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# German and Austrian Latter-day Saints in World War II: An Analysis of the Casualties and Losses

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In 1975–76 my assignment as a student research assistant to Professor Douglas F. Tobler of the Brigham Young University’s history department was to investigate the relationship of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to the government of Hitler’s Third Reich. While poring over the available literature I noted that in the early years of World War II, which began in September 1939, somber announcements published in Church literature (such as the *Stern* magazine) informed local members of the deaths of Latter-day Saint soldiers and civilians in war-related incidents. I invested a great deal of thought regarding the losses in membership, facilities, and programs suffered by the Church during the war.

During the war, most of the German branches of the Church were located in larger cities where most of the physical damage was inflicted by the enemies of Germany. The Saints in those branches must have been in a precarious

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situation. If the Church members adhered to the belief that they were to obey the laws of their countries, LDS men would have responded to draft notices, and several would likely have been in the heat of battle. Because these topics had not yet been treated in publications at the time, I resolved to someday produce a comprehensive report to answer these questions.<sup>1</sup>

The goals envisioned for my research were these: (1) to describe the fate of the German and Austrian Latter-day Saints and the branches of the Church in the two LDS German missions from 1939 to 1945,<sup>2</sup> (2) to identify those who lost their lives during the war or in the aftermath; and (3) to answer specific questions regarding the conduct of German and Austrian Saints and the condition of the Church during the war.

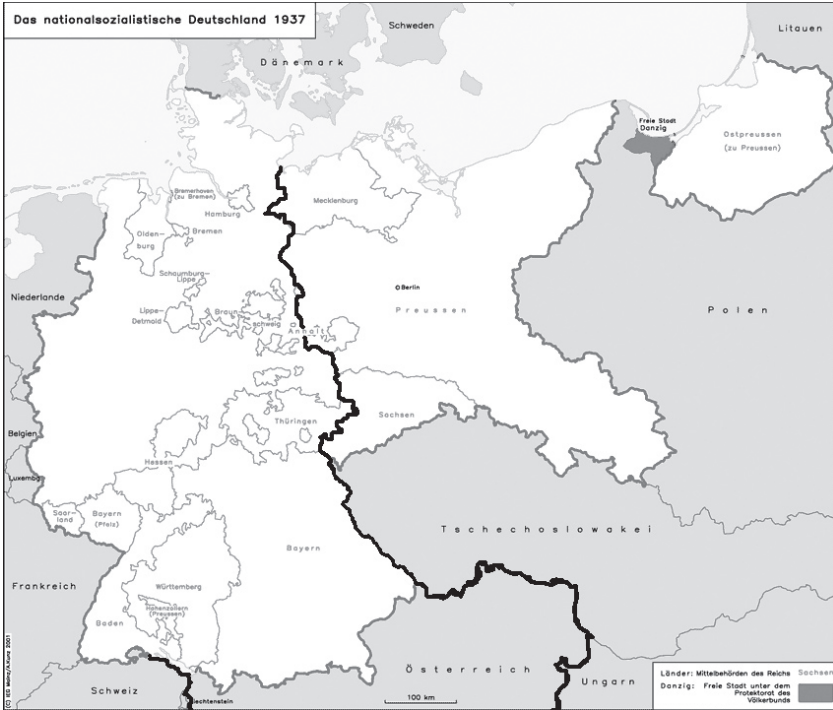
### **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Germany and Austria in 1939**

In 1939 the East and West German Missions of the Church were the largest LDS missions in the world in population. The 13,402 members living in a Germany approximately the size of the state of Texas, were organized into twenty-six districts composed of 144 branches and groups. The office of the East German mission was located in a villa at Händelallee 6, in an upscale neighborhood in Berlin. The West German Mission administration was situated in a fine office building at Schaumainkai 41 on the south bank of the Main River in Frankfurt. There were no LDS high priests, bishops, stake presidents, or patriarchs in Germany at the time. The closest LDS temple was in Utah.<sup>3</sup> The country of Austria had been added to the West German Mission in November 1938 (see Table 1).

The three largest branches of the Church in Germany were in Chemnitz, Saxony (469 members); in Königsberg, East Prussia (465); and in the Hamburg neighborhood known as St. Georg (465). The 2,359 priesthood holders in Germany and Austria represented fifty-two percent of the male members of the appropriate age. Adult females (over twelve years of age) dominated in essentially every branch of the Church—fifty-six percent of the total

**Table 1**  
**LDS Church Units In the East and West German**  
**Missions, 1939**

|           | East | West | Total |
|-----------|------|------|-------|
| Districts | 13   | 13   | 26    |
| Branches  | 75   | 69   | 144   |



Germany as it appeared on the map in 1937. The black line indicates the division of the two LDS missions. Austria was a part of the West German Mission.

Church population and nearly two-thirds of the membership in specific branches (see Table 2).

All foreign LDS missionaries were evacuated from Germany and Austria in late August 1939. When the war began on September 1, each mission was led by a local elder designated as the “mission supervisor” by European Mission President Thomas E. McKay. Friedrich Biehl was the first such supervisor of the West German Mission, and Herbert Klopfer led the East German Mission.

An enlightening view of the Church in Germany during World War II has emerged from the study of interviews, documents, and photographs.<sup>4</sup> Essentially all my research questions were answered. The hundreds of interviewees corroborated each others’ experiences in many regards (and coincide with the accounts of literally millions of other Germans), but individual experiences add remarkable and faith-promoting aspects to the description of Latter-day Saints in peril at home and abroad—living under and compelled to serve a government that many could not support in their hearts.

**Table 2**  
**LDS Church Membership in the East and West**  
**German Missions, 1939**

|                     | <b>East</b>  | <b>West</b>  | <b>Total</b>  |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Elders              | 402          | 390          | 792           |
| Priests             | 194          | 179          | 373           |
| Teachers            | 243          | 161          | 404           |
| Deacons             | 445          | 345          | 790           |
| Total Priesthood    | 1,284        | 930          | 2,359         |
| Other Males over 12 | 1,245        | 939          | 2,184         |
| Females over 12     | 4,336        | 3,172        | 7,508         |
| Males under 12      | 384          | 329          | 713           |
| Females under 12    | 358          | 280          | 638           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>        | <b>7,607</b> | <b>5,795</b> | <b>13,402</b> |

During the years leading up to the war, conditions in Germany for the Saints were quite prosperous—as they were for most Germans. However, by the time it became clear to many citizens of the Reich that Hitler was taking the country toward war, it was too late to emigrate, and overt opposition to the government could be fatal.

The young people of the LDS Church (ages ten to seventeen) were required to participate in the activities of the Hitler Youth, though some found legitimate excuses to avoid the programs (and many parents provided such excuses).<sup>5</sup> At age seventeen, all young men and most young women were required to render service in the national labor force—which for young men was simply the precursor to military service. The absence of these young people from their hometowns meant the increasing curtailment of Mutual Improvement Association activities in the branches.<sup>6</sup>

Latter-day Saints died in battle in distant countries and in air raids at home. Many who survived the fighting attributed their good fortune to God's protection. Thousands of LDS civilians lost their homes and became refugees. Nearly one hundred Saints are still missing after more than six decades. Church meetinghouses all over the country were damaged, destroyed, or confiscated for government use. Meetings and programs were discontinued due to the absence of branch members, or because members remaining in town could not make the trip through the rubble to the meeting rooms.

Through it all, the will of the German and Austrian Saints to survive the trials appears to have been a result of the common bond of LDS Church membership. During the war years, Saints told their friends of their faith, and several baptisms of adult converts were the results. Branch and district conferences were held until the war ended in May 1945. Many eyewitnesses told of being driven from their homes during or after the war, but remaining on the lookout for the closest LDS branch in their new location.

Despite the loss of husbands, fathers, and brothers, LDS women attempted to raise up a righteous and faithful generation while continuing to serve in the Relief Society and maintaining meeting schedules wherever possible—all this while protecting their children during air raids, and standing in seemingly endless lines hoping to purchase food with ration coupons.

### **A Comparison of the Wartime Experiences of Latter-day Saints in the Two German Missions**

Although the Saints in Germany and Austria lived under the same government and thus faced the same political, demographic, and societal conditions, their experiences in wartime were markedly different. For example, in the West German Mission the Saints lived in close proximity to the bases of attacking Allied air forces. Therefore, most of them suffered from air raids as early as 1940, and warning sirens sounded frequently for the next five years. Many Saints were bombed out early and found new apartments or left town for safer venues. This caused the demise of several branches before 1943.

On the other hand, in the East German Mission, the members' homes and meeting halls were too far away to be reached by enemy bombers until the last year of the war (with the exception of the capital city of Berlin, which was a strategic and psychological target). Many of those Saints spent little time in air raid shelters until the end approached when Soviet bombers reached their cities from new air bases constructed in Russia and Poland. In some smaller cities where little or no damage occurred, the Saints met regularly for worship services before the enemy ground troops arrived.

The invasion of the German homeland began in the fall of 1944. However, the Anglo-American armies in the west and the Red Army in the east made only slow progress toward the interior of the Reich (and Berlin) until the spring of 1945, when the German army could no longer offer sufficient defense. At that point, the East German Saints experienced the unbridled rage of Soviet soldiers bent on executing terrible punishment on German civilians (especially women) as retribution for German crimes committed in the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1944.<sup>7</sup> Latter-day Saint homes were broken into by marauding soldiers and their property vandalized or destroyed. Many eyewit-



The Birth family of the Schneidemühl Branch (East German Mission) in 1939. Sons Siegfried and Nephi (back row) were killed in battle and father Gerhard lost his right arm. The family fled to the west in the spring of 1945. Photograph courtesy of Edith Birth Rohloff.

nesses insist that no words could adequately describe the suffering that ensued as cities in eastern Germany were invaded one by one.

American and British troops invading German cities from the west generally deported themselves with civility when dealing with German civilians. Indeed, their behavior was so friendly that many eyewitnesses had fond memories of the arrival of GIs—especially the Afro-American soldiers, who usually handed out food and candy from their jeeps. The war ended peacefully in most West German cities, which was usually a relief to the haggard locals. The few eyewitnesses who recalled very poor treatment did so in connection with Moroccan or Algerian troops serving under the French flag. Their excesses rivaled those of the Soviet Army in eastern Germany.

Fully forty percent of the members of the Church in the East German Mission fled from their homes during the Soviet invasion, or they were driven from their homes when the territory was ceded to Russia and Poland.<sup>8</sup> They were not allowed to return even for a visit until 1989, when the communist governments of Eastern Europe collapsed. Some of the LDS refugees lived in temporary camps in Germany for several years before selecting or being assigned a new residence.

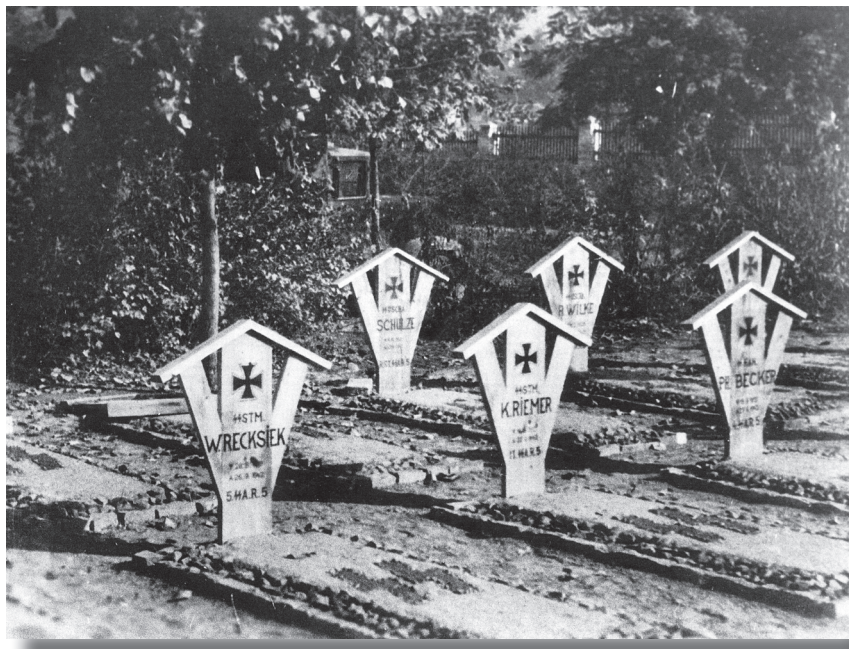
In contrast, in the West German Mission, more than three thousand Saints were bombed out. Most of them either found another apartment in the same city, or they evacuated for a time and returned after the war to find or build new housing. None of them lost their hometowns through involuntary displacement. There were essentially no West German Mission refugees.

In general, it could be said that the sufferings of the East German Saints were of much shorter duration but more intense. The Saints in western Germany and Austria endured privations over a longer period of time but of lesser intensity, and were subjected far less frequently to bodily mistreatment than their counterparts in the East. However, the price of human suffering was comparable and painful in both missions. As will be shown, the East German Mission lost more soldiers and the West German Mission more civilians in World War II.

It is now possible to answer the questions I formulated in 1975 regarding the fate of Church members during the war and the condition of the Church when the conflict was over.

### ***How many Latter-day Saints in Germany and Austria lost their lives due to World War II?***

Determining the exact number of Latter-day Saints who lost their lives as a direct result of World War II and its aftermath (lasting until 1950 for some Church members) is not possible. Nevertheless, from surviving records and eyewitness accounts a fairly reliable number can be calculated (Table 3). The 996 deaths directly attributable to causes of war (*Kriegseinwirkung* in German) is certainly not the actual total. It is very possible that some members of record were not known well enough in their branches to be remembered because in some cases they did not attend Church meetings or participate in branch activities. Many members moved from their 1939 branches for a variety of reasons and may not have established connections with other branches, thus becoming lost. During the final year of the war (1944–1945), the keeping of vital records among Germans was subject to considerable breakdowns. Allied forces invading from the east made little or no effort to record the names of German soldiers killed or captured. Under the air attacks in Germany, LDS members were either killed in the basements of their homes, or driven from cities to distant points of refuge where no connection to the Church existed. Refugees perished on the roadsides and were buried as strangers. Membership records of many LDS branches in the East German Mission were lost, but most records of branches in the West German Mission survived and usually include lists of persons who had not been located by 1948.



The grave of LDS soldier Walter Recksiek (far left) in Russia. Photograph courtesy of Heinz Recksiek.

At least 322 members of the Church died of causes apparently not directly related to the conflict. Their numbers are included in this study because in some cases the cause of death cannot be determined. Several causes of death appear to be incidental, but may indeed have been related to wartime conditions. For example, one elderly man suffered a heart attack and died as he hurried down the street to an air raid shelter while sirens wailed and approaching enemy aircraft could already be heard. In other cases, Saints may have needed medical treatments or medications that were not available due to wartime shortages and succumbed to curable conditions.

The 996 LDS Church members who died as victims of the war represent 7.4 percent of the 1939 Church membership. Most studies involving Germans show deaths at about 6.7 percent (approximately 5.3 million of a national pre-war population of 78 million).<sup>9</sup>

Divine intervention did not protect all the German Saints or LDS leaders during the war (see Table 3). The first two supervisors of the West German Mission were killed as soldiers, and the first supervisor of the East German Mission died in a Soviet prison camp.<sup>10</sup> Two district presidents were killed in



**Table 3**  
**Loss of Life Among German and Austrian Latter-day Saints in WWII**

|   | East       | West       | Total        |
|---|------------|------------|--------------|
| Died in the military                                      | 237        | 188        | 425          |
| Killed as civilians in air raids                          | 48         | 84         | 132          |
| Killed as civilians during the Allied invasion of Germany | 18         | 0          | 18           |
| Died from diseases or starvation                          | 99         | 226        | 325          |
| Died in concentration camps or euthanasia programs        | 6          | 5          | 11           |
| Missing   | 21         | 64         | 85           |
| Total deaths from war                                     | 429        | 567        | 996          |
| Died from other causes                                    | 177        | 145        | 322          |
| <b>TOTAL LOSSES</b>                                       | <b>606</b> | <b>712</b> | <b>1,318</b> |



The grave of West German Mission supervisor Christian Heck at Bad Innau in southwestern Germany. Photograph by Roger P. Minert, 2010.

battle, another in the siege on the city of Königsberg, and a fourth in an air raid on the factory in which he worked.

***How many Latter-day Saints in Germany and Austria lost their homes and meetinghouses?***

Two-thirds of the Saints lost their homes through destruction or eviction (see Table 4). More than one-half of all LDS meeting facilities in Germany and Austria were no longer available in May 1945 when the war ended. In rare cases, branches actually found other suitable locations for their meetings, but most branches were represented by only a few families meeting in a member's apartment at the end of the war.

In addition to the losses in facilities, the Church lost substantial supplies of literature, such as hymnals, Church magazines, and instruction manuals for priesthood groups and auxiliaries. Equipment losses consisted of office machines, chairs, pump organs, sacrament utensils, and other minor (but not easily replaceable) accoutrements. There is no way to set a value on such losses, but eyewitnesses in many branches in both missions told of their attempts to save such items by storing them in the apartments of LDS families.

***How did the war affect the functions of Church organizations?***

Due primarily to the evacuation of the Latter-day Saints from their homes in eastern Germany and the closing of the branches in that part of the country, most of the branches in the East German Mission were not conducting sacrament meetings when the war concluded. The West German Mission was more fortunate in this regard. Relief Society sisters carried on the work with remarkable dedication, but in some branches the official meetings could not be held as the war drew to a close. Assistance to LDS families (especially an

**Table 4**  
**Estimated Losses of Private Homes and LDS**  
**Church Meetinghouses**

|                   | East   | West   |
|-------------------|--------|--------|
| Private dwellings | 70%    | 60%    |
| Hometowns         | 40%    | 0%     |
| Meetinghouses     | 60%    | 53%    |
| Mission offices   | 1 of 2 | 0 of 1 |

increasing number of refugees) was often rendered by indefatigable sisters under extremely difficult conditions.

In many branches all over Germany and Austria, priesthood meetings held at the end of the war were gatherings of only the older men and the younger boys of Aaronic Priesthood age. With the great majority of Church youth (ages 12–19) away from home in national service and apprenticeships, the MIA faded away in most branches. Many branches in both missions discontinued Primary as a result of the interruptions caused by the *Jungvolk* program, the first phase of the government's Hitler Youth movement involving children ten to fourteen years of age (see Table 5).

The term “hometowns” used in Table 4 refers to the fact that nearly one-half of the East German Saints were evicted from their homes and never allowed to return (as discussed above). Many had ancestors who had lived in those locations for generations.

### ***Did LDS Church members join the Nazi Party?***

This question has been asked more frequently than any other. Because Latter-day Saints believe in supporting governments in general, there arises for some a conflict if the government in question appears to espouse non-Christian philosophies or programs. The findings of this study suggest that only three to five percent of adult males in the Church joined the National Socialist German Worker's [Nazi] Party. Because membership in the party was



The Reger girls inspect the ruins of the Saarbrücken Branch meeting rooms. Courtesy of Hans and Elisabeth Reger.

| Meetings discontinued | East | West |
|-----------------------|------|------|
| Sacramento            | 50%  | 30%  |
| Sunday School         | 50%  | 20%  |
| Primary Association   | 50%  | 30%  |
| Boy Scouts*           | 100% | 100% |
| MIA                   | 75%  | 55%  |
| Relief Society        | 40%  | 15%  |
| Priesthood            | 80%  | 50%  |

\*The Boy Scout program was replaced by the Hitler Youth in 1934.

required of state employees, several Church members were compelled to either join or lose their employment.

The Nazi Party registration of Kurt Schneider has been located and serves as a fitting example. Schneider (born 1909) was the manager of a large steel manufacturing facility in Strasbourg (German-occupied France from 1940 to 1944). He joined the Party with member number 8847219, but his record shows that he never participated in organized functions or leadership.<sup>11</sup> Apparently he chose to offer the appearance of cooperation, but his Nazi Party affiliation never hindered his enthusiastic service as the president of the Strasbourg District, and after 1943, as a counselor to the supervisor of the West German Mission.

Several eyewitnesses in the West German Mission recalled distinct impressions regarding the enthusiastic Party membership of at least one branch president and one mission supervisor. The president of the Hamburg-St. Georg Branch reportedly posted a "Jews Not Permitted" sign at the meetinghouse door; and one mission leader in Frankfurt told members in several branches that Hitler's programs were sanctioned by God and that Germany would be victorious in the war.<sup>12</sup> Despite these exceptions, there is no evidence that involvement in the Nazi Party caused anything but sporadic dissension among the Saints. Several members of the Church wore Nazi Party uniforms to church due to events taking place before or after meetings, but they were never denied the opportunity to pray, preach, or participate in priesthood ordinances.

### ***What property did the Church own during the war?***

All but one building used by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Germany and Austria from 1938 to 1946 was rented. This includes the mission offices in Berlin and Frankfurt and the meetinghouses and rooms of the 144 branches in those two countries. Most branches rented just a few rooms in buildings in the middle of housing blocks or in industrial neighborhoods. A free-standing building totally occupied by a branch was extremely rare. District and branch leaders essentially never enjoyed offices away from home, but the rooms in some branches extended over several thousand square feet.

The solitary building owned by the Church in Germany was a small structure erected in 1929 in the town of Selbongen, East Prussia. The property was donated by the Kruska family, who were branch members, and the construction was financed in part by the East German Mission. Local Saints experienced amazing and frightening events at the end of the war, but managed to hold on to their building until 1974, when the last Church members emigrated to the West.<sup>13</sup>



A pre-war photograph of the church in Selbongen. Photograph courtesy *Deseret News*.

### ***What was the status of the missionary effort during the war?***

Following the evacuation of American missionaries and their leaders from Germany on August 25, 1939, only a handful of native German male missionaries remained in service in the East German Mission and none in the West German Mission. The latter operated with the assistance of five young women, most of whom were replaced by others during the war.<sup>14</sup> The women lived in the mission office, and their status as paid Church employees likely spared them from government work assignments.

After the war began, only two men served as full-time missionaries in the East German Mission, but both were drafted into the German military by 1941 and could not be replaced.<sup>15</sup> Young unmarried women continued to serve and live in the office in Berlin until its destruction in 1943, and then in an apartment house nearby until the summer of 1945.<sup>16</sup> All but one of the young women were released and replaced by the end of the war. They traveled extensively to district conferences, were indispensable in carrying out administrative and teaching functions, and were held in high regard by Church members all over the mission territory.

### ***Was the Church persecuted by Hitler's government?***

There is no evidence that the Third Reich ever instituted any ill-treatment of the Church or its members. In a country of 78 million inhabitants, the peaceful activities of a mere 13,402 (a ratio of one in 5,820 Germans) were apparently of no interest to the state. LDS men answered the call to arms and thus deported themselves as loyal citizens. Speakers in church meetings avoided any statements that cast a negative light on the government or emphasized the Saints' relationship with the Church in the United States (Germany's enemy after December 1941).

Paul Ranglack of the East German Mission leadership was interviewed mid-war by government officials in Berlin and instructed to have the Saints refrain from preaching about such "Jewish" (and thus anti-German) concepts as "Zion" and "Israel." Instruction was given through President Ranglack to the Church membership in both missions that hymns which included such words were not to be sung.

Several branches saw their meeting rooms confiscated for the use of the military (as storage facilities) or the city government (for refugee housing), but such actions were not punitive in nature. Closures were usually temporary and the Saints were allowed in each case to remove branch equipment and private property. No attempts were ever made to permanently shut down a branch, though arrogant Nazis and angry neighbors were at times heard to

make threats regarding what the state should do to Mormons—all Christians for that matter—once Germany won the war.

### ***Did the secret state police investigate Church units or members?***

Many eyewitnesses recalled visits made in Sunday meetings by men in long dark coats who inevitably sat on the back row of the meeting hall. Those men were assumed to be agents of the Gestapo (*Gemeine Staatspolizei*, or secret state police) and were most likely in attendance to determine whether neighbors filing reports of un-German activities were correct. Not one Latter-day Saint eyewitness indicated that those men ever spoke or involved themselves in any way in the proceedings. No sanctions against the Church ever resulted from such visits.

German government archives include a Gestapo record for Christian Heck, the supervisor of the West German Mission. The record was made on January 1, 1940, in his first month in that assignment (he served until mid-1943).<sup>17</sup> The record states that Heck was a traveling salesman who had attended Church district conferences in various cities around the country. All details in the record were apparently provided by him and not collected by the Gestapo or provided by a third person. All information was typed, and nothing was added to the card.

Friedrich Vielstich, born 1886, was a member of the Frankfurt/Oder Branch of the East German Mission. Because he had declined on several occasions the invitation to join the Nazi Party—citing personal reasons—Party leaders requested that the Gestapo investigate the Church.<sup>18</sup> It was felt that Vielstich should not be promoted as an employee of the national railway system until he relinquished his membership in what the documents called a *Sekte*. No other documents regarding the case of Friedrich Vielstich have survived, but he maintained his membership in the Church while three of his sons died in the service of their country.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Did Latter-day Saints oppose the German government?***

Many eyewitnesses recalled how they or their parents secretly rejected Hitler, Nazism, and the Third Reich, but such opinions had to be carefully guarded. The only instance in which Church members offered active resistance to the German government occurred in Hamburg in 1941–1942, when teenagers Helmut Huebener, Karl-Heinz Schnibbe and Ruddi Wobbe decided to print and distribute anti-Hitler literature. As a result of their capture and prosecution, Helmut was executed and the other two imprisoned. After it was proved that local Church leaders were totally unaware of the youths' activi-

ties, the investigation was concluded and the Church suffered no lasting damage.<sup>20</sup>

The concept of “conscientious objector” did not exist in Germany’s Third Reich. Only one LDS man is known to have refused to serve in the army—Helmut Radack of the Kiel Branch (West German Mission) did so, was arrested and died in a concentration camp a year later.<sup>21</sup>

Many Saints perhaps believed that Hitler and his ruthless government would not last long in Germany. Some felt that it would be better to simply go along (despite the loss of life and property) and thus not bring upon the Church the wrath of the government. Many LDS soldiers were fortunate to serve in noncombat roles, while those in battle often sought assignments as medics or communication specialists where they would not be required to carry a weapon. Many eyewitnesses confessed to having had “a very poor aim” when firing at enemy soldiers. Acts of passive resistance were common among German and Austrian Latter-day Saints.

### ***Were LDS German soldiers involved in the Holocaust?***

Although the results of this investigation suggest that no LDS men serving in German military or police units contributed in any way to the destruction of European Jewry, it is always possible that some did and were simply able to suppress that part of their history. Anti-semitic attitudes did exist in the minds of some LDS at the time. Heinz Koschnike related the story of the Reich Crystal Night (November 9, 1938) when Jewish shops in his hometown of Breslau were looted by Nazi thugs. Heinz was only eight and reacted with shock to the violence he witnessed, but was reprimanded by an elder of the branch who reminded him that as a German boy, he “should be ashamed about being sympathetic to the Jews.”<sup>22</sup>

One LDS soldier, Bruno Stroganoff of the Tilsit Branch in the East German Mission, found himself too close to the action against Jewish civilians on the Eastern Front. As a member of Heinrich Himmler’s elite *Waffen-SS* combat troops, Bruno saw things he could not believe (the murder of Jews). He and a Hungarian comrade refused to be involved in such crimes, and they deserted. Captured, they should have been executed for treason, but instead were jailed in Krakow, Poland, and eventually in the Dachau Concentration Camp near Munich, Germany. Stroganoff survived the war thanks to a case of tuberculosis; he was sent from Dachau to a hospital in Heidelberg where the invading Americans found him in the spring of 1945.<sup>23</sup>



### *What happened to LDS refugees?*

With the approach of the Soviet Army in the fall of 1944, residents of Germany's eastern provinces began a long trek to the west. Just days after the Red Army invaded eastern Germany, reports of atrocities committed against German civilians circulated all over the Reich. Historians believe that of the nine million refugees who evacuated the German territories east of the Oder and Neisse Rivers, nearly one-half left early rather than see the enemy enter their homes. Others fled during battles or were evicted by 1947 as a result of the shifting borders of Germany, Poland, and Russia. Approximately 2,500 Latter-day Saints lived in the region, and about one-half of them chose to leave their homes before the enemy arrived. By the summer of 1947, all Saints in eastern Germany were gone—never to inhabit their homes again—with the exception of about sixty members of the Selbongen Branch in East Prussia.<sup>24</sup>

Most East German Saints settled in areas north and south of Berlin and became citizens of the new German Democratic Republic (generally referred to as East Germany). Several hundred Saints of the East German Mission made it all the way west into the British, American, and French occupation zones (what became the Federal Republic of Germany). Two large exclusively LDS refugee camps were established and flourished for several years—one at the Wolfsgrün estate in Saxony (south of Chemnitz) and another in Langen (south of Frankfurt am Main).<sup>25</sup>

Refugees in the West German Mission were a rarity. Although nearly two-thirds of the Latter-day Saints in that region lost their homes and many left town to find shelter, nearly all of them had returned to their home towns by 1948. The Allied military occupation forces in those areas did not evict people from their homes permanently and promoted the rebuilding of structures on private property where resources were available.

### *Did German Latter-day Saints deviate from Church practices and doctrines?*

For some reason, this question has long interested Latter-day Saints outside of Germany. I have heard many versions of a few basic stories told that seem to offer evidence that as soon as the American missionaries were withdrawn from Europe and communications with Salt Lake City were interrupted, isolated Saints altered practices in the Church.<sup>26</sup> One of the most frequent stories involves the use of candles on sacrament tables. Ruth Schumann Hinton, a former member of the Chemnitz Schloss Branch of the East German Mission, recalled that this was the case in her branch for very logical reasons: "We had no electricity and all of the windows were covered with wood or cardboard because the glass had shattered. How were the priests supposed to

read the sacrament prayers in the dark?"<sup>27</sup> No eyewitness accounts or documents support the suggestion that the ordinances of baptism or the sacrament were modified, that women participated in priesthood functions, or that the doctrines of the restored Church were revised and false teaching disseminated. The suggestion that such deviance existed is offensive to the Saints who struggled to keep the Church alive during those trying years.

## **Conclusion**

Historians estimate that fifty-five million people died worldwide as a result of World War II. Included among those were Latter-day Saints from many lands. However, it is likely that the only LDS Church members who learned the horrors of war on both the battlefield and the home front lived in Europe. LDS membership in Germany and Austria suffered the loss of at least one thousand members, 425 of them adult men. When the smoke cleared, the Church needed to function despite the permanent loss of approximately ten percent of the priesthood holders. Losses among other demographic groups were far fewer; women and children had died, but mathematical losses were quite tolerable in comparison to those of the men.

All over Germany, the ruins of homes, businesses, and factories testified to the brutality of war. With most branches homeless, the search for meeting places began without delay, and the Saints proved themselves to be very resourceful. They sat on floors, sang without hymnals, taught lessons and quoted scripture from memory, and awaited the day (usually years off) when the trappings of worship available in peaceful parts of the world would be had again. They reorganized branches where possible and established new ones among groups of refugees.

Accounts of unshakable faith and undaunted courage under pressure and under fire are legion among German-speaking Latter-day Saints who survived the war. Statistics are demonstrative but not always expressive, and thus can never reflect the heartaches of Saints for family members and friends who were killed or who left home and never returned. However, dedication to their faith proved to be stronger than dedication to mortals, and the Church was never in danger of disappearing from the scarred German landscape. By the time Ezra Taft Benson arrived in Germany in March 1946 to assess the condition of the Church there, branches and districts were functioning well, and the Saints—though still hurting—were optimistic about the future.<sup>28</sup>

The two books that resulted from my research, and this article, represent an attempt to describe what happened to individuals and branches in the two German missions during World War II. The same research needs to be done for countries such as France, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Great

Britain, where it is assumed that Saints of equal faith and loyalty lived, suffered, and served during World War II.

### Postscript

The first effort to promote the research on this topic was an international search for eyewitnesses. A front-page article in the *Church News* resulted in more than three hundred responses from interested individuals. Church leadership in Salt Lake City allowed me to send a small color poster to each Church unit in Germany and Austria for posting in the meeting houses and many more interested parties responded. The author expresses his gratitude to (then) Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf who forwarded the request through the office of the Presiding Bishopric to President Gordon B. Hinckley, who graciously approved it.

For purposes of this study, an eyewitness had to have been a member of the LDS Church in Germany during the war years.<sup>29</sup> Each qualifying person was sent a letter describing the study and my need to collect personal stories and documents. In all, 708 persons (5.3 percent of the wartime Church membership) were located in eight countries and subsequently invited to participate in the investigation. Of those 708 persons, 524 were eventually interviewed. Fifty more were too young (born after 1940) to have significant memories of the war. Seventy-one could not be contacted for a variety of reasons. Only sixty-three declined to be involved, most insisting that they did not want their names mentioned or that they simply declined to talk about their lives during those difficult years.<sup>30</sup>

Exhaustive searches for related documents and photographs were conducted in the Church History Library, the Family History Library, Brigham Young University's Harold B. Lee Library, city archives in Germany (via correspondence) and in many Internet sites. Numerous personal accounts were located, along with many branch histories and a number of contemporary photographs. Most such finds were copied and the remainder summarized.<sup>31</sup>

The research associated with this study would have taken more than a decade had it not been for the enthusiastic and competent support of student research assistants. From the onset of intense investigation in October 2005, to the publication of the first book in September 2009, twenty-three undergraduate students carried out tasks in the following areas: communications with agencies and individuals in many countries, eyewitness identification and location, English interviews (including transcription and text editing), German interviews (including translation and text editing), maps and demographics, compilation of the names of those who died, maintenance of our archive, Website design and management, and public relations and presentations.

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## Notes

1. Gilbert Scharffs included a short paragraph on World War II in his book *Mormonism in Germany* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970). The author has accumulated fewer than ten books published by individuals about their experiences. A number of histories compiled by German branches/wards give a page or two (rarely more) to the topic, but no publication describing all of the branches in the two LDS German missions had been attempted by 2005.

2. The five branches in Austria were added to the West German Mission on November 1, 1938 as a result of Germany's annexation (*Anschluss*) of Austria in March of that year. Austria had previously belonged to the Swiss-Austrian Mission.

3. Only four members of the Church living in Germany during the war have been identified as having been endowed in a temple. All four lived in the East German Mission, and two did not survive the war.

4. The details of individual and branch experiences of German and Austrian Saints are included in the two books that emerged from this investigation—one for each of the LDS German missions that existed during World War II: Roger P. Minert, *In Harm's Way: East German Latter-day Saints in World War II* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009); and Roger P. Minert, *Under the Gun: West German and Austrian Latter-day Saints in World War II* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, forthcoming 2011).

5. The *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) was a program designed to train boys and girls ages 12–17 in the ways of National Socialism. Activities were designed to develop a generation of youngsters who were physically, mentally and emotionally prepared to further the dominance of Germany in Europe.

6. This organization was known in the Church generally as the MIA (in German: *Gemeinschaftliche Fortbildungsvereinigung* or *GFV*); the modern equivalents are the Young Men and the Young Women.

7. At least two women of the Selbongen Branch fathered children of Russian soldiers as a result of molestation. Minert, *In Harm's Way*, 313.

8. Minert, *In Harm's Way*, 526–27.

9. See Martin K. Sorge, *The Other Price of Hitler's War* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1986).

10. The title “mission supervisor” was first used in a letter written by wartime European Mission President Thomas E. McKay. See Thomas E. McKay to Herbert Klopfer, February 13, 1940; East German Mission History, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

11. Bundesarchiv, Berlin. Schneider traveled extensively around the southwest region of the West German Mission after 1942.

12. The names of the two men mentioned here are withheld for two reasons—surviving family members staunchly deny these allegations, and no documentation has been found to support the claims.

13. The building still stands. Recently renovated, it serves the small town as a Catholic Church.

14. The five women were Hildegard Heimburg, Ilse Brüniger, Berta Raisch, Ilse Krämer, and Elfriede Marach.

15. Richard Deus of the Breslau South Branch served from 1939 to 1941, and Rudolph Wächtler of the Döbeln Branch served for just a few months in 1941.

16. The young women were Erika Fassmann of Zwickau, Ilse Reimer of Kolberg,

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Helga Meiszus Meyer of Tilsit, Renate Berger of Königsberg and Johanna Berger. Fassman survived the first bombing of the mission office on November 21, 1943. See Roger P. Minert: "The Fate of the East German Mission Home in World War II." *Mormon Historical Studies* 10, no. 1 (Spring 2009), 101–10.

17. City archive, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

18. Deutsches Bundesarchiv Berlin, Gestapoakten 103, Frankfurt/Oder, August 23, 1940.

19. Minert, *In Harm's Way*, 47.

20. Several excellent books have been written about this tragic story; thus no detailed treatment will be included here. Only one eyewitness outside of the Hamburg District claimed to have heard of Helmut Huebener during the war—Justus Ernst of the Kassel Branch, Hannover District. It appears that Mission Supervisor Christian Heck preferred to keep the matter under wraps rather than burden Church members all over the country with fears of government reprisals.

21. Minert, *Under the Gun*, book manuscript forthcoming.

22. Minert *In Harm's Way*, 122.

23. Bruno Stroganoff, interview by Jennifer Heckmann in German, Neckargemünd, Germany, August 20, 2006.

24. The branch had 156 members of record when the war began. The last survivors were detained in what had been renamed Selwagi, Poland, until 1974, when they were allowed to emigrate to West Germany.

25. The residents of Wolfsgrün (perhaps 150 in number) had moved out of the facility by 1951. The Langen LDS community survives, but emigration to the United States reduced the population from more than 300 to about fifty by 1954.

26. I decline to relate any such rumors here, since innocent readers might retell them as truth and thus perpetuate the myths.

27. Ruth Schumann Hinton, interview by Jennifer Heckmann and Erin Clark, Lehi, Utah, June 23, 2006.

28. See Ezra Taft Benson, *A Labor of Love* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1989).

29. Most of the Latter-day Saints in Germany today who were alive during the war years did not join the Church until after the war. Thus, while they are often qualified to relate experiences of the war, they cannot describe the circumstances of Church members and units during those years.

30. The residences of eyewitnesses were as follows: United States 480; Germany 207; Canada 11; Austria 6; Australia 2; England 1; France 1; Switzerland 1.

31. The author expresses gratitude to William W. Slaughter and Matthew Heiss, two staff members in the Church History Library who removed many hindrances to allow access to otherwise restricted documents.