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## **Review of Russlandheimkehrer: Die Sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen Im Gedächtnis Der Deutschen.**

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Elke Scherstjanoi, ed., *Russlandheimkehrer: Die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen im Gedächtnis der Deutschen*. Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012. 264 pp.

*Reviewed by Günter Bischof, University of New Orleans*

The study of World War II prisoners of war (POWs) has been a cottage industry over the past decade. The comparative treatment of POWs on all fronts has been the main focus. Many diaries and other documents of POWs have been published, and exhibits have been staged (an exhibit on U.S. POWs in Nazi Germany, “Guest of the Third Reich,” enjoyed large audiences in the first half of 2013 at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans). Now comes this richly illustrated volume of essays on “representations” (visual, film, literature, exhibitions) and the historical memory of returned German POWs in the Soviet Union after World War II. The German case of-

fers complexity because circumstances for returning POWs in the two Germanys (the Federal Republic of Germany and the Communist German Democratic of Germany) differed so markedly. The reception of the “*Heimkehrer*” and the production of public memories clashed. As Frank Biess has already shown in *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (2006), West Germany pampered its returning POWs as “victims” of Stalinism, whereas East Germany eschewed any mention of their traumatization in the Soviet camps. The horrific tales of the returned POWs helped form the core anti-Communist identity in the FRG, but similar accounts had to be suppressed in the GDR to demonstrate solidarity with the Soviet ally. What later became known as post-traumatic stress disorder was treated among returnees to the FRG, but it had to be glossed over in the GDR and thus must have continued to weigh heavily on the returned POWs.

The essays in the volume under review add considerable depth to this tale of POW returnees to the two postwar German states. The volume is based on papers written for a 2008 conference organized by the German Historical Museum and the Institute of Contemporary History in Berlin. The essays blend together unusually well for an edited volume. Elke Scherstjanoi’s introduction on all kinds of “pictures” (*Bilder*) under discussion here—“constructs” of visual, acoustic, and both self-experienced and mediated impressions (p. 2)—is tight; her historiographical grounding of the growing field of POWs studies anemic. Scherstjanoi adds two more essays to the volume—one on the images of POWs proliferating individual and (the formerly two) Germanys’ cultural memories, the other on Soviet female doctors. Based on more than ten years of collecting oral histories of *voennoplennyye* (Russian for POWs), most of them living in the former East Germany, she constructs a multiplicity of competing images of German POWs kept in Soviet captivity. They are associated with the principal stations of their captivity (capture, transport in cattle cars, being robbed of all possessions, work and life behind barbed wire, tensions between regular and privileged Antifa POWs, helpful Russian female doctors). These “images” are also the principal *topoi* recurring in all the representations in film and literature discussed by the contributors to this book. They are richly illustrated by Günter Agde’s documentation of images from the best-known West German postwar POW movies and Soviet documentaries about World War II.

Both Birgit Schwellings and Andrea von Hengel’s contributions deal with the little-known *Verband der Heimkehrer, Kriegsgefangenen und Vermisstenangehörigen* (VdH), a powerful West German organization started in 1950 to lobby for the return of some 30,000 German POWs still held in Soviet captivity years after the war ended. They had been put on trial in 1947–1949 and convicted as “war criminals,” often in show trials. The VdR lobbied with the West German public to keep alive the memory of the suffering German “victims” held in Soviet camps, some of them until 1956. In addition, the VdH lobbied in the political arena to give the returnees compensation for their suffering. Von Hegel analyzes the traveling exhibit the VdH put together in 1951 and sent to 138 German cities until the 1970s—with changing content over time. Some 2.15 million Germans saw this traveling exhibit (p. 72), which defined in

the West German public memory the “martyrdom” of German POWs—the crimes of perpetrators on the Eastern front were simply ignored. The exhibit contained personal items smuggled out of the Soviet camps from returned POWs, as well as many works of art and images. The exhibit was staged dramatically in a sacred space attacking Soviet abuses. The “one-sided” show sent a message that relied on Nazi propaganda of “Bolshevist inferior human beings” and culturally superior Germans who nobly suffered the indignities of Soviet captivity. Iconic images of German POWs with a bald pate suffering behind barbed wire illustrate this fine analysis of a theme rarely addressed in POW research.

Essays on West German and East German literary works dealing with the fate of POWs illustrate key themes. Berthold Petzinna’s two articles focus on autobiographical reports and illustrations in books by returned POWs from the 1950s. These starkly illustrated autobiographical reports by returned POWs became huge bestsellers in the FRG in the 1950s. The suffering, huddled masses of clean-shaven POWs behind iconic barbed wire in far-flung and snow-covered Siberian camps defined this master narrative (also advocated by the VdH), providing the FRG core images of Soviet captivity. Helmut Peitsch shows how West German writers such as Hans Bender wrote novels in the 1960s demythologizing the heroization and the wallowing in self-pity characteristic of the earlier uncritical autobiographical representations. Lenore Krenzlin analyzes how the East German authorities put together a counternarrative to challenge the West German image of the “barbaric” Soviet military prisons. The official GDR publication *Kriegsgefangene in der Sowjetunion* (1949) reminded the Germans that the Soviet Union had been attacked by Nazi Germany—with large swaths of the country destroyed and millions killed. In the East German reading, the German POWs made amends for German war guilt, rebuilding the suffering Soviet Union in the form of labor reparations. In this competing East German narrative of relative victimization, German POWs were treated decently in Soviet camps and suffered no more than Soviet civilians had during the war.

Cinematic production was similarly bifurcated between the two Germanys. West German film and television productions in the 1960s followed the lead of autobiographical and artistic narratives and portrayed heroic POWs who were “intellectually and morally superior” (p. 158) to the barbaric and “Asiatic” Soviet captors. East German DEFA film production ignored the topic of the Eastern front and German POWs in the Soviet Union altogether until the 1970s. The few movies made in the GDR about German POWs were differentiating and psychologically subtle, portraying anti-fascist heroes critical of the Nazis and rebutting Western tales of atrocities and Soviet *Untermenschen*. Elena Müller adds an essay about German POWs in Soviet/Russian film production. Soviet citizens had private memories of German POWs, but public memory ignored them. In postwar Soviet society the fate of German POWs was a taboo subject. Literary and film production during the perestroika years began to pay attention to the millions of German POWs who had helped to rebuild the Soviet Union. Film production under Vladimir Putin returned to the image of German POWs as “craven snitches” (p. 218), conforming to Putin’s desire for a set public nar-

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rative of the Great Patriotic War, a narrative that had been undermined by perestroika. These essays raise many important topics, and we need not fear the demise of POW research any time soon.