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Views of America and Views of Germany in German POW Newspapers of World War II

After Rommel's defeat in North Africa in 1943 German prisoners of war began to be sent to the United States in ever-increasing numbers, and by January 1945 there were 375,000 German soldiers housed in 130 base camps and 295 branch camps throughout the country.¹ In accordance with the 1929 Geneva Convention regulating treatment of prisoners, the American government provided decent housing and recreational facilities. Cultural offerings included concerts, films, crafts, plays, church services, and in many cases, a camp newspaper. To Alfred Andersch, the life of a POW was such a positive improvement over that of the front-line soldier that he called the camp a "golden cage."² Since America's wartime enemy soon became a close ally, it is important to investigate the role of the prisoners' American experience in modifying their opinions about the two countries. The experience was obviously very important in the political and literary development of writers like Andersch and Hans Werner Richter, for it led directly to their influential postwar intellectual journal *Der Ruf* and to Group 47, the writers' circle which grew out of it, but it was probably no less important for thousands of prisoners who were to play less significant roles. Since the Geneva Convention provided that prisoners of war be protected from acts of violence, insults, and curiosity, the general public was kept from associating with them.³ Prisoners were allowed to subscribe to English and German-language periodicals published in North America, but since many could not read English, and since organized groups in most camps sought to prevent other prisoners from expressing any signs of disloyalty to the home government, it is likely that one of the chief sources of information about the United States and best indicators of prisoner sentiment were the newspapers published in the German language by the prisoners themselves. These camp newspapers were not all of one type, however, and the amount of information and the outlook taken toward the United States and Germany varied; it would therefore be useful to compare the pictures of the two countries conveyed by two quite different newspapers, *Der Zaungast* and *Der Ruf*.

In the summer of 1944 the 6,000 prisoners of Camp Aliceville, Alabama, had the opportunity to purchase a used printing press and were given permission to publish a bi-weekly newspaper: The first issue of *Der Zaungast* appeared on 16 July. This must have been one of the first camp newspapers; by March 1945 there were forty-four such papers, and by the summer of 1945, after Germany had been defeated, the number had risen to 137.⁴ Before the war's end the United States made no attempt to indoctrinate German prisoners: To do so would have violated the Geneva Convention and made American prisoners in Germany subject to similar propagandizing. Prisoners had their own organizations and spokesmen; in some camps a Nazi majority even used unauthorized violence to keep dissidents in line. Of those forty-four papers existing before the end of the war, thirty-three were national socialist in tone, seven neutral, one Christian, and only three clearly anti-Nazi.⁵ In his survey of German-language periodicals in the United States, Karl J. R. Arndt says that until shortly before the end of the war the politics of the *Zaungast* were Nazi; thereafter it became non-political and "one of the best papers."⁶ The paper did not print Nazi slogans or insignia, but the ideological bias sometimes came through in articles on a variety of subjects. It was no doubt typical of many of the POW newspapers published before the war's end. The purpose of *Der Zaungast* is revealed in the first issue: It was to provide the prisoner with a "Brücke zur Heimat . . . sie soll ihm helfen, hier im fremden Lande die Heimat und ihre Lebensauffassung immer aufs neue vor seiner Seele entstehen zu lassen."⁷ A second task was to help improve the soldiers' skills so that they could aid in rebuilding Germany after the war's end.

Germany was thus the central concern of the editors, but since any information was valuable and useful, articles about America were also included. In the first issue began a series entitled "Erdkundliches über Nordamerika," which consisted entirely of factual information on the geography and geology of the continent (Z, 16 July 1944, pp. 9-10); subsequent issues reported on climate and population (Z, 23 July 1944, pp. 23-24; F, 11 August 1944, pp. 3-4). In the section on the people of the United States the author departs from his usual listing of data to make what sounds at first like a plea for tolerance. He says that America's great expanses allow various peoples a better chance to develop if they are willing to work; he calls America a *Raumvolk*, in contrast to the European *Zeitvolk*, characterized by old and highly developed mono-racial cultures. His use of Nazi vocabulary and his attempt to emphasize the differences between the two countries indicate his belief that what is true of the United States cannot be applied to Germany. Another important informational article, and the only one dealing with politics, was "Präsidentenwahl in den USA," which described the American electoral process and analyzed the populace and the issues. The perceptions are astute, but the author refrains from any opinions about the American form of government (F, 15 October 1944, p. 4).

On occasion, opinions were more clearly expressed, as for example in two articles on American film. In one article the author complains about the mediocre selections supplied to the camp and warns that the

films have neither worthwhile content nor moral value. "Wir kennen diese boys, die mit langen Haaren herumlaufen, Kaugummi kauend . . . [die] mit Vorliebe die Füße auf den Tisch flegeln und zu allen möglichen und unmöglichen Gelegenheiten o.k. sagen. Es sind nicht unsere Freunde." The author hopes that the American film industry can provide something better, but remains skeptical (S, 22 Oct. 1944, p. 2). The same author goes into more detail on a narrower aspect in his *sexualproblematisch-entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung* of the contemporary American film (F, 17 December 1944, pp. 4-6). Here he criticizes the dominance of sex in films through the early thirties, but he also finds fault with the unbelievable, pure woman who had replaced the earlier "bad girl." Another article, though basically factual in content, which seems designed to help the reader interpret American messages filtering into the camp is on American advertising. The author comments on its pervasiveness, analyzes its method, and points out that one can learn much about the people and the economy from carefully observing its use (F, 4 February 1945, p. 3). In general, *Der Zaungast* took a rather neutral tone toward the United States, and most criticism consisted of reminding readers that America was different from Germany and warning them not to view it uncritically. Information about America decreased as the war drew to a close; perhaps the founding of *Der Ruf* in March 1945 supplanted the need for this type of article.

In 1944 members of the War Department recognized the importance of having reliable people to work in responsible positions in postwar Germany; they therefore made plans for a special school camp to re-educate a select group of prisoners. In addition, these prisoners were to publish a newspaper called *Der Ruf*, which would have a similar function and which would be distributed in all camps throughout the United States. The editorial staff of *Der Ruf*, whose first issue appeared on 1 March 1945 at Ft. Kearney, R.I., were all antifascists, though they represented a wide range of political views from conservative Catholicism to orthodox Communism. They were given a relatively free hand, but the Americans always had the last word. Readers were supposed to have the impression, however, that the newspaper had been undertaken by Germans on their own initiative; to gain acceptance and to abide by the Geneva Convention the paper refrained from taking strong political stands until after the capitulation on 8 May 1945.⁸ Its editors were loyal to their nation, but not to its current government. *Der Ruf* always stressed its Germanness, but it took pains to separate "German" from "Nazi." An insignia on one of the pages portrayed the German eagle, but it stood on a book instead of a swastika. Nonetheless the editors frequently continued to use the style of speaking characteristic of Hitler's *Wehrmacht*, either because it was so ingrained or because they felt it lent credibility to their undertaking: "Wir wollen euch helfen, den oft wiederholten Weisungen des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht nachzukommen, die wir zusammenfassen in der Mahnung: Erhaltet euch frisch, gesund und geistig rege, denn die Heimat braucht euch noch . . . Zeigt, daß ihr alle da seid. Antwortet mit dem kurzen bündigen 'Hier' des Soldaten."⁹ As might be expected, the first issue of

Der Ruf encountered a variety of reactions: Some readers welcomed the newspaper, many liberals were disappointed that it failed to take a stronger position, and the ardent Nazis dismissed it as a *Kommunisten- und Judenblatt*. Most prisoners read it, however, without expressing an opinion.¹⁰ In their style of language and in their belief that prisoners needed preparation for the task of rebuilding Germany, the editors of *Der Ruf* resembled those of *Der Zaungast*. A major difference began to emerge in the issues following the defeat, for the editors of *Der Ruf* strongly believed that, in addition to factories and cities, political attitudes needed to be reconstructed. Their main task was to educate the prisoners about the failure of the Weimar Republic, the crimes of the Third Reich, and the political and social rebuilding that lay ahead.¹¹

The United States played an important role in this last function by serving as a model of democracy, compromise, and tolerance. This attitude was not merely a result of the paper's founding; most of the staff was democratic and had a generally positive view of the country. Andersch's view of the camp as a golden cage resulted not just from the clean beds and warm showers but from the attitude taken by the teachers at Ft. Kearney: They treated the Germans as equal partners rather than as prisoners, and instruction took the form of give-and-take seminars, rather than indoctrinating lectures.¹² Thus much more factual information was included in *Der Ruf* than in *Der Zaungast*; one entire page in each eight-page issue was devoted to such aspects of the United States as cities, famous Americans from Andrew Jackson to Bing Crosby, politics, and popular culture. But there was much more opinion and commentary as well. An article on the American constitution differed from the *Zaungast's* report on American politics in its inclusion of interpretations and evaluations: "Das Ergebnis war ein Kompromiß, doch ohne seine Nachteile. Gerade im Geiste der Nachgiebigkeit und des Abwägens lag seine Lebenskraft" (*R*, 1 June 1945, p. 7). This spirit of compromise and the civil liberties guaranteed in the Bill of Rights were important lessons for a country emerging from totalitarian dictatorship. A review of Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy* acknowledges the racial injustice which exists in America but stresses the freedom of expression which permitted this critical work to attain a spot on the bestseller lists (*R*, 15 July 1945, p. 4). Almost all of the opinions expressed about the United States are positive and are summed up in a special photographic supplement appended to the final number on 1 April 1946. A paragraph entitled "Abschied von Amerika" expresses appreciation for the fair treatment given to prisoners and lists the positive experiences gained in the camps, such as becoming acquainted with books banned in Germany, becoming aware of the faults of the Hitler government, and learning the English language. It concludes with idealistic sentiments linking the country where the prisoners had spent so many months with the homeland to which they were returning.¹³

To come to a fuller understanding of the two journals' concept of the relationship between America and Germany, one must also take a look at the pictures of Germany which they provide. Since the chief purpose of *Der Zaungast* was to keep an image of the homeland in the minds of

the prisoners, one of the most frequent types of contributions consisted of essays or poems about various regions of Germany. Most of these gave a romanticized, travelogue-like description of landscapes, but the importance of native soil in Nazi ideology is reflected in occasional sentences within the passages. The relation between place and political duty can be clearly seen in "Erinnerungen an die Heimat," where Wilhelm Muench conjures up images of Frankfurt am Main and its historical past after having seen a performance of *Wallensteins Lager* on the camp stage. He emphasizes the importance of his homeland in the last sentence: "Unsere letzten Gedanken und Worte gelten der Heimat; die Erinnerungen und die Pläne—sie kommen von Deutschland und sind für Deutschland" (S, 8 Oct. 1944, pp. 1-2).

Instead of romanticized recollections, a series of essays on historical subjects attempted to educate by interpreting information about Germany's past in a manner consistent with the ideology of the Third Reich. The introductory essay on "Kulturgeschichtliche Betrachtungen" points out that history and *Volk* can only be understood in terms of their relationship to one another: "Nur im Brunnquell der Herkunft kannst du in ihm, kann dein Volk in dir auf Erden beheimatet sein" (Z, 16 July 1944, pp. 6-7). The series, which continued in subsequent issues, stressed the Germanic tribes and their legends. Although the *Zaungast* avoided the excesses of Nazi propaganda, as well as any mention of the word National Socialism, the examples clearly indicate an underlying *Blut und Boden* outlook which was taken for granted, especially in the early issues.

A third portrayal of the homeland, which also conforms with the view of the Third Reich, is conveyed by the selection of authors whose works were included in the *Zaungast*. Except for a few writers from previous centuries such as Nietzsche, Eichendorff, and Walther von der Vogelweide, most were immediate contemporaries who had remained in Germany. Though not all were Nazis, and though most of the works were on neutral topics, the authors in question were on the approved list. Hans Carossa and Georg Britting were merely tolerated by the authorities, but Agnes Miegel, Börries von Münchhausen, Will Vesper, and Wilhelm Schäfer had been brought into the *Preußische Dichterakademie* to replace more prominent authors who had gone into exile.

As in its portrayal of America, *Der Ruf* differed significantly from *Der Zaungast* in its portrayal of Germany. Although the sentimental tone of some of the *Heimat*-reminiscences resembled that of similar articles in *Der Zaungast*, the *Blut und Boden* sense of mystical interrelationship between race and soil was lacking. In its place was an emphasis on survival and rebuilding, as might be expected in pieces written shortly before or just after the end of the war.¹⁴ *Der Ruf* also carried informational articles about Germany, but rather than recounting the distant Germanic past, it tried to reveal what had recently been suppressed or misinterpreted. One column, called "Das andere Deutschland," reported examples of resistance to the Hitler regime (cf. R, 1 July 1945, p. 5, or R, 1 August 1945, p. 5). The title and the articles themselves supported the *Ruf's* position that Germany and Nazism were not

synonymous. *Der Ruf* was also willing to print revelations of the crimes of the Third Reich: On 15 May 1945 it showed a picture of the citizens of Weimar viewing corpses at Buchenwald (p. 3). In addition to providing the most recent information from Germany, it attempted to help avoid a repetition of fascism by carefully tracing its origins and taking a strong position against it.¹⁵ Instead of abiding by the accepted ideological thinking, as did the *Zaungast*, *Der Ruf* attempted to reeducate by showing the errors of that ideology.

The differences between the two papers are also apparent in the authors selected for the feuilleton section. *Der Ruf* included works by or about contemporary writers such as Hermann Hesse, who had left Germany in the First World War, Ernst Wiechert and Albrecht Haushofer,¹⁶ who had been imprisoned by the Nazis, and Thomas Mann, Franz Werfel, Oskar Maria Graf, Carl Zuckmayer, Bertolt Brecht, and others who had gone into exile after 1933. The works selected or qualities praised generally underscored the editors' intention to open the eyes of their readers: Graf's "Angst" and Brecht's "Mahnwort" from *Furcht und Elend des dritten Reiches* illustrate the effects of the dictatorship in everyday life (R, 1 March 1946, p. 6). Excerpts from Thomas Mann's famous speech on "Deutschland und die Deutschen" point out how the best in German culture was turned into evil.¹⁷

In addition to the differences in the content of the two papers, there was also a major difference in the manner in which information and ideas were presented: In *Der Ruf* controversial matters were discussed from more than one perspective in an attempt to come to a clearer understanding. Sources were always plainly indicated, and the inclusion of contributions by a diverse group of prisoners, Americans, and exiled Germans tended to open rather than close discussion. The last page of each issue, headed "Lagerstimmen," was devoted to letters from prisoners around the country and to excerpts from other POW newspapers. One issue quoted criticisms from Camp Opelika's newspaper, *Querschnitt*, which accused *Der Ruf* of ignoring "the best in Germany's cultural heritage" and "the German soul" and of attempting to disturb the peace of the camps with its political debates. *Der Ruf* responded: "Denn, wo eine echte Freiheit des Geistes herrscht, da ist zugleich die Vernunft zu Hause. . . . Gerade als Soldaten haben wir die Verpflichtung, uns ein klares und nüchternes Bild von der Wirklichkeit zu machen. Nur indem wir die Dinge sehen, wie sie tatsächlich sind, werden wir dereinst bei unserer Rückkehr die besten Helfer der Heimat in ihrer Not sein" (R, 15 June 1945, p. 8). Another issue contained an open letter from General von Arnim, the highest ranking German POW, who stated that neither he nor any other captured officer had any knowledge of the concentration camps and that it was wrong to try to assign responsibility for such deeds to the army (R, 1 August 1945, p. 1). The editors reply in the same issue that the existence of concentration camps had been known since 1933, and even though the officers may not have had any direct involvement, they were at least guilty of silence and passivity; in addition, the editors accuse von Arnim of continuing to fail to draw any political conclusions from the lessons (R, 1 August 1945,

p. 3). Not only the message of the reply, but also the open disagreement with a general was significant.

Ironically, it was the guilt issue that brought the editors of *Der Ruf* into conflict with the American authorities during its last phase. Hans Werner Richter, who was strongly anti-Nazi, continued to make a clear distinction between "Nazi" and "German" and therefore rejected the idea of collective guilt for the whole German people. An article to that effect was censored by the Americans, who also grew less patient with other views that differed from the plans of the U.S. military government in Germany.¹⁸ Richter, for example, supported the combination of democracy with socialism, an undivided Germany, and a completely free press in the zones of occupation.¹⁹ Censorship by the Americans showed that the spirit of freedom which the prisoners were supposed to be acquiring was not always allowed to flourish; matters were somewhat more complex than what was conveyed by the idealistic praise of the United States in the final issue. Conflicts continued even after the prisoners had returned home: Richter, Andersch, and others published a German edition of *Der Ruf* from August 1946 until April 1947, when the Americans censored it, ostensibly on grounds of nihilism. It was after this that Richter started the literary circle that came to be known as Group 47.²⁰

In both *Der Zaungast* and *Der Ruf* didactic intentions gave an important role to portrayals of Germany and of America, though differences in the goals of that didacticism caused the resulting pictures to take quite different forms. The young prisoners of Camp Aliceville, attempting to keep alive the image of the homeland that the regime had effectively instilled in them throughout the previous twelve years, did little more than confirm existing views. Although the paper rarely "preaches," a common outlook is assumed; the pictures presented are static and conservative. The editors can thus offer views of America that are, in general, fairly neutral and can avoid blatant propaganda, for they know that certain code words such as *Volk* and *Heimat* will be understood in a certain way and help maintain an outlook acceptable to the home government. Even after a new editor brought a more neutral tone to the paper on 25 February 1945 there was no attempt made to analyze or reeducate. *Der Ruf*, on the other hand, believed that its purpose was "to encourage political discussion in the camps and to put the struggle against Nazism into motion" (R, 1 April 1946, p. 8); it therefore tried to expand and alter the view of its readers by means of information, analysis, and diversity of points of view. Its method was thus perhaps more significant than its content in getting its point across. It too used words like *Volk* and *Heimat*, but attempted to encourage its readers to think about them in a new way. In the editors' opinion the paper was supposed to encourage independent thinking and critical spirit, not to serve as a voice of America. Although the political configuration of postwar Europe was predominant in determining West Germany's close relationship to the United States, the treatment received by hundreds of thousands of German prisoners and their acquaintance with the twenty-six issues of *Der Ruf* no doubt aided the process. And even though all

the political ideals desired by Richter and other co-workers of the German *Ruf* failed to come to fruition, it is likely that the journal's existence helped stimulate the development of political thought in postwar Germany.

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Notes

¹ Volker Christian Wehdeking, *Der Nullpunkt: Über die Konstituierung der deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur (1945-1948) in den amerikanischen Kriegsgefangenenlagern* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1971), p. 3.

² Wehdeking, pp. 3-4.

³ John Brown Mason, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *The American Journal of International Law*, 39 (1945), 203.

⁴ Jerome Vaillant, *Der Ruf. Unabhängige Blätter der jungen Generation (1945-49)* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1978), p. 4.

⁵ Vaillant, p. 4.

⁶ Karl J. R. Arndt and May E. Olson, *The German Language Press of the Americas 1732-1968. History and Bibliography* (Pullach: Verlag Dokumentation, 1973), II, 305. This work evaluates around eighty camp newspapers.

⁷ Dr. Pies, "Zum Geleit," in *Der Zaungast*, 16 July 1944, p. 1. Subsequent references to *Der Zaungast*, or to the *Fortbildungsblatt* or *Sprachrohr der Lagerführung* which accompanied it, will be indicated in the text by the initials Z, F, or S, respectively, together with the date and page number.

⁸ Vaillant, pp. 3-7.

⁹ *Der Ruf*, 1 March 1945, p. 1. Quoted in Vaillant, p. 19. Subsequent references to *Der Ruf* will be indicated in the text with the initial R, the date, and the page number.

¹⁰ Vaillant, pp. 23-24.

¹¹ Vaillant, pp. 26-29.

¹² See Wehdeking, pp. 20-28.

¹³ "Wir nehmen Abschied von dem Kontinent, der als die 'Neue Welt' gilt, und sind bereit, auch in unserer Heimat eine neue Welt zu schaffen, eine Welt des Verständnisses, der Gerechtigkeit und des Friedens" (*R*, 1 April 1946, p. 1).

¹⁴ Examples include *R*, 1 April 1945, p. 2 and *R*, 1 July 1945, p. 4.

¹⁵ Examples include *R*, 1 June 1945, p. 4; *R*, 1 July 1945, p. 3; and *R*, 1 August 1945, p. 3.

¹⁶ Haushofer was executed in Berlin-Moabit on 23 April 1945 (ed.).

¹⁷ The author adds, "Nichts ist so fruchtbar für die Entwicklung der Grundlagen zu freiheitlichem Denken als die Beschäftigung mit Thomas Mann" (*R*, 15 July 1945, p. 2).

¹⁸ Wehdeking, p. 19.

¹⁹ Vaillant, p. 41.

²⁰ See Richter's account of his association with *Der Ruf* in "Wie entstand und was war die Gruppe 47?" in Hans Werner Richter, *Hans Werner Richter und die Gruppe 47* (Munich: Nymphenburger, 1979), pp. 41-176.