

The Experience of Occupation in the Rhineland, 1918-1930

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Introduction:

One of the key ways in which the peace Treaty of Versailles, marking the end of the First World War, was enforced was via the occupation of the Rhineland, the westernmost and most industrially important region of Germany. From December 1918 until 1930, this area was occupied by Allied forces, primarily the French, British, and Belgians. Approximately 15 million Germans lived under the control of their former enemies. The largest zone of occupation – representing 75% in total – was controlled by the French, policed by up to 300,000 soldiers. The British controlled 1,000 square miles containing 1.4 million inhabitants. Yet despite the scale and length of this occupation, it has been the subject of relatively little research, although there has been renewed interest in the last fifteen years or so. The existing literature tends to focus on the high politics of the Allied presence, the wider international context, or a history of Allied occupation administrations, as well as on the French use of colonial soldiers as occupation troops – which was met with horror by the Germans. My project will take a different approach, drawing on my previous research. It will comprise a socio-cultural history, examining above all the relationship between occupied and occupier (with a specific focus on the French), including the way in which the occupied Germans reacted to the Allied presence.

Aims:

- To see whether I can identify a specific culture among occupiers and occupied in the Rhineland, and what this means on our understanding of the phenomenon of military occupation. Building on my previous conceptual categories.
- To examine German behaviours under French occupation and ask whether these mirror those I have already studied in the context of France. This would allow me to question the usefulness of my initial conceptual categories and whether they can be transferred to a different context. Geographical and chronological comparisons tied to research thus far.
- To study the way in which the experience and memory of the occupation of France in 1914-1918 (and indeed of warfare in general) affected French occupation policies in Germany, understood via the notion of ‘occupation transfers’.
- To consider the way the occupation shaped local and national identity among both occupiers and occupied.
- To reflect on how we conceptualise and thus understand military occupations and their consequences.
- To provide a more comprehensive understanding of this relatively under-studied aspect of the legacy of the First World War.

Methodology:

- A flexible methodological approach, beginning with the occupiers’ perspective, examining documents in French and British archives, before moving onto German archives. Administrative documents, newspapers, diaries, and memoirs will all be used.

Research Output, Impact, and Public Engagement

- Two articles in the first two years, one on French soldiers’ understandings of the occupation to be submitted to *French History*, another on transferred occupation policies to be submitted to the *Journal of Modern European History*. The culmination of the project will be a monograph, which I aim to publish as part of Cambridge University Press’s cultural history of warfare series.
- Organisation of a conference in late 2017 on borderlands viewed from an interdisciplinary perspective, with potential contributors in fields such as transnational history, language studies, or sociology.
- Possible collaborations with the Goethe Institut and the Institut Français in London, ideally comprising papers for the public.
- Papers at various international conferences.
- Plan to communicate this research with the wider public through other forms (newspaper articles, media interviews), representing a forgotten history and an ‘epilogue’ to the centenary commemorations of the First World War.

