In the fall of 1941, the journalist Eve Curie, daughter of Nobel Laureate Marie Skłodowska-Curie, set out from New York to tour the battlefronts of the Second World War. Her first stop was the Gold Coast of West Africa. Curie was there to see how «Anglo-American collaboration» was taking shape, because it was here that the British Royal Air Force (RAF) assembled and then flew American-made Lend-Lease airplanes across the interior of the continent to Egypt. To Curie’s surprise, this RAF «ferry line» was being operated by 75 Polish pilots.¹

Curie continued her journey and, once in Egypt, managed to secure an interview with four RAF pilots, fresh from combat. The group was composed of one Briton, one Australian, one Rhodesian and one Frenchman.² As she continued her journey through the Middle East and on to China, Curie’s earlier surprise gave way to a general realisation that in this war, a soldier in a British uniform or under the command of British officers could be the citizen of any number of nations.

Curie’s finding stands in contrast to the intense nationalist rhetoric that characterised the war. Moreover, much of the historiography that has followed in the war’s wake has been similarly nation-centric. Yet the facts support Curie’s anecdotal assertions. During the decisive battle of El Alamein, one year after Curie’s visit, only 55 per cent of General Bernard Montgomery’s forces were British, the remainder being composed of Indian, Australian, New Zealand, South African, Free French and Greek nationals.³ In this the British were not exceptional. The German forces on the Eastern Front were supported by a host of Italian, Hungarian, Slovakian and Romanian divisions while 20 per cent of the personnel of «German» units were non-German.⁴

Indeed, a comparison of recruits from occupied Europe and neutral countries indi-

¹ E. Curie, Journey among Warriors, New York 1943, 15.
² Ibid., 39.
icates that at the end of 1941, 43,000 foreign personnel were fighting in the Waffen-SS and the Wehrmacht, and 86,000 foreign personnel were serving in the British forces.\(^5\)

Despite the growth of transnational and comparative approaches in historical scholarship, there is no study that situates and compares the armed forces of the Second World War as multinational entities. Since the appearance of the first histories of the Second World War, there has been an understandable tendency to reduce the opposing coalitions of nations to five principal protagonists, Germany, Japan, Britain, Russia and the United States. This has led to a general perception of the war as involving several separate and distinctly national war efforts. For example, though Britain hosted many exiled governments or national committees and made unprecedented efforts to incorporate foreign military personnel into the British armed forces, leading to the formation of new divisions, squadrons and flotillas, none of the volumes of the substantial British official history of the war were devoted to the organisation of these Allied forces.\(^6\) The German equivalent treated foreign formations and allies at some length though always within the framework of German leadership and agency.\(^7\) Over several decades this emphasis on the major powers’ armed forces as monolithic national institutions was reinforced by many military historians’ «top-down» approach to the study of battles and campaigns, focusing their analyses on the character and reputation of senior commanders, who inevitably came from one of the major powers.\(^8\) In the last two decades, this imbalance in the historiography has begun to be addressed by a growing scholarship on the contribution of foreigners fighting for the major powers.\(^9\) We now know much more about the motives, experiences and performance of these transnational volunteers of the Second World War. However, most of these studies have restricted themselves to analysing individual foreign contingents.

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6 The British government’s _History of the Second World War_ included 34 volumes on military operations and the War Office produced 30 supplementary volumes.


in the service of one of the major powers. In order to advance the study of multinational militaries, it is therefore necessary to examine the policies of the major powers themselves towards the recruitment, organisation and employment of non-nationals in their armed forces.

Two important points must be kept in mind when comparing the British and German multinational forces. Firstly, Britain was an empire of long standing while Nazi Germany was not. Therefore, Britain had access to larger reserves of manpower from diverse ethnic origins and had more experience in managing multinational forces than Germany. For example, by mid-1944 over 2.6 million colonial troops were serving under British command worldwide. Secondly, the First World War established a clear precedent for multinational armies: both Britain and France drew heavily on their colonial forces, while Austro-Hungary’s military was multinational by default and even Germany recruited ethnic Poles and ethnic French from Alsace and Lorraine. In light of these points, multinational participation in British and German forces (both Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht) after 1939 came from five sources: British dominions, British colonies, independent states allied to either side, occupied countries and neutral countries. This article will focus on recruitment from occupied and neutral countries for reasons outlined below.

Multinational participation from the above sources took several forms. There were units provided by allies that served under the host’s command but remained distinctly tied to the ally’s national military organisation. The British self-governing dominions of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada joined Britain in declaring war on Germany. They made a significant contribution in several spheres, including the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, the battle of the Atlantic and the campaigns in North Africa. While the Free French, Polish and other exile contingents served within British formations and were entirely dependent on British aid, the dominion forces were supported by their own national military structures and were ultimately under the control of the dominion governments. Similarly, Hitler’s invasion of Russia saw Germany lead multinational forces from a coalition of independent states. Finland, Romania and Hungary each committed over 500,000 sol-


diers to the campaign in the East, with Slovakia and Italy sending smaller national contingents.  

While the contributions of these closed and largely independent foreign units were significant to the war effort, this article assesses and compares the multinational make-up of the British and the German militaries by examining foreign units that were fully integrated into their host’s military organisation and units that contained a mix of national and foreign personnel. This means the article will focus mainly on foreign personnel coming from German-occupied countries and neutral countries, such as French and Spanish volunteer units that joined the Wehrmacht in 1941 or the Free French and Americans who served under British command from 1940. It was in these units that the exchanges and tensions of the multinational militaries were most profoundly felt. Moreover, in conceptualising and deploying such units, leaders in both Germany and Britain were faced with a number of challenging, unprecedented questions. This article seeks to answer both how and why these multinational forces were created and how ideological and practical imperatives manifested themselves in policies towards foreign personnel. In geographical scope the analysis pertains mainly to the campaigns in Russia, North Africa and Northwest Europe, reflecting the principal efforts of the German and British forces. A concluding section assesses the nature, extent and legacy of transnational military cooperation during the Second World War. In doing so, it explores the major similarities and differences between the British and German multinational forces, and outlines some of the methodological challenges arising in such an analysis.

1. The Making of Multinational Armies: The British Experience, 1939–1941

With his invasion of Poland in September 1939, Hitler unleashed a war of a duration, cost and suffering beyond anyone’s imagination. When the Soviet Union joined its unlikely partner in invading Poland, the Polish government and a number of military units fled from certain encirclement and defeat. Poles made their way to France through Romania, Hungary or Sweden to continue their fight. By the time, Hitler launched his invasion of France and the Low Countries some ten months later, over 43,000 Polish soldiers awaited the Wehrmacht. Though here, too, the Polish fighters would suffer defeat. Surviving Polish forces were forced to retreat and, along with remnants of the defeated British, French, Belgian and Dutch armies, escaped across the channel.

One month after the defeat of France, on 14 July 1940, Winston Churchill declared in a now famous broadcast: «[l]t has come to us to stand alone in the breach» and «we are fighting by ourselves alone; but we are not fighting for ourselves alone.»

14 Müller, An der Seite der Wehrmacht, 242.
However, it is often forgotten that in this and in his other major speeches of the summer of 1940, Churchill carefully balanced references to «our island» with acknowledgements of the continued support from the British Empire and the exiled European allies. Indeed, by July 1940 Britain had become a refuge for thousands of foreign soldiers after the defeat and occupation of their countries. Two days before his broadcast to the British people, Churchill had sent an exasperated message to the three service departments, dismissing their reservations and insisting that they put their full effort into organising the exiled service personnel into national units. «It is most necessary to give to the war which Great Britain is waging single-handed the broad international character which will add greatly to our strength and prestige», he told his chiefs-of-staff.17 Thus, Churchill understood that organising the foreign personnel conferred both military and political propaganda advantages. Firstly, they could contribute to the defence of the United Kingdom as the threat of invasion grew and secondly, they could strengthen his moral appeal for assistance from the United States by demonstrating that Britain was not just fighting for its own survival but to protect «right and freedom» and «Christian civilisation».18

Since the first arrivals of foreign personnel in Britain, senior British officers had voiced doubts about the competence and political reliability of many of these exiled soldiers, sailors and airmen. Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding of Fighter Command preferred to disband depleted squadrons rather than replace losses with Polish and Czech pilots, the Admiralty was concerned by reports of a «defeatist spirit» among Dutch and Norwegian sailors, and the War Office was so sceptical of the Belgian troops’ potential that they planned to employ them as individual tradesmen or general labour.19 Churchill’s intervention in July reminded the service chiefs that it was government policy to form «strong» Allied army, naval and air contingents and he ordered that «a weekly report upon the progress and condition of Foreign contingents should be furnished to the War Cabinet».20 These weekly reports, which were changed to monthly in October 1940 and quarterly in April 1941, give an insight into how Britain organised and employed Allied contingents in Britain. The first report on 22 July indicated that significant progress was being made. The Royal Navy reported that various Dutch, Polish and Norwegian warships were operating alongside their British counterparts, while due to the repatriation of many French sailors after France’s capitulation, twenty French ships that were in British ports were being manned by mixed crews made up of 75 per cent British, 25 per cent

17 TNA, PREM 3/43, Churchill to Chiefs-of-Staff, 12.7.1940.
19 A. Brown, «The Czechoslovak Armed Forces in Britain», in: Europe in Exile, 169; TNA, ADM 199/615, Minutes of a meeting held in the Admiralty 24.5.1940; Allen, «Belgian Army», 80.
20 TNA, PREM 3/43, Churchill to Chiefs-of-Staff, 12.7.1940.
French. The RAF reported that a Dutch squadron was operating with Coastal Command, that one Czech and two Polish bomber squadrons had been formed and that they planned to form one Czech and two Polish fighter squadrons shortly. The British army was in the process of arming 17,000 Polish soldiers, 4000 Czech soldiers and much smaller contingents from the other allies. Under the heading «Anti-Nazi Germans» the army reported that since May it had recruited 2000 enemy aliens (predominantly Jews) for service in the Pioneer Corps.  

The success in establishing these Allied forces led the British government to formalise this unprecedented transnational military cooperation. On 5 August 1940 it signed the third Anglo-Polish military agreement, which set a template for subsequent agreements with other governments-in-exile. The Polish government would be responsible for the administration, discipline and financing of its army. The Polish Army would be subject to Polish military law, have Polish badges and serve under the British high command. Britain would provide uniforms, equipment and training. The Polish Air Force was recognised as independent but for the purposes of organisation, training, equipment, discipline, promotions and operational use it remained under RAF control. This situation was unprecedented; there was no basis in British law for recognising the authority of a foreign army on British soil. As a result, on 22 August the British parliament passed the Allied Forces Act. This enabled the agreement to come into effect by legally empowering the governments-in-exile to maintain independent military forces in Britain. Moreover, by August the British military had set up the administrative machinery to integrate the Allied contingents into their order of battle: the RAF established the directorate of Allied Air Co-Operation, the Navy created the position of Naval Assistant (Foreign) to the Second Sea Lord and the Army appointed an Inspector of Allied Contingents. Through liaison officers these departments provided guidance on British procedures to each contingent, assessed the contingents’ strengths and weaknesses and advised the British high command on questions of organisation, morale and employment of Allied forces. Churchill’s belief in the value of the exile forces was quickly vindicated as the foreign pilots fighting in the Battle of Britain soon became a valuable propaganda asset in BBC broadcasts to occupied Europe, America and the British dominions. 9 per cent of RAF pilots in the battle were exiles, including 145 Poles, 88 Czechs, 29 Belgians and 13 Frenchmen. Moreover, Churchill’s insistence that General Charles de Gaulle’s Free French forces should receive every assistance bore fruit. In the fall of 1940, as Churchill had hoped, the Free French Army

21 TNA, CAB 66/10/12, Report on the Organisation of Allied Naval, Army and Air Contingents, 22.7.1940.
23 Zamoyski, Forgotten Few, 76.
expanded from 7,000 to 35,000 by rallying colonies in French Equatorial Africa to de Gaulle.\textsuperscript{25}

By late October 1940, as the Battle of Britain came to an end, the Allied contingents settled down to a long period of expansion and training. The British Army, in consultation with Allied commanders, began to define the role and force ceilings until 1942 for the various Allied land forces for the purpose of providing equipment.\textsuperscript{26} For example, the Czech, Belgian and Dutch contingents were each limited to a brigade group (about 3,000 soldiers with supporting artillery, engineers and transport) while the Poles were given a ceiling of 30,000 men to be composed into three brigade groups, corps troops and three tank battalions. In order to stimulate an \textit{esprit de corps} the army authorities «agreed that, as far as possible, the Allied contingents should each be kept together, and used as organised forces under their own commanders» and that there was no objection to any Allied contingent forming part of a higher British formation.\textsuperscript{27} In the subsequent agreements concluded with the governments-in-exile in 1941, the War Office granted independent status to their army contingents, which meant that the contingents retained their «own national character in respect of personnel, discipline, language and promotion».\textsuperscript{28} However, the Air Ministry was more reluctant: it conceded independence to the Free French and Polish Air Forces only after pressure from Churchill. By late 1941, the French had three and the Polish twelve squadrons. On the other hand, the smaller contingents were incorporated into the RAF because it was believed they were too small to form fully self-supporting air units. This meant that they served under RAF commanders and were subject to British military law.\textsuperscript{29} By December 1941, the Belgians had one squadron, the Czech four, the Dutch one, the Norwegians two, and a Greek squadron was being formed in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{30} These Allied air contingents proved their worth to the British war effort. In the last quarter of 1941, Allied pilots destroyed or damaged 88 German aircraft for the loss of 18 flyers, meanwhile the contingents were growing thanks to recruitment from colonies and expatriate communities around the world: in the same period, 894 Allied aircrew were in training and 332 pilots qualified.\textsuperscript{31} In the naval sphere, the Admiralty was prepared to give the Allied contingents as many ships as they could man: by late 1941, Allied naval personnel numbered 15,930 and they manned 175 ships, which were deployed in all theatres.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to the exile forces, Britain was receiving recruits from neutral countries: the Irish government did not outlaw enlistment in foreign armies and by late 1941 over 10,000 volunteers.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} TNA, WO 193/32, Note by Inspector of Allied contingents for meeting at War Office on 29.11.1940.
\item \textsuperscript{27} TNA, WO 193/32, Note by Major A. Cocks, 30.11.1940.
\item \textsuperscript{28} TNA, WO 193/32. C. Lambert, War Office to Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces, 23.6.1941.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Brown, \textit{Airmen}, 171.
\item \textsuperscript{30} TNA, CAB 66/20/47, Report on the Organisation of Allied Naval, Army and Air Contingents, 17.1.1942, 27.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 30. 5–21.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 24.
\end{itemize}
had left the country to join the British forces. Moreover, 240 American pilots joined the RAF’s «Eagle» squadrons in spite of this violating American neutrality legislation, under which they could have lost their citizenship.

While, as mentioned, the short-term need for soldiers of any nationality in the face of an expected German cross-channel invasion was dire, Churchill also recognised the long-term value in fielding soldiers from across the globe. His entire strategy for British victory depended upon the US joining the war. To secure American entry, however, Churchill had to counter the significant isolationist opinion there and one way of doing so was to portray Britain as the spearhead of an international struggle against tyranny – a tyranny that was now a threat to American freedom. While President Franklin Roosevelt did not bring America into the war after his election victory in November 1940, as Churchill had hoped, Britain's multinational forces gave the British cause much-needed moral legitimacy, as became evident when Roosevelt and Churchill met for the first time in August 1941. One outcome of this conference was the Atlantic Charter that proclaimed that America and Britain did not seek to conquer territory nor subjugate nations. This list of democratic rights and principles, which the US and Britain claimed to represent, carried weight precisely because of Churchill’s decision to host and actively assist the victims of Nazi aggression. Though President Franklin Roosevelt did not bring America into the war after his election victory in November 1940, as Churchill had hoped, Britain's multinational forces gave the British cause much-needed moral legitimacy, as became evident when Roosevelt and Churchill met for the first time in August 1941. One outcome of this conference was the Atlantic Charter that proclaimed that America and Britain did not seek to conquer territory nor subjugate nations. This list of democratic rights and principles, which the US and Britain claimed to represent, carried weight precisely because of Churchill’s decision to host and actively assist the victims of Nazi aggression. Though Churchill failed to obtain the declaration of war that he so impatiently sought from Roosevelt, the Charter and the other undertakings made by the President at the conference moved America closer than ever before to war with Germany.

2. The Making of Multinational Armies: The German Experience, 1939–1941

Britain’s primary adversary in Europe, Germany, underwent a transformation into a multinational military that similarly combined short-term need – and the availability of willing foreigners – with long-term considerations. For the first two years of the war, the German Wehrmacht had little need nor interest in integrating foreigners into its ranks. With each successive campaign, from the invasion of Poland in the fall of 1939 to the sweeping successes in the West in 1940, the Wehrmacht defeated one adversary after another with seeming ease. There thus appeared little reason for the Wehrmacht leadership to seek recruits or allies from outside its borders before 1941. Heinrich Himmler’s Waffen-SS, on the other hand, did have such a need. The Waffen-SS was the militarised wing of Himmler’s SS, the Nazi organisation that, among other tasks, oversaw the concentration camps and German police forces. The SS was the self-proclaimed elite of the Nazi state, with rigid «racial» admissions
standards and an emphasis on unyielding commitment to National Socialism. In the years preceding the war, Himmler had developed the militarised branch within the organisation both to give him greater influence vis-à-vis the Wehrmacht and to ensure that the regime had uncompromising politically-motivated soldiers at its disposal. By the time of the invasion of France, the Waffen-SS fielded four divisions. The ambitions of Himmler and his head of recruitment, Gottlob Berger for an even larger force, however, were limited by an agreement restricting the Waffen-SS allowance to some 2 per cent of yearly conscripts.37

With the conquest of North-Western Europe in 1940, the Waffen-SS’s prospects for growth brightened. Holland and the Scandinavian countries were, according to Nazi racial theory, populated by racially-related peoples. Owing to the SS’s emphasis on race, there were no ideological objections to the incorporation of foreign men of equal racial stock. In fact, with the organisation’s mission of harnessing and cultivating the «Aryan race» – known in SS jargon as «Germanics» – it would by extension need to expand its manpower pool to include non-German citizens of the same race. Thus beginning in the late spring of 1940, Himmler set up recruitment stations in the Germanic countries to attract volunteers for new Waffen-SS divisions.38 Before the conquest of Scandinavia and Western Europe, the organisation raised only 111 Germanic soldiers.39 By June 1941, some 3000 Germanics had been incorporated into the Waffen-SS, volunteers simultaneously being members of the larger SS organisation. Before the invasion of the Soviet Union, then, the German regime had not needed to compromise its rigid racialised ideology.40 The Waffen-SS’s practical need for expansion was complemented by the SS’s long-term pretensions of incorporating Germanics, and Germanic Europe, into the National Socialist sphere. The Wehrmacht, on the other hand, retained its German make-up and character. The war in the East would quickly change this.

Stretched across a front of nearly 3000 kilometres, the German invasion force of 22 June 1941 was the largest ever assembled.41 The invasion’s initial success was impressive. Defeating the enemy on the battlefield was not the sole German objective in the East, however. The war in the East also had long and deep seated ideological imperatives. Hitler, Himmler and Nazi ideologues were obsessed with the German people’s need to attain more Lebensraum. Under Himmler’s direction, the SS staff had laid the groundwork for a radical restructuring of the landscape, economy and

38 These had likely been planned before the invasions. See US National Archive and Records Administration [NARA], T75, 59/2574369.
39 Bundesarchiv Berlin [BArch], NS 19 / 3521, Über-sichtsplan, 4.5.1940.
40 One exception is the Division «Nordwest», set up in April 1940 from Dutch and Flemish volunteers deemed racially unsuitable for full incorporation into the SS.
demographics of the East, known as the Generalplan Ost.\textsuperscript{42} Following on the heels of the Wehrmacht into the Soviet Union were SS Einsatzgruppen whose task was to seek out and murder Jews and political commissars. At the start of the invasion, the Wehrmacht too had been given instructions to forego the restraints of the Geneva Convention in waging a racial war.\textsuperscript{43} The German military apparatus, and by extension its foreign soldiers, became deeply complicit in the unprecedented genocide that was unfolding on the Eastern Front.\textsuperscript{44}

The SS and Waffen-SS were part of a complex military-security apparatus with personnel and units participating in front-line fighting, protecting supply lines against partisans (whether imaginary or real), providing policing services and staffing the units carrying out the Holocaust. The SS’s available manpower was too small for these massive operations. Thus the SS’s genocidal designs of an unprecedented scale ironically led to the recruitment of «racial inferiors» to achieve its goals. Einsatzgruppe A, engaged in murdering Jews in the Baltic states, relied heavily on local collaborators, even incorporating them into a mobile auxiliary unit credited with murdering 130,000 Jews between July and November 1941.\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, for the gassing of Poland’s Jews, the SS was so desperate for manpower that it recruited Soviet prisoners of war. The so-called Trawniki auxiliary police force was an indispensable aid in the gassing of 1.7 million Jews in what the Germans referred to as «Operation Reinhard».\textsuperscript{46}

Involving non-Germans or Germanics in the dirty work on the Eastern Front was not the same as incorporating them into combat units. In one of many utterances of the same sentiment, Hitler cautioned his top cronies a few days before the invasion of the Soviet Union that «[i]t must be and remain a principle cast in iron: never may it be allowed that others except the Germans bear weapons».\textsuperscript{47} Within weeks of the invasion, Hitler was forced to make his first compromise on this policy, however. In

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\textsuperscript{43} These were the so-called Criminal Orders. See B. Shepherd, War in the Wild East: The German Army and Soviet Partisans, Cambridge, MA 2004, 53. On the Wehrmacht’s complicity in crimes against civilians and prisoners of war see M. Oldenburg, Ideologie und militärisches Kalkül: Die Besatzungspolitik der Wehrmacht in der Sowjetunion 1942, Köln 2004.


\textsuperscript{47} International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg [IMT], Document L-221, Martin Bormann, Memorandum, 16.7.1941, accessed at https://heinonline.org, 21.4.2009. See also: Black / Gutmann, «Racial Theory and Realities of Conquest».
various occupied Western European countries, the idea of forming national legions to contribute to the defeat of Bolshevism was spawned.\textsuperscript{48} Initially, these volunteer units were to remain independent, though under the German chain of command, they were to be subject to the country-of-origin’s military laws and outfitted in national uniforms with the addition of a small German insignia. From the German perspective, they were a useful tool in the emerging propaganda message of a European fight against Bolshevism. The Waffen-SS agreed to supervise legions from Germanic countries – Denmark, Norway, Holland and Belgium’s two ethnic regions of Flanders and Wallonia – while the \textit{Wehrmacht} would oversee Spanish and French units.\textsuperscript{49} While Hitler thought little of the contributions these volunteers could make to the outcome of the war, he accepted them for political reasons. In the case of Spain, for example, he hoped that the service of Spaniards at the front would cement the ties between the two dictators and ultimately convince Franco to join the war.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite the overwhelming success of the early stages of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the failure of the \textit{Wehrmacht} to inflict a crushing blow on the Soviet army and state in the first months of the campaign, as predicted by Hitler, combined with the American entry into the war fundamentally changed the conflict’s nature. In the fall and winter of 1941, the \textit{Wehrmacht} forces that had spearheaded the \textit{Blitzkrieg} conquest of Western Europe and the Western Soviet Union were largely destroyed. Already by September, only one-third of the tanks used in the invasion were still operational.\textsuperscript{51} Human losses too, were profound. The army suffered an average monthly casualty rate of above 180,000 soldiers between July and October, with only a small decline during the remainder of the fall. The transition of Germany’s preferred mobile warfare to static battles with the onset of winter exacerbated the losses.\textsuperscript{52} Given its already stretched human resources, it was impossible for Germany to sup-


\textsuperscript{50} Boog et al., \textit{Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion}, 4, 912.


ply sufficient replacements in men. Moreover, from this point on, the ability to mobilise human and material resources became the deciding factor, though German tactical prowess continued to amplify its units’ combat effectiveness. From 1942 on, the Nazi military machine, the vanguard of a racially-based ideological state and the implementers of a racially-rooted genocide, was forced to incorporate an increasing number of non-Germans into its ranks. The obvious tensions created by this ideological compromise would hamper this policy’s implementation. Meanwhile, the British military from 1942 onward became increasingly adept at incorporating and operating as a multinational entity.

3. Multinational Armies in the Global War, 1942–1945

The common problem facing all the Allied contingents in the British forces was that since they were exiled from their countries, they lacked a source of manpower to bring their units to strength and replace losses from action. The contingents found different solutions to this problem. All of them received a small stream of recruits from those who escaped German occupation and from émigré communities around the world. The Free French, as mentioned, relied on recruitment from the colonies and by 1942, the majority of de Gaulle’s troops were African. Stalin had a large number of Polish prisoners of war from the 1939 campaign and after the German invasion of Russia he was willing to transfer these men to the British. In August 1942, the Soviets evacuated 70,000 Poles to the Middle East. The Polish forces in Britain received 12,000 of these men while the rest stayed in the Middle East and were organised by the British into the Second Polish Corps. The Dutch and the Belgians, to some extent, benefited from recruitment from their respective colonies but to solve their continuing manpower shortages, they, along with the Norwegians, began conscripting their nationals residing in Britain, a process which created some controversy.

By 1942, the progress the British had made in integrating the Allied contingents was clear to see. In May the Air Ministry produced a document entitled «The Maintenance of Good Relations and Allied Air Force Morale», which set out its guiding principles for coordinating the Allied contingents after two years of acquired experience. These principles included «the preservation of national identity» through retaining traditions and customs, the recognition of equality in terms of pay and conditions and the concentration of Allied air forces rather than their dispersal throughout the RAF. Moreover, in a remark that showed the Air Ministry’s appreciation of the Allied contribution, British station commanders were advised that anyone who was so «die-hard

53 Perhaps the most successful example was the Polish Army which recruited 15,470 Poles from around the world: Latawski, «Polish Exile Armies», 34.
55 Latawski, «Polish Exile Armies», 34.
English» that they saw «nothing good or useful in a ‹foreigner›» should not be employed with Allied personnel. Allied army contingents were affected by the equipment shortages and low morale that plagued the British Army after many setbacks in North Africa and the Far East. However, from late 1942 onwards this situation began to change. Large stocks of American war material began to reach the British, enabling the multinational Eight Army to launch a successful offensive at El Alamein in October, in which Free French and Greek brigades participated, while in November an Anglo-American expedition supported by Dutch warships landed in French North Africa. At the same time the smaller Allied contingents in Britain began to make significant advances as effective combat units with the arrival of new equipment and the initiation of an intense training programme whereby Allied units were attached to British formations. The Free French, Belgian, Dutch and Norwegian units had repeated attachments with British divisions that continued into 1943.

In 1944, the British (and Allied) armies became multinational entities on an unprecedented scale. In Italy, Eight Army included three divisions from British India, two divisions each from Canada and Poland, one each from New Zealand and South Africa, the Italian Liberation Corps and a Greek Mountain Brigade, while the US Fifth Army included two British divisions, a French Corps of four divisions and later a Brazilian division. The involvement of so many nations was not merely for propaganda purposes: in the battle of Monte Cassino the French Corps demonstrated they had the best mountain-fighting troops of any army. Meanwhile in Britain, the formation of 21st Army Group under British command for the landings in Normandy saw British and American troops joined by Canadian, Polish, Czech, Dutch and Belgian forces. At an early stage in the planning the British decided that the smaller Allied contingents would be held in reserve. For the political credibility of the governments-in-exile, it was important that their forces saw action against the Germans, but the moment would have to be carefully chosen as it was equally important that these forces were not decimated before they had had a chance to lead the liberation of their countries. Reflecting their relative military contributions, the larger powers – the US, Britain and Canada – did not share the plans for Operation Overlord with the smaller allies and it was only after the landings in Normandy had commenced that their military missions joined the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force. Nevertheless, their forces were heavily involved in the air, sea and land operations. The governments-in-exile contributed over forty squadrons to the RAF and seventeen were assigned to Second Tactical Air Force to provide close air support to the landing forces. On D-Day there were 1213 warships providing naval fire support, 79 per cent were British and Canadian, 16.5 per cent were American and 4 per cent were Dutch.

57 Brown, Airmen, 13–14.
59 Allen, «Belgian Army», 89.
French, Greek, Norwegian and Polish. The only exile force to land on 6 June was a French commando unit but on 1 August two armoured divisions (French and Polish) arrived in Normandy and played key roles in the encirclement of the German forces in the Falaise pocket. From mid-August onwards the Belgian, Dutch and Czech brigades were involved in minor operations on the French coast.

Between 1942 and 1943, the German military caught up with the «multinationalisation» that had been a feature of British forces since the start of the war. Both the Waffen-SS and the Wehrmacht made increasing racial compromises as the war exacted ever greater tolls on limited German manpower. Both organisations, too, tried as long as possible to shield the fighting effectiveness of their German core from being disrupted by what they perceived as the corroding effects of admitting foreign nationals into their ranks. It would be the Waffen-SS, however, despite its status as the flag-bearer of National Socialism, that would incorporate the greatest number of foreigners. From the fall of 1941 to the winter of 1942, it doubled in size, from a combat strength of 140,000 to 280,000. By the end of the war, almost one million men had served in the Waffen-SS, over half of whom were not German.

With another failed German summer offensive behind it, Himmler and the Waffen-SS leadership began an expansion programme in the fall of 1942. Waffen-SS recruitment from the West had failed, and would continue to fail, to meet expectations. By the end of the conflict, recruits to the Waffen-SS included some 40,000 Dutch, 38,000 Belgians and 6,000 each from Norway and Denmark, along with a scattering of Swiss and Swedish volunteers, far below the various targets envisioned by SS planners. In line with National Socialist racial principles, Himmler’s attention thus turned to «racial Germans», so-called Volksdeutsche, in the East. Already spearheading a programme to recruit Volksdeutsche settlers to help in the «Germanisation» of the occupied Eastern territories, Himmler now sought their help to bolster his military force. Unlike volunteers from the West, however, Volksdeutsche were to be largely conscripted. In this step, Himmler was following the Wehrmacht, which had begun forcibly conscripting the inhabitants of Alsace and Lorraine in France (annexed by Germany in 1940) in August 1942; some 130,000 would serve in the

64 Some 400,000 Reichsdeutsche (citizens of the German «Reich»), 300,000 Volksdeutsche and 250,000 non-Germans, mostly Western Europeans, served in the Waffen-SS. L. Westberg / L. Gyllenhaal, Svenskar i Krig, Stockholm 2005, 258.
65 These are on the lower end of estimates. On Waffen-SS decision-making see: NARA, T-175/109, 33657, Berger to SS-FHA, Betr.: Freiwillige aus germanischen Ländern, 9.2.1942.
Wehrmacht.\footnote{See E. Riedweg, \textit{Les Malgré-nous: Histoire de l’Incorporation de Force des Alsaciens-Mosellans dans l’Armée Allemande}, Mulhouse 1995.} Himmler’s plan for restructuring the Waffen-SS in the fall of 1942 was thus profound. It signalled the abandonment of the voluntary principle that had been central to the organisation’s aim of accepting only the most committed National Socialists. To compensate, the Waffen-SS expanded a policy that had already begun in the fall of 1940 to categorise various units according to their racial standard. Moreover, with the large scale reorganisation in the fall of 1942, it was not long before Waffen-SS planners were forced to consider arming groups they considered racially wholly inferior.

By the late fall of 1942, disaster was looming for Army Group South. In late-November, the German Sixth Army, numbering 250,000 men, was surrounded at Stalingrad. A few days later, Himmler proposed to Hitler to create a Bosnian Muslim division within the SS. In February 1943, the Sixth Army surrendered, marking the first major military setback for the Nazi regime and a turning point in the war in the East. Less than two weeks after the disaster, Hitler approved the idea of a Bosnian division.\footnote{Stein, \textit{The Waffen SS}, 180.} This decision marked a watershed in German policy and highlights the increasingly desperate manpower shortage in the German ranks. As we have seen, Soviet nationals had been recruited and coerced into aiding the SS in its murderous policies and to support the German logistical effort. Some 50,000 Soviet Hiwis, or «voluntary helpers», were engaged with the doomed Sixth Army.\footnote{Beevor, \textit{Stalingrad}, 184.} Increasingly over the previous year, Soviet Hiwis had been employed in security operations behind the front.\footnote{On Soviet Hiwis see A. Munoz, \textit{The East Came West: Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist Volunteers in the German Army and Waffen-SS, 1941–1945}, Bayside, N.Y. 2001.} Moreover, various non-Slavic Soviet nationals, such as Estonians, had been formed into armed units. The Bosnian division, however, would be the first combat formation within the German military to be composed of Slavs, considered Untermenschen in the National Socialist worldview. More were to follow. 1943 saw the creation of a host of new Waffen-SS divisions, few of which were German or even Germanic in nature.\footnote{See, for example, B. Wegner, \textit{Hitlers Politische Soldaten, die Waffen-SS 1933–1945: Studien Zu Leitbild, Struktur und Funktion Einer Nationalsozialistischen Elite}, Paderborn 1982, chapter V. Some estimate the death toll of prisoners as high as five-sixth. See I. Dear / M. Foot (eds.), \textit{The Oxford Companion to World War II}, Oxford 2001, 713.}

The ultimate compromise with National Socialist principles came in the fall of 1944, when Hitler and Himmler approved the formation of combat units composed of Soviet prisoners of war. Over six million Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner during the course of the war, more than half of whom died in German captivity.\footnote{Some estimate the death toll of prisoners as high as five-sixth. See I. Dear / M. Foot (eds.), \textit{The Oxford Companion to World War II}, Oxford 2001, 713.} This pool of potential collaborators was ignored for the same reason they were allowed to die in droves: they were considered by the German leadership as politically and racially dangerous sub-humans. Red Army General Andrey Vlasov, captured by the
Germans in July 1942, however, sought to convince his captors that anti-Bolshevism was rife among the captured soldiers. Nevertheless, for the first two years of his capture Vlasov was employed only as a propaganda tool by the Wehrmacht.\textsuperscript{74} Even this made Hitler and Himmler uncomfortable, as any notions of a Russian army on Germany’s side could lead to expectations of a future non-Bolshevik Russian state. In 1943, Himmler forbade his SS officers from negotiating with Vlasov.\textsuperscript{75} The success of the Soviet summer offensive of 1944, in which the German Army Group Center was nearly annihilated, together with the Normandy landings forced Himmler to reconsider his decision. Red Army prisoners under Vlasov’s command were formed into a «Vlasov Army» and thrown into to protect the Oder front against the final Soviet offensive on the Reich. Of course even this desperate move was unable to prevent the Third Reich’s final collapse in the spring of 1945.

4. Comparative Observations

What was the underlying logic behind the organisation of multinational forces by Britain and Germany? Kiran Klaus Patel, in his examination of transnational history, urges scholars to explore the issue of directionality: the nation state can either be understood as an «enabling condition of transnational interaction» or «national […] phenomena can, vice-versa, be the product of transnational developments or structures».\textsuperscript{76} The pilots interviewed by Curie in the North African desert were all fighting for distinct national goals. The Free French strove to legitimise de Gaulle’s alternative to Vichy and the Poles hoped to one day regain their homeland. Churchill and the British officers who hosted these volunteers also had national aspirations: to ensure the survival of Britain and its empire. The circumstances of the war and national goals, however, forced these varied men into transnational interactions leading to the creation of multinational armed forces on both sides of the conflict. The participation of many nations in their respective forces was seized by Britain and Germany as a propaganda opportunity to portray their causes as a profound international crusade against a common enemy. Yet, since these transnational interactions were the result of national self-interest, when circumstances changed, the incentive to cooperate could disappear. For example, the alliance with the Polish exile forces, which was so important when Britain stood alone in the summer of 1940, became insignificant in 1944 when Churchill consented to Stalin redrawing the prewar Polish-Soviet border, in order to maintain good relations with the country that was fighting the bulk of the Wehrmacht. Similarly, in occupied Europe Germany

\textsuperscript{74} Müller, An der Seite der Wehrmacht, 216–217; J. Hoffmann, Die Geschichte der Wlassow-Armee, Freiburg 1984, 11–31.

\textsuperscript{75} Himmler to d’Alquen, July 1943, cited in: A. Dallin, German Rule in Russia, 1941–1945, London 1957, 604.

promised «freedom» to aspiring nations such as the Bretons in France and the Flemish in Belgium in exchange for military collaboration, but quickly abandoned them when circumstances changed.77 This illustrates the primacy of the nation state and the limitations on the extent of transnational cooperation during the Second World War. No matter how successful or integrated the British or German multinational armies appeared to be, they were in reality coalitions of unequal powers, and for such alliances to function effectively, regardless of whether they fought for democracy or totalitarianism, the lesser powers had to subordinate their interests to those of the larger powers and trust that eventually their national goals would be accomplished. For Britain’s West European allies this policy proved beneficial, but not so for Britain’s East European allies, nor did Germany’s allies and foreign personnel benefit from their service to Germany.

What were the factors driving the «multinationalisation» of the British and German militaries and what were the significant similarities and differences in their developments? In both cases, it was the availability of motivated foreign personnel combined with the increasingly desperate need for manpower that propelled the integration of foreigners into what had previously been somewhat closed national militaries. In the British case, this was true from the war’s early stages and multinationalisation was an integral part of its survival. In the German case, however, it was the dynamic created by Himmler’s rivalry with the conventional military and his mandate for enforcing racial policies that caused an early process of looking beyond Germany’s borders. The practical urgency and resulting large-scale introduction of foreigners, in the German case, came only with the failure of the invasion of the Soviet Union. Thus, the German and British experiences were in one sense opposite.

As the war progressed, Britain’s tenuous strategic position improved, and the integration of non-British personnel and units became more efficient as the pressure eased. In its approach to organising and employing multinational forces, Britain combined democratic values and pragmatism: agreements were negotiated with the governments-in-exile, acts of parliament were passed to facilitate foreign forces established in Britain and foreign personnel were generally treated in the same way as British personnel. Indeed, when it came to ensuring the effectiveness of combat units regardless of their nationality, the British focused on stimulating morale and esprit de corps rather than applying coercive techniques, such as draconian discipline. To this end, the service departments actively monitored the morale of members of the armed forces by reading their personal letters. This practice was extended to the Allied contingents and the results were included in the progress reports.78 According to this

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78 For example, reports on British and non-British soldiers’ mail for the Tunisian and Italian campaigns can be found at TNA, WO 204/10181 and 10382. See also S. O’Connor, Irish Officers in the British Forces, 1922–45, Basingstoke, 2014, 114–16, 126–7.
evidence, morale seems to have been at its lowest during the summer of 1940. The
chiefs-of-staff attributed this to the shock of sudden defeat and the enforced idleness
among exile forces as the British assessed their capabilities and decided how to
employ them. Later reports indicated that morale increased significantly when Allied
units were sent on training and active service.

In the German case, however, each month of fighting from the winter of
1941/1942 onwards saw the parallel growth of desperation with the incorporation of
more foreigners. Combined with the brutal and racist National Socialist ideology, the
German military’s integration of foreigners was fundamentally characterised by hier-
archy, mistrust and, at times, abuse. The German conduct of the war, including its
incorporation of foreign nationals and units, cannot be separated from the ideological
 imperatives of Hitler and the Nazi regime. Hitler cautioned in the spring of 1942:
«[H]istory shows that all conquerors who have allowed their subject races to carry
arms have prepared their own downfall.» 79 In the fall of the following year, Himmler
wrote of Soviet volunteers: «[Y]ou can never know when they will attack their superi-
ors, when they will destroy something, or when they will desert.» 80 Moreover, despite
the increasingly desperate nature of the German fight, German leaders proved reluct-
ant to make even empty promises of post-war political concessions to their willing
collaborators. As a result, foreigners in the service of the Nazi regime frequently suf-
fered at the hands of distrusting German officers. Adding to their plight was the fact
that German officers, with few exceptions, believed themselves to be racially and cul-
turally superior. Though exact figures are difficult to ascertain, low morale and a pro-
pensity to desert was a significant problem in German units. A Swedish volunteer
testified after desertion: «The command in Sennheim [Waffen-SS training academy]
treated the men almost as animals and, in addition, had a down-right hostile attitude
toward Sweden.» 81 This case was not unique but rather representative of a general,
though not ubiquitous, phenomenon. 82 Moreover, the derision and treatment that
volunteers who were considered racially inferior received was often worse than the
mocking experienced by many Germanics. 83

Despite the fundamentally different nature of the regimes in question and the
purposes of their wars – in Britain’s case, initially, to prevent German hegemony in
Europe and then simply survival, in Germany’s case conquest and genocide – one
must note similarities in their multinational armed forces. In both cases, the multi-
national forces served as a stage on which ethnic and national tensions played out
and, at times, were amplified. For example, the British Army eagerly accepted thou-

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81 Militära underrättelse- och säkerhetstjänstens Arkiv, Stockholm, FX 22:a, PM Angående svenske medborgaren Erik Harald Jonsson och dennes enrollering i tyska Waffen S.S. m.m.
82 See, for example, De Wever, «Rebellen an der Ostfront», 595–596.
83 BAarch, NS 19 / 2601, Phelps to Himmler, 7.5. 1944.
sands of recruits from neutral Ireland while in 1941 British ministers voiced the concern that «completely Irish units [...] might become a fertile breeding ground for subversive agitation by the Irish Republican Army and other disloyal elements». As a result of this suspicion, the War Office ensured that the newly-formed 38th (Irish) Brigade was a «mixed Irish and British unit». Similarly, in 1940 British politicians and senior officers allowed their «distrust and contempt» for the regime of Edvard Benes to influence their assessment of the competence and political reliability of the Czech exile forces. Thus, the global conflict in which these personnel were engaged reflected and reinforced national tensions.

Such ethnic and nationalist conflicts were decidedly bloodier and more pronounced in the German case, however. Here the dimension of proximity – the fact that the war was present on the home turf of non-German soldiers whether through German occupation or alliance – played a decisive role. German troops cultivated a lawless atmosphere in Eastern and South-eastern Europe in which arbitrary killings became the norm. Moreover, the disruptive nature of war – and in some cases deliberate German efforts – caused a flaring of internal ethnic, nationalist or political conflicts. The service of locals in Waffen-SS units and participation in violence against other ethnic groups within their borders thus frequently overlapped previously existing conflicts or tensions. Thus in the Baltic States German units, which were charged with implementing the Holocaust, relied heavily on local collaborators.

The intertwined nature of the Second World War and local, long-standing conflicts, thus complicate any reading of the multinational nature of German efforts in particular. It is methodologically challenging to define which units and individuals «count» as foreign soldiers within the German military machine. For example, the roughly 6000-strong Danish auxiliary unit, the Schalburgkorps participated under SS direction in reprisal and policing operations against the growing Danish resistance but never served outside of their home country. Similarly, the German occupation forces in Greece armed some 30,000 Greeks who fought alongside German units against the guerrilla force ELAS. Another case, fundamentally different but equally difficult to classify, is that of Swiss combat doctors who served voluntarily and with their government’s approval in German field hospitals on the Eastern Front.

86 For example, in Greece German officials intentionally overemphasised the communist threat to encourage civil strife. See H. Richter, Griechenland 1940–1950: die Zeit der Bürgerkriege, Wiesbaden 2012, 114.
87 Black / Gutmann, «Racial Theory».
Front. It is similarly problematic to clearly classify the growing resistance movements in the Balkans and Western Europe – though supplied and in some cases directed by the British, they were in no way regular members of the British armed forces.

Such gray areas in the number of actual foreign personnel within the British and German militaries make a direct comparison of their impact on the war effort difficult. While large contingents, such as the Poles and Free French in the British case and the Volksdeutsche Eastern European recruits to the Waffen-SS as well as Soviet Hiwis in the German case made real and sustaining contributions, the larger impact of the multinationals may have been in their legacy. Even before the Normandy campaign was finished, the British government began formulating its «long-term strategic policy» towards the European allies. On 30 June 1944 the Chiefs-of-Staff produced a report that illustrated Britain’s desire not only to continue the European alliance but to deepen it: the report considered the size of the forces these allies could likely contribute to the occupation of Germany in order to reduce demands on British manpower and from what source Allied forces would be equipped. In answering these questions, the Chiefs-of-Staff advised: «[I]t is in our strategic interest that the forces of Belgium, Denmark, Holland and Norway should always be closely associated with us. They should therefore be armed and equipped with types of arms in use in the British Army [...]. It would suit our interests best if the weapons concerned could be manufactured in the United Kingdom, since this trade would help to sustain the British armament industry in peacetime.»

In line with British policy, in the closing stages of the war, the Belgian and Dutch brigades expanded after large-scale recruitment in their liberated countries. In effect, the British-trained exiles became the nuclei for their respective post-war armies and ensured that the inter-Allied cooperation that had been built up during the war would be continued. In liberated Norway, British-trained senior army officers were replaced by Norwegian officers who had stayed in captivity during the war. However, the Norwegian Navy had forged a close relationship with the Royal Navy and requested a British officer to advise on rebuilding the post-war navy. Thus these cadres of exiles would have a presence in the high command of their national militaries, helping to align their governments with the Western Allies and constituting willing partners for closer multinational military cooperation after the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1949. Ironically, their nationals who had volunteered their service to
Germany reinforced the same process of creating post-war unity – with most of the civil service and many businesses deeply complicit in the Nazi occupation, the Dutch, Belgian, Norwegian and Danish Waffen-SS volunteers were an obvious and easily defined group of collaborators who could be tried and thus held responsible for the nation’s failing.94


Under a Foreign Flag: Integrating Foreign Units and Personnel in the British and German Armed Forces, 1940–1945

Significant numbers of foreign personnel served in the British and German armed forces during the Second World. Yet there is no study that compares and situates these armed forces as multinational entities. This article examines Britain’s and Germany’s policies towards the recruitment, organisation and employment of non-nationals in their armed forces during this conflict. There were several forms of multinational participation but this study focuses on recruits who came from German-occupied or neutral countries. It was in these units that the exchanges and tensions of the multinational militaries were most profoundly felt. The article finds that though there was significant transnational military co-operation, this did not erode the primacy of the nation state. In both the British and German cases, the multinational forces served as a stage on which ethnic and national tensions played out and, at times, were amplified. Arguably the most important aspect of the multinational forces was their legacy. For Britain and her European allies, the experience created willing partners for closer multinational military cooperation in the post-war world.

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