Civilian Coping Strategies in War

A Qualitative Content Analysis of a Diary from the Siege of Breslau in 1945

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Abstract

This paper aims to gain further understanding of civilian experiences of war by analyzing a diary written during the siege of Breslau in 1945. This study seeks to address two key issues. Firstly, the current Peace and Conflict Studies literature lacks integration of theories from psychology, which could help gain insights into civilian coping strategies in war. Furthermore, civilian war experiences should be addressed in their historical context. Drawing from Suedfeld et al.'s (1997) adapted *Ways of Coping Scale*, which derives from Lazarus' and Folkman's (1984) theory on psychological stress and coping, a directed, qualitative content analysis explores the coping strategies used by the diarist. The study finds that the diarist mostly employs problem-oriented coping strategies, focusing on altering the threat, consisting of escaping from bombs, analyzing, preparing for, and altering the damage caused by artillery and seeking social support. Emotion-oriented coping, aimed at regulating the emotional response to a threat, mostly shows through denying the threat to maintain sleep and normality, and through distancing oneself from the threat through humor, hope, and a positive attitude. My findings form a base to adapt Suedfeld et al.'s *Ways of Coping Scale* to better assess civilian coping strategies in war.

Key words: *psychological stress, coping strategies, civilians in war, diary, World War II, Germany*

Introduction

Civilians have been of great interest in Peace and Conflict Studies (PaCS) in the last decades (Chesterman, 2001; Finnström, 2008; Kaldor, 2012, vi, p. 133). This study contributes to the existing research in PaCS in two concrete areas.

Firstly, it addresses the need for more transdisciplinarity between PaCS and other social sciences. Alvargonzález (2011, p. 392) notes that the study of war is one of the oldest multidisciplinary fields. However, there is a need for the different areas in social sciences to inform each other reciprocally, as highlighted by Galtung (2010, pp. 26–28). Transdisciplinarity between the fields of PaCS and psychology specifically can help us better understand conflicts on the levels of interpersonal interaction (Galtung, 2010, p. 20). Coping strategies used by civilians in war have been extensively studied in PaCS. However, little attention has been paid to pre-existing theory on coping strategies from psychology, even though there exists a large body of research on how people cope with threats in different situations, including war (Afana et al., 2018). Surprisingly, many of those studies ignore insights from research conducted in PaCS (Afana et al., 2018; Gavrilovic et al., 2003). This paper addresses this issue, by integrating insights from ethnographic PaCS findings and established psychological theories on coping strategies, to explore how civilians cope during war. This can be of great value to evaluate concrete programs that aim at reducing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the use of dysfunctional coping strategies by civilians that experienced violence.

Secondly, personal diaries from World War Two (WWII) should be given more attention in contemporary studies as they prove particularly useful when it comes to the blurring of distinctions between combatants and civilians in war, with individuals alternating between different 'roles' (Mac Ginty, 2021, pp. 9-11). Moreover, a diary can provide insights into the lived experiences of people, such as the bombing of civilians by the Allied forces, and of course, the Holocaust (Kaldor, 2012, p. 27). The choice of material for this paper, a personal diary written by a civilian during the siege of Breslau[1] in 1945, can therefore hold valuable insights for PaCS to place civilian experiences of contemporary wars in their historical context. Furthermore, there is a tendency in contemporary PaCS for "recentism" (Mac Ginty, 2021, p. 3) – concentrating on recent events – which could lead to neglecting the broader historical perspective in which events take place by seeing the present as exceptional. Personal diaries from WWII should therefore be investigated more in PaCS (Mac Ginty, 2021, pp. 4–6). Overall, there is a need for a greater use of psychological theories in PaCS, and to put civilian experiences of war in historical context, which is addressed by this study.

The paper investigates the above-mentioned gaps through a qualitative content analysis (QCA) by analyzing diary entries from the 20th of January 1945 until the 7th of May 1945, written by a German civilian during the siege of Breslau, to which I gained access through my grandmother's personal archive. Accordingly, the following research question emerges: *How can the experiences of civilians during the siege of Breslau in WWII help us better understand how civilians cope with threatening situations in war?*

This paper continues by summarizing previous studies on coping strategies used by civilians in war, situating this study in the current field of PaCS. It will follow up with an elaboration and discussion of the theoretical framework, Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory on psychological stress and coping and the theoretical model guiding the analysis of this paper, Suedfeld et al.'s (1997) *adapted Ways of Coping Scale (WOCS)*. What follows is a presentation and discussion of a directed QCA (as formulated by Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) as the data analysis method, the qualitative research design, sampling material including source criticism, and an explanation of the analytical process, including the development of the two guiding operational questions. The findings will then be discussed with refer-

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[1]To assure the historical accuracy of this paper, I will refer to the city as *Breslau* when referring to the German-controlled period of the city until 1945, and as *Wroclaw* for the time after 1945 as well as in general references to the city (Thum, 2011, p. 21).

ence to these operational questions. Finally, the study concludes by answering the research question and suggesting areas for further research.

Previous research

In line with the research objective and question, this part explores previous PaCS literature on civilian war experiences, as well as psychological studies on coping strategies used by civilians in war.

Civilian experiences of war

Studies in PaCS on civilian war experiences shed light on ordinary life amid war (Kelly, 2008, pp. 164, 353, 356; Maček, 2009, p. 5). Atkin (2008, p. 105) underlines that while there is not a single civilian experience of war, some of the civilian experiences in WWII were universal across Europe. He identified four main factors influencing the civilian experience of WWII: *Displacement, Government, Adjustment* and *Comportment* (Atkin, 2008, p. 105). Likewise, Mac Ginty (2021, p. 5) argues that on the individual level, war experiences from WWII and contemporary wars are quite similar. Considering the historical background of this study and Mac Ginty's (2021) claim, Atkin's (2008) findings will be compared to research on civilian war experiences in contemporary wars.

Displacement describes the forced movement of people during and after WWII. This was a major experience of the diarist, his family, and friends. During the siege of Breslau, the diarist tried to obtain information on remaining family members and friends, who had fled to Thuringia. After the victory of the Red Army, the diarist fled Breslau, being one of the more than 7 million Germans that were evacuated and resettled in the process (Atkin, 2008, p. 107). Displacement also makes up a major part of civilian war experiences in contemporary wars. Kaldor (2012, pp. 9, 104-105) argues that it is even a main characteristic of today's wars, emerging through genocides, ethnic cleansing, and making a territory uninhabitable.

This leads to *Government*, or the place where one lives, being a major factor influencing the civilian experiences of WWII (Atkin, 2008, pp. 114–116). For the diarist, a German, upper-middle class civilian, this meant that his war experiences are mostly concentrated in 1945, when Breslau, before that rather unscathed by the war, became the subject of heavy destruction (Thum, 2011, p. 26).

This leads to *Adjustment*. Even amid war, people tried to get on with their lives as best they could (Atkin, 2008, pp. 119–120). This is described as the phenomenon of *normality*, making up a major part of civilian war experiences in the context of the siege of Sarajevo (Maček, 2009, p. 82). This *normality* is understood as the "standard of living" that people were "accustomed to before the war" (Maček, 2009, p. 65). Daily routines are a way to keep this *normality* (Maček 2009, pp. 5, 36, 82, 193), so writing a diary might be an attempt by the diarist to maintain a routine, by recording his daily life during the siege. Kelly (2008, pp. 365–366) termed this *normality* the *ordinary*, representing a major part of Palestinian civilian war experiences during the Second Intifada. Kelly (2008, p. 366) works out two contrasting sides of the *ordinary*: how things are and how they should be. This is reflected in Jansen's (2014, p. 242) understanding of *normal lives* in Sarajevo: a back-and-forth switching between how things were, are and how they should be. At the same time, civilians in war constantly evaluate threats, switching between acting and ignoring them by using knowledge that they acquired during the war (Maček, 2009, pp. 41–43). Maček (2009) discovers that the civilians' actions did not always follow 'logical' rules, but that the "[s]trength lay in the belief that you could survive" (p. 46). Atkin (2008, p. 123) underlines the lack of food as a major part of WWII where civilians had to adjust, while Maček (2009, p. 64) finds that securing necessities, such as food, water and electricity made up a major part of the Sarajevan war experience.

Finally, *Comportment* includes whether civilians chose to collaborate, to resist, or to simply go on with their lives. Mostly, civilians in war tend to do the latter (Atkin, 2008, p. 105), as highlighted by Kelly's (2008, p. 356) findings in the Palestinian context of the Second Intifada.

This section provided an overview of civilian war experiences. In view of the research question, this study focuses mainly on the civilian experience of *Adjustment* in WWII.

Coping strategies used by civilians in war

Considering the identified research problem, this section focuses on studies that employ psychological theories of coping.[2]

Existing research on civilian coping strategies in war finds that the three coping strategies of *Social Support Seeking, Escape/Avoidance* and *Planful Problem-Solving* are commonly used amongst a wide range of contexts (Skinner et al., 2003, pp. 241-242; Alzoubi et al., 2019, pp. 412–413). Other studies find that the use of problem-focused strategies (PFS) is useful when exposed to moderate levels of stress (Suvak et al., 2002, p. 976). Somer et al. (2010, p. 468) discover that those coping strategies include *war normalities*, such as preparing shelters, supplies, and making necessary appointments. When facing low or high levels of stress, these kinds of PFS would be unnecessary or ineffective, respectively (Somer et al., 2010, p. 468).

In highly stressful situations, specifically those that feel uncontrollable, civilians mostly use emotion-focused strategies (EFS), as pointed out by Hirsch and Lazar's (2012) study on Jewish Israeli mothers exposed to rocket attacks. In their work, they identify a frequent use of coping strategies such as optimism, humor, and denial in situations perceived as uncontrollable (Hirsch & Lazar, 2012, p. 57). Furthermore, the duration of exposure to the stressful situation is found to have an impact on the coping strategies employed (Hirsch & Lazar, 2012, p. 57), which is why it is important to keep in mind the duration of the siege of Breslau when reading this paper. Previous literature thereby suggests that the (perceived) level of stress influences which coping strategies are employed.

Moreover, gender has an important influence on the use of coping strategies (Alzoubi et al., 2019, pp. 412–413), as well as on the link between coping strategies and later symptoms of intrusion, as found by Gavrilovic et al. (2003, p. 132), who assessed coping by Yugoslavian civilians during rocket attacks in 1999. Especially, they find that the coping strategies of "talking and gathering" (Gavrilovic et al., 2003, p. 132), when used by male participants, correlated with higher levels of intrusion a year later. For female participants the simultaneous use of various coping strategies is the main predictor for higher symptoms of intrusion[3] (Gavrilovic et al., 2003, p. 132). Alzoubi et al. (2019, pp. 412–413) find that male, young, single, well-educated, high-income participants, satisfied with their income, who are employed and without chronic illness are most likely to utilize PFS. This underlines that individual demographic differences influence which coping strategies are employed, as well as their future effects on people's lives.

However, coping is also structural (Afana et al., 2018, p. 2036) and highly dependent on context, so that even small contextual and demographic differences can influence coping significantly, as demonstrated by Ubillos-Landa (2019, p. 11) in their study on coping strategies employed by two groups of women from different regions in Colombia. This finding is corroborated by a study of Jews' and Jehovah's Witnesses' coping strategies in concentration camps during the Third Reich: Jehovah's Witnesses used mostly *Supernatural Protection*, followed by *Confrontation* as coping strategies, whereas Jews tended to use *Escape/Avoidance* in comparison (Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, pp. 234–235). The differences stem from a homogenous faith in their religion by Jehovah's Witnesses in the camps versus heterogeneity for the Jews. Furthermore, the Witnesses' had a special status in the camps: they had the choice to leave and would be considered German Aryans by the Nazis if they signed a pledge to abjure their faith (Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, pp. 228, 229).

The importance of context is additionally underlined by results on coping strategies employed by Japanese suicide pilots in WWII. A study found that before en-

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[2]The terms which are written in italics in this section will be relevant as theory in this paper and will be elaborated on in the theory section.

[3]Intrusions, spontaneous and emotion-laden "flashbacks" of traumatic memories, are core symptoms of PTSD (Kleim et al., 2013, p. 999).

tering the military, the most used coping strategies were *Accept Responsibility, Endurance/Obedience/Effort*, and *Self-Control*, whereas after entering the military, the focus was mostly on *Endurance/Obedience/Effort* and *Accept Responsibility* (Leung & Chalupa, 2019, p. 230). These findings are likely to be influenced by the military and cultural context, as well as the fact that the soldiers faced imminent death (Leung & Chalupa, 2019, pp. 229–230).

In summary, existing literature assessing coping strategies employed by civilians in war explores how levels of stress influence which coping strategies are used, as well as how they influence later intrusive symptoms. Most of the literature reviewed above is based on interviews and questionnaires (Alzoubi et al., 2019, p. 402; Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, p. 230; Gavrilovic et al., 2003, p. 129; Hirsch & Lazar, 2012, p. 53; Somer et al., 2010, p. 464), and focus group discussions (Afana et al., 2018, pp. 2034-2035; Ubillos-Landa et al., 2019, p. 5) at different points in time after the exposure to war-related threats. Diaries can therefore contribute to the existing research, by containing data collected much closer to the threatening event, as Leung and Chalupa's (2019) study of Japanese suicide pilots' diaries shows. Furthermore, few studies investigate civilian coping strategies outside the Holocaust or the military context in WWII. This paper thereby contributes to the field by investigating this gap through analyzing a civilian diary from the siege of Breslau, combining insights from PaCS and psychology.

Theory

This section elaborates Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory on psychological stress and coping, defining the two terms as well as Suedfeld et al.'s (1997) *adapted WOCS* which forms the theoretical model of this paper.

Stress, threat, cognitive appraisal and coping

It is first important to define Lazarus' and Folkman's (1984) understanding of stress and cognitive appraisal, which is necessary to clarify how

instances of threat and coping are identified in this study.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 12), stress is most commonly defined as a stimulus. It is "a particular relationship between [a] person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). Events that are stress stimuli are categorized into three different types, the relevant one for this study being war or "major changes, often cataclysmic and affecting large numbers of persons" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 19). This theory was developed over several years (Folkman et al., 1986b, 1992), and it is still the predominant framework of coping today (Alzoubi et al., 2019, pp. 397–398; Hirsch & Lazar, 2012, pp. 51–53).

If a person finds themselves in a stressful situation, they must evaluate the situation's relevance with respect to their well-being. This process is termed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as *cognitive appraisal*, consisting of *primary* and *secondary appraisal*. *Primary appraisal* describes the evaluation of a stressful situation. *Threat* is defined as anticipated harm or losses that have not happened yet (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 32).

Secondary appraisal refers to a person evaluating what they can do in a threatening situation, looking at "which coping options are available, the likelihood that a given coping option will accomplish what it is supposed to do, and the likelihood that one can apply a particular strategy or set of strategies effectively" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 35). That said, *cognitive appraisal* determines how a person copes with a stressful, threatening situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 157). *Coping* is defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (p. 141).

The theoretical concepts explained above guide the coding process: the material was coded for threatening situations, where the diarist mentions efforts to manage internal and external demands exceeding his resources.

The Ways of Coping Scale

After making the necessary introductory step to investigate the research question, I needed to address the question of how the diarist copes, or in other words, which coping strategies are employed. For this, I used Suedfeld et al.'s (1997, pp. 162–163) *adapted WOCS*, which derives from Folkman et al.'s (1984) widely used WOCS, which Suedfeld et al. (1997, pp. 162–164) adapted for the Holocaust context (Folkman et al., 1986a, pp. 574–576). Critiques and advantages of this theoretical model are discussed at the end of this chapter.

Lazarus and Folkman's theory and the subsequent *WOCS* distinguished between problem-focused strategies (PFS) and emotion-focused strategies (EFS) (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 1000). PFS includes coping aimed at managing or altering the distress-causing problem, whereas EFS means to regulate the emotional problem-response (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 993). As elaborated in the previous chapter, PFS are generally used more in situations where a person has personal control over the outcome (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000, p. 116), whereas EFS are used when facing situations where people do see none or very few options for influencing the result (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 1000).

The theoretical model used in this study lists five PFS and eight EFS, making up 13 different coping strategies overall (Suedfeld et al., 1997, p. 163). They were applied deductively to those parts of the material that were coded in the first step as being instances of coping. Each of the 13 coping strategies will be outlined briefly in the following paragraphs.

Table 1.

The 13 Coping Strategies Divided into Problem and Emotion-Oriented Coping (based on Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, p. 232)

	CS	Description
Problem-oriented		
	Confrontation	Assertive or aggressive interaction with another person
	Endurance/Obedience/Effort	Perseverance, compliance
	Escape/Avoidance	Physical escape from the problem
	Planful Problem Solving	Rational, cognitively oriented effort to change or escape from the problem
	Social Support Seeking	Effort to obtain sympathy, help, information, advice, emotional support
Emotion-oriented		
	Accept Responsibility	Acknowledging that one has a role in the problem
	Compartmentalization	Isolating the problem psychologically from the rest of one's life
	Denial	Ignoring the problem, not believing in its reality
	Distancing	Emotional detachment from the problem
	Luck	Attributing outcomes to good fortune
	Positive Reappraisal	Seeing a positive meaning in the situation
	Self-Control	Regulating one's feelings or actions
	Supernatural Protection	Attribution of survival to religious or superstitious forces or actions

Problem-Focused Strategies (PFS)

PFS contain the following five sub-strategies: *Confrontation*, *Endurance/Obedience/Effort*, *Escape/Avoidance*, *Planful Problem-Solving*, and *Social Support Seeking* (Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, p. 232). These strategies might be helpful in stressful situations that are considered changeable (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000, pp. 116, 150). They are termed "practical task-oriented approaches" by Suedfeld et al. (1997, p. 169) and usually show through specific acts during wartime such as preparing bomb shelters (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 162-163; Somer et al., 2010, p. 468).

Confrontation includes aggressive or assertive actions aimed at changing the situation, often directed at another person, fighting for what one wants and expressing anger or hostility which could indicate a risk-taking behavior (Folkman et al., 1986b, pp. 995, 1000). A coping strategy was coded as *Confrontation*, when the diarist handled a threatening situation during the siege through an aggressive interaction, verbal or physical, with another person.

The second of the PFS, *Endurance/Obedience/Effort*, describes acts of dogged persistence, meaning continuing with something despite the danger (Suedfeld et al., 1997, pp. 163, 169), but also includes complying with orders (Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, p. 232; Suedfeld et al., 1997, p. 163). I coded this coping strategy when the diarist mentions actively trying to endure a threatening situation, or by obeying another person.

Escape/Avoidance describes efforts to escape or avoid the situation through literal physical escape from the problem (Suedfeld et al., 1997, p. 169), or escape through actions, such as drinking, eating, and sleeping, which indicates wishing for something that is not (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 995). Thereby, this coping strategy applies to situations where the diarist hides and flees physically from a threatening situation, or when he engages in specific, physical activities to avoid the threat.

The fourth PFS, *Planful Problem-Solving*, refers to "deliberate problem-focused efforts to alter the situation" in an analytical way (Folk-man et al., 1986b, p. 995). This includes instances where the diarist tries to alter the threat through specific acts based on an analysis of the situation.

Finally, *Social Support Seeking* means efforts to obtain help from another person (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 995). Schaefer et al. (1981) distinguish tangible, informational, and emotional support seeking. In the context of this study, *Social Support Seeking* includes instances where the diarist makes the effort to obtain any form of help from another person.

Emotion-Focused Strategies (EFS)

The EFS are divided into eight sub-strategies: *Accept Responsibility*, *Compartmentalization*, *Denial*, *Distancing*, *Luck*, *Positive Reappraisal*, *Self-Control*, and *Supernatural Protection* (Suedfeld et al., 1997, p. 163). They regulate one's emotional problem-response, with a tendency to occur when a stressful situation is perceived as unchangeable (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 1000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 150).

Accept Responsibility involves self-blame (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). It includes instances where the diarist engages in self-criticism, self-lecturing, acknowledging that he brought the problem onto himself, trying to make things right the next time, or apologizing (Folkman et al., 1986b, pp. 995, 1000).

Compartmentalization means isolating the problem, immersing in other aspects of one's life (Suedfeld et al., 1997, p. 172). If the diarist writes about aspects of his life that do not involve the threat even though he faces a threatening situation, thereby separating himself from the threat, this hints at *Compartmentalization*.

Denial is characterized by ignoring or downplaying the danger (Suedfeld et al., 1997, pp. 163, 170). Those situations where the diarist refers to instances of not believing in the reality or the magnitude of a danger hint to this strategy.

Distancing describes detaching oneself emotionally from the problem, by not thinking about it, trying to forget it, and by concentrating on positive aspects of the threatening situation

(Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 995). This coping strategy involves situations where the diarist acknowledges that there is a threat that concerns him, however, he does not ignore or downplay it, which would point to *Denial*, but he instead focuses on its positive sides.

Even though *Luck* is listed as a coping strategy, it could be seen as the opposite: it involves acknowledging that one's survival is dependent on chance, often due to lack of information while *Supernatural Protection* includes superstitious and religious beliefs (Suedfeld et al., 1997, pp. 170-171). The difference between *Luck* and *Supernatural Protection* is that the former is granted randomly, whereas the second is considered as earned (through following the 'correct' religion, praying, faithfulness, devotedness) (Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, p. 237).

Positive Reappraisal means focusing on opportunities and perceiving actual personal growth when creating a positive meaning out of a situation (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 995; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000, p. 115). Coping is coded as involving *Positive Reappraisal* when the diarist mentions (the possibility of) personal growth arising out of a threat.

Ultimately, *Self-Control* involves the control of feelings and actions, where the diarist keeps feelings to himself or tries to not act too quickly on a situation (Folkman et al., 1986b, p. 995).

Limitations and advantages of the theoretical framework

The distinction between PFS and EFS has been criticized by several authors (Stanisławski, 2019, p. 2). Main points of critique were that the classification oversimplified coping and that those two sets of coping strategies often work together which leads to problems with which category a coping strategy should be assigned to (Stanisławski, 2019, p. 2). However, the distinction is still widely made today and is also included in Suedfeld's et al.'s (1997) *adapted WOCS*, which has proved successful in several recent studies regarding civilian coping with threatening situations in WWII (Chang & Suedfeld, 2018, p. 232; Leung & Chalupa, 2019, p. 214). Due to its proven advantages, I will use and apply the distinction Lazarus and Folkman (1984) made between PFS and EFS.

A second critique refers to the application of Suedfeld et al.'s (1997) *adapted WOCS* in this study. As outlined above, a part of the model developed out of results from the Holocaust context. Due to the quite different experiences of 'ordinary' German civilians during WWII in contrast to people that endured the Holocaust, and since the theoretical model contains many sub-strategies, it is likely that some coping strategies from the theoretical model do not apply to my study. However, it has already proved to be applicable outside the Holocaust context and since no better-adapted theoretical model exists to assess coping strategies used by civilians in war, the complexity is necessary. Furthermore, using such a well-established theoretical framework adds to the applicability of my study.

Finally, I decided to use this framework over others, notably the COPE-inventory developed by Carver et al. (1989). Due to the successful application of the *WOCS* in recent studies addressing the same historical period and similar material, including a recent study on Jehovah's witness survivors of Nazi concentration camps (Chang & Suedfeld, 2018) and on coping strategies in diary entries of Japanese suicide pilots of WWII (Leung & Chalupa, 2019), *WOCS* proved to be the the best framework for the purpose of this study.

Methodology

To apply the above-mentioned theory appropriately, certain methodological choices were made. This section discusses the research design, including the development of two operational questions, the data analysis method, materials, sampling, and the analytical process.

Research design and data analysis method

As the material for this study consists of a diary, reflecting deeply personal experiences, a qualitative design is applied, allowing a deeper insight into the lived experiences of the diarist. According to Chambliss and Schutt (2019), qualita-

tive data analysis focuses on meanings of a few but in-depth, context-sensible cases. Qualitative research seldom attempts to generalize and should discuss the researcher's bias (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019, pp. 266–268). The research design used for this analysis focuses on the "individual unit of analysis" by concentrating on the diarist (Chambliss & Schutt, 2019, p. 54).

The material presented above will be subjected to a directed QCA (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Krippendorff (2019a) defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 2). Cognitive processes, according to Krippendorff, manifest themselves in words. They are "facts [...] constituted in language" and therefore can be analyzed through a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019c, p. 32). The definition of a QCA is understood according to Boréus and Bergström's distinction (2017, p. 24). They differentiate quantitative and qualitative content analysis as being relative: if counting and measuring play a subordinated role and the interpretations include a more complex understanding of the data, then the content analysis is more qualitative (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p. 24). A qualitative design is more suitable since the material only represents a single point of view and categories often overlap. Furthermore, the diary does not answer questions pre-decided by the researcher, which would make relying solely on measurement flawed. The 'directed' approach to QCA is used to "validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). This is in line with how theory is first applied deductively to the material in order to assess instances of threat and coping, thereby addressing the first, descriptive, operational question guiding the analysis: *Which coping strategies does the diarist employ in threatening situations throughout the siege of Breslau of 1945?*

Even though it has a strong potential to extend existing theory, a directed approach to QCA might contain the danger of being heavily influenced by the theory, thereby creating a bias towards confirming it (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283). To address that problem, I use a more inductive approach to let the data speak for itself in a second step of dividing the coping strategies inductively into sub-categories. However, it is still likely that those categories were to some extent influenced by my previous readings on the *WOCS*. According to Suedfeld et al.'s (1997) *adapted WOCS* presented above, the categories were then deductively assigned to the 13 concepts in a final step. This helps in exploring the second operational question: *Why does the diarist use those coping strategies?*

Considering this second question, the use of content analysis as the method is a particularly appropriate choice, since it enables me to track changes over time (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p. 25).

Sampling

Due to the nature of the data, a convenience sample had to be employed (Krippendorff, 2019b, pp. 10–11). A convenience sample is never ideal. However, I had to work with the historical data at hand that had survived until the present, which made it difficult to apply another sampling strategy with the time and resources available for the study (Krippendorff, 2019b, p. 11).

However, there are possible problems arising from the use of a convenience sample, especially when it comes to diaries. As Krippendorff (2019b, p. 11) underlines, the motivations behind writing a diary could be many, so the researcher could be "drawn into the project of the writer", preserving the author's ideas for the future in her or his favor. This also impairs the external and cross-cultural validity of this study. I acknowledge that a comparative approach could have been helpful to overcome this problem, but was not possible due to the limited time available for this project. Nevertheless, I considered it to be important to thoroughly investigate the background of the diarist, use all available resources to triangulate the data and to devote sufficient time for the transcription and translation process, which led me to instead concentrate on one diary.

To overcome the above-mentioned drawback, I applied three strategies recommended by Noble

and Smith (2015, p. 35) to address the potential biases arising from the sampling method to add credibility to my study: truth value, consistency/neutrality and applicability. In the methodology section, I lay out possible methodological limitations. I sought out similarities and differences across accounts and used triangulation to verify statements of the diarist. I informed myself about the historical background of the siege of Breslau as well as discussions in German society following WWII across different sources, such as *Opferdiskurs* and *Historikerstreit*, which are elaborated on briefly in the next section. References to historical events in the diary were triangulated with knowledge of historical facts. Moreover, I examined additional sources from my grandmother's private archive such as letters to the diarist and my grandmother's aunt, Anni, sent by Anni's sister from Thuringia, to where she, her children

(including my grandmother) and her mother had escaped. Since Anni is the most mentioned person in the diary by the diarist and experienced the whole siege (as well as the escape to Thuringia after the war) with him, I considered it to be important to know her perspective as well. Furthermore, I could triangulate certain statements made by the diarist, such as when he mentions that Anni finally heard from her sister for the first time since the beginning of the siege, with letters that mark this instance. I consulted documents produced by the diarist in his work as an accountant in the years following the war, as well as surviving documents from the siege of Breslau (Figure 1, 3, 4). Additionally, I obtained first-hand information from my grandmother, notably on the diarist's demographic background.

Figure 1.
Scan from the original diary (K., 1945, p.1)
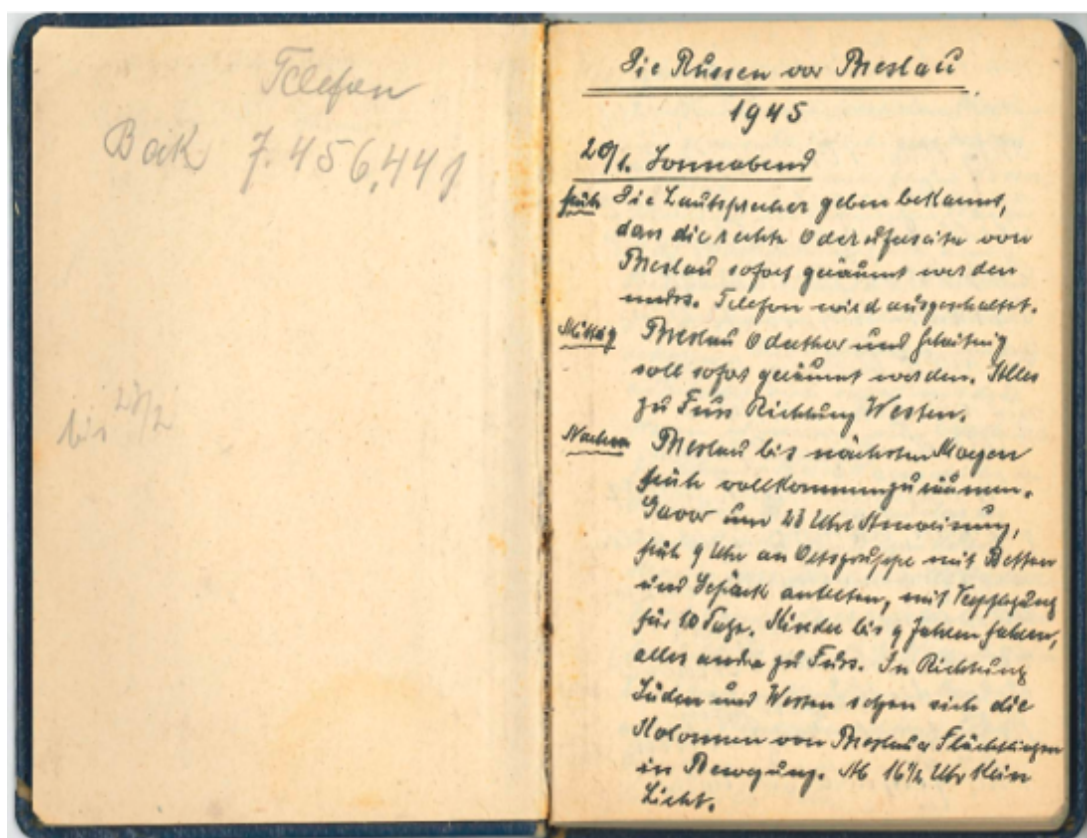
Material, source criticism and ethical considerations

The material is an unpublished documentary source, specifically, a diary containing entries from the 20th of January 1945 until the 7th of May 1945. It fulfills the four defining criteria of a diary listed by Alaszewski (2006): It is written regularly, being "organized around sequences of regular and dated entries over a period of time" (p. 1). Furthermore, it is personal, since it was written by an "identifiable individual who controls access to the diary while [. . .] she records it" (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 1). Not destroying it indicates a tacit acceptance that others will access it. However, it is unknown whether the diarist would have accepted utilizing the diary for a study accessible to such a wide audience. The person closest to him who I could talk to was my grandmother, who gave her consent for the publication. The diary is also contemporaneous, with entries written close in time to the events that occurred, and a record of what the diarist "considers relevant" (Alaszewski, 2006, pp. 1–2). This specific diary could be categorized as what Alaszewski (2006) calls "a diary bearing witness" where "individuals [. . .] record or bear witness to events, especially those involving personal or collective suffering" (pp. 15–16, 19).

Miller and Brewer (2003, p. 3) note that historical research is highly dependent on sources surviving time. The selected material consists of daily diary entries, ranging from a six-word sentence from the 2nd of April 1945 to 649 words in the longest entry from the 28th of February 1945. Unfortunately, the diary entries between the 6th of March 1945 until the 1st of April 1945 are missing. Apart from the missing entries of March 1945, the diarist covers the whole period of the siege, which officially lasted from the 13th of February 1945 until the 6th of May 1945 (Hinze, 2005, pp. 167, 173).

The diarist was a self-employed accountant living in Breslau. He was married and had one daughter. Being a well-educated, upper-middle class man might have been factors influencing his decision to start writing a diary throughout the siege. The diary was in the possession of my grandmother, who fled Breslau by train as a young child with her mother and brother on the 25th of January 1945. Her mother's sister, Anni, stayed in Breslau throughout the siege together with the diarist, Mr. K. The diary survived all those years because the diarist's and my grandmother's family shared a close professional and personal relationship, the diarist having been the accountant of my grandmother's family business and Anni being the diarist's secretary. Those reasons led to the diary and the other sources used for triangulation (Figure 1, 3, 4) coming into Anni's possession after the diarist's death, and they were later passed from Anni to my grandmother. I decided to anonymize the names (using only first letters or nicknames) to protect the privacy of the individuals, who are no longer available to give their consent. Furthermore, I decided to not publish the whole diary publicly but only the relevant parts for the research questions. This mitigates potential ethical problems associated with using a personal diary for this study.

There are some potential drawbacks with the use of personal diaries and memoirs in PaCS research. Notably, wartime is not "an optimal time for diary-keeping" (Mac Ginty, 2021, pp. 8). "[M]emory issues", "self-censorship", and a bias towards white European and US sources are possible issues (Mac Ginty, 2021, pp. 8–9). The applicability of my results for other contexts, such as recent wars or female experiences of WWII, is thereby limited. There is a bias towards the male experience, especially in the armed forces, and finally potential political motivations behind keeping a diary (Mac Ginty, 2021, pp. 8–9). Furthermore, diaries generally only represent a single perspective on events (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 30). This asks the researcher to judge the authenticity of the data, the agency of the diarist, and the implications of the research (ethical and practical) (Mac Ginty, 2021, p. 9).

When it comes to the authenticity of the data and the diarist's agency, I had to rely on my grandmother's word, and verified references to historical events in the diary with historical data and consulted additional material in my grandmother's possession (Figure 3, 4). Despite these limitations, the diary can provide detailed in-

formation of the diarist's life, as well as information of "activities and relationships of particular groups in society" (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 33). Furthermore, Mac Ginty (2021) identifies five factors that make memoirs and personal diaries an insightful source of research for PaCS: their authors witnessed events first-hand, they represent local experiences that are often not represented in official documents and might differ from official narratives, eventually criticizing their leaders. In addition, they could offer new perspectives on different phenomena since they do not answer fixed questions by the researcher and contain personal details not found in other sources (Mac Ginty, 2021, p. 6).

Moreover, I am not a trained paleographer, which means that I had to rely on my grandmother's knowledge of the German 'Kurrent' handwriting. She is herself emotionally involved in the subject, which could have led to a potential bias during the transcription, as well as psychological harm by talking about the subject. This potential psychological harm must be balanced by the benefits of this study for contributing to our understanding of civilian coping in wartime. Furthermore, my grandmother is very open about her post-WWII memories as a child, and her memories from the time of the diary entries were those of a refugee child in Thuringia since she did not witness the siege of Breslau directly.

A few words were lost in the transcription process, often concerning places such as street names that I could not identify, lacking the necessary background knowledge, which could not be acquired in the limited time frame of the study. In the transcribed version of the diary, those words were marked, so that after the first transcription process, I could return to them to decipher them in their context. Words that could not be deciphered that way are marked in the transcribed and translated version. The subsequent analysis is based on the transcribed version.

All translations of diary entries from German to English found in the analysis are my own. Spelling mistakes in the original text were retained throughout the transcription and translation process. By transcribing the original source

with a person that has knowledge of the writing system and through the repeated rounds of deciphering words, I set out to achieve consistency in my research (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 34).

Due to the subjective nature of the data, as well as the emotional involvement of my grandmother and thereby myself in the topic, it is unrealistic to conduct completely objective research. Therefore, a short paragraph on potential researcher bias is necessary for the reader for contextualization.

My grandmother fled Breslau, her home, as a young child. The loss of her home, parts of her family and suddenly having to live a life as a refugee means that memories of Breslau and the time following the war involve deep emotions. Those extend in some part also to myself, being part of my family's history, and hearing stories from that time from my grandmother already as a young child.

However, my education in the field of PaCS has taught me to critically reflect on different perspectives on lived experiences in war. Knowledge on how to triangulate statements in historical documents and knowledge on the nature of civilian war experiences allow me to critically approach the material.

Analytical process

The previous section discussed potential drawbacks of diary writing in war. The raw material often showcases ample information, such as precise times of air alerts and deaths, and was written in dangerous situations, for example in between air alerts. Therefore, several pilot studies on parts of the material were conducted to ensure that the coding strategy was adapted to the material. The material was coded in its original language (German). For this paper, relevant passages were translated to English.

After the three steps (identifying instances of coping, creating inductive categories, deductively applying theory), to maintain the logical historical sequence of events, the diary entries were re-ordered according to their date, which is important to investigate the second operational question. When an instance of coping could fit several of the 13 coping strategies, this was

marked and considered in the analysis.

Historical background

The city of Breslau was besieged by the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army[4] for more than 80 days, from the 13th of February 1945 until the 6th of May 1945 (Hargreaves, 2015, p. 215; Hinze, 2005, pp. 167, 173). Even though it became inevitable that Germany would lose the war, the German commander of the besieged Breslau, Niehoff, refused to surrender (Thum, 2011, p. xxviii), further prolonging the destruction of the city and the suffering of its inhabitants.

For historical context, it is helpful to map the geographical locations in which the diarist moved during the siege. The following map shows Breslau and the situation of the siege on the 6th of March. The area marked in red is where the diarist most likely lived (Figure 2). Since no exact address could be found, this estimate is based on the following document, where the diarist states that he lives near *my grandmother's family* (Figure 3). The street names mentioned throughout the diary confirm this. Furthermore, the diarist decides to flee his apartment to another part of Breslau on the 29th of February, since fighting becomes immediate. The position of the Red Army shown as a black circle on the following map correlates with his writings and confirms the estimation of where the diarist lived.
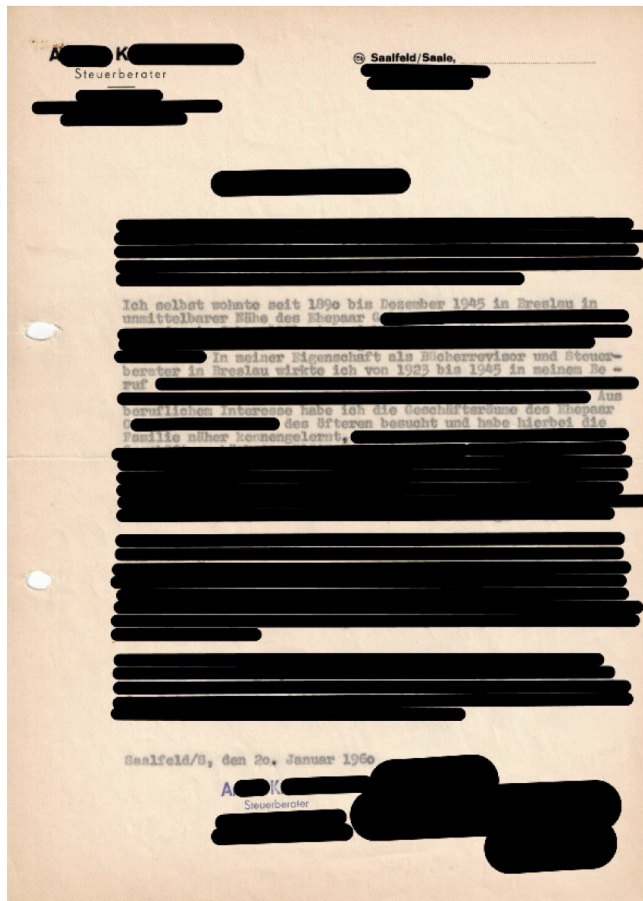

Figure 2.
"Fortress Breslau, situation on the evening 6/3/1945" (Hinze, 2005) with the approximate location of the diarist's apartment marked in red

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[4]The army and air force of the Soviet Union from 1922 until 1946.

Figure 3.
"Official Document" (K., 1960)

"I lived since 1890 until 1945 in Breslau in close proximity of Mrs. and Mr. Goldemund . . . . In my capacity as accountant in Breslau I functioned in my profession from 1923 until 1945.... Out of professional curiosity I visited the premises of Mrs. and Mr. Goldemund frequently and thereby got to know the family better, ..." (K., 1960)

Opferdiskurs and *Historikerstreit*

The notion of the *Opferdiskurs* (discourse of victimization) is still of importance in contemporary Germany when it comes to remembering WWII and its aftermath. It describes the presentation of the German population under the Third Reich, throughout the second half of the 20th century until today, as the passive victims under an evil leadership (Sabrow, 2009). An important part was played by the *Historikerstreit* (historian's dispute) which evolved around the question of how the Holocaust should be remembered in the Federal Republic of Germany (Port, 2017, p. 380).

This *Historikerstreit* started with Jürgen Habermas' publication of an essay in the West German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* (1986), as a critical response to an article by Ernst Nolte published the previous month and a short book by Andreas Hillgruber (Port, 2017, p. 376). Habermas criticized Nolte, Hillgruber, and others who subsequently joined the discussion, for

relativizing the crimes of the National Socialists (Port, 2017, p. 377). Since the 1990s, a new turn in the German culture of remembrance, a new *Opferdiskurs*, and new attention towards German civilian victims developed. Sabrow (2009, pp. 9–10) identifies a turn from "educative clarification" towards "healing recognition" and today's *Opferdiskurs*, which focuses on historical compensation, and the identification of perpetrators and victims, instead of weighing different sufferings against one another.

The present study should be a part of this recognition, and its focus on the suffering of the German civilian population in the war should in no way relativize or undermine the crimes of the Holocaust.

Analysis and discussion

This section captures the main findings from the analysis according to the two operational questions, including empirical material. Five main coping strategies were identified, as guided by

the first, descriptive operational question. The second operational question explores these results in view of previous research and the historical background. First, the descriptive operational question is investigated: *Which coping strategies does the diarist employ in threatening situations throughout the siege of Breslau of 1945?*

To cope with controllable aspects of the siege, the diarist mostly uses PFS, showing through specific acts and analyzing the different courses of action available. At the beginning of the siege, those were focused on efforts to leave the town through *Planful Problem-Solving.* The diarist switches between concrete actions, such as trying to repair their car, and analyzing the situation.

> We work feverishly to get the car going again. (24th January)

> What to do? Trying the country road, no! We stay, since the main roads are also stuffed with vehicles. (24th January)

> We definitely decide now to stay here, since marching during this coldness and heavy snowfall impossible. (26th January)[5]

During the siege the PFS involved preparing shelter, repairing damage caused by bombs and shells, analyzing threatening situations to make decisions, and running from bombs and shells both through *Planful Problem Solving* and *Escape/Avoidance.*

> . . . 6 bombs fell nearby. Now it goes to removing the flinders, and then we fetched cardboard to board up the windows. (11th February)

> At midnight a tenant chose us out [of bed] since planes are there. We jump up, but my ears hear German machines. (22nd February)

These findings can be explained by considering the historical background of the siege of Breslau and the diary. The town was heavily bombed and shelled, and the diarist lived in the area of Breslau where most of the fighting took place (Thum, 2011, p. xxiii; *Figure 2*). PFS like escaping bombs were therefore necessary for survival. This underlines Suedfeld et al.'s (1997, p. 172) finding that under extreme threats, EFS are of limited use.

Furthermore, *Social Support Seeking* is a major part of PFS. This is highlighted through the inductive finding that the diarist writes mostly in the first-person plural, commonly referring to himself and Anni. Sometimes this includes all the tenants in the house, such as in the second quote below, where the diarist and the other tenants want to flee from their house by stealing cars, since German soldiers use their cellar windows as embrasures:

> Anni moves to [my place] and we acquire some food so that we can persevere. (25th January)

> We scan the houses for carts and steal two exemplars. (28th February 1945)

Other instances of active *Social Support Seeking* involve the search for tangible help, information (about family members that fled Breslau), or emotional help, proving Schaefer et al.'s distinction of *Social Support Seeking* into tangible, informational and emotional support seeking (in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 250) to be a useful tool for categorizing *Social Support Seeking* strategies for civilians in war:

> My car not working. We contact O. who should set the car afloat through K. Anni digs with A.L. frantically and with great effort the petrol out in the garden. O. sends me now 2 . . . [tools] to set the car afloat. (26th January)

> We instruct Dr. L., that his wife, situated in Friedland, writes to H.[6] to fi-

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[5]The temperature dropped to -15 degrees Celsius (Thum, 2011: xxii).

[6]Anni's sister, the author's great-grandmother

[7]Those letters, from H. to Anni, are still in my grandmother's possession and were consulted for triangulation; to ensure privacy, they were not included in the Appendix.

nally get a connection.[7] (5th February)

At 13 o'clock the Cell leader[8] bounces into the cellar, everything[9] directly must [leave] to Oderthor-Scheidting, the Russians are near .... We are clueless. We get in touch with the neighboring residents and decide to stay. (24th February).

EFS mostly involve *Denial* by ignoring or downplaying a threatening situation to get sleep or to keep up *normality.*

... from 1 to 5 am heavy sound of guns. But we stayed in bed. (26th January)

We allow ourselves at 7:45 am to brush the teeth in the apartment [upstairs], when 2 impacts take place into the house: first and second floor the masonry is smashed, and we speed downstairs with big leaps. (24th February)

This underlines previous research finding that *normality* is a recurring topic for civilians in war (Kelly, 2008, pp. 359, 365; Maček, 2009, p. 9). Maček (2009) termed this coping strategy "imitation of life" (p. 9), a coping between *Endurance*, *Compartmentalization* and *Denial*, learning to live in an environment that they cannot directly change by remembering their norms from before the war, imitating a 'normal' existence.

Another frequent EFS used by the diarist is *Distancing* by focusing on positive aspects of the situation, hoping for change (at the beginning and at the end of the siege), and using humor.

... but no train left, also not the previous day, because the Russians are shelling the line .... We drag our baggage now homewards and finish over a cup of good coffee. (10th February)

It thaws and we are happy about it and wishing for even more warmth so

that the Russians get stuck in the mud. (1st February)

We wait since Sunday that Niehoff[10] surrenders. (5th April)

... the grenades fly around the house. We jump up, washing, hairdressing, side issue. (21st February)

The second operational question, which is more explanatory than the first one and therefore needs to account for previous research as well as the historical background to be investigated thoroughly, is the following: *Why does the diarist use those coping strategies?*

Overall, the coping strategies are a part of the process of *Adjustment* that civilians in WWII underwent (Atkin, 2008, p. 105), which is tied to the aforementioned notion of wartime *normality* underlined by Maček (2009, p. 82) in the context of the siege of Sarajevo. The major use of PFS may be explained by the demographic background of the diarist as a well-educated, high-income, employed male without chronic illness, all of which are found to have an influence on using more PFS than EFS (Alzoubi et al., 2019, pp. 412–413). Preparing shelters was found in previous research to be a major PFS for civilians in war (Somer et al., 2010, p. 468). The frequent fleeing and hiding from bombs can be explained with the historical background. Breslau was bombed heavily throughout the siege (Thum, 2011, p. xxviif, 331), and civilians were therefore severely exposed to bombs and shells, so hiding in the cellar was often the only option.

The importance of *Social Support* for civilians to cope with threatening situations in war was highlighted in previous studies in the field of PaCS (Maček, 2009, p. 86), and is confirmed by my inductive finding that most of the diary is written in the first-person plural. This highlights my deductive results of the diarist's frequent use of social support to obtain tangible, informational, or emotional help. Furthermore, I found the diarist to use EFS mostly in situations

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[8]Orig.: Zellenleiter: Nazi mid-level leadership political title
[9]Meaning: *everyone*
[10]Commander of the German troops in Breslau since early March 1945 (Thum, 2011: xxviii).

that he perceives as - or that are - uncontrollable. Those findings are in line with previous research (Hirsch & Lazar, 2012, p. 57).

To get sleep and to keep up his *normality*, the diarist uses *Denial* to emotionally deal with a threat. Previous research in psychology confirms this finding; people learn to deal with a chronic stressor if it persists (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, pp. 100–102). This is also found in ethnographic PaCS research on civilians in war, highlighting *Denial* as an important strategy to stay 'normal' (Kelly, 2008, pp. 359, 365; Maček, 2009, p. 9). Earlier studies confirm my finding that *Denial* is also used to deal with fatigue: "The overwhelming destruction numbs one's sensitivity, the sight of death becomes an everyday fact,

and exhaustion takes over after the initial rush of adrenaline in one's body" (Maček, 2009, p. 38).

The second major EFS used by the diarist, *Distancing*, is manifested in the diary through hope at the beginning and the end of the siege. During the siege, *Distancing* shows through focusing on the positive aspects, such as one's survival and humor. Humor has been discovered to be a major strategy for civilians to cope with war (Gavrilovic et al., 2003, p. 130; Maček, 2009, p. 26). The findings of this study support this. Especially illustrative is the following document, which was found inside the diary:
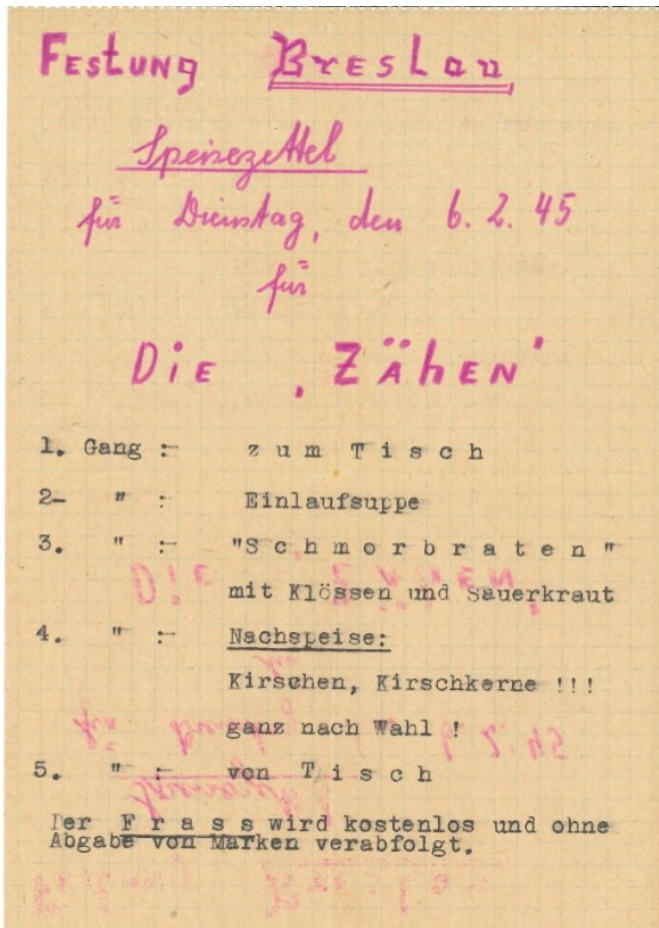

Figure 4.
(Festung Breslau. Speisezettel Für Dienstag, Den 6.2.45 Für Die "Zähen", 1945)

"Fortress Breslau, Menu for Tuesday, the 6/2/1945 for the "Tough Ones" 1st course:

sit down at table

2nd ": Egg-drop soup

3rd ": "pot roast" with dumplings and sauerkraut

4th ": Dessert: Cherries, cherry pits!!! As you like!

5th": leave table

The muck will be administered free of charge and without due of food stamps"

Those EFS that were identified in the analysis reflect previous results on civilian experiences in recent wars. Attempts to stay normal and to get sleep were identified as reasons for *Denial*, reflecting previous, inductive findings from PaCS (Kelly, 2008, pp. 359, 365; Maček, 2009, pp. 9, 38). Keeping a positive attitude was equally identified as being an important coping strategy before (Gavrilovic et al., 2003, p. 130; Maček, 2009, p. 26). However, in previous studies, those EFS were found to be of central importance, whereas my study found that PFS are central. The shorter time span of the siege (as compared to the Siege of Sarajevo that most previous research was based on) and the higher density of the threats probably explain this difference. Whereas the siege of Sarajevo and the Second Intifada lasted several years, the siege of Breslau continued 'only' for around three months. However, those were three months of heavy bombing and shelling, partly in the same street or house where the diarist lived, which could explain why EFS were found to be of secondary importance in my analysis.

Conclusion

The initial question this paper sets to investigate was: *How can the experiences of civilians during the siege of Breslau in WWII help us better understand how civilians cope with threatening situations in war?*

The diarist uses both PFS and EFS to cope with threatening situations in war. Predominantly, the diarist employs PFS, due to the constant, immediate threats that he must act upon to survive. The EFS – *Denial* and *Distancing* – used by the diarist underline that getting sleep, staying normal, and keeping a positive attitude were, however, crucial to cope with the threats.

The theoretical framework used in this study led to important insights into the material and allowed me to investigate the research question. My study found that many of the coping strategies included in the theoretical model (developed in the Holocaust context) did not prove to be as relevant for or widely used by 'ordinary' civilians in WWII. This is an important insight for future research in PaCS and might suggest that civilian coping strategies depend a lot on the wider context. Future studies on civilian coping strategies that pursue the goal of integrating insights from psychology to PaCS could investigate this further through quantitatively assessing coping strategies in a broader range of contexts. Other qualitative studies could investigate questions such as: *How did female civilians cope compared to male civilians in WWII?* or *How did children cope with threatening situations in WWII?*

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