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Occupied, Looted, and Raped: The Conduct of Canadian Soldiers in Sögel

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ABSTRACT
This article critically examines the conduct of Canadian soldiers from the 4th Canadian Armoured Division in Sögel, a small town in northwestern Germany, during the Second World War. Drawing on an array of archival materials, including local records and Canadian war diaries, the study scrutinises allegations of civilian complicity in German counterattacks, subsequent punitive actions by soldiers, and incidents of misconduct. The article contends that Canadian soldiers' lack of credible evidence for civilian involvement rendered the punitive measures and misconduct indefensible. The findings reveal a more nuanced and problematic understanding of the Canadian military's actions in Sögel than previously acknowledged.

Introduction: The Events at Sögel

In *Werwolf!: The History of the National Socialist Guerrilla Movement, 1944-1946*, Perry Biddiscombe describes the capture of Sögel and the subsequent actions of Canadian forces

> Vokes saw the destruction of property as the most effective answer to civilian resistance, even though he knew that this measure violated the Hague Rules and that it put him on such shaky legal ground that he prudently avoided issuing written proclamations whenever the policy went into force. The first place to suffer under Vokes' heavy hand was the northwest town of Sögel, where a number of civilians harboured *Wehrmacht* bazookamen and participated in a revolt against Canadian troops on 10 April, the day after the community was captured. After five Canadian soldiers lost their lives suppressing this

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> disturbance, civilians were ordered to leave their homes, and the centre of the town was systematically blown into rubble.[1]

This interpretation reflects a narrative deeply embedded in Canadian military historiography, namely that civilian assistance to German paratroopers during the counterattacks of 10 April 1945 justified the subsequent demolition of Sögel. Although major campaigns in France and Italy have generated extensive scholarship, the final weeks of the war in northwestern Germany – particularly the transition from combat to occupation and the dynamics of occupation in smaller towns – have received comparatively limited analytical attention. Within this context, the Sögel episode is frequently summarised based on wartime reports and C.P. Stacey's 1960 *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War: The Victory Campaign*, in which civilian complicity is presented as an established fact.

A review of Canadian archival records, however, calls that conclusion into question. No documentary record supports the existence of an April 1945 investigation that conclusively implicated civilians. Instead, a 42-page inquiry conducted in July 1945 by the North-West Europe Detachment of the No. 1 Canadian War Crimes Investigation Unit found insufficient evidence to substantiate allegations that civilians had fired on Canadian troops or assisted the counterattacks. Soldiers interviewed from multiple units described widespread suspicion within the ranks, but none could provide firsthand evidence of civilian gunfire or organised collaboration.

A reconstruction of the events in Sögel between 9 and 12 April 1945 enables a reassessment of both the episode and the interpretive frameworks that shaped its historiography. Drawing on Canadian operational records, court-martial proceedings, the 1945 investigation file, and German clerical and civilian testimony, this article demonstrates the instability of the civilian-complicity narrative. It contends that demolition, looting, and sexual violence occurred within a context defined by operational pressure, suspicion of irregular resistance, and inconsistent disciplinary enforcement. Reassessing the Sögel episode from this perspective not only challenges the official narrative but also reveals how interpretations formed under wartime conditions became embedded in Canadian military historiography without subsequent archival scrutiny.

4 Canadian Armoured Division in Sögel, April 1945

The Allied crossing of the Rhine in March 1945 constituted a decisive phase in the advance into northwestern Germany. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's revised

[1]Perry Biddiscombe, *Werwolf!: The History of the National Socialist Guerrilla Movement, 1944-1946,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p.258.

plan for *Operation Plunder*, issued on 28 March 1945, assigned the First Canadian Army responsibility for clearing western Holland before advancing northwards and eastwards to secure the coastal belt and enemy naval installations up to the Weser line.[2] 4 Canadian Armoured Division, commanded by Major-General Christopher Vokes, was tasked with advancing along the Almelo - Neuenhaus - Meppen - Sögel - Friesoythe - Oldenburg axis to protect the left flank of the British Second Army.[3]

On 9 April 1945, the Lake Superior Regiment (Motor) entered Sögel, a town in the Emsland district of Lower Saxony, and secured it after encountering only limited resistance.[4] On the morning of 10 April 1945, German paratroopers launched a series of counterattacks against Canadian positions, which were repelled through coordinated action by Canadian armoured and infantry units.[5] The fighting resulted in the deaths of five Canadian soldiers and significant losses among German forces, including casualties, wounded, and prisoners.[6]

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[2]Ian Kershaw, *The End: The Defiance and Destruction of Hitler's Germany, 1944-1945,* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), p.255; C. P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War: The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945,* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer, 1960), p.530.

[3]Stacey, *The Victory Campaign,* p.543.

[4]Library and Archives Canada (hereinafter LAC) RG24-C-3, vol. 14054, file 950, microfilm reel T-10660: War Diary of the Headquarters of the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade, April 1945, p.19; LAC RG24-C-3, vol. 15099, file 942: War Diary of the Lake Superior Regiment (Motor), April 1945, p.15; Pastor Georg Wolters to Bishop Berning, 13 May 1945, Sögel Archives, Germany; Pastor Hubert Garvert, *Krieg in Sögel: Die Tage nach dem Weissen Sonntage 1945,* Sögel Archives, Germany, n.d., ca. 1950, collection: Erinnerungen an das Kriegsende *1945*; Paul Augustus Mayer, *Report No. 32: The Concluding Phase of the Operations by the First Canadian Army* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, Historical Section Army Headquarters, 1949), p.71.

[5]LAC RG24-C-3, vol. 14766, file 916, microfilm reel T-18599: War Diary of the 8th Field Squadron, RCE, April 1945, p.373; LAC RG24-C-3, vol. 16105, file 299: War Diary of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment, April 1945, p.12; Hermann Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel aus der Ortschronik von Sögel,' in Elizabeth Schlicht (ed.), vol. 4 (Meppen: Verlag des Emslandischen Heimatvereins, 1957); Theo Kröger, 'Clemenswerth im 2. Weltkrieg – die Kanadier in Sogel,' in Werner Franke and Eckard Wagner (eds.), *Jahrbuch des Emsländischen Heimatbundes* , vol. 33 (Meppen: Verlag des Emsländischen Heimatvereins, 1987), p.254; Mayer, *Report No. 32*, p.72; W.D. of the Lake Superior Regiment (Motor), April 1945, p.17.

[6]Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.558; War Diary of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment, April 1945, p.13; War Diary of the 8th Field Squadron, RCE, April 1945, p.373.

Interpreting the Counterattacks

Initial Canadian explanations for the effectiveness of the German counterattacks in Sögel focused on operational shortcomings. Delayed recognition of the assault was attributed to adverse weather, poor visibility, and the routine discharge of captured enemy weapons, all of which obscured the attack's onset and limited the effectiveness of the immediate response.[7] As 4 Division Engineers observed, 'everyone was used to hearing their own troops discharging captured enemy weapons,' a circumstance that 'prevented early detection of the attack.'[8] A comparable explanation appears in a letter dated 13 May 1945 from the local pastor Georg Wolters, who cited inadequate Canadian security as the enabling condition for German infiltration, noting the absence of guards at the town's entrance.[9]

Subsequent Canadian military reporting, however, shifted away from these explanations. War diaries and unit reports increasingly attributed the counterattacks to civilian complicity, alleging that residents had sheltered German paratroopers and concealed arms and ammunition, and, in some instances, participated directly in armed resistance. The 4 Armoured Division Signals reported that civilians had 'harboured some Jerries,' who subsequently attacked field engineer squadrons.[10] At the same time, other units claimed the discovery of arms and automatic weapons in private homes.[11] Repeated across multiple units, these allegations reframed the counterattacks as the product of civilian complicity, a shift captured in the 9 Field Squadron's description of Sögel as 'the first town in which they encountered civilian snipers.'[12]

From Civilian Complicity to Punitive Measures

By late April 1945, interpretations of the Sögel counterattacks increasingly framed them as the product of civilian complicity. This framing circulated publicly in an article published in the Canadian field newspaper *The Maple Leaf* on 27 April 1945, which attributed the effectiveness of the counterattacks to civilian assistance rather than operational vulnerability. Accompanied by a photograph of civilians kneeling in the town's church square, the article 'German Civilians Five Years Late with Prayer'

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[7]4th Divisional Engineers, *Green Route Up*, ed. Lt. M.O. Rollefson, (The Hague: Mouton and Cy, 1945), p.55.

[8]Ibid., p.55.

[9]Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.

[10]LAC RG24-C-3, vol. 14947, file 1926: War diary of the 4th Canadian Armoured Divisional Signals, RCCS, April 1945, p.20.

[11]War Diary of the 8th Field Squadron, RCE, April 1945, p.373; 4th Divisional Engineers, *Green Route Up,* p.56.

[12]LAC RG24-C-3, vol. 14769, file 917, microfilm reel T-18602: War Diary of the 9th Field Squadron, RCE, April 1945, p.1309.

described them as 'civilians rounded up and placed here because of the help some of them had given to counterattacking Hun paratroopers.'[13]

This public framing contrasted sharply with local interpretations. Pastors Georg Wolters and Hubert Garvert rejected the implication of civilian involvement and dismissed the article's reading of the photograph as a misinterpretation of a religious rite by a reporter unfamiliar with the town's social and confessional context.[14] Subsequent historical analysis echoed this position. Writing in 1957, German historian Hermann Hölscher emphasised Sögel's strong Catholic identity and long-standing opposition to the National Socialist movement, suggesting that its inhabitants neither endorsed Hitler nor embraced the movement's ideology.[15] While Hölscher's account cannot definitively establish the town's political orientation – and may reflect, in part, postwar efforts by many German communities to distance themselves from the National Socialist past – it portrays a context incompatible with allegations of organised civilian assistance to paratroopers.

These objections, however, did not inform the conclusions of the Canadian military authorities, which endorsed the civilian-complicity narrative. In *The Victory Campaign*, Stacey reported that an internal investigation conducted in April 1945 concluded that civilians had assisted German paratroopers and attributed Canadian casualties to their actions.[16] As presented in the official history, this assessment provided the basis for demolition orders issued against the town, framed explicitly as both 'a reprisal and a warning.'[17] Operational records further justified the demolitions on logistical grounds. The war diary of 4 Canadian Armoured Division identified Sögel as a source of approximately 30,000 tons of rubble required for urgent road repairs.[18] Responsibility for the demolitions, codenamed *Operation Pushover*, was assigned to 8 Field Squadron, whose war diary recorded plans to dismantle nearly the entire town, except for the church, noting that 'there must be no ecclesiastical rubble, so all but church will go!!'[19]

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[13]'German Civilians Five Years Late with Prayer' *Maple Leaf – West Europe Edition* (Brussels), 27 April 1945, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=jsY6AAAAIBAJ&sjid=SyoMAAAAIBAJ&pg=1688%2C13134048. Accessed 15 February 2026.
[14]Pastor Garvert, *Krieg in Sögel*; Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.
[15]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel.'
[16]Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.558.
[17]Ibid.
[18]LAC RG24-C-3, vol. 13790, file 900/GS, microfilm reel T-10547: War Diary of the Headquarters, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, April 1945, p.9.
[19]War Diary of the 8th Field Squadron, RCE, April 1945, p.373.

The Destruction of Sögel, 11-12 April 1945

Although officially authorised on retaliatory and logistical grounds, the destruction of Sögel on 11 and 12 April 1945 was widely perceived by civilians as an act of collective punishment.[20] This interpretation is reflected most clearly in the testimony of Pastor Wolters, who later recalled being informed by a Canadian interpreter that the demolitions were punitive in nature 'because civilians had fired shots.'[21] When pressed on where such firing had occurred, the interpreter reportedly could not provide an answer.[22]

The operation was characterised by its suddenness. Reports from 8 Field Squadron indicate that civilians were given as little as 20 minutes' notice to leave their homes, leaving insufficient time to secure personal belongings.[23] Civilian accounts consistently described the demolitions as abrupt and coercive.[24] Heinz Schmees, then a young resident of Sögel, described seeing two Canadian soldiers place explosives inside his family home and prevent their exit through the front door before the house was destroyed.[25] 'Just in time, we made it outside,' Schmees recalled, 'our house was blown up in a loud bang.'[26]

Canadian military records confirm both the scale and intensity of the demolitions. War diaries describe extensive use of explosives, with the 4 Canadian Armoured Division Signals reporting difficulties in maintaining brigade and divisional communication lines due to the 'inspired demolition work.'[27] It was this use of explosives that led divisional records to compare Sögel and the neighbouring town of Friesoythe, which was itself subjected to extensive destruction in April 1945, to areas 'hit by an earthquake.[28] The material consequences were severe and long-lasting, leaving the town largely

[20]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel'; Kröger, 'Clemenswerth im 2. Weltkrieg,' pp.255-256; Pastor Garvert, *Krieg in Sögel*; Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.
[21]Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.
[22]Ibid.
[23]LAC RG24-C-3, vol. 13790, file 900/GS, microfilm reel T-10547: War Diary of the Headquarters, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, May 1945, p.54; War Diary of the 8th Field Squadron, RCE, April 1945, 373; 4th Divisional Engineers, *Green Route Up*, p.55; Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel.'
[24]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel'; Kröger, 'Clemenswerth im 2. Weltkrieg,' p.256; Pastor Garvert, *Krieg in Sögel*; Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.
[25]Heinz Schmees, *Die Kriegshandlungen in Sögel am 8., 9., und 10. April 1945*, Sögel Archives, Germany, n.d., collection: Erinnerungen an das Kriegsende *1945*.
[26]Ibid.
[27]War Diary of the 4th Canadian Armoured Divisional Signals, April 1945, p.20.
[28]War Diary of the Headquarters, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, May 1945, p.54.

unrecognisable.[29] German sources report the destruction of 73 houses, severe damage to many others, and the loss of cultural sites, including the local museum.[30] Reconstruction continued for nearly a decade, and total damage in 1945 was estimated at approximately 4.1 million Reichsmark.[31]

The Misconduct of Canadian Soldiers: Looting

The destruction of Sögel did not end with the demolitions themselves. The occupation that followed raised significant concerns regarding the treatment of civilian property. On 12 April 1945, Vokes issued a statement expressing alarm at the increasing incidence of looting and announcing measures to curb such behaviour.[32] While this directive indicates that looting had become a concern for the Canadian command, it provides no details on how such incidents unfolded in Sögel.

German civilian and clerical testimony, however, reports extensive looting following the town's capture on 9 April 1945. These accounts situate this looting within the context of house searches conducted to locate German soldiers, weapons, and ammunition, during which civilians were removed from their homes and denied the opportunity to supervise their property.[33] Theo Kröger recalled that on the day of the capture, 'the search for 'Nazi soldiers' began in all buildings,' with inhabitants ordered to gather in the church square and denied access to their homes while Canadian soldiers 'ruthlessly plundered all buildings.'[34] Similar patterns of looting were reported during house searches conducted in the aftermath of the German counterattacks on 10 April 1945.[35] Pastor Garvert corroborated these accounts, observing that 'the houses were searched by the troops that afternoon, and a large part of them were heavily looted,' with many buildings also sustaining significant damage.[36] These operations created conditions in which looting could occur on a broad scale, enabling soldiers to take civilian belongings both opportunistically and as perceived spoils of war.

[29]Schmees, *Die Kriegshandlungen.*
[30]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel'; Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.
[31]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel,'; Kröger, 'Clemenswerth im 2. Weltkrieg,' p.262.
[32]War Diary of the Headquarters, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, April 1945: 'Major-General Vokes' Conduct – Personnel in Germany,' 12 April 1945, p.181.
[33]Pastor Garvert, *Krieg in Sögel;* Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning; War Diary of the 8th Field Squadron, RCE, April 1945, p.373.
[34]Kröger, 'Clemenswerth im 2. Weltkrieg,' p.254.
[35]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel.'
[36]Pastor Garvert, *Krieg in Sögel.*

Limited corroboration is provided by the Canadian Army courts-martial records, which document investigations and trials of Canadian soldiers charged with offences including absenteeism, fraternisation, theft, and murder. Illustrative examples include two robbery cases involving Canadian soldiers in Sögel in April 1945. Gunner Bruce Smith of 99 Battery, 19 Canadian Field Regiment, was charged with aggravated robbery after taking a watch from civilians while threatening them with a revolver; although initially sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment, his sentence was later commuted to six months.[37] A second case involved Gunner Donald Higgs Cole of 87 Canadian Medium Battery, 3 Medium Regiment, Royal Canadian Artillery, who was charged with multiple offences, including the robbery of a civilian's wedding ring, and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment before being released in February 1946 for good conduct.[38]

The Misconduct of Canadian Soldiers: Sexual Violence

Concerns about the treatment of civilian property during the occupation of Sögel were accompanied by more serious allegations of violence against civilians. As with looting, incidents of sexual violence are largely absent from Canadian war diaries, reflecting both a reluctance among soldiers to report crimes committed by their peers and an institutional tendency to avoid documenting such offences. This absence stands in stark contrast to German civilian and clerical testimony, as well as to subsequent senior command directives that indicate awareness of the problem.

Before Canadian troops entered the town, senior command had already identified sexual misconduct as a foreseeable risk during the transition from combat operations to occupation. On 8 April 1945, Vokes issued instructions warning that sexual relations 'where circumstances indicate that consent was induced by force or fear' would result in charges of fraternisation or rape.[39] Despite this directive, however, German accounts suggest that the risk materialised almost immediately after occupation. Pastor Wolters reported that sexual assaults began on the evening of 9 April 1945 and continued into the following day, describing 'a large number of rapes of women and girls,' and noting that the situation was exacerbated by the distribution of large quantities of alcohol in Sögel shortly before the occupation.[40] Following the German counterattacks of 10 April 1945, house searches displaced residents and

[37]LAC R112-609-0-E, RG24-C-27, microfilm reel T-15850: Canadian Army Courts Martial Records: No. A55690 Gunner Bruce William Smith, pp.2544-2548, p.2586.
[38]LAC R112-609-0-E, RG24-C-27, microfilm reel T-15593: Canadian Army Courts Martial Records: No. A60052 Gunner Donald Higgs Cole, p.1361, p.1403.
[39]War Diary of the Headquarters, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, April 1945: 'Major-General Vokes' Division Routine Orders 3142,' 8 April 1945, pp.125-126.
[40]Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.

concentrated them in the church square. Pastor Garvert recalled that women hesitated to return home after these searches and, as fear intensified, young women and girls living alone did not want to return home that evening 'without the necessary protection.'[41] On the night of 12 April 1945, Garvert further described that civilians, particularly women and girls, gathered in groups so that they 'would not become the victim of the night,' suggesting a sustained atmosphere of insecurity.[42]

Other local testimonies situate sexual violence within the same sequence of displacement, detention, and intoxication. Kröger described seeing 'drunken soldiers [raping] women and girls in large numbers' while 'men were held behind barbed wire, [and] the houses were searched for soldiers'.[43] Hölscher similarly reported widespread sexual violence committed against women by 'often intoxicated soldiers,' emphasising that neither young girls nor older women were being spared.[44] Hölscher's account notes efforts by clergy and civilians to protect victims where possible, implying that the threat was pervasive enough to prompt organised protective measures.[45]

The available evidence indicates that reports of sexual violence were known to Canadian authorities during the occupation of Sögel. Pastor Wolters appealed directly to the local Canadian commander, seeking intervention against what he described as ongoing assaults.[46] According to Wolters, the commander acknowledged that such acts were prohibited but difficult to stop immediately, advising women and girls to 'keep a very low profile' and to dispose of alcohol supplies.[47] The diary of the Lake Superior Regiment records that a 'German pastor came up to the Colonel' on 11 April 1945 to discuss the events at Sögel, suggesting that the complaint reached regimental command.[48] As both Lieutenant-Colonel Hogarth and Lieutenant-Colonel Keane were present with the regiment that day, Wolters' interlocutor was likely one of the two.[49] On 12 April 1945, Vokes issued a formal directive titled 'Conduct – Personnel in Germany,' explicitly addressing pillage, rape, and fraternisation and warning of maximum penalties.[50] The timing of this order suggests that reports received between 8 and 11 April 1945 had reached divisional headquarters and prompted formal

[41]Pastor Garvert, *Krieg in Sögel.*
[42]Ibid.
[43]Kröger, 'Clemenswerth im 2. Weltkrieg,' p.255.
[44]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel.'
[45]Ibid.
[46]Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning.
[47]Ibid.
[48]War Diary of the Lake Superior Regiment (Motor), April 1945, p.18.
[49]Ibid.
[50]War Diary of the Headquarters, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, April 1945: 'Major-General Vokes' Division Routine Orders 3132-3143,' 8 April 1945, p.181.

disciplinary intervention. Court-martial records, however, demonstrate that recognition did not translate into rape prosecutions arising from events at Sögel. Instead, they illustrate how sexual violence was addressed within military justice through broader disciplinary or moral categories. In the case of Gunner Cole, testimony described physical aggression and coercive sexual intent following an incident on 10 April 1945.[51] A young German woman recounted that Cole, who appeared intoxicated, dragged her into another room, lifted her skirt, and refused to release her despite her pleas.[52] Although testimony indicates sexual coercion, the court-martial proceedings avoided reference to rape or attempted rape, Cole being instead charged with fraternisation.[53]

Quantifying sexual violence in Sögel presents significant methodological challenges. Local accounts estimate 'over 50 incidents,' with some suggesting figures 'possibly exceeding 100' or even 'hundreds.'[54] These discrepancies stem from the instability of evidence produced under occupation and the structural barriers to documenting sexual violence, especially where victims faced stigma, fear of reprisal, and limited access to formal reporting mechanisms. Precise calculation is further complicated by uncertainty about the town's wartime population. Post-war demographic data record approximately 3,200 inhabitants in 1946, suggesting that the pre-war population in 1939 was likely comparable, notwithstanding wartime displacement and refugee presence.[55] Allowing for evidentiary uncertainty, the reported figures indicate a locally significant level of sexual violence in a town of this size.

Assessing the Evidence and Its Limits

German accounts of the events at Sögel must be situated within the broader context of postwar German memory formation, in which narratives of destruction and suffering occupied a central place. As Robert G. Moeller has demonstrated, accounts of civilian victimhood functioned not only as recollections of loss but as mechanisms of postwar reintegration, allowing communities to process defeat while re-establishing

[51]Canadian Army Courts Martial Records: No. A60052 Gunner Donald Higgs Cole, p.1393.
[52]Ibid., pp.1406-1407.
[53]Ibid., p.1393.
[54]Hölscher, 'Ein grauenvolles Kapitel'; Pastor Wolters to Bishop Berning, Kröger, 'Clemenswerth im 2. Weltkrieg,' p.255.
[55]Statistisches Reichsamt, *Volks-, Berufs- und Betriebszählung vom 17. Mai 1939: Gemeinden mit 2.000 und mehr Einwohnern,* (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1940); Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder, *Amtliches Gemeindeverzeichnis für das Vereinigte Wirtschaftsgebiet 1946,* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1948).

coherent moral identity.[56] Memories of wartime violence were therefore not transmitted as objective records of events but were shaped by social and emotional pressures that influence how suffering was narrated.[57]

Harald Welzer's analysis of postwar family memory further illustrates these dynamics, showing that recollections of wartime violence were often subject to unconscious exaggeration and narrative drift.[58] Over time, stories became simplified, moralised, and intensified through repetition, without necessarily involving intentional fabrication.[59] These processes are especially relevant to clerical sources, which often functioned as moral documents, foregrounding injury, loss and injustice rather than detail or contextual explanation. Recognising these conditions of production does not invalidate German testimony but clarifies the interpretive limits. When critically assessed alongside the silence of Canadian military records, German civilian and clerical accounts remain essential for reconstructing patterns of civilian harm that occupying forces rarely documented. The lack of detailed Canadian reporting reflects institutional reluctance rather than a lack of evidence, a dynamic common to many occupational contexts.

The plausibility of German accounts from Sögel is reinforced by events in Friesoythe that occurred only days later. Following the killing of a Canadian officer, Canadian units systematically destroyed much of the town in what was explicitly framed as a punitive response.[60] Unlike Sögel, this episode is well documented in Canadian records, which detail both the scale and intentionality of the destruction. Friesoythe demonstrates that retaliatory violence was not a unique feature of operations in Sögel but formed part of a broader repertoire of punitive responses employed during the transition from combat to occupation. In this context, German accounts of violence and destruction in Sögel require no exaggeration to sustain their credibility. Even allowing for emotional emphasis, narrative drift, or moral framing, the patterns described align with conduct independently documented elsewhere under comparable operational conditions. The central analytical problem is therefore not whether misconduct occurred, but how such violence was produced and justified within the legal, institutional, and disciplinary frameworks governing Canadian operations in northwestern Germany.

[56]Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories*: *The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp.1-20.
[57]Moeller, *War Stories*, pp.1-20; Harald Welzer, Sabine Moller, and Karoline Tschuggnall, *'Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis', (*Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2002), pp.258-272.
[58]Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall, *'Opa war kein Nazi'*, pp.258-272.
[59]Ibid.
[60]Biddiscombe, *Werwolf!,* pp.258-265; Stacey, *The Victory* Campaign, pp.558-559.

Interpretation and Accountability

The misconduct documented in Sögel must ultimately be assessed against the legal framework governing the treatment of civilians and private property in 1945. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 prohibited collective punishment, looting, and violence against civilian populations during both combat operations and military occupation. Article 28 explicitly forbade the pillage of towns or places, even taken by assault, while Article 46 required the protection of 'family honour and rights,' a formulation contemporaries understood to encompass coercive sexual acts.[61] Although enforcement during the war was inconsistent and prosecutions were relatively rare, these provisions nonetheless constituted an accepted legal and normative standard within Western Allied military culture. Acts of looting, sexual violence, and punitive destruction, therefore, cannot be dismissed as informal excesses of battle or unavoidable by-products of operational stress but instead fall within a legally defined framework distinguishing permissible security measures from unlawful punishment and criminal behaviour.

After the capture of Sögel, Canadian forces engaged in various forms of civilian harm, including looting, sexual violence, and punitive destruction. Although these acts varied in form and severity, they occurred within a brief period and under similar operational conditions, suggesting a broader breakdown in discipline during the transition from combat to occupation rather than isolated incidents. Reconstructing the extent of this violence is methodologically challenging. German civilian and clerical sources provide numerous accounts of abuse, while Canadian war diaries are largely silent, reflecting both the complexities of documenting civilian harm in wartime and the institutional reluctance of military organisations to record crimes by their own personnel. Nevertheless, even a conservative reading of the available evidence indicates that misconduct in Sögel was neither isolated nor incidental. When considered alongside Vokes' 12 April 1945 statement acknowledging a high incidence of rape and pillage, as well as corroborating court-martial records, the sources collectively indicate a pattern of widespread misconduct, even if its precise scale cannot be conclusively determined.

[61] Hague Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land, (The Hague, 29 July 1899); Hague Convention (IV) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land, (The Hague, 18 October 1907); Roger Mac Ginty, 'Looting in the Context of Violent Conflict: A Conceptualisation and Typology,' *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 5 (2004): pp.859-861; Tuba Inal, 'The (Non) Prohibition of Rape in War: The Hague Conventions,' in *Looting and Rape in Wartime: Law and Change in International Relations,* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p.61.

Explaining this breakdown in discipline does not require certainty about soldiers' intent.[62] As John Horne and Alan Kramer have shown in their study of wartime atrocity, historical explanation may proceed through analysis of structural conditions, situational pressures, and institutional responses that make violence against civilians possible.[63] In April 1945, Canadian forces advancing rapidly in northwestern Germany were operating amid fatigue, dislocation, and uncertainty. The transition from conventional combat operations to occupation and stabilisation tasks strained command structures and blurred the boundaries between combatant and civilian. Operational pressure remained high, yet responsibilities expanded to include policing, population control, and security against perceived irregular threats. As Claire Cookson-Hills has shown, environments characterised by weakened oversight, inconsistent enforcement of discipline, and permissive command climates create conditions in which sexual violence and civilian abuse become more likely.[64]

These pressures were compounded by unit composition. Many Canadian formations incorporated substantial numbers of recently arrived reinforcements, including conscripts introduced following the Conscription Crisis of late 1944.[65] Soldiers with limited combat experience were often rapidly integrated into units shaped by prolonged fighting, heavy casualties, and informal disciplinary norms developed over months of combat. The combination of rapid advance, unstable occupation conditions, and uneven integration placed additional strain on already stretched systems of supervision and discipline.

Perceptions of civilian complicity significantly influenced Canadian responses. War diaries and contemporaneous reports frequently alleged civilian assistance to German paratroopers during the counterattacks of 10 April 1945, despite a lack of substantiating evidence. A post-war investigation in July 1945 determined that these claims were primarily based on hearsay, general suspicion, and retrospective rationalisation rather than direct observation. Once these assumptions became entrenched, they justified reprisals and collective punishment. Within this framework of presumed civilian culpability, looting, sexual violence, and punitive destruction were not isolated excesses but practices embedded in a broader logic of retaliation and control.

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[62]See John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).
[63]Ibid.
[64]See Claire Cookson-Hills, 'Sexual Violence as Motivation,' in Robert C. Engen, H. Christian Breede and Allan English (eds.), *Why We Fight: New Approaches to the Human Dimension of Warfare,* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), pp.51-81.
[65]C.P. Stacey, *Arms, Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada, 1939–1945,* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1970), pp.434-475.

Command climate further influenced the trajectory of events. Vokes was known for endorsing severe measures to deter perceived resistance, and his willingness to employ punitive destruction as a warning to civilian populations was consistent with wider Allied anxieties surrounding irregular warfare in Germany's final months.[66] While formal orders concerning the demolition of Sögel emphasised logistical necessity, German and Canadian testimony alike suggests reprisal was widely understood as a primary motive, rendering the destruction of the town both a material and symbolic assertion of authority.

Within this broader breakdown of discipline, sexual violence constituted one of the most severe forms of civilian abuse. Scholarship on military occupation has consistently rejected explanations that reduce such violence to individual pathology or the inevitability of war. Joanna Bourke has demonstrated that it is frequently enabled by permissive disciplinary environments in which civilian populations are dehumanised rather than protected.[67] Elisabeth Jean Wood has shown that its occurrence varies systematically across conflicts and correlates closely with the presence or absence of effective command and control.[68] These findings shift the analytical focus from individual motivation to institutional context. In environments marked by inconsistent oversight and uneven disciplinary enforcement, especially where civilians are regarded as suspect or expendable, opportunities for abuse expand. Under such conditions, sexual violence reflects failures of command and control rather than isolated misconduct.

In Sögel, German testimonies consistently linked sexual violence to house searches, alcohol consumption, civilian displacement, and inadequate supervision. The reluctance of Canadian soldiers to report crimes by their peers, combined with limited prosecution, further diminished the likelihood of accountability and contributed to an environment where abuse could recur. Sexual violence, therefore, did not occur in isolation but formed part of a broader pattern of civilian harm enabled by fear, disorder, and a command climate shaped by suspicion and reprisal.

The July 1945 Investigation

A review of the relevant Canadian archival material yields no evidence of an investigation conducted on 10 April 1945 into the events at Sögel. This absence stands in contrast to Stacey's assertion that such an inquiry conclusively implicated civilians

[66]Biddiscombe, *Werwolf!,* pp.258-265; C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, pp.558-559.
[67]See Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present,* (London: Virago, 2007).
[68]See Elisabeth Jean Wood, 'Variation in Sexual Violence during War,' *Politics & Society* 34, no. 3 (2006): pp.307-342.

in the counterattacks.[69] Instead, a previously unidentified 42-page report entitled 'Atrocities Committed by Citizens of Sögel against Canadian and Allied Troops' documents a subsequent investigation initiated in July 1945.[70] Of particular significance, the investigation concluded that insufficient evidence existed to substantiate allegations of civilian involvement.

The July inquiry was prompted by the interception and censorship of a letter written by Major Bruce F. MacDonald on 23 April 1945. In the intercepted correspondence, MacDonald described the situation as follows,

> I lost a very dear friend when the citizens of Sögel turned werewolves on us and shot up a field ambulance and an Engineer Unit. They used Dum-Dum bullets and nearly tore the chaps apart that we hit. We levelled their town for them, and there has been less trouble since.[71]

In response, the North-West Detachment of the No. 1 Canadian War Crime Investigation Unit was tasked with examining allegations that civilians had engaged in 'sniping on Allied troops,' used dum-dum bullets, and concealed weapons and ammunition. Between 5 July and 7 July 1945, investigators interviewed soldiers who had been present during the counterattacks in Sögel.[72] While many interviewees acknowledged having heard rumours of civilian involvement, none could provide firsthand evidence.[73]

Testimonies from multiple units revealed a consistent pattern. Several soldiers conceded that civilians might have assisted German paratroopers but admitted that these beliefs were based on general impressions rather than direct observation. Captain J. G. Murdock of 8 Field Squadron referred to 'a general feeling among the troops that the attack would not have been successful as it was if civilians had not helped,' while conceding the absence of proof. Corporal R. J. Parker similarly described a 'general feeling in the unit,' but stated that he had 'no knowledge of any hidden weapons in houses that were used by German troops during the attack.'

Major W.E. Boothroyd of 15 Canadian Field Ambulance characterised the counterattacks as 'a normal, well-thought-out and well-executed counterattack,'

[69]Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p.558.
[70]LAC R112, RG24-C-2, vol. 12842, file 67/Sögel/1: *Atrocities Committed by Citizens of Sögel against Canadian and Allied Troops*, July 1945.
[71]*Atrocities Committed by Citizens of Sögel,* p.15.
[72]Ibid., p.23.
[73]For interview summaries, see Atrocities *Committed by Citizens of Sögel*, pp.23-36.

adding that, although Canadian troops had been caught off guard, he had 'no reason for believing that war crimes were committed' and possessed 'no knowledge of any overt acts on the part of civilians.' Lieutenant A.B. McAdam, Major H.M. Jolley, and Corporal N.E. Burns likewise reported no knowledge of civilians engaging in sniping.

Allegations that civilians carried weapons were similarly unsubstantiated. Sapper W.R. Mitchell of 8 Field Squadron reported seeing a civilian with a rifle but emphasised that 'at no time was any civilian shooting at troops or taking an active part in the counterattack.' Sapper W. Skemin, also serving 8 Field Squadron, observed civilians leaving houses with German helmets and Mauser rifles, but did not witness civilians firing weapons. Skemin further claimed seeing '28-30 German soldiers … wearing British helmets and carrying British Bren and Sten guns.' Investigators, however, rejected these claims, concluding that no evidence existed that German soldiers in Sögel possessed British weapons, clothing, or helmets.

The Findings

Following its investigation, the North-West Europe Detachment of the No. 1 Canadian War Crime Investigation Unit determined that the allegations of civilian involvement in the counterattacks lacked substantiated evidence. The inquiry was formally closed on 8 July 1945, with the investigators concluding:

> [The] original censor intercept had been made on hearsay and did not correspond with the known facts. The attack on Sögel was entirely a German paratroop counterattack; no civilians were seen to have fired on the Canadian troops, and none were found with arms, ammunition or equipment. Of the large numbers of witnesses interrogated, including medical installation personnel, none could recall a Canadian body bearing seven bullet wounds. No evidence was obtainable from medical channels of the admission of any wounded Canadians suffering from other than normal bullet wounds. … This case has been closed. Even if the original story as told by Major MacDonald is true, which is questionable, the perpetrators are unknown.[74]

The findings suggest that troop suspicions, rather than verified evidence, shaped wartime reports of civilian participation and the punitive measures that followed. Stacey's claim that an April 1945 investigation implicated civilians cannot be corroborated without supporting documentary evidence in Canadian archives. His failure to cite sources limits the assessment of the claim's reliability and warrants caution in treating it as conclusive. It remains unclear whether Stacey's interpretation reflected prevailing assumptions within the Canadian army, the political and institutional context in which the *Official History* was produced, or an incomplete

[74] *Atrocities Committed by Citizens of Sögel*, pp.17-18.

evidentiary record. Regardless of its origin, the persistence of this unsubstantiated claim in subsequent scholarship illustrates how authoritative narratives, once established, can be reproduced without evidentiary reassessment. This episode highlights the importance of continued critical engagement with military historiography.

Conclusions: Canadian Soldiers' Misconduct in Sögel

Although the events at Sögel represent a minor episode in the history of the Canadian campaign in northwestern Germany, they offer significant insight into the formation of wartime narratives. In April 1945, the demolition of Sögel was framed as a reprisal for civilian participation in German counterattacks. This explanation, perpetuated in official history and subsequent scholarship, was based on assumptions that the July 1945 investigation ultimately failed to substantiate. No reliable evidence confirmed that residents had fired on Canadian troops or assisted the counterattacks; nevertheless, suspicion proved more enduring than documentation.

Simultaneously, the occupation of Sögel revealed significant disciplinary failures. Reports of looting and sexual violence in German testimony, partially corroborated by Canadian court-martial records and senior command directives, indicate that misconduct occurred under conditions of uneven supervision and enforcement. These acts cannot be attributed solely to individual misconduct; rather, they unfolded within an environment shaped by fatigue, rapid transition from combat to occupation, the integration of inexperienced reinforcements, and a command climate permissive of punitive destruction. Collectively, these factors undermined disciplinary restraint and enabled violence against civilians.

When considered within the structural and situational realities of late-war occupation, the events at Sögel do not appear as an isolated episode but as an example of patterns that extended beyond a single town. Operational strain, suspicion of irregular resistance, and uneven disciplinary enforcement shaped Canadian conduct on the ground and framed the interpretation that followed. The episode thus illustrates how wartime assumptions can become embedded in authoritative accounts. Reassessing Sögel does not diminish the broader record of Canadian military achievement in the Second World War; rather, it underscores the importance of subjecting even established narratives to critical scrutiny. Such analysis contributes to a more historically grounded understanding of Canadian conduct during the final weeks of the war and the transition from combat operations to occupation.