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**« German Prisoners of War in French Hands:  
Captivity in France, Repatriation into Germany (1944-1949) »**

PhD in contemporary History, supervised in *co-tutelle* between the University of Paris Ouest Nanterre – La Défense (co-supervisors: Annette Becker and Henry Rousso) and the University of Augsburg (supervisor Andreas Wirsching), defended on the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2010.

Between the end of 1944 and the end of 1948, almost one million German prisoners of war were detained in metropolitan France by the new authorities. As hated figures of the German occupation and the Nazi defeat, Hitler's soldiers, henceforth vanquished, became a main issue of how to get out of the war, which involved a large number of actors.

The authorities of the provisional government of the French republic were immediately confronted with a huge logistical challenge: to take care of a mass of prisoners, whereas France at the time of Liberation already had some difficulties to provide for its own population. Whereas German prisoners had been claimed and kept above all as labor to rebuild France. From being military in nature, the German captivity in French hands became an economic phenomenon and posed the question of the maintenance of this labor force.

Removing the prisoners from camps presented some solutions, but spread progressively the management to the whole society: employers, mayors, but also local populations and public opinions who came in contact with this new German presence. The "German POWs question" became an issue of domestic policy, which made the conflicting diversity of war experiences resonate: Where is the line between the economically profitable treatment, but politically not so patriotic? Who must have priority in the allocation of POW labor? Must the work of this latter be due to the employer or to benefit the whole nation? Answers to these problems defined a certain idea of the reconstruction.

This question of the treatment of POWs exceeds the national framework to become an issue of the Franco-American relationships in the after-war period and, de facto, of German policy - decided by two allies with such unequal status: 70% of the prisoners managed by the French had been transferred by the Americans who wanted to keep the responsibility as the detaining power. With the end of the conflict, then the beginning of the Cold War, which changed American priorities, the management of the German POWs at the international scale gives the opportunity to observe how the transatlantic bilateralism was progressively integrated into the European framework which set its own agenda. How could the French authorities meet the claims for liberation from 1946 without thwarting the Monnet plan?

The German captivity had also a fundamental legal dimension, because these prisoners still remained protected by the Geneva Convention of 1929. Though the mediation of the humanitarian law, neutral powers –mainly the International Committee of the Red Cross- got actors of the *drama* of this captivity in peace time. But they are in turn caught by the question of the impossible neutrality in the post-war world. Which attitudes, for instance, should be listened to in the mining clearance? Toward the escapees into Switzerland after the hostilities?

Finally, this unique captivity because it brings together pacifically two enemy populations remains a human experience with a significant density, even if it is much more difficult for the historian to track it adequately. The last episode of the Thirty Years War, the German presence doesn't belong only to the Franco-German relationships: it also constitutes a founding chapter for German history of the post-war period. The prisoner of war as an improbable figure of the national-socialist ideology constitutes on the other hand a tremendous screen to cope with the burden of the total defeat. Though the mobilizations his absence arouses, he proposes a new articulation between individual experience and collective destiny, and contributes to redefine German national identity.

My PhD tries to analyze these challenges of a war-based captivity extended into peace time by showing first how the German captivity, structured after the end of the hostilities, adapts to the consequences of the decline of a military influence which progressively changes its nature.

Germany's defeat cancels out the military threat represented by the prisoners and opens the battle for reconstruction. Whereas the French authorities hadn't worked out any definite plans for the economic exploitation of this labor, the place of the captive in the production process determined how he was managed and lead to a significant shift: because the POW becomes, above all, a source of labour he is henceforth taken in charge by the civilian employer, who applied their rules and norms of treatment to him. This *economization* of captivity goes together with a substitution of a "disciplinary logic" for a "security logic". This evolution increases the role and intervention of the civilian actors and extends the contact possibilities between 'enemies of yesterday.' This new breathing space explained, at the same time, the diversity regarding the treatment of 900 000 bodies to feed, to house and to clothe as well as keeping the mortality rates low. They demonstrate too why the economic use doesn't necessarily lead to more humane conditions in the treatment of the POW.

Secondly, the PhD will show how the democratic management of the captivity in a peace time period changes radically the relation to any 'norm' and its application. The most obvious case is the impossibility for the same humanitarian law and the neutrality to continue to be applied after 1945 as it was in war time. For the International Committee of the Red Cross as well as for the Helvetic authorities, this German captivity brought with itself reconversion in the letter and the spirit, the new Geneva Convention of 1949 is a good example for that. But this discrepancy could be found in the daily life in France in the many relationships between former enemies through the question of legitimate and legal violence: the change from revenge to judicial mediation needs to specify what is allowed and what is not and who controls. It is to be thus seen in the context of more global relationships between the provisional government of the French republic and the local forces of the Resistance, which defend, both of them, rival projects of reconstruction.

Thirdly, German captivity in French hands contributed, according to my research, to redefine the social imaginary and the representations the actors could have of themselves and others during and after the conflict. It reveals for example for France the discrepancy between the official discourse at the Liberation and the perception at the local level concerning the Allied victors. Captivity is to be placed in the background of Franco-American relationships insofar as it could either improve or to damage the image of the partner and, as a consequence, have a decisive influence on the American decision-making process in favour of France or of Germany. It also can be applied to the German population, whose absence of their compatriots -behind barbed-wire- stopped them, in a real sense, leaving the war behind. This situation encourages the transfer of perception: the POW becomes the symbol of a Germany, certainly vanquished, but more and more itself a victim.

Fourthly, prisoners of war in French hands are involved in the redefining of the national communities and identities; more as a point of rupture in France, and a selective continuity in Germany. They intervene of course as a factor of unity by making easier the delimitation of the community toward the churches in Germany as in France during the Liberation where the image of the POW in the newspapers becomes the vector of redefining and forging a new representation of the vanquished nation. However, this captivity which lasted, contributed to confusing these new referents of identity: the POW is not only the Nazi or the “Boche” anymore, but also the worker, the human being, even the friend; the French people for the Germans are not only the occupants or the detaining power any more, but also the administrator, the coreligionists. From then on, captivity in peace time increases the interface between German and French people. It leads to the expression of the political feelings of belonging inside the communities. The village community offers a subtle level to observe the internal tensions and the gaps between national discourse and local realities.

The study finally tried to reveal a dimension of this captivity which is sometimes hard distinguish for the historian: the perception and the tracks of personal experience in the two populations, as captivity stays a bi-national founding experience.

**Key words:** Germany, France, prisoners of war, Second World War, French Occupation Zone