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88. Kaes, *From "Hitler" to "Heimat,"* 161-92.

89. See notes 37 and 38 on the Historians' Debate and note 16 on the Feminist Historians' Debate.

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Survivors of Totalitarianism

RETURNING POWS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF

MASCULINE CITIZENSHIP IN WEST GERMANY, 1945-1955

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BETWEEN 1945 and 1955, more than one million German POWs returned from captivity in the Soviet Union to West Germany.¹ After having served as Hitler's soldiers on the Eastern front where, as recent research indicates, many of them became bystanders, accomplices, and perpetrators of genocide, they faced a prolonged period of deprivation and forced labor in Soviet POW camps.² While hundreds of thousands of sick POWs were released in the immediate postwar period, the bulk of German POWs were forced to contribute to the rebuilding of the Soviet Union through forced labor and did not return until the late 1940s and the first few months of 1950. The last 30,000 German POWs were convicted of war crimes by Soviet courts and were finally repatriated in two waves in 1953 and in 1955, the last ones after Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's visit to Moscow. When the mass of the POWs returned home during the late 1940s, they encountered a *Heimat* (homeland) that had radically changed since they had left it in order to fight the war on the Eastern front.³ Yet while the POWs met an environment that still bore the visible marks of total defeat, they also reentered a West German society that was undergoing a rapid transformation into a liberal-democratic and increasingly "Americanized" society.

This essay focuses on the way a changed and changing West German society received and treated returning POWs from the Soviet Union during the first postwar decade.⁴ By analyzing West German responses to returning POWs, the essay highlights the nature of West German society specifically as a *postwar* society. It seeks to demonstrate that as a result of the delayed return of the POWs, West German society was compelled to cope with the direct social, moral, and psychological consequences of the racial war of destruction on the Eastern front well into the second half of the 1950s.⁵

The concept of "totalitarianism" was central to West German responses to returning POWs from the Soviet Union. Yet in these responses, totalitarianism did not primarily feature as an analytical concept signifying a political system. It rather appeared as a psychological force that threatened to destroy the moral and personal integrity of the individual.⁶ West German reactions to returning POWs consisted of two distinct yet related components: a process of disintegration through vic-

timization that turned these former soldiers of Hitler's army into victims of totalitarianism and a process of reconstruction that transformed them into survivors of totalitarianism. While victimization persisted throughout the period considered here, it was increasingly tempered by an emphasis on reconstruction that coincided with the reconstruction of West German society at large and its gradual integration into the Western Cold War alliance during the first half of the 1950s. By the mid-1950s, the then dominant image of the POWs as survivors of totalitarianism indicated a specific West German way of relating to the past and it reflected distinctly West German ideals of masculine citizenship.⁷ This synthesis, as the essay will show, firmly anchored returning POWs in the political, social, and moral fabric of postwar society. Yet at the same time, it also represented one of the origins of the massive social conflicts of the 1960s.

Contrary to previous research, West Germans' relationship to the Nazi past during the first postwar decade was not characterized by complete silence or collective amnesia.⁸ The rise and fall of the Third Reich had left ever-present marks that were too visible simply to be ignored, and it had produced experiences that were too traumatic simply to be repressed. During the first postwar decade, West Germans debated their recent past during the Nazi dictatorship and the Second World War in a very intense, albeit also highly selective, manner. Many different groups in German society crafted tales of the past that tended to emphasize their suffering and generally neglected the various degrees of their passive tolerance or active complicity with the Nazi regime. In so doing, these groups supported their claims for material compensation from the West German welfare state. They also sought to reclaim a moral high ground as Hitler's victims, a position that they had lost as a result of their exposure as perpetrators by Allied prosecutions of Nazi crimes at Nuremberg and elsewhere.⁹

Within this larger context of West German selective memory, the experience of returning POWs occupied a privileged position. In a more dramatic fashion than perhaps any other group in postwar German society, returning POWs from the Soviet Union united in their personal and collective histories the German paradox of combining, in many cases, a function as perpetrator or bystander during the war with an experience of victimization after the war. As Robert Moeller has argued, in West German public memories returning POWs from the Soviet Union became one of the two main reference groups of a "rhetoric of victimization" that explicitly equated the suffering of "German victims" with the suffering of "victims of Germans."¹⁰ This equation focused especially on the phenomenological similarity of the camp experience that Jews and other victims of Nazism allegedly shared with German soldiers who were interned in Soviet POW camps after 1945.

This equation of Jewish victims and returning POWs, however, did not come into being quasi automatically after the *Wehrmacht's* unconditional surrender. A variety of public and private statements from the early postwar period indicate instead how West Germans employed the issue of German POWs as one way to address the complicated problem of German individual guilt and moral responsibility. Individual Germans demanded, for example, that POWs should be repatriated

according to the extent of their involvement with National Socialism.¹¹ The Hessian state government and parts of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) discussed the exchange of antifascist POWs for well-known National Socialists.¹² Other voices located the harsh treatment of German POWs in the Soviet Union in the context of "Hitler's criminal conduct" in the East or rejected "the simple equation of POW and concentration camps."¹³ While it is impossible to ascertain how widespread these attitudes were, their existence demonstrates that the perception of returning POWs as victims represented a social and discursive process that silenced other, more differentiated, voices of the early postwar period.

Within these specific West German narratives of victimization, the discussion of medical and psychological consequences of captivity assumed a special significance. Beginning in 1946, West German medical doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists began to diagnose the condition of sick and utterly exhausted returning POWs as "dystrophy."¹⁴ The term apparently derived from the Russian and entered German medical literature only after the Second World War. Dystrophy originated from malnutrition in the camps. It signified a variety of physical symptoms such as water edema, liver damage, and loss of sexual instinct as well as a wide range of "psycho-pathological behavior," including apathy, depression, and loss of all moral inhibitions.¹⁴ These psychological symptoms indicated that returnees were suffering from what today would be called "posttraumatic stress disorder" (PTSD).¹⁵

In her classic 1951 study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt analyzed the destructive impact of the concentration camp as the "most consequential institution of totalitarian rule" on the individual personality of inmates.¹⁶ Even before the publication of Arendt's study, dystrophy literature addressed similar problems with respect to former German POWs in the Soviet Union. German physicians and psychiatrists argued that the camp experience "de-differentiated" and "primitivized" the POWs, who had therefore developed "abnormal" and "asocial" personalities.¹⁷ These deformations seem to have not only resulted from the POWs' material deprivation but also derived from their exposure to a foreign natural and social environment that was deemed incompatible with any German sense of *Heimat*.¹⁸ Contemporary observers noted that the "endless space of the Russian landscape" and the "completely different way of life" in the Soviet Union had shaped German POWs to such an extent that "their nature and facial expressions have become Russian" and they "had lost much of their actual humanity."¹⁹ Dystrophy literature thus indicated the extent of German POWs' victimization by ascribing to them the allegedly subhuman features of their former enemies on the Eastern front.

Moreover, dystrophy did not only call into question German POWs' ethnic identity, it also destroyed their sexual identity. Virtually all discussions of dystrophy emphasized in particular the loss of any sexual desire among starving German POWs in the Soviet Union as a result of the exclusive focus of all libidinal instincts on food.²⁰ This diagnosis stood in marked contrast to concerns about homosexuality and "sexual perversions" among German POWs from Western POW camps.²¹ According to dystrophy literature, POWs in the Soviet Union were de-



Figure 2.1: *Heimkehrer* 1946. During the immediate postwar period, German POWs returned in an utterly miserable condition. West German observers described their physical and psychological condition as “dystrophy,” and often ascribed to returning POWs the allegedly “inferior” moral characteristics that had previously been assigned to the victims of Nazi racial persecution. Courtesy of the Landesbildstelle Berlin.

sexualized and thus returned from Soviet captivity as emasculated and infantilized sexual beings. These deficiencies, moreover, did not only concern the psyche but extended to the very sexual characteristics of their bodies. In the first monograph on dystrophy, the psychotherapist Kurt Gauger described the dystrophic feminization of returnees’ bodies, which had apparently assumed female shapes and features with “pubic hair of the female type” as well as the “first signs and sometimes fully developed forms of female breasts.”²² Dystrophy literature thus indicated that the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht was followed by a complete emasculation of its former soldiers in Soviet captivity.

As a growing literature on trauma, memory, and war has demonstrated, trauma does not represent a timeless fact with a clearly discernable psychobiological essence.²³ Instead, the interpretation and diagnosis of trauma is closely linked to larger cultural narratives of war and defeat. Dystrophy literature therefore also needs to be analyzed from the perspective of the “social construction of illness.”²⁴ This is not to say that German POWs did not suffer any serious health damages as a result of their deprivations in Soviet captivity. Yet in the aftermath of genocidal warfare on the Eastern front, discussion of these physical and psychological deficiencies of returning POWs assumed a specific meaning. In a peculiar inversion of racist discourse, these diagnoses assigned to German POWs the racial and sexual markers that Nazi propaganda had assigned to their former enemies on the Eastern front. Dystrophy literature indicated that German POWs in the Soviet Union had become dehumanized in a similar way to the primary victims of Nazi racial warfare on the Eastern front, Russians and Jews.²⁵ If therefore signaled how postwar internment in the Soviet Union had inscribed the military defeat of the Third Reich onto the body and the psyche of its former soldiers. Moreover, by ascribing these “inferior” characteristics to German POWs, these diagnoses indicated that they were not just losers of an “ordinary” war. They rather portrayed them as losers of a racial war of extermination in which defeat was always associated with racial or moral inferiority.

This pathologizing tone in dystrophy literature also derived from the personnel and conceptual continuities in the medical and psychiatric profession. Before 1945, some of the most prolific writers on dystrophy had displayed a strong allegiance to the ideology and practice of National Socialist health policies. As an “enthusiastic propagandist for the Nazis,” Kurt Gauger, one of the main authorities on dystrophy in the postwar period, had advocated a “political psychotherapy” during the Third Reich.²⁶ Dystrophy authors like Gauger were therefore strongly predisposed to viewing health problems of returning POWs as indicators of an alleged moral inferiority. Yet dystrophy literature was not an exclusive specialty of a few compromised members of the medical and psychiatric profession. Contributions on dystrophy appeared in all established medical and psychiatric journals.²⁷ While not all of them shared the cultural biases of the diagnoses cited above, most commentators accepted the notion of a specific “pathology of captivity” among returning POWs.²⁸ State authorities, moreover, also adopted this perception of the POWs’ condition as pathological. In a meeting with church welfare organizations in October 1953, a representative of the Ministry of Expellees underscored the severe physical and

psychological damages that returning POWs suffered as a result of dystrophy and cited Kurt Gauger's book as the authoritative treatment of the issue.²⁹ As late as 1956, the Ministry of Labor commissioned a collection of medical, psychological, and sociological studies on dystrophy because it represented a "widespread, obvious, and threatening syndrome for everybody who is affected by it."³⁰

The West German discussion of the medical and psychological consequences of Soviet captivity during the late 1940s and early 1950s thus established dystrophy as the specific trauma of the Second World War. Dystrophy exhibited similarities as well as differences to the characteristic trauma of the First World War—"shell shock," or war neurosis.³¹ Like shell shock, dystrophy signified the collapse of preceding ideals of militarized masculinity. Yet while shell shock had exposed the anachronism of Victorian ideals of heroic soldierly conduct in the age of the machine gun, dystrophy denoted the breakdown of the Nazi ideal of the racially superior warrior on the Eastern front.³² The symptoms and the etiology of dystrophy also differed widely from those of shell shock. Shell shock manifested itself in "uncontrollable shaking, stuttering, tics and tremors and disorders of sight, hearing and gait" as well as "insomnia, wild emotional outbursts, racing heart beat and nervous exhaustion."³³ Whereas shell shock thus referred to a loss of control over bodily functions, dystrophy rather indicated the extreme reduction or even complete extinction of physical and psychological capacities.³⁴ Significantly, moreover, shell shock resulted from exposure to intolerable conditions on the front and was therefore largely limited to front soldiers. Dystrophy, on the other hand, derived from camp internment and thus affected, at least in theory, millions of civilians as well. In that sense, dystrophy indicated the collapse between front and home front, between civilian and military victims, that distinguished the Second from the First World War.

This focus on the POWs' deprivations in the camps rather than on their previous experience on the front in dystrophy literature fostered the elimination of considerable differences between various forms of internment during and after the Second World War in West German postwar consciousness.³⁵ Dystrophy literature allowed West Germans to claim their share in what was perceived as a Europe-wide camp experience that, according to one commentator, had deprived "millions of prisoners of all categories" in "concentration, forced labor, and POW camps" of their personal freedom.³⁶ This equation then enabled Kurt Gauger, at a medical congress on "Prisoner-of-War Diseases" in 1953, to discuss the dystrophy syndrome with reference to a female concentration camp survivor from the Theresienstadt concentration camp. He asserted as a "simple fact" that "captivity in Theresienstadt, just like in the POW camps in the Soviet Union, led to severe dystrophy."³⁷ A contribution to the state-commissioned study on dystrophy, moreover, explicitly rejected calls for a differentiated treatment of returning POWs and concentration camp survivors by emphasizing the "similarity of the captivity situation."³⁸ Dystrophy literature therefore left no doubt that returning POWs, like Jews, should be described as victims of the camp, as victims of totalitarianism.

This portrayal of returning POWs as dehumanized victims of totalitarianism paradoxically served a variety of useful functions for individual POWs as well as

for West German society at large. It eliminated, for example, differences not just between returning POWs and Jewish victims but also among returning POWs. This was especially significant because an unusually high percentage of SS men seem to have fallen into Soviet captivity and returned to West Germany together with ordinary POWs.³⁹ As a result of their delayed return, they benefited from a special amnesty for returning POWs that excluded virtually every POW who had returned after 8 May 1947 from denazification procedures.⁴⁰ Returning POWs, moreover, were not only collectively exonerated, they were also almost indiscriminately integrated into the wide range of "war damaged" groups that were entitled to material compensation from the West German welfare state. Most medical commentators agreed that the physical and psychological consequences of captivity should be compensated according to the 1950 "Federal War Victims' Benefit Law."⁴¹ Returning POWs, including SS men, also received benefits according to the 1954 "Prisoner-of-War Compensation Law."⁴² The undifferentiated perception of POWs as victims of totalitarianism thus clearly obscured the considerable differences among them that had still been recognized during the early postwar period.

Within West German society at large, the perception of returning POWs as completely deformed and demoralized victims served the rather obvious purpose of providing a moral counterweight to Allied accusations of German complicity in National Socialist crimes. Whereas ordinary Germans had been forced to confront the horrors of the liberated concentration camps immediately after the war, they could now point to returning POWs from the Soviet Union as having undergone an allegedly similar experience. How closely an awareness of conditions in concentration camps during the Nazi period was linked with perceptions of returning POWs as victims became apparent in a letter of one Frau R., a mother of a POW in Russia, to a Catholic priest in 1947. Conversations with returned POWs from the Soviet Union had convinced her that captivity in the Soviet Union was indeed "not comparable" to conditions in the "German concentration camps." It was, in fact, "much worse." Whereas "innocent people who had only done their duty at the front" had to suffer for a prolonged period of time, "the people in the concentration camps were immediately anesthetized in the gas chambers" even though, she added, "it was terrible and not nice to treat people like that."⁴³ Such voices from the grassroots level indicate how in West German popular consciousness an existing awareness of German crimes and a certain degree of compassion for Germany's victims was gradually overshadowed by an increasing self-perception of Germans as victims.

This identification with returning POWs as victims of totalitarianism, moreover, united the overwhelming majority of ordinary Germans with political representatives in all major parties except the Communist party (KPD). To both ordinary Germans and their political leaders, images of victimized POWs confirmed earlier National Socialist predictions of the catastrophic consequences of a Soviet military victory. The West German societal consensus of POWs as victims thus indicated the continuity of an antibolshevist community of suffering that had emerged during the last years of the war and reached into the postwar period.⁴⁴

This continued antibolshevist community of suffering received its annual symbolic affirmation in national commemorations of the fate of German POWs in the Soviet Union. After 1950 the Association of Returned POWs annually organized, in cooperation with the two Christian churches, unions and employer organizations, and the federal government, a "week of remembrance" as well as a "day of loyalty" featuring a two-minute work and traffic stoppage, fires of admonishment along the border between West Germany and East Germany, and torchlight parades of returned POWs in POW uniform.⁴⁵ The image of POWs as victims thus maintained a public presence during the first postwar decade, periodically reminding all West Germans of the continuity between past and present horrors of Soviet bolshevism.

In the new context of the Cold War, to be sure, West German antibolshevism dissolved into a larger Western antitotalitarianism. Members of the West German Foreign Office welcomed American wishes "to activate the question of German POWs for the active defense propaganda against Russian Communism."⁴⁶ Similarly, a formal West German complaint at the United Nations against Soviet failure to repatriate German POWs indicated that West Germans sought to transform the "vital question of German POWs into a cause of the free world."⁴⁷ Yet accusations of Soviet inhumanity also increasingly served as a way to critique the remnants of the Western Allies' prosecution of German crimes against humanity. After the early 1950s, demands for a release of the last POWs from the Soviet Union were routinely linked with calls for a general amnesty of German war criminals who were still imprisoned by the Western Allies. West Germans thus employed the victimization of German POWs in the Soviet Union not only to align themselves with Western antitotalitarianism, but also to erase the last distinctions between themselves and "the West" that resulted from the Western Allies' prosecution of the crimes committed by the perpetrators of the preceding German version of totalitarianism.⁴⁸

While the perception of returning POWs from the Soviet Union as victims served a variety of political purposes that were both symbolic and practical in the postwar period, it also presented considerable problems to West German society. Physically and morally deformed POWs, after all, were ill-suited to contribute to the enormous task of rebuilding an utterly devastated society, and they were certainly incapable of defending this society at the forefront of the Cold War. Their integration into postwar society as victims was therefore merely negative in that it turned POWs into a symbol for the defeated nation but did not assign them a positive function within postwar society. The POWs, however, were "men in their best years" from every social background who, as one observer noted, had a "decisive part in the fate and the shaping of our social order."⁴⁹ For functional as well as symbolic reasons, the reconstruction of West German society thus required their positive integration as citizens of a liberal democratic republic. They therefore needed to be transformed from victims into survivors of totalitarianism.

Because the victimization of POWs in West German public discourse had been perceived as a process of moral, physical, and psychological disintegration, their

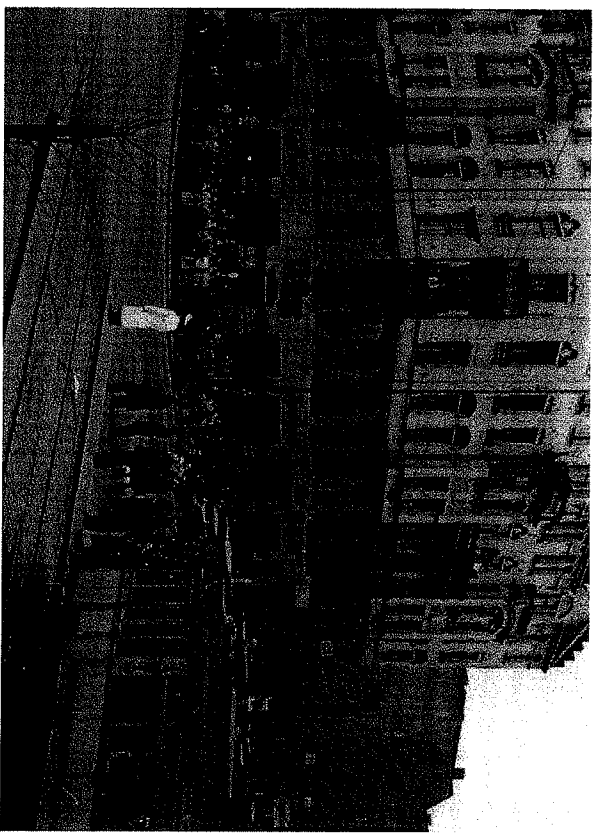


Figure 2.2: During the early 1950s, the fate of the German POWs still held in the Soviet Union received enormous public attention and confirmed the continuity of an "antibolshevist" consensus from the Third Reich to the Federal Republic. This picture depicts a two-minute traffic stoppage in West Berlin in 1952 on occasion of the annual "week of remembrance" for German POWs in the Soviet Union. Courtesy of the Landesbildstelle Berlin.

reconstruction as postwar citizens demanded a process of reintegration on all these levels. This process, to be sure, was greatly facilitated by the much improved health conditions of POWs who returned after 1948–49.⁵⁰ Yet the perception as survivor instead as victim applied to all POWs from the Soviet Union. It involved a reevaluation of the collective POW experience that transcended its purely victimizing aspects as well as a new definition of the POWs' places as male citizens within postwar society.

The two Christian churches played an especially significant role in the moral reevaluation of the POW experience. As the only major institutions that had survived the collapse of the Third Reich nearly unchanged, the churches possessed a singular moral authority in postwar Germany. They were thus uniquely positioned to offer redemptive meaning to disillusioned and demoralized POWs that went beyond mere victimization. Church publications portrayed captivity as a period of "soul searching" that had led to a kind of "Christian community experience" during which former soldiers had realized their previous "distance from God."⁵¹ Given the Christian emphasis on suffering as precondition for redemption, church publications asserted that the deprivations in captivity had earned returning POWs a "knowledge" and an "invisible crown" that signaled their larger "mission as a

secret order for our torn people in the middle of Europe."⁵² Because religion had inspired returning POWs to survive an "unprecedented boundary situation of occidental man," they were supposed to redeem postwar society from "Eastern and Western nihilism."⁵³ According to these statements, the Soviet POW camp epitomized the destructive tendencies of modernity, such as massification, collectivization, and secularization. The POWs' survival in the camps therefore predisposed them to provide a corrective and a counterweight to these very tendencies at home.

The interpretation of captivity as religious conversion represented more of an ideological project, to be sure, than a reflection of actual religious sentiments among returning POWs. Catholic priests and Protestant ministers who had been active in Soviet POW camps provided mixed reports about the piety of German POWs.⁵⁴ Yet church authorities also received letters from former POWs testifying to the support that religion had provided to them in mastering an unprecedented personal and moral crisis situation.⁵⁵ A Catholic memo on the "spiritual and religious situation in Germany" identified a "singular religious wave especially among soldiers in the internment camps" as a result of the "catastrophic ending of the war." According to this analysis, former soldiers' resurgent religiosity was, however, soon stifled by the bleak reality of life in postwar Germany and hence replaced by a widespread "nihilism."⁵⁶ Church organizations were therefore determined to activate even the "small number of those who had gone through the Christian community behind barbed wire," hoping that their survival in captivity would have a "revolutionary impact" on Christian communities at home.⁵⁷ The extensive involvement of church welfare organizations in the social and religious care of returning POWs actively sought to foster their religious sentiments.⁵⁸ Church groups hoped that even a small cell of religiously inspired survivors of captivity would function as important agents of a "rechristianization" of postwar society.⁵⁹

Secular commentators shared the churches' interpretation of captivity as a period of spiritual and moral regeneration. According to these voices, German POWs had not succumbed to "massification" in the camps. Unlike members of "more primitive peoples," the German POWs had allegedly demonstrated their membership in a German *Kulturnation* by displaying an unbroken attachment to culture and education in captivity. Their suffering in Soviet camps had thus entailed a "deep educational value."⁶⁰ The liberal economist Ludwig Preller shared this notion of returning POWs as contributing to a "spiritual renewal" of postwar society and identified them, together with returning emigrants, as the two most important groups that could infuse a torn society with new meanings.⁶¹

This redemptive interpretation of Soviet captivity was also in tune with the "organizational ideology" that the "Association of Returned POWs" (Verband der Heimkehrer, VdH) was developing during the early 1950s. The VdH sought to create, according to James Diehl, "a community of experience [among returning POWs] whose negative experience was now given a positive reevaluation."⁶² Two exhibits that the VdH organized during the 1950s clearly documented these efforts. They were entitled "Prisoners of War Speak" and "We Admonish" and tried to pre-



Figure 2.3: Karl Steth, "Der Gekrönte." In postwar West Germany, the two Christian churches frequently portrayed the suffering of German POWs in the Soviet Union as a precondition for redemption and saw returning POWs as important agents of a "rechristianization" of postwar society. This painting reflects this religious interpretation of captivity by portraying a German POW as a modern Christ figure wearing a barbed-wire crown. During the early 1950s, it was displayed at an exhibition on the experience of German POWs. Courtesy of the Verband der Heimkehrer, Bonn.

sent the lessons of the captivity experience to a larger audience. These exhibits, to be sure, did not tell stories of deformed and victimized German POWs but rather told tales of moral resistance and inner strength. The handcraft works on display that had been produced by POWs in the camps documented, for example, their dexterity under primitive conditions and signaled that even the Communist labor system of norms and quotas had not corrupted established notions of German "quality work." These exhibits thus sought to document how German POWs had "asserted themselves spiritually" by maintaining their "humanity in the midst of inhumanity" and by holding on to beliefs in "freedom," "Heimat" (homeland), and "family."⁶³

These recast memories of the POW experience were supposed to confirm the transhistorical continuity of timeless German values that had been untainted by total war and total defeat. The POWs' conduct in Soviet captivity seemed to represent a source of an essential "Germanness" that should contribute to the moral foundation of postwar society. As survivors of totalitarianism, moreover, returning POWs also demonstrated that in the postwar period to be (West) German meant to be anticommunist. Returning POWs were uniquely prepared to assert the legitimacy of West Germany as the only representative of the nation by associating the German Democratic Republic with conditions in Soviet POW camps. This was clearly the message of returnee Alfred H.'s description of his homecoming experience to Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. He had passed through GDR territory on his return from the Soviet Union, and he identified "Germany's demarcated Eastern zone" as the "mirror image of Russia." Only after he had crossed the border between East and West did he and his fellow POWs, who were "all eyewitnesses and reporters on conditions behind the Iron Curtain," feel the "love of the Heimat." Only then, he added, "were we in Germany."⁶⁴

At the same time, however, the POWs' survival in captivity also provided a possibility for the assertion of a distinctly German identity in the face of increasing American influences. Especially in the aftermath of the return of the last POWs in 1953 and 1955, their commitment to "comradeship, faithfulness, and personal integrity" in captivity was frequently juxtaposed to the alleged superficiality of an increasingly Americanized, West German consumer culture.⁶⁵ A 1957 poster advertisement of a VdH documentary movie on the fate of returning POWs explicitly contrasted the figure of the German returnee with representations of American popular culture such as rock 'n' roll and jazz.⁶⁶ By the mid-1950s, representations of the POWs as survivors of totalitarianism thus countered earlier perceptions of POWs as completely demoralized victims who had lost their identity as Germans. Instead, the returned POW now appeared as a powerful symbol for an ideal West German citizen who was firmly anticommunist yet also kept a skeptical distance from the "American way of life."

Tales of POWs as survivors of totalitarianism, however, could not disguise the fact that there were other returning POWs who had survived not because they had adhered to timeless German values but because they had cooperated with Soviet authorities as antifascist activists or camp officials during captivity. It is estimated that almost half of all German POWs participated in one way or another in antifascist reeducation programs.⁶⁷ Some of them later assumed positions within the camp administration. Beginning in the late 1940s, returned POWs began to charge some of these political activists and camp officials with having denounced their fellow POWs to Soviet authorities or even with having personally tortured them. In more than one hundred so-called "Kameradenschinder" trials (trials of those who tortured their comrades) during the first half of the 1950s, these activists were sentenced to prison terms from a few months up to fifteen years.⁶⁸

These trials signaled the legal and symbolic exclusion of former antifascist activists from the "comradeship" and the "community of experience" among returning POWs that was an ideological product of the reevaluation of the captivity

experience. Antifa-activists, to be sure, were excluded not for explicitly political reasons, but rather because of their alleged moral and personal failure in captivity. Observers of the trials generally would not concede that antifascist activists had acted out of genuine political convictions. Instead, their conduct was explained in terms of a "psychology of the Kameradenschinder" that had led them to betray their "comrades" out of the lowest possible motivations.⁶⁹ Commentators frequently stressed Antifa-activists' earlier allegiance to National Socialism as party functionaries or even SS members. Their smooth transition to Communist activists in the POW camps allegedly suggested their affinity to a "totalitarian" personality structure.⁷⁰ The antifascist activists' moral weakness thus appeared as the negative foil to the steadfastness of ordinary POWs whose proven immunity against any totalitarian temptation predisposed them to be ideal citizens of a liberal-democratic republic.

These trials were also part of a larger moral reconstruction of postwar West German society. By constructing a clear dichotomy between "loyal" and "disloyal," between "comradeship" and "betrayal," the trials sought to give new meanings to these moral categories that had become highly questionable as a result of their uses for the justification of National Socialist crimes.⁷¹ The trials also addressed the more general problem of individual moral and legal responsibility under totalitarian conditions, which also figured prominently in later NS trials. Some of the Antifa-activists employed defenses similar to those used by National Socialists during their trials. They argued, for example, that they had been pressured into collaboration with Soviet authorities or that they had only collaborated in order to protect other German POWs.⁷² VdH representatives who were called as experts on conditions in the camps asserted, however, that any voluntary antifascist activity implied the possibility of incriminating other POWs and could thus not be excused with reference to repression or force.⁷³ This rather unpromising attitude toward antifascist activists thus stood in marked contrast to the VdH's persistent efforts on behalf of a general amnesty for German war criminals imprisoned by the Western Allies.⁷⁴ While the legal prosecution of Nazi crimes abated during the first half of the 1950s, these trials indicated that in the early Federal Republic, collaboration with the foreign Soviet dictatorship, not with the homegrown Nazi dictatorship, appeared as the truly pathological behavior.⁷⁵

The trials also clearly served an important function as political propaganda in the context of the Cold War. By prosecuting former antifascist activists, the trials pathologized and criminalized precisely those returning POWs who were received as ideal, newly converted antifascist citizens in East Germany.⁷⁶ The trials thus sought to expose not just "pathetic torturers" but also "an entire system that used them as instruments to achieve its goals."⁷⁷ This potentially negative propagandistic impact of the trials was also recognized by the leadership of the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED). The SED tried to intervene in the Soviet Union's decision to release the last German POWs in 1955 partly because it was concerned that their repatriation might lead to new trials against former antifascist activists in West Germany.⁷⁸ Similarly, the West German Foreign Office indirectly con-

framed the political significance of the Kameradenschinder trials when it tried to stop the prosecution of two former POWs who had served as camp functionaries in a Yugoslavian POW camp because it threatened to damage diplomatic relations with the only non-Stalinist country in Eastern Europe.⁷⁹ The Kameradenschinder trials thus indicated how East and West German confrontations with the POW experience became increasingly entangled in the larger Cold War confrontation between East and West during the 1950s.⁸⁰

The transformation of returning POWs from victims into survivors and the concurrent exclusion of antifascist activists through the Kameradenschinder trials were part of the larger project of reconstructing West German national identity in the aftermath of total war and total defeat. This universalization and appropriation of the primarily male POW experience for the nation represented a complement and a corrective to the universalization of female experiences during the early post-war period.⁸¹ Yet unlike the rather static interpretations of the female experience, the interpretation of the male POW experience was dynamic and underwent a crucial shift from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. The shift in emphasis from POWs as victims to POWs as survivors of totalitarianism significantly influenced the reconstruction of gender relations in West Germany and crucially shaped negotiations of men's place in postwar society. It therefore did not only reflect returning POWs' moral integration into postwar society, but also promoted their social and sexual integration into the workplace and the family.

During the occupation period, returning POWs' right to return to their old workplace was not universally insured in all three Western zones.⁸² Even where POWs had the right to return to their old jobs, these jobs often no longer existed as a result of Allied bombardment or postwar dismantling of industry.⁸³ With a growing demand for jobs after the 1948 currency reform and concurrent mass repatriations of returning POWs from the Soviet Union, however, German employment officials increasingly engineered the replacement of working women with returning POWs, particularly in typically "male" industries such as construction and in the public sector.⁸⁴ These informal policies were formally codified in the 1950 "Returned POW Law" (Heimkehrergesetz), which provided a legal guarantee to returning POWs to be rehired in their old jobs and granted those POWs who had returned after 1 January 1948 the same preferential treatment in finding new employment that the war-disabled or the recognized "victims of fascism" enjoyed.⁸⁵ An increasingly sex-segregated as well as expanding labor market thus ensured a relatively smooth absorption of returning POWs into the world of work.⁸⁶

Besides their integration into the workplace, the restoration of returning POWs' position within the reproductive sphere of the family appeared to be another essential component of their transformation into postwar citizens. Given the central significance of the reconstruction of the family for the larger task of rebuilding postwar society, West German responses to returning POWs perceived them primarily as actual and potential fathers and husbands. Returning POWs were supposed to rectify the perceived gender imbalance in postwar society by transform-

ing "incomplete" into "complete" families.⁸⁷ In addition, their proven moral strength as survivors of totalitarianism also uniquely predisposed them to restore a moral order to families that had allegedly been undermined as a result of the upheavals during the war and in the postwar period. A host of prescriptive literature therefore suggested to women how they should retreat from the strengthened positions within families that they had gained during the war and the immediate postwar period for the benefit of their returning men.⁸⁸ The moral reevaluation of the captivity experience thus directly influenced the conservative family ideology of the 1950s and, at least in theory, fostered the re-creation of men's authority over women.

Inextricably intertwined with the restoration of returnees' position as fathers and husbands within reconstructed families was their heterosexual stabilization. Just as the POWs' desexualization in captivity had constituted an important aspect of their victimization, their resexualization became crucial to their transformation into postwar citizens. The close links between the reconstruction of the social and the sexual order in postwar West Germany became evident in widespread concerns over the dangerous consequences of returnees' failed resexualization.⁸⁹ Postwar commentators created a causal connection between returning POWs' failure to channel their sexual drives into a heterosexual direction and their alleged overrepresentation among sex and property crimes.⁹⁰ This alleged link between the sexual problems of returnees and their inclination toward crime then also aroused the interest of state authorities. In a letter to all district attorneys and judges, the attorney general of Lower Saxony highlighted the diminished criminal responsibility of returnees resulting from the late consequences of dystrophy. In this context, he approvingly cited the case of a returning POW who had committed incest with his twelve-year-old daughter; he was not convicted to a prison term but was instead referred to a hospital in order to cure his dystrophy.⁹¹ Aside from uncontrolled heterosexuality, a "lapse into homosexuality" appeared as another, equally pathological consequence of returnees' failed resexualization.⁹² These concerns over returning POWs' homosexuality were especially voiced after 1948-49, when nutrition levels had improved in Soviet captivity and the POWs had regained their sexual energy but were still confined to an exclusively male environment in the camps.⁹³ Homosexuality thus appeared as an indicator of social disorder or of an extreme crisis situation such as Soviet captivity and was also frequently associated with totalitarian political convictions.⁹⁴ The restoration of a controlled heterosexuality to returning POWs was therefore crucially linked to their transformation into survivors of totalitarianism and hence into ideal liberal-democratic citizens.

The focus on returnees' reproductive functions as fathers and husbands also shaped the manner in which they were integrated into postwar society. It transplanted the primary locus of their readjustment to a civilian environment from society at large into the families. Unlike after World War I, the return of the soldiers did not trigger public conflicts fueled by violent fantasies.⁹⁵ The pacification of returning POWs after 1945 was therefore not just based on the "economic mir-

acle" and the rather generous social policy measures that it provided. It also derived from the "privatization of reconstruction" in postwar West Germany, which reduced the potential for conflict that was inherent in returnees' confrontation with a dramatically changed society by defusing it within many individual families.⁹⁶ How conflicted returning POWs' readjustment to civilian society actually was became evident, however, because the skyrocketing divorce rates within postwar families were even surpassed among families with returning POWs.⁹⁷ The normative prescriptions of gender relations therefore stood in marked contrast to the social realities within postwar families in general and families of returning POWs in particular. Yet although the postwar "crisis of the family" affected families of returnees more dramatically than other families, a probably even larger percentage of returning POWs either succeeded in making the necessary adjustments to continue conjugal life or, in the case of unmarried POWs, found a wife over the course of the 1950s.⁹⁸

Inside the families, the more long-term conflicts seem to have been not so much between the sexes but rather between generations. After a period of crisis and adjustment, husbands and wives were united in their shared experience of overcoming hardship and suffering during the war and the immediate postwar period. For the next generation, however, it was very difficult to relate to these shared experiences of catastrophe of the preceding generation.⁹⁹ Implicitly, the youth rebellion of the 1950s already challenged the ideals of masculine citizenship that were associated with returning POWs as survivors of totalitarianism.¹⁰⁰ A politicized student generation during the 1960s explicitly attacked these ideals. The 1968ers saw their fathers' generation no longer as survivors of totalitarianism but rather exclusively as "perpetrators of fascism," or even in the words of Gudrun Ensslin, one of the founding members of the terrorist Baader-Meinhof group, as the "generation of Auschwitz."¹⁰¹ While the conflicts over the postwar readjustment of returning soldiers had thus been largely contained inside the families during the 1950s, the student revolt of the 1960s transported these conflicts back into society.

The ideals of masculine citizenship that emerged from West German responses to returning POWs were therefore almost immediately challenged again, implicitly during the 1950s and explicitly during the 1960s. Still, they represented a significant departure from preceding ideals of masculinity. Unlike the militarized and overtly aggressive masculinities of the Nazi period, the emphasis on returning POWs as fathers and husbands highlighted their identity as civilians. West German responses to returning POWs thus signaled a significant break with a thirty-year process of militarization during which male identities had primarily rested on their functions as soldiers.¹⁰² Postwar ideals of masculinity, to be sure, also differed from the utterly destroyed masculinities of the immediate postwar period that had been associated with POWs as victims. The reevaluation of their collective experience provided returning POWs with new bases of moral authority within postwar society as well as within the families. These tamed masculinities then corresponded precisely to the tamed militarism of the new West German army and its

ideal soldier as the "citizen in uniform." Unlike the victimized POW, the new German man embodied by the survivor of totalitarianism would be capable of taking up arms again. Yet he would do so not out of a sense of racial superiority or imperialist dreams of conquering "living space" in the East but rather in order to defend his family and a democratic order against a perceived totalitarian threat from behind the "Iron Curtain."¹⁰³ The "remasculinization" of West Germany therefore did not represent a mere restoration but rather a recasting of masculinities.¹⁰⁴ It thus reflected the broader recasting of West German society, politics, and culture that remained deeply embedded in German traditions yet also differed significantly from a mere restoration of the old order.¹⁰⁵

Throughout the first postwar decade, returning POWs from the Soviet Union brought back to West German society the experiences of warfare on the Eastern front and of Soviet captivity as one of its consequences. Their reception and treatment demonstrated, however, that West Germans sought to confront the consequences of Nazi ideological warfare within a distinctly de-ideologized and depoliticized framework. After the immediate postwar period, the integration of returning POWs into West German society was never defined as an explicitly political problem that would imply a reckoning with political responsibilities and individual guilt. The perception of POWs as victims as well as their transformation into survivors was based on moral, religious, psychological, or sexual categories; it was never based on political categories. While the perception of returning POWs as morally inferior victims still echoed the specificity of the war on the Eastern front, their transformation into survivors increasingly removed captivity in the Soviet Union from this specific historical context and portrayed it as a paradigmatic moral and spiritual regeneration.

These depoliticized West German responses to returning POWs, to be sure, served important political functions.¹⁰⁶ They allowed West Germans to distinguish themselves from the parallel East German reception of returning POWs, which focused almost exclusively on the POWs' alleged *political* transformation in Soviet captivity.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, these depoliticized responses to returning POWs both reflected and promoted the integration of West Germany into the Western alliance. Depictions of returning POWs as both victims and survivors fit neatly into the Western antitotalitarian consensus and the moralizing and psychologizing West German response to returning POWs also underlined the significance that the West assigned to the reconstruction of the individual personality in the aftermath of the totalitarian experience. The returning POW as survivor thus also represented a posttotalitarian, liberal notion of the individual that stood in clear contrast to the collectivist ideal of both Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. This transformation of returning POWs into productive and reproductive citizens repressed, however, their earlier destructive function as soldiers of an ideological war. While these different functions were united in the collective biography of returning POWs, they became increasingly separated in their perception by postwar West German society.