

THE PARTICIPATORY ASPECT OF CREATING A COLLECTION ON WWII COLLECTING EGO-DOCUMENTS FROM LUXEMBOURGISH RECRUITS AND THEIR FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

The University of Luxembourg's "WARLUX" project focuses on studying the biographies of young Luxembourgers who were conscripted into German forces during World War II under the Nazi German occupation. Through participatory contributions and crowdsourcing, the research team has created a unique collection that is typically inaccessible through official institutions. This citizen science endeavour emphasises the involvement of families and the public in collecting historical data, reshaping historiography and providing a fresh understanding of the war. The interaction between researchers and contributors, particularly the families, has mutually benefited both parties, amplifying voices and uncovering fascinating personal histories. This collaborative approach contributes to a comprehensive exploration of the war's impact.

KEYWORDS:

Crowdsourcing; family memory; Luxembourg; WWII; ego-documents; digital collection

INTRODUCTION

Over 80 years have passed since the end of the Second World War, and the number of eyewitnesses is steadily declining. Despite subsequent conflicts in Europe, the war continues to hold significant historical and emotional weight in Europe, which bore the brunt of Nazi occupation. Luxembourg, which endured nearly four years of Nazi oppression and terror, experienced a dark and complex period in its history. One notable aspect is the forced conscription of its young population into Nazi services. While this impacted only a minority of the population, it remains a highly emotional subject, often depicted as a broad victim narrative encapsulated by the term "eradicating Luxembourgish youth", as stated by the president of the Association of Forced Conscripts (*Fédération des Enrôlés Force*) in January 2020.¹

¹ Armand Hoffmann, '75 Jahre Danach / Gedenken an Die 91 Erschossenen Luxemburger', *Escher Tageblatt*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.tageblatt.lu/headlines/gedenken-an-die-91-erschossenen-luxemburger/>.

It is essential to approach the term “eradication” with critical scrutiny, recognising that it primarily refers to the Jewish inhabitants of Luxembourg who were deported to extermination camps because of the Nazis' racial and ethnic ideology. However, the term also encompasses the interpretation of the experiences of those young individuals within German services. To challenge the assigned victim role and explore the experiences of this group from a critical perspective, the WARLUX project was initiated at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C²DH) at the University of Luxembourg. The project, entitled “WARLUX - Soldiers and their Communities in WWII: The Impact and Legacy of War Experiences in Luxembourg”, is funded by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (Fonds National de la Recherche - FNR). Its primary focus is to examine the personal war experiences of forcibly recruited young adults, aiming to gain a “bottom-up” perspective on their individual lived experiences.

In addition to utilising official sources as supplementary material, the research team relies on ego-documents – personal testimonies and writings – to gain deeper insights into the perspectives of individuals involved. However, quantitative ego-documents related to the targeted group within Luxembourg's archives and research institutions are scarce. Consequently, the research team, coordinated by the author, decided to engage citizens and launch a crowdsourcing project to collect personal documents from the affected individuals. This approach places significant emphasis on interaction with the contributors and their families, as the project relies on public participation and engagement.

This article aims to elucidate the intentions and motivations of the researchers, shed light on the motivations of the project participants, and examine the dynamic interaction between participants and researchers. In addition to outlining the project's procedures, challenges and pitfalls, the article will show how participatory engagement within the realm of citizen science enhanced and enriched the study of Luxembourgers' war experiences.

Goals and target group

After the occupation of Luxembourg and the establishment of the occupation administration led by Gauleiter Simon, both male and female Luxembourgers were recruited for various Nazi services. Mandatory labour service, or *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (RAD), was imposed on men and women on 23 May 1941 for those born between 1920 and 1927.² Furthermore, men were called up for military service in the German *Wehrmacht* on 30 August 1942. Initially, this policy applied

² Verordnungsblatt (VBl.) Chef der Zivilverwaltung (CdZ) Luxemburg, Verordnung über die Reichsarbeitsdienstpflicht in Luxemburg, 23 May 1941 (Luxembourg, Regulation on compulsory national labour service in Luxembourg), p. 232.

to individuals born between 1920 and 1924, but it was later expanded to encompass those born prior to 1927.³

While the exact numbers are still subject to debate it is estimated that approximately 10,211 young Luxembourgish men complied with the conscription order and joined the Nazi forces.⁴ An estimated 2,300 Luxembourgers deserted and 1,200 evaded the draft,⁵ and around 1,500 male Luxembourgers probably volunteered for the German military and police forces.⁶

As well as the 10,211 male conscripts from Luxembourg, 3,600 women were also called up for compulsory service in the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* camps.⁷ After that the women served in the *Kriegshilfsdienst* (KHD), an auxiliary war service, in munition factories or other war-related industries. In total women had to serve one year. Men served in German uniforms for a longer period than women. After their six months in the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, they were called up to the *Wehrmacht*; if they survived, they served there until the end of the war, and some then continued to be held as prisoners of war by the Western Allies or the Soviets.

In total, the forced conscription of young Luxembourgers impacted 13,825 men and women, who constituted approximately 4.7% of the country's overall population of 290,000.⁸ Although this proportion may appear relatively small, the consequences of this forced conscription had a significant impact on both the affected individuals and the broader population, leaving a lasting legacy.

³ VBl. CdZ Luxemburg, Verordnung über die Wehrpflicht in Luxemburg, 31 August 1942 (Regulation on compulsory military service in Luxembourg), p. 253.

⁴ André Hohengarten, *Die Zwangsrekrutierung Der Luxemburger in Die Deutsche Wehrmacht. Eine Dokumentation.*, ed. Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, vol. 1, Histoire & Mémoire. Les Cahiers Du CDREF (Luxembourg: Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, 2010), 13.

⁵ Hohengarten, 1:23; Norbert Haase, 'Von "Ons Jongen" und "Malgré-nous" und anderen. Das Schicksal der ausländischen Zwangsrekrutierten im Zweiten Weltkrieg', in *Die anderen Soldaten: Wehrkraftersetzung, Gehorsamsverweigerung und Fahnenflucht im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1997), 171; Peter M Quadflieg, 'Zwangssoldaten' Und 'Ons Jongen'. *Eupen-Malmedy Und Luxemburg Als Rekrutierungsgebiet Der Deutschen Wehrmacht Im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Aachen: Shaker Verlag, 2008), 115.

⁶ In historiography, numbers ranging from 1500 to 2000 volunteers from Luxembourg appear. However, it is important to approach these numbers with caution as they are based on German contemporary sources, see Paul. Dostert, *Luxemburg zwischen Selbstbehauptung und nationaler Selbstaufgabe: Die deutsche Besatzungspolitik und die Volksdeutsche Bewegung 1940-1945* (Luxembourg: Imprimerie Saint-Paul, 1985), 171; Hohengarten, *Die Zwangsrekrutierung Der Luxemburger in Die Deutsche Wehrmacht. Eine Dokumentation.*, 1:12.

⁷ André Hohengarten, "Die Zwangsrekrutierung Der Luxemburger in Die Deutsche Wehrmacht", *Histoire & Mémoire. Les Cahiers Du CDREF1* (2010): 13.

⁸ Steve Kayser, 'Vorwort', in *Die Zwangsrekrutierung Der Luxemburger in Die Deutsche Wehrmacht. Eine Dokumentation.*, ed. Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, vol. 1, Histoire & Mémoire. Les Cahiers Du CDREF (Luxembourg: Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, 2010), 7.

However, it is essential to highlight that our research premise revolves around the male and female cohort born between 1920 and 1927, regardless of whether they were conscripted or volunteered for *Wehrmacht* and/or the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* and *Kriegshilfsdienst*. This particular cohort was established by the Nazi occupational government and serves as the primary focus and case study for our investigation into forced recruitment. When referring to the affected group or generation in this article, it specifically pertains to this birth cohort. It is worth noting that while our research project also considers the experiences of family members, the primary emphasis remains on the protagonists and the conscription cohort.

In previous research and public discussions, there was a collective focus that grouped together all individuals affected by the war. However, in post-war Luxembourg, there was a lack of effort to explore personal viewpoints and experiences and people's individual lives and contexts. In order to depart from traditional historiography, the WARLUX project used biographical documents, ego-documents, testimonies and witness reports, which represent the "voices from below" that are absent from the dominant national narrative.

Although the official documentation in the Luxembourg and German archives pertaining to conscription and military records provided a baseline, it was deemed insufficient. Additional material beyond the official accounts and victimisation narratives was required to understand individual journeys from conscription to service in German forces. While some individual records could be found, they were predominantly created by the Nazi administration and therefore lacked a perspective that encompassed personal and individual experiences. Ego-documents served as one such avenue to address this gap.

Our primary objective was therefore to collect personal documents, particularly war letters, diaries and photographs, that could illuminate the experiences of individuals during the war. It should be noted that while individual documents such as letters are preserved in institutions like the National Archives or the Literature Archive in Luxembourg, their quantity is limited, and they primarily represent a select few individuals, such as famous writers and journalists, who have already shared their stories or published memoirs.⁹ Our aim was to obtain material that had not made its way into archival collections.

We were aware of the limitations of our research contributions, as the passage of time and other factors have resulted in the loss of many ego-documents. Moreover, due to various constraints, such as the inability to collect material from

⁹ Many memoirs have been published by individuals who were forcibly conscripted, such as Arthur Philippe, ... *... an du goung et no Osten : meng Krichserënnerungen*, ... *... an du goung et no Osten meng Krichserënnerungen* (Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2005); Norbert Bache, *In Den Fängen Der Wehrmacht. Die Erlebnisse Des Zwangsrekrutierten Norbert Bac h* (Luxembourg, 2002).

men who voluntarily joined the German forces, we acknowledge that our dataset may not fully represent a comprehensive range of perspectives.¹⁰

Given the potential unavailability of direct participants from the conscription cohort, particularly because they have already reached an advanced age or passed away, our research team focused on reaching out to their families, particularly their children and grandchildren. To engage as many families and members of the affected group as possible, the WARLUX team initiated a call for contributions in February 2021. To generate awareness and clarify our objectives, we organised a press conference, accompanied by radio interviews and newspaper articles. The national newspapers *Luxemburger Wort* and *Tageblatt* extensively covered our project and the appeal for ego-documents and photos. Choosing these prominent outlets, along with national radio stations like RTL, allowed us to effectively disseminate information about our research and call for contributions.

Furthermore, we complemented the call for contributions with a targeted poster and flyer campaign (see *Figure 1*). These promotional materials were distributed in various locations frequented by the general public, such as supermarkets, bakeries, butchers and even hair salons, with the intention of reaching not only younger individuals but also the elderly population, who represent the birth cohort. Additionally, we strategically placed our flyers in magazines that cater to senior populations and are popular among residents of retirement homes, where many members of the conscription cohort might reside.

WHY CITIZEN SCIENCE? THE POWER OF CROWDSOURCING

This participatory campaign can be classified as a citizen science project in the discipline of the humanities, within the wider field of history. The “conscription cohort” is mostly no longer with us, and interviews are no longer possible, so as historians we have to find and rely on other sources. The citizen science (CS) approach makes it possible to reach out to the public and ask for personal statements and testimonies – in our case, personal documents and stories from direct relatives, which are “second hand” but still valuable, as we will see in this article.

Those from the conscription cohort are often also known for “keeping quiet” about their war experiences. Because of the trauma and pain they suffered, or out

¹⁰ There are no exact figures available regarding volunteers, but a publication from the former Research Centre on Forced Recruitment indicates a number of 1,500 for volunteers in the SA, SS, *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen-SS*. André Hohengarten, *Die Zwangsrekrutierung Der Luxemburger in Die Deutsche Wehrmacht. Eine Dokumentation.*, ed. Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, vol. 1, Histoire & Mémoire. Les Cahiers du CDREF (Luxembourg: Centre de Documentation et de Recherche sur l'Enrôlement forcé, 2010), 12.

of shame and remorse,¹¹ children and grandchildren often know nothing of their relatives' wartime history, but they are interested in learning about it. As members of the conscription cohort neared the end of their lives, some came forward and spoke about the war; in other cases, after the death of parents or grandparents, younger family members found diaries and letters in their belongings and started to research the lives of their deceased relatives. The CS project brought together the interests of historians who wanted to gather more information about the conscription cohort, and family members who were in possession of relevant documents and were interested in finding out more about their relatives' lives and experiences.

The creation of data collections is essential for historical research. As well as consulting existing records in state archives and libraries, discovering and compiling documentation about personal views is always a challenge. Building a collection up close and "live" during a research project is a unique and valuable experience for both researchers and participants. Starting to document a sensitive historical topic like the Second World War is especially challenging, but it proved enriching. Studying and collecting personal experiences and individual stories requires a sufficient quantity of data and documents, and this was the goal of creating a collection of ego-documents.

As Bonney et al. suggest,¹² CS projects can differ in the type of citizen involvement they require. The authors distinguish between three types of project: contributive, collaborative and co-created. The WARLUX project falls under the contributive category, but it also touches on the collaborative, as I will show later in this article. Another term that is widely used when describing CS methods is "crowdsourcing". Crowdsourcing as a part of CS aims to use data collection and complementary research to find objects, documents and information that fill gaps in collections, such as those held by cultural heritage institutions, as Aroyo describes.¹³ The assumption here is that there is a need for CS to collect and obtain

¹¹ Renée Wagener, "Familial Discussions in the Context of Memory Research on the Second World War: Expectations and Disappointments", *Peripheral Memories*, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839421161.69>. Other studies, like Welzer, show how the wartime past was dealt with in the family memory; see Harald Welzer and Sabine Moller, "*Opa War Kein Nazi*". *Nationalsozialismus Und Holocaust Im Familiengedächtnis*, vol. 15515 (Frankfurt a.M., 2002). For more about dealing with parents' past as revealed in letters about WWII: Larson, R B. *Secrets and Rivals: Wartime Letters and the Parents I Never Knew*. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2015.

¹² Bonney, Rick et al., "Public Participation in Scientific Research: Defining the Field and Assessing Its Potential for Informal Science Education. A CAISE Inquiry Group Report". (Washington, D.C., 2009), 11, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED519688.pdf>.

¹³ Johan Oomen and Lora Aroyo, "Crowdsourcing in the Cultural Heritage Domain: Opportunities and Challenges", *C&T '11: Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Communities and Technologies*, June 2011, 143, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1145/2103354.2103373>.

material – in our case private material – which is not represented in official archives and museums. It is here that citizens, our participants, come in.

As many authors have stated, the definitions in this field are many and varied – as Garcia et al. show.¹⁴ But I would categorise the WARLUX project as a crowdsourcing project within the broader realm of CS. Many authors point out that CS is mostly used in the natural sciences,¹⁵ but the humanities and the field of history have delivered several remarkable projects and ideas in terms of engagement with the public.¹⁶ After all, the basic idea of crowdsourcing is to engage with the public and promote a project;¹⁷ it is undeniably a form of social engagement. According to Holley, crowdsourcing “uses social engagement techniques to help a group of people achieve a shared, usually significant goal by working collaboratively together as a group”.¹⁸

The researchers aimed to compile detailed records about individuals which had not yet been collected or published. Time was, however, of the essence, since the children of World War II soldiers are an invaluable source for detailed information – such as nicknames, eccentricities of personality or quirky facts –, whereas grandchildren tend to have less detailed knowledge of their forebears. Only in rare cases is the conscription cohort still alive, but their children and nieces and nephews might well be, and they may therefore be able to share details and offer essential hints for further research. Engagement and participation were the main concepts in this process.

Collecting and crowdsourcing historical information such as documents and objects “gives researchers access to privileged information or new primary sources”.¹⁹ As Ridge et al. write, crowdsourcing is not just about data; it is also about

¹⁴ Francisco Sanz García et al., “Finding What You Need: A Guide to Citizen Science Guidelines”, in *The Science of Citizen Science*, ed. Katrin Vohland et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 15, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-58278-4_21.

¹⁵ Milena Dobrova and Azzopardi, Daniela, “Citizen Science in the Humanities: A Promise for Creativity”, *Proceedings of the 9th International Conference on Knowledge, Information and Creativity Support Systems, Limassol, Cyprus, November 6-8, 2014*, 2014, 448.

¹⁶ For an overview and report on the impact of crowdsourcing projects, see Mark Hedges and Stuart E. Dunn, “Crowd-Sourcing Scoping Study: Engaging the Crowd with Humanities Research”, 2012, 54, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Crowd-Sourcing-Scoping-Study%3A-Engaging-the-Crowd-Hedges-Dunn/9940b0520332a6b0605559fd7c8c46672b3fb655>.

¹⁷ Anna Maria Tammaro et al., “Data Curator’s Roles and Responsibilities: An International Perspective”, *Libri* 69, no. 2 (2019): 89–104, <https://doi.org/10.1515/libri-2018-0090>.

¹⁸ Rose Holley, “Crowdsourcing: How and Why Should Libraries Do It?”, *D-Lib Magazine* 16, no. 3–4 (2010): 16–17, <https://doi.org/10.1045/march2010-holley>.

¹⁹ Loreta Tauginienė et al., “Citizen Science in the Social Sciences and Humanities: The Power of Interdisciplinarity”, *Palgrave Communications* 6, no. 1 (7 May 2020): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0471-y>.

interaction with participants.²⁰ Approaches like that adopted by WARLUX provide possibilities of gauging perceptions among the population in ways other than merely consulting official collections in archives and memory institutions.²¹ The creation of a collection with the public is an active way of preserving sources that are otherwise not accessible via official institutions; it represents a unique approach in contemporary Luxembourg.

THE COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The process of collecting and preserving war experiences in connection with the WARLUX project was driven by research objectives. Conducting research on the cohort comprising eligible men and women for military and labour service is not without challenges. The complexities arise from the fact that these individuals wore German uniforms during the occupation of Luxembourg, worked in munitions factories, or fought alongside the *Wehrmacht* against the Allied forces. But societal and political shifts across generations, coupled with the inquisitiveness of younger historians, have paved the way for the emergence of a project like WARLUX. This has created an opportunity for more unhindered and open contributions and sharing, enabling the analysis and exploration of entirely novel questions.

The involvement of the public, specifically the direct relatives of the affected group and their descendants, presented a unique opportunity for them as active participants. It granted them a “symbolic and emotional link with heritage as well as empowerment or socialization of heritage, including identity formation and community building”, as articulated by Tauginienè.²²

Upon the publication of the call for contributions in February 2021, our team witnessed an immediate surge in interest. Operating with a team of three members, we diligently attended to the influx of telephone calls and incoming emails. The volume of over 200 enquiries overwhelmed us, necessitating a systematic approach. Each incoming call and message was duly recorded, and subsequent follow-up conversations were conducted to engage contributors in detailed discussions regarding their potential contributions. However, it is noteworthy that approximately one-third of the calls did not align with our research objectives, primarily for three reasons. Firstly, some individuals merely sought to share personal stories and seek information about their families during the war,

²⁰ Mia Ridge et al., “5. Designing Cultural Heritage Crowdsourcing Projects”, *The Collective Wisdom Handbook: Perspectives on Crowdsourcing in Cultural Heritage - Community Review Version. 1st Ed.*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.21428/a5d7554f.1b80974b>.

²¹ “Crowdsourcing. Konzeptionelle Überlegungen Für Den Einsatz in Archiven. ‘DFG-Projekt Digitalisierung Und Entwicklung Neuer Nutzungsmöglichkeiten von Archivalischen Fotobeständen” (Stuttgart: LANDESARCHIV BADEN-WÜRTTEMBERG, 2016), 15.

²² Tauginienè et al., “Citizen Science in the Social Sciences and Humanities: The Power of Interdisciplinarity”, 7.

encompassing diverse categories of wartime experiences, such as imprisonment or deportation, without having any documents to share. Secondly, certain enquiries pertained to different documents, including memoirs of political prisoners, accounts of resistance activities, or narratives focusing on civilians and their encounters during bombing raids. In such cases, we advised these individuals to share their documents with their local archives or with the National Archives, as they could be of interest and suitable for long-term preservation. Lastly, some contacts only offered photographs or official documents, without providing any personal insights or experiences.

During the initial phase of the collection process, we accepted all contributions, even those consisting solely of official documents such as *Soldbücher* (a form of Wehrmacht identification document) and photo albums. However, as the research progressed, we made the decision to decline such submissions as they lacked personal experiential expressions, which are essential for our research objectives. From a research perspective, the value of a single diary surpasses that of an entire series of official documents. Furthermore, other aspects such as conscription, deployments and missions within the *Wehrmacht* can be discerned through existing official documents already housed in state archives.

Document submissions were received through various means. In certain cases, contributors delivered digital scans of the documents directly to the university. Our research team also visited families in their homes, collecting physical documents for subsequent digitisation on campus. Once the digitisation process was completed, the documents were promptly returned to their respective owners.

The majority of documents received by the WARLUX team predominantly pertained to male conscripts (164 in number) and soldiers in the Wehrmacht, with only 28 contributions from women. This disparity can be attributed to the fact that a significant portion of those affected by conscription were young men. Specifically, there were 10,211 male conscripts from Luxembourg, while 3,600 women were summoned for compulsory service in the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* camps and *Kriegshilfsdienst*.²³ Consequently, male Luxembourgers served for extended periods, up to four years or more, resulting in a higher number of documents related to their wartime experiences, such as letters.

In order to address this gap, it would be a good idea to consider a second call for contributions in the future, with a specific focus on capturing “female voices”.

In total, our efforts yielded 160 distinct collections, creating a substantial corpus of over 5,000 letters and 20 diaries. The content of these collections varied significantly, ranging from a few postcards in some instances to extensive compilations exceeding 500 letters from multiple family members in others. As our research predominantly centred around the conscription cohort, we did not

²³ Andre Hohengarten, “Die Zwangsrekrutierung Der Luxemburger in Die Deutsche Wehrmacht”, *Histoire & Mémoire. Les Cahiers Du CDREF1* (2010): 13.

systematically record personal details such as the age and profession of the contributors. However, throughout our discussions with these individuals, we diligently noted their relationship to the “protagonists” of the war and their family background.

Copyright and data protection

Each contributor was required to sign an agreement regarding the use of the material for the research project, as well as for any potential future projects at the university. We made a commitment to handle the documents with utmost care and to uphold the privacy of the contributors. In certain cases, we agreed to use the data anonymously or refrain from publishing photographs. The majority of families exhibited a considerable degree of trust in handing over their data to the university. However, some families were more cautious as they felt there may be a risk of the collections containing sensitive material concerning their own families or others. In a small country like Luxembourg, where interpersonal connections are widespread, there was a genuine concern that the research findings could expose compromising information. This apprehension to some extent hindered the progress of the research. This information was documented in the consent form, and the data was handled in accordance with the participants’ wishes. In the event of publication, the names have been or will be pseudonymised.

Nevertheless, the families who contacted us expressed a strong desire to share their materials in any capacity and willingly signed the data protection agreements.

Document transfer and selection

In some cases the contributors submitted the documents as digital scans sent directly to the university via email or flash drives, and in others the research team visited the families at their homes and collected the documents for digitisation on campus. Once the digitisation process had been completed, the original documents were returned to the families, and the university did not retain any originals.

During the home visits, we collected war-related letters, including both incoming and outgoing correspondence from the war front. While the correspondence mostly ceased after the soldiers returned home, certain documents such as pre-war letters and diaries were included to provide a more comprehensive understanding of specific stories. Additionally, some collections included “official” documents from the Nazi administration, educational certificates, draft orders, court files, and records related to labour or military service.

Group photographs were generally excluded from the selection process, for several reasons. Firstly, these documents were often contributed by individuals who were not able to provide the names of everyone in the photograph. Secondly, identifying specific individuals depicted in the photographs posed challenges.

Thirdly, obtaining copyright permissions or agreements from each individual, even if presumed deceased, presented difficulties. Our research group was of the view that photos alone did not necessarily convey personal experiences, with the exception of group “activities” such as social gatherings, recreational events and depictions of life on the front line. In the case of photo albums, we did not remove any photographs; instead, we marked the relevant ones to be scanned on campus.

The detailed protocol, including the handling and selection of documents, was meticulously recorded in an Excel spreadsheet and reinforced through the consent agreement. Furthermore, for each collection, detailed notes were provided, indicating the potential existence of additional documents within the family that fell outside the scope of our research, for instance documents from younger family members born after 1927.

THE CONTRIBUTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE ASPECTS

In accordance with Bonney et al., the WARLUX project primarily aligns with the research-driven intent of the Contributory Model. This model, as suggested by Bonney, involves researchers designing a project in which members of the public contribute data - in our case, the material related to the project. Additionally, our project also incorporates elements of the Collaborative Model, although to a lesser extent than the Contributory Model. According to Bonney et al., the Collaborative Model is designed for researchers to work alongside the public in refining project design, analysing data and gaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

The first pillar of our project encompasses the collection of data through our call for contributions. This step involved obtaining the necessary material and data for our research. However, it is important to highlight the significance of the interaction with participants, particularly the families who contributed to the project.

In essence, the core of our approach is rooted in the Contributory Model, which relied heavily on engagement and interaction with the families involved in the project.

Interactions with families or the contributory aspect

Interactions with families played a crucial role in our collection process. By establishing personal relationships and allocating sufficient time for visits, we were able to build trust and receive additional information about the material provided. Unsurprisingly, the majority of responses to our call came not from the conscription cohort themselves, but from their children born after 1945. As these family members emptied the houses of elderly parents, either after their death or when they moved to a care facility, they discovered war letters and diaries. This generation, including the children and grandchildren of those directly affected by

conscription, represents one of the last connections to the individuals involved. They possess invaluable knowledge about them and can provide crucial information that is not documented in files or audio recordings. These insights encompass emotions, quirky family stories, love, hate and everything in between.

While these family memories are considered “second-hand” accounts, they nevertheless offer vital supplementary information. Discrepancies naturally arise when comparing the information obtained from families with military archival records. In some cases, the archives provide only factual details such as enlistment dates and unit assignments, leaving gaps that can be filled by ego-documents or discussions with families. However, throughout the collection process, we grappled with the question of how reliable we could consider these sources of information to be.

We remained mindful of the inherent challenges associated with using personal recollections as historical sources. Memories, and even the act of passing down memories, are inherently fallible. They are subject to biases, forgetting and reconstruction over time. The passage of time, individual perspectives and external influences can all contribute to potential inaccuracies or gaps in the information provided. We also encountered instances where families shared “myths” that had been passed down through generations. As historians, we acknowledge that exceptions and discrepancies can arise, and the information and accounts provided by families may not always align with historical facts.

During one visit to see a contributing family, we encountered a recurring narrative about the father's forced conscription. According to his daughter, the father “had” to join the *Wehrmacht* and confidently mentioned a date for his departure to the front, which clearly preceded the conscription order issued by the Nazis in August 1942. Upon further enquiry about the date, the daughter confidently confirmed it. This suggests that her father may have volunteered for service rather than being conscripted like others. However, when we shared this information during our conversation with the family, they strongly asserted that he “had to go” and was indeed forced into service. This case highlights the need for further research and investigation. It demonstrates that family memories and historical facts can sometimes collide or contradict each other.

However, as Tanya Evans highlights, family memories are not solely individual recollections; they are shaped through collective construction.²⁴ In the context of conscription into the Nazi forces, it is widely accepted that fathers were often coerced into service. However, a more in-depth enquiry is necessary to fully grasp the nuances of their conscription, including the extent to which it was voluntary or forced. It is also essential to consider the information shared by the conscription cohort with their family members upon their return. Through our conversations

²⁴ Tanya Evans, “How Do Family Historians Work with Memory?”, *Journal of Family History* 46, no. 1 (January 2021): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0363199020967384>.

with families, we gained valuable insights into the dynamics of intergenerational communication and the transmission of memories, as they shared their perspectives on what their parents revealed or withheld about their wartime experiences.²⁵

Despite these challenges, family memories serve to connect existing historical knowledge about the conscription cohort to individual experiences.²⁶ Therefore, it was crucial for us to corroborate and cross-reference these second-hand personal accounts with other available sources to establish a more comprehensive and reliable understanding of the historical context. By doing so, we were able to “humanize” history, as proposed by Evans.²⁷

The way in which documents are preserved can offer valuable insights into the past, reflecting a diversity of archival practices. Practices ranged from meticulously organising documents and storing them chronologically to more haphazard methods involving envelopes, boxes and suitcases (*see Figure 2*). Such variations in archival practices provide glimpses into how families valued these materials and their historical significance.

During our interactions, we asked participants various questions covering a range of topics. We explored their relationship with the main protagonist, whether they returned, and the circumstances surrounding their return. We enquired about their conscription experience, their life before the war and conscription, their attitudes towards the Germans, the dynamics within their family, and whether other family members were affected by occupation, repression or resistance. We also tried to get a sense of their immediate reactions upon learning about their conscription and investigated the actions they took in response to this news.

Through conversations with contributors, we obtained valuable information about the individuals' backgrounds, their families and some of their correspondence partners. Many letters were addressed to parents and siblings, while others were written to individuals using nicknames such as “Jempi” or “Jängi”, making identification challenging. Some contributors helped us identify these individuals or provided their names. However, in many cases, identifying a “Jempi” proved difficult because of the nickname's commonality – it was one of the most popular boys' names in Luxembourg during the 1920s. Nonetheless, some letters included envelopes, which aided in tracing the senders' identities through their last names and status. Many letters were also exchanged among soldiers at the front lines or in training camps.

In one case, limitations in military records led researchers to engage directly with the family. This case involves Ernest Classen, who was serving in the anti-aircraft

²⁵ Wagener, “Familial Discussions in the Context of Memory Research on the Second World War: Expectations and Disappointments”, 82. Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik*, *Schriftenreihe der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, Lizenzausg (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2007), 98.

²⁶ Evans, ‘How Do Family Historians Work with Memory?’, 93.

²⁷ Evans, 95.

defence (*Flak*) in Luxembourg during the closing stages of the war in late summer 1944. While we have archival records and his correspondence with family documenting his time in the air defence of the *Wehrmacht*, there is a notable absence of details regarding the final phase of his service. The German forces retreated to Germany, leaving Luxembourgers behind. Ernest Classen survived the war and returned home, but the circumstances surrounding his repatriation remain unknown. To address this gap in knowledge, the author diligently engaged with his family. Classen's sister and son clarified that Ernest did not simply return home but went into hiding due to his continued wearing of the German uniform. Given the presence of German soldiers evading capture by US forces in Luxembourg, Ernest risked being mistaken for a German combatant. Unfortunately, this aspect of his homecoming lacks documentary evidence, but the family's testimonial provided crucial insight. This disclosure is of paramount importance: Ernest Classen's service in Luxembourg's anti-aircraft defence, despite limited combat exposure compared to his compatriots on the Eastern Front, takes on greater significance. The revelation enhances our understanding of his personal journey, offering a more nuanced portrayal of his wartime experiences and shedding light on his antipathy towards military duty when he was subsequently conscripted by the Luxembourg army in 1945.²⁸ We can offer numerous additional examples of the family supplying us with supplementary information and guiding us towards further research avenues. Although our interactions were not conducted following an oral history-based methodology, as our focus was on the protagonists rather than the family narrative, they were instrumental in capturing the personal side of the individuals central to our research.

Although digitised scans were appreciated, personal relationships and direct engagement with families provided us with a better understanding. Despite thorough review, unknown material was still discovered in letters. While variations existed in background stories, the quality of the contributions remained consistent.

The collaborative aspect

The interaction between families and us as historians yielded “synergetic effects of increased knowledge”, as Ina-Maria Jansson aptly describes the results of participatory projects.²⁹

However, it is important to explore the motivations behind people's participation and how their engagement influenced the existing narrative. In general, we observed a genuine desire among the families to share information and contribute to the research. Some families sought additional information or advice on how to conduct

²⁸ See Collection Classen/Everard, WARUX Collection, University of Luxembourg.

²⁹ Ina-Maria Jansson, “Creating Value of the Past through Negotiations in the Present: Balancing Professional Authority with Influence of Participants”, *Archival Science* 20, no. 4 (December 2020): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-020-09339-8>.

their own searches or find assistance with transcriptions. Knowing that the project was being carried out at the University of Luxembourg, which enjoys wide recognition and holds an important position in the country, provided reassurance to most families.

For many families, submitting documents and arranging appointments with us was not burdensome. The contributors displayed a sincere interest in our work, and we often spent extended periods of three to four hours at their homes. There was no expectation of financial reward; rather, they expressed gratitude for the attention we paid to them and for listening to their families' stories. Following Jansson's suggestion to give participants opportunities to exert influence,³⁰ we granted them creative freedom to present the documents and stories they wanted to highlight. We approached the families impartially, requesting only personal documents belonging to conscripts without formulating specific questions beforehand. Our enquiries aimed to be objective, focusing solely on conscripts' experiences and family backgrounds. However, it is possible that the families may have been influenced, either by a national narrative that encouraged them to present only "positive and harmless" stories or by a desire to selectively share the favourable and untroubled parts of their history, such as mentioning a family member's involvement in resistance activities.

Initially, there was a desire among family members to share their stories, and the presence of "experts from the university" made the significance of their narratives more apparent and important. We actively listened to their accounts, which in turn provided a sense of recognition and validation for the role their parents played during the war. The researchers were warmly welcomed, and people expressed gratitude that their fathers, brothers, mothers and sisters were finally receiving acknowledgement and being treated with genuine interest. Some family members proudly emphasised their relatives' resistance efforts, even in the face of challenging circumstances during the occupation. They shared tangible evidence of recognition, such as medals or certificates awarded by the post-war Luxembourg government for their acts of resistance. However, the majority of family members questioned why we were interested in their seemingly ordinary stories. They viewed their family members as "just" workers, maids or individuals without any exceptional qualities. We reassured them that even these seemingly average experiences were precisely what we were seeking to understand and highlight.

Additionally, there was a strong desire among the families to obtain more information about their parents' experiences, as their fathers or mothers often spoke very little about their time during the war, like many from the war generation.³¹ The silence surrounding war memories and trauma, as illustrated by Wagener's

³⁰ Jansson, 333.

³¹ As studies like Welzer show, see Welzer and Moller, *'Opa War Kein Nazi'. Nationalsozialismus Und Holocaust Im Familiengedächtnis*.

research, was widespread in Luxembourg as well.³² Many children knew that their parents were forced to serve in the German army or labour service but lacked details about their whereabouts, survival and experiences. As they prepared the documents for our team, many respondents read them for the first time, gaining a new perspective on their parents. This became a therapeutic journey for the contributors, allowing them to delve more deeply into their family history. Additionally, contributors sought advice and information from us, such as military service details, to provide historical context or learn more about burials and grave locations. We assisted them in locating certain places at the former Eastern Front, where their father was deployed or where a relative died. We directed them to databases and online resources for further information or recommended other sources for their research.

It is not surprising that the collection lacks a significant number of documents from women, volunteers who fought for the Germans, and individuals with complex family backgrounds. The contributors who contacted our research team and provided personal documents believed that their family's involvement in the war was largely innocuous and unrelated to their broader family history.

We expressed our gratitude to all the contributors and extended an invitation to our final project event in February 2023, where we would present the preliminary findings derived from the case study of the municipality of Schifflange. Recognising the limitations of time and scope, we carefully selected specific examples of contributions to showcase during the event, acknowledging that it would be impractical to discuss every individual and family in detail. In a relaxed atmosphere, accompanied by Luxembourgish sparkling wine and delectable hors d'oeuvres, we had the opportunity to engage in further conversations with the contributors, fostering additional dialogue and exchange of ideas.³³

THE EVALUATION IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The data and documents collected and the additional information provided by family members needs to be documented and evaluated. In the subsequent analysis, we must take into account biases, especially for data of private origin. War letters, for example, only contain information the sender wants to communicate to the recipient and do not reflect the whole truth of their situation. Here, contextualisation of the data is urgently needed, as are metadata, attribution and

³² Renée Wagener, "Familial Discussions in the Context of Memory Research on the Second World War: Expectations and Disappointments", *Peripheral Memories*, 2014, 82, <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839421161.69>.

³³ Report on the event - <https://www.c2dh.uni.lu/forum-z/local-history-close>

further curation.³⁴ In addition, of course, reuse of the data – processing and accessibility after the project – must be carried out in full compliance with the GDPR, especially given the sensitivity of the private information in our case.

The input shared by the families has greatly enriched our research. By combining their information with our own investigations and verification of historical facts and documents, we have gained valuable insights. In some cases, their contributions have led us to explore additional sources, such as archives or other documentation. Moreover, we have discovered connections among the individuals involved, such as family or friendship ties, which have provided important context regarding the community and backgrounds of these individuals.

Engaging with the families has revealed a remarkable depth of personal relationships that extends beyond the data collection phase. Even after the initial collection, the author and other researchers have maintained ongoing contact with the contributors to seek additional information. This continued engagement has proven invaluable in acquiring a deeper understanding of post-war struggles, encompassing challenges such as alcoholism and trauma. While our project was not originally conceived as an oral history endeavour, the profound nature of these personal connections and experiences has surpassed our initial expectations. As historians, we bear an ethical responsibility when faced with discrepancies between a family's understanding of their ancestors' service and historical facts. It is crucial to correct factual inaccuracies while respecting the perspectives held by the family members. The situation becomes more complex when encountering evidence of an individual's involvement in war crimes, although such instances have not arisen within our project. Our role is not to pass moral judgements but to acknowledge suspicions, interpret information and provide contextualisation through the use of other reliable sources.

Decisions regarding the disclosure of the identity of those who volunteered for military service (as opposed to being conscripted) require careful consideration. Family narratives often present stories that require thorough verification and integration into our analysis. Critical evaluation of sources plays a pivotal role in our scholarly pursuit. It is essential to address any suspicions that an individual may have volunteered and to ensure a nuanced understanding of their role in historical events.

Building trust and respecting privacy are fundamental in our research. We were only able to gather information because of the trust placed in us by the individuals involved. Safeguarding their privacy is of utmost importance. If we decide to disclose names, it will be done in accordance with consent forms or by anonymising/pseudonymising identities. Maintaining this trust is vital, as it directly impacts our collaborative partnerships and our commitment to future projects. We

³⁴ Bálint Balázs et al., “Data Quality in Citizen Science”, in *The Science of Citizen Science*, ed. Katrin Vohland et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 144, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-58278-4_8.

are also exploring the possibility of a crowdsourcing initiative, contingent on funding, to transcribe the collected letters, further promoting accessibility and engagement.

As academic historians, we uphold the value of critical engagement. This entails conducting meticulous examinations of family narratives and being willing to publish potentially unsettling facts. We strive to maintain scholarly rigour and integrity throughout our research process.

It is important to acknowledge that we did not manage to obtain a representative data set, as some material from volunteers is missing. Considerations regarding inventory management and the manner in which the collection will be made accessible are crucial. Any additional information provided by the families, such as notes and short interviews, is stored in digital collection folders. However, the personal relationships and interpersonal dynamics that were established during the project are not captured in the documentation, and this aspect will fade away over time.

Despite the conclusion of the research project, our work with the collected materials continues to evolve. Three collections which played a central role in our research have provided invaluable insights into the experiences of Luxembourgish conscripts in the *Wehrmacht* and the broader wartime context. Additionally, we have implemented a relational database to store the collected data, serving as a valuable tool for organising and managing the information gathered throughout the project. These collections have not only facilitated our own analysis but also formed the basis for various educational activities. Our team has incorporated them into courses that focus on working with primary sources and digital history, including the use of automated transcription tools like Transkribus for handwritten text recognition (HTR).

Moreover, we have made the letters and documents available to university students, enabling them to embark on independent research endeavours and enhance their academic pursuits. By using these materials in their own theses and projects, students have gained a deeper understanding of the historical period and contributed to the growing body of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the WARLUX project exemplifies the dynamic nature of citizen science projects and the diverse ways in which citizens can contribute to scientific research. As Bonney et al. suggest, different projects can involve varying levels of citizen involvement, and the WARLUX project demonstrates a combination of contributive and collaborative approaches. Crowdsourcing projects are an essential part of citizen science. This article emphasised the importance of integrating families and the public in the process of collecting historical data. Such interactions

and participation are shaping the existing historiography, and analysis of this material by historians contributes to a fresh, bottom-up understanding of the war and its innumerable narratives. The interaction between researchers and contributors – the families we were in contact with – was beneficial for both parties: it gave the families a voice, not to mention a platform to share information, while the researchers were provided with fascinating and important details about individuals and their personal histories.

In summary, our project has not only deepened our understanding of the everyday realities of individuals during the war but also fostered a renewed appreciation for the significance of their experiences. We have empowered families to engage with their own history, supported scholarly research, and amplified the voices of those whose stories have long been overshadowed. By expanding the narrative to encompass diverse perspectives, we have enriched our collective understanding of the past and paved the way for a more nuanced and inclusive interpretation of history.

Throughout the process, our engagement with the public revealed the complex relationship we had with the participants and contributors. We recognised our ethical responsibilities in handling and revealing family histories, understanding the sensitivity and potential impact of the information we collected. Our approach was guided by the principles of honesty and trustworthiness, ensuring that we obtained information without passing judgement or imposing moral interpretations.

Creating an environment that fostered openness and active listening was crucial in establishing a foundation of mutual understanding with the participants. As representatives of the university, our expertise and credibility played a significant role in building trust and facilitating meaningful interactions. We made it clear that our goal was to gather information in an unbiased manner, respecting the narratives and experiences shared by the families.

Consent forms played a vital role in ensuring transparency and clarifying the purpose and usage of the collected information. We were diligent in clearly communicating what would be recorded and how it would be used, providing participants with the opportunity to make informed decisions about their involvement. Respecting the legitimacy of the data was paramount, and we emphasised the importance of maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of the families involved.

While our ultimate goal was to make the collected information accessible for educational and research purposes, we understood the need to balance accessibility with the privacy rights of the participants. Restrictions on access were carefully considered and aligned with the consent forms, ensuring that the data was used responsibly and in accordance with the terms that had been agreed. It was crucial to convey this intention clearly from the outset, demonstrating our commitment to the responsible use of the collected information.

While the primary focus of our team was on documenting the experiences of conscripts who lived through the war, there are potential avenues for further research that deserve attention. One such area is the examination of how contributors discuss their family members' wartime experiences, as these narratives offer valuable insights into family dynamics and the lasting impact on the affected community. Although the second generation was not our main target, their perspectives could have added another dimension to the project. For instance, recording conversations with family members and analysing them using oral history methods could have provided valuable insights. Unfortunately, owing to various constraints, including limited time and resources, we were unable to pursue this avenue fully.

In conclusion, while there are areas that could have been further explored and limitations that must be acknowledged, the WARLUX project has made significant contributions to understanding the experiences of individuals and families during the war. The collection we have amassed, although not complete, provides valuable insights into personal narratives and historical legacies. Moving forward, it is essential to continue finding ways to preserve and analyse these materials, ensuring their accessibility for future research and fostering a deeper understanding of this pivotal period in history.

GRANT INFORMATION

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FIGURES



Figure 1: Flyer for the call for contributions

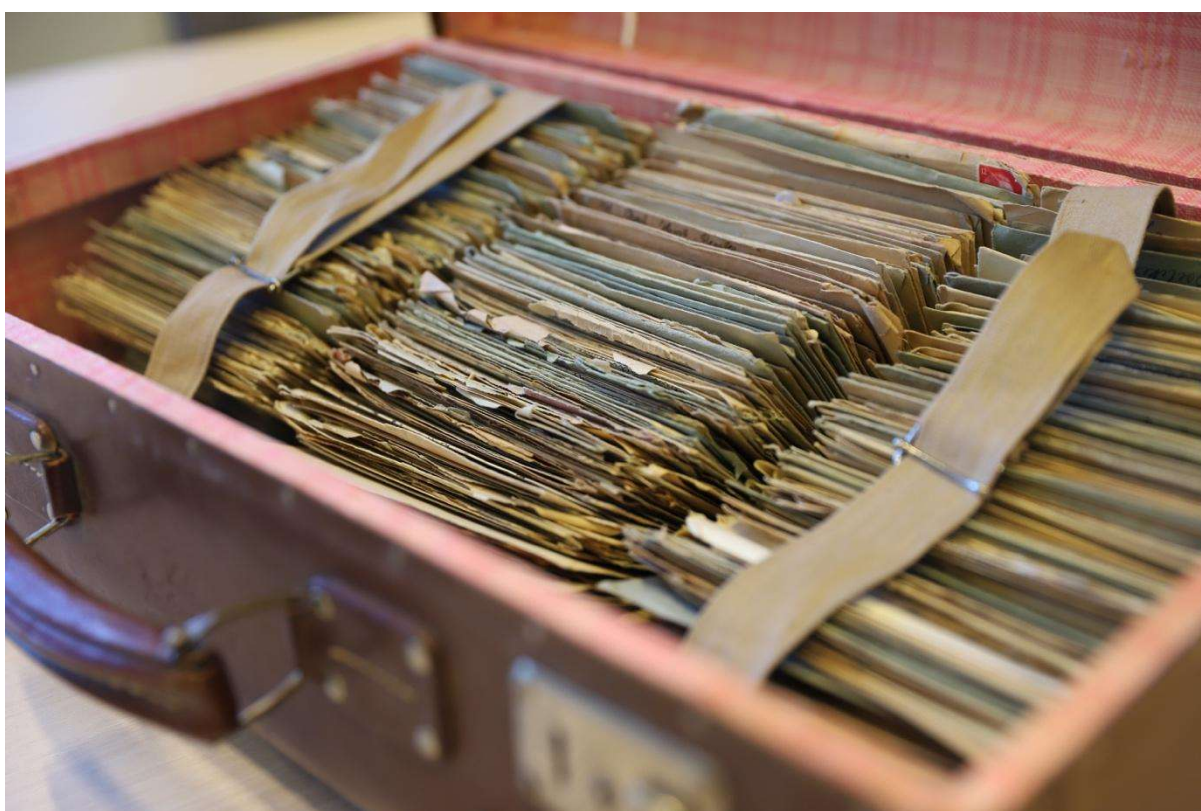


Figure 2 (photo by Noëlle Schon, C²DH - University of Luxembourg Ego-Doc Collection, Collection Hirt)