

## A painful legacy of World War II. Nazi forced enlistment in the Alsace and Lorraine

**Florence Fröhlig**  
**Painful legacy of World War II: Nazi forced enlistment: Alsatian/Mosellan prisoners of war and the Soviet prison camp of Tambov**

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Florence Fröhlig's doctoral thesis in ethnology is concerned with the legacy of Nazi forced enlistment in the Alsace and Lorraine regions during World War II. From 1870 to 1945, Alsace and parts of Lorraine changed nationality five times. In 1939, when France entered the war, the region was part of France. When France was defeated a year later, the regions were annexed to the German Reich.

IN AUGUST 1942, the German government decided that all men from these regions born between 1908 and 1928 were to be enlisted in the German army. The young men had no choice but to enlist since the Germans threatened to kill their families if they did not comply or if they deserted. These men called themselves "les malgré-nous" ("against our will"). In total, 130,000 men were so enlisted. The majority was sent to the Eastern Front and many of them were eventually imprisoned in Soviet prison camps. The Soviet authorities gathered the French prisoners in Prison Camp 188, situated in the forest of Rada, near the town of Tambov in Russia. In July 1944, the Russians handed over 1500 of these prisoners to France. These men made a long journey to Algeria, where most of them joined the Free French Forces. After the war, Alsace and Lorraine were handed back to France, and the surviving prisoners returned home. Forty thousand of the malgré-nous never returned, however.

The thesis focuses on the experiences of these men who fought in the German army during World War II and were prisoners of war in Russia, and who came to be seen as traitors on their return to France, since they had fought against their own country. Florence Fröhlig's grandfather and great-uncle were two of these men.

Fröhlig's focus places the lingering aftereffects of war, as well as individual and collective efforts to overcome them, at the center of her analysis. She examines various strategies adopted by former prisoners and their descendants to deal with the past. The aim of the thesis is to examine how knowledge and memories about forced enlistment and Soviet captivity have been remembered, commemorated, communicated, and passed on since the Alsatian prisoners of war bore the stigma of enemies or traitors on return-

ing to France. Fröhlig is interested in both individual and collective responses to the legacy of World War II, and she regards the people engaged in these processes as memory actors. The focus of the thesis is on their strategies to transcend painful memories and hand them down from one generation to another, transforming a legacy into a heritage.

Fröhlig is influenced by a wide range of theoretical and methodological work in which processes of remembering and commemoration are at the center of interest. In her introductory chapter, she offers theoretical discussions on the concepts of narratives, experiences, rituals, memory, place, and space, and also trauma. Fröhlig views narratives and commemorations as interpersonal acts, and in the case of the former prisoners and their descendants, as strategies and actions used in efforts to give meaning to their experiences and memories. These acts take place within the constantly changing framework of cultural systems and are viewed as processes of remembering.

THE THESIS IS ARRANGED around four strategies of dealing with the experiences of forced enlistment and internment in Soviet prison camps. These stages are chronological but overlap. The first is silence, both individual and collective. Fröhlig writes about this strategy in Chapter 2, titled "To Silence Experience". She shows that there are several types of silences intertwined with one another, and distinguishes four of them. The first one is a political silence. In the post-war era, European societies plunged into a period of forgetting. This sort of forgetting concurred with the hope of the regenerative power of the future, a central value of modernism. In connection with this collective silence there was also an individual, self-protective silence. This is the second silence, which Fröhlig calls liturgical silence. This silence is a survival technique, aimed at overcoming suffering and moving on from the war and its consequences.

The third kind of silence that is discussed is a consequence of the fact that the testimonies of the kinds of experiences the former prisoners of war had had were not well received; there were no empathetic listeners. Hence there was no place for the experiences to be acted out, no space available for expressing them. The fourth form of silence discussed is linked to the humiliation of the former prisoners. Many felt guilty for being deserters and for having fought against their countrymen. In the immediate postwar period, the only script available was the war hero script, which could not cover the experiences of the former prisoners of war.

This construction of silence about forced enlistment and experiences of imprisonment led to a blocked communicative memory, resulting in the difficulty of handing down the memories to the next generation. Despite the silence, children and grandchildren of former prisoners still sensed and in a way carried the burden of the blocked experiences. By distinguishing these four silences, Fröhlig demonstrates that silence in the post-war period was not only due to the tension between personal experience and political

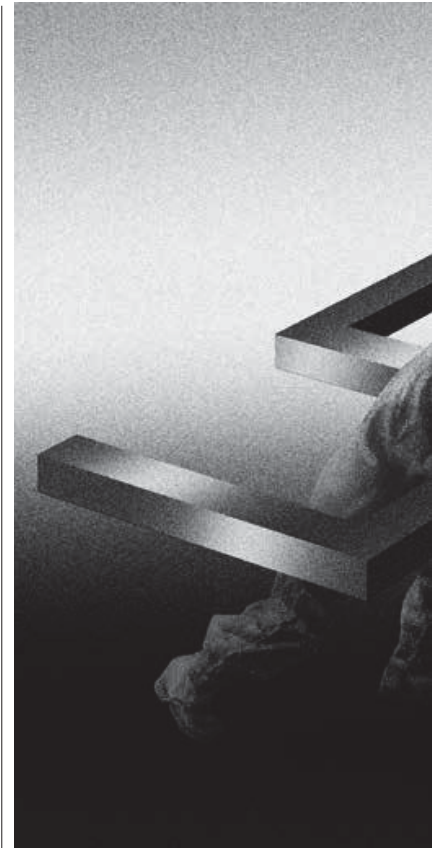
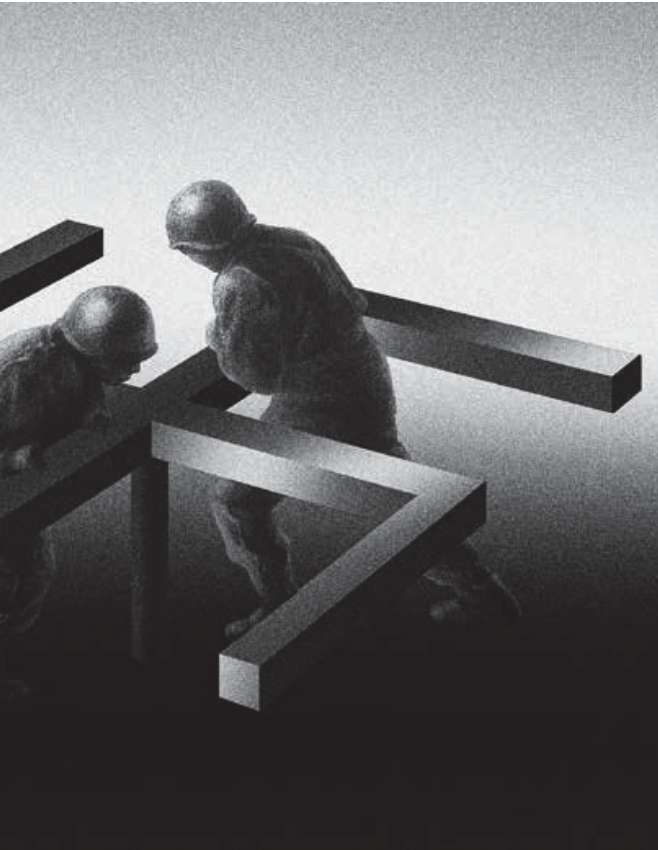


Illustration: Karin Sunvisson

memory, but also connected to the very nature of the experience.

The second strategy for dealing with the past is the constitution of families of resemblance, which Fröhlig writes about in Chapter 3. Families of resemblance were constituted by organizations that defended the interests of the former prisoners of wars. These organizations became intermediaries between French society and the forced conscripts, trying to reintegrate them into the French patriotic discourse and political memory. Within these interest organizations, a collective memory of the events was constituted.

Fröhlig discusses the changes in the interest organizations and the constitution of new ones in the national and international context of remembering and reconfiguring the Holocaust. Commemoration of the Holocaust changed dramatically during the 1960s, when it came to function as a kind of model for non-heroic war experiences such as forced enlistment and imprison-



The first and second strategies are examined mostly through historical records and written testimonies, while the analysis of the third strategy is based mainly on oral interviews with 13 former prisoners of war born in Alsace and Lorraine between 1922 and 1925.

**IN HER ANALYSIS** of the interviews, Fröhlig demonstrates that the narratives were structured chronologically and that they emphasized the dichotomy between individual and collective history. The narrators avoided heroism and emotionality, but followed the genre of the “survivor of the Russian camps” narrative or the “victim of Nazi Germany” narrative. Fröhlig notes that, since trauma is difficult to talk about, the former prisoners of war may have found comfort in the formal structure of such master narratives. They wanted to talk about their experiences since

they were “invested with a mission to add their words to the campaign against denial”, as Fröhlig writes. She concludes that the agents of remembrance whom she interviewed are turning the tangible and intangible legacies of World War II into heritage. This is done by transforming the legacy from the private and familiar sphere and inscribing it into the public sphere.

The fourth strategy, the pilgrimages, is examined by participant observation on two pilgrimages, surveys, and interviews with 13 of the participants. Through her field observations of the two types of pilgrimages, one for the former prisoners and one for their young descendants, Fröhlig examines how the prisoners and their descendants engage with the past by remembering and reassessing meaning in terms of the social, political, and cultural needs of the present. In this chapter the importance of place and aspects of self-in-place are thoroughly analyzed, and enable Fröhlig to demonstrate how memory is constructed, conducted, and transmitted.

The pilgrims travel to the site of Prison Camp 188, in the forest of Rada outside Tambov, Russia. This place is called “the French camp” and is symbolically important. The pilgrims tend the place and make it familiar with the help of various artifacts, both major ones such as monuments and a cross, and minor ones

such as tobacco pipes and flower arrangements. Other ways of taking in the place and making it familiar include cleaning it, arranging the soil, and forming lines of honor. All these and many other tasks and customs construct a place out of space. In so doing, the pilgrims not only appropriate the place, but also incorporate it in their ongoing lives and their physical existence.

In this manner, the pilgrims confront their grief and pass on or receive the memories of the former prisoners. As the pilgrims themselves argue and as the genre of pilgrimage attests, it is regarded as a healing process. In addition, the pilgrims’ agency is a clear challenge to the paradigm of French remembrance in which the experience of these prisoners of war could not be articulated. During the pilgrimages a new narrative is being put together. In this narrative, the legacy of forced enlistment is repositioned as a part of French history. In that sense, the pilgrims are engaged in presenting a selected and consensual interpretation of past events.

This narrative or interpretation depends upon how it is received not only by the former prisoners of war, the descendants, the interest organizations, the Alsace and Lorraine regions and France, but also by Russia and the Russians. Fröhlig shows that acknowledgment by the Russian authorities is important in forming a narrative, and in return for this acknowledgment, the pilgrims are called upon to reevaluate their preconceptions of Russia and Russians.

**THE THESIS SHOWS** that memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but reconstructions of it in the present. The formation of social memory is an active, ongoing process that changes over time. What is being remembered and how it is remembered depends on the cultural frames, moral sensibilities, and demands of the present. But remembering is not the aim of the process; it is a medium of transformation. The strategies of the former prisoners and their descendants are aimed at transforming the legacy into heritage while simultaneously overcoming traumatic experiences of the past.

In my view, this is an important work that covers a whole range of different and interesting aspects of experience, memory, cultural heritage, and narrative. The empirical data is elegantly presented and analyzed, the methods are thoroughly discussed, and the theoretical framework is appropriate. It is obvious that Fröhlig is up to the task she has set herself of examining the former prisoners’ and their descendants’ way of dealing with the past. ❖

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ment. The constituting of families of resemblance offered a platform and a framework for the former prisoners to articulate and narrate their experiences. This third strategy is analyzed in Chapter 4, “To Speak Out”. The new realm of remembrance not only opened up a space and an opportunity for the former prisoners of war to communicate about their experiences, but also provided a space for empathetic listening, which was lacking in the immediate postwar period.

The fourth strategy that Fröhlig discusses is the organization of “pilgrimages” to the site of the Tambov prison camp where most of the prisoners from Alsace and Lorraine had been gathered during the war. These pilgrimages bring together three to four generations, and offer an opportunity for Fröhlig to examine the transmission of memory, which she does in Chapter 5, “Pilgrimages to Tambov”.

The studies of the four strategies demand different empirical sources.