



EUI Working Papers

MWP 2007/39

Innocent Victims of Red KZs?

West German Representations of Soviet Internment
1945-55

Andrew H. Beattie

**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE
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ISSN 1830-7728

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Printed in Italy
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

<http://www.eui.eu/>
<http://cadmus.eui.eu/>

Abstract

The paper seeks to contribute to the growing literature on Soviet internment camps established in eastern Germany in the wake of the Second World War. Since 1990 there has been heated debate about who was in the camps and why, but questions around the contemporary reception of the camps have been rather neglected until recently. This paper examines a section of the literature produced about the camps during their existence and in the years immediately following their final closure in 1950. I hope to provide a fuller and more analytical account of the representations and interpretations of the “special camps” than has been offered to date, and to correct some assumptions, assertions, and misapprehensions in current literature. In particular, the paper questions the frequent assumption of the absolute polarisation of contemporary attitudes between the eastern communist defence of the camps and simplistic western anticommunist condemnation.

Keywords

Soviet occupation – East Germany – internment camps – concentration camps – reception – anticommunism – denazification

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“Why have the concentration camps of the Third Reich still not contributed to inducing a profound change of opinion among the German people?” asked sociologist and Nazi concentration camp survivor Eugen Kogon in spring 1949 in a new concluding chapter to the second edition of his study of *Der SS-Staat: Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager*.¹ Kogon’s answer, highlighting a combination of German wartime and post-war suffering, Allied inconsistency, the East-West conflict and renewed totalitarian methods and terror, was that:

Because it was proven that *Hitler’s spirit lived also in others*, not just in Germans; because the world’s susceptibility for totalitarian methods has become apparent; because hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of Germans became their victim anew; because the deterrent [das Abschreckende] that is past loses its effect amidst the tumultuous horrors [Schrecken] that are present; because homilies are always weaker than deeds, particularly when the deeds strongly contradict the homilies.

It all came together.²

¹ Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat: Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* [The SS-State: The System of German Concentration Camps] (Frankfurt am Main: Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1965 [1st ed. 1946]), 403. For the dating of the chapter, see *ibid.*, 402. The book appeared in English as *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them*, trans. H. Norden (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Co., 1950). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this paper are my own from the original German editions.

² Kogon, *Der SS-Staat*, 403, emphasis in original.

Specifically, Kogon referred to German prisoners of war (POWs) in Soviet captivity, the expellees from eastern territories, Germans deported to and performing forced labour in the Soviet Union, and the fiasco of denazification and internment in the western zones, following which “No one is any longer in a position to say who actually deserved the atonements imposed and who did not.”³ The “overall political development” of the Cold War did not help matters either, with its “discriminations, distortions, repression, [and] blindness for the shades of reality.”⁴ All of this is familiar to anyone who has followed the development of historical studies in the last decade into the interplay of the Cold War in Germany and Germans’ self-perception as victims, not only of the war and its immediate aftermath, but also of Allied occupation and attempts at denazification.⁵

However, a further central component of Kogon’s explanation is less well represented in recent historical literature: the continued existence of “concentration camps ... in Germany, in surrounding European states, in Soviet Russia,” to which he had pointed already in the foreword to the first edition of his book in 1946, without then going into more detail.⁶ In 1949, though, Kogon referred specifically to the camps and prisons in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany (SBZ) which—as leading Communist officials he had known in Buchenwald concentration camp under the Nazis had admitted to him—contained not just former Nazis but “dangerous political opponents.”⁷ Why, Kogon wondered, should former Nazis be so horrified about concentration camps between 1933 and 1945, when similar methods—if not similar abuse of inmates—were still being used in the present, and when the western Allies’ apparent indifference and enforced silence on the topic seemed to lend retrospective legitimacy to Germans’ earlier inaction *vis-à-vis* Nazi camps?⁸ “Concentration camps of yore—were they even worth mentioning any more?”⁹ Kogon, of course, thought so, and hoped that his book would help correct the common tendency to “feel the proscribed past as not quite as bad as it is depicted (and as it was).”¹⁰ In optimistic enlightenment mode in 1946, he believed that “*Nothing but the truth can liberate us.*”¹¹ Yet in a more determinedly political vein in 1949, he also insisted that “The system of the SS-state must be

³ Ibid., 403-6, quotation 406.

⁴ Ibid., 408-9.

⁵ See Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Robert G. Moeller, ‘Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II’s Legacies,’ *History and Memory* 17 (2005) no. 1-2, 147-94; Frank Biess, *Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Bill Niven (ed.), *Germans as Victims: Contemporary Germany and the Third Reich* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006); Helmut Schmitz (ed.), *A Nation of Victims? Representations of German Wartime Suffering from 1945 to the Present (German Monitor 67)* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007); Helmut Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte: Die nationalsozialistische Herrschaft in den Debatten des Deutschen Bundestages* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1999); Norbert Frei, *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* trans. J. Golb (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁶ Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat: Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (Munich: Verlag Karl Alber), x.

⁷ Kogon, *Der SS-Staat* (1965), 407.

⁸ Ibid., 407-8.

⁹ Ibid., 406-7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 402.

¹¹ Kogon, *Der SS-Staat* (1946), vi, emphasis in original.

recognised, so that the expansion of the system of the GPU state can be fought, so that a repetition ... can be prevented.”¹²

The ten Soviet “special camps” established on the territory of what became the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1949 are almost entirely missing from the recent historiography of Germans’ self-perception as victims of Nazism, the Second World War, and post-war developments, an omission that stands in marked contrast with their prominence in Kogon’s analysis, and his motivation. This paper seeks to correct that neglect and to redress the rather marginal status of public perceptions and representations in the growing literature on the camps themselves by examining substantial accounts of the camps published in the western occupation zones, West Germany, and the western sectors of Berlin between 1945 and 1955.¹³ Most appeared in the wake of the dissolution of the last camps in 1950, yet some predate this. The majority were publications by the anticommunist activist group the Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit (Fighting Group against Inhumanity, KgU) and affiliated individuals and organisations, but the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) also published some accounts, as did the Federal Ministry for All-German Questions, and individual authors such as Kogon.¹⁴ I consider what these accounts suggested about the purpose of the camps, the nature and treatment of the inmates, and how the overall phenomenon was to be characterised.

Historical and Historiographical Background

A key factor affecting the camps’ contemporary reception and assessments of their purpose in particular was that the secret Soviet order for their establishment was not publicised in Germany. At least initially, contemporaries were therefore left to their own suppositions on the basis of the arrested persons and the limited statements by individual representatives of the occupying authorities, later on the basis of the reports of released or escaped internees, and finally on the official declarations by the Soviet and East German authorities. Without wanting to minimise the highly inconsistent and often arbitrary practice of the Soviet secret police, the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD)—from 1946 the Ministry for Internal Affairs (MVD)—, it is important to point out, as Klaus-Dieter Müller has, that the lack of transparency (or indeed any public declaration) fostered among the German population a sense of

¹² Kogon, *Der SS-Staat* (1965), 410. GPU stands for State Political Directorate, a branch of the Soviet People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs and forerunner of the KGB.

¹³ By substantial I mean those longer than newspaper reports. For their identification I rely on Bodo Ritscher, Rosmarie Hofmann, Gabriele Hammermann, Wolfgang Röhl and Christian Schölzel (eds), *Die sowjetischen Speziallager in Deutschland 1945-1950: Eine Bibliographie* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1996); and Rosmarie Hofmann and Bodo Ritscher, ‘Auswahlbibliografie zur Geschichte der sowjetischen Speziallager in der SBZ/DDR,’ in Petra Haustein, Anne Kaminsky, Volkhard Knigge and Bodo Ritscher (eds), *Instrumentalisierung, Verdrängung, Aufarbeitung: Die sowjetischen Speziallager in der gesellschaftlichen Wahrnehmung, 1945 bis heute* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 271-97.

¹⁴ On the KgU, see Kai-Uwe Merz, *Kalter Krieg als antikommunistischer Widerstand: Die Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit 1948-1959* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1987).

complete indiscriminateness.¹⁵ There is little doubt that, as a result, the camps contributed to a widespread sense of fear and terror.¹⁶

Ostensibly, like their counterparts in the western Allies' zones of post-war occupied Germany, the ten internment camps in the Soviet zone were to accommodate for a brief period Nazi Party and state functionaries and others deemed a threat to the occupying forces. Order No. 00315 of the head of the NKVD, Lavrenty Beria, foresaw in April 1945 the internment of a range of people who occupied various professional and political positions in the Third Reich or otherwise considered to pose a potential threat to the Soviet occupier:

- a. spies, saboteurs and terrorists of the German secret services;
- b. members of all organisations and groups left behind by the German leadership and enemy secret services to carry out subversive activities in the rear of the Red Army;
- c. possessors of illegal radio stations, weapons stores and illegal printing presses (...);
- d. active members of the National Socialist Party;
- e. leaders of the fascist youth organisations at regional, town and district level;
- f. personnel of Gestapo, "SD" and other German organs of punishment;
- g. heads of regional, town and district administration, as well as newspaper and magazine editors and authors of anti-Soviet publications.¹⁷

Members of the SA, the SS, and the personnel of concentration camps and military justice institutions were to be included with POWs and thus separated from the civilian internees (the presence at Sachsenhausen of Russian former POWs of the Vlassow Army and of German POWs released by the western Allies was exceptional). Most arrests occurred in the year 1945 more or less on the basis of this order, and Soviet and East German communist authorities subsequently declared—somewhat inconsistently—that the camps housed dangerous Nazi criminals and war criminals.

However, from 1946 onwards the internees increasingly included Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Liberals, and critical Communists who were arrested for opposing communist rule or particular communist policies, or others accused of having contacts with the other occupying powers or other alleged misdemeanours. They were often accused of spying, sabotage etcetera. A number of inmates were arrested after being denounced by personal or political rivals. While some—particularly in Sachsenhausen

¹⁵ Klaus-Dieter Müller, 'Sowjetische Speziallager in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1950,' in Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (ed.), *Zukunft braucht Erinnerung: System und Wirklichkeit der Speziallager in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1950, Forum am 16. August 2006 in Potsdam* (Sankt Augustin: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2006), 12-13.

¹⁶ See Jan Foitzik, 'Der sowjetische Terrorapparat in Deutschland: Wirkung und Wirklichkeit,' in *Schriftenreihe des Berliner Landesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR* 7 (Berlin: Berliner Landesbeauftragten für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR, 2000), 4-28, esp. 10-14; and Andrew H. Beattie, 'Orte des Terrors oder der "stalinistischen Entnazifizierung"?' *Zeitgenössische britische Wahrnehmungen sowjetischer Speziallager in der SBZ,* in Peter Barker, Marc-Dietrich Ohse and Dennis Tate (eds), *Views from Abroad: Die DDR aus britischer Perspektive* (Bielefeld: W. Bertelsmann, forthcoming 2007), 67-78.

¹⁷ See the order in German and English translation in Günter Morsch and Ines Reich (eds), *Sowjetisches Speziallager Nr. 7/Nr. 1 in Sachsenhausen (1945-1950): Katalog der Ausstellung in der Gedenkstätte und Museum Sachsenhausen* (Berlin: Metropol, 2005), 70-73 (quotation from the English in the catalogue, 72).

and Bautzen—had been convicted and sentenced by Soviet Military Tribunals for various offences, the “internees” proper did not go through any formal trial or any other formal procedure or processing whatsoever, unless they were among the approximately 3,500 internees “tried” at Waldheim in 1950 after the official dissolution of the camps at the beginning of that year. To complicate matters further, several camps, including the largest and those of longest duration—Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen—, had been Nazi concentration camps. It is this continuity that in large part gave—and gives—questions about the assessment of the special camps their political and moral edge. The other crucial dimension is the massive suffering and deaths that occurred. Conditions in the overcrowded camps were appalling, and thousands of internees died. According to Soviet documents released after 1989, at least 157,837 people were interned, of whom 43,821 died.¹⁸ Contemporary estimates in the publications examined in this article, based largely on the evidence of former inmates, suggested that up to 200,000 were interned, and that at least 90,000 inmates had died there, while many others were presumed to have died after deportation to the USSR. Recent research suggests that at least 7,000 of the approximate 28,500 inmates in Buchenwald died.¹⁹ While in Sachsenhausen, of approximately 60,000 inmates, at least 12,000 died.²⁰

Since mass graves of special camp inmates at Sachsenhausen to the north of Berlin were (re-)discovered in the winter of 1989-90, the post-war history of the site has been the subject of heated public debate and extensive scholarly research. Survivors and their supporters, memorial officials, historians, and politicians at local, regional, and national level have engaged in a frequently vitriolic debate about how to handle the multiple pasts of such sites, and a great deal of historical research has been conducted into the history of these long-neglected post-war camps.²¹ The constitution of the camp populations, the purpose of internment, the overall characterisation of the camps, and their comparability with Nazi concentration camps, western Allied internment camps, and the Soviet Gulag have been the most controversial issues.²²

Amidst the heated debate about, and the scholarly search for answers to these questions, some have tended to fall by the wayside. Until very recently, the questions of how contemporaries reacted to, interpreted, and represented the camps were addressed only indirectly.²³ In the last couple of years, such questions have received greater attention,

¹⁸ Brigitte Oleschinski and Bert Pampel, “*Feindliche Elemente sind in Gewahrsam zu halten*”: Die sowjetischen Speziallager Nr. 8 und Nr. 10 in Torgau 1945-1948 (Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1997), 20.

¹⁹ Bodo Ritscher, Rikola-Gunnar Lüttgenau, Gabriele Hammermann, Wolfgang Röhl and Chsitian Schölzel (eds), *Das sowjetische Speziallager Nr. 2, 1945-1950: Katalog zur ständigen historischen Ausstellung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1999), 7.

²⁰ Morsch and Reich, *Sowjetisches Speziallager Nr. 7/Nr. 1*, 49.

²¹ For the debate on Sachsenhausen, see Petra Haustein, *Geschichte im Dissens: Die Auseinandersetzung um die Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen nach dem Ende der DDR* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2006). For an overview of the scholarly research, see Bodo Ritscher, ‘Geschichtswissenschaftliche Aufarbeitung der Geschichte der sowjetischen Speziallager in der SBZ/DDR seit Beginn der 1990er Jahre: Zwischenbilanz und Ausblick,’ in Haustein et al., *Instrumentalisierung*, 170-92.

²² For a brief discussion of these issues in the context of German postunification commemorative politics, see Andrew H. Beattie ‘The Victims of Totalitarianism and the Centrality of Nazi Genocide: Continuity and Change in German Commemorative Politics,’ in Niven, *Germans as Victims*, 147-63, esp. 156-60.

²³ For an early exception, see Helga Schatz, ‘Die gesellschaftliche Wahrnehmung der sowjetischen “Speziallager” in der Nachkriegszeit,’ in Renate Knigge-Tesche, Peter Reif-Spirek and Bodo Ritscher

not least due to the realisation that post-1990 positions did not emerge from a historical vacuum.²⁴ Contemporary and more recent public debate about the camps has even been included in the documentary exhibitions at the Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald memorial sites.²⁵ Nevertheless, research into the topic is still in its early stages.²⁶ Moreover, numerous accounts of the camps or of the debate about them remain remarkably presentist, while some authors' ostensible attempts to address the history of their reception fail to move beyond their primary concern with the normative question of how the camps should be seen today.²⁷ In short, we are far from having reached the historicization of the topic. This will hardly surprise anyone familiar with simultaneous debates about the post-war discussion of German war-related suffering more broadly. They, too, are replete with highly selective, unreliable, and instrumental accounts.²⁸

This working paper seeks to advance the cause of historicization by (re-)examining a section of the literature produced about the camps during their existence and in the years immediately following their final closure in 1950. I hope to provide a fuller and more analytical account of the representations and interpretations of the special camps than has been offered to date, and to correct some assumptions, assertions, and misapprehensions current in the literature. In particular, the paper questions the not infrequent assumption of the absolute polarisation of contemporary attitudes. For example, the new exhibition catalogue of the Sachsenhausen memorial suggests that a clear dichotomy characterised contemporary approaches to the camps and their inmates: on the one hand the view of Soviet and East German communist authorities that the internees were exclusively Nazi and war criminals; on the other the view of the anticommunist free West that they were all innocent victims of political persecution, martyrs to the democratic struggle against bolshevism.²⁹ While there is some truth to

(eds), *Internierungspraxis in Ost- und Westdeutschland nach 1945: Eine Fachtagung* (Erfurt: Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, 1993), 90-110.

²⁴ See the editors' foreword in Haustein et al., *Instrumentalisierung*, 7-9; and Wolfram von Scheliha, 'Sackgasse Totalitarismus: Die Forderung nach einem Gedenken an die sowjetischen Speziallager im Zeichen der Totalitarismustheorie führt ins erinnerungspolitische Abseits,' *Deutschland Archiv* 39 (2006) no. 2, 283-90.

²⁵ Ritscher et al., *Das sowjetische Speziallager Nr. 2*, 88-99, 173-75, 197-205; Morsch and Reich, *Sowjetisches Speziallager Nr. 7/Nr. 1*, 425-56.

²⁶ For a (by no means exhaustive) discussion of (potential) research questions informed not least by research into contemporary perceptions of Nazi concentration camps, see Christian Schölzel, 'Zeitgenössische Wahrnehmungen von Speziallagern 1945-1950: Das Lager Nr. 2 in Buchenwald,' *Deutschland Archiv* 32 (1999) no. 3, 460-70. The camps are also surprisingly absent from studies of analogous discourses focusing on German POWs in Soviet captivity after the war. Frank Biess claims to address not just POWs but civilian detainees as well, but the latter barely feature in his account, *Homecomings*. See also Moeller, *War Stories*.

²⁷ See for example Karl Wilhelm Fricke, "'Konzentrationslager, Internierungslager, Speziallager": Zur öffentlichen Wahrnehmung der NKWD/MWD-Lager in Deutschland,' in Haustein et al., *Instrumentalisierung*, 44-62.

²⁸ See Robert G. Moeller, 'Sinking Ships, the Lost *Heimat* and Broken Taboos: Günter Grass and the Politics of Memory in Contemporary Germany,' *Contemporary European History* 12 (2003) no. 2, 147-81.

²⁹ Morsch and Reich, *Sowjetisches Speziallager Nr. 7/Nr. 1*, 425-29. Cf. Müller, 'Sowjetische Speziallager in der SBZ/DDR 1945-1950', 6-7; Wolfram von Scheliha, 'Die sowjetischen Speziallager – ein Symbol des kommunistischen Unrechts in der publizistischen Auseinandersetzung zwischen Ost und West bis zum Bau der Berliner Mauer 1961,' in Haustein et al., *Instrumentalisierung*, 10-20.

this view, the picture is more complicated, as I hope to show at least for the western side.³⁰

More generally, I consider how representations of the special camps conformed to or differed from broader contemporary discourses of on occupation, denazification and post-war politics. Recent scholarship has revised the widespread notion that the early 1950s constituted a period of wholesale silence about the Nazi past, and demonstrated not only the “noisy business” of extracting selected, “usable past[s],” but also the extent and popular support of the reversal in the early 1950s of allied denazification measures.³¹ German opposition to Allied efforts at post-Nazi justice and accountability (with the partial exception of the Nuremberg Trials) is as old and as well known as the efforts themselves. The discussion of the special camps belongs in this context, too, but again can help to complicate and enrich our understanding. In the broader literature on post-war Germany it is often assumed or asserted that pointing to German suffering or communist abuses, or comparing these with the suffering of the Nazis’ victims (necessarily) entailed the trivialisation or relativization of German crimes, or the evasion of responsibility for these; that the rise of the Cold War and totalitarianist discourse fostered the forgetting of Nazi crimes and their perpetrators and victims, and of German guilt and complicity; that fighting present communist totalitarianism led to the neglect of the recent Nazi version.³² The special-camp phenomenon surely invited such developments, yet even in the literature examined here—most of which can be categorised as highly anticommunist propaganda—there were shades of grey, more complex approaches, and more nuanced treatments than is often assumed, or than one finds in some quarters in the post-unification period.

The Camps’ Purpose

That contemporaries commonly called the Soviet camps “concentration camps” (KZs) has frequently been noted, but rarely considered further. Closer inspection reveals a range of interpretations and a number of different perceived purposes behind the camps. Kogon and others’ use of the term reflected a belief that the main purpose of the Soviet camps was the isolation and destruction of real and potential political resistance to the regime being established in the SBZ.³³ This was certainly the line taken by SPD publications in the 1950s that highlighted the opposition and persecution of social democrats during and after the 1946 forced merger of the party with the Communist Party of Germany (KPD).³⁴ Yet earlier publications highlighted the use of the camps for the purpose of recruiting forced labour for deportation to the USSR or, more

³⁰ I acknowledge the problematic nature of focusing only on western publications, because they were often responses to eastern depictions. However, this research is work in progress, and I believe examining western depictions in their own right is a valid undertaking.

³¹ Moeller, ‘Germans as Victims,’ 164; Moeller, *War Stories*; Frei, *Adenauer’s Germany*; Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei*, 37-49.

³² I confess that I have rather uncritically accepted and repeated such depictions in my own work. See Beattie, ‘The Victims of Totalitarianism.’

³³ Kogon himself preferred the abbreviation KL. As he noted, however, KZ was preferred because of its harsher tone and was more common. This applied to the post-war period as well as to the Third Reich, and I therefore use the more common abbreviation.

³⁴ *Die Straflager und Zuchthäuser der Sowjetzone: Gesundheitszustand und Lebensbedingungen der politischen Gefangenen* (Sopade-Informationsdienst: *Denkschriften* 55) (Bonn: Vorstand der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, 1955).

specifically, for dealing with those deemed insufficiently capable of such labour. One of the KgU's first pamphlets stated in 1949 that:

In these concentration camps of a different type of totalitarianism [from that of National Socialism], the classification of the victims occurs according to other criteria than in those of the Third Reich. The sliding scale of torment and humiliation no longer goes according to "racial" criteria from Jews, foreigners, to political and criminal prisoners, but is directed exclusively at the labour value that the individual possesses in the view of the Bolsheviks. Whoever is not credited with such labour value is slowly and tortuously destroyed in these camps by systematic and continuing under-nourishment. The elderly and the sick and even children meet this fate.

But since 1945 hundreds of thousands of those capable of work have taken the path into inner Russia as work-slaves who—burnt out after a few years—are then discarded like blunted tools. Tens of thousands whose health appeared to make their deportation to the Soviet Union "uneconomical" sit behind the barbed wire of the KZs ... in which so far ... half of the inmates have died.³⁵

The pamphlet stressed (more than many others) the large numbers deported to the USSR, and stated (as did others) that the situation was no different in the other countries behind the Iron Curtain.³⁶ There was thus nothing specifically German about the suffering, or apparently its justification or purpose, but the inhumanity of Soviet exploitation and treatment was foregrounded.

Subsequent publications were even more explicit in their suggestion that the purpose of the camps was the physical elimination rather than the exploitation of the inmates. According to a KgU pamphlet from around 1950, their eradication (*Ausrottung*) was the goal, and tuberculosis merely replaced the Nazis' Zyklon B gas as the means to that end.³⁷ In an article in the journal *Der Monat*—whose title "Der NKWD-Staat" (The NKVD-State) was a clear reference to Kogon's *Der SS-Staat*³⁸—the writer and KgU co-founder Günter Birkenfeld wrote of the decimation (*dezimieren*) process at work in the camps, and reported the former internees' belief that the intelligentsia and bourgeoisie were the main targets.³⁹ The lengthiest treatment, Hermann Just's 1952 book *Die sowjetischen Konzentrationslager auf deutschem Boden 1945-1950*, argued that deportees from the East of the Oder/Neisse rivers, POWs, and scientists, scholars and specialists deported to the USSR were to be exploited for their "physical and mental powers."⁴⁰ In contrast, it appeared that "The 'internees' of the soviet-zone KZs on German soil were destined to die, as class enemies, as vengeful toll for war atrocities and destruction, and for the deterrence of all ideological opponents."⁴¹ Just thus painted

³⁵ KgU, *Auch das ist Deutschland: Bericht von drüben* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag, n.d. [1949]), 2. [BAK ZSg. 1-64/3 (6).]

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. Similarly, Hermann Just, *Die sowjetischen Konzentrationslager auf deutschem Boden 1945-1950 (Hefte der Kampfgruppe)* (Berlin: KgU, 1952), 7.

³⁷ *Berichte aus Mitteldeutschland von der Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit* (n. p.: KgU, n.d. [ca. 1950]), 30 [BAK ZSg. 1-64/3 (1)]. Cf. KgU, *Auch das ist Deutschland*, 11.

³⁸ Cf. Morsch and Reich, *Sowjetisches Speziallager Nr. 7/Nr. 1*, 443.

³⁹ Günter Birkenfeld, 'Der NKWD-Staat: Aus den Berichten entlassener KZ-Insassen,' *Der Monat* 2 (1950) no. 18, 628-43, especially 631, 642. See also Bund der Opfer der Sowjet-KZ (Berlin) (BdO) (ed.), *Ein Beitrag und eine Forderung zur Sicherung des Weltfriedens* (n.p.: n.d. [1950?]), 3.

⁴⁰ Just, *Die sowjetischen Konzentrationslager*, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

a rather unclear picture of the motivation behind the annihilation, but that the camps were intended as “death camps” (*Todeslager*) for the internees was apparently beyond dispute.⁴² Even more explicit in this regard was a publication by the SPD from 1955, which declared that the camps “had the character of extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*) until the year 1948,” when for the most cynical of reasons—the need to release prisoners in order to avoid further criticism—the rations were improved marginally.⁴³ These depictions thus went far beyond the condemnation of the camps for the unjustified and illegal imprisonment of political opponents. Present-day commentators who invoke and praise contemporary interpretations should perhaps bear in mind the range of opinions and the substance of the arguments presented, rather than just the concentration camp label so common in contemporary publications and their titles.

Internment’s ostensible official purpose of isolating the supporters and office-holders of the Third Reich and other elements deemed dangerous to the occupying power was by no means entirely absent from contemporary treatments. Yet it was often addressed indirectly, and was most frequently evoked where there was evidence that the camps were *not* justified or appropriate instruments of denazification, indeed, that they were not even intended as such. For instance, in a KgU report a survivor of Buchenwald arrested in May 1945 reported that he had never been accused of being a fascist, although other publications stressed the interest of NKVD interrogators in real or imputed NSDAP membership.⁴⁴ Considerable emphasis was placed on the arbitrariness of arrests and—even more so—of the arbitrariness of releases; for example it was frequently noted that it was above all NSDAP members who were released in 1948, or that those internees transferred to and “tried” in Waldheim were selected “completely randomly.”⁴⁵ A 1952 publication of the Federal Ministry for All-German Questions made much of the fact that most of the internees released in 1950 were never interrogated or investigated, implying that the Soviets had not believed them to be culpable and had never intended to bring them to any proper sort of justice.⁴⁶ The implication was that their treatment was indiscriminate and that it in no way reflected the inmates’ previous records, or even an attempt to treat them according to those records; and Soviet practice was contrasted with that of the western Allies on precisely this point.⁴⁷

Indeed, numerous accounts, at least implicitly, endorsed the notion of denazification and other measures to bring Nazis to book. It is possible to read these texts as reflecting a

⁴² *Ibid.*, 114. Also KgU, *Auch das ist Deutschland*, 13. Just seemed torn between merely condemning the concentration camps for their non-legal and persecutory incarceration of political opponents and accusing the Soviets of genocide, *Die sowjetischen Konzentrationslager*, 17-18, 144-48.

⁴³ *Die Straflager und Zuchthäuser*, 1.

⁴⁴ *Berichte aus Mitteleuropa*, 26; BdO, *Ein Beitrag und eine Forderung*, 2.

⁴⁵ *Sowjetische Konzentrations-Lager auf deutschem Boden 1945-1950* (Göttingen: Kampfbund gegen Unmenschlichkeit, n.d. [1950]), 4, 10, Anhang B [BAK ZSg. 1-64/3 (5)]; BdO, *Ein Beitrag und eine Forderung*, 5; Birkenfeld, ‘Der NKWD-Staat,’ 629; *Wir dürfen nicht schweigen: Streiflichter aus den politischen Haftanstalten der Sowjetzone* (Düsseldorf: Untersuchungsausschuss Freie Juristen der Sowjetzone [Berlin-Zehlendorf] [UFJ], Bund der Verfolgten des Naziregimes [Düsseldorf], KgU [Berlin-Nikolassee], n.d. [ca. 1951]), 6.

⁴⁶ *Unrecht als System: Dokumente über planmäßige Rechtsverletzungen im sowjetischen Besatzungsgebiet* (Bonn: Bundesministerium für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, 1952), 65.

⁴⁷ E.g. Just, *Die sowjetischen Konzentrationslager*, 18-19.

belief that the internment of criminals and even of active NSDAP members was understandable and even justified in principle. To be sure, there were also rather problematic claims that suggested more German hostility to the Nazi regime and greater openness to the denazificatory policies of the victors and the Soviets in particular than was accurate. The KGU's co-founder and first leader Rainer Hildebrandt claimed for instance that the Germans in 1945 had "met the [Soviet] power that proclaimed great social thoughts and had made the largest sacrifices in the struggle against fascism with some hopeful expectation."⁴⁸ He continued that initially the Red Army's rape and plunder had been silently accepted, not least because "We knew how the SS had resided in Russia."⁴⁹ Other statements similarly depicted a German population eager to cast off the Nazi yoke, punish the Nazis and embrace a purgatory period of occupation—all of which stands in marked contrast to what we know about the widespread German resistance to and criticism of occupation and denazification—even in the western zones. In this context, the anti-Soviet implications of such arguments are undeniable. Explicit statements indicated support for the principles of the Nuremberg trials, but the focus was on calls for their extension to the instigators of new crimes against humanity and/or on the Soviet Union's hypocrisy in participating in the trials but perpetrating its own grave human rights violations.⁵⁰

The Inmates

Yet to a rather surprising extent given many post-unification arguments, the picture of the camp populations that emerges from the contemporary accounts is rather nuanced, and by no means did it suggest that none of the internees were interned because of their Nazi pasts. There were frequent more or less direct concessions that many Nazi Party and state functionaries were interned. Again, this not infrequently occurred in a critical light, for instance when the 1949 *Auch das ist Deutschland* pamphlet reported that it was above all rank and file members of the Nazi party who were released in the summer of 1948.⁵¹ The implication was twofold: that they were released precisely because they were not among the vocal critics of the new regime; and, again, that their release demonstrated that the camps were not (primarily or at all) for the purpose of denazification. Other publications addressed the question of the camp populations more directly. A KGU pamphlet published soon after the closure of the last camps (with the anticipated exception of Bautzen) provided a reasonably accurate elaboration of the distinction between the "internees" arrested from 1945 through to the beginning of 1946 and the "convicts" (*Strafgefangene*) arrested from the beginning of 1946 onwards and sentenced by SMTs for political offences; the former were interned "because they were members of Nazi organisations or, irrespective whether party-comrade or not, whether in a leading or lower function, [because they] had served as employees or civil servants in state, communal, or police authorities".⁵² This depiction was clearly critical and suggested the inconsistency and unwarranted breadth of the arrests. Like much discourse of the 1990s, such statements reflected a narrow understanding of responsibility qua criminal culpability for crimes committed and at most—a point of

⁴⁸ *Berichte aus Mitteldeutschland*, 20. Similarly, BdO, *Ein Beitrag und eine Forderung*, 1.

⁴⁹ *Berichte aus Mitteldeutschland*, 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 9. For the latter, *Wir dürfen nicht schweigen*, 2; Just, *Die sowjetischen Konzentrationslager*, 144-48.

⁵¹ KGU, *Auch das ist Deutschland*, 3, also 7, 13.

⁵² *Sowjetische Konzentrations-Lager*, 7.

view often missing from post-unification discourse—a slightly broader sense of the political responsibility of anyone who had been a member of the NSDAP. Yet the number of Nazi Party members among the internees cited in the contemporary publications is worth noting. In stark contrast to the positions of special camp victims' organisations since 1990, the League of the Victims of the Soviet-KZs declared in a 1950 statement that "In summer 1945 the largest part of the internees comprised without doubt members of the former NSDAP. Towards the end of the year however the picture began to change"; it highlighted the varying political party membership of new inmates, but still noted that at the beginning of 1946 70% were former Party members, and at the end of that year 50%, while at time of the releases in winter 1950 the proportion had dropped to 42%.⁵³ In the 1990s, memorial directors who made claims of similar proportions of NSDAP members were threatened with libel suits. Contemporary publications were thus far from being as one-sided or absolute in their depictions as often assumed, and criticism of the camps was not incompatible with acknowledging a large number of compromised internees.

Suggestions that real Nazi criminals were held in the camps were rare, but by no means non-existent. A note from a former inmate of Sachsenhausen smuggled out of a transport on the way to the Torgau camp that was published in the *Auch das ist Deutschland* pamphlet spoke of the release of [normal] criminals, and the continued incarceration of "the real guilty ones and we innocents."⁵⁴ Günther Birkenfeld provided a somewhat different numerical analysis from that of the League of Victims, claiming that in 1945 only 50% comprised "the Nazi criminals, war criminals, those who had committed crimes against POWs and foreign workers and all those, who falsely came into suspicion of the same."⁵⁵ Even at that early point, he argued, the other half comprised members of the intelligentsia and other political parties, students, youths etc, but he nevertheless left open the possibility that the internees included a considerable number of genuine Nazi and war criminals. Hermann Just similarly seemed more concerned to demonstrate that the internees were not all former Nazis, than to argue that none of them fell into that category.⁵⁶ Like more recent depictions, however, all of these contemporary authors regarded Soviet internment as having transformed even these former Party members and possible criminals into victims.

For all of the acknowledgement of Nazi Party members and even possibly of criminals among the internees, the self-denazification of German society after 1945 noted in other contexts was evident here too.⁵⁷ Numerous reports from survivors of incarceration in the special camps and "GPU-cellar" declared that they had not been NSDAP or Hitler Youth members.⁵⁸ Several survivors reported some connection to the anti-Nazi resistance or their prior persecution by the Nazis.⁵⁹ In rare instances where it is possible to discern from the narrative that the reporter may have been a NSDAP member, no

⁵³ BdO, *Ein Beitrag und eine Forderung*, 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁵ Birkenfeld, 'Der NKWD-Staat,' 629.

⁵⁶ Just, *Die sowjetischen Konzentrationslager*, 132.

⁵⁷ Norbert Frei, *1945 und Wir: Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005).

⁵⁸ KgU, *Auch das ist Deutschland*, 4, 8, 14.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10. *Wir dürfen nicht schweigen*, 7-8, 12

reference was made to their past.⁶⁰ Generally, the diversity of their political and professional backgrounds was stressed, and thus the existence of any obvious connection of the camps to the Nazi regime or its crimes denied.⁶¹ Moreover, the experiences of SMT-convicts and others arrested from 1946 onwards and accused of various post-1945 offences were over-represented in the accounts relative to the regular “internees,” the vast bulk of whom were arrested in 1945. This is understandable in accounts of the 1950s that focussed on those inmates remaining in prisons such as Bautzen.⁶² For earlier accounts and for those that sought to give an overview of the history of the special camps from 1945 to 1950 it is more problematic and misleading. In his frequently cited and excerpted article in *Der Monat*, Birkenfeld selected the testimonies of 25 former inmates on which to base his analysis. Only two of them had been NSDAP members, while one was a veteran of the 20 July 1944 plot against Hitler and a fourth was Jewish, whose entire family was “gassed in Auschwitz.”⁶³ Birkenfeld did not claim this selection to be proportionally representative, but the parity of Nazis on the one hand and their victims and those who resisted on the other was certainly neat, and helped to further undermine any suggestion that the camps had served denazification.

Fighting communism, forgetting Nazism?

Broader notions of culpability or responsibility for having supported the Nazi regime professionally, militarily, economically or otherwise were exceptional. Yet Hildebrandt declared that anyone who had supported the Nazi regime after November 1938 had thus necessarily endorsed its methods, and that anyone who had wanted to know about the system of concentration camps could have found out. He concluded: “Many Germans thus became guilty without having done anything.”⁶⁴ Such statements demonstrate that the struggle against the Soviet camp regime did not necessarily entail the avoidance or minimisation of German responsibility for Nazism. Indeed, rather than focusing on communist crimes all-the-better to forget their Nazi precedents as some commentators suggest, those who were most vocally critical of the former were also among the vocal critics of the latter, and—like Kogon—of many Germans’ reluctance to face up to them. KgU publications frequently repeated Hildebrandt’s dictum that the lesson of the Third Reich was that one had to protest early and vigorously against a regime of terror.⁶⁵ Parallels were drawn with, and legitimacy drawn from the memory of the 20 July 1944 resistance against Hitler, long before historians generally argue that it became politically acceptable and heavily instrumentalized for Cold War purposes.⁶⁶ As Kai-Uwe Merz has argued, the antifascist spirit of 1945 and the hope for a new beginning had not

⁶⁰ KgU, *Auch das ist Deutschland*, 13.

⁶¹ *Sowjetische Konzentrations-Lager*, Anhang A; KgU, *Berichte aus Mitteleuropa*, 27; BdO, *Ein Beitrag und eine Forderung*, 1.

⁶² For example, *Wir dürfen nicht schweigen*, 4-6.

⁶³ Birkenfeld, ‘Der NKWD-Staat,’ 628. Cf. *Wir dürfen nicht schweigen*, 7

⁶⁴ *Berichte aus Mitteleuropa*, 19.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 11, 16. According to one publication, “18 Million people in the Soviet zone have learnt from the experiences of the 3rd Reich, from Nuremberg and from the Soviets themselves. They do not want to be slaves, but to be free,” *Wir dürfen nicht schweigen*, 32.

⁶⁶ *Berichte aus Mitteleuropa*, 9, 52-55. Cf. David Clay Large, “A Beacon in the German Darkness”: The Anti-Nazi Resistance Legacy in West German Politics, *Journal of Modern History* 64 (suppl.) (1993) 173-86; Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948-1990* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999).

entirely disappeared in some quarters by 1948.⁶⁷ Indeed, it nurtured the current struggle in numerous, often ambivalent ways. The KgU even felt compelled to justify the limitation of its work to the period after the war's end, declaring that this "should in no way allow the misdeeds committed by Germans before this time limit to be obscured let alone be forgotten." And in terms similar to Kogon's emphasis on the special duty of the Nazis' victims, it declared that "Only those who have recognised the National Socialist crimes against humanity to their complete extent and have understood their own individual co-responsibility possess a true right to fight the new inhumanities."⁶⁸ In the same publication a section devoted to the popular German actor Heinrich George who died in Soviet custody at Sachsenhausen reported him speaking self-critically of how he had allowed himself to be blinded by privileges and failed to notice the terrible reality of the Nazi regime that offered them.⁶⁹ While such statements were potentially self-serving, they nevertheless suggest that the common notion that anticommunist agitation and fervour were both motivated by, and in turn fostered, a will to forget the Nazi past and to undo measures to bring those responsible to account is too simplistic.

Particularly from today's perspective, some of the frequent parallels and comparisons drawn between Soviet and Nazi practices and inhumanity are disturbing. A survivor of 38 months in Sachsenhausen under the Soviets wrote as follows:

You can kill people in two ways: by gassing, hanging or shooting them. But you can also allow them to starve slowly. The NKVD chose the second method in the name of humanity.⁷⁰

The implication was that the former (where surely more differentiation is required) was more humane because it was quicker. Rare references to Auschwitz or to Zyklon B similarly suggested a disinclination to distinguish between the older Nazi concentration camps for example Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen on the territory of the German Reich and the extermination camps in the East where the genocide of Europe's Jews was carried out. Yet other comparisons were more discriminating. Not infrequently, comparative assessments by survivors of the same camp under the two different regimes appeared, and they more often than not suggested that conditions with respect to clothing, medical treatment and food were worse under the Soviets.⁷¹ They did not suggest however that the Soviet camps were more brutal or inhumane over all. For all the parallels implicit in the title of his article, Birkenfeld insisted that the soviet concentration camps could not simply be identified either with their Nazi equivalents or with labour camps in the USSR: they were different and new in certain ways, the most important being the inmates' forced inactivity and the "systematically applied system of dystrophy"; he also stressed the inmates' utter isolation and the intention that they be condemned to complete oblivion.⁷² While stressing the two regimes' overall equal inhumanity, others sought to distinguish between different methods, and quite different statements were proffered about the physical abuse and torture practised (or not) in the Soviet camps.

⁶⁷ Merz, *Kalter Krieg*, 46.

⁶⁸ *Berichte aus Mitteldeutschland*, 12

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷⁰ KgU, *Auch das ist Deutschland*, 8.

⁷¹ Birkenfeld, 'Der NKWD-Staat,' 632. Cf. Beattie, 'Orte des Terrors.'

⁷² Birkenfeld, 'Der NKWD-Staat,' 630, 642, 638.

While all of the publications examined were fiercely critical of the special camps and vigorously anti-Soviet and anticommunist in orientation, they were nevertheless more complex and diverse than they are often given credit for. None of the authors or the witnesses they cited believed the camps were just or appropriate instruments of denazification, but they generally did not deny either the right of the Allies to engage in the latter or the fact that many Nazis were interned in the camps. In contrast with more recent treatments, the inadequate living conditions and hunger rations were the focus of most attention—more than the imprisonment of political opponents or critics of the emerging communist dictatorship. And it was the need to intervene for the benefit of the inmates—felt immediately—that warranted the vigorous attacks against the system that incarcerated them. The death rates gave rise to expansive claims about the intended extermination of the inmates, but the publications examined give little support to arguments that the focus on the current communist threat served to obscure the Nazi past. There were certainly self-serving, indeed exculpatory tendencies in the narratives developed about the camps and their inmates, but there was also room for more critical and nuanced voices. Not everyone who attacked the Soviet camps as concentration camps did so out of rabid anti-bolshevism, and a concern for present Soviet practice was by no means incompatible with a desire to continue to highlight Nazi crimes and Germans' responsibility for them. The contemporary western reception is not reducible to straightforward labels and one-dimensional depictions, and nor does it hold simple recipes for present-day debates about the interpretation of the special camps.