

Introduction

Journal of a Conscript

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FIRST INDORSEMENT. JOURNAL OF A CONSCRIPT—in 1945, twenty-five-year-old Melvin J. Lasky boldly inscribed these words on the cover of his 250-page typescript.¹ Lasky began his diary on 22 January 1945 in Fort Totten, New York while waiting to be shipped to Europe with the US Army, and concluded it in Frankfurt, Germany almost a year later, on 19 December 1945. He chronicled his time as an American GI en route to, and into Germany, filling page after page with the narrowly spaced text of his Army-issued typewriter. However, what may once have been the ambitious book project of a young aspiring author and intellectual, was left unpublished and soon forgotten. A brief excerpt appeared in the left-leaning intellectual magazine *Common Sense* in June 1945, which seems to have been the only instance of any part of the diary being published at the time. Entitled “Travel Diary in Germany,” the entries from 7 and 11 April 1945 were printed anonymously—presumably because Lasky feared Army reprimands (Anonymous 1945). Asked to comment on what he thought had been Lasky’s plans for the diary, his longtime assistant Marc Svetov replied: “He might’ve thought he would publish [it], but I think events just transpired, and he had other ambitions” (Marc Svetov, email message to Maren Roth, 14 May 2015).

After Lasky left the military in 1946, his career picked up, at first gradually and then, starting in 1947, more quickly as events in Allied-occupied Berlin took him on the path that he is best known for today: He was one of the initiators of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) and became the editor of two highly acclaimed—albeit partially CIA-funded—literary journals; a transatlanticist, liberal anti-communist of the consensus era, and a cultural cold warrior par excellence. In fact, while Lasky features in quite a few studies of the transatlantic intellectual scene of the Cold War, he tends to be a figure on the sidelines, at best pulling strings in the background.² While this might indeed have been the role he thrived in, so far, we know little about his mindset and about what shaped his ideas and his identity.³ To understand Lasky’s

career, his views on Germany, the United States, and transatlantic relations, reading his war diary is highly instructive. Sociologist Daniel Bell once remarked that his longtime friend Melvin J. Lasky always remained but a “visiting member” among the so-called New York intellectuals. He went to Europe and stayed there—that made all the difference (Bell 2010, 45).

Content and Themes

Written on the verge of the most politically active phase of his life, Lasky’s 1945 diary illustrates formative moments and reveals personal insights into the mindset of a young man who was convinced of his own intellectual potential, but not quite sure yet how best to put it to use. The diary gives a first glimpse of the political and cultural views he would go on to assert. They emerge from his prewar youth and education, his social milieu, and his political conditioning, mostly in New York City, complemented by the experiences he gathered while serving with the US Army. As Michael Kimmage shows in his contribution to this volume: the diary clearly “bears the New York intellectuals’ stamp,” and a personal “trajectory” to that effect appeared to be already in place when Second Lieutenant Lasky embarked for Europe in 1945: “‘America’ discovering ‘Russia’ was a precious spectacle!” he reports from Berlin to his mentor Dwight Macdonald. At the same time, the experience of the war, specifically the experience of being part of the occupation forces, clearly impacted his commitment to Europe in general, and to Germany in particular. The diary enables us to see this pivotal development unfold. Lasky also filled his journal with literary allusions and remarks, leaving us a record of his personal cultural frame of reference. The everyday encounters, reflections, and emotions Lasky consigned to the page become, as George Blaustein puts it in his chapter, “the precondition for the postwar transatlantic exchanges.”

Beyond the persona the author was to become, Lasky’s diary also speaks to us on a different level. His particular positioning renders his text a multifaceted hybrid, composed by a somewhat reluctant soldier, who, on the one hand was a committed American and on the other hand, self-consciously strove for intellectualism and a transcendent notion of European culture. From this vantage point, Lasky offers unabashed observations of military life, the occupation, and views on victory and defeat that run much deeper than what we find in the average soldier’s ego-documents.⁴ Jana Aresin’s chapter places Lasky’s evaluations in the larger context of debates on denazification and early reeducation. She shows how he acutely identified key problems and predicaments.

The curiosity and journalistic ambitions that drove Lasky in his explorations of a world in the last throws of a world war had an official dimension as well. As a trained historian, he had managed to secure a position within the Army's Historical Branch. He thus had the access, the freedom, and the gear (typewriter, camera) necessary for in-depth assessments and investigations of his surroundings. He spoke a good amount of German, which also set him apart from many of his peers. Availing himself of these opportunities to explore and investigate his surroundings, he accompanied his observations with a reflective commentary in his diary on historiography and documentary method.

For all his critical ruminations and insightful observations, however, Lasky was also a young man, abroad for the first time, in the company of other young men. "We would be tourist-conquerors," he observed poignantly as they entered Heidelberg in April 1945. The men seem constantly caught between the thrill of adventure and the deeply distressing realities of war and destruction. In this respect, the diary presents a much more unmediated account of the experiences and encounters. Moods and tone change throughout the document, sometimes suddenly. Tales of juvenile antics and sexual exploits are followed by melancholy descriptions of cities reduced to rubble or profound reflection about the fate and guilt of the German people. This affective dimension of the document adds a further layer to the diary as a rich source for examining the cultural history of the immediate postwar moment. In that vein, Katharina Gerund's chapter explores the deeply gendered nature of the text. She flags the distinct "male gaze" of the composition and traces the various manifestations of military masculinity both in actual everyday practices as well as on the meta level, where war-torn Europe appears feminized.

Melvin J. Lasky's war diary can be read from many different perspectives and with numerous research interests in mind. From military history to cultural studies, from literary criticism to historiography, it presents the reader with material for a plethora of possible approaches. The accompanying essays open up the most prominent of these dimensions. They invite readers to focus on individual aspects while guiding students towards different methodologies and interpretations. Scholars of both World War II and the Cold War can find cues in the document, as well as historians of cultural diplomacy, reconstruction, or gender, and those studying transatlantic relations and the emergence of the so-called American Empire. Overall, because of Lasky's individual biography, this diary compellingly illustrates the historical moment when World War II slowly transformed into the Cold War. It sheds light on the close ties between the United States' experience of fighting Nazism, the complex occupation policies, and the emerging cultural imaginaries that shaped the second half of the twentieth century.

Publication History and Editing Process

For almost sixty years no one knew about the war diary. It was discovered only after Lasky's death on 19 May 2004, when his assistant Marc Svetov, while organizing and sorting through Lasky's papers, unexpectedly found it in three neatly stacked ring binders "hidden . . . behind the closed doors of the bookcase" (Marc Svetov, email message to Maren Roth, 22 May 2018). In a report for the family on what he had found, Svetov noted his enthusiasm about this "historical and literary document worth having in print."⁵ There were some aspects he felt needed editing and amending, for example, "where Mel generalizes too much in a pompous manner and appears too vain for a reader's comfort."⁶ He also pointed out that, to him, Lasky at times presented the German viewpoint almost too apologetically, a position that he did not find very comprehensible for an American Jew who throughout his diary, time and again, emotionally commented on the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust as well as on their difficult postwar situation. The typescript shows signs of a first editorial process, undertaken by Svetov, who indicated passages to be left out or explanatory information to be added. However, nothing came of it until 2007, when a few short excerpts appeared in the journal of the Berlin-based American Academy (Lasky 2007). Seven years later, a friend of the family, Professor Emeritus of Ancient History Wolfgang Schuller (1935–2020), edited a much-abridged version of the diary to appear in translation for a German readership (Lasky 2014). It was geared towards, and emphatically resonated with, the generation who, like Schuller himself, had lived through the time, growing up as children in the rubble. One of them, born in 1931, penned a moving personal response to Schuller: he had felt "truly touched and comforted" by the way Lasky had "navigated his way through hatred, rubble, war, precondition and personal experience," guided by what the writer of the letter deemed a well-calibrated *Menschlichkeitskompaß* (humanitarian compass) (Letter to Wolfgang Schuller, 23 March 2015 and kindly forwarded to Maren Roth, 2 April 2015). The book was positively reviewed in all major German newspapers.⁷ These reactions hint at a further dimension that documents such as this war diary can have—as catalysts of personal and public memory, as they become part of a larger narrative (Sollors 2014).

The task of editing the full original English version of the text for both an academic readership and an interested public fell to the Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies in Munich. This is where the original diary ended up as part of Lasky's personal papers, which were donated to Ludwig Maximilian University in 2008.

The original typescript was first transcribed and furnished with basic *annotations*, which included identification of names and places as well as deciphered

military language and other colloquialisms and common abbreviations.⁸ Information regarding names and contexts directly relevant to the events described in the diary are referenced in the endnotes. The numerous, often casual cultural references, especially from literature, historiography, and art, have been indexed and listed in appendices A and B. The compilation of such a separate collection of cultural references drawn from the text provides an interesting overview and affords added attention to the cultural framework at play.

The diary reflects the many uncertainties and insecurities of the time. This ought to be kept in mind when reading the primary text. Not everything Lasky observed, inferred, or speculated, proved correct later on; a considerable amount of the information he relates is based on hearsay. This incompleteness of knowledge available at the time is an essential and characteristic element of the original text. Thus, in-text annotations have been kept to a minimum. People and historical circumstances directly relevant to the events unfolding in the main text are explained in the endnotes, though hearsay and conjecture remain without comment. The accompanying chapters provide explanations of the larger historical contexts. The decision to keep interspersed foreign language terms and sentences without translation also highlights the aim to retain the original character of the document and the way it captures the polyphone confusion and chaos of that particular historical moment.

We present the document as completely as possible, though in order to keep the manuscript to a publishable length, some cuts had to be made. Places in the text where sections have been omitted are indicated by ellipses in square brackets. Any parentheses or ellipses without brackets are part of the historical text. Marc Svetov's original order has helped tremendously in compiling the manuscript. It provided a preliminary pagination and separated diary text from letters that had been mixed in with the material. Some letters remain, though, as occasionally Lasky used his diary to draft letters.

The *parameters for abridging* the text have been determined with readability, relevance, and consistency in mind. They are as follows:

- Lengthy citations from literature or newspapers, copied verbatim from books, some of them in German, have been cut.
- Sections that were clearly drafts for other texts (with the exception of some letters) were cut, along with unclear, mostly incomprehensible notes, jotted down for later use. The subject matter of these notes is generally covered in the text a few pages later.
- Some cuts were made on scenes that proved repetitive when considered in the context of the diary as a whole.
- One larger section describing a tour of the Scandinavian countries between 5 and 11 October has been taken out completely. While it would

have been valuable to keep, it constitutes the largest self-contained section that made sense to cut without losing the coherence of the narrative. Some later references to the trip remain.

In the interest of smoother reading, the following *formatting measures* have been applied:

- Dates are rendered in a uniform format: day month year (+ place where the information was available)
- Abbreviations are standardized and explained in a separate list.
- Any words and sentences in foreign languages (mostly German, some French, Russian, etc.) are left in the original without translation and are italicized. Lasky uses both, anglicized and local spellings for place names. This inconsistency has been maintained on purpose.
- Titles of books, songs, plays, etc., are italicized. As some references are rough or incomplete, full titles and publication dates are listed alphabetically in Appendix A.
- Obvious grammatical errors and typos are corrected tacitly, except for purposefully capitalized words (e.g., War, History, They). These are kept in the original form to allow for the added layer of meaning Lasky implied. Words spelled incorrectly to highlight a certain accent or dialect are also left untouched to preserve the authenticity of the text. For the same reason, racial slurs and curse words have not been expunged.

The complete original typescript as well as a full transcript are available for researchers at the Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies, Munich.

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Notes

1. Cf. Melvin J. Lasky, "First Indorsement' Journal of a Conscript," Melvin J. Lasky Papers, Lasky Center for Transatlantic Studies, Munich (subsequently quoted as Lasky Papers), New York Box 1, Folder 1.

2. For a general impression of Lasky's public image see for example his *New York Times* obituary ("Melvin J. Lasky, Cultural Cold Warrior" 2004). See also: Hochgeschwender 1998; Scott-Smith 2002; Scott-Smith and Lerg 2017. For a publication that focuses exclusively on the connections to the CIA, but at times jumps to conclusions, see Saunders 1999. For an overview of the research on the issue see Pullin 2013.

3. Maren Roth is currently working on a biography of Lasky's early life. For a first look see for example, Roth 2014.

4. Among the soldiers' diaries and memoirs of World War II appear military leaders like George Patton (Patton 1947) as well as lesser-known names (e.g., Tomikel 2000). Most examples are edited collections of various shorter accounts (e.g., Wallis and Palmer 2009; Miller and Miller 2016). There is only one other diary comparable to Lasky's in that it was also written by a combat historian (Pogue 2001).

5. Marc Svetov, Comment on “Melvin Lasky’s Diary of a Conscript 1945–1946,” 23 January 2005, Lasky Papers, New York Box 1, Folder 1.
6. Ibid.
7. Reviews in *Jüdische Allgemeine*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.
8. Full names and ranks of Lasky’s fellow soldiers in the 7th Army Information and Historical Section are taken from the listing in ETOUSA Historical Division Records 1941–46. NARA Record Group 498 File No. 161. See Appendix C for a full list.

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