

## Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany

**Review Number:**

582

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 1 March, 2007

**Author:**

Frank Biess

**ISBN:**

9780691125022

**Date of Publication:**

2006

**Price:**

£22.95

**Pages:**

352pp.

**Publisher:**

Princeton University Press

**Publisher url:**

<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/8209.html>

**Place of Publication:**

Princeton and Oxford

**Reviewer:**

Bill Niven

This is the first book in English to examine the reception, in both the west and the east of Germany between 1945 and 1955, of the returning POWs released from Soviet captivity. With commendable clarity, it seeks to understand this reception within the context of the political, social, and cultural discourses prevalent at the time. For all the political and ideological differences between West and East Germany, both states attempted, in their own ways, to make propaganda of the returning soldiers. In the West, they were represented not as defeated soldiers returning from a genocidal war, but as victims of Soviet captivity whose courage transcended their suffering. In the East, they were represented as men enlightened by the antifascist ideals to which they had been exposed in captivity. In neither state was there an inclination to dwell on the unfortunate fact of the participation of Hitler's Wehrmacht in a criminal war.

Biess begins his always measured, insightful, and thorough analysis by taking us back into the Nazi period itself. His first chapter sketches the official Nazi policy of silence on those German soldiers held in Soviet captivity and those missing in action (MIAs). Thus the Reich Security Main Office ordered that, 'all mail from Soviet POW camps be held back by the censorship office' for 'state-political reasons' and 'forwarded to the RSHA for further evaluation' (p. 25). Tens of thousands of intercepted letters were never passed on. Biess argues that the Nazi leaders, especially after the debacle at Stalingrad and the surrender of General Paulus, were keen to convince the population and the German soldiers of the continued need to focus on heroic struggle. Even to acknowledge the fact that many German soldiers were now in Soviet hands would

have been to acknowledge the existence of an alternative scenario—one of surrender, captivity, and survival. Beyond this, allowing contact between Soviet-interred POWs and their families in Germany would have risked undermining the Nazi view of the Soviets as subhuman—especially as Soviet treatment of German POWs improved in the last years of the war. Soviet attempts, through the National Committee for a Free Germany, to inform the Wehrmacht and, indeed, Germans on the home front that German POWs were well-treated in Soviet hands intensified this risk. As Biess is able to show, family members of POWs and MIAs refused to accept the hush-hush policy of the Nazis, and did what they could to establish what had happened to their loved ones. This led, in Biess's view, to a certain disengagement on the part of some German families with the regime, and to a retreat into a private world in which missing family members, and the wish to be reunited with them, became an obsessive focus. This retreat led to a cultural turn towards family values, anticipating the collapse of Nazism and forming a bridge into the postwar period. It also helped to foster a sense of those unaccounted-for family members as victims—anticipating in turn the postwar culture of victimization that blocked empathy with victims of Nazism such as the Jews.

For all that Biess believes in the cultural significance of this disengagement, he does not believe that it led in any way to a wish to protest against Nazism. The Wehrmacht, and the home front, stood by Hitler to the end. But if this is the case, what was the nature of this disengagement? If, as Biess seems to suggest, it was a disengagement with the Nazi claim that heroic struggle down to the last man was the only form of proper conduct for a German soldier (rather than surrender and captivity), then this disengagement, it seems to me, would constitute a form of inner rejection of Nazi propaganda—a refusal, if not a protest.

The second chapter stresses the importance of the reception and treatment of returning POWs as a 'site of memory' for postwar Germany, given the totality of German defeat. Biess informs us that the western Allies released all their POWs by 31 December 1948, while the Soviets needed until 1950. Even then, a further 26,000 POWs and civilian internees classified as 'war criminals' were only released in two main waves; in 1953–54 and 1955–56 (p. 45). All in all, 2 million POWs returned from the Soviet Union. Biess argues that, in the immediate postwar period, there were indications that the Germans would be prepared to confront guilt, including Wehrmacht guilt. But the situation soon changed. Biess goes on to make two fundamental claims. First, that narratives of German victimization were soon mobilized by political parties on both sides of the ideological divide—here the SED, there the SPD and CDU—in their attempts to win support as the election campaigning began. The returnees and their families, after all, represented an enormous percentage of the population. In the West, the SPD began to berate the SED and the Soviets for their continued victimization of Germans, while in the East, the communists—initially so critical of the way the workers had streamed into Hitler's war—were now prone to presenting the German soldiers as victims of 'western' fascism.

Biess's second claim is that the returnees themselves developed a tendency to regard themselves as victims—not least because such an attitude enabled them to make sense of the otherwise disorienting present. Faced with unexpectedly high levels of destruction at home, and with the fact of defeat, ex-POWs resorted to constructions of continuity according to which they, their wives, and their families had all been victims in different ways. Yet Biess also points to other reactions amongst returnees. Changing gender-roles as a result of the war, urban destruction, and massive political upheaval were too much for former POWs to process, and so they escaped into the imagined world of a rural Heimat, untouched by war and social upheaval. Biess sees variety in the coping mechanisms of returnees—mechanisms that went beyond the victimization trope. As a result, he does not believe that a sense of victimization became the bedrock of new personal or national identity in the postwar years. That development set in later. This argument is subtle, but perhaps not convincing. If returnees defined their relationship to the present in terms of a common experience of victimization, then they certainly were understanding themselves and others as stamped by that experience. It had become part of the fabric of their identity. The idealization of Heimat does not contradict this. In retreating into an imagined status quo ante, the soldiers abnegated the very modernist horror that they were implicated in, seeking to retrieve a lost innocence. Only on that basis is self-identification as victim possible.

In the following chapter, Biess turns his attention to the medical and psychological assessments by West and

East German doctors of the mental condition of returnees. In the West and East, there was widespread reluctance to recognize mental problems as the direct result of the involvement of soldiers in war (not least genocidal warfare). In West Germany, psychological difficulties were attributed to the effect of malnutrition (under the rubric 'dystrophy') and other privations experienced in Soviet captivity. In both West and East, it was believed that returnees' psychic problems could be alleviated by therapy—ranging from electro-shock and psychotherapy in the West, to a programme of political enlightenment in the East. Where problems persisted, this was put down to individual psychopathology. It was only under the pressure of lawsuits brought against compensation authorities by former soldiers that doctors in the West started to acknowledge the fact that exogenous factors such as captivity (if not war) could per se cause long-term psychological damage. This shift helped to foster a sense of the returnees as victims. But it was a slow shift, partly, perhaps, because the doctors involved in assessing the psychological condition of returnees had been active during the Nazi period; a time notorious for its emphasis on inherited illness, sterilization and euthanasia.

Chapter Four, 'Survivors of Totalitarianism', explores the way in which narratives of victimhood, in West Germany, were gradually supplanted by what Biess calls 'redemptive memories' (p. 97). Now the stress was on the heroic fact of surviving both the experience of serving in Hitler's war, and of imprisonment in Soviet POW camps. The use of Christian iconography implied that Germans had undergone a Christ-like martyrdom. It also implied that captivity had triggered a spiritual resilience, a soul-searching, and a reorientation towards God. Thus it was that the Protestant and Catholic organizations heavily involved in supporting ex-POWs in the immediate aftermath of the war sought to frame their experience in a manner which would foster postwar re-Christianization. Church and state bodies were, not surprisingly, keen to reinstate returning POWs as dependable citizens and fathers. Yet, as Biess shows, post-currency-reform problems on the employment market, as well as the physical and psychological deficiencies of returnees, made absorption into the market a halting process. Moreover, shifts in gender roles as a result of war and postwar, as well as the weakened condition of returnees, meant that they could not simply resume patriarchal positions within their families. For all that the state wished to see ex-POWs recover their 'masculinity' (literally and symbolically), within the family returnees needed to negotiate and redefine their roles to an extent. At the same time the family represented a deideologised realm for the ex-POWs where their role in a genocidal war largely went unquestioned. Biess shows that many ex-POWs did not immediately embrace western democratic values. Many clung instead to nationalist and even Nazi attitudes. The chapter also discusses the lobbying of the West German government by the Association of Returnees for compensation for POW captivity, a cause supported by the SPD.

Chapter Five deals with a different form of redemptive narrative—that of 'antifascist conversion' (p. 126), the dominant official narrative in the eastern zone and then the GDR. Given that some 70,000 German POWs in Soviet captivity had participated in antifascist courses from 1942 onwards, it may well have been the case that some, at least, had genuinely undergone an 'antifascist conversion' during the war. After the war, however, the KPD and then the SED would seem to have identified in returnees generally a particular antifascist potential which needed to be harnessed and developed. According to official SED narratives, the returnees from Soviet captivity had undergone an ideal transformation from soldiers in Hitler's fascist army to philo-Soviet antifascist fighters for socialist progress. This narrative, which Biess rightly calls 'pseudoreligious' (p. 127), enabled former POWs to continue seeing themselves as soldiers—only now, of course, for the better cause. The narrative also allowed them to forget their role in Hitler's war. The SED did what it could to recruit members and functionaries from the ranks of former POWs. The Party also sought to press returnees into joining the Kasernierte Volkspolizei, the military arm of the state; some 4,800 POWs were integrated into KVP units. As Biess shows, not all returning POWs were enamoured of SED socialism, or indeed of the Soviet Union; others may genuinely have believed antifascism represented a model for a new society. I did wonder if Biess might not have underplayed one of the motives for the 'antifascist conversion' narrative—namely wishful thinking. The SED will have been well aware of the nationalist, anti-Bolshevik, orientation of many ex-POWs. The 'antifascist conversion' narrative hoped to bring about what it evoked; it was a rhetorical ploy. Pressing ex-POWs into the police force, moreover, was an ideal way of disciplining them by giving them the role of discipliners.

There follows a fascinating chapter in which Biess identifies further parallels between West and East Germany—this time with respect to the trials of former POWs in West Germany, known as the Kameradenschinder trials, and the purges of some ex-POWs from the state and party apparatus in East Germany. Between 1948 and 1956, about one hundred former POWs, who had been in Soviet captivity, were sentenced by West German courts either for maltreating, in their capacity as camp functionaries, other German prisoners, or for denouncing other POWs to the Soviets. In East Germany and the early GDR, POWs who had been in *western* imprisonment became the subject of investigations by the Central Party Control Commission. They stood accused of ‘political indoctrination’ and ‘deviation’, and even of having collaborated with western ‘agents’. Biess demonstrates here the effect of the descending Iron Curtain. In West Germany, any collaborative contact between German POWs and their Soviet captors was dismissed as symptomatic of a pathological or totalitarian personality; in East Germany, any form of interaction between German POWs and the Americans and British was stigmatized as collaboration with the imperialist and capitalist enemy. Thus the Cold War shaped interpretations of the Second World War. Biess’s discussion of the Kameradenschinder trials is particularly illuminating. At a time when the West German legal system was doing little to put Nazis on trial, it showed less hesitation in prosecuting supposed ‘Soviet collaborators’. It was also less inclined to recognize Befehlsnotstand as a defence in such cases than in cases where former Nazis claimed they had been acting under orders. Evident from this was the continued commitment of the legal authorities to wartime national and military systems of evaluation. For all the legal positivism which Biess identifies in West German legal thinking, the Kameradenschinder trials also show that West German judges still tended to think in terms of categories such as ‘treason’ or at least ‘uncomradely behaviour’.

‘Absent Presence’, Biess’s penultimate chapter, examines the 1950–1955 period. In May 1950, the Soviet News Agency, TASS, announced that all German POWs had now been repatriated. In West Germany, this claim was greeted by a storm of protest, not least from Adenauer himself, who vastly inflated (as did others) the number of POWs actually still held by the Soviets. In the first half of the 1950s, organizations such as the Association of Refugees (VdH) lobbied for the release of Soviet-held POWs, *and* of those POWs still in western captivity—although the latter comprised convicted war criminals such as Erich von Manstein. In this way, post-war POW commemorations, ‘helped to erase crucial boundaries among victims, bystanders and perpetrators’ (p. 191). While the anti-communist thrust of much VdH rhetoric was quite in tune with Adenauer’s politics, the increasing insistence of the VdH on negotiations with Moscow on the subject of the POWs was not. Biess shows that appeals in West Germany for the release of the remaining Soviet-held POWs kept the POW theme alive and adapted it to the growing anti-communism of the Cold War. In the East, there was no official political discourse on the POW theme after 1950; the matter was regarded as ‘resolved’. Biess can prove, however, that here too tensions existed. Family members refused to accept that TASS’s statement was an end of the matter, and petitioned President Pieck for the release of their loved ones. Official silence on the subject bred discontent.

The final chapter, appropriately enough, deals with the final chapter in the postwar repatriation history: the release of about 10,000 German POWs by the Soviets in 1953, and roughly the same number in 1955. The public and political reception of the 1953 and 1955 returnees in West Germany, among whom there were war criminals, made little distinction between straightforward POWs and war criminals. In East Germany, the opposite problem was the case: all 1953/1955 returnees were tarred with the brush of Nazi criminality. However, as Biess shows, the situation in West Germany did gradually become more differentiated. In response to domestic and international pressure, the West German judiciary began to arrest returnees suspected of war crimes and place them on trial. Biess points to the example of the two notorious Sachsenhausen guards, Sorge and Schubert, who were arrested in 1956 and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1959 (although Biess does not mention the role of the GDR in campaigning for their arrest). In the East, the official discourse remained static, but it failed to impose itself upon the population at large. Biess cites several examples of East Germans who did not accept the criminal status assigned to the 1953/1955 returnees by the SED, and who found that the latter had been treated far more judiciously in the West. Not that these East Germans expressed such ideas openly: they were registered by the Stasi.

Biess’s book is superbly written and carefully, indeed meticulously, researched. The unpublished sources he

uses were gleaned from some thirty different archives. He also consulted an enormous number of magazines and newspapers, as well as conducting oral history interviews. The bibliography of secondary literature consulted is also impressive. The sheer thoroughness and conscientious attention to detail results in a work of subtlety, refinement, and intelligent, differentiated comparison. His study covers responses to returning POWs in all their social, political, economic, cultural, legal, and social policy dimensions. No stone is left unturned. He proves that returning soldiers, in the West, were regarded as victims. But the real originality of his work lies in his identification and analysis of a 'redemptive narrative' in both West and East Germany; a narrative in accordance with which the returnees could be understood as contributing to social and spiritual reconstruction. That narrative masked, indeed denied, the traumatic effects of war and captivity, and of involvement in genocide. It circumnavigated the mental and moral morass of the Wehrmacht's war. Symptomatic of this was the refusal to recognize the psychological effects of that war. With *Homecomings*, Biess has enriched our understanding of the formative post-war years in both East and West Germany. It is a masterful piece of scholarship—and beautifully written.

**Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/582#comment-0>

**Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3973>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>