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Author(s): Gabriele Rosenthal

Source: *Oral History*, Autumn, 1991, Vol. 19, No. 2, Remembering (Autumn, 1991), pp. 34-41

Published by: Oral History Society

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40179226

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# GERMAN WAR MEMORIES: NARRABILITY AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF REMEMBERING

GABRIELE ROSENTHAL

When German witnesses of World War II narrate their life history, stories about the war period account for a disproportionately large part of the total narration. Biographical narrative interviews — be they focused on the 'Third Reich' or on life history — produce long, epic and dramatic stories about war. The Second World War is still undoubtedly a private as well as a public theme which is frequently and easily expanded upon, with seemingly few problems of memory.

One explanation of this phenomenon is that important and widely experienced historical events, or phases which have had extreme and painful effects upon the everyday lives of people in a certain region or country, generate narration. Common experience and suffering leads — it is assumed — to the formation of groups in which common stories and myths are traditionalized. Where this process has occurred, as we will assume it did for World War II, then it is possible to externalize former suffering, to distance oneself from it and to cause the pain to recede into the background, possibly with the help of anecdotes.[1] Yet although the narration-generative effect of the collective suffering and experience of World War II has an empirical basis,[2] it is quite impossible to maintain this assumption in general. While it may be possible to argue that some sort of togetherness is created by narrators,[3] the converse assumption that togetherness produces narration applies only to specific structures of experience. In fact, two empirical examples show by contrast that painful events which are commonly experienced can become inexpressible.

For many people who were persecuted by the National Socialists, who were in hiding during WW II or were forced into ghettos, or who survived concentration and extermination camps, a great deal of effort is necessary for remembering and narration. Since their liberation, a few have spoken frequently of their experiences, but the vast majority have tried to forget. Among those who are beginning to speak now, and who are trying to remember the crimes committed against them, many have narration gaps and are almost completely unable to give themselves over to a stream of narration or to a re-living of experience. While the narration difficulties of these people are partly due to the traumatization they have undergone, another factor is revealed by analysis of the narrations of bystanders and perpetrators of national socialism: the partial speechlessness of the victims contrasts to the verbosity of the non-persecuted German, whose narrations serve, paradoxically, not to uncover the injustice of the national socialist system and their own involvement in it, but to cover it up with stories. Holocaust survivors, on the other hand, want to talk about their traumatic experiences as a reaction against tendencies to forget Nazi crimes, and against the thesis of the 'Auschwitz-Lie', but their experiences are so much more difficult to relate. For persecuted and non-persecuted Germans the possibilities of narration about the period of National Socialism depend upon different, and differently realisable, social functions of remembering.

My second example is that of veterans of World War I who say hardly anything about their experiences in the trenches. Common soldiers who had little part in the creation of the literature of the war are especially notable for speaking very little about their time at the front.[4] WW I in no way resembles WW II in the generation of narration. The presentation of the former in speech is confined to images, metaphors and limited reports about personal experiences.[5] The difference in the verbal presentation of the two wars is connected to differences in the conditions for experience of the wars, and above all to the contrast between a war of immobility and a war of mobility.

In this article I wish to discuss the thesis that the narrability of WW II — that is, the structural possibility of generating narrations about the war experience during the period of National Socialism, and the accompanying readiness to narrate — is conditional upon the structure of the war experience, the biographical necessity for narration, and its social function for the Germans. My argument is based on analyses of biographical narrations which were gained in various projects.[6] In one collective project, 'Biographical Working Through of War Experiences', my colleagues and I examined 21 non-persecuted witnesses of the Third Reich born in the years 1890-1930.[7] I will also consider another 15 interviews I conducted with men who had been soldiers in both wars. Twenty life stories from Israel, of European Jews whose lives were affected by the Holocaust, furnish the contrasting group. In all these interviews people were asked to tell their life stories in accordance with the method of the narrative interview. The aim of this interview method is to elicit and maintain a full narration by the interviewee, with the help of a set of non-interfering techniques applied by the trained interviewer. The method is based on the assumption that the narration of an experience comes closest to the experience itself.[8]

## THE STRUCTURE OF WAR EXPERIENCES

As I have already indicated, there were significant differences in our interviews between narrations about the First World War and those about the Second World War. The most extreme example of the non-narrability of the former period occurred in the narrations of a man who had described in detail his basic training and first days in the barracks. The minute he wanted to start telling me about the time in the trenches, he had a complete blackout and could recall nothing. All my questions were to no avail. He was only able to continue his narration when I asked him to talk about the end of the war.



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There are few such dramatic memory lapses in narrations about the war; the following quotation from an interview with Herr Heinrich, born in 1897, is more typical. With a few sentences he reaches his time at the western front in 1916:

> I was 18 years old, when I was called up. I entered the 40th Regiment in Baden. For half a year I trained there. After my training I was sent to the western front on New Year's Day in 1916, into the field. We had big attacks. That was in France, near Amiens. This I still remember, we had a big battle there and there I was wounded, here on my arm, can you see?

After this short report about the front there followed a detailed story about being wounded, his stay in the field hospital and his eventual return to service in his homeland.

The briefness of this war narration might be explained as due to the old age and poor memory of the interviewee, but that explanation can be rejected on several grounds. We found that limited narration about the time in the western front trenches was a general phenomenon in interviews. Our interviewees were quite able to relate stories from their childhood and adolescence, and were able to narrate more expansively about WW II, using the texttype of narration rather than the short report. In this regard there were no differences between the stories about WW II or WW I veterans, and those of younger soldiers. The terrible experiences in the trenches of the First World War still afflict the veterans in dreams, and this affliction was felt deeply by the interviewers. Recollection of wartime events reveals accompanying feelings: the fears, the pain and the sorrow emerge from the memory of the autobiographer and are often expressed in their tears. The following textual features are found in the self-presentations of WW I veterans: an orientation upon external dates, as well as places, army units and dates of conscription; an abundance of short reports or descriptions of laces; and evaluations of experience (such as 'one felt as if one was imprisoned') rather than narration of stories of interactions. War operations — the entire time spent in the trenches — are blocked out, in contrast to the narrative working through of time before being sent to the front, during hospitalisation, and at the end of the war.

Comparisons with presentations about the Second World War reveal definite differences. These presentations are usually epic narrations continuing for many hours, that is, narrations following the linearity of the events. There are dramatic stories embedded in these narrations which deal with situations like a battle, or being taken prisoner, and which lead to a climax. From veterans of WW I we found out nothing about situations in which people died, and could only imagine them from utterances such as, 'They fell like flies'. The veteran of WW II tells at least one or two stories about death. These are usually stories which are not connected to the routine of the war: for example, how someone died unexpectedly from a 'civilian' sickness or how one found a comrade killed by the partisans. As an interpreter of this kind of text one often had the impression that these stories serve to thematize death while covering up terrible events which are more painful to the autobiographer. Such 'cover-stories', as I name them with reference to Freud's

*Three photographs from the private album of a baker from Berlin-Wilmersdorf, in 1915. The postcards were posted to his family with the remark 'put into album!' Photographer unknown.*



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concept of 'cover-memories', do not appear in the narrations of the soldier of WW I.[9] What were the death situations that were considered outside the routine of the war for him? The comrades who fell next to the canons, the many wounded, and the battlefield screams of the dying: these were phenomena he associated with the everyday routine, and they could hardly be covered by other stories.

I do not wish to create the impression that the soldier of WW II talks much about dying. More frequently he is busy with war anecdotes and presents himself as a brave and, more importantly, a clever soldier. Such a self-presentation hardly ever occurs in the stories of WW I veterans. The veteran of WW II renders a long narration about the war with descriptions of war tactics, including arms and vehicles, and stories about arrivals and departures, about peaceful experiences with civilian populations, and about the superiority of the Wehrmacht. Here, too, these are cover-stories which do not serve the autobiographer by making it possible to thematize painful experiences. Rather, they stand for something else, and do not deal with personal pain, with the friend who was killed, or the wounded and frozen soldiers who were left behind during retreats. Similarly, the sorrow which was caused by the German soldiers — the destruction of villages, cruelty towards the civilian population, crimes against prisoners of war, mass executions in the ghettos and the concentration camps — are hardly ever thematized; they are mostly denied.

Let us look at the sequential structure of the presentation of WW II. The sequentiality of the narration is oriented on the steady progress or subsequent retreat from place to place, that is, on the linearity of the events in their chronological sequence. I would like to show how narration proceeds with this quotation from Herr Sallmann, born in 1915. Shortly before the attack on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, he was sent from the western front to the eastern front. This is what he says about the attack:

> So we went into a state of alert, at night we moved to the points of departure and early in the morning at dawn the whole thing started, the big noise, all the artillery, from all the guns, deafening noise in the air. Those were the first air-battles and one could see how the Russian planes came up. And before they saw what it was all about, they went down like burning lanterns. That was, let's say, something pretty exciting.

'That was, let's say, something pretty exciting'; I cannot remember hearing this type of evaluation in accounts of the First World War. The narration of such an exciting event, which was outside of the routine of the everyday wartime situation, contrasts with Herr Heinrich's accounts of the First War, which were oriented around external dates. The difference is not an expression of the personalities of the narrators. Rather, the absence of narration about WW I has something to do with the ways in which experiences in that war were different to those in the other. One of the main differences between the two wars was the contrasting experience of a war in the trenches and a war of mobility.

The war of mobility between 1939-1945 was an experience of non-routine situations in different places with various people, and of confrontations with living persons, including both civilians and the enemy. In the trenches of the First World War it was impossible to orient oneself according to time, or to structure the days according to the sequences of an ordinary day. The veteran of World War I did not know when there would be breaks in fighting, or when he could eat or sleep. In theoretical terms, the iterative structure of everyday time was broken by the nature of trench warfare. The difficulty of narrating about the First World War is a result of the difficulty of putting into some sort of sequential order the diffuse and chaotic experiences of trench warfare.[10]

It is possible to support these ideas with gestalt-theoretical analyses. Empirical investigations of memory achievement show that what is already 'gestalted' is remembered much better than the experience of chaos.[11] Chaos enters the memory as an impression of chaos, that is, without taking on meaning. For traces to remain in the memory the experiences must be structured: what is well remembered is what is found in the memory as organized units, and 'organized memory depends upon organized experience'.[12] If we follow further the gestalt-theoretical assumption that memory is organized along spatial rather that temporal or sequential lines, and is thus oriented upon change in the surroundings, the difficulty of remembering the time in the trenches is understandable. One trench looked just like the other. When our surroundings do not change we lose our consciousness of time.[13] The years spent in the trenches shrink into a single image or a brief evaluation, which attempts to express the feelings of dread and despair which are buried deep in the memory. In this situation stories are not told, though they could be developed with the help of a constructive listener. However, after WW I this was not the case; rather, the motto was: 'Try to forget the terrible things'. This advice was also given frequently by psychiatrists.[14] Over time this tendency of denial became a behaviour pattern, and even today it is very difficult to break that pattern.

The conditions of WW I were more burdensome and traumatic for the soldier than the conditions of WW II. The experiences of immobility in the narrow trench and of the invisibility of the enemy were particular causes of neurotic reactions in the soldiers.[15] People will try to control their fears with activity and this was impossible for the soldiers in the trenches. They could not defend themselves actively in the trenches, they could only react by passively seeking shelter. This passive endurance can be compared with experiences in air raid shelters during the bombing attacks of the Second World War. In WW II, civilians were more passively exposed to the war than were the soldiers at the front. Narrations by civilians, usually women, show the same telling patterns of remembering as those of veterans of WW I. Like the men, the women speak freely about WW II; however they concentrate upon situations like the changing of shelters or dwellings, upon particular places, and upon expulsion and flight. The anxious hours in the shelters and the awful scenes after the air raids, which were repeated day after day, are not expanded upon in the narrations, and when the women do touch upon this subject it causes them difficulties. When they talk about bombing attacks they do not describe separate experiences; rather they describe how it was in general.



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Like the presentations of the soldiers of WW I, WW II is presented by the women as a natural disaster. This might be explained as due to a tendency of women to see themselves as victims of powers beyond their control.[16] But this explanation disregards the material conditions of the civilian population, including men and women, which affected their experiences. These material conditions are, in a number of ways, structurally comparable with those of trench warfare. Firstly, there is the same break in the iterative structure of everyday time. One did not know when the attacks were coming, whether one could sleep at night, whether the electricity would function after the attack, or whether one's house would still be inhabitable. A response to living with such conditions was to 'act as if ...' nothing unexpected could happen,[17] to live from day to day and not think about tomorrow; to plan for a day, but not produce long-term plans. A second comparable feature was passive endurance; one could merely seek shelter; one could do nothing for active defense. So one spent one's time waiting till the next attack was over. This passive structure of experience was hardly one to generate stories. Thirdly, the constant repetition of similar situations, disrupting the ordinary routine and at the same time becoming routine in themselves, was also comparable in trench experience and the civilian bombing experience. In narration these routine situations are not elaborated upon, at most they are described in what I call a 'condensed story', that is, a story compiled out of different events which may not have really happened.

What are the consequences for the witnesses of events about which it is impossible to produce stories to represent their suffering? Only with difficulty can they communicate about their suffering to others, and they will not receive sympathy from listeners unable to share their experiences. One may be able to share the experiences of others, but only when they are related in detail, not when they are dealt with vaguely and in short reports. Telling a story means converting the strange into the familiar; through the act of narration the listener passes from a state of not knowing to one of knowing.[18] When it is impossible to relate experiences there is a danger that the individual will remain entangled in past experiences, unable to create a distance from them.[19] This also makes it impossible to experience the past as different from the present, and thus creates an orientational problem in situations which require action.

In my opinion the inability to talk about traumatic experiences leads to a second traumatization after the suffering is over. When it is impossible to turn experiences into narrations, the trauma accompanying the original experience is consolidated. Where narrating is met with little or no interest, as when the listener is unable to help the narrator in the production of stories, then further attempts at narration will become even more difficult and the feeling of isolation will be strengthened. As interviewers we should be aware of all this and should try to overcome the strange, but we often reveal a therapy-phobia from which many sociologists and historians seem to suffer. As a defence against a trend of narration which may open the doors of verbalization, we often respond with a 'well-meant' attempt to shut those very doors by changing the subject, asking the next question on our interview questionnaire, or even comforting the narrator with 'but, after all, it was in the past and is gone now'.

It was in my interviews with Holocaust survivors that I became especially aware of how to overcome memory blocks and narration difficulties by constructive listening. Some of my interviewees were almost unable to talk without help about their time in hiding and in the concentration and extermination camps. Like the soldiers who experienced trench war, they dealt with that time with brief reports or images ('it was like a madhouse'). However, holocaust survivors signalled much more clearly than the German interviewees that they wanted to talk about their experiences, and thereby perhaps to 'unload' something. An ordinary narration stimulus like, 'Could you tell me a little more about what your experience was?' would fail here. Here we were called upon to help the interviewee to return to the scene of experience, by asking detailed questions dealing with the emotion, not the cognition.[20]

## THE BIOGRAPHICAL NECESSITY OF WAR NARRATION

We might assume, therefore, that specific structural aspects of the experience of WW II conditioned its narrability. These aspects are different from ordinary experience; situations completely divorced from the less traumatic everyday routine are more easily remembered. For many of the women, WW II meant being bombed out, fleeing from place to place; for men it meant marching forwards or retreating. These non-routine events, with their memory-impressive changes of place, are advantageous for the process of narration. The biographical main-narration can follow these place changes chronologically. In this way the narrator is in control of a memory frame[21] which helps him or her to bring the past into the present.

However, the narrability of WW II is neither a sufficient nor a necessary reason for it to be given such attention. We don't, after all, talk for hours about experiences simply because it is easy. We must have motivations: the experiences must be meaningful for us or for our listeners. In other words, there must be a biographical necessity for the narrator. Autobiographers tell about their lives because they want to reassure themselves with regard to their past, present, and anticipated future. They try through narration to bring their lives into some kind of consistency, and to explain to themselves who they are and how they got there.[22] It is not difficult to see that WW II had an enormous biographical meaning for many of its witnesses. That is why this particular phase in the lives of people is today still in need of attention. WW II had far-reaching effects upon the lives of men and women in Germany. It was not only the actual war years which changed the lives of these people. Many of the men spent more years as prisoners of war; families lost their homes; their property and their friends; and many people lost their *Weltanschauung*, their beliefs. After the war many women lost again the autonomy they had gained during the war, in the family as well as at work. As the soldiers returned from imprisonment they met with great difficulties as they tried to resume family and professional lives where they had left off before their service in the Wehrmacht.



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The degree to which men and women experienced the war as an intervention in the course of their lives depends on which generation they belong to. According to our investigations, the life stories of witnesses who were born between 1888 and 1930 can be divided into three different generations: the Wilhelminian-youth generation, the Weimar-youth generation and the Hitler-youth generation.[23] These will be discussed more fully in order to clarify how the generation to which one belongs influences one's need to narrate.

The Wilhelminian-youth generation, including those born between 1890 and 1900, experienced their childhood and youth in the Kaiser-Reich. The men of this generation, who reached adulthood in the trenches of WW I, were and are especially deeply affected by the war. The men and women of this generation experienced their early adulthood, and the tasks of founding a family and building a career, at a time of a wild inflation in Germany and a worldwide economic crisis. In the beginning of WW II the men who had served in WW I, born between 1893 and 1900 and now in the middle age, were again sent to the front. Thus families which had been formed in the twenties and had developed routines of family-life, and in which the husband had established his professional career, were suddenly separated. This generation tended to be less affirmative about the Second World War than the younger generation, because of the implicit pacifism that resulted from experiences in the trenches of WW I.

Those belonging to the Weimar-youth generation (born between 1906 and 1919), were the first generation of Germans to spend their childhood and youth in a democratic republic. The generation-image, however, is affected more by the conditions pertaining during the phase of early and middle adulthood than by the phase of youth. During the war years the women of this generation were able to advance considerably along the road of emancipation, only to have to return to their former situation after 1945. The men, from their eighteenth or nineteenth year on, led lives connected in one way or another with the military establishment. Most of these men were soldiers during the entire Second World War, and a part of this generation, those born between 1911 and 1919, were already called to service before 1939 in one or other of the paramilitary organizations of the National Socialist regime. Even without taking into consideration war-imprisonment, these men spent up to ten years of their lives in a military organization. These are critical years in life when biographically relevant decisions have to be made in the familial and professional spheres. This is a time when the professional career is stabilized and the family established, but for this generation this was also a time of war, and of being a soldier. The men of this generation were unable to assume professional identity outside the Wehrmacht; the interviews we conducted, as well as those described by the research group of Lutz Niethammer,[24] show that the men of this generation regarded soldiering as their profession, to be attained step by step and conscientiously. Many of the members of this generation also married and became parents during the war years. This, then, was a generation of freshly married couples and young parents who could not partake of this status except in their thoughts and on short leave at home. These men hardly knew their wives or their children. The wives had to provide for all the needs of the families at home and were also called upon to perform war-time duties which had previously been performed only by men.

The members of the Hitler-youth generation (born approximately between 1922 and 1930), experienced their childhood and youth in the 'Third Reich'. In school and youth movements they were socialized in the ideology of National Socialism.[25] As children and youths these were, according to Nazi propaganda, the 'guarantors of the future', and they were raised to establish a new society. Their self-confidence was developed and strengthened by the establishment of youth movements which had not been available to previous generations. Hitler Jugend and Bund Deutscher Madel offered attractions — summer and ski-camps and training in certain professions — which had not previously been available, and especially not to the children of the poorer strata of the population. To be a BDM-girl or a Hitler-boy was central to many a young person's identity. National Socialist pedagogues were also successful in arousing enthusiasm in these young people for the Nazi *Weltanschauung* and the war. Many of these youngsters were glad to be able to join the auxiliary forces towards the end of the war. The older members of the generation were conscripted into the Flak-auxiliary, and then at the very end into the regular army. According to our analysis, these men came closest to the National Socialist ideal of the political soldier who was willing to fight to the end for the triumph of National Socialism.

Among the war narrations of these three generations, it is the members of the Weimar-youth generation, and especially the men, who narrate most extensively about WW II and the succeeding period of imprisonment. They were also the ones upon whom WW II has had the greatest effect. These men served the longest period in the Wehrmacht, and their wives and mothers had to fend for themselves all these years as well as during the period of imprisonment. The post-war period was also biographically incisive for this generation, which had the greatest problems in readjusting to civilian life. After the return of the prisoners of war and the relegation of women to their former roles, these men had for the first time to obtain a real profession and face real life at home as father and husbands.

The members of the Wilhelminian-youth generation, on the other hand, were able to continue professional and family life which had previously been routinized. Their mobilization had less biographical importance than that of the younger men. In 1939 these men were in a phase of life where they were secure in professions which gave the central meaning to their lives. Thus they were less likely than the younger men to strive for a career in the military, even if this had been possible despite their advanced age. They regarded mobilization as an interruption of their professional lives. They were loyal to their country and saw their soldiering as an obligation to their fatherland, but although they gave up several years to this obligation, it did not call for the biographical balancing which was required of those who regarded soldiering as a profession. The obligation was over and done with in 1945, and they could pick up the threads of pre-war life.



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By contrast, the coming of peace caused a biographical break for those soldiers who regarded their soldiering as a profession. They had difficulty in picking up the threads of a life which, although it had existed, had not been experienced for a long time. Members of the Weimar-youth generation needed to ask the following questions: What will I do now? What profession should I take up — should I continue what I had started or take up something new? Have all my plans and ambitions in the Wehrmacht come to naught? Will my children learn to accept me? Can I keep my marriage going? For women of the Weimar-youth generation the post-war period was marked by the return of husbands who reclaimed the role of 'head of the house', and by the loss of qualified jobs. For that reason the war period maintains biographical relevance even in later years. The women experienced the war as a time of active participation, even though this included suffering; they were able to cope with the vicissitudes of life in wartime, becoming more independent and self-reliant in the process. After they had to give up these roles and capabilities, the wartime period often became very meaningful biographically.

War narrations assume a lesser importance within the whole life story among members of the Hitler Youth generation than among the older age-groups. Even though they tell very detailed stories about the war, they are able to be even more expansive about their time in the Hitler Jugend. Their war experiences are less central to their biographical balance than their membership in the HJ and their enthusiasm for the NS ideals. After all, they were also the ones — according to our analyses, at any rate — who identified with the 'Third Reich' for the longest time and for whom the defeat of National Socialism meant the collapse of personal ideals. The year 1945 posed different questions for them by comparison with those posed for the men of the Weimar-youth generation. These questions were related less to the fulfilment of biographical plans than to their revision. These women and men, who in 1945 were just beginning their family and professional careers, and thus were not returning to something that already existed, were able to begin a new life with relatively few difficulties. They were also much more future-oriented than the older generation. Thus these younger people suffered much less from biographical crises in the post-war period than the members of the Weimar-youth generation.

The crises of the younger generation were related to their ideological orientation.[26] It was not their professional career or their family life that was brought into question, but the *Weltanschauung* with which they had identified. Because of the youth amnesty proclaimed by the western allies, together with the liberating arguments prevalent in this generation — 'We were, after all, too young to understand...' — these men and women were able to verbalize more easily about their erstwhile enthusiasm for the Nazi regime, and much more easily than members of the older age-groups. They did not have such a need for war narrations in order to free themselves from membership in Nazi organizations or involvement in the Nazi regime.

## THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF WAR NARRATIONS

We might accept that so much is narrated about WW II because it represents a phase of life which was and is of enormous biographical importance for people. Our investigations reveal, however, that war-narrations have an additional function in Germany today for those witnesses who were not persecuted by National Socialism: they serve in a process of the normalization of the Nazi past. Through the narrative expansion of the theme of 'war', people are able to avoid the theme of 'national socialism', and to strengthen the idea that 'we also suffered a lot'. This unburdening argument, which equates the suffering of the speaker with that of an NS victim, is also the kernel of the avoidance of the theme of Nazi crimes which is part of the narration of war stories.

The strategy of telling stories about the war and not about National Socialism causes the condensation of the Nazi period into the depoliticized years of the war, and is one of several ways of avoiding the NS theme. This biographical strategy serves to repair a questionable Nazi past. It also leaves its mark on many life-stories, and on the wide public discussion taking place in Germany. This strategy gives the impression that the twelve years of the 'Third Reich' were war years. A manifestation of this phenomenon is that when there are referrals to the 'Third Reich' only the war years are discussed, although the Nazi regime began in 1933.

Reports about the persecution of Jewish citizens in the first years after Hitler's rise to power are placed into the 'war years'. In biographical narration this strategy determines the structure: the phase of life between 1933 and 1945 is narrated as if it took place almost entirely during wartime. The time before the war is hardly mentioned. This makes it possible for men who were active in Nazi organizations to be able to avoid thematizing this aspect of their life story. They tell about their time in the Wehrmacht, which to them has no connection to National Socialism and which also put an end — according to their presentation — to any Nazi party activities on their part.

As our analyses show, it is the activists of the 'Third Reich' who especially avail themselves of this biographical strategy of relating National Socialism to the depoliticized war years in order to mask their own or others' party-political involvement. The members of the Weimar-youth generation particularly use this strategy when narrating their life stories. They are able to tell about the eventful years of their youth in the Weimar Republic and then go lightly over the pre-war period which was the time of young adulthood in which routines of profession and family were established. Having more or less skipped this period, they are then able to narrate quite explicitly about the war years in which these routines were broken.

This presentation of the 'non-political war' conforms with the idea that this was a war just like any other war. The war goals of National Socialism, such as the conquest of new 'Lebensraum' and the proof of the superiority of the German race, are denied in this kind of argumentation, Germany's guilt for beginning the war is thus dethematized or even denied. In order to avoid possible difficulties arising from personal connections with crimes committed during the war, many of these witnesses shut out the criminal parts of the military opera-



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tions during WW II.[27] This normalization of the German war attack is still presented today. The Nazi crimes against humanity are thus included among war operations, with a justification which may sound like this: the Nazi crimes were committed during the war, and every war has its own laws. When, however, these crimes are admitted, they are presented as having been committed by the SS or the Einsatztroops. To this day, former soldiers assure each other that the Wehrmacht did not participate in or commit any crimes; they themselves certainly never experienced such events and had never even heard of such things till 1945. We have, for example, war narrations continuing for hours from soldiers who participated in the attacks on Poland and the Soviet Union, yet there are no references to any crimes.

One could ask whether this entire war narration is perhaps a cover-story, to cover something which was painful for the former soldier. We cannot under any circumstances accept the non-thematization of war crimes as an indication of a lack of morality, or a lack of guilt-feelings. Rather, it is a sign of a painful burden which the speakers try to avoid. On the other hand, the war years do enable an unburdening by many other witnesses, because this was a period of suffering and time in which they were much less independent. Witnesses tend to feel less responsibility for a life governed by external factors than for one that is autonomous. In other words, they feel less responsible for events which happened during the war even if the events were connected with the Nazi policy, because they also suffered.

And so it is that the war years — which were experienced as a time of suffering, in contrast to the pre-war years which were a time of active planning — play an important role in the way Germans handle the question of political responsibility for National Socialism. Instead of deciding in 1945 that it was impossible to talk about the past because of the guilt-theme, the war-theme offered an opportunity for expansive narration which did not require denial of one's own biographical past. For many this was the dilemma: on the one hand, one could not present oneself as a being without a past, as an identity without a history; but on the other hand, the past was a burden. The solution was to sever one's own past and one's own involvement in National Socialism from its political context, and to tell about things which were at the same time both unpolitical and personally painful. This made it possible to identify oneself as a victim of National Socialism. 'We are all victims of National Socialism', came to be a feeling shared by many Germans.

The survivors of the crimes perpetrated by National Socialists needed a completely different strategy in 1945. After their liberation they needed to mobilize their entire strength in order to stay alive. Although there were some who spoke in private or in public about their experiences, or who wrote about them — both speech and writing were necessary for their continued living, as, for instance, with Primo Levi — most of these people chose silence. They wanted to forget or, perhaps, they did not want to undergo the experience of not being understood by their listeners or of being exposed to the latter's lack of interest. In addition, they did not want to burden their families, especially their children. One interviewee expressed it in this way, 'I remained silent a long time, I wanted to suppress it. I didn't want to burden others with it, and not to make life difficult for my children'.

But since memories do not allow themselves to be erased, but express themselves in nightmares and daily anxiety, and because panic-reactions may come out later in psychosomatic illnesses, the survivors have an ever-growing need to express themselves. In our time they are also more afraid of the forgetting or denial of the Holocaust. For some years now there has been an increase in Israel of life stories by survivors. In many families it is only now that grandparents who kept silent with their own children begin to tell about the Holocaust to their grandchildren. Their speaking has the opposite function to the dethematization of the crimes. While the bystanders and perpetrators try to cover up with their speaking, the survivors try to uncover. They want to leave a testament, to prove with their personal experiences what kind of unspeakable cruelties were committed in Europe by the Nazis and their helpers. Often they are faced with the problem of uncovering and telling something which was so traumatizing for them that it seems impossible to express and to include in a narration. Among the experiences of outstanding cruelties, they include those that were suffered daily, situations that had become routine: the humiliation and mortification, the death of fellow-inmates, standing at attention, the impossibility of washing oneself, the hunger and the cold.

## CONCLUSION

It is possible to prove empirically the following assumptions about narrability and the readiness to narrate about historical and life phases. Firstly, experiences which can be brought into a sequential order are more easily narrated than diffuse and chaotic experiences. Experiences which are easily remembered and narrated are those which are different from the daily routine, especially those connected to changes of place. Secondly, whenever a certain period of life influences the rest of that life by affecting the present and the future of the biographer, then this period must somehow be balanced. The greater the biographical relevance of historical events and phases, the more this leads to a biographical self-assurance and thus to narration. The biographical necessity for narration is also dependent on the generation to which the narrator belongs. Thirdly, if certain periods of history require collective justification, and if one nation or group is faced with the question of political responsibility, then it is possible that cover-stories will appear which deal with personal suffering and serve to normalize the past. The mutual influence of these three components — narrability, the necessity for narration and the social function of the narrations — makes the collective thematization of historical phases possible.



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**Notes**

[1] K. Koestlin, 'Erzaehlen vom Krieg — Krieg als Reise II', *Bios*, 2, pp. 173-182.

[2] F. Schuetze, 'Kollektive Verlaufskurve and Wandlungsprozesse. Dimensionen des Vergleichs von Kriegserfahrungen amerikanisher and deutscher Soldaten im Zweiten Weltkrieg', *Bios*, 1, pp. 31-109, 1989.

[3] K. Roettgers, 'Die Erzaehlbarkeit des Lebens', *Bios*, 1, pp. 5-19.

[4] Against these findings it has often been claimed that there is already so much war literature. Despite the metaphorical wealth of this literature, which is perhaps a substitute for stories, and the ability of any writer to invent stories, authors like Walter Benjamin (*Illuminations*, 1961, p. 410) or Ernest Hemingway (*A Farewell to Arms*, 1929, p. 198) complain of difficulties in narration (cf. Koestlin, pp. 175ff).

[5] As for the different types of narrations, argumentations and description, see W. Kallmeyer/F. Schuetze, 'Zur Konstitution von Kommunikationsschemata', in D. Wegner (ed), *Gespraechsanalyse*, S. Buske, Hamburg, 1977, pp. 159-274.

[6] The procedure of hermeneutical case reconstruction (cf. G. Rosenthal, *'Wenn alles in Scherben faellt...' Von Leben und Sinnwelt der Kriegsgeneration*, Leske und Budrich. Opladen, 1987; is based on U. Oevermann et al., 'Die Methodologie einer 'objektiven Hermeneutik" und ihre allgemeine forschunglogische Bedeutung in den Sozialwissenschaften', in H.G. Soeffner (ed.), *Interpretative Verfahren in sen Sozial- und Textwissenschaften*, Metzler, Stuttgart, 1979, pp. 352-434.

[7] G. Rosenthal (ed.), *"Als der Krieg kam, hatte ich mit Hitler nichts mehr zu tun". Zur Gegenwaertigkeit des "Dritten Reiches" in erzaehlten Lebensgeschichten*, Leske & Budrich, Opladen, 1990.

[8] F. Schuetze, 'Zur Hervorlockung und Analyse von Erzaehlungen thematisch relevanter Geschichten im Rahmen soziologischer Feldforschung', in *Arbietsgruppe Bielefelder Soziologen: Kommunikative Sozialisationsforchung*, Fink, Muenchen, 1976, pp. 159-260.

[9] S. Freud, *Ueber Deckerinnerungen. Gesammelte Schriften*, 1, 1899, p. 465.

[10] E. Leed, *No Man's Land. Combat & Identity in World War I*, University Press, Cambridge, (1979).

[11] K. Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1963. (First printed: 1935).

[12] Ibid., p. 520.

[13] A. Gurwitsch, *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1966.

[14] W.H.R. Rivers, 'The Repression of War Experience', *Lancet*, 1, 1918, pp. 173-180.

[15] M. Maxwell, *A Psychological Retrospect of the Great War*, London, 1923, W.H.R. Rivers. 1918, pp. 173-180.

[16] A. Troeger, 'German Women's Memories of World War II', in M. Higonet et al. (ed.), *Behind the Lines. Gender and the Two World Wars*, Yale University, New Haven, London, 1987, pp. 285-299.

[17] W. Fischer, *Time and Chronic Illness. A Study on Social Constitution of Temporality*, Berkeley (Habilitation Thesis), 1982. W. Fischer, 'Alltagszeit und Lebenszeit in Lebengeschichten von chronisch Kranken', in K. Hurrelmann, *Lebenslage Lebensalter Lebenszeit*, Beltz, Weinheim, 1986, pp. 157-171.

[18] F. Schuetze, 1976, pp. 159-260.

[19] K. Roettgergs, 1988, pp. 173-180.

[20] In questions of scenic remembering one should try to relate to sensory impressions or place-images in order to remind how something was handled or experienced.

[21] M. Halbwachs, *Das Gedaechtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1985. (First printed: Paris, 1925).

[22] On the topic of the function of biographical narration see W. Fischer, 'Perspektiven der Lebenslaufforschung', in A. Herlth & K.P. Strohmeier, *Lebenslauf und Familienentwicklung*, Leske & Budrich, Opladen, 1989, pp. 279-294; M. Kohl, 'Zur Theorie der biographischen Selbst — und Fremdwahrnegmung', in J. Matthes, *Lebenswelt und soziale Probleme. Verhandlungen des 20. Soziologentages*, Campus, Frankfurt, 1981, pp. 502-520; G. Rosenthal, 1987.

[23] G. Rosenthal, 1990.

[24] L. Niethammer, *Die Jahre weiss man nicht wo man die heute hinsetzen soll*, Dietz Nachf., Berlin, Bonn, 1986.

[25] G. Rosenthal, 1987.

[26] G. Rosenthal, May 8th, 1945: 'The Biographical Meaning of a Historical Event, *International Journal of Oral History*, vol 10, no 3, 1989, pp. 183-193.

[27] F. Schuetze, 1989, pp. 31-109.

## Notes from Chris Healy, 'We Know Your Mob Now'.

[20] 'The Dreaming' is a generic term used by Stanner in preference to the 'Dreamtime', a phrase misunderstood by early anthropologists to refer to a mythological past when spirit ancestors created the world. 'The Dreaming' is a culturally specific term which does not necessarily refer to distinctions of past and present, and may be used to refer to knowledge and tradition. Nevertheless it has been appropriated by non-Aboriginal people mean many things.

[21] Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 39, 36-37.

[22] *Ibid*, p.37.

[23] Mackinolty and Wainburranga, op. cit., p. 360; and Penny MacDonald, *Too Many Captain Cooks*, AFTRS, 1988.

[24] Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, (2nd edition) James Currey, London, 1985, pp. 23-24. I hope it is clear that the notion of 'floating gap' is not applicable to the historical consciousness of these Aboriginal histories because 'The Dreaming' and historical time do not exist in chronological sequence.

[25] Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988, p. 124.

[26] Maurice Bloch, 'The past and the present in the present', *Man*, 12, 1977,pp. 278-92.

[27] From Jeremy Beckett, 'The past in the present; the present in the past: constructing a national Aboriginality' in J.R. Beckett (ed.) *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, p. 209. He cites Hugh Morgan from *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19/3/85.

[28] These histories form part of my larger project which will appear later. In the meantime interested readers could consult Bernard Smith, 'Cook's Posthumous Reputation', in Robin Fisher and Hugh Johnson (eds.) *Captain Cook and His Times*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1979.

[29] See Howard Morphy and Frances Morphy, 'The Myths' of Ngalakan History: Ideology and Images of the Past in Northern Australia', *Man*, (NS) 19, 1984, pp. 459-78, for some astute comments on such historicist approaches.

[30] See for example, R.M.W. Dixon, *The Dyirbal Languages of Northern Queensland*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p. 29.



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