

OD SOVRAŽNIKA DO PRIJATELJA? VETERANI KOT GONILNA SILA MEDNARODNE SPRAVE PO DRUGI SVETOVNI VOJNI

FROM FOE TO FRIEND? VETERANS AS A DRIVING FORCE OF INTERNATIONAL RECONCILIATION AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Povzetek V 50. letih 20. stoletja so veterani druge svetovne vojne postali pionirji mednarodne sprave. V članku so z osredotočanjem na nemške in francoske vojake analizirane okoliščine, pojavitve in funkcije tega procesa v kontekstu zunanje in notranje politike Zahodne Nemčije. Postavljena je teza, da so organizirani vojni veterani sprejeli vzorce razlage in argumentiranja povojne družbe v Zahodni Nemčiji ter jih prilagodili svojemu konceptu zgodovine, da bi pridobili zgodovinsko samozavest. Predvsem pa so svoje mednarodno delovanje predstavljali kot evropsko pobudo o dogovoru. V nasprotju z 20. in 30. leti prejšnjega stoletja so bila prizadevanja nemških vojaških veteranov v 50. letih 20. stoletja skladna z vladno politiko. Na temelju pluralističnega kulturno-zgodovinskega ozadja so veterani vzpostavili stike na lokalni, območni in regionalni ravni v procesu, ki ga lahko poimenujemo sprava.

Ključne besede *Veterani, sprava, 50. leta 20. stoletja, Nemčija, Francija.*

Abstract In the 1950s, World War II veterans became pioneers of international reconciliation. Focusing on former German and French soldiers, this article analyses the conditions, manifestations, and functions of this process within the context of West Germany's foreign and domestic policies. The thesis is that organised war veterans accepted the patterns of interpretation and argumentation of post-war West German society, and adapted them to their concept of history for the purpose of gaining historical self-assurance. Most of all, they presented their international activity as a European initiative for a better understanding between nations. In contrast to the 1920s and 1930s, the efforts of German war veterans in the 1950s were in accordance with the policy of the government. Against the backdrop of a pluralistic cultural-historical background, the veterans established contacts at the local, district and regional levels in a process that can be called reconciliation.

Key words *Veterans, reconciliation, 1950s, Germany, France.*

Introduction War veterans of Hitler's *Wehrmacht*, as pioneers for reconciliation after 1945? The idea that the very men who had just fought an ideological war, and subjected large parts of Europe to an exploitative occupation as members of the National Socialists' (NS) armed forces, might have become pioneers for peace and democracy in Europe is surprising. After all, the veterans of World War I had turned out to be revanchist warmongers. Nevertheless, it is one of the paradoxes of the second post-war period that former combatants assumed an important role in the process of international reconciliation in the early 1950s; my argument is that they did not put the recent war to the back of their minds, but rather adjusted what they had experienced during the war to the constellation of the post-war period at home and abroad by ascribing to it a specific meaning and making it "suitable for reconciliation" (Schwelling, 2012).¹

As far as Germany is concerned, I will focus on the fields of activity, forms of action, mental dispositions, patterns of interpretation and argumentation, and symbolic practice in the specific historical context which enabled "reconciliation" (Wienand, 2013) to take root. The fact that the source material is fragmentary and important sources are difficult or indeed impossible to access² may explain why thorough work on the international and transnational dimension of the European history of war veterans has not yet been undertaken. However, there are some empirical studies, especially on the history of Franco-German relations (Roessner, 2010), on which the following reflections are based; they are also based on my own work (Echternkamp, 2014) and on source analyses, in particular publications of associations, media reports, and memoirs.

We will begin with the way in which the view of history and the self-image of West German war veterans were a precondition for reconciliation (Part 1), then go on to the organisation and initial official contacts (Part 2), and finally discuss the various associated fields of activities and forms of action (Part 3). At the end I will summarise my reflections, which extend the view into the period after World War I and are intended not least as suggestions for further research.

¹ This article is based on my chapter "Veteranen als zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure der Versöhnung? Dispositionen, Handlungsfelder und Aktionsformen transnationaler Verständigung ehemaliger Kriegsteilnehmer in der frühen Bundesrepublik, in: Corine DeFrance und Ulrich Pfeil (eds.), 2016. *Verständigung und Versöhnung nach dem „Zivilisationsbruch“? Deutschland in Europa nach 1945 (= L'Allemagne dans les relations internationales / Deutschland in den internationalen Beziehungen, vol./Bd. 9)*, Brussels: P.I.E. Peter Lang, pp. 443-463.

² Until further notice, stock B 433 (VdH) at the Bundesarchiv, Abt. Militärarchiv, Freiburg i.Br., is not available for use for conservatory reasons (Information BArch-MA, Abt. MA 1, dated 19 Feb 2015).

1 VIEWS OF HISTORY AND SELF-IMAGES AS FACTORS PROMOTING RECONCILIATION

Following a short phase of criticism during the immediate post-war period, against the backdrop of the Nuremberg Trials in 1945-46, the image of the Wehrmacht that rapidly spread was one in which its officers were presented as victims of a misused army and as soldiers who had nothing to do with the crimes committed by the SS. The myth of a "clean Wehrmacht" was henceforth the interpretative context in which former soldiers presented themselves as lovers of peace and staunch Europeans.

This corresponded with an ahistorical representation which ignored the specific character of the national socialist war – the fusion of warfare and genocide – and instead used characterisations which signified a general validity. Against this backdrop, the home comers returning from imprisonment were able to develop a self-image which allowed them to see themselves on the one hand as "victims", and, on the other, to a certain extent also as experts, with a very special insight into the conditions and consequences of war and violence because of their experience of suffering. They regarded their experience of imprisonment as vital, not only for the societal integration of a German republic, but also for European unity in peace and freedom (Echternkamp, 2014; Schwelling, 2012). "Comradeship" and "honour": these often quoted key categories of a soldier's self-description could also be applied beyond their nationalistic elevation and used for other soldiers, like a set of professional ethics that took no heed of borders.

The captivity of prisoners of war was an additional and crucial chapter in their experience of war. This was particularly emphasised by the German War Graves Commission (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*, VdH), which represented approximately 520,000 members in 1950 (*Der Heimkehrer*, 6 (3 Sep 1955) 9, p. 4.). The home comers regularly considered the facts of having been taken prisoner by the enemy and spending years in custody, particularly in the Gulags, both as the real acid test and as a time of reformation. The VdH spoke again and again of a community of people who shared the same experience or fate and who also included the civilian population (*Der Heimkehrer*, 6 (3 Sep 1955) 9, p. 1). By contrast, reports of those who had "harassed" fellow soldiers, or of deserters or defectors on the eastern front, served as negative foils against which the idealising image shone even brighter.

The use of this historical self-image of former Wehrmacht soldiers as a factor for inducing international reconciliation becomes more understandable when account is taken of the philosophical horizon of the 1950s and the threat perception in the conflict of systems. The Christian-Occidental worldview emanating from the interwar period was popular again for the last time during the 1950s as the Cold War ideology. The confinement of prisoners of war was seen in this context as the experience of a "mass society" incriminated by cultural pessimism. Consistent with their self-image, war veterans believed that their "becoming an indiscriminate mass" during the absence of freedom turned them into champions of the concept of the

individual in freedom. In political terms, their idea was that only a united Europe could ward off the danger threatening the Occident from the East. Based on the Occident ideology, their interpretation of imprisonment inspired their enthusiasm for Europe, irrespective of the fact that different concepts of political order existed, thus creating a hotbed for international reconciliation with fellow soldiers from Western Europe. Traditional anti-communist attitudes did the rest.

2 FIELDS OF ACTIVITY, ACTORS AND SYMBOLIC PRACTICE

While the efforts to promote international understanding were only part of the veteran associations' work, their focus was on the search for missing soldiers, on assisting home comers and their relatives by providing medical care, accommodation and legal counselling, on political lobbying, and on the remembrance of soldiers killed in action. Nevertheless, international contacts were established as soon as a veterans' culture evolved in the new West Germany. This also went for the neighbouring French (Cochet, 1997; Roessner, 2010; Wienand, 2017). Even among former soldiers, Franco-German relations were a driving force in the reconciliation process. A comparison between France and Germany recalls the different structural conditions in the two countries. For example, imprisonment only really began in 1945 for many German soldiers, while for the French it ended that year. The demilitarisation policy implemented in the country of those who had lost the war delayed the veterans organising themselves and founding associations throughout the country until late into the 1950s, while in other countries, these associations formed shortly after their liberation, such as the *Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre* (FNCPG) in France in November 1944. From the start, the Fédération's aim was to establish contact with equivalent organisations in other countries. There were soon international affiliations. In September 1949, a joint French, Belgian and Dutch initiative resulted in the founding of the *Confédération Internationale des Anciens Prisonniers de Guerre* (CIAPG); in 1950, the "International Federation of War Veterans Organization" (later: World Veterans Federation, WVF) was established in Paris. The first German war veterans association to join was the *Verband der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegshinterbliebenen und Sozialrentner Deutschlands* (VdK) (Schröder, Munimus, Rüdte, 2010; Donner 1960), which did so in 1953; the *Reichsbund* followed some time later (Die Zeit, 4 Sep 1958)³.

Achieving understanding with former Wehrmacht soldiers was at best a subordinate aim. Formal contacts initially developed between the eminent officials who represented their associations at events organised by third parties. The German reunions known as the *Heimkehrer-Deutschlandtreffen* (HKD) are an example of this. Delegations from Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands attended the 3rd HKD in Cologne, and reunions took place biannually until 1975. The only communist state to send delegates to Cologne was Yugoslavia, which had a special role in the eyes of the West since Josip Broz Tito's breakaway from the Soviet

³ In 1960, the German section of the WVF was founded.

Union. This HKD was the first to be attended by representatives from American organisations, such as the committee of American Veterans (AMVETS), the association of World War II veterans (DH 10 (10 May 1959) 9, p. 1)⁴. The 3rd HKD was devoted to veterans' international networking activities. Beside the VdH flag, the flag of the World Veterans Federation (WVF) flew outside the Cologne exhibition centre. For the VdH, this was proof that it belonged to a multinational community of interests based on a transnational concept of comradeship. The "*Der Heimkehrer*" saw the WVF's symbol as a sign that "the strong comradeship between those coming home from war and imprisonment knows neither continental nor national boundaries when it comes to showing commitment to living in a free and peaceful world" (*Der Heimkehrer* (25 May 1959) 10, p. 1; (Wienand, 2017)). European unification and international reconciliation merged into one objective. The attraction of the peace and freedom formula at home was its diachronic and synchronic ambivalence. It not only aimed to achieve disassociation from World War II and the national socialist dictatorship, but also the abolition of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) dictatorship in East Germany and the reunification of the two German states.

A special relationship existed between German and Austrian war veterans, as over 1.3 million Austrians had served in the Wehrmacht (Grischany, 2015). There were therefore close contacts with the *Österreichische Kameradschaftsbund* (OKB). Association representatives at both national and regional levels did the honours (*Der Heimkehrer* 10 (25 May 1959) 10, p. 1). The chairperson of the Bavarian association represented the West German home comers on behalf of the VdH when the Austrian war veterans association *Heimkehrerverband Österreich* (HVO), established in 1957, inaugurated the home comers' memorial site at the Ulrichsberg, a mountain near Klagenfurt in Carinthia. The memorial carried a Christian message of reconciliation: a 20m high cross in memory of the soldiers killed in World War II. The memorial located in the tri-border area stands not only for the love for one's country, but also for "all the dead soldiers beyond national differences" and urges people to work for "international understanding and peace in a free and united Europe" (*Der Heimkehrer* 10 (25 May 1959) 10, p. 1).

Finally, international war veterans' associations also offered ideal opportunities for former Wehrmacht soldiers to establish and consolidate international and bi-national contacts. The CIAPG, the International Confederation of Former Prisoners of War, is a good example of this. A working congress of the confederation in Paris from 1 to 3 September 1955 was attended by 150 German delegates as representatives of over two million front veterans (*Der Heimkehrer* 6 (8 Sep 1955) 9, p. 1). The VdH already had representation in Paris. Besides the national executive committee and the ten state chairpersons, the delegates included members of the advisory boards which had been established to deal with prisoner-of-war matters and political and medical issues. The congress even voted for a German, August Fischer, the first VdH

⁴ *AMVETS* was founded in late 1944 in Kansas City, Missouri, and on 23 Jul 1947 recognised by Congress as a World War II veterans association.

national chairperson, to be installed as its vice president. The major international event also attracted the interest of the people of Paris. The mayor of the city extended an invitation to a reception at the city hall, in the course of which Fischer was given the opportunity to sign the city's Golden Book.

3 FORMS OF RECONCILIATORY ACTION

The mechanisms of rapprochement, the social practice and cultural design of "reconciliation", and not least its political character, stood out very clearly at the local and regional levels of German war veterans associations. International contacts were also established and maintained at these levels.

One example highlighting the attendance of German war veterans at one major event of the equivalent French organisation was the national congress of the French war veterans' association in Metz in early September 1959. Representatives of the VdH district association from Merzig/Wadern, in the west of the state of Saarland, travelled to Metz. There, they entered into a partnership with the *Association des Prisonniers de Guerre du Département des Ardennes in Charleville*. The twin towns of Merzig (Saar) and Charleville were tasked to "coordinate" the partnership at the local and Département levels within the framework of their twinning agreement. As in similar instances, institutionalised contacts centred on memories of the wars. The German VdH was convinced that this was the way to prevent "people from either side ever having to face each other with a weapon in their hands". Against the background of developments in the security situation –having rearmed, the Federal Republic acceded to NATO in 1955 after the project of a European defence community had failed in 1954 – "*Der Heimkehrer*" had the hope that the Germans and the French would rather "support freedom together" (Gardner Feldman, 2012; 18 (25 Sep 1959) 13, p. 3).

In Metz, the chairperson of the Saar regional association, Helmuth Hinsicker, declared himself in favour of building "understanding" with the former enemy and "mutual trust". In his speech, he referred to the outbreak of the war 20 years earlier and reminded the audience of the human and material losses. Hinsicker omitted disturbing questions concerning responsibility and guilt when he emphasised that those present "had confronted each other as soldiers, hence, as enemies, through no fault or volition of their own [...]" – as if millions of men had nothing to do with the political system under which they had served. This remark reflected the myth according to which the Germans saw themselves as victims. Hinsicker looked ahead when he called upon those present to "live" what they had "experienced" in war: through friendship and cooperation, for example, in the form of exchange programmes for children (*Der Heimkehrer* 18 (25 Sep 1959) 13, p. 1)⁵. Thus, personal contacts between the

⁵ During the 1950s, the reception of "holiday children" was a well-known programme furthered by the VdH, which at the same time enlivened contacts between West Germany and Berlin. War veterans enabled children from the "afflicted four-sector city" to spend their holidays with the families of home comers, especially by the North and Baltic Seas. Cf. *Berliner Ferienkinder in sonniger Sommerfrische*, in: *Der Heimkehrer* 18 (25 Sep 1959) 13, p. 3.

families of war veterans and also "exchange partnerships" (Der Heimkehrer 18 (25 Sep 1959) 13, p. 5) developed into a driving force for reconciliation.⁶

This practice not only applied to German-Franco relations. To develop contact with the Dutch prisoners of war association, the VdHENnepe/Ruhr district association organised a bilateral "holiday initiative". The Dutch-German "exchange of children" programme in June 1959 helped place the children of war veterans from one country with families in the other (Der Heimkehrer 10 (25 May 1959) 10, p. 8). In late 1959, the VdH general manager concluded that within one such "regular exchange programme", 7,000 members had travelled to another European country, while 1,000 war veterans from abroad accompanied by their spouses had paid a return visit to West Germany (Der Heimkehrer 18 (25 Sep 1959) 13, p. 6). Traditional associations also ran similar exchange programmes, with German youth groups including children of former members of the 16th Infantry Division, for example, visiting France. The "Greyhound Division", as this major Wehrmacht unit was later called, participated in the Western Campaign in 1940⁷.

The binational exchange programme for former soldiers was closely connected with another evolving reconciliation model: partnerships between towns and cities (Defrance/Hermann, 2016)⁸. The dynamics worked in both directions. War veterans' contacts were used to promote partnership programmes, while the latter brought veterans into contact with each other.

By contrast, more controversy existed in the field of civic education, which was another means used to achieve understanding and reconciliation. Since the late 1950s, the local, regional and district level war veterans' associations had been organising international seminars, "women's discussion weeks" and youth congresses at which people from different nations met.

International solidarity initiatives can also be seen as a means for achieving reconciliation among war veterans. The "Europa-Hilfe" aid programme was one example of such a tool for providing material help. As early as 1958, VdH members donated DM 22,000 to assist their fellow veterans from Holland when the Netherlands had to take in nationals expelled from the Dutch East Indies, among them 10,000 former prisoners of war. After all, they had each experienced the feeling of their countries "being overcrowded" with displaced people and refugees – this analogy

⁶ To cite another example: When the chairperson of the local VdH association of Bochum-Wiemelhausen in North-Rhine Westphalia, Heinrich Schöppner, had a visit from the chairperson of the CIAPG of the 14th Arrondissement in Paris, Jean Taganti, they agreed to promote partnerships between former French and German prisoners of war. War veterans would regularly meet, accompanied by their spouses, and enable their children to spend their holidays in the respective neighbour country. Taganti who, by his own account, initially had to overcome doubts, asked for the addresses of neighbouring local VdH branches upon his return to Paris so that he could help build more partnerships. The sides agreed that the days of the "alleged hereditary German-Franco enmity" were over (ibid).

⁷ See the reports in "Der Windhund", here, specifically British soldiers visiting the "Greyhounds".

⁸ Cf. the list of current and planned partnerships in: Der Heimkehrer 10 (10 Sep 1959) 17, p. 2.

was drawn by VdH general manager Werner Kießling (*Der Heimkehrer* 18 (25 Sep 1959) 13, p. 6). And when the Austrian alpine foreland was hit by thunderstorms in the summer of 1959, a number of VdH local branches sent financial donations to affected members of the HVO under the "Europa-Spende" programme. The VdH interpreted the solidarity between German and Austrian soldiers not only as a sign of comradeship, but also as an expression of a "European sense of community"⁹. The contact was linked to the European idea and acquired an ideal value, even an excess of utopia.

Another reason for criticising other countries was the state of German war graves on former battlefields. In their publications, associations made every effort to promote "war grave trips" to Western and South-Eastern European countries, and later also to North Africa (*Der Heimkehrer* (8 Sep 1955) 9, p. 7)¹⁰. Again and again, the associations' publications deplored the poor state of war graves on former battlefields. One thorn in their side was the difference between the graves of soldiers of different nationalities. They concluded that equality in death meant equal status in the design of graves. "Soldiers are equal in death, but their graves are not" was a complaint made by "*Der Heimkehrer*" with regard to a cemetery in France where American, British, French and German soldiers were buried alongside one another.

International networking by association officials, international family and youth exchanges, educational activities with participants and lecturers from home and abroad, donation campaigns for foreign war veterans, municipality-level partnerships and trips to war graves in Western and Southern Europe: the various fields of activity and forms of action reflected the international dimension organised war veterans had achieved in West Germany. This variety showed that they were civil actors involved in a reconciliation process in which concern was shown both to foreign and domestic policy issues, in spite of the use of a rhetoric that was occasionally apolitical.

Conclusion Did Wehrmacht veterans after 1945 become pioneers of reconciliation which upended previous enemy perceptions? This was the initial question. Let me sum up the results in three points.

Firstly, the organised war veterans accepted the patterns of interpretation and argumentation of post-war West German society and adapted them to their concept of history for the purpose of gaining historical self-assurance. Here, historical awareness was equivalent to European awareness, and international activity was presented as a European initiative for understanding.

Secondly, the reconciliation efforts were helped by the domestic and foreign policy parameters and the mental disposition of the war veterans. As in the second half of the 1920s, the policy of rapprochement pursued by the then French and German

⁹ Cf. the list in *Der Heimkehrer* 10 (10 Sep 1959) 17, p. 4.

¹⁰ For details on a trip to Greece, see *DH* 8 (25 Feb 1957) 2, p. 6.

Foreign Ministers, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann, was regarded by many as the driving force behind international reconciliation efforts and as a prerequisite for peace in Europe. While the process of reconciliation was stalled in 1933, however, when Germany left the League of Nations after the "seizure of power" by the Nazis and began its rearmament, the efforts of German war veterans in the 1950s were completely in line with the policy of the Adenauer government. In addition, the democratisation and pluralisation of West German society broadened the scope of action markedly after the Allies lifted the ban on forming organisations.

Thirdly, this cultural-historical background yielded several fields of activity for associations and their members at the local, district and regional levels, after and alongside the establishment of contacts at the functionary level; in these fields of activity, they were able to build bi- and international contacts based on civil commitment and thus initiate and carry on a process whose social practice and cultural design can, in this instance, be called reconciliation.

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