

Robert C. Freeman, “‘When the Wicked Rule the People Mourn’: The Experiences of German Saints during World War II,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Europe*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon and Brent L. Top (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 89–107.

“When the Wicked Rule the People Mourn”: The Experiences of German Saints during World War II

Robert C. Freeman

The memories of World War II are terrible for members of the Church who lived through it and for people everywhere. The devastation inflicted upon the nations of the earth during the awful conflict made it the bloodiest war in modern human history. In all nations of Europe, people both in and out of the Church suffered greatly as did those in many other countries. In some places, such as Russia and Poland, millions died as a result of the violence. Germany also paid a tremendous price for its role as chief instigator of the hostilities in Europe. Over four million of her sons and daughters died, and many cities and towns were utterly destroyed. For German members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the tribulations of the war were difficult indeed.

At the time of the outbreak of war in Europe, the Church had a strong presence in Germany. By the end of the 1930s the Church population in Germany ranked third in total membership, behind the United States and Canada.^[1] Against the growing evidence that war loomed on the horizon, Church President Heber J. Grant and several other leaders toured Germany and key European nations during the summer of 1937. At each stop President Grant assessed the progress of the Church and warned members of the need to rely less on the American missionaries.^[2]

In September 1938 indications that the outbreak of war might be imminent prompted Church leaders in Salt Lake City to evacuate American and other missionaries from Germany.^[3] However, the immediate threat of hostilities soon dissipated, and the missionaries were allowed to return.^[4] This evacuation served as a dress rehearsal of the actual evacuation ordered by the First Presidency one year

later.^[5] Beginning on 25 August 1939 and continuing through the next week, approximately 150 full-time missionaries were safely withdrawn from Germany. The last missionaries arrived in Copenhagen, Denmark, on 1 September 1939, the day of the German invasion of Poland.^[6]

Several weeks after the evacuation of missionaries, on 25 September 1939, President Thomas E. McKay, who presided over the Church in Europe throughout most of the war, issued a letter of encouragement to the German members:

We pray sincerely to our Heavenly Father, that He might protect and bless those that have been called to arms and that He might strengthen those who have remained at home for the additional responsibilities that rest upon your shoulders. Pray, live a pure life, keep the word of wisdom, pay your tithing, visit and participate in all the meetings, keep free from finding fault and bearing false witness, sustain those that have been called to preside and it is our promise that the Lord will guide and lead you in all things and that you, even in the midst of afflictions and difficulties will find joy and satisfaction. Be always mindful that we are engaged in the work of the Lord and that Jesus is the Christ. He is our head, we are members of His Church. His gospel, as it has been revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith will be victorious.^[7]

In January 1940 new presidents were called to preside over the missions in Germany and Switzerland.^[8] The new leadership was called to replace the American leaders who returned to the United States early in 1940. The new leaders included Herbert Klopfer and Christian Heck as acting presidents of the East and West German Missions respectively. In spite of the hardships of the war, these leaders inspired the members to remain faithful.

Among the most difficult challenges that confronted the Church in Germany were the difficulties associated with Communications. As in several other European nations, Church members in Germany were essentially cut off from Salt Lake City for most of the war. Additionally, in September 1940, the monthly Church publication *Der Stern*, which had

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been in publication since 1869, was halted for the duration of the war. Suspension of the paper came in response to the Nazi government's wartime prohibition against the printing of independent magazines and books.

During the early period of the war, Germany's successes were many and conditions of the Church in Germany remained fairly stable. While food and other commodities became increasingly scarce, Church programs generally operated without significant interruption. In 1942, for example, the Hamburg District sponsored a joyful centennial celebration of the founding of the Church's Relief Society. Ironically, general Church and stake celebrations of the same event in the United States were canceled, while the event in Hamburg drew over five hundred Saints, making it one of the largest commemorations in the Church. [\[10\]](#)

In stark contrast to these joyful celebrations, just one month earlier, seventeen-year-old Latter-day Saint Helmut Hübener and close friends Karl-Heinz Schnibbe and Rudi Wobbe were arrested by German authorities for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets. [\[11\]](#)

While Karl-Heinz Schnibbe and Rudi Wobbe were given lengthy prison terms, Helmut Hübener was eventually beheaded at Plotzensee Prison, near Berlin, on 27 October 1942. [\[12\]](#) Hübener died a martyr's death and in the years after the war was revered as a hero.

Another Latter-day Saint civilian who suffered under the Third Reich was Jewish member Salomon Schwartz, an active member of the Hamburg-Barmbeck Branch who was incarcerated in a concentration camp at

Theresienstadt. [\[13\]](#) The experience of Salomon Schwartz was particularly lamentable because leaders of the Hamburg—Barmbeck Branch had posted a sign over the entrance to the branch building that read “Jews Are Not Allowed.” Although typical of other churches and businesses during that period, the message provided a sad commentary on the circumstances of the time.

The Feverish War at the Battlefront

While exact numbers are not available, hundreds of German Saints wore the uniform of the Third Reich during the war. For those engaged in the fighting, the experiences were often too difficult to describe. By the end of the war, nearly five hundred German Latter-day Saint soldiers died in battle and many more were injured. [\[14\]](#) Whenever news of the death of a Latter-day Saint soldier was received by family and branch members at home, special memorial services were convened. In March 1943 Friedrich Biehl, former president of the West German Mission, became one of the first of several key leaders who died during the war. [\[15\]](#)

Experiences of those involved in the fighting varied greatly, but some of the most harrowing stories told were by those fighting on the Russian front. One German Saint who fought along the Russian front was Walter K. Rohloff, who described the experience of arriving at his “new home”:

My new home was a hole in the ground, covered with big logs and plenty of dirt on the top. The “Bunker” as we called that place, was connected to the “Hauptkampf linie” (front line or trench). A squad of about six to eight men occupied a bunker. I was placed in a squad and introduced myself to everyone. One of the men was standing guard, the others were sitting in the bunker playing cards. When my turn came, I had to stand guard by a machine gun. From that place I could see, as much as darkness permitted, the no-man's land. About forty yards in front of me, we had a barbed wire entanglement. I couldn't see the enemy line, but I could see the flash from their rifles. Sometimes the Russians would shoot with the “Stalinorgel,” a rocket gun which could fire many rockets at once. When a rocket hit the ground, the detonation looked like a big mushroom of fire. It was pretty to see, and while watching that, I got careless. I felt the touch of a hand on my back. My corporal had come up behind me. He reminded me of the danger and that I should protect myself. He told me the Stalinorgel is not very accurate, makes lots of noise, and seldom hits its target. While we were not bombarded with it, it could still stray over to hit us. The next morning I went along the trench and visited the place where the rockets had hit our line. There were the first dead I saw, and I told myself to be more careful in the future. It made a deep impression on me. [\[16\]](#)

Another young German Saint, Jared H. B. Kobs, told of a violent encounter with the enemy in the terrible winter of 1944—45:

Our rifles were frozen again and our ammunition almost out. And when the nerves break down there is nothing left but to admit that one can't handle the situation and shoot oneself. I was ready to do so[.] I had one hand grenade left to blow myself up. I thought better this way than be murdered from the Russians or be run over from a Russian tank. I asked my comrade who was in my hole if we could pray together? The answer was "who believes in God?" I took my helmet from my head and put it on top of my small shovel to find out where the enemy was. . . . It took just a minute and I had a shot thru my helmet. I prayed by myself as I was taught by my mother—and suddenly I heard a voice saying to me, get out of here—get out of here. It was really suicidal to do so. But as fast as I could do so I was climbing out of the hole and running like a rabbit zigzag from one tree to the other tree to cover myself. 0[h], I hear it still today that shooting toward me, which hit mostly into the heavy big trees. I really didn't know where to run to, because Russian tanks (T34) came already from behind us. Finally I saw a Ranger station (cottage) close by, and was running to the Ranger station. I went inside in disbelief. I saw the casualty rates, the seriously wounded downstairs in the basement. I must say catastrophic the figures were irreversible and damning. But there was no time for me to think about it, just follow the voice to get out of here on my own thru the forest. On my way out I met another German soldier and another wounded soldier on the roadside. We made a human chair to sit on our hands and carried him along the road till a German tank came toward us, which took the wounded fellow to the nearest Field hospital. On our way out we heard the Ranger station and our own unit is surrendered by Russian troops, there is no way to go back and I never heard anything anymore from our company or battalions. [\[17\]](#)

Although death and destruction were everywhere, many of the Latter-day Saint German soldiers felt divine assistance amidst the danger. Latter-day Saint Philipp J. Bauer, a member of the German Army, described pleading for divine protection during one of his first combat experiences:

I was scared, scared to death. I thought this would be my end. I prayed to the Lord like I prayed never before. I promised him, if I would come out alive of this terrible shooting, I would serve him and do whatever he asked me all my life. I never forgot this incident, and always remember this promise when I need to. [\[18\]](#)

The story of another Church member, Horst K. Hilbert, provides a similar example of divine intervention experienced by other Latter-day Saint soldiers. Hilbert's unit had been deployed to the Russian front where many German soldiers experienced horrible conditions. While on guard duty one day, he and his comrades were attacked by the Russians. The only shelter he had was a little shack with a straw roof:

I was very afraid and since I was forbidden to leave the post, I wanted to pray. I could feel the power of the destroyer. But I could not utter one word of prayer, my tongue felt paralyzed. To think, that the first words in my life were prayers on my mother's lap. All I was able to say was: if my mother could pray for me right now, so the Lord might hear the prayer of a righteous woman. With this thought I looked to the east, and felt prompted to look north. When I did this and turned, a bullet passed and in passing hit the coat at my stomach. Had I not turned, it would have struck my stomach. After this incident the shooting stopped. Some days later I received a letter from my mother. In this letter she wrote me, that in the night of January 6 she woke hearing me call her Mama, also she heard the sound of shooting. She got up quickly, woke up my four sisters and said: we have to pray fast, Horst is in mortal danger and needs our prayers. The five women knelt down, and mother pleaded with the Lord to keep His protecting Hand over me. After the prayer, my mother told my sisters to go back to sleep and be of good cheer—Horst has been in danger, and the Lord has helped him. [\[19\]](#)

During an assault of Allied bombers during an air raid in June 1944, German Latter-day Saint Wilhelm Krisch responded to spiritual promptings which he later credited for saving his life:

The first thing I did that afternoon was to dig a hole, so that when enemy airplanes came I could protect myself from the bombing attacks. There was a row of trees. In between the trees were shrubs. Some foxholes were already dug there. Others probably already had been there, so that they had dug the holes. I happened to be the first one in the group to arrive there. I stood by the foxhole. I did not know if I should enter the foxhole. It was as

if someone said to me, “Here come the enemy bombers.” At first I did not know what I should do. I went in and out of the hole. How many times I went in and out of the hole, I do not know. I had no peace, I had to come out.

It was as if someone had said to me, “There is going to be a direct hit from enemy bombers in this hole.”^[20]

Krisch described digging another foxhole with his bare and bleeding hands and thus gained protection during the succeeding days. Those who used the first hole he abandoned were killed by a direct hit by Allied bombers. Reflecting on his feelings of protection, Krisch felt that his life was preserved for a special mission.

The Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944 was a key turning point of the European war. One of the Latter-day Saints present on D-Day was a German by the name of John L. Flade. Flade served as a “forward observer” for the German Army during the terrible battle. Viewing the Allied landing through field glasses, Flade’s assignment was to coordinate the deployment of German troops and equipment. Through his experience Flade became convinced that Germany was destined to lose the war. He cited the American industrial might—the sheer number of ships, men, and materiel—as a key reason for his pessimism about Germany’s chances for victory. Soon after D-Day, Flade was captured by Canadian troops and was held as a prisoner of war in both Britain and in the United States for the remainder of the conflict.^[21]

Flade was not the only German Latter-day Saint soldier to spend time in Allied prisoner of war camps. Several German soldiers had their first introduction to the gospel while in such circumstances. One young soldier who was introduced to the gospel while incarcerated in a POW camp in France was Joseph F. Beuchert. He was taught the gospel by a fellow German prisoner and was later baptized.^[22] One German soldier incarcerated in a POW camp in Italy, Hans M. Boettcher, had the good fortune of being able to meet another Church member.

One Sunday morning some fellows from our group showed me a written program about a worship service they attended in Camp Pisa, where [Latter-day Saint] Hans Karl Schade participated as a tenor soloist. That name, of course, was very familiar to me. I asked the Pastor if he could take me to Camp Pisa to see my old friend. He agreed! We were both overjoyed when we met—the only two Mormons among 100,000 German POWs. The first thing we did was to find a quiet place where we knelt down and prayed. We poured our hearts out before the Lord for opening the way to see each other. We departed very satisfied at the end of the Day.

Soon after this experience, Boettcher, was granted permission to worship at a Latter-day Saint branch in a nearby town. Each Sunday an American Latter-day Saint chaplain by the name of Royden Braithwaite escorted him to Church.^[23]

Civilian Life in the Face of Defeat

Life for the civilian Saints in Germany was difficult. As the war progressed, Germany was increasingly the target of bombing raids by Allied forces. Berndt Moser, a young Latter-day Saint boy living in Leipzig (East Germany) at the time of the conflict, remembered well his feelings of fear during the bombing raids:

My most vivid recollection of the war was an air raid that leveled a duplex identical to ours and just to the side of it. Only my mother and I were at home. As was the custom upon reaching the basement, we turned on the radio. The announcer would give information as to the geographical direction from which the attack was coming. Soon the power went off and all we could hear was the drone of airplanes and bombs dropping. . . . I can honestly say that I have never prayed more fervently than I did that day. I beseeched my Heavenly Father to spare my Ufe. Suddenly the earth shook. At the time of this bomb’s impact, both of us were literally lifted off the basement floor several inches. . . . The bomb had barely missed our house. It entered the house closest to us.

It had collapsed like a deck of cards, instantly killing the people that huddled in one of the basements.^[24]

In the days and weeks that followed, the destruction imposed upon Germany intensified. Several journal entries recorded by district president Willy Deters provide an insight into the increasing struggles faced by Church members:

January 1, 1943: The conditions in the branches are becoming more difficult. The lack of food is more and more

noticeable. The constant air-raids make the people nervous and irritable. Only the real faithful Saints are coming to the meetings now. These are sufficient to carry on the work. [\[25\]](#)

January 1, 1944: The year 1944 is here and this awful war is still going on. Life is very difficult now. The last bit of strength has been offered to the frantic war god. The life in the branches is becoming increasingly more difficult. The brethren have to work day and night and don't find time to visit the meetings. The food rationing is more severe now. Trains are attacked by planes day and night and traveling is very dangerous. The attendance in the meeting has dropped drastically but the spirit has not suffered. [\[26\]](#)

January 1, 1945: Hell has opened its fiery portals. It is almost impossible to visit the branches. Planes attack trains constantly. No rest can be found at night. Many of the brethren are called into the armed services that are either very young or over forty in an organization called "Volkssturm," so that they might save the fatherland.

Reasoning now has changed to madness. [\[27\]](#)

In the midst of such hardships, the Saints bonded together in a true spirit of welfare. One such example of mutual dependence occurred in Hamburg where Allied bombing raids during the summer of 1943 killed tens of thousands of civilians. Prior to the raids, leaders of the Hamburg District called upon the local Saints to conduct clothing drives:

Brother Berndt felt inspired to instruct the branches to bring all this clothing to the Altona Branch hall. . . . During these raids all the branch halls were destroyed with the exception of the Altona Branch where the clothing was stored, and the brethren were now in a position to help the Saints, most of whom had lost all their belongings, and return to them the clothing they had contributed. Over thirty members of the Hamburg District lost their lives in these raids at this time. . . . Family after family brought their entire stores of clothing, food and household supplies and shared them with their brethren and sisters who were destitute. The Altona branch hall was used as a temporary barracks for a large number of homeless families and the remainder were housed in the homes of members whose property still permitted habitation. Groups of brethren were sent out and made purchases of small plots of land in the suburbs upon which they built hastily constructed homes for the members, using what materials could be salvaged from the blasted ruins. In a remarkably short time the mammoth job of relief and rehabilitation had been accomplished through the application of basic Church welfare principles with which most of these members were quite unfamiliar, but they had responded unselfishly as true brothers and sisters. [\[28\]](#)

In addition to responding to their own needs, the Saints in Germany reached out to other distressed Church members in their midst. One such example was described by acting Belgian district president Paul J. Devignes, who thanked German Saints for sending relief food and money to three Latter-day Saint Belgian youths who were sent to labor in German industrial plants. [\[29\]](#)

During the early fall of 1944, conditions in the branches worsened. In the northern Germany city of Bremen, the branch hall was destroyed in August 1944, and 95 percent of the members were left homeless. [\[30\]](#) Another example was a branch in Kassel where several Saints lost their lives due to bombing; in addition, the meeting hall was

destroyed. [\[31\]](#) The loss of meeting places was a common experience, and by the end of the war nearly all Latter-day Saint branch

facilities were destroyed. One month after the destruction of the meeting hall in Kassel, bombs demolished the East German Mission home in Berlin-Haendel Alie, forcing mission presidency counselor Paul Langheirich to move the

mission headquarters to his home temporarily. [\[32\]](#) Mission president Herbert Kopfler and his wife nearly lost their lives in the assault. Their son provided an account of the experience:

While my father was on furlough in Werdau in the fall of 1943, he and mother traveled back to Berlin to care for

some mission business and to obtain some personal belongings we had left behind. En route on the train they realized they had forgotten the key to the mission home. . . . My parents could not get in so began walking to the home of his first counselor, Brother Ranglack. As they proceeded, the first of three air attacks that night occurred. As they sought cover in a public air shelter, a pitiful sight of frightened and injured people opened to their eyes. Even though hungry themselves, they passed out what food they had to as many people as possible. Some of the people were without arms or legs, a result of previous bombings. They reached Brother Ranglack's home just before the second air attack. Again they had to go to an air raid shelter. The next morning they returned to the mission home. . . . During the night the mission home had been destroyed in a raid in which more than 1000 England-based planes took part. A few minutes after my parents left the home the previous night, it took a direct hit by a 500-pound phosphorus bomb which fell to the basement, burning the home from the bottom up. Only the walls remained standing. Surely the Lord had protected mother and father in allowing them to forget to bring their house key. [\[33\]](#)

During a branch meeting in Hamburg-Altona, a prompting received by branch president Herbert Baarz helped avoid what otherwise might have been a great tragedy:

It was customary that during the meeting a member of the branch presidency would listen to the radio for information concerning any possible air raids. On a Sunday during the sacrament meeting of the Altona Branch the branch president Herbert Baarz was listening to the radio and everything seemed to be in order. Brother Baarz felt inspired to tell the members to leave the meeting immediately and go to the shelter, a ten minute walk. The meeting was closed and members left. They had no sooner arrived at the shelter when Altona was attacked by American bombers, leveling the area close to the meeting hall. [\[34\]](#)

The increased danger meant even more desperate measures by the German government to reinforce their beleaguered army. As the war raged on, younger and younger recruits were drafted into the service. Manfred Deus, a fourteen-year-old German Saint described how abruptly his school experiences were traded for military service:

We had six hours of school every day of the week, including Saturday. I came home from school on a Saturday, and a draft notice came in the mail that day, that I would have to report the next morning at the railroad station. This was August of 1944. I reported to the railroad station that morning, where I found a lot of my classmates from school. We were sent into a basic training camp, where we were supposed to learn how to shoot, how to handle a rifle, to protect ourselves. We received uniforms that Sunday afternoon. We received another set of uniforms on Wednesday afternoon. We were shipped in railroad cars, and sent right behind the front lines. [\[35\]](#)

As 1945 dawned, conditions in Germany were truly desperate. The tide of the war had turned, and Germany's fate seemed clear. As the bombing of key cities in Germany intensified, panic gripped the German people. The endurance and faith of Church members was tried severely. In the city of Dresden, tens of thousands of civilians were killed in the space of two days in mid-February. [\[36\]](#) One young German member, Dorothea Speth, described her family's experience during one particular bombing episode on the night of 13 February:

One of the first bombs of the second air raid hit our corner house at an angle, setting the ground floor on fire so that the building started burning from the bottom upward. The only way out was a hole in our basement wall connecting die basement with the house next door. Our family and an older couple who lived on our floor managed to escape through this hole. We all realized that we needed to get away from the burning houses immediately! My father took one of my older sisters and my twin sister and began to lead the way. As my father started walking, he headed towards a narrow side street instead of choosing the wide street which led directly to our goal, to the [Elbe] river. Mother stopped, not wanting to follow down the narrow, burning street and began calling Dad to try to persuade him to turn around and take the more direct route along our street, which seemed so much safer and quicker. With each passing second, the distance between us increased, but Mom was still not willing to abandon her plan. Then I heard my older sister plead with her, "Mom, let's follow Dad; he holds the Priesthood!" With this reminder, we started to move quickly, trying to catch up with Dad, who led us safely in a [\[37\]](#)

roundabout way down to the river.

As the final assault on Germany reached a feverish pitch, a sense of panic spread everywhere. For the Saints, mutual dependence and reliance upon God was their only hope. At the close of a conference of the Hamburg-Altona Branch, Elder Otto Berndt described a particularly poignant moment with the Saints:

The meeting closed with a hymn, “God Be With You Till We Meet Again.” A strange feeling came over all of us and with a sudden impulse all of us got hold of the hands of the persons next to us, thus forming a chain. When the last verse was sung, not one eye was dry. This was probably the most solemn hour in the history of the Hamburg District. During the night the meeting hall was damaged so badly, that no meetings could be held there for four months. [\[38\]](#)

The invasion of Germany affected every branch. Branch president Willi Horn described the privations endured by the Danzig Saints:

The members in Danzig [later Poland] live on weeds, cats, dogs, a few potatoes and carcasses. The suggestion was made that a tenth of this food should be given to the poor and the sick. These Saints were overjoyed about this help. [\[39\]](#)

President Horn also reported that four branch members died of typhoid at that time. Actions of the government reflected the same kind of desperation felt by its citizens. As the war neared its conclusion, the Nazi regime turned to the very young and the very old in an attempt to replenish their depleted military ranks. One boy who was pressed into service during this time was future Church member and General Authority F. Enzo Busche. In March 1945, while not yet fifteen years of age, Enzo was drafted into the army of the Third Reich dressed in his Hitler Youth uniform and sporting an unfamiliar weapon. He had to travel on foot and described the dangerous conditions:

I was a little kid and scared to death. We were under constant attack, but I never once shot back. I experienced terrible things that are beyond my ability to explain. In that chaos every emotion was loose and everyone behaved crazily. People panicked and shot themselves; nothing was illegal and there was no police protection. Money lost its value and people threw it away like dirty paper. [\[40\]](#)

Elder Busche described the difficult days that followed when American troops captured him and held him for three days without food in a small barn. Although initially he feared he and his comrades would be put to death, the Americans eventually freed their prisoners on the condition of a promise that they would not take up their arms again.

The Awful War Concludes

After nearly six years of fighting, the conflict in Europe finally ended with the unconditional surrender of Germany on 8 May 1945. The cessation of hostilities, however, did not mean the end of suffering for the citizens of Germany and other European nations because of a lack of food and shelter. Within the Church, efforts were undertaken to alleviate the suffering. Local Church leadership arranged for several Latter-day Saint “refugee centers” to be established in the East German cities of Chemnitz, Cottbus, Langen, and Wolfsgruen. [\[41\]](#) In Wolfsgruen, for example, the Church located a mansion in which approximately one hundred Latter-day Saints could be cared for at any given time. Although great challenges confronted those who lived there, the facility served as a safe shelter, a place for convalescence, and a Church center. Everything from constant shortages of food and other supplies to harassment from local authorities were a part of the experience of the Saints at Wolfsgruen. Nonetheless, many Saints regained hope and started new lives. [\[42\]](#)

By the end of the war, 482 Latter-day Saint German soldiers and 111 civilians had died including German Mission presidents Friedrich Biehl and Christian Heck as well as district presidents Martin Hoppe, Carl Goeckeritz, and Erich Behrnt. [\[43\]](#)

Despite such heavy losses, the total number of Latter-day Saints in Germany was approximately

[\[44\]](#)

12,000, only a slight decrease from the beginning of the war. Approximately 85 percent of the members were left homeless, and many were unaccounted for. In spite of the sorrow and grief the members experienced over their own fallen family and friends, they took time to convene a memorial service for President Heber J. Grant, who died on 14 May 1945. On 19 August, 300 German Latter-day Saints overfilled a hall in Berlin designed to hold 170 to remember their leader. A number of American servicemen also participated in the meeting. [\[45\]](#)

Among the most difficult hardships endured were those experienced by German soldiers who were forced to labor in Russia for years after the war. One such individual was Artur Schwiermann, a German soldier and Church member who described the working conditions which he encountered:

Three times a day we received soup or, in other words, warm water and a slice of bread. If we would have found a mouse in the soup it would have added at least some protein. The bread was handed out in loaves and it was up to us to cut and divide it. After the bread was sliced, a blindfolded person called out our names while someone else pointed to the bread. This was our way of making sure that no one would be short-changed; still everybody felt he had received the smallest portion and had been cheated. There was no trust among the men and friend would turn against friend for a crumb of bread. Since the only water in the well was typhoid infested, it was off limits. The Russians used this water only for the laundry. Instead of water, the prisoners received coffee. Not knowing that the Russian people were tea drinkers, the Americans had shipped enormous amounts of coffee to Russia. To the delight of the prisoners, the coffee was a daily treat except for me. I was determined to adhere to the Word of Wisdom. At night, I filled my canteen with the contaminated water and put my trust in the Lord. . . . By December, 500 of the 1,000 prisoners had died. My weight dropped from 145 to 95 pounds. It was in my favor that I was young, tough and endowed with a tremendous faith in God. My daily conversations with the Lord gave me great strength. [\[46\]](#)

One soldier who escaped the fate endured by Schwiermann was Paul Guildner. Guildner was a German Latter-day Saint who had lost his right arm fighting on the Russian front and whose fortune was changed by a quick-thinking American soldier by the name of Ferrel Bybee. Bybee, who was stationed with a discharge unit, had met Paul Guildner, his wife, Ingeborg, and their baby while attending Church services in Salzburg. Later, Guildner was sent to the discharge camp where Bybee served. Due to an agreement between President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and Premier Stalin, the German soldiers were returned to the area of Germany where they were born. Bybee related:

The most unhappy German Troops in our camp, were those who were being sent to East Germany into the hands of the Russians. They knew many of them would not stop in East Germany, for Siberia was their final destination, particularly those who had fought on the Russian front. . . . Our discharge unit placed a notice in the local newspaper requiring all German soldiers to report to our camp for processing. It is difficult to understand how I was able to recognize Paul Guildner in the large fenced compound of unprocessed soldiers. The compound contained several hundred men, and I didn't know he would be there. I am sure now, that I was led by the Spirit. I knew that Brother Guildner was from East Germany, that he would likely never see his wife and baby again if he was sent to the Russians. We were forbidden any contact with the German soldiers, but I felt I must do something. I was able to get Brother Guildner to come over to the fence I was standing by, and obtained his soldiers record book and other personal papers from him. That was a difficult task with the language barrier. All of these papers I burned, destroying the evidence that would require the American soldiers to return him to the Russians. I then told the Sargent [*sic*] in charge that I had recognized a German soldier in the compound who needed to get home to his wife and baby. It wasn't long until Paul Guildner was discharged and sent home to Salzburg. [\[47\]](#)

Guildner was not able to thank Ferrel Bybee at the time, since Bybee soon returned to the United States. However, many years later, while serving a mission with his wife at the Swiss Temple, Bybee took part in a glad reunion with his German friend during a chance meeting at the temple in 1983. It was truly a joyful temple moment for Bybee and Guildner, then the patriarch in the Munich Germany Stake.

Another American Latter-day Saint who shared a joyful occasion with the German Saints was Julian Lowe, who described his anxious feelings just before attending Church services at a German branch soon after the war:

I pulled up to a little gray church and heard coming from it the joyous strains of *The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning*. I was ever so thrilled and hurried to get inside. The door through which I entered was on the side of the building and opened up near the front of the audience. Before I realized what I had done, I was inside in full view of everyone. It was a tense moment indeed, having an American officer suddenly arrive. The singing stopped and one of the leaders who spoke English, came to where I was standing to see what I wanted. When he heard that I was a member of the Church from Utah, he joyously announced it to the group, and a love feast such as I had never known began. In a flash, political animosities between peoples were forgotten, and the pure love of Christ prevailed. ^[48]

The war was awful for both the victor and the vanquished. During a war in which fifty million sons and daughters of God died, the German nation and her people were severely punished for playing the role of the aggressor. The experience of the German people during the war years seemed somehow a fulfillment of scripture. “Nevertheless, when the wicked rule the people mourn” (D&C 98:9). Several trying decades followed World War II as Germans experienced many struggles, including over fifty years as a divided nation.

During the last half of the twentieth century, Church membership in Germany increased threefold. At the beginning of the twenty-first century over 36,000 German members were organized into fourteen stakes and six missions. ^[49] Additionally, today two temples beautify the cities of Freiburg and Frankfurt. A great tradition of dedicated service has been established, and the strength of the Church in Germany today stands as a tribute to those whose faith and endurance allowed the gospel to continue uninterrupted during the difficult times of war and tumult.

^[1] Gilbert Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany: A History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Germany between 1840 and 1970* (Salt Lake City: DeseretBook, 1970), 222.

^[2] David F. Boone, *The Worldwide Evacuation of Latter-day Missionaries at the beginning of World War II* (master’s thesis, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1981), 2.

^[3] Justus Ernst, comp., *Highlights from the German-Speaking Latter-day Saint Mission Histories, 1836—1960*, Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, 14 September 1938, hereafter Church Archives. The account reads, “Due to the critical situation in the Sudetenland the missionaries were instructed to leave Germany and go to Denmark and Holland.” See also Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 91.

^[4] Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 91.

^[5] David F. Boone, *Worldwide Evacuation*, 14—15.

^[6] Boone, *Worldwide Evacuation*, 42—43.

^[7] Ernst, *Highlights*, 25 September 1939.

^[8] Ernst, *Highlights*, 31 January 1940.

^[9] Ernst, *Highlights*, 9 September 1940. The East German Mission did organize a small publication entitled *Der Sonntags-Gruss*, which was sent to its members on a weekly basis.

^[10] Ernst, *Highlights*, 22 March 1942. Highlights of the event included the rendition of a play written by Sister Ing Baum of the Kassel Branch titled *The ABC’s of the Relief Society*.

^[11] Alan F. Keele and Douglas F. Tobler, “The Führer’s New Clothes: Helmuth Hübener and the Mormons in the Third Reich,” *Sunstone*, November—December 1980, 21. Hübener’s closest friends were Rudi Wobbe and Karl Schnibbe. In addition, his half-brother Gerhard Duwer supplied the radio that allowed Helmuth to receive the British Broadcasting Corporation’s (BBC) reports that provided the information for the anti-Nazi leaflets he distributed throughout his community.

^[12] Keele and Tobler, “The Führer’s New Clothes,” 26.

^[13]

Keele and Tobler, "The Führer's New Clothes," 21. It is presumed that Schwartz died while in the camp, which was one of the largest in Germany.

- [14] Ernst, *Highlights*, 8 May 1945.
- [15] Ernst, *Highlights*, 3 March 1943.
- [16] Walter Rohloff, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University, 59–60.
- [17] Jared Kobs, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University.
- [18] Philipp J. Bauer, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University, 16.
- [19] Horst Kurt Hilbert, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University, 7.
- [20] Wilhelm Krisch, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University, 40–41.
- [21] John L. and Alice Flade Oral History, interview by Jeffrey L. Anderson, 1991, typescript, 24, Church Archives.
- [22] Gerry Avant, "German Soldier Learns of Gospel," *Church News*, 31 May 1975, 12. German POWs Joseph F. Beuchert and Hans Ruckdaschel both joined the Church as a result of being taught the gospel by another POW, Latter-day Saint Walter Ruthenberg.
- [23] Hans Max Bóettcher, Saints at War Collection.
- [24] Paul H. Kelly, *A Season of War*, unpublished manuscript, 262.
- [25] Ernst, *Highlights*, 1 January 1943.
- [26] Ernst, *Highlights*, 1 January 1944.
- [27] Ernst, *Highlights*, 1 January 1945.
- [28] Ernst, *Highlights*, 3 August 1943.
- [29] Ernst, *Highlights*, 23 December 1944.
- [30] Ernst, *Highlights*, 18 August 1944, 23 December 1944.
- [31] Ernst, *Highlights*, 22 October 1943, 23 December 1944.
- [32] Ernst, *Highlights*, 22 November 1943.
- [33] Kelly, *A Season of War*, 273–74. The account is provided by the son President Klopfer who died later in the war as a result of malnutrition. His death came just two months before the end of the war in Puschka, near Kiev, Russia, in a prisoner of war labor camp.
- [34] Ernst, *Highlights*, 31 December 1943.
- [35] Manfred Deus, interview by Don Norton, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University.
- [36] Estimated numbers of casualties have varied greatly from 35,000 to 250,000 (Stephen E. Ambrose, *New History of World War II* [New York: Viking, 1997], 406).
- [37] Garold N. Davis and Norma S. Davis, "Behind the Iron Curtain: Recollections of Latter-day Saints in East Germany," *BYU Studies* 36, no. 3 (1996): 32–35. Dorthea Speth survived the war and later married Spencer J. Condie, member of the First Quorum of the Seventy.
- [38] Ernst, *Highlights*, 8 April 1945.
- [39] Ernst, *Highlights*, 29 April 1945.
- [40] Derin Head Rodriguez, *From Every Nation* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 33–34.
- [41] Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 130.

- [42] The Mormon Home at Wolfsgrün, Church Archives.
- [43] Ernst, *Highlights*, 8 May 1945. See also Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 101, 105, 116.
- [44] Scharffs, *Mormonism in Germany*, 116.
- [45] Ernst, *Highlights*, 19 August 1945.
- [46] Artur Schwiermann, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University, 43–44.
- [47] Ferrel Bybee, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University, 21–22.
- [48] Julian C. Lowe, Saints at War Collection, Brigham Young University, 181–182.
- [49] *Deseret News 2001–2002 Church Almanac* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 2000), 329.