

Christiane Wienand, *Returning Memories. Former Prisoners of War in Divided and Reunited Germany*, Camden House, Rochester 2015, XV + 346 S., 90.00 \$.

In seeking to examine individual and collective memories of Second World War captivity in Germany from 1945 to the early 2000s, Christiane Wienand has set herself a challenging task. At the end of the war some eleven million surviving members of the Wehrmacht found themselves behind barbed wire. Yet their experiences varied widely and their stories, even today, remain buried beneath official histories of the Second World War. Some were held captive in camps on German soil, and others in camps abroad – whether in Europe, North Africa or further afield. Some were released quite early, while others – including many of the three million or so in captivity in the USSR – remained prisoners until the late 1940s, and in the most extreme cases, until the mid-1950s. Upon regaining their freedom, some returned to the western occupation zones, or what by May 1949 had become the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and some to the Soviet zone, in other words to the territory which in October 1949 became the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Others still were barred altogether from returning to their pre-war homes – because they were located in those eastern parts of Germany incorporated into Poland or the Soviet Union after 1945. In the first post-war decade, many were forced to move again as the cold war division of Europe took hold and they joined the large numbers of economic and political refugees travelling from east to west. Finally, to complicate matters further, the history of prisoners of war (POW) did not simply come to an end with the repatriation of the last German POWs from the Soviet Union to the FRG and the GDR in 1955/56. Rather, it continued through the emergence of divided ways of narrating and remembering the past.

Challenging the more narrow chronological framework adopted by many earlier studies, Wienand is determined to include as broad a temporal dimension as possible, with a view to examining how official and non-official representations of war- and post-war captivity in the two Germanys developed over time – both during the various peaks and troughs of the Cold War after 1955 and following German reunification in 1990. What emerges is a view of memory formation as a continuous, „multi-layered“ and open-ended „communicative process“ (p. 13) involving social interaction between a variety of actors and interested parties, from former POWs and their families to politicians, film-makers, fiction-writers, professional historians, veterans’ associations and religious and community leaders. The conclusions drawn by the author, based as they are on her use of a multitude of sources – from parliamentary debates and media portrayals to local and small-group memory projects, autobiographical writings and oral history work – are necessarily nuanced and sensitive to the ambiguities, subjectivities and local or context-specific variations inherent in any investigation of this kind. Readers looking for a „continuous historical narrative“ (p. 6) will be disappointed, because, as Wienand readily admits, memory reveals „fragmentation“ and „complexity“ and is impervious to straightforward linear chronologies. Nonetheless, four key points do emerge which help to further our understanding of how to incorporate „memory studies“ into the history of captivity during the world wars.

Firstly, Wienand deliberately displaces 1955 – the year of West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer’s visit to Moscow and the release of the final POWs from Soviet hands – from the centre of her analysis. Rather, as her evidence convincingly shows, wartime captivity and how to manage its conflicting legacies was a „recurring issue“ all the way through to German reunification and beyond, even if it was not a „constant topic of debate“ or a continual theme in political life (p. 229). The form and content of POW memory did of course change over time, but not in a manner that can be easily reduced to mono-causal or uniform explanations. Nonetheless, there was a gradual shift in emphasis whereby prisoners’ experiences after release and repatriation were increasingly included alongside experiences in the camps in various types of „memory activity“.

Secondly, Wienand questions what she sees as a false dichotomy between „public“ forms of commemoration and „privately told stories of the past“ (p. ix), and in particular rejects the notion of a growing „privatisation of the war’s consequences“ in the west from the early 1950s. Rather, in her view there was an unbroken interaction between „private“ and „public“ acts of remembering, sometimes mediated through the work of local history projects, informal friendship groups or veterans’ associations, and sometimes through the simple desire of individual ex-POWs and their families to forge new civic identities for themselves in the post-war world – whether as fathers, family men, members of the clergy or teaching profession, peace activists, campaigners for reconciliation between erstwhile enemies or between different generations, and so on. It is here too that Wienand’s re-reading of „transformation narratives“ is especially important. Political discourses concerning the concrete, „transformative“ impact of captivity on individuals, whether of the (West German) anti-totalitarian or the (East German) anti-fascist variety, were often entangled with, and also reshaped by, the „memory work“ of private citizens and non-official groups for whom captivity was also – albeit in more complex and nuanced ways – a life-changing and for some at least, a positive experience. The desire to communicate this to children and grandchildren, and to future generations more generally, was strong, irrespective of whether individuals or sub-groups of POWs agreed or disagreed with particular aspects of the official discourse or party line.

Thirdly, Wienand addresses the issue of German-German relations in new and imaginative ways. Of course, asymmetry is at the heart of most histories of post-1945 Germany that are written from a „gesamtdeutsche“ point of view. Yet like memory, Wienand sees asymmetry as a „complex“ and „multi-faceted“ phenomenon. Of course it is linked with the lack of associational freedom and suppression of dissent in the east when compared to the tolerance and pluralism of the west. Yet there were many other dimensions to it. Thus, to take a few examples, we find asymmetries between those whose voices were marginalised before 1990 but became more visible thereafter versus those whose experiences still languished in silence even after reunification. We find asymmetries in east and west, and in reunited Germany, in the use and emotional resonance of key terms such as „Wiedergutmachung“, „Zwangsarbeit“, and „Reeducation“, and their application to victims of Nazism versus victims of war, or to German versus non-German victims of „fascist“ or „Stalinist“ tyranny. Most tellingly of all, we find asymmetries between those whose children and grandchildren were interested in helping to retain and cultivate the memory of captivity, and those whose descendants were hardly „engaged in the memory discourse“ at all (p. 231). All of these asymmetries can be linked in complex ways to the east-west conflict and its post-1990 legacy, but to some extent they also transcend it, especially as memory of Germany’s cold war division has itself become more fragmented – and, for younger generations in particular, more tenuous – in the quarter of a century or so since the fall of the Berlin wall.

Finally, Wienand highlights the elaborate interplay between conflicting representations of former POWs as victims, heroes and perpetrators in official/media portrayals of captivity. In this respect she is particular good at exploring the sideways links between POW memory and the memory of other contemporaneous victim groups, especially German civilians who were deported to the Soviet Union in 1944/45 and in the early post-war era. In one of the best sections of the book, she discusses how „returned camp doctors“ often gained a heroic status in West German narratives of captivity in the 1950s and 1960s, arguing that the medic who saved lives became a defining symbol of a new, „non-militaristic“ and non-threatening version of masculinity which allowed the successful reintegration of former soldiers into a peacetime society. Yet in fact the same „heroic doctor“ narratives can also be found in some of the testimonies written by former civilian deportees after their return from the Gulag to the Federal Republic, and here too cold war criticisms of the „totalitarian“ Soviet Union and representations of western „normality“ were never far from the surface. In East Germany, on the other hand, there were tensions between the desire to focus on heroic working-class resistance to Nazism and the need to highlight the work of the Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland (NKFD), formed in 1943 by upper- and middle-class Wehrmacht officers who had embraced anti-fascism and the cause of German-Soviet friendship after entering Soviet captivity. These tensions were only partly resolved when Erich Honecker took over from Walter Ulbricht as SED general secretary in 1971 and – in line with his own personal biography – moved the emphasis back to the strictly proletarian and national character of the domestic German communist opposition to Hitler (pp. 86, 139, 207).

Were there, in spite of this, prisoner narratives that were able to bridge the east-west ideological divide? Significantly, the one concrete example that Wienand finds also helps to demonstrate some of the profound and unsettling changes in memory and identity politics that have taken place in Germany since reunification. From the late 1970s a cross-border „community of remembrance“ was formed between former East and West German inmates of the French camp at Bizerta in Tunisia, many of whom had served in the Wehrmacht’s penal division 999 – in other words, soldiers who had been politically opposed to Nazism and had been persecuted for their anti-fascist views. Reunification initially allowed a deepening of these contacts, which had been rendered difficult, but not impossible, by travel restrictions before 1989/90. Yet writing in 1994, after the euphoria had died down, one of the leading East German figures from this circle admitted: „Der Kontakt mit den Freunden ist abgeflaut, das Alter mag dabei eine Rolle spielen, aber solche Kontakte brauchen auch Inhalte, die in der Periode des Kalten Krieges schon aus inhaltlichen Gründen eher gegeben waren als jetzt nach der Wiedervereinigung“ (p. 218).

This letter is fascinating on a number of different levels. In the first instance, it suggests that the real caesura in prisoner-of-war memory came not – as Wienand occasionally remarks (pp. 11, 93, 230) – in the period 1989-90 but somewhat later, in the mid-1990s. In fact, if anything, the trend in the late 1980s was towards a gradual convergence of POW memory discourses, as seen, for instance, in the landmark decision by the Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand in West Berlin to include the NKFD as a genuine resistance organisation when relaunching its permanent exhibition in July 1989. A similar, albeit partial form of convergence can also be seen at around the same time in representations of the Trümmerfrauen (rubble women) and their mythical role in post-war reconstruction, as Leonie Treber has recently shown. What changed things as far as POWs and their memories of captivity are concerned was less reunification and more the Wehrmachtausstellung of the mid-1990s, as it brought back to life fears and concerns that former POWs might be associated in people’s minds with German atrocities on the eastern front between 1941 and 1944, making them seem less deserving of „victim status“ than other groups – whether Trümmerfrauen or bombed-out families or post-war refugees and expellees.

Secondly, the letter, in conjunction with the response to the Wehrmachtausstellung, is a reminder that memory politics, like nature, abhors a vacuum. If there is a discursive gap that needs filling, and if the older master narratives of the cold war era can no longer do this, then something else will take their place. Wienand hints at one potential consequence, namely the tendency of the NPD and other far right groups to „misappropriate... [POW] memorial[s]“ and other sites of Second World War memory „for their own aims“ (p. 192). Yet in her understandable concern to celebrate the diversity of prisoner memory, and the new opportunities for East Germans in particular to „deal with the past“ since 1990, she misses one of the bigger dangers inherent in the new identity politics, namely the tendency not only to question, but to disparage, the role of academic experts in determining historical truths and causation. Even in the early 1990s, as Eric Hobsbawm writes in *Age of Extremes*, professional historians could still assert with confidence that it was their „business... to remember what others forget“, using the „essential“ skills of their trade to create meaningful connections between „contemporary experience [...] [and the experience] of earlier generations“. But since the second half of the 1990s „memory“ has increasingly asserted itself over „history“.

Thus Wienand writes warmly of the „increased self-awareness of returnees as having [their own] expert knowledge about the past“ which has resulted from a variety of new memory ventures and projects, especially since the advent of the internet, and of the emotional satisfaction which can be gained from having one’s subjective experiences acknowledged, heard and worked through (p. 233). However, she does not address the existential challenges to the academic profession itself from these „returning memories“, or the deeper philosophical dilemmas posed by the triumph of identity over a historically-grounded civic awareness in the years since the end of the Cold War.

Some alternatives suggest themselves. It is worth recalling, for instance, that German POWs of the First World War also tended to identify themselves as „second class war participants“ and as an overlooked (or looked down upon) group of veterans. Most of their stories remained buried in memory and the archive, both during and after the 1919-45 era, leaving them feeling deprived of their masculine identities as soldiers and citizens. However, the difference between then and now lies not only in the development of new „spaces“ for communication and social interaction, especially and most recently the internet, but in the many-layered cross currents of remembering and forgetting that have shaped

Germany's divided history since 1945. Thus German POWs of the Second World War era might be seen, or see themselves, as „second class“ in a multitude of ways – as „second class war participants“, potentially, but also as second class resisters (whether of the anti-fascist or anti-communist variety), second class returnees, second class participants in the reunification process, and finally, particularly against the background of broader resentments arising from different compensatory arrangements in east and west, as second class war victims and „second class POWs“ (p. 126). Confronting the negative consequences of such polarising ideas, and offering more inclusive ways of explaining and critiquing the inequalities of the present, is admittedly as much a challenge for politicians and representatives of the established democratic parties in Germany as it is for historians of memory.

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