



## War Triptych

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### Abstract

This three-part collection of personal memories was inspired by Otto Dix's triptych 'The War' (1929-1932). The horrors of war and presence of death Dix exposed in his painting form the implicit point of reference for three short stories of reconciliation in and after the Second World War. The three auto/biographical memories by and 'as told to' the author celebrate forgiveness and humaneness among ordinary people in and after times of war as the one way to survive and continue life after the pain and losses caused by war, which are not part of the stories. The condensed form of the triptych recalls Dix's painting as well as the sacredness of suffering and reconciliation as symbolized by conventional Crucifixion triptychs.

*Keywords:* Second World War, reconciliation, personal memories, triptych

### Zusammenfassung

Diese dreiteilige Sammlung persönlicher Erinnerungen wurde von Otto Dix' Triptychon ‚Der Krieg‘ (1929-1932) inspiriert. Die Schrecken des Krieges und die Allgegenwart des Todes, die Dix in seinem Gemälde darstellt, bilden den impliziten Bezugspunkt für die drei kurzen Erzählungen von Versöhnung in und nach dem 2. Weltkrieg. Die drei auto/biografischen Erinnerungsstücke, von der Verfasserin selbst und von anderen ihr erzählt, feiern Vergebung und Menschlichkeit unter einfachen Menschen während und nach dem Krieg als den einzigen Weg zum Über- und Weiterleben nach den Schmerzen und Verlusten des Krieges, der nicht Gegenstand der Geschichten ist. Die dichte Form des Triptychons soll sowohl an Dix' Gemälde als auch an die Heiligkeit des Leidens und die Versöhnung erinnern, die in konventionellen Kreuzigungstriptychen symbolisiert ist.

*Schlüsselwörter:* 2. Weltkrieg, Versöhnung, persönliche Erinnerungen, Triptychon

## Left wing: The story my neighbour Auguste told me

Auguste was born and raised in a village near Königsberg, at the time in Eastern Prussia, now a Russian enclave. Born in 1908, she remembered that the battle lines of the First World War had moved back and forth across their village, but the family just stayed put. This strategy, however, did not work in the Second World War. After the Red Army finally drove the 'Wehrmacht' west, the Russians stayed for good and the region became part of the Soviet Union. The civilians in the occupied villages were forced to leave their homes with the belongings they could carry and were marched eastward to work camps. Auguste, already widowed but with a three-year old daughter, ended up in a work camp in Western Russia, where she, with other women and children, worked mainly in agriculture for about three years before they were allowed to go back to Germany. She told me that the work was hard, that the women had lice and suffered from typhus, and that the Russian guards would sometimes come in at night and pick women to go with them, on which occasions Auguste usually hid under her daughter and remained unscathed. But she also saw that some relationships developed between guards and women and that children were born. She remembered how the women often nicked potatoes and other foods, and stuffed them under their clothes to get them to the camp, and that the guards usually turned a blind eye. Her comments went roughly like this: After the war, the Russians were as poor and starving as we were and didn't have anything themselves, therefore they usually let us get away with our meagre booty. Auguste reflected repeatedly that she did not bear any grudges against the Russians because life was hard on everybody in those days and some of the guards were friendly enough with the women and empathetic with those who were struggling as much as them. To me, her empathy and forgiveness made her a model human being.

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### Central panel: What my Scottish friend Margaret told me

When working in the library in Edinburgh, I got to know Margaret, a Scotswoman roughly my age. She knew that I was German, so one day she told me about her father, who had fought as a British soldier in the Second World War and become a prisoner of war in Germany. The British POWs were interned in a camp near Nordhausen and forced to work in the German arms industry. However, because most German men were serving in the military or elsewhere, there was a shortage of agricultural labour. I remember Margaret relating her father's story that one day, German officials were looking for POWs who would be willing to spend their day off working on a German farm. He volunteered, was taken to a farmhouse the next Sunday, and expected to be put to work. To his great surprise, the farmer asked him in and took him into the kitchen, where he was seated among the family and fed. They told him that they saw how the POWs were treated and how hard they had to work, how little they had to eat, so they certainly would not make him work more. For quite some time, he would be dropped at the farm on his days off, but instead of making him work, the family would feed him and look after him. Eventually, the war ended, Nordhausen was liberated and Margaret's father returned home. She said that he had always wanted to go back and find this family to reminisce with them, but that he never managed to go on this trip, which he regretted when he got older. How come such stories spread happiness?

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## Right wing: My own memory and family stories

In the spring of 1945, my small German hometown first surrendered to the U.S. Army, but after a short time, the Soviet Army replaced the Americans because the town lay within the boundaries of the Soviet occupation zone fixed among the Allies. My grandmother lived together with another family in a detached house she had had built after her husband's death in the 1930s, and this was requisitioned as quarters for an officer of the Soviet Army, his wife, and staff. At the time, my father was a POW in France and her other son had gone missing as a POW in Russia. But my grandmother was a courageous, pragmatic woman and, like her late husband, averse to Nazi ideology. Therefore, friendly relations could ensue between the German and Soviet housemates, and I grew up with numerous anecdotes about the officers trying to adapt to German culture and manners, and the German children picking up a smattering of Russian. Grandmother also mentioned that the officer's wife had given birth to a daughter during the time they occupied the house. The quartering ended in 1946,<sup>1</sup> and when I grew up in the 1950s, there were no traces left except the anecdotes. One day in the sixties, when I was still in elementary school but sick at home, the bell of the garden gate rang though we weren't expecting anyone. The button was pressed, the gate opened, and three strangers walked along the garden path towards the house. From the hallway, I watched as my grandmother, after initial hesitation and surprise, was enveloped in a big bear hug with the woman – 'Tasja!' It was all shouting and hugging and emotions. Unfortunately, I was not allowed to participate in the scene as I was shooed back into my room, but I was told later that Tasja and her husband had wanted to show their adolescent daughter where she had been born. To me as an untraveled child, this family seemed the most exciting and exotic I had ever seen or heard of, and my grandmother seemed so delighted by the visitors that a positive image of the post-war Soviet occupation and Russian people was firmly established in my mind.

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### **Predella: What lies underneath**

Otto Dix's triptych 'Der Krieg' ('The War') about the horrors of the First World War, and war in general, inspired this assemblage of memories. In the predella of Dix's painting, the deadly power of war in the form of decaying corpses lies underneath the images of active warfare. Being of the post-war generation, I have no memories of my own of the killing fields but an acute if abstract and image-based awareness of their horrors. Thus Dix's war triptych remains my referent against which any memory of kindness and reconciliation, however slight, needs to be saved and treasured. The central panel holds a memory from wartime itself, flanked left and right by memories of forgiveness and reconciliation after the war which seem to have made possible the continuation of life afterwards.

Naturally, my own memories are more detailed, while the stories I was told by Auguste and Margaret are more spectacular. Maybe the rememberers' memories were already embellished, and maybe my memory embellished them further, but they hold the core of hope that is indispensable for survival in the face of the death that permeates every image of Dix's war triptych.

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## About the Author

Gabriele Linke is Professor emerita of British and American Cultural Studies at the University of Rostock, Germany. After completing her undergraduate studies in English, German and Education and her first and second doctoral degrees at Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, she was appointed professor in Rostock in 2001, where she taught at the English Department for twenty years.

Over the years, she has published widely on various issues in ELT and Cultural Studies. In her book on popular literature as cultural memory (*Populärliteratur als kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 2003), she examines contemporary British and American serial romances with regard to the construction and memorialization of national history. Her interest in Memory Studies has also informed her involvement in Autobiography Studies since 2006. In Cultural Studies, she has focused on postcoloniality and transculturality in British and American film. Furthermore, she has co-edited five thematic volumes of interdisciplinary gender studies, the last of which, dealing with popular culture, gender and agency (*Populärkultur – Geschlecht – Handlungsräume*), came out in 2018. Previously, however, contemporary autobiography in English evolved as her main field of research and publication, which resulted, for example, in the collection *British Autobiography in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries* (2017), co-edited with Sarah Herbe.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Spilker, Hannelore, 'Ein kleines Idyll nach dem großen Krieg', in: *Mühlhäuser Beiträge* 45 (2022), 29-31.