

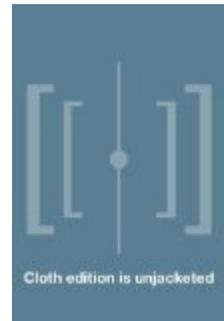


Hedda Kalshoven, ed. *Between Two Homelands: Letters across the Borders of Nazi Germany*. Translated by Hester Velmans and Peter Fritzsche. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014. xxxiv + 253 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07985-6; \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03830-3.

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## A Family under the Shadow of Dictatorship and War

This thought-provoking book consists of a rich collection of letters exchanged between family members across national borders during the turbulent years of the Weimar Republic and Third Reich. The dialogue is centered on Irmgard Gebensleben (affectionately called “Immo”), who, as a young girl of thirteen, traveled from Germany to the Netherlands in 1920 on a war-children transport.[1] Most of these letters were exchanged between Immo—who relocated permanently to Holland in 1929 to marry a Dutch national and raise her children—and her immediate family who remained in their hometown of Braunschweig. This cross-border correspondence, with authorship spanning four generations, provides a remarkably honest recounting of some of the most important historical events of the twentieth century.

The volume begins with a short preface by Peter Fritzsche, who translated the text from its original German. The preface provides commentary on the historical relevance of the letters. The book’s editor and granddaughter of Immo, Hedda Kalshoven, writes her introduction as an observation, recalling the personal characteristics of her Dutch and German family members and the emotionally difficult task of reading the thousands of letters available to her while preparing the manuscript for publication.

The first section, titled “To Holland,” consists of a short series of letters sent between Immo and her for-

mer foster parents after she returned to Braunschweig in 1920. Although the inclusion of this correspondence in this collection is largely intended to introduce family members and establish Immo’s relationship with her soon-to-be adopted home of the Netherlands, one also gains many historical insights into the political and social culture of Weimar Germany. Topics discussed include the widely criticized Treaty of Versailles, the postwar economic crisis, and the rising popularity of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP). The widespread anxiety that permeated German society in these immediate postwar years, as well as the growth of nationalism and anti-Semitism in the 1920s, is a central theme of these letters, reminding the reader that such sentiments predated the National Socialist period.

The second and largest section, “The Parents,” uses Immo’s mother, Elisabeth Gebensleben, as the principal narrator. This chapter acts as the centerpiece of the book not only due to its considerable length but also because it sheds light on a number of important (and popular) historical subjects. The rise and rule of the National Socialists, propaganda, anti-Semitism, and the politicization of German society during the 1930s are discussed at length. While living in Holland, Immo learned of the political events unfolding in Germany mostly through the words of her mother, who became an enthusiastic supporter of the National Socialists and was swept up in the excitement of reactionary politics. Elisabeth’s support for the

Nazis was balanced by her much more ideologically moderate husband, Karl Gebensleben (Immo's father), who, although a civil servant and Nazi sympathizer, was more cautious about the radical change in government and skeptical of Adolf Hitler's grand promises of national salvation.

The most revealing letters in this chapter demonstrate how National Socialism interacted effortlessly with the anti-republican, nationalist movement already well established in Germany. Fears of a Communist revolution, animosity toward the Treaty of Versailles, and the impassioned vision for a rejuvenated German state were all extremely popular sentiments prior to the "seizure of power." The NSDAP did not introduce these political agendas and cultural visions; it was simply the largest and most vocal representative of them. Many nationalists, like Immo's father, endorsed the Nazi program but did not necessarily embrace the party or its leader. As Fritsche explains, "you could live happily in the Third Reich without having to love the Nazis" (p. xii). The existence of such compromised support raises larger questions and provides a possible challenge to well-worn theses regarding the Nazis' base of support and could help to explain how the party was able not only to ascend to government but also to achieve political and social *Gleichschaltung* (co-ordination).

Still, there existed a large group of Germans who welcomed the NSDAP with open arms. Through Elisabeth's letters to her daughter, the reader is invited into a world where the Nazis were viewed as saviors of the German people, as defenders of all that was "pure" and "wholesome," and as resolute citizens equipped with moral innocence and peaceful intentions. Elisabeth wrote that "if it were not for the National Socialists, I would not be able to keep my spirits up. How they have restored faith in Germany and in the ultimate triumph of the true German that we have in our blood!" (p. 52). It is interesting, but not altogether surprising, that Elisabeth's nationalistic and racial rhetoric was often accompanied by a broader claim to victimhood, often portraying Germans as a historically oppressed people, threatened by all other nations and political movements. Whether the product of an effective propaganda machine or an amalgamation of residual hopes and fears, Elisabeth hastily rejected any views that did not accord with her Nazi worldview. Rumors of Nazi brutality were quickly dismissed as "distorted reports," "the work of provocateurs," and "simply absurd" (pp. 63, 67, 73).

Elisabeth's letters to her daughter also reveal the ex-

tent to which anti-Bolshevism penetrated German society in the early 1930s. In nearly every letter that mentions the Nazis, one finds a concomitant fear of Communists and the "red revolution." Elisabeth depicted Communism as an omnipresent and destructive force that would surely annihilate the German nation and its people without firm action. She argued that "every last man is needed to hold the line against the Communists" (p. 62). Although the "Communist threat" was a popular motif during the Weimar period, these letters reaffirm with even greater clarity that Nazism was viewed by many Germans as primarily a reactionary political and cultural movement—one that could "save" the nation and its people from the political Left.

Finally, the letters in this section broach the topic of anti-Semitism, albeit only in a few isolated excerpts. The fact that family members were discussing the escalating persecution of German Jews is significant in itself, but so too is the tendency, at least on the part of Elisabeth, to associate such discriminatory acts as an inevitable response to the "damage their kind [the Jews] have caused" (p. 73). Although subtle anti-Semitism was already present in Elisabeth's letters prior to her encounter with National Socialism, her racial condemnation developed an overt political tone as a result of the Nazis' increasing prominence, as she began referring to the so-called Jewish Question. An interesting point of comparison between Immo and her mother was their very different views regarding the "Jewish threat" and government sanctioned anti-Semitism. However, beyond stating their individual opinions, no real confrontation or discerning conversation on the topic comes out in their correspondence. A more heated exchange may simply have never occurred between mother and daughter, but it is still a dialogue that the reader is left to desire.

The third and fourth sections of the book include correspondence from the Second World War, after Immo's parents had fallen ill and died, in 1936 and 1937 respectively. The majority of these letters were exchanged between Immo and her grandmother, Minna von Alten, who remained in Braunschweig until her death in 1940, and with her brother, Eberhard Gebensleben, a Wehrmacht soldier deployed at different times on both the eastern and western fronts. An enthusiastic tenor pervades the letters written at the beginning of the war. Minna, a staunch nationalist, celebrated the rapid German military advance on the eastern front and condemned its enemies, recounting atrocities Soviet partisans and the British Royal Air Force committed against German soldiers and civilians. However, as the war progressed the

mood of the letters changed. By the summer of 1942 (well before the German defeat at Stalingrad), the discussion of politics and military victories had all but ceased and instead their correspondence was dominated by the subject of mere survival. Immo and Mina wrote about the difficulty of acquiring food and escaping indiscriminate bombings, and to assure one another that Eberhard would return home safely from the front. Although brief moments of comfort and even cheerfulness did occur, the majority of their letters were ruled by frustration, fear, and anxiety.

It is within this distressed state of communication that the reader witnesses one of the most interesting and historically telling events of the book: the emotional collapse of Eberhard. Originally an enthusiastic Wehrmacht soldier who had embraced the war as a great adventure, Eberhard became severely depressed while serving in Russia. In late 1942, he suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to a military hospital which subsequently resulted in his disillusionment with the war and the regime. Eberhard's emotional condition can be attributed to the ever-increasing loss of life that he witnessed at the front, as well as to personal injuries he suffered in the fighting. But above all, it was rooted in his inability to remain a party member while also marrying his wartime love, Herta Euling, a Jewish *Mischling* (person of mixed "Aryan" and Jewish ancestry). After the Party Court and Nazi chancellery repeatedly rejected his attempts to marry Herta and especially after the stillbirth of their first child in April 1943, Eberhard fell even deeper into a depression that consumed him prior to his death on the front in September 1944. Eberhard's situation was unique and his psychological state especially dire, but his general disillusionment with both the war and the regime was shared by millions of other German soldiers and civilians during the final months of the war.

Mention must also be made of a short yet significant excerpt regarding rumors of the German killing of Jewish civilians. In a lone diary entry, dated September 22, 1942, Eberhard wrote that he had overheard "repeated conversations of a general political nature about 'golden pheasants' and the murder of 35,000-40,000 Kiev Jews." He ended his entry by writing that "poor, dear Germany will pay for this" (p. 186).[2] Although there is no further mention of these crimes or any significant emotional reflection on Eberhard's part, this excerpt confirms the already widely held belief that rumors of mass murder were commonplace among regular German soldiers fighting on the eastern front, and that many troops bore witness and even participated in such acts. Alluded

to by Fritzsche, this experience may also be representative of other Wehrmacht soldiers' experience of fighting in the East, as some became disillusioned with National Socialism and disagreed with violent anti-Semitism but were either "unwilling or unable" to remove themselves from the Third Reich (p. xix).

The fifth and final section of the book, "The Others," includes a small collection of letters written after the war by Immo's friends and family members still living in Braunschweig. In one letter, Dorothy X listed for Immo the various hardships that had befallen their close circle of friends; these included incidences of lost husbands and brothers, bombed-out homes, and impoverished and starving children. This of course only reaffirms that many Germans viewed themselves as victims of the war, ignoring their support for and affiliation with the Nazi government. The book concludes with Immo visiting Braunschweig in September 1949, her first time back to her hometown since the end of the war. Although she was happy to see her friends and to speak her mother tongue, it becomes clear that the city, and Germany as a whole, was no longer home for her; Immo returned to a country in ruins, a society obsessed with its own suffering, and a family that had largely passed away.

The sheer number of letters (more than six hundred), their short length (often only a sentence or two), and the inclusion of multiple authors (twenty-three in total) at times disrupts the fluidity of the story and distracts the reader from the historical content. Providing fewer or longer excerpts, however, would likely also have rendered problems. While both Kalshoven and Fritzsche allude to this omission, the volume never explicitly addresses the extent to which the *Gebenslebens* can be characterized as "ordinary Germans." The family and its immediate community were firmly middle class and from a city that had always exhibited strong support for the Nazis; although the continuous search for a "typical" German case study may be a redundant one when using a source base such as these letters, an evaluation of such variables is necessary to better understand the popular sentiment of the time.[3]

However, these are minor and almost trifling criticisms. *Between Two Homelands* is a captivating book and an important contribution to the vast body of literature on Third Reich *Alltagsgeschichte* (history of everyday life). This rare collection of letters provides an honest depiction of the everyday lives of Germans living through economic travail, political violence, dictatorship, and war. While considerable insight is gained into the in-

dividual German citizen's relationship with National Socialism and in part anti-Semitism, so too is the reader exposed to more intimate, yet equally historically relevant, experiences. These include the pervasive anxiety present in interwar and wartime German society; the personal and family agony of separation and death; and the building and rebuilding of individual and collective identities before, during, and after the war.

#### Notes

[1]. The war-children transports were funded by various international political and humanitarian organizations during and after WWI and witnessed the temporary relocation of thousands of impoverished children mostly from Central Europe to private homes and orphanages in

the West.

[2]. Eberhard was describing the massacre at Babi Yar which occurred one year earlier and involved the murder of more than thirty-three thousand Jews.

[3]. For an excellent study on the success of Nazism in Braunschweig, see Richard F. Hamilton, "Braunschweig 1932: Further Evidence on the Support for National Socialism," *Central European History* 17, no. 1 (March 1984): 3-36. It is also worth noting that Braunschweig is a mere eighty kilometers from Northeim, the town that is the subject of William Sheridan Allen's popular book, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single Town* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965).

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