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The Rhine in German Military Outlooks:

1918-1945

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the Department of History

Idaho State University

Spring 2019

Committee Approval

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Acknowledgements

I dedicate this to my grandfather who fought in the Second World War and gave me the desire to look further into his history surrounding the war after he had passed. I was unable to get many stories from him while he was still alive, but through his inspiration I started this project as a way of understanding what was going on around him when he arrived in France in 1945. It is because of my study into his past and the Second World War that I feel closer with my grandfather now than ever before. I am forever grateful for his service. I also thank him for the love of history.

I also want to thank my parents, for being my unchanging support throughout my time in school. They were able to push me towards graduate school, and help me believe that I was capable of anything I put my mind to. They are my constant rocks, and I'm so grateful for the love and appreciation of the study of history that they instilled in me early in life.

Thanks to my parents, my grandpa, and various teachers and professors from high school and college, I was able to further my education in a field that I hold dear. As well as those who put up with me through my two toughest years of grad school, especially my fiancé, who sat beside me through many edits of this paper. Even when I didn't have any more belief in myself, he knew that there were bigger things on the horizon for me, and that I would make it through this part.

Thank you to all, this thesis is for and because of you.

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The Rhine in German Military Outlooks: 1918-1945

Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University (2019)

The Rhineland held great significance for the nations surrounding the territory and was a land that was fought over and used strategically by various powers. It was particularly contentious between 1918 and 1945, a time of intense warfare and transition. This land was distinctly German at this time, and as the territory was occupied by Allied troops several times throughout this period, it was seen as a territory that needed to be protected. Examining the Rhineland following the Treaty of Versailles, through the interwar period to the ending of the Second World War, provides a view toward the significance of this land within the German nationalistic mindset.

Keywords:

World War I
World War II
Rhine River
Rhineland
Rhineland Bastards
Interwar Europe
Germany
Military History
Treaty of Versailles

Chapter 1: Introduction

The frontier of the Rhineland has existed since the sixteenth century, but it is not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the military significance of this land was greatly exposed. Within this time frame, the area was primarily viewed as one of contention between opposing powers, as both French and German nations sought to keep under the protection that this natural barrier provided during the hardships that ensued. This is the case surrounding the twentieth century, particularly when looking at the fallout of the First World War, as well as one of the final battles of the Second World War, when this land became a barrier, and a buffer zone for the Allies. As this land continued to survive as German homeland through both world wars, occupations, and other turmoil, its most significant history was shaped, bringing about a wider topic in which historians have studied. To bring this to a more manageable size, it is most important to look at this land in a military sense through the eyes of those Germans who lived to protect it. What significance did this land hold to the means of military strategy prior to the Second World War through to its end? In other words, how did this land prove to be of great significance to German and French military alike, and in what ways was there a show of protection towards this area from the German standpoint? The twentieth century provided the greatest military conflict in this land, as each side attempted to gain a leg up on the other by holding power in the Rhineland.

This thesis will lay out the significance of the Rhineland to the German military through an examination of the leaders, occupiers, civilians and soldiers who lived through this time. The first chapter provides a look at the occupied Rhineland area following the First World War and after the implementation of the articles in the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty stated that the Rhineland was to be occupied by Allied troops for as long as seen fit, or within a fifteen-year

time frame. It was also to be divided between French, British, American and Belgian troops, though seemingly the French proved to be the biggest threat as they viewed this time of occupation as a chance to minimize the control that Germany had west of the Rhine River.¹ As the stories of individuals who lived on this land come to light, as well as those who held the land captive, we receive a deeper understanding of what was happening on the occupied Rhineland in the 1920s. This chapter brings an introduction into the time of occupation and turmoil that occurred in this land for nearly the next thirty years. This contributes an explanation to the mindset that is seen in the 1930's, and how the German army sought to rise from their weakened and vulnerable state, as seen as a fallout of the First World War.

Many historians of the interwar period view the Rhineland as a contested landscape, a liminal place where French and German interests collided. Within the interwar period, scholars tell the story of the occupied territory, mainly through the viewpoint of those who are leading the occupation, the Allies. Many scholars of this period look at this land through the eyes of France. The contention is prevalent throughout sources between these two great powers and what should happen with this land following the First World War. Robert McCrum dives into this idea with his article "French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," where he explores the position of French leaders following World War One as they attempted to gain full access of this land. In this article, French Prime Minister Clemenceau explained that gaining control of the Rhineland in a military sense was nearly the only way to secure the security of France.² The other Allies were to keep France in check at this point, as the French tried to enforce stipulations in the treaty that the Rhine would ultimately be handed over to them, as a means of victory, but also as a means of protection. This article follows many other scholars of the time who seek to

¹ Robert McCrum, "French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," *The Historical Journal* 21, no. 03 (1978): 625.

² Robert McCrum, "French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," 627.

understand the position this territory was in following the First World War. Peter Schöttler and Chris Turner examine it as an object of historical controversy, providing a broader history of this land and the importance it holds to both nations individually. This article also seeks to challenge images of the Rhineland and bring in new perspectives. Instead of creating this territory as of one nation over the other, it shows the way in which it has been pulled back and forth between East and West, and because of this has caused turmoil.³ This land proves to be most significant to all of Western Europe, especially during this time. As the entire thesis lays out, this area was used as one of protection, as well as a barrier to keep Germany at bay. The other Allied nations essentially used this as a buffer zone to ensure their safety from German military action throughout the twentieth century.

There is also a distinct focus throughout these works on the Rhineland Bastards, those who were conceived between colonial French soldiers and German women. This focus draws into the time that Hitler came to reign, showing how they suffered due to their impure blood. Robert Kestling, Michael C. Mbabuike and Julia Roos all examine the Rhineland Bastards in the terms of their significance and persecution around the Nazi Regime. Kestling in particular looks at the deeply rooted racism that existed in Germany and was further accelerated by the Nazi regime and what they sought to bring to the German nation.⁴ Julia Roos shows the debate that is prevalent surrounding these Rhineland Bastards, showing how by 1927 the “forced sterilization and deportation of mixed-race children was dropped,” around the same time that Germany officials begin taking on cases against the non German fathers of these children.⁵ This led to greater protection for these children and their German mothers. It also attributes to further hatred

³ Peter Schöttler, "The Rhine as an Object of Historical Controversy in the Inter-war Years. Towards a History of Frontier Mentalities," *History Workshop Journal* 39, no. 1 (1995): 14.

⁴ Robert W. Kestling, "Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note," 84.

⁵ Julia Roos, "Racist Hysteria to Pragmatic Rapprochement? The German Debate about Rhenish 'Occupation Children', 1920–30," 156.

towards the inferior fathers. At this time, it was seen that there was a sense of German resistance towards allowing the French to be included in the upbringing of these Rhineland Bastards.⁶ As examined in the second chapter, these children were used as a catalyst for furthering the Nazi ideology.

This leads into the second chapter, which shows how the Rhineland was viewed during Hitler's reign, 1933-1945, holding a strong focus on 1936. In 1936, he remilitarized the Rhine and took it back from the Allied nations who had been occupying it in the previous decade. Instead of looking towards another fight, French leaders decided against bringing in a military to fight Hitler's army. This was instead viewed as a means of prevention of further war amongst the nations, as Germany was able to take their territory back as their own, looking to protect it in any way. Looking at the way in which this territory was used in a military sense throughout the nation from a German perspective within the time of Hitler's reign, as well as examining the Rhineland occupants in a post occupied territory, brings in further influential accounts of how it was seen right before and in the beginning of the Second World War.

The final chapter looks at the Rhineland through the eyes of the soldiers, civilians, and those in power who witnessed one of the final pushes of the Second World War, with the crossing of the Rhine River in 1945. This crossing brought to a close the nearly thirty years of suffering that the people of this land had been through, as they got the opportunity to rebuild. It also paints the situation of the destroyed and defeated Rhineland cities, as they look towards a renewal of life compared to what this land had been through in the last thirty years. This chapter examines the importance of this crossing to not only German leaders, but civilians as well,

⁶ Julia Roos, "Racist Hysteria to Pragmatic Rapprochement? The German Debate about Rhenish 'Occupation Children', 1920-30," 165.

seeking to understand the strategic place this territory held. It shows the ability of the Germany that is left behind to come back from the turmoil to rebuild their society as a whole.

The Rhineland was of great importance to the ending of the Second World War. As such, it became a popular topic of study especially when looking at the final year of the war. Within the last forty years, many authors have retold the story of the crossing of the Rhine, attempting to view this important battle from different viewpoints. Ian Kershaw, in his book *The End*, attempted to find the reason for the loyalty of Germany for the continuation of this fight. Looking at the nation and amongst the leaders, he looked towards the idea of identity surrounding this area. By discovering what this land meant militarily to Germany, he is able to identify why there was a fight to continuously keep the Allied troops on the Western side of the Rhine. This continuation of fighting was seen as a way of preserving a land in which Germany held to high standards due to its important war industry during this time. This is an important aspect that many historians have come across throughout the years, but he also uses it as a way to explain the lack of morale in the country. As the Allies got closer to this border, there was a worry of what the crossing would bring, but also what it would take away from the German nation.

In 1945, and after, most informed accounts regarding the war surrounding this territory came primarily from the leaders in Germany. Though it has gotten better over time, it is still the case that many works written surrounding the leadership of Germany, as well as the Allies, were more widely released. As these books tell the stories of national leaders, they are often chosen to explore what occurred within wartime. For example, on the German side, Joseph Goebbels kept a journal speaking towards most aspects of the war, but of course spoke mainly towards propaganda, as he was Hitler's propaganda minister. He grows weary in his *Final Entries 1945*

as the war nears completion in March with the Rhine in the horizon of the Allies. He looks towards keeping a grasp on the population through the use of propaganda, effectively keeping most of them in the dark regarding the end of the war.

Within the last twenty years of works many individuals' stories, especially from the soldiers of war, have become even more accessible thanks to the plethora of online resources. The Library of Congress provides a lot of readily available material regarding German soldiers during wartime. Though often considered to be uninformed sources, they are much more valuable to understanding the importance of the landscape to those who fought, worked and lived in these environments. It's crucial in understanding how they viewed the territory of the Rhineland because one gets to hear from people of the front, as a way to understand how significant this land was to the German troops. Works such as Stephen Fritz's *Frontsoldaten*, brings to light stories of the average soldier on the front during the Second World War. This book was published in 1995, fifty years after the war had ended. It brought individual soldiers stories into the history of the war. Regarding World War II, this can be seen as one of the biggest progressions within literature. The story is no longer simply of the leaders, but now forms a complete story to help in the total understanding of the significance of the environment especially when studying the art of war.

Looking at the scholars who have examined the Rhineland, there is an obvious separation of insight into individual events that took place in the twentieth century. Most scholars look to narrow down the scope of time to a particular time period in which an event occurred, such as the final year of the Second World War, with the Crossing of the Rhine, or the situation of this land following the agreement in the Treaty of Versailles. By pulling this 30-year gap into one study, it makes it clearer to identify the importance of this territory to the German people and

why this became even more prevalent within this time period. This helps in identifying the factors that lead to an understanding of how significant the Rhineland was surrounding the time of war and turmoil. By looking at the biggest military conflicts of the twentieth century, this creates a picture of how this land was utilized in more of a strategic sense.

One historian, David Blackbourn, pulls together a wider history of Germany through an environmental lens. He states, “all history is the history of unintended consequences, but that is especially true when we are trying to untangle humanity’s relationship with the natural environment.”⁷ To understand the importance of this territory to the German nation, it is best to look at it from a wider point of view. In 2006, Blackbourn specifically looked at the development of modern Germany through an environmental point of view, showing how the environment forged the path for different actions to occur. From the destruction of World War I, to the fall of Nazi Germany after the Second World War, *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape, and the Making of Modern Germany* provides insight into the importance of the development of the Rhine to Germany. It strives to show how this river, and other environments in Germany, can explain the position that this country was in during the tough times of the twentieth century.

Blackbourn can be seen as one of the most useful resources when studying the environment in the context of the history of Germany. He pushed past borders that surrounded this idea of environmental history and helped create a new vision of how to study a land’s history with the help of other studies. The two most significant studies are that between environmental and military history. For example, he dives back into the French Revolution time period and shows how instead of using the word ‘conquest’ when speaking of annexations, the Rhine at this time could be seen as a natural frontier.⁸ This was a way of displaying this territory in more of a

⁷ Neal Ascherson, “Imagined Soil,” *London Review of Books* 28, no. 4 (2006).

⁸ David Blackbourn, *The Conquest of Nature*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 95.

peaceful tone, and using it as protection. This continues into the twentieth century and the situation of Germany and France regarding the use of the Rhine as a natural barrier.

The works surrounding this landscape have been numerous, but many look towards one particular aspect to tell a story. It is important to understand that combining these different perspectives, gives a full understanding of the topic at hand. By presenting this river as part of the military identity to the German people, the actions surrounding the twentieth century can be further explained. This is possible by looking through the works of the past century. Through the eyes of soldiers and civilians who lived and fought for the Rhineland it is shown how the last fifty years have presented this river as more important than ever before.

Chapter 2: Demilitarization and Occupation of German Land

Introduction

In 1918, an Armistice ended the fighting of the First World War. It brought devastation to the world through its totality as well as the effects it had on nations directly involved in the front lands. This left many nations in economic stress, and searching for someone to blame. The victors of the war looked for a solution to assure that destruction and death to that degree would never happen again. Therefore, by placing the blame entirely on Germany, there could be terms set in place to make them pay for what happened. In 1919 the victors assembled at Versailles to figure out the specific consequences of those that were to blame. Through this, the Allied representatives were able to devastate the German nation further by demanding reparation payments, and threatening them with further occupation if this did not occur. Following this agreement, the Rhineland was to be occupied by a period of fifteen years after the First World War.

The terms regarding the Rhineland had one of the biggest blows to Germany, as the victors made this more of a personal action by intruding on their land and taking control. It was then used as a buffer zone between France and Germany. As the stories of individuals who lived on this land came to light, as well as those who held the land captive, there becomes a deeper understanding of what was happening on the occupied Rhineland in the 1920s. This chapter examines the territory following the First World War after the implementation of the articles of the Treaty of Versailles, by showing this time of occupation and the intrusiveness that occurred for nearly the next thirty years. Through this, Germany falls down the ladder of power amongst the biggest nations in the world. This action proved to be demoralizing, especially when looking at the colonial troops that were sanctioned there. This ultimately pushed German leaders to prove

their dominance over this land, and reinsert themselves back into the world powers. In order to accomplish this, it was shown that they must regain control of this significant military territory. Therefore the growth of the Rhine and its significance to nations came during the period where France and Germany fought the most over its ownership, both attempting to gain control. This piece of land was used strategically by both the Allies and Germans in the military conflicts of this time, and proved to be a territory that was protected under the German wing, as it came to be a territory that separated the enemies through a natural landscape with the river. Due to this, it is easier to understand why there was such controversy, as each nation provided their reasons for holding claim to the Rhine.

Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles was put under the authority of the League of Nations, which was created under the umbrella of the victors of the First World War. Following the war, German officials themselves sought to become a part of the League of Nations, as a way of showing their cooperation with the victors of the war. This was a feat they were able to accomplish by 1926. This was a huge stepping-stone for Germany at this time, as they tried to once again become a part of the international world. This action was shown as an opportunity to appeal to the Allies following the bad nature that came from the First World War. In all, Germany's efforts to join the League of Nations in the 1920s was shown as a way of complying with the terms the Treaty laid out.

Overall the Treaty left the German nation in debt and holding nearly sole responsibility for the causation of the First World War. The victorious nations came together to decide the ways in which to settle the war, as well as place punishment on Germany to deter any further violent actions. Though many of the Treaty's terms were considered to be substantial, the

demilitarization of the Rhineland and subsequent occupation of this land was one that held a long lasting effect, as there was not only an intrusion into German territory, but also that German rule did not have the final say in the Rhine. Ultimately, they lost their command and control. They were forbidden from providing the area with the protection that it needed through the use of troops. According to the Treaty, the German army was to be significantly reduced and was therefore limited to: “7 divisions of infantry, 3 divisions of cavalry with a total of 100,000 men, of whom not more than 4,000 might be officers.”⁹ Along with this, they were also forbidden to have naval or military air forces.¹⁰

In terms of the territory which was to be completely demilitarized, the Treaty stated that German forces were “forbidden to maintain or construct any fortifications either on the left bank of the Rhine or on the right bank to the west of a line drawn 50 km to the East of the Rhine.”¹¹ The territory was then divided into sections between French, British, American and Belgian troops. As it was, the French proved to be the biggest threat to this land as this time of occupation was seen as a chance to minimize the control that Germany had west of the Rhine by forbidding military action there, and in turn beginning to produce more of a French Rhineland, controlled by Allied military.¹² Each of these zones that carried out the occupation were “committed to the separation of the left bank from Germany,” but not all were working with the same commitment as France.¹³ Regardless, the Allies were all working together in an attempt to punish the German people through occupation, which in turn forced Rhinelanders under direct Allied control. In all, this agreement showed that Germany lost 13 percent of its territory and

⁹ James Edward Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland: 1918-1929*, (London: H.M.S.O., 1987), 183.

¹⁰ Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland: 1918-1929*, 184.

¹¹ “Treaty of Peace with Germany (Treaty of Versailles),” Accessed January 15, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000002-0043.pdf>.

¹² McCrum, “French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919,” 627.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 628.

thus a tenth of its population.¹⁴ Alsace-Lorraine in the west was given back to France, after living for nearly half a century under German law, and thus 200,000 to 300,000 ethnically German people were either forced out of this land or left willingly when it changed hands.¹⁵ When combining this with the temporary loss of the Rhineland, there was a crucial blow to Germany's landholdings following the First World War.

The Treaty of Versailles outlined that the Rhineland was to be occupied by Allied troops for as long as seen fit within a fifteen-year time frame. These specific terms were important to the structure of the entire agreement because it was not just merely about the space that was to be occupied, but also outlined the amount of time the Allies were permitted to hold power in this territory. This fifteen-year gap was a significant move to make regarding the Treaty and power of the Rhineland as the movement by the Allied troops proved not to be a takeover nor an imperialistic decision, but instead it was merely for the purpose of staying true to what the treaty laid out. In the strategic sense, this occupation created a buffer zone between countries, which was a way of guaranteeing French security. If German forces were to act in a violent matter and attempt to remilitarize the territory, the Allies were given the authority to take up this land once again for the good of the Rhine's neighboring nations. German officials were unable to take back full control of this land without the permission of the Allies. The Treaty of Versailles's terms of the Rhineland was one of the most influential turning points in the history of this territory in the twentieth century, and displays why the German people came along to lay claim to it once again prior to the Second World War, as well as protect it during some of the most crucial battles in the years to come.

¹⁴ Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 200.

¹⁵ Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*, 200.

The Rhineland occupation was further approved when Germany fell behind on their reparation payments. Allied leaders David Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson were against any occupation on the left bank of the Rhine, “except for a short occupation as a provisional guarantee for payment of the German debt.”¹⁶ This did not fully settle well with Georges Clemenceau, prime minister of France, though he decided to accept these terms in hopes of later reevaluating the fate of the Rhineland. Despite some ill feelings from both the Allies and Germany, all the terms of the treaty were drafted and given to Germany on May 7, 1919, thus putting into place the time of occupation.¹⁷

Occupation

There was a desire for a more peaceful society following the First World War with the destructiveness that war ultimately brought to the entire world. When the Allies took over the Rhineland, many German citizens were disheartened, perceiving the toll that this occupation would take on them and the industrial society they lived around. Personal liberty was also something that many Rhinelanders lost in this time, as soldiers overtook their lives. Overall, “measures were taken to considerably curb the freedom of movement, association and expression of inhabitants; the threat of execution was brandished over potential offenders – and hostages.”¹⁸ The German people were deprived of some fundamental rights through this intrusion by the Allied nations. Marshal Foch, in charge of the Rhineland occupation, sought to gather information from the Allies on how much this occupation would ultimately cost. These included “the total effectives (officers, men, horses)...the daily average cost of maintenance per

¹⁶ McCrum, "French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," 635.

¹⁷ Ibid., 636.

¹⁸ Anne Godfroid, "Occupation after the war (Belgium and France)," *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, Last Modified 18 September 2015, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918online.net/article/occupation_after_the_war_belgium_and_france, 3.

officer...and the general cost of transport.”¹⁹ He then added this up and imposed it on the German representatives, giving a short timeline of when the payments should be handed over to the Allies. Therefore they were not only expected to find a place for all these incoming soldiers, but they were also forced to pay for the overall maintenance of each soldier, despite the ability to protect themselves against the incoming men.

The influx of people into this land created problems such as not having enough room for the soldiers, whether in dwellings or kitchens, which brought up a fear for the amount of food needed to keep up with everyone in the Rhineland, including these soldiers. “Public buildings were further requisitioned and outfitted to palliate the lack of accommodation.”²⁰ Along with this, German authorities were required to pay for the construction of additional buildings that were needed to house the extra soldiers.²¹ Due to the close quarters, there was also a constant risk and concern for disputes between the occupying forces and those who inhabited the land.²² For example, almost monthly there were disputes attributed to drunken soldiers mistreating otherwise peaceful German citizens.²³ The psychological toll of occupation can be seen as quite detrimental to the morale of those living in the Rhineland during this time, especially as the ability to protect their land was stripped from them.²⁴ They were left with foreign troops as their defense, as the German military was forbidden to remilitarize.

This toll of having one’s land overtaken by one of their greatest enemies came to head at this point, and many German citizens rebelled against most ideas that were French because of their loyalty to their own nation. French soldiers were therefore often portrayed as the worst

¹⁹ Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland: 1918-1929*, 52-53.

²⁰ Godfroid, “Occupation after the war (Belgium and France),” 4.

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² Wilhelm Marx, “The Rhineland Occupation,” *Foreign Affairs* 7, no. 2 (1929): 199.

²³ Marx, “The Rhineland Occupation,” 199.

²⁴ Michael C. Mbabuike, and Anna Marie Evans, “Other Victims of the Holocaust,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 25, no. 1 (2000): 12.

enemy and occupiers of the Rhineland in the 1920s due to their extreme intrusiveness towards the German people.²⁵ They sought to make the occupants of the Rhineland come around to being more French than German, as this was seen as a way of obtaining control of this territory. It was during this time, that there was an opportunity to create more of a pro-French environment to the west of the Rhine. The French soldiers wanted to “awaken a sympathy for Latin art and culture.”²⁶ Therefore artists were also enlisted to perform at the Wiesbaden Opera House.²⁷ They attempted to bring in their own identity to this territory, changing and combining with the makeup of the German society that was already established there. Some French leaders sought to create a sort of bond between the occupiers and the inhabitants, which would then strengthen the ties between these two enemies. This occupation was by no means a malicious action against German citizens, but simply used as a way of ensuring the Treaty of Versailles was withheld.

Regardless, this show of friendliness had little to no effect on the Rhineland occupants, as many were not pro-French. These German citizens often did as they wanted despite authority, and formed rebellions against the enemy troops. Despite some of the troops attempting to sway them other ways, there were still many events that were done in an anti-French manner. For example, in 1925, citizens of this land went so far as to celebrate the supposed “Rhineland millennium” as a German land with an anti-French festival, showing their deeper discouragement with the situation.²⁸ These “rheinische Jahrtausendfeier,” or “millennium celebrations” were seen as reaffirming the German-ness of the region, and those who lived in the area, as well as removing the boundary between the two banks that were caused by occupation.²⁹

²⁵ McCrum, "French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," 635.

²⁶ B.T. Reynolds, "A Review of the Occupation of the Rhineland," *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, no. 3 (1928): 200.

²⁷ Reynolds, "A Review of the Occupation of the Rhineland," 202.

²⁸ Schöttler, "The Rhine as an Object of Historical Controversy in the Inter-war Years. Towards a History of Frontier Mentalities," 8.

²⁹ Godfroid, "Occupation after the war (Belgium and France)," 7.

The Inter-Allied Rhineland High Commission was a body of representatives from France, Britain and Belgium, who were in charge of the Rhineland and served as the “supreme authority.”³⁰ This commission was put into affect in January 1920, where they took control of the Rhineland for the first time, leaving the German leaders with little to no authority. “The Commission was put in place for securing the maintenance, safety and requirements of the Allied and Associated Forces.”³¹ It was significant in that it helped keep both sides safe and under the same law. In slight contradiction, the right was also given to the Allied Commission to “pardon an offender or commute or reduce any sentence imposed by a German court; to supervise German prisons; and to designate the prison in which a sentence shall be served.”³² Though the German power was still permitted in the Rhineland, the Commission was able to override many of their rulings as they saw fit. This once again fits in with the idea of humiliation, as the German command lost all control compared to the Rhineland Commission who held the upmost power. Though their job was to make sure this occupation went through without too much conflict, the Commission did not often interfere much in the day-to-day life, nor the problems that came from the variety of nations that occupied this territory. Instead, they merely oversaw that the occupation was taking place and that the terms of the treaty were being followed. They were not viewed as an authority that would punish anyone for the abuse of people or soldiers. Under the terms of the treaty, the German authorities “were obliged under penalty of removal to conform to the ordinances issued by the High Commission.”³³ They were no longer able to hold control over their own territory, but instead forced to go through other nations when it came to any political measures that may be taken during the time of occupation. It is because of this that the spirit of

³⁰ Reynolds, "A Review of the Occupation of the Rhineland," 201.

³¹ Robert E. Ireton, “The Rhineland Commission at Work,” *The American Journal of International Law* 17, no. 3 (1923): doi:10.2307/2187897, 462.

³² Ireton, “The Rhineland Commission at Work,” 463.

³³ Llewellyn F. Jones, “Military Occupation of Alien Territory in Time of Peace,” 152.

compromise was nearly extinguished among those of the Rhineland, as they were doing all they could to get back in the good graces of the Allies through their cooperation with the treaty agreements.

Though the land was taken over and blockaded by the Allies, food and other necessities of life were allowed to get through. This was seen as a way to keep the Rhinelander's content while the occupation took place around them. The railways that kept the Rhineland going as an industrial territory continued to be used for the trading of goods outside of the occupied territory. The pain of occupation took more of a form in the psychological mindset, rather than physical, as they were overall treated as human beings when it came to basic necessities. The psychological pain came from this huge loss sustained in the First World War and the way in which they were made to suffer economically and through occupation, as well as the inability to provide their own protection within their land. This came through the land invasion by the enemy and having to answer to the Allies, even when the occupying soldiers were from colonial conquests, where many Germans considered being of low standings in society.

In 1921, there were 138,500 soldiers that occupied the whole of the Rhineland, split between the four separate nations. In December 1923, this number rose to its peak of 163,000 men.³⁴ It was overwhelming for the German citizens to put up with these circumstances for over ten years following the ending of the First World War, as they were directed to stay in the occupied territory for this period of time, whereas the Allied occupiers were permitted to go where they needed.³⁵ It was strictly written: "no civilians will be allowed to pass from occupied to unoccupied territory or vice versa."³⁶ There were also rules against telephone usage between

³⁴ Marx, "The Rhineland Occupation," 200.

³⁵ Ireton, "The Rhineland Commission at Work," 467.

³⁶ Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland: 1918-1929*, 63.

occupied and unoccupied Germany.³⁷ This outlined the rights that were taken away as far as communication and interaction with members of unoccupied Germany. This was even more hurtful to the Rhinelanders, as they were cut off from their homeland, and their communications with people in unoccupied Germany were either censored or stopped altogether during this time. Along with this, German residents of this land were also required to carry identity cards with them at all times, which was seen as a means of separating the various groups throughout the land.

As the Treaty of Versailles outlined “if before the expiration of the period of fifteen years Germany complies with all the undertakings resulting from the present Treaty, the occupying forces will be withdrawn immediately.”³⁸ Even so, many soldiers remained past their time, causing grief amongst the representatives of Germany. This continuation of occupation was thought of as a violation of the treaty itself from the eyes of those who continued to live with these soldiers on their territory. This brings about further resentment pertaining to this situation and the effect that it held on individual citizens.

France and the Rhineland

Despite the distressing situation of German citizens during this time, the period directly following the First World War was a time of hope for France. The hope was to close or minimize the natural gap that the Rhine created between France and Germany. As discussed, this became reality as the western side of the Rhineland fell under the occupation of the French. Therefore, following the First World War, the French leaders look towards the opportunity to take control of a region in which they felt they should be entitled to. This territory was right on the border of the two nations and was seen as great for industry, trade and even protection. This is why the terms

³⁷ Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland: 1918-1929*, 63.

³⁸ Marx, “The Rhineland Occupation,” 201.

in the Treaty of Versailles were seen as a step in the right direction for France. By gaining control of this land, they could declare themselves as one of the greatest world powers of the interwar period and beyond.

Following the end of the war, Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France, remained quiet in regards to the question of what would happen on the Rhineland. This provides for an ambiguous interpretation of what was going through the minds of those in power in France at this time, as they were searching to find a settlement that would prove to be fair and most useful to the nations surrounding it. Unlike Clemenceau, French President Poincare was more in favor of a limited occupation to guarantee reparation payments, rather than the takeover of land that Clemenceau was looking towards.³⁹ Poincare aligned himself more with Marshall Foch, who was commander in chief of the Allied armies of occupation, and in charge of the advancement of troops as well as where they were stationed in the Rhineland territory.⁴⁰ Through these three major characters of the occupation era, it was shown how there was a split of understanding on what should happen with the Rhineland following the First World War.

In the midst of the peace treaty negotiations, French leaders had asked Foch how they could assure the security of their homeland. To this Foch reportedly said: "You must have the Rhine frontier, that river settles everything."⁴¹ This therefore became the ultimate goal in regards to the policy made around this land. As it was, the French were not given the Rhine in its totality; instead they merely occupied it for a short time. The rest of the Allies assured French security by providing backup if the Germans ever tried to attack or remilitarize. Though overall, following the occupation, the French were left to fend for themselves.

³⁹ McCrum, "French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919," 625.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 625.

⁴¹ Harold Nicolson, "Germany and the Rhineland," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1931-1939)* no. 6 (1936): 8.

Prior to the official release of the terms of the treaty, there were many people who assumed that the Rhineland belonged to the French following the war, as a gift of victory.⁴² The French leaders were not clear on their precise hope for this land. Many powerful characters within France could not ultimately show their desire to obtain this land under their full control at the very beginning of the peace talks, meaning they had to sit back and wait for the right moment to bring up their proposed policies. As it was, the land was left to the fate of the Paris Peace Conference, widening the influence of countries from simply French officials getting what they wished for, and instead providing a fair decision on the fate of what was to become of this land, as well as assuring a fair punishment for Germany.

In 1923, after Germany had fallen behind on their reparation payments, the French sent soldiers into the Rhineland to occupy and seize needed German resources, causing further problems.⁴³ Through this action by Allied forces, there was a chance to overpower laws that were in place regarding trade along the Rhine. Following the First World War, many resources were very low or even depleted throughout the nations. There was a system in place in Germany to control the goods that were allowed in and out of the Rhineland. The occupying forces sought to change these rules and restrictions so that they could more easily get goods to their occupying soldiers. There was a lift on the restrictions that limited imports and exports during occupation.⁴⁴ A British official had noted that the occupied territory was regarded as a part of France and Belgium when it came to trade.⁴⁵ He also remarked: "We dealt with the situation as if the Rhine was the frontier of these countries and we suspended practically all laws that restricted the free

⁴² Reynolds, "A Review of the Occupation of the Rhineland," 198.

⁴³ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18.

⁴⁴ Ireton, "The Rhineland Commission at Work," 464.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 464.

movement of goods into or out of the occupied territory.”⁴⁶ This was shown as an opportunity for the occupying forces. It provided a chance for an expansion of the trade route within the Rhineland, which could in turn prove quite useful to France as well as Belgium due to their proximity.

In particular, bribery with money and goods was shown as a useful tool in creating a pro-French society amongst the Rhinelander’s, as French troops took hold of the great resources that the Rhine produced. By strengthening the ties between France and the Rhineland, they would have been further able to get a leg up on laying their claim to the territory. This action was more useful to France over the rest of the Allies, as it meant they would have greater access to this grand river that was known for its transport of goods, making trade to other nations even easier. The other Allies were therefore put in place to keep the French in check. Despite the other nations shooting down their proposals, they fought for the right to control this territory for good, as a way of having military advantage over the German army.

There were three major advantages when it came to talk of the Rhineland’s separation from Germany. It would be seen as a way to “diminish Germany’s superiority in population...establish a buffer zone between the two countries and render impossible a German concentration of troops west of the Rhine.”⁴⁷ The last two actions would prove to have the greatest effect for the majority of the Allied nations. Through the creation of a buffer zone, power was given to the Allies on the West of the Rhine, with stronger forces. This also split the river and territory in two, which made it impossible for Germany to have military access on both sides of the Rhine at one time. These three actions were not simply with France in mind, but proved useful to the whole of the Allies, as Germany grew weaker with the loss of land and

⁴⁶ Ireton, “The Rhineland Commission at Work,” 464.

⁴⁷ McCrum, “French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919,” 623.

occupation, as well as the constraints on the full use of their great resources along this river as well.

There were a lot of contradictions within this treaty on what it was hoping to accomplish. On many accounts there was simply the hope of stopping Germans from acting out further towards the countries around them, attempting to stop the threat of violence and further war. It was also seen as a manipulative way of separating this part of Germany from the German people altogether. They were still seen as a part of the nation, but did not have the direct access that they had had prior to occupation. There was no German military access in this territory, which meant that they were unable to provide it with the protection needed following the destruction of the First World War.

Ultimately, the French used this occupation of the Rhine as a means of protection. By gaining access to this land, they would have control of the western side of the Rhine, creating a blockade through which the Germans would have trouble getting through. Through this they were able to use the Rhine River as a natural barrier between them and their enemy force of Germany. This natural barrier that both sides used within this thirty-year time frame brought to light the reason for the importance of this land to both France and Germany.

End of Allied Occupation

Allies occupied this land for most of the 1920's, with some nations staying into the mid 1930's, but the majority were out before 1935. This was seen as a way to humiliate Germany further, following their loss in the First World War, as well as deter them from starting a war again. In 1930, the Allies had withdrawn their "rump occupation forces ahead of schedule in an effort to minimize German ill will."⁴⁸ This evacuation of troops was done with a leap of good

⁴⁸ Stephen A. Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936," *French Historical Studies* 14, no. 3 (1986): 302.

faith towards Germany. The Locarno Treaty of 1925 was still held in place, with the Rhineland held to it. This determined that Germany was still unable to remilitarize this land, even after the mass majority of the troops had left.

The Allies began their evacuation of the Rhineland in September of 1929, with the specific terms set in place that they were able to reoccupy it at any time if the German army looked towards another war or violation through remilitarization. This initial end to occupation of this land contributes to our understanding of the next moves made by Germany, as well as the lack of movement by the Allied nation of France. When this land was left open for the first time in the Interwar period, it gave opportunity to German leaders to take back their strategically significant territory, despite the violation of the treaties that the action would bring. As it was freed from Allied control, the fight over this lands heritage seemed to end. Through the Allies evacuation, there was a trust placed on the German army to stay out and keep a peace that had been signed into law in 1919.

Conclusion

The Rhineland following the Treaty of Versailles was an arena of contention for the German and French nations. When Germany was blamed for the war through the War Guilt Clause and then disciplined with terms that took form throughout the treaty, there was a chance for hope amongst the French leaders. This territory was quite useful for transport and industry, which would have greatly increased the position of France and decreased that of Germany. The Rhine was of great importance to the German military in that it provided a natural border between them and any intruding nations. This meant that the occupation was even more detrimental, as they were unable to provide protection to their nation as they had done previously.

The Allies versus Germany situation was continuously gaining resentment and frustration over the position that Germany was placed in following the First World War. This resentment was carried through the interwar period and into the reign of Hitler and his regime, fueling his next move to reclaim and remilitarize the Rhineland and prove Germany's place amongst the world powers.

Chapter 3: Remilitarization and Hitler's Rhine

Introduction

As was explored throughout chapter one, the Treaty of Versailles demilitarized the Rhineland for a minimum of fifteen years following the First World War. Then in 1925, the Treaty of Locarno laid out further terms that the Rhine was to be permanently demilitarized. Both of these documents sought to create a permanent buffer between the Allies and Germany. Following the occupation of this land for nearly a decade, there was an evacuation of Allied troops prior to the fulfillment of the allotted time, between 1929 and 1935. This was seen as a way of extending trust towards Germany to not remilitarize and therefore avoiding further bloodshed.⁴⁹ Despite this, following the exit of the last troops in 1935, there was still a significant amount of humiliation for the occupation endured. There was a need to reassert themselves as a legitimate nation once again after the punishment that occurred following the First World War. The German army took this one step at a time, starting out by taking back the Rhineland. Therefore, despite the terms of the Treaty of Locarno and the Treaty of Versailles, German soldiers marched into the Rhineland on March 7, 1936.

The question that ultimately derives from this is why did Hitler decide to attempt this with lesser and weakened troops, knowing full well the strength and power of the Allies? Alternatively, why did the Allies choose the policy of appeasement rather than that of military action? Through the German military leaders of the interwar, it can be shown why Hitler took such a large risk and how this was a stepping-stone towards a pure German society housed in the Rhineland. Through the Allied eyes the policy of appeasement was an action made in the hopes of curbing further war and bloodshed, looking to appeal to Hitler by providing him the opportunity to once again have control of the Rhine.

⁴⁹ Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936," 302.

Along with the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, another important factor to focus on under the rule of Hitler is that of the Rhineland Bastards. Prior to the Nazi party, there was deeply rooted racism in Germany, going back to the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ This racism was in regards to different, non-German races residing in the country, which held a particular prejudice against blacks. "Europeans persecuted such groups as Jews and Gypsies...they also enslaved Blacks for hundreds of years, long before Hitler and his party developed its racist ideology."⁵¹ It is because of this racism, and that which the Nazi party accelerated, that the Rhineland Bastards were viewed as outsiders, as well as cultural deviants, tainting the pure German race. They came from impure blood due to the ethnicities of their fathers. Prior to and within the Second World War, these people came in contact with segregation and persecution. This discrimination moved further and pushed towards blaming the occupying nations for bringing impurity to Germany. Arguably, the black horror demonstrates the 'dark side' of interwar foreign- policy discussions that were centered on themes of women's sexual vulnerability.⁵² The idea of impure races taking control in the Rhineland in the 1920s and 1930s helped to fuel the decision to remilitarize the land, to bring it back under a pure German race. The Rhineland Bastards as a whole were used as a means of accelerating the Nazi ideology, bringing members of society under its umbrella in hopes of eliminating the threat of sub human beings.

Remilitarization of the Rhine, 1936

German troops had every reason to avoid remilitarization of the Rhineland so quickly after the evacuation of foreign troops in 1936. The death toll from the First World War had hit the world hard, and it continued to be in a weakened state. Though both weak, the French army

⁵⁰ Robert W. Kestling, "Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note," 85.

⁵¹ Mbabuike, and Evans, "Other Victims of the Holocaust," 11.

⁵² Julia Roos, "Racist Hysteria to Pragmatic Rapprochement? The German Debate about Rhenish 'Occupation Children', 1920-30," 178.

had the numbers that the German troops could not match up to. Regardless, the German military moved towards the Rhineland with vigor, even with knowing that they may be faced with a foreboding enemy and defeated immediately.⁵³ German soldiers were under orders to fight if France brought their army against them rather than withdraw from the territory. This has become a concept of some confusion, as different sources throughout this time period have countering arguments. Ultimately there was truth found in the order that General von Fritsch gave on March 3, 1936.⁵⁴ It stated: “the concentration orders and war directives for war in the west remain in effect...The troops transferred into the areas west of the Rhine on the issue of the order ‘Action in the West’ or in the case of a sudden hostile violation of the frontier.”⁵⁵ The word “war” was outlined throughout these orders, as the German army prepared for the worst, expecting retaliation from the Allied troops. German troops were even directed to put up resistance zones in the West, as had already been established in the East.⁵⁶ This can be seen as part of the German mentality headed into the Second World War, that there was no fight worth backing down from, even if destruction came from their actions. Though Germany had compromised in the 1920s by enduring occupation, this remilitarization was seemingly shown as an acceptance of another battle, if not war. By giving the order to fight back against the French if needed, the Reich government in turn accepted the fact that their armed forces must be prepared for war as they headed into the Rhineland.⁵⁷ German soldiers had to do whatever it took to delay any French offensive along the Rhine.

⁵³ Zach Shore, "Hitler, Intelligence and the Decision to Remilitarize the Rhine," *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 1 (1999): 9.

⁵⁴ Donald Cameron Watt, "German Plans for the Reoccupation of the Rhineland: A Note," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 4 (1966): 194.

⁵⁵ Watt, "German Plans for the Reoccupation of the Rhineland: A Note," 195.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

Hitler felt the weakness of the Allies as he “employed his intuition and instinctively sensed the democracies’ reluctance to act,” while his generals relied more on the strength and numbers of French troops.⁵⁸ Hitler’s chief interpreter, Paul Otto Schmidt, and Constantin Freiherr von Neurath, the German foreign minister, assured Hitler of French weakness and in turn became the two biggest promoters for remilitarization.⁵⁹ Neurath consistently urged Hitler forward with his plan to march back into the Rhineland, even if it put his own position amongst Hitler’s highest officials at risk.⁶⁰ He was able to gain evidence from fellow foreign ministers that led him to the belief that there would be no retaliation were the German army to attempt a takeover of the land. Neurath believed in the information he had collected amongst his peers, trusting in the weakness of the Allied troops regarding their unwillingness to attack. Based on the information from his trusted confidants, as well as his own intuition, Hitler made the decision to enter the Rhineland in 1936, a decision that would change the attitude of the interwar period. Had this action gone wrong, Neurath would have faced a weakened credibility and his dismissal as foreign minister would have been imminent.⁶¹

Overall, this action was a violation of both the Treaty of Locarno and the Treaty of Versailles, which had outlined that German troops were not to be allowed back into this land within the time frame set. Interestingly enough, the Minister of War in December 1919 had spoken to a member of the Military Inter-Allied Commissions of Control and stated, “we signed the Peace Treaty knowing we could never fulfill the terms and believing no nation would ever expect us to do so.”⁶² Some members of German command following the First World War felt that there were too many terms in the Treaty of Versailles and that Germany would never be

⁵⁸ Shore, "Hitler, Intelligence and the Decision to Remilitarize the Rhine," 5.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁶¹ Ibid., 13.

⁶² Edmonds, *The Occupation of the Rhineland: 1918-1929*, 185.

expected to fulfill every aspect. Furthermore, the Allies had put terms in place that they were able to reoccupy this land if they saw a need or to counterattack any German fight. This held to the idea of the Allies prominence in this territory even after the final evacuation of the troops in 1935. For the safety of other Allied nations, there were still terms to keep the Germans at bay. Despite this, Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland on March 7th, 1936.

Overall, this can be attributed to the action of appeasement, a prominent explanation for the actions that occurred in the late 1930s in regards to the German nation. The Allies saw this as a chance to appease Hitler, as they sought to avoid any more loss of life. It was concluded that if the Allies were to give him what he wanted with land, there might be a chance of stopping the desire for more war and conquering. This was not a thought that had full support of the Allies, as it became a worry that it would not effectively help in the further prevention of another war. French and British officials often argued over this decision to not fight in the Rhineland in 1936.⁶³ There were some, such as Albert Sarraut, the prime minister of France, who thought that it was more likely they could have stopped Hitler without a major conflict, had they resisted his remilitarization in March 1936.⁶⁴ This would ultimately have led to less disaster for France, as well as the entirety of the world. The French tragedy was the result “not of a failure of vision or logic or understanding, but the absence of will power, determination, and courage.”⁶⁵ The French officials were prepared to arm their troops for battle, but this was overturned through the League of Nations.⁶⁶ Overall, this policy of appeasement was thought of as one of the only ways to avoid engaging in another world war with Germany at the forefront, which was the main priority for the Allies. Therefore, remilitarization occurred.

⁶³ R.A.C. Parker, “The First Capitulation: France and the Rhineland Crisis of 1936,” *World Politics* 8, no. 3 (1956): 355.

⁶⁴ Parker, “The First Capitulation: France and the Rhineland Crisis of 1936,” 355.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 373.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 355.

Overall, the remilitarization of the Rhineland shows that the French ultimately had no desire to go back to war with Germany.⁶⁷ They hoped to eliminate any future bloodshed through this capitulation. Not only were they trying to appease the Germans, they were also hoping to create more unified international powers. Within this time period, the French were labeled as more of a pacifist race.⁶⁸ Though this cannot be held onto throughout the twentieth century, it does lend another reason for their lack of counter attack at the Rhineland in 1936. Looking at this idea from a contemporary view it is shown that “Hitler got away with undoing many of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles” and that his actions were not unreasonable as they corrected some of the injustices that Germany endured following the First World War.⁶⁹ This could provide another explanation for the lack of French movement as well.

Ultimately, Hitler hoped the French would do nothing, therefore giving him the full advantage of taking this land back. One historian, Donald Cameron Watt, stated that “to reoccupy the Rhineland was to score a walkover, and so it proved to be.”⁷⁰ Hitler could not have been stopped regardless if the Allies had confronted the German forces that came to overtake the land, because there was always another opportunity to take advantage of. It was not just for the French officials to decide to fight, but extended throughout the Allies on determining a way in which the German army could have been stopped. As the Allies were on different sides of the idea of appeasement or war, the reality was simply that Hitler was gearing up for a fight. Since the Allies did not have to face the reality of this fight, it is easy to see that there could have been a chance to stop Hitler and Germany at this point, though this is a fallacy. The Rhineland

⁶⁷ Nicolson, "Germany and the Rhineland," 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁹ Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*, 260.

⁷⁰ Watt, "German Plans for the Reoccupation of the Rhineland: A Note," 199.

remilitarization became an opportunity for the German nation to not only take back their land, but also reassert their dominance in the international powers.

Hitler stated that remilitarization was one of the most daring actions of the Interwar period, even more than the actions of the Second World War.⁷¹ Following their march into the Rhineland in 1936 he noted, “we had no army worth mentioning” yet were still willing to overtake this land, knowing the risks that came from a possible run in with the greater French army.⁷² Hitler sent a small group of soldiers into the Rhine. There were nineteen infantry battalions and thirteen artillery units, who then met up with 22,000 local police forces when they got to the territory, equaling out to around 36,500 men.⁷³ German troops were too few and weakened to go through a battle for the Rhineland. On the other side, French leaders were making the decision to put a limited amount of troops around this territory to not appear as hostiles, but to hold at a location in case there was a need for them in a larger capacity. Overall, the lack of conflict from France allowed for the remilitarization to occur smoothly and Germany was once again able to reclaim their territory under its nationalistic ideology. In the long run this remilitarization and fortification of the Rhineland by German soldiers would “rob France of credibility should it even threaten such a maneuver as a deterrent to German action elsewhere.”⁷⁴ The decision to stand down against Hitler’s army was seen as appeasement, but it also put France into a place of weakness against the German army. This may have fueled the German army even more.

⁷¹ Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936," 305.

⁷² Ibid., 305.

⁷³ Nicholas Henderson, “Hitler and the Rhineland, 1936: A Decisive Turning Point,” *History Today*, October 1992, 18.

⁷⁴ Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936," 303.

The Persecution of the *Rheinlandbastarde* (Rhineland Bastards)

Several Allied nations took control of the western Rhineland following the First World War, but many historians hold a significant focus on the French. One of the greatest impacts that came from French soldiers, in particular the colonial ones, were the “Rhineland Bastards.” These offspring came from colonial soldiers, often those of color, and German women who lived along the Rhine. Their importance to the make up of German society extended further, as they came to be seen as targets of segregation and persecution even before the racism of the Nazi Regime took hold of Germany, then once it did, it was able to fuel the Nazi ideology. These people were born and grew up in the Rhineland but by the time of the Second World War they were left without a home in France or Germany, as neither wanted to claim them as a part of their nation due to their mixed blood. By tainting the German race that existed in the Rhine with other blood, there was a society of people that were held to lower standards of living and persecuted by the Nazi party because of it.

Overall it is worth noting that around “55,000 black victims and prisoners of war were victimized by the Nazis.”⁷⁵ Though these statistics do not match up to that of the Jews or Gypsies, it is important to an overall understanding of the situation of the Rhineland Bastards and how they were targeted by the Nazis and treated as non-human elements. The title “Rhineland Bastard” itself served as yet another tool of humiliation, after all Germany endured following the First World War. They were so aptly named for the low place that they held in German society at this time. They were also termed as the “black shame,” lending the same definition, but creating an even more demeaning title surrounding these occupation children, and

⁷⁵ Kestling, "Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note," 84.

showing that they were unwelcome in German communities as they were considered to be a shameful race.⁷⁶

The discrimination against the Rhineland Bastards became even more prevalent during Hitler's reign as he sought a pure German society to inhabit the land. Those who were not of German blood were to be considered outsiders, and therefore were discriminated against. They were often sterilized so that they could not produce more offspring of impure blood. Rhineland Bastards were described as "so potent to the German identity that they were asked to be sterilized by the Bavarian Ministry of Interior."⁷⁷ They were foreigners in the land in which they were born, and then became a target of larger extinction. They originally started out as nomads in the Rhineland, left in the middle ground with their ethnicity and often mothered by poor German women.. When the Nazi Regime first took over, many Rhineland Bastards were unwelcome in any of the communities where their bloodline came from, namely Germany, France and Africa. They were either neglected or hunted down in the German and French regions, as the nations did not often claim them as their own due their impure origins. Overall, they were people who did not belong to any particular society, therefore lending to their nomadic title and tendencies.

The debate that is seen over these children of the occupation era highlights the "contradictory political potentials of the new international relations of sentiment emerging from World War I."⁷⁸ As it got closer to the Second World War and the Nazi Regime, these children were shown to be homeless, despite the German desire to be considered as a part of the international world. They would eventually move forward through their integration into the League of Nations, and then take a step back as they cast out members of society who did not fit

⁷⁶ Godfroid, "Occupation after the War (Belgium and France)," 5.

⁷⁷ Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory*, 79.

⁷⁸ Roos, "Racist Hysteria to Pragmatic Rapprochement? The German Debate about Rhenish 'Occupation Children', 1920–30," 179.

the Aryan mold. It was shown how France, between the period of 1920 to 1930, sought to care for these children, rather than completely abandoning them, but the unstable diplomatic relations between the two countries made this difficult. Regardless, France tried to help them receive social welfare for the state in which they were in, as they came from colonial soldiers and Rhenish mothers who were not able to care for them fully.⁷⁹

The racism that already existed throughout Germany prior to the twentieth century was strengthened when Allied nations put troops of African decent in charge of the Rhineland. This made it so that the “German hatred of Africa increased because the Africans who were once their servants were able to ally themselves with other groups of Europeans and became part of the occupying forces in Germany. This infuriated the Germans.”⁸⁰ These black troops were most unwelcome to citizens of the Rhineland. The Allies had gathered their colonial troops in order to have enough soldiers to occupy the Western side of the Rhine. Due to the prominent imperialism at this time in Europe, different races of people were coming from a variety of countries and were shown as superior over the Germans. Through the constant struggle for Africa prior to the First World War, many troops from this territory were involved in this occupation as well. This came to prove as yet another symbol of disgrace towards Germany, as they were placed lower than Africans whom were viewed for centuries as inferior. The controversy that came from the Rhineland Bastards accelerated German hatred against blacks in their country even further, and helped in bringing about the popularity of the Nazi Regime This stemmed from the ill feeling towards these soldiers. They were viewed as a constant remembrance of their loss of cultural territory, and the creation of wrong identities. Ultimately these soldiers were regarded as “non-human factors,” which meant that it was an appalling action to have them serve in a position of

⁷⁹ Roos, "Racist Hysteria to Pragmatic Rapprochement? The German Debate about Rhenish 'Occupation Children', 1920–30," 179.

⁸⁰ Mbabuike and Evans, "Other Victims of the Holocaust," 3.

such authority.⁸¹ This fueled the actions of 1936 even more, as Germany fought to gain back their land.

During the latter part of the 1920s German medical doctors often illegally sterilized Blacks.⁸² Though as time went on many doctors and German high authority saw that there was a need for sterilization to happen in more of a legal sense. In 1927, Governor Jolas of the Palatinate expressed concerns to the Berlin government about Black children reaching puberty, and pushed for a law that would allow for legal sterilization of these children to maintain the pure race.⁸³ Regardless of the fact that he knew this was something that would still be proved illegal, he pushed forward with it, hoping to gain some acceptance through the Nazi ideology. This ultimately failed, as some German officials at this time moved towards helping rather than harming the situation that the Rhineland Bastards were in. Shortly after this, the number of colored German children was to be calculated for the national leaders. Therefore, it became commonplace in the 1930s for German doctors to illegally sterilize those of African decent, and in turn Rhineland Bastards, in their attempt to stop them from passing on their inferior genes.⁸⁴ There were also instances when it was suggested that these children of color be shipped back their country of origin, primarily Africa. Some were under the opinion that these outside races, including the Rhineland Bastards, who were officially half-German but still considered outsiders, had “no right to continue the contamination” of their pure Aryan race.⁸⁵ Therefore, by implementing this sterilization they could control the situation of these other races and be assured that they would not pass on their outsider genes. “Extermination and sterilization of all

⁸¹ Mbabuike, and Evans, "Other Victims of the Holocaust," 7.

⁸² Ibid., 13.

⁸³ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 4.

Black German men and women was seen as the solution” towards accomplishing this idea of a pure German race, as everyone else was seen as inferior.⁸⁶

Joseph Goebbels, who would later become Hitler’s propaganda minister, had the same hatred of Jews as many of the high commands in Germany. In his earlier diaries he made references to how Jews were “filthy pigs, traitors and vampires.”⁸⁷ In *Mein Kampf*, with a deeper hatred for Jews and what they were bringing into German land, Hitler stated that “Jews had brought the Negroes into the Rhineland with a clear aim of ruining the hated white race.”⁸⁸ This goes beyond simply taking over land and goes into this idea that the Allies, and subsequently Jews came into this area with the intent of destroying the purity of race that was seen there. Coming back, it brings in multiple reasons as to why there was a need to remilitarize this territory in 1936. They sought to prove their nationalistic attitudes towards this land by reclaiming it, while also seeking to rid it of any impure races residing there. Though racism towards the Rhineland Bastards as well as other races does not stem from this idea, it is seen how it took hold and was used in the persecution of races outside German.

When it came to the paternity of the occupation children of this era, the fathers had to merely be black occupation soldiers of the Rhineland to be condemned; it did not matter where their nationality came from.⁸⁹ The Gestapo took hundreds of Rhineland Bastards under secret orders to do so in 1937.⁹⁰ The German state described black soldiers as “rapists of German women and carriers of venereal and other diseases.”⁹¹ They were once again placing blacks as the lowest of society, through this insinuation of their uncleanness and disease-ridden bodies.

⁸⁶ Mbabuike, and Evans, "Other Victims of the Holocaust," 7.

⁸⁷ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 257.

⁸⁸ Kestling, "Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note," 87.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

This also placed German women in a higher place in society, as these soldiers were described as rapists, which may have not always been the case. The German race holds purity above all else according to the doctrine at this time, therefore these soldiers and their offspring must be punished for their impure blood.

Overall, the Rhineland Bastards hold a complicated in the history of the 1920s and 1930s. Though they were highly persecuted during the Nazi Regime, there were instances witnessed where the German government started to support the mothers of these occupation children as a means of bringing paternity suits against the French soldiers/fathers.⁹² This was an action that came to light around 1927. The idea was to side with the German parent against one of their greatest enemies of France by letting the French know that their use of colonial troops was seen as a “crime against civilization.”⁹³ While the German government primarily used these lawsuits as a way of strengthening their distain towards the colonial soldiers, the mothers saw this as an opportunity to receive child support for their out of wedlock occupation born children.⁹⁴ By 1930, statistics showed that there were at least 4,532 occupation children in the Rhineland, of which less than a thousand were from French troops.⁹⁵ As had been the case for the last few decades, France was the greatest obstacle to Germany, especially when it came to any Versailles revisions that may have been sought after. For this reason, it is shown why the German government focused primarily on paternity suits against the French troops.

The persecutions of the Rhineland Bastards were considered to be on a different level of racism during the interwar. One scholar noted that: “The secret sterilizations of the *Rheinlanbasterde* shows that German racial theorists were as concerned with German-African

⁹² Roos, "Racist Hysteria to Pragmatic Rapprochement? The German Debate about Rhenish 'Occupation Children', 1920–30," 159.

⁹³ Ibid.,160.

⁹⁴ Ibid.,159.

⁹⁵ Ibid.,169.

miscegenation as with German-Jewish miscegenation.”⁹⁶ The bloodline that came directly from Germany had no effect in how they were to be treated, whether they were of African or Jewish descent. Many view the Second World War persecutions from the strict point of view of a hatred of Jews, but through the last sixty years of research, more factors have come to light to include the lesser known persecuted.

Conclusion

The remilitarization of the Rhineland prior to the Second World War is influential in understanding the strategic position that this land holds through to the end of the war. This action seeks to bring an explanation into why this territory holds such a significant place amongst the German military, while also bringing in the idea of nationalistic pride and how that played out throughout this time on the Rhineland. The act of remilitarization sets the stage for the next phase of the twentieth century, the Second World War. The policy of appeasement can be viewed in both negative and positive light at this time. Overall it held off the bloodshed of war temporarily and showed Germany an action of good will. In the negative light though, it created an idea in the mind of German national leaders that they could get away with certain actions, even if this meant disobeying treaties that were put in place. It also presented the Allied nations as weaker than Germany for not fighting back against their remilitarization, despite military weakness. Overall Germany succeeded in retaining the Rhineland and began the process of building themselves up as a strong nation once again.

The occupation by Belgium, France, Britain and America was not only viewed as intrusive and humiliating, but it also created a scapegoat for Germany, someone to blame for damaging the purity of the German race. The Rhineland Bastards were a huge part of creating a racist identity around the Second World War. They were seen as impure because they were not

⁹⁶ Kestling, “Blacks Under the Swastika: A Research Note,” 90.

of full German blood. Therefore, they were hunted and discriminated against and were left without a homeland, creating a nomadic race. Their persecution continued on throughout the Second World War. Even after the war had end, they were still left as outsiders. Though Jews and Gypsies were the primary people who were persecuted and essentially hunted down, it is also essential in understanding the ideology of the Nazi party to look towards the hatred that has existed towards blacks for hundreds of years, and how it was further escalated when the black colonial troops came to be in charge of German civilians in the Rhineland. The persecution of the outsider races of the Rhine led directly into the further turmoil of non-German people throughout the world that the Second World War was to bring.

Chapter 4: Battle for the Rhine and Life Following the War, 1945

Introduction

The culmination of the greatest time of significance for the Rhineland came in 1945 with one of the ending battles of the Second World War, the battle for the Rhine. After years of humiliation and resentment towards the Allies, this was seen as Germany's final chance to rise up as a once again powerful nation, or fight to the end for their homeland. With Hitler as the führer, Germany continued on in some of the most morale draining battles of World War II.

Overall, the motivation in Hitler's regime was to gain the most land for Germany as possible. As was explored in great detail in chapter two, he wanted to create an area where Germans could live without the influences of other races, while also seeking to eliminate the outside races. Along with this, he was also looking to expand the German nation, and conquer territories throughout Europe, expanding to the rest of the world. Within the span of the Second World War many battles were fought in which land proved to hold significance. For example, in 1940 when German troops entered Paris and trapped many citizens within it, the geography made it so that people did not have many options on where to flee. The environment in D-Day, 1944 also played a significant part. The sea was open and vast, making the Allies a clearer target for the German troops, though once the Allies were able to get to shore, they were able to find some cover due to the way the beach was laid out. The environment often plays a large role in battles, as was especially the case during the Crossing of the Rhine in March 1945, as the territory was used as a barrier between nations. As examined throughout this thesis, the Rhineland rested as a natural border between Germany and France. It hadn't been crossed by an invading enemy nation, heading east, since Roman times.

After the Treaty of Versailles, the Allies occupied the Rhineland until 1935. It then became a place where the German army was forbidden to remilitarize. In 1936, the German army sent troops into this territory to reassert German strength following years of control. It was then in 1944-45, as the Ardennes Campaign, also known as the Battle of the Bulge, failed to stop the Allied forces that this river became a crucial point in the ending of the war. As the Allies began to push the German troops back towards Germany, there was one thing for sure: they must be stopped before getting to the Rhine, or even worse, getting across it. Many soldiers were unsure of continuing the fight for Germany, while others believed in what they were fighting for and continued on, even though they were weak from their most recent devastating loss at the Battle of the Bulge. Through the eyes of the soldiers and leaders who were involved in World War II, it can be shown how the Rhine River showed the ultimate end to the war, bringing both joy and frustration to the Germans.

Beginning of the War

In December of 1944, Hitler began his last great offensive against the Allies. The Soviets were gaining more land with every day in the east, while the Allies in the west had officially entered German territory. A two front war for Germany had been waged since the summer of 1941, and it was clear that there must be a plan to defend Germany. It was at this point Germans efforts were turned to the west and the Ardennes, leaving the east scarce on German troops. The hope was to eliminate the threat of the Allies by division and cutting off supply lines, and once they were defeated, turn all efforts towards the advancing troops from the east. As the battle began to fail, many began to lose faith in a victory, but there were those who still held high hopes. Joseph Goebbels noted that large parts of the German people were convinced the war in

the west was coming to an end in the foreseeable future.⁹⁷ But soon after, the reality of the battle set in.

As it was, this battle did not work out as well as hoped and in turn it became one of the bloodiest and worst losses of the war yet. Prior to this battle, the German troops were well equipped and ready for battle with more experienced men, while the American troops held less weapons and were less experienced. At the beginning of this battle, it appeared that the Germans had the upper hand. However, in the month that it lasted, the Germans lost nearly 100,000 men to the Allied losses of about 90,000.⁹⁸ One of the most important aspects of how this battle changed the way the war was headed was that, unlike the Allied troops, Germany did not have much manpower to rebuild their army following their losses. The Allies could make up for the losses they sustained and continue on towards Germany, while the German army was left weakened. If the Allies could pull off a win against Germany in this battle, they could start the final push of the German troops back into Germany, across the Rhine River and towards Berlin, where Russian troops had been advancing since 1943.

The importance of keeping the Allies on the west side of the Rhine River and preventing their crossing was clear, as this would crush the hopes of German troops and civilians, with the Allies then pushing into Germany. The push back towards Berlin would cause the ultimate problems; the fear became the idea of a two front war. In order to have control of the situation as well as the land, troops must stop the Allies from getting to the east of this river. If the river were to be crossed, the enemy forces would be on the western side, bearing into Germany, with German troops no longer having the advantage of the river between them. As Fredrick the Great once said, “you can defend a river that lies behind an army, but it has yet to be shown how a

⁹⁷ Ian Kershaw, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944-1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 161.

⁹⁸ Kershaw, *The End*, 375-376.

river in front of armies can successfully be held.”⁹⁹ If the river was crossed and the Allies were then fighting on the east side of it, the tides of the war would change yet again and the chance for a defeat of Germany would be almost inevitable. Hitler forbid the construction of defenses behind the Rhine so that his troops would not be tempted to retreat to them. Instead, they would continue to fight, even as the Allies grew closer to the Rhineland. By this time he ultimately knew that the river would be crossed at some time and place. These weakened troops needed rest and a chance to rebuild, but it wouldn’t turn out that they had much time to do so. As it was, the Allies were rapidly approaching the river that would begin to bring the Second World War to a close.

Crossing the Rhine

One of the most important notes to make about the battle at the Rhineland is the significance of the crossing itself. The Allies, consisting largely of British and American troops, could get to the river, but crossing became the most difficult feature as they faced more exposure to the German army. Throughout the Second World War the Ahr Valley had proved to be an efficient way of getting goods around to the troops, and it was located right next to a town of possible worry for the Germans, Remagen. Field Marshal Walter Model was not that worried about Remagen as the river ran swiftly there, and the terrain was fairly rugged, which created a place that was hard to navigate.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, there was a need to protect the areas of the Rhine that had bridges going across; therefore the decision came that the German troops should defend it. However, there were not enough troops to spare for Remagen, so Model saw the best option as destroying the bridge and the Allies chance of getting into the Rhineland, and move on. Hitler prevented this from occurring and ordered that, “charges should not be laid until the very

⁹⁹ Allen Parfitt, “A Path Across the Rhine: The Ludendorff Battle at Remagen, March 1945,” <http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/wwii/articles/apathacrosstherhine.aspx>, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Allen Parfitt, “A Path Across the Rhine: The Ludendorff Battle at Remagen, March 1945,” 2.

last moment, although the circuits could be in place, and that bridges should be demolished only as a last resort and at the last possible moment.”¹⁰¹ The hope was for the German troops to defend their territory, rather than relying solely on the blowing up of these bridges as a way to keep the Allied troops on the other side of the Rhine, because this would just prolong the inevitable. This meant that soldiers needed to be in this area to defend the bridge, therefore stretching the German troops further throughout the Rhineland. Even though many knew this would lead to the deaths of many more in yet another battle, the orders were followed, as Hitler made his usual fear invoking threats. Out of nationalistic pride for their homeland, as well as the fear of being pushed further back into Germany, German leaders would not allow for the crossing of the Rhine River by the Allied troops. The army had put so much on the line in 1936 when they remilitarized the Rhineland for the sake of regaining control and proving that they were no longer a weakened nation. Therefore they were willing to place German troops in harms way to make sure that the enemy did not cross this land or river.

On March 7th 1945, plans ultimately changed and the day ended with the German troops on the eastern side of the Rhine, ready to blow up the bridge once supplies and people were safely across. The Allied troops were rapidly approaching from the West. Major Hans Scheller ordered for the bridge to be destroyed, but it did not go as planned. The troops attempted to blow the bridge a few times, but when nothing happened, they were even more frustrated with the situation. Their last hope of destroying the bridge was to set off the emergency charge, meaning that a soldier would have to go out and light the primer cord. A brave young corporal lit the cord and the original thought was that this last charge had worked, and that the bridge had been destroyed. Instead of destroying the bridge, and stopping the Allies chances to create a bridgehead on the eastern side of the Rhine, “the bridge lifted itself off its piers, hung for an

¹⁰¹ Parfitt, “A Path Across the Rhine,” 4.

instant, then settled back in place, damaged, but intact.”¹⁰² The Germans were now on the wrong side of the Rhine, creating an unguarded bridge for the Allied troops to successfully cross and capture. At this point, Major Scheller knew that the German commanders must be told about the bridge, and in turn took off to tell them about it, a decision he paid for with his life. He would have been safer having been captured by the Allies then telling the German high command that the Rhineland was once again out of Germany’s control. Since the bridge was captured and the Allies made a bridgehead on the eastern side of the Rhine, which in turn blocked Germany from the river that proved most useful for transporting goods, this caused concern throughout the high command. Hitler then gave three orders that were to be followed immediately: First, the bridge was to be destroyed by any means necessary, which was seen as a last resort chance at stopping the Allied troops from advancing further. Second was that there must be a court martial for those responsible. The third and final one was that his commander in the west, Field Marshal von Rundstedt, be relieved of his position.¹⁰³ Hitler and Model then began to look for scapegoats to blame for the bridgehead being implemented, as the bridge was still intact.¹⁰⁴ On March 18th, 1945, five men were executed for not blowing up the bridge in time, even if they had just been following orders to never give up and use the charges only as a last resort, as they had seen fit. They fought to the last possible moment they could, but were still blamed for all that had occurred. Out of fear or out of patriotic pride, these soldiers continued to fight for their homeland, and many paid for this with their lives, but this was the price for the ultimate freedom in a new German world. Goebbels places a certain amount of blame on the commanders in the West, such as Rundstedt, believing that if Model had been in charge of the West all along, the army would not have been in the situation they found themselves in with the Allies across the

¹⁰² Parfitt, “A Path Across the Rhine,” 7.

¹⁰³ Parfitt, “A Path Across the Rhine,” 10.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Goebbels, *Final Entries 1945*, Translated by Richard Barry, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1978), 105.

Rhine.¹⁰⁵ By April 1st, Hitler issued more orders to not retreat, and to fight or die, but the story quickly changes and by April 15th many troops were simply discharged to go home. The fight in the west virtually ended once the Allied troops were over the Rhine River and pressing the German troops further back into their country, proving this river and territory to be a very significant part to the ending of World War II.

Allied Bridgeheads

The introduction of Allied bridges across the Rhine was an intrusion to the German people as a whole. Not only had the enemy invaded the German territory, but they were also now using one of the most widely used ports of transport for goods to further illustrate their dominance over the Germans. This leads to an understanding as to why many German troops destroyed these bridges that connected the two sides of the Rhine. The destruction of Allied bridges could not affect the outcome of the war, but instead would cause enormous difficulties for the German people after the inevitable surrender.¹⁰⁶ The Allied troops were already flooding into German territory, but instead of surrendering, they acted as their führer would have commanded, destroy and fight to the very end. They sought to show that they were unafraid of what could happen.

The Ruhr was Germany's largest industrial region, and the center of the German war economy. When it was overtaken in April of 1945, 317,000 German troops were taken prisoner.¹⁰⁷ This was an area that was to be protected as much as possible, as it was essential to the continuation of the German troops in the war through industry. From the Allied point of view, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was an American general during the Second World War, saw this territory as most appealing due to the significance it held for the German nation strategically.

¹⁰⁵ Goebbels, *Final Entries 1945*, 105.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 35.

¹⁰⁷ Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, 33.

By controlling this territory, the Allies essentially controlled the fate of most of Germany's future battles. The idea was to cut off some of Germany's supply lines, and goods by encircling the Ruhr, where they could deprive Germany of some of their war manufacturing capabilities.¹⁰⁸ There were three significant bridgeheads created at the Rhineland with Remagen, Oppenheim and Wesel all helping in the capture of the Ruhr, where the German army had sought to protect their industry.¹⁰⁹ Overall the operation helped in sealing the fate of the German nation, sending them to their defeat, and also shows the magnitude of the situation in the Rhineland through major losses.

German Morale

Some German leaders at the time of this battle were merely following the orders of Hitler, as they feared what would happen otherwise, and he sought to eliminate those who stood in his path. There were others that believed in the platform of the Nazi party and fought for their country and the chance to extend the German nation further. As Ian Kershaw suggests in his book *The End*, "given the fragmentation in the subordinate leadership and their inability to pose any collective criticism of his leadership....he could continue to demand the impossible and expect his orders to be obeyed."¹¹⁰ There was a definite sense of fear throughout Hitler's party. The leaders were often the least afraid, while many citizens had no choice but to keep their heads down and follow the orders of Hitler out of fear of what could happen if they did not. He perceived the action of staying and fighting in the Rhineland as a heroic end for the war. A member of the Nazi party, Martin Bormann looked at the defeat at the Ardennes, and saw a future where Jews would be in charge whereas the Nazi party would be forced underground. This

¹⁰⁸ Peter Chen, "Crossing the Rhine." *World War II Database*. http://ww2db.com/battle_spec.php?battle_id=134, 2.

¹⁰⁹ W. Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, *Rhineland: The Battle to End the War*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 325.

¹¹⁰ Kershaw, *The End*, 166.

shows that the morale throughout the leadership of the Nazi party was mixed, as they started as early as 1944 to look towards a future where they would be underground, with the ultimate German nation never coming to fruition. Some leaders believed in the Nazi cause and knew they could overcome any obstacles; Hitler was especially prone to this idea, no matter what the war could be turned around. Many others were already looking towards the future in a more dismal way, accepting their inevitable defeat.

Joseph Goebbels, propaganda minister and close associate of the Führer, kept diaries throughout World War II. In his final journal entries, Goebbels continuously spoke of the lack of morale throughout the German troops and civilians throughout the last year of the war. He attributes this to the state of the troops following their failure at the Battle of the Bulge and the advancing Allied troops, as they got nearer to the Rhine with every passing day of March. In an entry dated March 7th, he speaks of the uninterrupted fighting the German troops had been engaging in for years now as a clear factor in why the morale was down.¹¹¹ With every day that they continued to fight, they were weakened even more and became unable to gather the strength or courage to fight on, even with Hitler's threats continuing to loom over them. At this point in the war, Goebbels still had hope for a victory from Germany, and so he kept his head up and attempted to keep things positive amongst the German nation.

On March 24th, Goebbels stated that the war in the West had entered its decisive stage. The ability to win rested on the "soldier's will to resist and their morale and on the speed with which we can reinforce."¹¹² One problem that German officials had throughout the ending months of the war was whether their forces should be focused more on the East or on the West. Some leaders believed that the Eastern front held more threat, while many, such as Himmler,

¹¹¹ Goebbels, *Final Entries 1945*, 67.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 218.

believed that the West was where the most threat came from. In reality, before March, the Allies in the West were on the other side of the large barrier of Germany with the Rhine. If they could put the pressure of their troops there to hold the Allies back, they could avoid a two front war. Therefore they placed the most troops in the West. Although Goebbels documents all aspects of World War II, he seemed to hold a heavy focus on the Western Front, especially during these last two months of the war. After hearing about the bridgehead that was established at Remagen, he maintained hope that the German army would push the Allies back. Throughout his final entries it can be seen that he has the morale of the German nation in mind. He worries that their morale, along with that of the German troops themselves, will lead to an end, or giving up in the war and all that it stands for. He noted: “the total paralysis of transport in West Germany also contributed to the mood of increasing pessimism among the German people.”¹¹³ Even so, Goebbels was continuously looking for ways to boost morale throughout Germany and the troops. He sought a way to make them believe in something, and to not forget the fight for their homeland. He used his propaganda to make them believe in the ability of the German troops to overcome any obstacles the war was providing. The low level of morale was perhaps what caused Hitler to discharge the troops in mid April, which started to bring World War II to a close. Every passing day showed Germany losing more of their land as the Allies drew closer to the Rhine.

Despite their best efforts, leaders in Germany saw the low morale throughout the nation continue to spiral. Goebbels documented in his diary that “the morale of our men is slowly sinking. This, moreover, is explicable in the light of the fact that they have now been fighting uninterrupted for weeks and months.”¹¹⁴ He does not want to confirm the accuracy of the information that Eisenhower’s troops have created a bridgehead on the right bank of the Rhine.

¹¹³ Goebbels, *Final Entries 1945*, 113.

¹¹⁴ Goebbels, *Final Entries 1945*, 67.

He claims it as out of the question, still putting his faith in the German nation.¹¹⁵ Hiding the fact that they were in an unwinnable war, German officials held onto their power of the population mainly through propaganda, but also through means of organization and unrelenting coercion.¹¹⁶ This propaganda served as a means of hope for the people and a way of shielding them from the truth of the frontlines. It put both the Western and Eastern Allies on the same level of terror, showing that neither was better than the other and that Germany should be the ones to prevail in war. Goebbels stated, “the population will soon recover its poise even in regions occupied by the enemy.”¹¹⁷ Even the people of the Rhineland, where Allied troops were flooding through and disrupting everything, could get back to life from before the war.

Hitler was different than his commanders in handling the civilians and troops. Instead of giving hope to the German people as his leaders had been doing for quite some time, Hitler, in a speech made in 1945, told the truth to the Germans, that there would be further hardship, suffering and bloodshed with no end in sight, he used fear as his greatest motivator.¹¹⁸ His outlook of Germany’s place at this point alternated during these final weeks, where he would display extreme confidence in the troops in turning the situation around, and then to despair that the war was lost and there was nothing to be done.¹¹⁹ Regardless, Hitler had decidedly taken the stand to go down fighting rather than foolishly surrendering, as was the case in 1918.

As the Allies crossed the river and began their advance further, they noticed that there were many German civilians left behind in areas. Some were unable to get out of the territories that were most likely to become frontlines in the war due to there not being enough room within the Reich territory with the influx of people throughout the war. On the other hand, there were

¹¹⁵ Goebbels, *Final Entries 1945*, 76..

¹¹⁶ Kershaw, *The End*, 142.

¹¹⁷ Goebbels, *Final Entries*, 105.

¹¹⁸ Kershaw, *The End*. 162.

¹¹⁹ Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 717.

other territories that were quite deserted when the Allies arrived, such as Cologne, which rested right along the Rhine River. This area had been bombed roughly 300 times in this period of war. The aim of the Rhineland Campaign was to push into Germany and force the German troops back towards Berlin, ultimately ending the war. One officer stated that it did not make any difference because nobody was going anywhere from Remagen.¹²⁰ Many believed this spot was less important than the rest of the Rhine River, but the fact that it was first to be crossed proved that it meant more to both the Germans and Allies than it had previously.

The battle that occurred at the Rhineland was inevitable, and would show that Germany was no longer in dominance. Remagen and the Ludendorff Bridge had never officially been in the plans of either the Axis or the Allies. Most of the leaders on both sides were looking towards a fight in the North, and preparing as such. The first crossing to the Germans was almost as significant as the last, because it meant that the Allied troops had finally broken through the last barrier that Germany had put up and they were then making their way through German territory. The defenses that they had put up on the west side of the Rhine had been pushed across. Many people on all sides of the war felt that Hitler's decision to defend the river from the west was not the best, and therefore criticized him. Though to give up territory to the Allies was an admission of defeat.

There became an increasing amount of anger towards the Nazi leadership, as they failed to surrender, even when it was the best option and the best chance of preserving any part of the German nation. The constant bombing of towns throughout Germany within the last year of the war destroyed the faith of the people in Hitler and the Nazi regime. Hitler became the primary person who stood in the way of surrender and ending the war, as he sent orders to continue to fight throughout the final months of the war, ensuring that Germany and the Nazi regime would

¹²⁰ Kershaw, *The End*, 618.

go down fighting instead of being taken captive by the Allies. German troops and civilians alike sought an end to the suffering they endured under the Nazi regime. The battle fought around the Rhineland can be viewed in multiple ways. The first was that it was an invasion by the Allies into the homeland that the Germans fought so hard to protect; even still fighting after the Allies were across and pushing them back further. It was also viewed as a chance to once again rebuild their lives.

Allied Morale

Allied troops continued to gather along the west banks of the Rhine River throughout the month of March. It was no longer a surprise, as the German troops knew that the Allied forces were only taking a short time to gather up their strength before the invasion of Germany could commence. By March 19th, George Patton's army was getting ready to cross the Rhine north of the Ruhr, and by April 1st, the Allies were all soundly on the Eastern side of the Rhineland. When Patton's army got across the river, they did not meet as much resistance as they had anticipated. Eisenhower recognized this as the beginning of the destruction of German morale.

¹²¹ The German troops had been told by Hitler to hold their positions no matter the consequences. The lack of resistance against the Allies meant that many were ready for an end to the war and a chance to be freed of Hitler's regime. Therefore, the Crossing of the Rhine was the beginning of the end, as Germany was finally nearing the end of Hitler's regime and World War II and looking towards a chance to rebuild.

As early as 1944, some Allied commanders were trying to figure out what should be done with the Rhineland. Charles de Gaulle, an officer and leader within the French army, thought that following the Second World War the Rhineland should be detached from the German territory.

¹²¹ Chen, "Crossing the Rhine," 1.

He then wanted the entire Ruhr region to come under international control.¹²² This all came about as the Rhine was viewed as an important barrier point to protect in early 1945. De Gaulle wanted the chance to have control over the entirety of the Rhine River and its borders, giving him an advantage after the war had commenced. This would have then helped the French following the war, economically, as they had control over a useful place of transport and industry. These suggestions were all resisted when looking at German territories following the end of the war.

Life in the Rhineland Following the War

Due to its geographic location in Europe, it was not uncommon for the war to come home to Germany. Allied bombing fleets gained domination of the skies and brought down devastation to German cities. Until the point that the war came home to them, the Nazis managed to convince most of the German nation to follow their leadership and believe in their platform. There was a huge sense of German nationalism, and this belief in the greatness of Germany and all it could accomplish. These ideals, combined with resentment at the Peace Settlement of 1919 were present in every part of the population.¹²³ This brings in the concept of how the German troops managed to follow the Nazi regime and fight their war for so long, even when their morale dropped. German people looked back at when they were blamed for the start of the First World War, and how the Rhineland had been taken over by foreign troops following the Treaty of Versailles. This provides insight into the mindset of the German nation at the start of the Second World War and shows how this drastically changed by the time that 1945 came around, and the nation was significantly more defeated and weakened. The German people were

¹²² Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, 287.

¹²³ Evans, *Third Reich at War*, 761.

unwilling to give up, but also many couldn't continue to fight, therefore they had to turn to the act of surrendering.

The city of Cologne was located along the Rhineland. Within the course of the war as well as shortly following, there was a lack of population within this area. This can be attributed to its location within Germany, resting on the edge of one of the greatest natural barriers. This area was a center of major transport through the Rhine River, as well as one of great industry, which proved useful throughout the war in the creation of munitions and other supplies for the army. Due to its position and usefulness to the German troops in general, this city was often the scene of destruction and air raids throughout much of the Second World War. In March 1945, when American troops entered the city of Cologne, they found that "eighty percent of the city had been destroyed, with its famous cathedral hovering over the ruins."¹²⁴ The town was all but ruined. Many people who resided in this territory packed up their lives and moved, or were evacuated to escape the wrath of war. In April 1945 when the Allies had crossed the Rhine River, there were roughly 44,000 civilians left within the city, whereas the prewar population was 557,658.¹²⁵

This war had caused the displacement of millions of people throughout the world, but took a big hit in places where fighting was most prevalent. German civilians wanted the fight for the nation to happen outside of their own territory. This was not the case in many cities, especially those situated along the Rhine. The geography of Germany compared to its enemies placed German troops and civilians alike in harms way. There was nowhere to escape safely without running into the Allied troops. It is because of this that the places where it was known that the war was coming were often evacuated and left as a ghost town during the war, as people

¹²⁴ Michael P. McConnell, "'The Situation Is Once Again Quiet': Gestapo Crimes in the Rhineland, Fall 1944," *Central European History*, vol. 45, no. 01, 2012, 30.

¹²⁵ Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, 253.

sought cover in places outside of the front lines of war, usually deeper into the German nation. The Rhine became fighting grounds in the last months of the war, until many German troops gave into surrender and those that were left willing to fight fled towards Berlin and the two front war approaching.

The Allies had both a negative and positive impact in this area of the Rhineland. If it were not for the Allies air raids, people would have been able to remain in their homes without the fear of evacuation or death, but it was also the Allies who were able to bring these civilians back to their homes following the war, after pushing the German troops to the ending of the Second World War. Overall, the Allied crossing was what helped Cologne get back to normalcy. Slowly this idea would spread throughout all of Germany, as they sought to get people back on their feet and to their ways of life before the war. Even still, there was a large percentage of Germans who found it difficult or impossible to return home.

Once the Allies were firmly into German territory, they came across German troops who would often surrender quietly to their conquerors. This shows where the German nation was at this time, and where these troops were in terms of morale. They looked for the chance to surrender to the Allies, even with Hitler's orders continuously raining down that there must be a fight to the end. The cross into the German nation was a chance for renewal.

Life after the war in the German nation took many different forms. The cultural life of many Germans resumed fairly quickly. This was brought on by the encouragement of the Allied troops, as they wanted to free many civilians from the difficulties of the years of turmoil and harsh leadership. Even cities on the Rhineland, which had been so heavily occupied and destroyed throughout the years of war, were able to get back on track, nearly back to the normalcy of life before the war. Individuals did not always find it quite as easy to adjust to life

after war, especially those who came back to nothing, which happened to many. A great example of the disruption caused in Germany came from a young man who was forced to live a nomadic lifestyle following the war.¹²⁶ He tells his story of going back to his home in Cologne after being released as a prisoner of war and coming home to find out that his family was no longer alive. He is then a displaced member of society, moving around the cities in the Rhineland as well as throughout Germany, but eventually finding the ability to come back to Hannover to stay for good.¹²⁷ He had no sense of home, and floated around from city to city, living day-to-day just to survive. This is just one example out of the many there are. People lived a day-to-day life after the war, as a way to get back on their feet. After the war concluded, it was natural for home to no longer feel like home to soldiers or prisoners of war. They had to create an entirely new identity of whom they wanted to be going forward. The invasion of the Rhineland by the Allies and German troops alike displaced so many civilians, uprooting them from a territory that they longed to make feel like German land once again following the war and their return home.

Conclusion

Following the war, there was no longer a unified German economy. As parts of the territory were occupied by different powers, it became harder to get supplies where they needed to be. The Rhineland, which had been of great help in shipping supplies prior to wartime, was now harder to use as mainly the British controlled it. The German economy was in trouble and the inflation showed that. The Rhineland in many ways no longer felt like home to many German citizens who lived there, as some aspects of their lives and this territory were not able to be rebuilt. The land was no longer able to be utilized for its usefulness of transport for both goods and people. There was one aspect that many individuals locked onto following the Second World

¹²⁶ Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, 249.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 249.

War as they attempted to adjust to their life after all the destruction, and that was that there was one achievement that came from the war , which they can hold onto in memory of the war; the fact that they had survived.¹²⁸ This attitude was not one of resentment or anger, but instead it came from a place of acceptance. People were encouraged to make the most of their situation and move on from the wraths of war.

The end of World War II had some very significant battles that played a huge role in the destruction of Nazi Germany. The Battle of the Bulge did not turn out as expected as both sides seemed to believe in Germany's strength and numbers, but didn't take into account their weak state from years of war and the inability to rebuild their army. Therefore, throughout the last few centuries the battle has been termed as Hitler's last gamble. Even still, this did not deter him from continuing to fight for four more months after the battle had ended. He would not take the path of surrendering as had been done in the First World War. The Rhine River became a significant part of the European western theatre of war, as it was shown as the strategic buffer zone between Germany and France.. When this territory was crossed the German people watched with frustration at the further destruction of their homeland, but some were also overjoyed by the chance to be liberated from Hitler's regime. The Allied troops looked at the Rhine as their chance into Germany and beginning the process of ending the war which had dragged on for so long. For both sides the Rhine River showed an end to the suffering, which had lasted in Germany for too long. After years of slaughter and destruction there was something special and important that came from survival following the war. After years of displacement, troops and civilians alike were able to return to their homes to begin their lives in a post war world.

¹²⁸ Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace*, 397.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Through the examination of the Rhineland in the twentieth century, prior to and during the Second World War, this land's most significant period of influence is revealed. By looking at this in the specific events, such as the aftermath of the Treaty of Versailles and the Crossing of the Rhine in 1945, it is explained how this territory became an increasingly important natural barrier for Germany. This land proved to be one of great costs to the German nation, as they fought to protect it in all capacities. Through this, it can be concluded that the Rhineland was one of the most influential landscapes in the twentieth century, as the German military utilized it through a strategic sense, keeping a buffer between them and their Allied neighbors.

After the First World War, Germany was weak and left solely to blame for the causation of the war. Allied nations were able to take advantage of this situation and demand reparations and actions to be done in atonement. Overall, this helped light the flame of German resentment in the twentieth century. They endured the occupation of the Rhineland in the 1920s as a means of showing compromise with the Allies, and in hopes of gaining back their military landscape. Although, as the soldiers came to the land from all different nations, some considerably lower in standing than the rest, many Germans were in outrage. They were not only split from their own territory of unoccupied Germany, but they were also under the watchful eye of colonial soldiers. This situation helped to fuel Hitler and his regime in the 1930s. They were not only taking it back from their European enemies, but also from people considered to be sub-human, or even unhuman. Hitler sought to cleanse the Rhineland of the impure souls who had taken it over, bringing it back under full German law once again. In a sense, this land influenced Nazi ideology at this time by fueling people with enough anger to protect it under the nationalistic wing of Germany.

Despite France's greatest efforts to claim this land as their own on several occasions, they were left on the outside, without control of this significant barrier between the two nations. One question pops up when studying this territory in relation to the nations beside it, and looking through scholarly works. That is, why was there held such a focus on the French nation throughout the Interwar in regards to their relationship with Germany? As examined throughout this paper, France and Germany held one of the greatest contentions with their location and proximity to the Rhine River. To have control of the Rhineland was not merely to have control of the trading capabilities, but it was also a great tactical advantage, one that both sides needed at differing times throughout the twentieth century. This land became a natural barrier in wartime, used as a means of protection for both sides involved.

Some scholars of this period look at the Rhineland not as a German land, but a European one. "The Rhine becomes the line where Eastern and Western Europe meet."¹²⁹ During the twentieth century it became more difficult to separate the Rhine from the rest of Europe due to the amount of confliction it caused. Overall it developed into a European territory through its industry and ease of trading, with one of the greatest rivers available. It developed into a territory that was used militarily by differing nations, particularly as a buffer zone when it came to the hostilities from the German nation. Historians in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century have challenged this notion, even showing how this territory belonged to all of Western Europe rather than one nation. Regardless of where historians place this land, its significance comes from its position in wartime and the stories of inhabitants as well as soldiers who fought to protect it.

¹²⁹ Schöttler, "The Rhine as an Object of Historical Controversy in the Inter-war Years. Towards a History of Frontier Mentalities," 10.

Without some amount of national pride for the territory, it is hard to see why Hitler would risk everything and break the Locarno Treaty as well as the Treaty of Versailles to march into the Rhineland and take back what was theirs in 1936. There was a bigger fight than the story may have shown from an outside perspective. He arranged his troops to fight for the purity of the German race, by cleansing it of outsiders. This was an instance that was repeated on multiple occasions during this time frame, as the lesser and weakened troops were risked as a way of showing their dominance in the world powers and reclaiming their territory. From the occupation by the Allied nations to the Crossing of the Rhine, the situation is repeated that this land was the final barrier into new attitudes and beginnings by the German nation.

A significant group of people came out of this time period, the Rhineland Bastards. Though their existence, they proved to be a sign of humiliation for the German people. They symbolized a time when Germany, especially the Rhineland, was at one of its lowest points where they were under the direction of Allied soldiers, including black colonial ones. The placement of these soldiers holding power in the Rhineland during the 1920s was used as fuel going into the Second World War. The colonial soldiers represented the lowest members of society. Therefore placing Germany at the very bottom following their involvement in the First World War. This action explains a couple of events that happened following this occupation, most significantly the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the persecution that the Rhineland Bastards endured in the Nazi regime. Both of these events came under the eyes of Hitler and tie directly to the humiliation that was suffered thanks to the Allies and the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

It's important to look at the crossing of the Rhine as a culmination of these nearly thirty years of war, occupation, and distress within the Rhineland. Though the territory was invaded

and nearing defeat, this crossing allowed for a new chance for people to rebuild their lives without the fear of soldiers overtaking their land. The Allies throughout this time period were the enemy prior to 1945. They were the ones who overtook land that was not their own and made the decision that Germany was to pay for the First World War. Once this crossing occurred in 1945, the view of the Allies changed in some German's eyes, as they were viewed as liberators from war, as well as from Hitler and his dangerous regime. Seeing this point of view is crucial in understanding the changing nature of the German ideals towards the nations that surrounded their territory.

By gaining first hand accounts of direct occupation during the 1920s, or the frontlines of the Second World War, it is clearer to understand how this area was shaped even more as a significant military landscape within the last one hundred years. Thanks to the ever-evolving historical insights, more of the story of a specific land can be explained in greater detail. By studying this area not just through one event, but multiple ones over a thirty-year period, we can begin to pull together the similarities shown over time. The German mindset of this land has clearly vastly changed since its Prussian times in the nineteenth century, as it became a land further utilized for its natural barrier. As history grows and specific fields begin to intertwine with one another, the result is a fuller history of a specific area. Through its prominence in this time period the significance of this territory is greatly formed and therefore protected, as nations beyond simply Germany use it as a strategically important place.

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