

Writing about the press. German Feldpost letters about the use and reception of newspapers and magazines during WWII

Clemens Schwender

The products of Goebbels' propaganda machinery are documented. The speeches were printed in papers and magazines, and for historians they are still available. But what is not known so far is what the Germans thought about these media and their content. But there is one unique source that becomes more and more interesting for researchers of different fields: The soldiers communicated with their families and friends about the events in letters. Almost 100.000 of these letters are kept in the Berlin Feldpost-Archiv (www.warletters.de) and can be used by researchers. So for the first time questions about the role of propaganda can not only be asked but to some degree even be answered.

The basic facts like dates, battles, troop movements, and front lines are well known. Feldpost letters have a different value. They are increasingly being recognized as documents of everyday communication. They give an insight into the emotions and motivations of the ordinary soldier and their families and partners. Written communication was the only possibility for contact with those at home and vice versa. In the days of World War II, the Feldpost letter was about the only means of individual communication available to soldiers and their relatives and friends back home.

Estimates based on existing invoices between the German Wehrmacht and the Reichspost indicate that during World War II, about 30 to 40 billion items marked Feldpost were transported.

In addition to furlough and letters, the mass media were the only possibility for shared current experience independent of the separate worlds of home and the front. Feature films produced in the Babelsberg film studios were shown not only in the cinemas at home, but also in many locations where German soldiers were stationed. Newspapers, magazines and books could be sent everywhere and were very popular among soldiers. In this way, participation in public discourse was possible. Radio was the only live media that could be heard at the same time at all parts of the front and at home.

The speeches given by leaders of the Third Reich are of particular interest in newspapers. They made attempts to explain and interpret the current military and political situation. The

letter correspondents could use these speeches as a topic in their communication. Through these media events, some form of shared experiences was possible. Discussions about opinions are very important and play an important role in everyday communication. Aesthetic judgements are spontaneous assessments of perceptions.

In my presentation I'd like to present examples of how newspapers and magazines as well as their content are mentioned in Feldpost letters. The citations will be categorized and analyzed to understand their function during war. The presence of censorship must be considered during the process of interpretation.