



Introduction

In 1987 the Walter Kempowski Archive in Berlin published its first call in German newspapers for biographical or autobiographical materials from the twentieth century. Kempowski was a novelist, literary critic, and avid collector who had amassed a substantial archive from literary and musical figures. His turn to ordinary people's papers was possible only after the end of the Cold War as East-West tensions relaxed and Germans could revisit the past that had been suppressed to a large extent by that global conflict as well as their own reluctance or inability to look at that past. In 1991, Luise Traubmann submitted materials written by her mother, Vera Conrad, to Kempowski's archive. On the submission form Luise wrote, "I am happy that you are interested in my mother's written work. I believe that the women of her generation lived and worked through so much that must not be forgotten. Above all, I admire that she never gave up and tried to make the best of every situation."¹ Luise's admiration of her mother is representative of a broader German memory tradition regarding the war that emphasizes "women standing alone" while rebuilding their families and society.² This narrative, grounded in the reality of millions of men dead or missing, heroizes women as stalwart victims of war. This study seeks in part to demythologize German women, who in fact exhibited admirable emotions like commitment, determination, and love, but also more disturbing mindsets such as prejudice, resentment, and blind privilege. In thoroughly exploring the full range of Vera Conrad's emotional landscape, I hope to enrich our understanding of women's subjective stances and the external constraints upon them.

Vera Conrad's story is shared in important ways by millions of German women who grappled with accommodating themselves to the emotional expectations and norms of Nazi society while suffering intense personal loss.³ Vera Conrad lived in rural central Germany and got married shortly before the war broke out. Vera was a woman who had a broad formal and practical education and married into a well-to-do landowning family. She joined the Nazi Party and participated in Nazi organizations, including the League of German Girls (*Bund Deutscher Mädel*, or BDM), and she later held a minor administra-

tive position as a district farmer. She became an avid and active writer: in her husband's stead she recorded events in the church register as the patron of the local Lutheran church, and she wrote memoirs and guidebooks to the beach forest on the Baltic where she later led walking tours. Her political, social, and cultural sensibilities likely reflected those of a majority of German women, particularly those who did not live in large, cosmopolitan cities like Berlin. This story—about an individual woman—illuminates an era for women that is not well understood in the classroom, and this book is intended as an entry point for readers (students in particular) to explore the complexity of women's emotional, political, and social experiences under a repressive regime at war.

This book is about the missing, and about the rupture in everyday life the absence of the missing makes for those left behind. Political scientist Jenny Edkins observes, "When someone goes missing the threads that connect our stories and our lives are strained, even broken."⁴ This waiting for information was a special kind of suffering shared by approximately 4.4 million German women during and after World War II.⁵ Like many of them, Vera became the head of the household and, as her children told me, "both mother and father."⁶

In 1939, when Vera was expecting her first child, her mother-in-law gave her a small, blank clothbound book as a second wedding anniversary gift to serve as a baby book. This book, which became her wartime diary, illuminates the cares and concerns of an ordinary German woman during World War II. On the opening page Vera wrote, "I hope I can write down a lot of good and happy memories."⁷ At first, she wrote in the baby book to her unborn child, establishing a family history, later adding memories of the infant's first months of life.⁸ Her audience was her own son, years if not decades in the future, when he would be able to read and appreciate her chronicle, or his origin story. The purpose and focus of the "little book" changed, however, when her husband, Joachim, disappeared on the Eastern Front in 1943. She hoped to record her experiences for Joachim to read upon his return. As his absence grew longer, the therapeutic value of the diary became more pronounced, and the diary developed into a place to reflect on her relationship with Joachim as Vera mourned his likely death. Nostalgia and recollection established a narrative of their relationship, which played out largely against a backdrop of total war. Not only did Vera struggle with grief; she also wanted to offer something symbolically to Joachim. In keeping such a diary, she rehearsed her own memories and transmitted them to her children.⁹

Her diary did an important part of that emotional work: it came to embody Vera's ongoing relationship with her missing husband, Joachim. Through its dynamic relationship with the author, the diary formed a circuit as she enacted her emotions in it, saw their evidence, and had them reanimated by the book as a reminder of them. In order to tell this story, I have consulted the work of historians, psychologists, and scholars of emotions and trauma to bring context

to the Conrads' experiences. Additionally, I met and interviewed both of Vera's children. Her son, Joachim Jr., graciously opened his home, the farmhouse where the diary was written, and allowed me access to the original diary and other personal papers.

Women and National Socialism

The topic of women and National Socialism is a complex and much contested one. Until the 1970s, very little scholarly attention was paid to the topic. Then an argument developed that women's votes had been the decisive ones in allowing Nazis access to the Reichstag. This was followed by examinations of women's experiences as victims of the regime. While I do not want to engage with that debate here, the argument about agency does underline women's centrality to National Socialism.¹⁰ Some assert that ignoring women's participation in Nazism allowed scholars and the German people to avoid confronting ordinary people's involvement with the Nazi state and its murderous policies. Examining such involvement would undermine popular myths about the victimization of Germans generally and women specifically.¹¹ Beginning in the 1990s, not only were women objects of inquiry, but gender analysis was also brought to bear on the Nazi system, yielding valuable insights about the role of masculinity in maintaining and exercising power, for example.¹²

National Socialism was an authoritarian, patriarchal system that granted political power, status, and privilege to men and afforded women "protection" in return. Nonetheless, within such a misogynistic system, women could still exercise agency, especially when they were able to leverage racial privilege to their benefit.¹³ In their shared rejection of many concepts, stances, and emotions that have traditionally been gendered feminine, such as fear, empathy, and sadness, women could enjoy a politics of cultural superiority, especially conservative women like Vera Conrad.¹⁴ While Nazism did not see men and women as equals in the sense that their roles were interchangeable, it did place value on women's domestic activities and especially on reproduction.

The idea of the *Volkgemeinschaft*, the people's community, was founded on the notion of complementary spheres of activity for men and women. It has recently gained attention as a way to approach women's history in a more nuanced way by avoiding the simple binary of victim/perpetrator. It also invites an approach to gender as a relational dynamic between masculinity and femininity.¹⁵ As members of the racially exclusive *Volkgemeinschaft*, women could serve as "fanatical fellow-combatants" to men as housewives, mothers, and nurses, as Hitler said to a Nazi women's group in 1934.¹⁶ Training manuals and instructions for male Nazis encouraged them to see and treat women as comrades; women, too, shouldered patriotic duties.¹⁷ Indeed, fully 33 percent of

German women were involved in Nazi organizations, and they joined the party in increasing numbers throughout the twelve years the National Socialists held power.¹⁸ Wendy Lower's work on women in the East draws attention to the opportunities National Socialism offered to women despite its patriarchal ideology. For young, ambitious women of Vera's generation, National Socialism provided a chance to belong to a group that provided leadership positions, the chance of escape from families and hometowns, and the opportunity to gain official titles and positions. While Vera was not a professional woman like the physicians or administrators studied by other scholars,¹⁹ her work as a land-owning farmer did give her a professional status and bureaucratic position as a district farmer under a National Socialist administration, a position that became increasingly important as the war continued and men were drafted for the front.

An aspect of Vera's story that contributes to deepening our understanding of women in National Socialism is related to her rural situation and identity. Nineteenth-century bourgeois ideas about the distinction between the private and public spheres did not hold as much sway in a rural setting.²⁰ In fact, the countryside was a site of resistance to change: paradoxically, men and women worked more cooperatively together than in many "modern" contexts where women stayed home and men went to work. Even before the emergence of National Socialist ideas about the *Volksgemeinschaft*, cooperation and collaboration between the genders were already embedded in rural life. Men and women provided mutual and complementary labor support, shared financial decisions, and saw themselves as teams. Vera, then, did not have to create a place of production for herself in the way that new middle-class professional women did. Apprentices and farmhands extended the "family" beyond kin, and in tiny villages such as Vera's, "privacy" was likely difficult to conceptualize. Unlike the subjects of Christian Meyer's investigation into the private sphere from 1933–39, Vera Conrad did not use terms like "public" or "private" in her diary.²¹ Vera's story cuts across private and public, "masculine" and "feminine," as it narrates her experiences with childrearing, vulnerable emotions, gender expectations, household management, serving as the head of the household, and interacting with state officials and ideologies.

While other scholars seek to understand women's "social history of experiences,"²² their focus remains fairly centered on the public sphere, in particular on women's paid labor. Examining policy debates, discursive texts, or women's testimonies about their professions does not tell the entire picture; nor do men's and women's activities in the public sphere—what happens in kitchens and bedrooms is also very important if less visible or dramatic.²³ Scholars are also coming to recognize that under authoritarian regimes, private life assumed "its most political power and personal value."²⁴ My study integrates public and private, illuminating the emotional and psychological bedrock of choices and

options. In doing so, my project shows the mutual dependencies and relational dynamics between those gendered spheres as Vera attempted to navigate her experiences, drawing on cultural and emotional scripts to do so.

The Importance of Emotions

The bourgeois gendered spheres of public and private also had corresponding emotions associated with them. Attending to this fact is a central focus of my work; unlike much other scholarship on women and war, my approach stays close to Vera's subjective experience as related through her emotional expressions. In doing so, I am heeding sociologist Jeffrey Alexander's call for scholars to work across social scientific and psychotherapeutic disciplines to gain greater understanding of how people create meaning and translate their values into action (or inaction). He observes, "Culture is patterned emotion. Emotion is culture experienced."²⁵ Thinking about Alexander's claim provides another way to think about German society during World War II. The seemingly unthinkable and absolutely horrific acts undertaken and tacitly supported can be more fully understood when we use emotions as a heuristic lens.

In the mid-twentieth century, historians began to reflect on the centrality of emotions to human experience as well as their historicity. French historians started to investigate everyday life, in particular what they called *mentalités*, that is, mindsets or worldviews. Focusing on medieval history, they demonstrated that people then had significantly different emotional valences from modern ones, which, if captured, really brought the past and its foreignness to life.²⁶ A generation later, historians and anthropologists continued this work.²⁷ Using Freud's concepts about the psyche, Peter Gay and other historians applied psychoanalytic models to groups in history (like the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie or the German Nazis).²⁸ While these theories provided fresh insights, historians largely rejected the approach because Freudian psychology is grounded in a very specific historical context, early twentieth-century Vienna, yet makes universalizing claims about human nature. Applying such theories to individuals in the past was very problematic.

This historicist rejection of universalizing claims about humans and emotions also was brought to bear on the field of psychology in general. Other social scientists, such as anthropologists, however, took on the idea that emotions are culturally constructed. That is, they vary across time and space in different human societies. Normalized expressions of emotion in Western countries, these anthropologists argued, were simply that: expressions grounded in a particular time and place that could not be generalized to all humans.²⁹

In the early 2000s, "emotions studies" came into being as an academic discipline.³⁰ Historian William Reddy sought to integrate the two poles—the uni-

versalist and the constructivist—in his 2001 work *The Navigation of Feeling*. Reddy argued for the social constructedness of emotions as performative acts. He brought the universal human experience of having an emotion together with its particular cultural form and coined the term “emotive.”³¹ Culture and humans’ emotional nature created a circuit, each influencing the other. As these feedback loops continue, emotional norms develop—prescriptions about which emotions to express and how—in order to adhere to cultural norms, and thus to be accepted, to preserve status and respect, and so forth. These “emotional regimes” teach people emotional codes from very early life, often through the family, and are internalized as natural.³²

The idea that culture shapes emotional experience and expression has been fruitful for historians, who have developed two important approaches to understanding how emotions work. Some focus on the vocabulary used to express and explain emotions, taking a textual, discursive approach.³³ How emotion words came into use, changed meaning, and disappeared is valuable information about an era’s emotional style.³⁴

Others focus on the bodily experience and practice, the physicality and habitual characteristics of emotions. In practice theory as articulated by Monique Scheer, the subject is in part defined by the body, since all activities of the body—eating, drinking, working, sleeping, grooming—express social and political embeddedness. Emotions themselves can be viewed as a practical engagement with the world, a form of communication, that emerges from bodily dispositions that have themselves been shaped by cultural context.³⁵ The body is both actor and instrument. Through habituated processes, the body’s memory contributes to consciousness and subjectivity.³⁶ Others, building on feminist scholar Judith Butler’s work on gender, see emotions as performative activities.³⁷ We cannot really know how another person is feeling, and we signal feelings to each other, not only through our words (“I’m feeling sad”) but also our actions and expressions. These practices may in fact reinforce the emotional experience into a closed feedback loop: signaling to another person may in fact create the emotion. “Performative” does not mean inauthentic, necessarily, simply that we communicate our emotional states to others, sometimes consciously, other times unconsciously. Perhaps gestures and physical expressions can serve as a shorthand, making words unnecessary. However, we cannot really assume we know what another is feeling from such signals; interpretation is always required.³⁸

I would like to suggest that bodily sensations that are interpreted, given meaning, and become emotions—and the words we use to think about them—are interconnected as parts of a process. Words, then, are “but a small part of this [meaning] making . . . Meaning, matter and language arise from their intra-activity. Matter ‘kicks back’ against language, constraining its meanings, as much as language constrains matter.”³⁹ In other words, humans have bodies

that deliver sensory information, that is, “kick back.” What we make of that information—does an ache in the chest mean a heart attack, acid reflux, anxiety, grief (i.e., “heartbreak”)—is produced by an “intra-active” process between body and culture (words), in a mutually determining and interdependent way.

The current neuroscientific thinking about emotions is this: all humans (and some animals) experience emotions.⁴⁰ In fact, emotions are an important tool that humans use to help interpret incoming sensory information, and to make meaning of our experiences. Emotions are part of our moral, interpretive, and cognitive frameworks; we use emotions to help make sense of the world, and in so doing, to adapt to our environments.⁴¹ However, humans express, interpret, and name emotions differently as shaped by their cultures and societies.

The centrality of emotions to social life was recognized by National Socialists; in fact, Germans’ moods and emotional expressions were of vital importance to the regime.⁴² The National Socialists ascribed emotions a central role in building a sense of racial community; they therefore also sought to “thwart, or at least to control, emotions that would derail their efforts.”⁴³ The party aimed for a “revolution of feeling,” as historian Nicholas Stargardt observes.⁴⁴ Seeking to forge a single “emotional communit[y],” in which people’s emotions and their expression were aligned to support the regime, the Nazis created a street theater of marching boots and uniforms, parades, flags, and rallies.⁴⁵ They organized society into youth and charity groups while coopting most major social organizations outside the churches. Members of these groups often wore uniforms that gave them an identity and their absence easily identified outsiders. The local theater performances, athletic events, and affordable vacations sponsored by the regime further knit the population together. Whether one truly supported the Nazi program or not, one needed to appear to fit in by participating. Singing folk songs, waving flags, and using the Hitler salute all were physical gestures and activities that signaled belonging to the *Volksgemeinschaft* and support of the regime. In exchange for this vocal, performative support, the regime assured “Aryan” Germans that they would benefit from a racially pure, classless society in which political, religious, regional, and economic divisions were transcended.

This intense and conscious focus on building an emotional regime was born from traumatic events in earlier German history, namely, the defeat in World War I. Historian and psychoanalyst Thomas Kohut observes that many Germans of Joachim and Vera Conrad’s generation learned to “suppress feelings, escape painful reality in idealized fantasy, substitute activity for introspection, and to value emotional hardness over vulnerability” in their young adulthoods in the aftermath of the war.⁴⁶ These protective measures that shielded against feelings of despair and vulnerability were readily adopted by the Nazis as not only protective but preventative; continuing to enact these emotional stances, they believed, would prevent any future defeats.

The regime's emotional demands on the population were not limited to the enthusiastic support exhibited in parades and rallies. They also expected a new kind of emotional discipline. Again, borrowing to an extent from experiences in World War I, the Nazis nurtured a cult of the fallen soldier. Battlefield deaths were celebrated as "heroic deaths," or sacrifices for the Fatherland, and bereaved mourners needed to exhibit pride in the bravery and willingness to sacrifice of their loved one.⁴⁷ This cult was also related to the primary emotional virtue for the Nazis: "hardness."⁴⁸ Hardness was allegedly the clear-eyed, rational vision of the world in which some people belonged to a superior race and many others were undeserving of life because of inherent racial flaws. This hardness was founded on a feeling of disgust cultivated by the regime through dehumanizing their alleged racial enemies.⁴⁹ To feel compassion or sympathy for such creatures was actually wrongheaded in that everyone would be better off if they ceased to exist. Thus, particularly for soldiers, "hardness" meant being willing to perform acts that might be distasteful but were thought necessary for German racial health. Drawing heavily on his flawed understanding of Nietzsche's "superman" concept, Hitler saw Christian values such as compassion, turning the other cheek, and loving one's enemies as weaknesses that threatened the German race.

This emotional prescription carried with it an ethical one. Claudia Koonz's book *The Nazi Conscience* explored the bounds of caring in Nazi Germany. She observes, "the universe of moral obligation, far from being universal, is bounded by community."⁵⁰ In privileging "Aryan" ethnicity, the National Socialists created a "sphere of care" in which all "pure" Germans were to have access to resources, social belonging and status, and full membership in the community; race increasingly was the lens through which Germans viewed and made sense of the world.⁵¹ It was the one aspect of identity that dominated all others. Over the course of the 1930s, Germans were gradually conditioned to exclude Others, primarily Jews, but also disabled people, Communists, and nonconformists like homosexuals, the unemployed, and addicts. Koonz observes, "the emerging solidarity did not so much render victims' suffering invisible as *make them marginal* to the larger purpose of an ethnic renaissance."⁵² Vera Conrad's emotional world was constituted in part by these constraints, which played out in her choices and, indeed, in her focus on her own suffering.

Reading women's ego documents and reflecting on how they conveyed and expressed their experiences led me to a set of questions. How did the Nazis' emotional prescriptions sit with the violence, uncertainty, death, and grief that most if not all Germans experienced? Did women whose husbands were killed in these wars find comfort and solace in those official narratives? Or did they turn to alternate sources of meaning such as religion? Did they turn against the regime that had sent their loved ones to their deaths in war? Did women find solidarity with others experiencing loss, even those victimized by the regime?

Asking these questions may seem strange or unsettling to students of German history. While a focus on perpetrators has been part of historical writing since the 1960s, it is only within the last twenty years that scholars have really begun to explore the complexity of support for Nazism among Germans. It is no longer possible to neatly categorize people as perpetrators or victims, or even, as some suggest, “bystanders.” This last concept tried to capture the mass of Germans who were not Nazi Party members but who nonetheless benefited from the systematic oppression of others.⁵³ This very broad cross section of German society, in fact, was absolutely essential to the success of National Socialism, which is in part why so much effort was expended to “teach” Germans the proper emotional attitudes. It took effort, time, and resources to Nazify Germans so that they accepted the benefits that came with the oppression of a numerically small minority.⁵⁴ Early thought about this topic, in which only Nazi Party members perpetrated the Holocaust, was politically motivated, and it is not particularly helpful now, eighty years on, as we try to understand how such atrocities are possible.⁵⁵ Humans are complex entities with almost unlimited capacity for social action. Examining that complexity of the influences, motivations, and emotions behind human choices, what the Holocaust survivor Primo Levi called the “gray zone,” rather than ironing it out into two simple choices, good and evil, is the task of the student of history who wishes to learn not only about the past but also about herself.⁵⁶

Vera Conrad and her husband Joachim supported the Nazi Party, supported the war, and seemed to support the party’s social and economic agendas. Rather than calling them “bystanders,” I would like to explore alternative terms. In German, the term *Mitläufer* means “those who walk with” or “accompany.” “Fellow travelers” is a fairly common translation of the term into English and shows more agency than the passive “bystander.” I would rather say that the Conrads were “supporters,” however, because they belonged to National Socialist organizations and upheld the regime’s agenda for at least a decade. Aspects of Vera Conrad’s point of view will likely make readers uncomfortable, but I challenge us all to explore the emotional world that Vera Conrad inhabited. For me, that is what historical work is about—trying to understand people in their place and time, with their values, assumptions, and blind spots. This awareness and exploration of humans’ three-dimensionality can help us come to terms with, which is not to be equated with accepting, the thoughts and emotions behind their atrocious acts.⁵⁷

Life Writing and Narrative

A new focus in historical work has begun to emerge that explores some of my questions. Scholars’ heavy emphasis on state policy and the examination of academic, social-welfare, and feminist discourses in regard to war widowhood,

prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s, has begun to give way to an examination of subjective experiences of war.⁵⁸ Unlike much of this new scholarship of subjectivity, my project addresses populations and spheres largely unexamined in the current literature. Most studies of subjectivity during the Nazi years trace Germans' engagement with public matters like the rise of Nazism, its integration into German society, and World War II, and they do not systematically use gender as a category of analysis to understand those matters.⁵⁹ The contribution my study makes is to broaden examination of experiences to include the other half of Germans' lives, the private world where many emotions are born and expressed.

In order to learn about how people experienced their lives and made sense of them, ego documents, or "life writing," such as diaries, correspondence, and memoirs are invaluable.⁶⁰ Such texts are cultural products, and they are also examples of an emotional practice. Scholars of private life in the 1930s observe that "writing involved an initial filtering of impressions and views of events: in this process, what individuals wrote was shaped by prevalent ideologies and forms of widely accepted knowledge, social customs, conventions of writing and visual representation, and the agendas of the party, state, and Wehrmacht."⁶¹ Reading a diary such as Vera Conrad's allows us to see how "events and developments were 'processed' internally, as well as the diverse reasons for people's responses and their capacity or otherwise for effective action."⁶² Life writing captures the author's attitudes, fears, and hopes, and the tone of the moment. It reveals the choices people believed they had as well as their blind spots. In so doing, it allows for nuanced insight into cultural norms of the era.

Psychologist Paul C. Rosenblatt observes that diaries are excellent sources through which to understand grief. In such documents, day-to-day changes in moods, perceptions, or thought may be observable, which can aid in charting the course of grief. Also, diaries may be more reliable or accurate than other kinds of self-reporting, in part because of their immediacy and confidentiality.⁶³ While Rosenblatt was trying to describe a "typical" grief process, he was aware of cultural differences as well as temporal ones. To his observations I would add that diaries can also reveal the emotional styles of individual authors as well as those of their milieux.

However, working with such sources also presents difficulties for the historian. Diaries and letters are rarely intended for posterity or, indeed, for readers unknown to their authors. As such, these personal texts that adhere very closely to daily experience are rich with references beyond the knowledge of the historian. Even in the twentieth century, with its overwhelming plethora of information, ordinary people's daily lives are elusive and can be inaccessible, particularly if the documents they left behind are fragments or have large gaps. As such, careful research, contextualization, and even speculation are necessary.

This kind of educated speculation is a method used more often in early modern histories, but it also has its place in the twentieth century.⁶⁴

In most life writing, authors present themselves as the “central character” in their texts.⁶⁵ Several scholars have noted the constructive and performative aspect of keeping a diary. Lynn Bloom writes that, “through the act of writing, the author . . . composes her own character” and brings a new self into existence.⁶⁶ The “selves” these scholars have in mind are interpretive lenses through which diarists bring meaning to their experiences. These lenses bring different needs and possible perspectives on events to the surface for the writer to express and even interrogate. Remembering the importance of practice in the expression and interpretation of emotions, we can recognize that the diary provides a clear example of actions that produce emotional states and, in this case, may even produce the self rather than simply express a pre-existing identity.⁶⁷ In developing such selves, writers are constrained by what is imaginatively possible, which is determined by their cultural context.

It is important when working with life-writing sources to be mindful that the author’s account is “embedded within the network of social relations that confer identity and meaning.”⁶⁸ Our identities are relational, formed over time through our interactions with other people and the larger culture. This indicates that ego documents do not “provide privileged access to the inner workings of an authentic self.”⁶⁹ Rather, ego documents may illuminate “identities [that] are shaped . . . at the intersection of different sets of roles[,] . . . expectations,” and cultural scripts.⁷⁰ They thus are valuable sources of cultural history, which investigates the values, meanings, and beliefs that underlie people’s actions.

Diaries often serve as important psychological and emotional tools for their authors. In unusual and crisis-ridden times, they can become key coping mechanisms. Historian Susanne zur Nieden suggests that authors can use the “healing power of speaking and writing” to make sense of traumatic events, loss, or a conflict of core values.⁷¹ Nieden points out that while most writers intend for their texts to remain private, they nonetheless may have an audience beyond themselves; furthermore, their texts can “serve as a form of conversation or correspondence between the writer’s selves.”⁷²

The idea that writing can provide comfort and emotional context is especially important in regard to uncertainty and crisis. For example, the war, with the loss of loved ones, and in particular the bombing of German cities, shook Germans’ faith in the regime, which necessitated the creation of new narratives. The regime’s promises to protect its people, to achieve a quick and decisive victory, and to mete out the burdens of war equally among the population were all broken. These experiences—of losing faith in a regime that one had given allegiance to—could be experienced as a betrayal or a trauma. Jenny Edkins investigates loss and trauma and has coined the phrase “trauma time.” She observes that in “normal” life, people construct chronological narratives to help make

sense of events and to craft a biography, and thus, an identity. “Trauma time” disrupts “normal” time, which flows in a smooth, linear narrative. Many trauma survivors experience a profound and seemingly insurmountable isolation from the rest of humanity as parts of them split off and freeze, fixing them in time, to shelter them from the trauma.⁷³ In order to deal with this disruption, and the broken or fragmented narrative that emerges from trauma, writers develop different points of view about their experiences, or selves. Edkins continues, “Until this new story is produced we literally do not know what has happened; we cannot say what it was, it doesn’t fit the script—we only know that something happened.”⁷⁴ How those scripts unfold, what they say and how they say it, can illuminate much about the society in which they were created.

The shock of learning that her husband was missing disrupted Conrad’s sense of continuity. Since there were no more letters from the front, she could no longer carry on a dialogue with Joachim that would sustain their relationship. The diary became the vehicle for her to do so. Not only did she record events so that her husband could “catch up” on them when he returned; she also used the diary as an important form of maintaining a relationship with him. In conducting the diary as a sort of conversation, she could imagine his responses and pour out her emotions to him via the “little book.” In a small way, this practice filled the gap left behind by the end of his letters in November 1943. The physical act of writing could be soothing, as when Vera curled up on the kitchen bench and lost herself thinking about better or future times, but it could also be exhausting in that it confronted her with grim realities: the act of committing words to paper made the events described more real and permanent.⁷⁵

The diary itself is hardbound in a roughly woven cream-colored fabric and as a physical artifact retains traces of Vera’s emotional states, which were impressed on the paper. She mostly wrote using fountain pen in “the German handwriting,” a script developed by a graphic designer and taught in Prussian schools between 1915 and 1941. Later in the diary Vera shifted to the Roman script used by English speakers, and often resorted to pencil. When serious bombing raids began and she snatched any time she had to write, her handwriting became larger and looser. Vera’s diary contains not only a record of both family and personal events; she also included pressed flowers, illustrations, cards, and photos. These personalized the book and recorded specific moments and experiences. The flowers in particular expressed an important component of Vera and Joachim’s relationship. They both loved being out of doors and knew all the local wildflowers by name. Not only did they use flowers to express their love for each other, they also commemorated hikes or vacations they took together or favorite sites on their land. Moreover, Joachim sent flowers via his letters from his solitary hikes while he was stationed in Berlin. The flowers in Vera’s book were meant to recall their shared time in nature (figure 0.1). Such

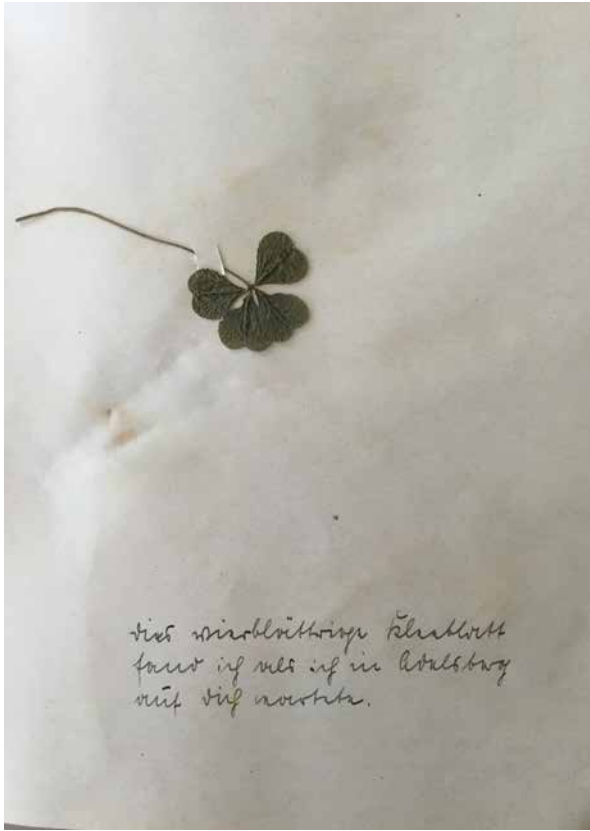


Figure 0. 1. Diary page with pressed flowers in Sütterlin script. It reads: "I found this four-leaf clover while I was waiting in Adelsberg for you to be born." © Erika Quinn.

flower albums had been kept by men and women alike since at least the nineteenth century, when the Romantic movement celebrated nature as a source of self-expression and transcendent experience.

In response to the difficult wartime conditions and Joachim's absence, Vera developed a set of selves through which to interact with the world and interpret events and her inner experiences. According to feminist scholar Judith Butler, one way of coping with such an unwelcome new reality consists in the "possibility of appearing impermeable, of repudiating vulnerability itself."⁷⁶ In order to maintain a sense of normalcy and agency, Vera attempted to preserve, in her diary conversation with Joachim, the same patriotic, somewhat mocking tone that characterized her writing in the same diary for her son. As Vera struggled to live up to social expectations and to align her responses with what she had been taught was respectable and responsible, she developed a heroic self to pro-

tect herself and her family's property and reputation. This heroic subjectivity adhered to Nazi ideology and, in so doing, relied on Vera's racial privilege as an "Aryan" German, a foundation unexamined by Vera herself. This heroic self, which attempted to step into her husband's place, retained a sense of irony, humor, and patriotism. Such a stance, however, was very challenging to maintain in light of her difficult circumstances and precarious emotional state. Thus, the diary alternates between the polarized voices of the heroic self and a mourning self that emerged immediately upon receipt of the news of her husband's disappearance. This mourning self was emotional, anxious, and in need of comfort. A response to "sudden, unexpected vulnerability,"⁷⁷ the mourning self had to be hidden away, shared only with her husband in the diary. In order to narrate her life in a way that allowed for agency and a degree of certainty in a time when so much was unknown and any news likely to confirm her worst fears, Vera could not rely solely on the heroic sense of self but needed to turn to a mourning self that helped her maintain a sense of relationship with her missing husband.

These two selves served the author's two central needs—first, to stay within an acceptable range of emotional expression in a regime that repressed criticism, thereby maintaining her reputation and status, while, second, coping with her deep pain and personal difficulties. Later, I speculate about another function these two selves may have played for Vera: focusing on her own overcoming and suffering may well have shielded her from engaging with the suffering of others outside her small community of neighbors, friends, and family.

These conceptualizations of selfhood as heroic and vulnerable reflect Vera's lived experience. As a working woman, she coped stoically: she managed the farm, met with neighbors and officials, traveled to conferences, and visited friends. As a vulnerable body in pain, hidden away from curiosity and scrutiny in the bedroom or the kitchen, she grieved Joachim's absence and fully felt the pain of uncertainty. Vera's bodily experiences shaped her subjectivity and informed what she recorded in her diary entries.

In addition to the heroic and mourning selves, a third emerged out of the overwhelming wartime context, a self characterized by depression and apathy. The apathetic self served several purposes. It protected her from her own vulnerability, from her pain regarding Joachim's absence, and possibly, from her knowledge of the violence perpetrated on civilians in the name of the country she loved. Vera Conrad was a German nationalist; she supported the National Socialist regime. She regularly and credulously listened to radio broadcasts of Hitler's speeches, seemed to accept the regime's reactionary and xenophobic viewpoints, and supported the war effort. Like so many Germans, she became critical of the war only when German defeat became more and more likely after the loss at Stalingrad in February 1943.⁷⁸ Even then, she continued to support German troops and the regime but wrote often about the war's horrors and her wish for it to end. Of Jewish and other victims of Nazi policy and

war, she wrote nothing, despite the fact that Jews had been deported from the neighboring village of Tröglitz and the nearby larger town of Zeitz, where she often ran errands.⁷⁹ Her silence could in part be explained by a lack of personal relationships with Jewish Germans, who generally did not live in the countryside.⁸⁰ Another likely reason for her silence is that she had accepted National Socialist antisemitic attitudes, and Jews thus were excluded from her sphere of care. Conrad's three selves were in conversation and conflict with one another as she sought to navigate both external and internal challenges.

Grief and Its Expression

Vera's diary provides important insights into how mourning was conducted in a war of mass death, a topic that has not been fully explored in regard to individuals' experiences.⁸¹ Scholars have frequently claimed that twentieth-century war presented an upheaval in mourning practices and a crisis of meaning because of the unprecedented manner and number of deaths, and that these left the bereaved without language to express themselves.⁸² Another claim is that "individuals generally tackled the emotional and practical issues they faced, rather than bearing witness to them on paper."⁸³ Contrary to these notions, Vera used quite simple and very repetitive language to express her grief in the diary. Historian Winfried Schulze notes that ego documents' intimate qualities often allow for redundancy.⁸⁴ Like other waiting wives, Vera repeated the phrases "if only I had some sign of life," "when you come home," and "where are you?" Rather than lacking language, I suggest, she was reiterating to herself how she felt when she engaged in a conversation with her mourning self. That self was put away from consciousness as much as possible when she was working, managing employees or apprentices, spending time with her children, or engaging in other everyday activities.

Mourning is an expressive act or display and entails a process of coming to terms with the loss or negotiating the meaning of it over time.⁸⁵ In a sense it is performative in that Vera's repetition of certain phrases and words like "dearest" take on an insistence that is not necessarily grounded in reality. By stating her love and concern over and over again, there is a kind of "sedimentation of the past" that establishes norms and conventions that convey authenticity.⁸⁶ The time she set aside for herself to write in her diary was the time to enact and re-create her grief. As a repository, the diary became charged with emotion. In attempting to continue the relationship, she in fact constructed it through the diary text by naming and performing her emotions.⁸⁷

Humans are relational beings: our sense of identity is heavily dependent on people around us.⁸⁸ Vera experienced the loss of her husband as one she could not entrust to most people around her; her sense of alienation intensi-

fied through her mourning and apathetic selves to the point where she did not want to interact with others at all. She turned to her diary as a confidante. She did so to try to find meaning in Joachim's disappearance but was unsuccessful. She did not possess that memory; rather, it possessed her in that she remained frozen in the pain.

Her grief was snared in a Western tradition that says pain is incommunicable to others, and its sufferers are therefore isolated.⁸⁹ This apparent loneliness of pain requires it to be disclosed to a witness. As feminist scholar Sara Ahmed explains, "because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain . . . I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relationship to others."⁹⁰ For mourners like Vera, love can often be conveyed by wanting to feel the loved one's pain. When Vera agonized over how Joachim was doing in Russia, she imagined his pain and felt it for him, forging a connection. She did not allow the inverse to take place; there was no one to imagine and feel the mourning self's pain.

In keeping the diary, Vera addressed Joachim, but she was also aware that the act of writing left a physical trace of their relationship behind. We are intertwined with other people and the impressions they leave on us. Contact between physical objects, or affective contact between living beings, leaves behind "sticky" impressions. That stickiness can transfer to other objects or affective relationships.⁹¹ Emotions circulate between bodies and can imbue objects with qualities. Emotions then are both about objects, which they shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects.⁹² Objects, like the physical book into which Vera impressed her emotional expression, become sticky through reuse. Like the "book tombs" created by mourners during World War I, the diary created an emotional and physical repository for grief and loss.⁹³

After a chapter that provides context about diary writing by German women during World War II and their emotional expression in diaries, this account of the Conrad family proceeds in roughly chronological order. It begins, as Vera's diary does, with family history. It then recounts in part 1 the years of war and the Conrads' marriage before Joachim was declared missing. Part 2 addresses the remainder of the war years: Vera's growing responsibilities on the farm, the growing severity of bombing attacks, and the chaotic and violent end of the war. Part 3 narrates the war's aftermath, focusing on the Soviet occupation of Ostrau. It also tells of Vera's ongoing attempts to gain information about Joachim's whereabouts and ends with her acceptance of his death, using her emotional experiences of loss as a red thread throughout the book.

Notes

1. V. Conrad, diary, 1939–48, Walter Kempowski Biography Archive, no. 2910; complete diary in private collection. Hereafter VC. All translations mine unless otherwise noted. Names of all mentioned except the historically notable have been changed to respect the family's desire for privacy.
2. Heineman, "Hour of the Woman," 354–95. Many collections of women's life writing were also inspired by the sentiment that women's experiences were central to the recovery effort and had been overlooked by society and historians. See, for example, Dörr, *Wer die Zeit*; Freier and Kuhn, *Das Schicksal Deutschlands*; and Schulze and Meyer, *Wie wir das alles*.
3. Estimates of the number of women widowed by World War II range from 1 to 1.7 million. Radebold, "Kriegsbedingte Kindheiten," 46.
4. Edkins, *Missing*, 9.
5. This figure is based on 40 percent of men married and eleven million POWs. See Biess, *Homecomings*, 45.
6. For more on the relationship between parents and children in East Germany, see Wierling, "Generations as Narrative Communities," 102–20.
7. VC 23 August 1939.
8. This particular kind of document, the "parental diary," began as a genre in the late 1700s when fathers began recording a child's life. Miriam Gebhardt claims that it was not until 1938 that children were directly addressed in such diaries. See Gebhardt, "Mit Waage und Papier," 47.
9. Winter and Sivan, "Setting the Framework," 18.
10. See, for example, Bridenthal, Grossman, and Kaplan, *When Biology Became Destiny*; Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*; Bock, *Zwangsssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus*.
11. Hagemann, "Military, War, and the Mainstreams," 75.
12. Kühne, "Protean Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity," 390–418.
13. Leck, "Conservative Empowerment," 157; Stibbe, "Racial State," 159–60.
14. Leck, "Conservative Empowerment," 162.
15. For the *Volksgemeinschaft*, see Schmichen-Ackermann et al., *Der Ort der "Volksgemeinschaft"*; Latzel, Mailänder and Maubach, *Geschlechterbeziehungen und "Volksgemeinschaft"*; Steber and Gotto, *Visions of Community*; Burleigh and Wippermann, *Racial State*.
16. Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich*, 1; Heinsohn, "'Volksgemeinschaft' als gedachte Ordnung," 83.
17. Kramer, "German Home Front," 181.
18. Lower, *Hitler's Furies*, 11.
19. Kravetz, *Women Doctors*; Century, *Female Administrators*; Lower, *Hitler's Furies*.
20. Hausen, "Polarisierung," 363–93.
21. Meyer, *Keine Grenze*, 4, 96–100.
22. Kramer, "Volksgenossinnen," 171.
23. Vaizey, *Surviving Hitler's War*; Goltermann, *Gesellschaft der Überlebenden*.
24. Betts, *Within Walls*, 3.
25. Alexander, preface to *The Unhappy Divorce*, xiv.
26. Febvre, "La sensibilité et l'histoire," 5–20; Lefebvre, *La Grande Peur*.
27. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*; Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions*.

28. Gay, *Weimar Culture and The Bourgeois Experience*. See also Loewenberg, "Psychohistorical Origins."
29. Psychologist Paul Ekman is the primary proponent of the idea of universal human emotions. See his *The Face of Man*.
30. For a helpful orientation to recent scholarship, see Barclay, "State of the Field," 456–66.
31. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, 41–42.
32. Barclay, "State of the Field," 463.
33. Frevert, *Emotional Lexicons*.
34. For emotional style, see Gammerl, "Emotional Style."
35. Scheer, "Are Emotions," 193.
36. Scheer, "Are Emotions," 200, 201. See also van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*; Feldman Barrett, *Seven and a Half Lessons*.
37. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 1–5.
38. Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made*.
39. Barclay, "New Materialism," 172.
40. Davis and Panksepp, "The Brain's Emotional Foundations."
41. In addition to Feldman Barrett's work, see Damásio, *Strange Order of Things*.
42. Reporting on the public mood was an important part of the Gestapo's purview. See Boberach, *Meldungen aus dem Reich*.
43. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, 137.
44. Stargardt, *German War*, 12.
45. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions," 842.
46. Kohut, *A German Generation*, 72.
47. See Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*.
48. Fritzsche, *Life and Death*, 3. Kohut points out that this emotional value already was developing after Germany's defeat in World War I. See *A German Generation*, 63.
49. Nussbaum, 182–85.
50. Koonz, *Nazi Conscience*, 5.
51. Fritzsche, *Life and Death*, 17.
52. Koonz, *Nazi Conscience*, 3. Emphasis mine.
53. Fulbrook, *Small Town*, 116.
54. See Fritzsche, *Life and Death*.
55. Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives*, 13.
56. Levi, *Drowned and the Saved*, 36–70.
57. Kohut, *Empathy*, 37, 42, 44–46.
58. Hanna, *Your Death*; Wierling, *Eine Familie im Krieg*; Stargardt, *German War*; Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives*. See also Föllmer, "Subjective Dimension of Nazism."
59. For example, Fritzsche's and Stargardt's works include women writers, but mostly as Germans grappling with Nazi racial policies or responses to the war itself.
60. Fulbrook and Rublack, "In Relation." See also Woods, Dahlke, and Tate, *German Life Writing*.
61. Harvey et al., "Introduction," 19.
62. Fulbrook and Rublack, "In Relation," 265.
63. Rosenblatt, *Bitter Tears*, 5–6.
64. For notable examples in the early modern field, see Davis, *Return of Martin Guerre* and *Trickster Travels*.
65. Bloom, "I Write," 31.
66. Bloom, "I Write," 32; Couser, *Memoir*, 14, 182.

67. Barclay, "New Materialism," 170.
68. Woods, "Introduction," 9.
69. Fulbrook and Rublack, "In Relation," 264.
70. Fulbrook and Rublack, "In Relation," 268; Woods, "Introduction," 10.
71. Zur Nieden, *Alltag*, 17; see also Vaizey, *Surviving Hitler's War*, 13.
72. Zur Nieden, *Alltag*, 28, 32, 41–42. See also Sederberg, "Writing through Crisis."
73. See, for example, van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*.
74. Edkins, *Trauma*, xiv.
75. Zur Nieden, *Alltag*, 52.
76. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 42.
77. Butler, 42.
78. Stargardt, *German War*, 223. Harvey et al. also find a lot of evidence of "individual accommodation with Nazism and the war" in ego documents. See their "Introduction," 21.
79. Heyden, "Humanizing Remembrance," 346 and fn 71.
80. Fulbrook, "Private Lives," 74.
81. For recent works that engage with mass death and its emotional effects, see Black, *Death in Berlin*; Bessel and Schumann, *Life after Death*; and Confino, Betts, and Schumann, *Mass Death and Individual Loss*.
82. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, *Understanding the Great War*, 176.
83. Vaizey, *Surviving Hitler's War*, 10.
84. Schulze, "Ego-Dokumente," 23.
85. Kauffman, "Mourning," 311.
86. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 91–93.
87. Grenz, "Feldpostbriefe," 255–57.
88. Both affect theory and interpersonal neurobiology affirm this: see Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, and Siegel, "Interpersonal Neurobiology."
89. Kleinman, Das, and Lock, *Social Suffering*, xiii.
90. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 30.
91. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 91; Frevert, "Rethinking the Corporeality."
92. Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 4. See also Quinn, "Inscribing Grief."
93. Capdevila and Voldman, *War Dead*, 126.