehrmacht soldiers and about the meaning of male bonding and male sociability more broadly. Scholars since the war have wondered why these soldiers kept fighting until the bitter end, instead of deserting or mutinying as their predecessors had done at the end of the First World War when they realized that there was no chance for victory – just as the Wehrmacht soldiers could have done as early as summer 1943. One answer was provided by American sociologists immediately after the war. After interviewing German POWs in American captivity, Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz concluded that the soldiers had been fighting for the same reason American and other soldiers had fought: not so much out of patriotism, nationalism, or hatred of the enemy, and not out of antisemitism as the American public at that time believed, but because they did not want to let down their comrades. Avoiding the loaded term comradeship, Shils and Janowitz presented their own theory of combat motivation. "Primary group" relations, i.e. solidarity and cohesion in the small, face-to-face units of an army, based fighting morale, not the soldiers' identification with anonymous, imagined "secondary" groups such as the entire army or their country.[7]

Shils's and Janowitz's theory paved the way for a humane depiction of the Wehrmacht soldiers that resonated well with the way these servicemen presented themselves to the German and the international audience over the following decades – until the 1995 exhibition shattered the image. Unlike the SS-Einsatzgruppen, and apart from a few exceptions, the Wehrmacht, so its former members claimed, had remained untainted and not been complicit in the Nazi mass crimes in the East.[8] Only in the 1980s did military historians – though not yet the public – start arguing about the reputation of the Wehrmacht and the guilt of the ordinary soldiers. Most powerfully, the historian Omer Bartov showed in two books, the first published in 1985, that ordinary German soldiers had by no means been free of antisemitism. On the contrary, Bartov wrote, antisemitism was at the core of a racist ideology of hatred that, together with the experience of enormous casualties, primitive living conditions at the Eastern front, and

the Wehrmacht's draconian military justice, brutalized and barbarized these soldiers and enabled their complicity in the Holocaust. At the same time, primary group relations, Bartov pointed out, could not have survived under the conditions of the massive casualties sustained by the Wehrmacht from late 1941 on.[9]

Subsequent inquiries into the emotional and ideological world of the soldiers, based on their private letters and other ego-documents such as diaries and memoirs, have highlighted that the Wehrmacht was as diverse as the rest of German society, even under the Nazi regime, and yet widely supported the Nazi genocidal project in the East.[10] No consistent picture, however, has emerged of the meaning of comradeship and the role of primary group relations in the Wehrmacht. In part, this inconsistency is the result of conceptual uncertainties and empirical restrictions. The sociological concept of the primary group only partly overlaps with the ideologically loaded term comradeship, which may describe not only real face-to-face relations but also imagined groups of any size such as the entire army or the entire German nation.[11] Instead of essentializing primary groups and assuming that they worked alike in all armies and historical settings, students of military cultures have rightly proposed to "historicize" them by examining their specific fabric and stature; and instead of juxtaposing primary and secondary groups, one has to examine how both, in a given army or unit, or in the mind-sets of individual soldiers, intersected, mutually enforced, or contradicted each other. Soldiers, and groups of soldiers, have agency. They can work on strengthening or loosening their social ties; the solidarity in face-to-face units can be used to propel the army's fighting power or to launch a mutiny. Which option the soldiers choose depends not least on the secondary symbols they support – symbols of patriotism or rebellion, for instance.[12]

Unaffected by military sociology, the Holocaust historian Christopher Browning, in his 1992 book on the German Police Battalion 101, nevertheless illuminated how group pressure, a basic feature of comradeship, enabled the perpetration of the Holocaust. While not explicitly addressed in Browning's book, comradeship again does not appear as the epitome of altruistic solidarity but as the engine of evil per se, deeply ingrained in the machinery of Nazi terror.[13] Widely praised in Germany just as in America and other parts of the world, the book's argument thus yet raised concerns among readers who still appreciated comradeship as a core virtue of soldiers. An officer of the German Bundeswehr, for instance, warned about generalizing Browning's findings. The social psychology of Himmler's murder troops had nothing to do with the military virtue of comradeship, he clarified. Instead, he said, Himmler's men had "completely perverted this concept of dedicated commitment between soldiers."[14]

While historians and sociologists debated whether or not certain ideals of social cohesion were realized (and if so, how; how much; when; where; and in which parts of the army), the fabric of male solidarity in military and paramilitary formations more generally came under attack from different quarters. Feminist and antimilitarist inquiries and theories cast dark shadows on the moral quality of concepts such as comradeship. Most influentially, the German literary scholar Klaus Theweleit in the 1970s, studying memoirs of the post-1918 German Freikorps soldiers, denounced their misogynistic aggressiveness. In his theory, male solidarity – comradeship was the term used by contemporaries to idealize it – appears as the engine of the patriarchal order and, more specifically, of all-male groups embracing tough and "hard" manliness and despising women, femininity, domesticity, tenderness, and compassion.[15]

Theweleit himself understood his findings in a quasi-universal sense, not limited to Germany, the Nazis, or the Freikorps. And subsequently some strands of feminist thinking polemically denounced "male comradeship" as the hotbed of all kinds of misogynistic violence, as the German military sociologist Ruth Seiffert noted critically even before the mass rape of women in former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s seemed to indeed confirm such critique from yet another different angle.[16] At the same time, inquiries into the workings of "the masculine bond," as represented by popular Hollywood Vietnam War movies, inspired and grounded more nuanced assessments but left no doubt that male sociality was tied to men's domination of women as well as other men.[17]

Male identity is defined by the "repudiation of femininity," pioneers in the field of masculinities have widely confirmed. Being a man means, first of all, "not being like a woman," states Michael Kimmel. Being a man means to be stronger than women (physically, mentally, or intellectually) and to rule over or control them, and by extension also over other men who are classified as weak and feminine, such as homosexuals, as R. W. Connell has argued in an influential theory on hegemonic masculinities.[18] And yet a broad range of inquiries into representations of male emotionality, their appropriation by different men and in different societies, and the fabric of male sociability and interaction have cautioned against overemphasizing the anti-feminine fabric of masculinity. Instead, we are asked to "explore the locus of expression of 'non-masculine' sentiments by men."[19] In other words, how far does the repudiation of femininity go, and what counts as femininity? The language of intimacy and the pathos of tenderness, care, empathy, and even love that permeate the evocation of comradeship in testimonies and recollections of former soldiers cloud the emotional and moral ambiguity of manliness.

In public and in academic debates the concept of comradeship vac-
illates between glorification and demonization; it is subject to mysti-
fications and controversies about its historical reality, or unreality, its
quality, and its meaning. At stake are the historical semantics of the word
comradeship as well as its social practice. Inquiring into both semantics
and practices, this book examines the place of comradeship within the
war experiences of Hitler's ordinary soldiers, that is, the bulk of German
men who joined the Wehrmacht voluntarily or were drafted into the army
from the entire social and ideological diversity of German society. How
did comradeship impact way they experienced, perceived, and acted in
the war? Was it merely a chimera, or was it "real" – and if so, in which
ways? In what ways did the soldiers understand and practice comrade-
ship (if at all), and to what degree did the meanings they assigned to
the concept and the ways they appropriated it establish the cohesion and
unity it aims to reinforce?

A history of experience illuminates how individuals and groups per-
ceived, interpreted, and constituted social reality. Amorphous as it is, the
concept of experience allows for an integrative view of sensory impres-
sions, emotions, cognitive frameworks, social imaginaries, ideas, and the
knowledge that enables individuals to make choices. It tracks the ways
historical actors select, appropriate, and archive impressions in order
to act. These processes depend on situational circumstances as well as
dispositions – the "knowledge" people have acquired about the world
and themselves from childhood onward. As the sociologists Peter Berger
and Thomas Luckmann have explained, knowledge is a container of
socially constructed, and thus changeable, conceptions of reality includ-
ing languages, traditions, mental representations, mythical truths, scien-
tific findings, vernacular wisdoms, and popular fantasies. Knowledge is a
complex set of "tutorials" – often framed as discourses – that affect and
determine which impressions individuals notice, how they appropriate
these impressions, whether they use them to confirm or to question pre-
viously acquired frameworks of meaning, and how they translate them
into action. The choices people make are informed by their past experi-
ences; they are also affected by ideas and expectations about the future.[20]

Experiences are tied into a continuum of past, present, and future
actions, perceptions, and wisdoms. A history of war experiences of sol-
diers therefore has to analyze the sequence of three time-periods: first,
the cultural preconditions of the war, the "knowledge," imaginaries, and
attitudes that have shaped individual and collective expectations of the
war – the cultural "baggage" the draftees and volunteers carried with
them when they entered the army, became soldiers, and carried out their

duties as soldiers, whether on the battlefield or as occupational troops. Second, the actual experiences in war – from basic training to the front lines or rear areas, hospitals, retreats, defeat, death, or captivity. Third, the aftermath of the war, its remembrance and memorialization in private circles and public forums, the coping with traumas, and the production of glory in intimate conversations, by veterans' associations, through memorial sites and monuments, or in popular culture including movies, autobiographies, and novels.[21]

Diversity is operative at any of these stages of experience. The same event – a battle, for instance – is likely to be experienced in different ways by different people, according to their various roles, functions, assignments and social backgrounds. Although military organizations heavily invest in fostering the uniformity of their members – with the actual uniform as its most powerful symbol – and although the soldiers often behave uniformly, their war experiences vary. Their experiences are contingent upon their role within the army as well as upon their civilian identity – their cultural "baggage" – especially in a mass army. A private is likely to experience a battle in a different way than his battalion leader, and the battalion leader may experience it yet differently than the division general. Wehrmacht soldiers of a frontline unit in the East may have different experiences than soldiers deployed with the occupation army in France. A private with a socialist or Catholic or pacifist background coerced into the army is likely to experience the same unit, the same tasks, and the same battles differently than a devoted Nazi or the son of an aristocratic family of professional soldiers who volunteered for service. Different peoples, social classes, generations, regions, sexes establish their own containers for knowledge (although these containers may overlap). Experiences therefore depend on the individual's place and role in society, on his or her social identity – private or professional – or even multiple and possibly conflicting identities. This is true not only for diverse and liberal societies but also for "totalitarian" dictatorships, which have never reached their own goal of "totally" controlling and indoctrinating their citizens.[22]

And yet the issue of cohesion and unity is a crucial one for an inquiry into the social impact of a concept such as comradeship on soldiers fighting for a regime that valued cohesion and unity more than anything else. Creating a racially and ideologically purified society, a *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community), was the ultimate goal of the Nazis. They never reached it, as a substantial amount of research since the 1980s into the mind-sets of Germans in the Third Reich has suggested. Social and cultural cleavages, such as the gap between working classes and middle classes, between Catholicism and Protestantism, between northern and

southern regions of Germany, and not least between different genera-
tions, continued to shape German mind-sets under the Nazi regime.[23]

More recent studies have emphasized that Germans during the war and
during the Holocaust may have been more affected by the regime's efforts
to realize the idea of a *Volksgemeinschaft* than previously assumed. For the
concept of the *Volksgemeinschaft* had two sides, an inclusive and exclu-
sive one. On the one hand, Nazi propaganda envisioned and promised
social harmony – class unity instead of class conflict – at home, within
German society. While this inclusive side of the *Volksgemeinschaft* was
never realized, its exclusive dynamic caught hold of Germans. The Holo-
caust and other parts of the Nazi genocidal project could be carried out
only because Germans supported them, whether enthusiastically, or by
looking the other way and then being haunted by pangs of conscience
resulting from the knowledge that it was the German fatherland and
the Germans at large who were and would be held responsible for the
crimes. While the *Volksgemeinschaft* as the epitome of a harmonious nation
may not have become a reality, yet a different kind of *Volksgemeinschaft*,
united by racist ideologies and the shared knowledge of complicity in a
mass crime of unforeseen dimensions, materialized during the war, not
only in the minds of the tens of thousands of SS men, police officers,
and NSDAP functionaries and state officials who managed the occupa-
tion and exploitation of the conquered territories and executed the Nazi
genocidal project, but also within the army. For it was the army that kept
the bulk of adult German men, 17 million in total, under control and
had, by separating them physically and emotionally over years from their
families and friends – from the foundations of their civilian identities –
more effective means at hands to brainwash, or "re-educate," Germans
than the Nazi rulers could ever have acquired at home.[24]

Following the tripartite progression of war experiences, this book
examines the significance of comradeship for German World War II sol-
diers in three chronological steps. Part I explores the ideas about com-
radeship operative in the 1920s and 1930s – the discourse about com-
radeship that filled the cultural "baggage" of German men who joined
the Wehrmacht and shaped these men's expectations of their service and
the war they were to fight. While the available sources do not make it pos-
sible to track the content and workings of these expectations in individual
biographies of soldiers, a well-documented public discourse on comrade-
ship in the interwar period grants access to the various compartments of
that cultural baggage. Germans talked about comradeship in a wide array
of media, most importantly when they tried to cope with the legacy of
the First World War. Ex-servicemen and their associations stressed how
the experience of comradeship had helped them to survive physically,

morally, and emotionally during the war – and even beyond. In fact, some of them, especially the militarist and nationalist veterans, suggested that the experience of comradeship in war should be taken as a model to heal the current civilian society from its social and political maladies, such as Germany's suffering from military defeat in 1918, from the humiliating peace treaty, and from ongoing class and ideological conflicts.

The political Left doubted these political appropriations of wartime comradeship and advocated an egalitarian concept of comradeship among the rank-and-file who defied their superiors, while in the rightist discourse the military leader represented the ideal comrade and obtained charisma from a comradely leadership style. Despite such disputes about the true meaning of comradeship, all major strands of the veterans' movement, echoed by many younger Germans and by numerous popular war novels and movies that reached out to Germans of all age cohorts, agreed on an almost holy core to the concept of comradeship. Comradeship was hailed as the model of altruistic male solidarity, of quasi-sacred community, of humanity, of moral goodness. He who performed good comradeship in war was morally sacrosanct and granted the ultimate experience of communal security. After 1933, the myth of comradeship, and its extension into propaganda, emphasized the flipside of this security more than before: its coercive implications. The benefits of comradeship were reserved for those who surrendered their Selves, their individual desires and their agency, to the group of comrades. The myth of comradeship leveled the ground for a conformist ethics that honored only what served group cohesion and denounced the concept of individual responsibility. The myth of comradeship made German soldiers ready to join in or look the other way when their army waged criminal and even genocidal war on Europe.

How did German soldiers deal with this concept when they conquered, occupied, and eventually were chased out of other countries? This is the basic question of Part II. Ideologically diverse as the army was, the soldiers did not appropriate the concept of comradeship uniformly. A core group of enthusiastic or "born" soldiers was fascinated with the myth of comradeship. They had internalized it before joining the army, and they entered it in order to experience comradeship. From basic training to the battlefields, from the initial victories to the retreats and defeats at the end of the war, they found what they were looking for by creating it: male bonding and male solidarity. Homoerotic desires and the longing for "homosocial," all-male togetherness, drove the type of comradeship they produced. Strategies of Othering were necessary as well. To come into being, comradeship needed both – inclusion and exclusion. The Other was exchangeable. During basic training, it could