

“German and French prisoners of war during and after World War II: a common experience for a common interpretation?”

The German invasion of France in May 1940 was the starting point of a Franco-German history of war captivity that would end only with the liberation of the last German prisoners of war held in France in December 1948, more than eight and a half years later.

The experience of war captivity for Germans and French during and after World War II was quite similar, both being held at a time when open hostilities between the two states had come to an end. French prisoners were held in Germany while the armistice of 22 June 1940 was in force; German prisoners were held in France well beyond the surrender of Germany on 8 May 1945. The absence of peace treaties after the end of the fighting, both in 1940 and in 1945, created for German and French prisoners a situation of total uncertainty as for a possible repatriation which dominantly shaped the prisoners' state of mind during captivity.

The parallels are manifold. Germany held up to two million French POWs between 1940 and 1945; France had the custody over up to one million German POWs between 1945 and 1948. In both countries, extended systems of hundreds of camps of various sizes were organised, with transit camps, central camps and labour camps and detachments, bringing the prisoners to almost every region of these countries.

For both French and German prisoners, the localisation of the camp and the labour they were affected to, determined for a large part the living conditions. Prisoners living and working in big cities were under threat of aerial bombing in Germany and suffered from food shortage and hostile civil populations in France's destroyed urban centres. On the contrary, the countryside and work on farms was both in France and Germany the opportunity for the prisoners to improve their living conditions and to tie more peaceful relations with the locals.

Finally, the repatriation to their home countries after years of captivity abroad was often a dramatic moment, when illusions and wishes built up over years far away from home were confronted to a reality that was sometimes quite different: destroyed houses and families; wives that had made a new life with someone else, maybe thinking the prisoner-husband was dead. Never the repatriation was a return to those pre-captivity conditions that had illustrated the prisoners' imagination for the years of hardship.

But in spite of these many parallels between the German and the French experience of war captivity, the history of these prisoners had mostly been written within the framework of a national discourse. Although a common experience for French and Germans, the interpretation of that same experience was clearly not common, and took separate ways on each side of the Rhine.

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From a purely numerical point of view, never before had so many Germans lived in France, and so many French stayed in Germany. Never before had Germans and French lived in such close physical proximity to each other. Despite the experience of suffering, death,

hardship, privation and sometimes extreme violence, French and Germans were forced to meet, usually in the framework of individual, non-violent relations.

These forced transnational encounters took place between soldiers, POWs and civilians, in camps, factories and in towns and villages. They were human encounters of various forms, which had a significant cultural impact on both nations – though a silent one.

In 1971 Kurt W. Böhme published *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in französischer Hand* and therein only hinted at the evolution “from below” of the relations between French and Germans after an extended cohabitation. He identified the fact of working together at a same task as a main condition for a successful integration of the foreign group into the autochthonous society:

“Beyond the significant material benefits, the work of the POWs in France also brought an equally significant psychological value. The common work place, and this only, offered to the French and the Germans after the Occupation and the war a favourable occasion to learn to know and to respect each other as humans. But before the wall of prejudices, false estimations and hatred could be overcome, the prisoners had some bitter stages to leave behind. At the end of the path, that passed through a strict reservation and sometimes apathy, there was tacit or open acknowledgment from the civil population, and sometimes lasting friendship. Even though the times that passed contributed to that, the work in common was the determining catalyser that enabled this evolution.”

The conditions of forced cohabitation were quite similar for French prisoners in Germany during the war. In 2003, German historian Helga Bories-Sawala pointed to the consequences on post-war Franco-German relations of the forced labour engagement of Frenchmen in Germany during World War II:

“There are human contacts with work colleagues, with German women, with the civil population in general, which contributed to a very differentiated appreciation of the neighbour people as reflected by the testimonies of former POWs or labour deportees. An everyday understanding, solidarities, sometimes friendship or even love could arise within a situation of exception and often beyond political considerations. These experiences are certainly an explanation for the fact that many French who experienced an often painful period of exile were nevertheless among the most active in the creation of Franco-German twinings and the exchanges with both Germanies after the war.”

Hence, it is particularly interesting to notice the forms taken by the encounter in France between German POWs and homecoming French liberated prisoners after 1945.

The number of French POWs captured in 1940 represented an average of 143 prisoners per any 1,000 male actives. Interestingly, these French prisoners of war, repatriated in 1945 for most of them, were to play an important role in the Franco-German reconciliation process, at least on the local level. Back from their own captivity in Germany, they represented a group of people that proved to be particularly indulgent towards the German POWs now held in France.

What might seem contradictory at first sight emerges, as a constant factor in many narratives. While certain repatriated French prisoners sought to avenge their own sufferings endured in Germany, as we have seen, others, certainly more numerous, did not endeavour to exact revenge. On the contrary, some of those who had suffered while in captivity endeavoured to alleviate the sufferings of the German prisoners, whereas those former French prisoners who had benefited in Germany from more convenient living conditions, as farm employees for example, saw no reason for the German soldiers still held in France to suffer gratuitously.

The phenomenon of rapprochement between the former French POWs and the German prisoners was even more significant as the French authorities fostered the recruitment of liberated French prisoners for the surveillance of the Germans. Thus, from early June 1945, the supervision of Germans employed in agriculture in the département Calvados (Normandy) was conferred to the “recently liberated French POWs”. And from the end of August, it was officially recommended to recruit the civil guards “preferably among the French repatriated former prisoners or political deportees”, certainly with the initial goal to give them a chance for a symbolic revenge while expecting them to behave with sympathy.

In fact, contacts between the former French prisoners and the German captives soon proved to be particularly peaceful. Some did not hesitate to use their weight in public opinion to denounce the living conditions of the Germans in France. As early as November 1945, Robert Gasnier, a former POW, expressed to the International Committee of the Red Cross his anger over the situation in Vire, a town in Normandy, reporting “a very regrettable state of fact and which is unanimously condemned by the repatriated French prisoners, that is to say the bad treatments endured by the German prisoners in France”.

The narrative of the German prisoner Hellmut Frauenlob, who worked on a farm in Normandy, confirms that French ex-prisoners behaved correctly towards the captives working for them. He wrote in his diary what he experienced at Easter 1946:

“I passed by the neighbour’s farm, the son of the house was waiting for me. He gave me two cigarettes for me and Hans. He thought that we, too, had to feel that it was Easter. He had himself been for two years in Germany and he had been happy, so here it was meant to be the same for us.”

A German prisoner who had stayed consecutively in a series of camps in Northern France, “noticed that the French who had stayed five years in Germany behaved more decently with us than the younger generation”.

In the northern part of the Cotentin peninsula, a cousin of Marguerite Allais’ parents employed a German POW and “despite the fact that he had been a combatant during the war of 1940, he had a German under his roof and everything went very well”.

Rudolf Hagemann, a young prisoner converted into a civil worker, wrote about a Frenchman who invited him for lunch in Caen in 1947, and explained the “reason for his amiability: He had been POW in Germany and had been very well treated”.

The attitude of the former French POWs towards the German captives in France can best be explained by a certain brotherhood in fate which connected them. Most of the French soldiers of 1940 who had stayed in Germany until 1945 found upon their return to France, German POWs in the exact reverse situation than their own of five years earlier.

The weight of the French veterans' opinion in the French society moreover enabled them to act humanely towards the German prisoners without fear of being treated as sympathisers of Nazi Germany. Also, their captivity in Germany with their obvious absence from home, had certainly prevented them from adapting their behaviour in public to the politically correct anti-German attitude adopted by many French during the occupation.

Furthermore, their captivity in Germany had largely enabled them not only to how to communicate in German, but also to get to know Germany and the Germans in a different way beyond the stereotype conceptions in force in France after the war. In brief, they knew the Germans and their experience as captives gave them the necessary credit among the population to behave accordingly to their consciences, even in public.

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Which role did the forced cohabitation between French and Germans for over eight years in France and Germany play in the general evolution of the Franco-German relations after World War II? Did the forced encounters prepare the ground for a political rapprochement by creating a solid basis of differentiated knowledge of the other capable of overcoming the differences and hatred?

The forced cohabitation of POWs and civilians in both countries has enabled both groups to see the other no longer simply through the stereotyped spectrum of propaganda and rumours, but to consider him as a person on his own, with his past, his future projects, his joys and his pains.

Ultimately, the forced cohabitation gave birth to a common Franco-German past of deprivation and sufferings, that would become a determining element for the national identities on both sides of the Rhine in the second half of the 20th century.

Without doubt, this process was favoured by a relative cultural and ethnic proximity between Germans and French, founded not only on a common European and Christian culture, but also on a common past that was already rich in voluntary or forced Franco-German encounters and cohabitations. In many cases, the memories of a forced stay in Germany of a French farmer, ex-POW of the Great War, enabled the construction of a relation with the German worker that was based on a mutual understanding. Thus, the rapid and peaceful integration of the German POWs in France after World War II also shows that the cultural distance between Germans and French was not fundamental.

However, it must be said that the individual relations between French and Germans during and after World War II, both in Germany and France, have paradoxically not directly contributed to the rapprochement between Paris and Bonn after the birth of the German Federal Republic in 1949 – a process reacting mainly to geopolitical necessities.

But it can be supposed that the common past and as a result, the better knowledge of the other, have promoted the approval by the majority of a policy of rapprochement unprecedented in the history of the two nations. The process of reconciliation, which culminated in the Elysée Treaty in January 1963, also showed that the hatred between French and Germans had never been as structural and deep rooted as the political leaders during World War II and before wanted to make believe. Hatred between French and Germans had more of a shallow symbolic character, as shown by the rapid normalisation of the individual relations after 1945.