PhD Rüdiger Ritter

University of Bremen, Germany

POW CAMPS DURING WWII AND AFTER IN GERMAN COLLECTIVE MEMORY. A RESEARCH SURVEY

POW camps - in the German public that term evokes the idea of Stalin's first prisoner of war camps. The return of German prisoners of war in the Adenauer era in the Federal Republic of Germany is still one of the best known places of memory regarding these camps. But although i was known that there existed additionally to these camps many other prisoner of war camps, this hardly played a role in the public debate. This presentation addresses some distinguishing characteristics of the memory of these places in western Germany. It focuses first on the long silence with regard to the prisoner of war camps in the West German public at all, then to the different types of prisoner of war camps and dealing with them in the public remembering, and finally to the phenomenon of fragmented memories regarding the variety of POW camps. During and after World War II many camps experienced a change of use, when the Allies put an end on the Nazi regime, but the existing camps mutatis mutandis continued to be in use.

Silence after the War

The silence regarding the POW camps is closely related to the basic structure of dealing with the Second World War and especially with German guilt. Therefore here follows first a brief outline of this process. Here I orient on relevant works by Aleida Assmann, Edgar Wolfrum and other authors.

The remembrance tradition in the postwar period has long been generationally divided into contemporaries and posterity, and has been fragmented into diverse narrative communities, such as those who bombed civilians in the four occupation zones formed after 1945, or the refugees and displaced persons from the German eastern territories, the Displaced Persons in the "Old Reich" and the Holocaust survivors of the killing factories in the east, the different groups of the anti-fascist resistance and the "Stalingrad fighters". Different viewing angles also opened the various historical coordinate systems of national defeat and political new beginning, in which the history of World War fit in and decided on the view of the end of the war as capitulation or liberation.

The conductive Topoi of the West German memory circled in the public discourse of the first two decades with the exception of Stalingrad less than after the First World War to the military hostilities themselves - their theming largely confined to the booklets world of Landserromane and military memoirs remained - and more about their effects. In the foreground, the horror of the bombing campaign and the destruction of cities, the circumstances of flight and expulsion from the eastern territories and the fate of the soldiers were the most important topics.

With some exceptions, the post-war period was marked by three self-discharge mechanisms that repelled the debt and at the same time froze the memories.
The first relief mechanism was the silence. Here we must distinguish between displacement (Verdrängung) and silence. Under displacement I understand that one is not aware that he forgets something, under silence I understand a communication strategy. We know very well what we do do not want to bring to the public, and thus, from the unifying force of a common silenced memory a special type of publice behaviour evolves. There was in the postwar West German society a stable consensus not to address the past from the perspective of biographical existential experience. Hermann Lübbe later spoke of "communicative silence" („Kommunikatives Beschweigen").

The second relief mechanism was the victim syndrome. It was based on a clear separation of the regime and the people. The perpetrators, that was the regime; the people were the victims. Thus the idea of collective innocence replaced the idea of collective guilt. They saw themselves as deceived, betrayed, bruised and dishonored.

The veil of silence has been broken by the generation of the sons and daughters of the late sixties, the accused not only her parents and called to account, but they also began to illuminate the brown continuity in the institutions. The memories of the older generation have also been pushed back and blocked, and only now this came to consciousness.

In retrospect, the German memory history can be divided into three phases. The first phase, which can be overwritten with past policy, I would like to start from 1945 to 1957. It stands under the sign of "Kommunikatives Beschweigens" and a massive defense of remembrance. At that time there were two issues to the fore: the politics of reparations, which is focused on the compensation of victims, and the policy of amnesty, when it came to the reintegration of former Nazis.

The second phase from 1958 to 1984 is determined by the criticism of its past.

In this phase, in which the prosecution of Nazi criminals is tightened and in 1958 begins with the establishment of the Center for the Study of NSVerbrechen in Ludwigsburg, are outweighed by large processes, the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt. At the same time, the self-critique of the forms of dealing with the past evolved. This critical element culminated with the personal and political commitment of the '68 Generation.

The third phase, which could be dated from 1985, is dedicated to the memory. At this stage, the importance of official commemoration and its symbols is clearly increasing. Although compensation legislation and legal prosecution are far from complete, now the symbolic ritual of signs and the importance of public media are increasingly becoming the center of attention. Here two directions differ, a politics of memory with the character of"dealing with the past" which is associated with the name of Helmut Kohl, and a politics of memory with the character of „past preservation" which is associated with the name Richard von Weizsäcker.

The other direction of the politics of memory, which is connected with the name Richard von Weizsäcker, is dedicated to preserving the past. In his famous speech made by the then Federal President on May 8, 1985, fell for the first time the words then repeatedly cited in the following time by the Hasidic philosopher Baal Shem Tov of the 18th century: "The mystery of redemption is remembrance." So the discussion moved from the point of established mutual forgiveness and forgetfulness between winners and losers to a process of permanently remembrance of the crimes committed against the victims and their suffering.

A new phase of past preservation started after the falling of the Berlin Wall. It turned out that the discussion of these questions is no more an internal German matter, but already a global topic, if not to say: a part of the integrated universal framework. That Auschwitz belongs to a special place in the memory of humanity, has emerged ever more clearly in the last fifteen years. Auschwitz has now been declared against the other in the sixties and seventies still possible candidates for Hiroshima, signature of the century '. The historians' debate also revolved around this question. This dispute affirmed the uniqueness of the Holocaust against the competitors Gulag and thus fortified its quasi-religious significance in the memory of mankind. The keyword "break with civilization" which was coined by Dan Diner in the early nineties, also emphasizes the singularity of this crime.

This consensus on remebrance since the mid-1980s in effect was largely found in recent years in a

surprising and often disturbing manner, after the destruction of the legend of the clean Wehrmacht, the last bastion of "unmastered past". Supported by the media career of eyewitnesses, the victims' narrativ has released from the confines of an enlightened dealing with the past and has returned from the victims of the Germans to the Germans as victims. How radical this changed affects, became evidence by such diverse literary productions and initiatives such as Günter Grass' novel "Crabwalk", Jörg Friedrichs bombing indictment "The Fire" or the newly laid and now filmed Anonyma book. The same took place at the political level with Erika Steinbach's initiative for a "Centre Against Expulsions" and already with the Renaissance of the expulsion issue at all. The extent to which victimization even the center the Nazi crime has reached, was made clear by the popular success of Oliver Hirschbiegel and Bernd Eichinger wthn their film "Downfall" (2004) who broke a taboo of filmic Hitler representation and presented the dictator himself as a victim - his illusions and his madness, but also the converted war fortune and political betrayal as the human loneliness.

What does this have to do with the handling of the prisoner of war camps? In fact, the flow of the story of remembrance is the explanation for the fact why the issue of prisoner of war camps for a long time were known, but were treated only marginally.

In the 1950s, the media omnipresence of the returning POWs contrasted in a strange way with the lack of concern with the camps where they had partially been living for almost 10 years. Memories were indeed quite frsh, but were almost always displaced into privacy. This was a result of the social climate of the West German 50s. The war and everything that went with it, should as far as possible be removed from the public sector. There prevailed a pragmatic focus on "reconstruction" and a focus on the "economic miracle", which excluded any critical public reflection on the own foundations and also about their own experiences. The fifties were marked by efforts to build a serene and idyllic presence, with the horrors of just barely lived past should be wiped out.

The highlighting of the POW camp would have required an intensive examination of the whole complex of the war and the German guilt for the Nazi regime. This would have meant a criticla discussion of fatalistic formulations of that time like "The fate of the war came upon us" which were common in the near postwar period.

2. Types of camps and their handling
To the extent that in the West German society a critical public opened for a differentiated study of

the Second World War, the existence of prisoner of war camps could be considered. The treatment of the POW camps can be seen not independent of the general structure of ddealing with World War II and the postwar period.

In the immediate post-war period it was the Alliied that led the German population into the concentration camps to show the crimes of the Hitler regime. The defense mechanisms of the West German public, however, were very strong, so that these pictures though as anathema images were enshrined to mind, but did not initiate a differentiated debate and in particular did not lead to a reflection on German guilt. The defenses were so strong that it came to a public denial of the Holocaust in parts of West German society. Even a law that this defense mechanism criminalized as "Auschwitz lie", could change hardly a thing in continuing of this displacment structure in right-wing circles.

Something similar took place in the public debate about the so-called "Rheinwiesenlager". These were POW camps established by the Western Allies on the large open areas mainly on the left bank of the Rhine for the many captured German soldiers. A dense network of camps stretched from the Dutch border to Rheinhessen.

The "Rheinwiesenlager" had been degraded quickly in the early postwar years and disappeared without a trace. That was all the easier because they had hardly consisted of fortified buildings, but simply consisted only of a fence, some wax plants and primitive tent accommodations for prisoners of war. Likewise, like they disappeared without a trace , they also disappeared from the public eye. In the postwar period that had something to do with the fact that Western Germany now had become political friends to the Western Allies under the sign of the Cold War. Especially under the Americans, who had indeed built the main part of this Rheinwiesenlager, a kind of West German "self-censorship" began. At least until shortly before the Vietnam War the West German public forbade itself a too negative striking against the former occupiers.

All the more remarkable is the fact that recently a guided Internet campaign prevailed in right-wing circles to denounce the Western Allies, especially the Americans for the inhuman conditions in these camps. In some cases, this led to a complete distortion of the facts. The German prisoners of war are presented as innocent suffering victims who have suffered the cruel, inhumane camp conditions of the war winners. On the other hand there are also Internet efforts to face this interpretation of the "Rheinwiesenlager" using an explanation in terms of the recognition of German guilt.

The fact that this discussion is still so violent shows how much these topics and these ressentiments prevailed under the surface.They could not be uttered for decades, but had their impact. It also shows how much the simple victims' narrativ even after a long time was still working to a time when it was hardly transported from the generation of experience, but from later generations. Just the presence of the Western Allies had been established certain ways of thinking and a prescribed dealing with the past which did neither extinguish the old resentiments nor evoke the critical examination.

Fragmented memories

Since the fall of the Wall was the commemoration of the Second World War changed into an all-European affair. It is an object of the continent to use the various national stories about the Second World War as common building elements for a common European identity. Quickly however, the problems turned out. It proved impossible, to combine just side by side the individual narratives and to create a common, consensual European narrative. Often the individual narratives were not only apparently entirely independently, but also contradicted each other directly. The debate about the definition of a start and end time of the Second World War showed this problem. While data 1. September 1939 and 8 May 1945 fr Germans are perfectly clear, many countries in Western and Eastern Europe present different ideas of the beginning and end of the war. Depending on your perspective also the same historical events are diametrically rated differently.

These phenomena have implications for dealing with prisoners of war camps. It should be emphasized that many of the camps after the war, experienced a change of use, i.e. that the winners in many cases liberated the prisoners of war from the German POW camps, but did not give upothe camp by no means, but filled it with German prisoners of war. In most cases, this was a practice of pure pragmatic necessity under the the situation of general shortage. There were simply no means to build new facilities. The change of use of existing camps by new rulers therefore was not the exception but rather the rule.

This meant that no single memory to the POW camps evolved but it came to processes of fragmented memories. Several groups of victims designed their arangement of symbols of memory of the memorial site, everyone in its own way. Moreover, not only victims' but also perpetrators' memories play a role here. A prisoner of war camp is by its very nature therefore a complex plac of memory, composed of sometimes contradictory components of remembrance, which work each

6

different for each memory group.

That shows the example Macikai very forcefully.

Nazis treated Memelgebiet as the legitimate area of the Reich and WWII years here differs from the the rest of the country. In the Šilutė suburban village Macikai in 1939 Nazis established camp to held Polish POWs. In 1942 they "reformed" this relatively small camp to significantly bigger one - Stalag Luft VI. The name suggest that the "purpose" of the camp was to held pilots of planes that were shot down. There were six Stalag Lufts in Germany and this was the last one and located in the farthest possible corner of the Reich.

Another characteristic property of this camp that majority of the people held here were servicemen of western countries: Macikai is the single way in Lithuania were so many British and American military were held and some of them lost their lives (from about 10000 POWs held here more than 9000 were British, Canadian and American airmen, the second most populous group were Polish POWs - about 300-500 people). In the autumn of 1944 the camp and the people held here were evacuated from Macikai.

But the break in the camps activities was very short : it was again reopened at the end of 1944. In 1945it got the name GULAG-3 under the "auspicies" of NKVD. In 1944-1947 here were held German POWs. When last Germans were moved from Macikai the camp still wasn't closed: in 1948 - 1955 it was used to held and execute the "enemies of the Soviet regime" (most of them of course Lithuanian residents). And only the year 1955 marked the end of the cruelties made in this place. After that this place went to oblivion: the complicated history of the camp wasn't the good place to memorialize it by the soviets. In 1960s or early 1970s most of the camp buildings were destroyed and the pansionat for older people with mental disabilities was built. And only in 1990 this place went back to the remembrance. Since 1995 it is treated as the state protected historical monument. In 2000 here various memorials were built and that also made it very "international" in some sense place.

In Silute (Heydekrug) there was the central administration of the NKVD camp Nr. 7057th From this place several POW camps were administered. One such camp was located in the village Macikai (Matzicken), today part of Silute (Heydekrug). The perished here POWs were buried not far from

the camp in mass graves. The number of deaths can no longer identify.

On behalf of the People's League, the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture has prepared in 2001 a report on the situation of German prisoners of war cemeteries in the former Memelgebiet cities Silute and Klaipeda (Memel). After spot audits and examination of archive documents you came to the conclusion that only the cemetery has been preserved in Macikai. In addition to German prisoners of war and Russian prisoners of war and other nations were (until 1945) and Lithuanian civilian internees buried (about 1948) in Macikai.

In 1991 the entire area was at the initiative of the municipality includes Macikai with a bridle. In May 2003, a Bundeswehr group has cleaned the German cemetery from the Marine Technology School in Parow and sown with grass. Centrally a high wooden cross was erected. Cross groups mark the graves areas.

These memories coexist up to today. In the case of Macikai the organisation has managed to put together the fragmented fragments of memory, so to speak into a mosaic that the plurality of memories has created a place of common remembrance. However, the history of the place is still not satisfactory told, since a multi-perspective approach is needed that takes into account the awareness of all involved offenders and victim's groups. Here is a challenge, not also for history scholars baut also for history teaching ad educative purposes. At a place like Macikai a narrowing of memory means already a falsification of history.

14–15 May 2015