

Peter Speiser. *The British Army of the Rhine: Turning Nazi Enemies into Cold War Partners.* History of Military Occupation Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 224 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-04016-0.

Reviewed by Nerissa Aksamit

Published on H-War (May, 2017)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In *The British Army of the Rhine: Turning Nazi Enemies into Cold War Partners*, Peter Speiser investigates the presence, perception, and purpose of the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) in postwar Germany from 1948 to 1957. It was during those years and in the context of the Cold War that the British were engaged in efforts to foster Anglo-German relations, and British policymakers believed that the BAOR could be utilized as a tool to foster those relations. Focused on the political, economic, and social context and impact of the BAOR, Speiser begins his study in 1948 when the merging of western zones in Germany into a semi-sovereign state became apparent and ends in 1957 with the deterioration of good relations between Britain and Germany. This periodization is particularly interesting for two reasons. First, most of the officers and administrators had direct experience with Germans during the Second World War, and even some with the Germans during the First World War, whereas many of the young recruits to the BAOR did not. Secondly, as Speiser indicates, there was a reduction in bilateral relations and more “European-wide cooperation” with the Cold War picking up speed (p. 8).

The book is organized into five thematic chapters. The first chapter examines the context in which the BAOR was becoming less a military

force and more of a political one. Not unlike the British military presence in Germany at the end of the First World War, the BAOR was a small army of occupation. However, in the context of the Cold War and a growing threat from the East, the BAOR increased in size to serve as a demonstration of British resolve in the western alliance against communism while at the same time could be used to establish contact with local communities and bolster Anglo-German relations. Speiser points out the controversies and disagreements among Labour and Conservative governments; reduction of the BAOR would have provided some relief to British taxpayers, yet decreasing the British presence could have initiated similar actions by the Allies and created doubts about the defense of western Europe.

The second and third chapters concentrate on the perceptions the Germans and British had of each other. In chapter 2, Speiser focuses on the British press, nonfiction literature, novels, comics, and war films to analyze representation of Germans in popular culture and the influence of media on young British men. He contends that the portrayal of Germans in popular culture and in the media was not positive, but it could have been more negative considering the proximity of the two world wars. Certainly, the most negative

views came from the press, which was a “constant obstacle to improved relations between the two countries” (p. 43). Speiser notes that this may have been due to the difficulty in dropping wartime propaganda, the fear of German rearmament, and the rise of German nationalism. Despite the negative views from the press and official aims of strengthening Anglo-German relations, Whitehall was reluctant to obstruct freedom of expression. The following chapter traces perceptions of the British by Germans through three grievances: the economic distress experienced by housing and land requisition, the political consequences of maneuver damage inflicted by the BAOR, and fox hunting as a source of social friction. Though Speiser finds that the British were considered less troublesome than American, French, and even Canadian troops, the German press and political bodies used those grievances to instigate negative sentiments among the German public.

In chapter 4, Speiser turns to the attempts made by the BAOR to improve relations and in doing so explores both the official and individual levels. He contends that there were several factors that had affected tensions or poor relations between Germans and the BAOR: first, several garrisons were isolated and self-contained, which provided little interaction between the British and local populations; second, even though there were some attempts by soldiers to learn the German language, language remained a significant barrier; third, the heightened tensions of the Cold War and the Soviet threat continued to pose a problem; and finally, boredom and alcohol were not always successful tools in establishing positive relations. The final chapter centers on attempts made by the administration in London, as well as the “on-the-ground” efforts by the Information Services Division of the Foreign Office in Germany, to bring together British soldiers and German civilians during the mid-1950s after Germany joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Speiser found that there was little change in the relations

between the German civilian population and the BAOR; certainly, there was no widespread conflict but there was not any improvement to relations either.

Overall, Speiser’s work is both insightful and accessible. The thematic structure coupled with signposting makes this work useful for those new to Cold War history as well as those seeking nuance in war and society studies and postwar British transnational history. Yet there are a couple points Speiser could have explored further. Regarding his second chapter on representations of Germans in print media and Germany’s influence on the British public, it would have been beneficial to have a point of comparison on representations of Germans against representations of Soviets. The postwar period witnessed a quick turn of enemy from “Nazi” to “Soviet,” those who had once been called ally. Probing those representations might have provided additional context for the shaping of Cold War attitudes of young men in the British military as “protectors” of the Western world. In his examination of offenses by British troops, Speiser mentions a report of incidents by British personnel—malicious damage, indecent assaults, rape, brawls, theft—but does not offer detail of such incidents or consequences for such incidents (p. 85). If those incidents directly shaped German perceptions of the BAOR, then more information could have provided richer insight into the poor and eventually, deteriorating Anglo-German relations.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Nerissa Aksamit. Review of Speiser, Peter. *The British Army of the Rhine: Turning Nazi Enemies into Cold War Partners*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47666>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.