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# Migration and War Memory in a European Perspective

## A Case-Study on Displaced Persons in Belgium

Machteld Venken



DEPARTMENT OF  
EUROPEAN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

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MACHTELD VENKEN

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## Abstract

In the aftermath of World War II, about 20,000 people who had experienced displacement entered Belgium.<sup>1</sup> Among those there were about 350 soldiers serving in the Polish armed forces in the West, and about 4,000 Ostarbeiterinnen - young female Soviet citizens who were deported to Nazi Germany to do forced labour. All the soldiers and Soviet women married Belgian citizens, and most settled in the home town or city of their spouses. This paper focuses on the war memories of these migrants in post-war life, memories that were arguably shaped not only by the characteristics of their war experiences themselves, but also by the changing positions which they held within their home and host societies. Following the migrants from their moment of settlement until today, the article highlights the changing dynamics of their war memories over time, starting during the Cold War era and ending up in present day Europe. As such, the study finds itself on the crossroads of memory and migration studies, two academic disciplines that only recently started to dialogue with each other.<sup>2</sup> Before analysing the arrival, settlement and war memories of the Displaced Persons at study, I give an interpretation of academic literature on memory of World War II from the perspective of migration studies.

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1 Idesbald Goddeeris, *De Poolse migratie in België 1945-1950. Politieke mobilisatie en sociale differentiatie*. Aksant, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 151.

2 See for instance: E. Boesen and F. Lentz (eds.), *Migration et mémoire. Concepts et méthodes de recherche/ Migration und Erinnerung. Konzepte und Methoden der Forschung*, LIT Verlag, Berlin-Münster-Wien-Zürich-London, 2010, in press; Karen Schönwalder, 'Integration from Below? Migration and European Contemporary History', in: K. H. Jarasch, T. Lindenberger and A. Ramsbrock (eds.), *Conflicted memories: Europeanizing contemporary histories*, Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, 2007, pp. 154 and 161.

## Résumé

Au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, environ 20.000 personnes déplacées sont entrées en Belgique.<sup>1</sup> Parmi ces personnes il y avait environ 350 soldats servant dans les forces armées polonaises en Occident, et environ 4.000 « Ostarbeiterinnen », de jeunes citoyens soviétiques qui avaient été déportées vers l'Allemagne dans le cadre du travail forcé. Tous les soldats et les femmes soviétiques se sont mariés avec des citoyens belges et la plupart s'est installée dans la ville d'origine de leurs conjoints. Ce Cahier de Natolin se concentre sur les mémoires de guerre de ces migrants dans leur vie d'après-guerre. Des mémoires qui ont été construites non seulement sur le fondement des caractéristiques de leurs expériences de guerre mais aussi par l'évolution des positions qu'ils occupaient dans leurs sociétés d'origine et d'accueil. En suivant les migrants depuis leur installation en Belgique jusqu'à aujourd'hui, cette étude met en évidence la dynamique changeante de leurs mémoires de guerre durant le temps, commençant au cours de la guerre froide et finissant dans l'Europe d'aujourd'hui. Cette étude se trouve donc au carrefour des études de la mémoire et de la migration, deux disciplines qui n'ont que récemment commencé à dialoguer l'une avec l'autre.<sup>2</sup> Avant d'analyser l'arrivée, l'installation et les mémoires de la guerre des personnes déplacées, l'auteur se livre à une interprétation de la littérature académique sur la mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale du point de vue des études de la migration.

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1 Idesbald Goddeeris, *De Poolse migratie in België 1945-1950. Politieke mobilisatie en sociale differentiatie*. Aksant, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 151.

2 Voire, par exemple: E. Boesen et F. Lentz (eds.), *Migration et mémoire. Concepts et méthodes de recherche/Migration und Erinnerung. Konzepte und Methoden der Forschung*, LIT Verlag, Berlin-Münster-Wien-Zürich-London, 2010, en cours de publication; Karen Schönwalder, 'Integration from Below? Migration and European Contemporary History', in: K. H. Jarausch, T. Lindenberger et A. Ramsbrock (eds.), *Conflicted memories: Europeanizing contemporary histories*, Berghahn Books, Oxford and New York, 2007, pp. 154 et 161.

# 1. Introduction: History and Memory

History and memory are often presented as juxtaposed concepts. In such outlines, history is generally defined as what happened and what people experienced, memory as our perceptions of what happened or was experienced.<sup>3</sup> As memories sometimes turn their backs on factual content, their usage in historical sciences is not supported by all historians. Some claim that memories are unreliable because they distort the past, which they believe to be better “preserved” in written sources. Within the historical discipline, however, there are important authors who reject such a view and argue that historiography is not an objective and independent science, and follows, just as other disciplines do, changes in society. As a result, historians write history according to the way they see society. Historiography not only recreates events that happened in the past, but also creates social reality, for example texts that come to function as new loca of commemoration.<sup>4</sup> As such, historiography in fact co-creates memory.

In this respect, the historian Dan Diner speaks of changing historical paradigms, which he sees as ‘delayed modes of interpretation of historical processes that have preceded them’, and ‘offer the historian an arsenal of semantizations to correspond to objects in the life-world’.<sup>5</sup> According to him, in the late 1960s, a first shift in historical paradigms took place. Whereas before, the historical paradigm of state had corresponded to a vertically power-inspired and structured life-world, the historical paradigm of society came to embody the societal life-world shaped during

3 See for instance Jonathan Sacks, *Studies in Renewal*, quoted in Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, ‘New Threads on an Old Loom. National Memory and Social Identity in Post-war and Post-communist Poland’, in: R. N. Lebow, W. Kansteiner and C. Fogu (eds.), *The Politics of Memory in Post-war Europe*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006, p. 177.

4 Mareike König and Rainer Ohliger. ‘Facing Migration History in Europe. Between Oblivion and Representation’, in: M. König and R. Ohliger (eds.), *Enlarging European Memory. Migration Movements in historical perspective*, Jan Thorbecke Verlag, Ostfildern, pp. 11-12.

5 Dan Diner, ‘From Society to Memory: Reflections on a Paradigm Shift’, in: D. Mendels (ed.), *On Memory. An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2007, p. 151.

the Cold War. Hence the raised attention for social history in those years, partly at the detriment of political history. The changes in society following the collapse of communism are causing a second historical paradigm shift: one from society to memory.

Diner argues that the homogenising societies from the Cold War had frozen the diversity of narratives on World War II memory. Standardised, top-down articulations of what the war had been prevailed in societies for almost half a century. The end of such a societal model also re-awakened diverse narratives on war memory in pan-Europe, i.e. now on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. When a society is no longer perceived to be homogeneous, but a pluralistic entity consisting of different groups, then precisely these narratives on World War II memory, unheard or interpreted differently during the Cold War, come to the fore.

## 2. Displaced Persons, Forgotten Memories?

It is estimated that during World War II up to twenty million people left their homes. Many did not want to go back after liberation since their homegrounds had fallen into the Soviet sphere of influence (which is the case of some of the people of this study) or they feared repression in their homeland, the Soviet Union (in case of other people this study concentrates on). Following the unsuccessful attempt of the Allied Forces to repatriate all these people, a special organ, the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), coordinated their settlement in the Atlantic World. The Displaced Persons who came to Belgium, were above all miners recruited through the IRO, but to a lesser extent also students with a stipend and people who married Belgian citizens, such as the people of this study.

DPs were overlooked in official collective war memories. There is, for example, not something like one Displaced Persons' group which over the years autonomously produced a shared war memory. Displaced Persons in the West were very heterogeneous, having different national and ethnic backgrounds as well as various political convictions. As the migration historian Daniel Cohen formulated, however, 'they all lived in the same standardized refugee world' having experienced migration because of war.<sup>6</sup> Some other people with similar war experiences, such as Prisoners of War and resistance fighters, over the years came to be seen as homogenised groups with a specific war memory. The studies of Pieter Lagrou and Annette Wieviorka showed how civil society agencies articulated the war experiences of POWs and resistance fighters in war memories, which competed with each other.<sup>7</sup> But Displaced Persons, as one group, and with them their war memories, were not presented.

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6 G. Daniel Cohen, 'Remembering Post-War Displaced Persons. From Omission to Resurrection', in: König and Ohliger (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 97.

7 Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000; Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide. Entre la mémoire et l'oubli*, Hachette 'Pluriel', Paris, 2003.

In general historical overviews of Europe's migration history, they also receive very little mention.<sup>8</sup>

The attention for Displaced Persons dates from the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> In line with the two dominant thoughts in migration studies, researchers focused on either their societal integration or on their ethnic identification. Commonly used factors to measure the successfulness of societal integration within a country of destination are for example intermarriage or scattered habitation patterns, both requirements which the migrant men and women of this study fulfil. This assumption has made research on the integration of these people needless in the past; they were simply considered examples of perfect integration within the Belgian society. Scholars focussing on identification on their turn researched ethnic groups of Displaced Persons (categorised by these historians) in one nation state over the years. In this process 'Polish' Displaced Persons, 'Ukrainian' Displaced Persons and so on came to existence.<sup>10</sup> The people in this study are not so easy to classify ethnically, and have therefore either been written out of overviews of ethnic migrant populations<sup>11</sup> or have been inadequately approached 'ethnically'.<sup>12</sup> Studies on the identification of specific 'ethnified' DPs start

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8 Klaus J. Bade, *Migration in European History*, Blackwell, Malden, 2003; Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: migration in Western Europe since 1650*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2003.

9 Frank Caestecker, 'Displaced Persons (DPs) in Europa seit dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs' in: K. J. Bade, C. van Eijl and M. Schrover (eds.), *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa: vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, Schöningh, Paderborn, 2007, pp. 529-535.

10 For Belgium, I refer to: Leen Beyers, *Iedereen zwart: het samenleven van nieuwkomers en gevestigden in de mijncté Zwartberg, 1930 - 1990*, Aksant, Amsterdam, 2007; Goddeeris, *op.cit.*

11 See for example the absence of former Ostarbeiterinnen in: Mykola Kohut, 'Ukrainians in Belgium', in: A. Lenczyk Pawliczko (ed.), *Ukraine and Ukrainians throughout the World: A Demographic and Sociological Guide to the Homeland and Its Diaspora*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Buffalo, London, 1994, pp. 214-230; Emmanuel Waegemans, *Rusland - België 1900- 2000. Honderd jaar liefde - haat. Feestbundel aangeboden aan Prof. em. Hugo Benoy bij zijn zeventigste verjaardag*, Benerus, Antwerp, 2000.

12 The soldiers of this study served in the Polish armed forces, but not all held Polish citizenship, and not all of them spoke Polish. They are, nevertheless, categorised

from their arrival in their country of settlement and pay no attention to their war experiences and memories.

Recently, however, the migration historian Christoph Thonfeld focused on the war memories of some Displaced Persons, thereby breaking through ethnic categorisation and national identification, but introducing the collective label of 'forced labourers'.<sup>13</sup> Using interviews conducted among people who were displaced during the war from Poland because of forced labour, and who after the war migrated to Great Britain, Thonfeld looked for general tendencies in their individual war memories and found they were almost entirely host society oriented.<sup>14</sup> My research builds further on the ideas of Cohen and Thonfeld. It focuses on the war memories of some specific Displaced Persons settled in Belgium, a category that, in contrast to forced labourers, was institutionalised at the end of World War II.

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as solely Polish in for example: Jerzy Kępa, *Ocalić od zapomnienia. Materiały do dziejów Polonii belgijskiej*, Stowarzyszenie Wspólnota Polska, Warsaw, 2004.

13 For the rise of the concept 'forced labour' see also p. 16.

14 Christoph Thonfeld, 'Ehemalige NS-Zwangsarbeiter als Einwanderer in England nach 1945', in: A. Von Plato, A. Leh and C. Thonfeld (eds.), *Hitlers Sklaven. Lebensgeschichtliche Analysen zur Zwangsarbeit im internationalen Vergleich*, Böhlau Verlag, Wien, Köln, Weimar, 2008, pp. 298-310.



### 3. Memory and the Nation State

Not only did the dominant assumptions used in migration studies for many years lead to an ignorance of the war memories of displaced persons, but also keystone social memory paradigms contributed their part. Maurice Halbwachs introduced the concept of 'collective memory', and in this way linked the concept of memory to social groups, ranging from a small organisation to a whole nation state.<sup>15</sup> Halbwachs' concept formed the basis for the later theory of Pierre Nora. Nora gathered places, objects and symbols that according to him and his collaborators embody French national memory, and called them *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory).<sup>16</sup> Above all, his work was influential in making memory a valuable topic of research for historians and other human scientists. In the footsteps of Pierre Nora, many scholars have already researched public war commemorations (mostly concentrated in cemeteries and in front of statues) and demonstrated how these commemorations draw from war experiences of death and sacrifice to stimulate people's identification with the nation state. Rituals and traditions during commemoration services which present wartime suffering as a constitutive element of national unity and identification appear to be powerful means to reinforce official war memory. Although influential, his work is also criticized. According to migration scholars, one fundamental problem is that Pierre Nora dictated the nation state to play a role in choosing sites of memory. As a result, which sites will be detected depends on the way a nation state perceives itself. Whereas some of them do include migrants, such as the United States of America, most do not, or only in a selective way, such as France.<sup>17</sup>

Historical research on war memory has thus mainly concentrated on the level of nation states, without questioning their construction. The

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15 Jeffrey Andrew Barash, 'Analyzing Collective Memory', in: D. Mendels (ed.), *On Memory. An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2007, p. 114; Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1968.

16 Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 1-7 edn., Gallimard, Paris, 1984-1997.

17 König and Ohliger, *op.cit.*, p. 14; Kleist, 'Grenzen der Erinnerung', in: E. Boesen and F. Lentz (eds.), *op.cit.*, pp. 228-230.

characteristics of nation states indeed prescribe the access of people to, and the expressions of war memories in, pre-existing or newly shaped sites of war memory articulation. The extent to which a nation state allows civil society movements or other social groups to debate its official war memory determines the possibilities of tolerating, or even integrating, the articulation of (or aspects of) oppositional memories. Although, during the Cold War era, nation states in the Atlantic World had a more open attitude in this respect than the ones 'behind the Iron Curtain', they did not prevent certain people from being more or less ignored. As nation states are constructions designed at the end of the 18th century after the image of the male citizen and, as a result, left other individuals such as women and non-citizens outside that project, war experiences undergone by people considered to be 'foreign' to the nation state were overlooked in official collective war memories.<sup>18</sup>

Changes in society over time have influenced research on the sites in which war memories found articulation. Second-wave feminism in the Atlantic World, for instance, criticised the solely male representation in war memory, revealing that the suffering of men could be integrated more easily into national war memories than the suffering of women, because the former memories were related to virtuousness and honour for the nation state, whereas the latter were often associated with shame.<sup>19</sup> Feminist scholars indicated how the war shattered the stabilised pre-war gender order within society, and how official normative war memories aimed to re-install this order after liberation. The political scientist Claudia Lenz argued that occupation not only made people afraid of losing their nation's character, but also made men fear they would have to give up their hegemonic role within society. Consequently, official war memories concentrated foremost on male virtuousness, i.e. the identification of men with the (successful) defence of the nation. Women were less often

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18 Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, Sage, London, 2003, p. 2.

19 Marianne Schwegman, 'Oorlogsgeschiedschrijving en seksueel geweld. Het probleem van de historisering van het vrouwelijke slachtofferschap', in: *Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis*, vol. 15, 1995, pp. 145-146.

portrayed. If they were, it was either as mothers and housewives, who were taking care of the homestead while their husbands and sons were at the front, or as female dissidents who had deliberately made a mockery of the pre-war social norms of sexuality and had to be punished in order to purify the nation.<sup>20</sup> Although women did play active roles during the war, in official war memories they are omitted.<sup>21</sup> Feminist scholars saw it as their task to offer female war survivors a voice and started to collect oral testimonies.

After the fall of communism, researchers started to interview war survivors settled in Central and Eastern Europe and marginalised by the nation state. Only then did people begin to feel relaxed and became more willing to speak openly about their war experiences. Orlando Figes' project *Whisperers* about daily life under Stalin can serve here as an example.<sup>22</sup> Besides second-wave feminism and the collapse of communism, a third evolution has boosted the emergence of oral testimonies. As many war survivors are living their last days, recording their individual life stories is considered a means of preserving the reality of suffering, humiliation and death. All these evolutions have led to the current situation in which personal testimonies expressed in various forms, written, oral or audio-visual, have themselves become sites of war memory articulation.<sup>23</sup>

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20 Monika Diederichs, *Wie geschoren wordt moet stilzitten. De omgang van Nederlandse meisjes met Duitse militairen*, Boom, Amsterdam, 2006, p. 159; Claudia Lenz, *Haushaltspflicht und Widerstand: Erzählungen norwegischer Frauen über die deutsche Besatzung 1940 - 1945 im Lichte nationaler Vergangenheitskonstruktionen*, Diskord, Tübingen, 2003, pp. 44-51.

21 Hannah Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France 1939-1948. Choices and Constraints*, Pearson Education, Harlow, 1999; Lucy Noakes, 'Review: Gender, War and Memory: Discourse and Experience in History', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 36, no. 4, pp. 663-672.

22 Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, Picador USA, New York, 2008. See also [www.orlandofiges.com](http://www.orlandofiges.com).

23 T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson and Michael Roper, 'The politics of war memory and commemoration. Contexts, structures and dynamics' in: T. G. Ashplant, D. Graham and M. Roper (eds.), *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp. 25, 44 and 48.

To date, scholars have mainly followed these two tracks of memory articulation and focused either on official memory politics, or on oral testimonies. In conducting them separately, academics failed to pay attention to the power dynamics that lead people to articulate their memories in the public or private sphere, as well as the reshifting of power over time that causes people to speak up or to fall silent. Looking at the war memories of migrants, who are similarly 'foreign' to nation states, like the women and war survivors discussed above, offers a unique perspective to unravel such power dynamics. As newcomers at the fringes of society, they interacted with, were offered or deprived of access to war memory articulation in the public sphere.

## 4. Memory and Power Dynamics

In order to research the complex mechanisms through which migrants and elites in power dialogue over the articulation of war memories, I developed a framework that borrows concepts from both migration and memory studies. It presumes that migrants do not receive or demand a place, as was previously assumed in migration studies, in a homogenising society. In line with Pierre Bourdieu, societies are here perceived to consist of various autonomous and interdependent fields.<sup>24</sup> Depending on the characteristics of the migrants and the fields, migrants become familiar with the ones that are relevant for them or for the people that execute power over them.<sup>25</sup> This study focuses on one such field, which I call the cultural field of war memory. I consider this field to contain all the narratives on war memory which are visible in the public sphere of a given society. My framework is completed with ideas from literary and memory studies. Narratives are defined as reformulating an event or experience and helping people to identify themselves, i.e. to find coherence in relation to themselves and others.<sup>26</sup> Following the literary historian Susan R. Suleiman, narratives on war memory are said to mould war survivors' contingent war experiences into a coherent explanation for the present.<sup>27</sup> Such narratives on war memory operate as a cultural field within society, where different and changing interests are at stake.

Timothy Ashplant and his colleagues have already described how such interests are represented by what they call various agencies, in various arenas.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, Routledge, London, 2002, pp. 84-85.

<sup>25</sup> Christian Joppke and Ewa T. Morawska, 'Integrating Immigrants in Liberal Nation-States: Policies and Practices', in: C. Joppke and E. T. Morawska (eds.), *Towards Assimilation and Citizenship: Immigrants in Liberal Nation-States*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 13; Jorn Rüsen, 'Holocaust Memory and Identity Building: Metahistorical Considerations in the Case of (West) Germany', in: M. S. Roth and C.G. Salas (eds.), *Disturbing remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2001, p. 254.

<sup>27</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory and the Second World War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2006, pp. 3 and 215.

Dominant agencies in articulating narratives on war memory are nation states and other elites in power, such as civil society agencies. Dominant agencies produce standardised articulations of what, according to them, the war had been. Agencies articulate their narratives on war memory in arenas. There, both dominant and dominated agencies compete with each other, and determine both which war experiences are remembered and which ones are silenced, as well as what shape the articulated and silenced narratives on war memories should take. Arenas have different forms, depending on the power dynamics between the various agencies taking part in the game. It is a very broad concept which encompasses the cemeteries or war monuments focused on by 'Nora followers', but also immigrant organisations and their publications, interview settings and so on. The outcomes of negotiation in arenas differ, as power relations and acts of articulation are situational.<sup>28</sup>

The memory building of the Displaced Persons described in this study interacted with similar processes of memory construction and articulation in narratives operating in both the DPs' host and home societies. This brings me back to migration studies and the focus on societal integration. When using their ideas within the light of the new historical paradigm of memory, one can say that the way narratives on war memory of DPs are constructed and articulated in the public sphere indicates their integration in the host society and transnational contacts with their home society.<sup>29</sup> Depending both on the way home and host societies define 'foreignness' (i.e. how they draw boundaries between 'us' and 'them') and the power

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28 Ashplant, Dawson and Roper, *op.cit.*, p. 16-17; For more information on dominant agencies and arenas of former division soldiers and former Ostarbeiterinnen during the Cold War era see: Venken, 'Tussen Oost en West. De oorlogsherinneringen van migrantenvrouwen en -mannen tijdens de Koude Oorlog' In: Sophia vzw, *Genderstudies: een genre apart? / Savoirs de genre: quel genre de savoir?*, Sophia vzw, Brussels, 2010, pp. 79-93.

29 Leo Lucassen, David Feldman and Jochen Oltmer, 'Immigrant Integration in Western Europe. Then and Now', in: L. Lucassen, D. Feldman and J. Oltmer (eds.) *Paths of Integration. Migrants in Western Europe (1880-2004)* Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2006, p. 21.

and creativity DPs have to negotiate these boundaries, various paths of integration and transnational practices are possible.<sup>30</sup>

Such a broad framework enables migration researchers to go beyond the normative question as to whether migrants, in this case DPs, integrate or not, a question commonly answered by the measurement of structural factors. It helps to shed light on the involvement of Displaced Persons in a certain field, to ask if they accepted the dominant tendencies in this field, to question how their attitudes towards the field developed over the years, whether or not leading to greater representation within the public sphere, and how the field changed because of their presence.<sup>31</sup> In this way, migration research can grow beyond its marginal position within historiography and redraw historiography by using the position of migrants on the fringes of society as a unique entrance gate to revealing more about various aspects of home and host pluralistic societies researched in mainstream historiography.

This study unravels migrants' narratives on war memory in Belgium. It contains an analysis of archival sources and 26 in-depth interviews. Paying attention to the relation of power dynamics and memory over time, it researches how the people at study gathered in immigrant organisations and how they constructed narratives on war memories within these organisations. Since life-worlds of state and society saw no need to focus on the war memories of migrants, such research nowadays takes place in what for a long time was considered the periphery. A study on immigrant groups and their group memories does not tell 'the big story' of commemoration. When researching how war memories were articulated on a group level, one is confronted with various mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion

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30 Frank Caestecker, Bert de Munck, Marnix Beyen, Peter Stabel and Bruno Blondé, 'Historici en "hun vreemden". Historische perspectieven op wanneer vreemd "vreemd" wordt', in: J. Wets and C. Timmerman (eds.), *Waarom vreemd vreemd wordt*, Acco, Leuven, 2004, pp. 29-48.

31 Leen Beyers and Machteld Venken, 'Geschiedenis van integratie? Een historische kijk op vestigingsprocessen na migratie', in: *Mededelingenblad van de Belgische Vereniging voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 16-17.

operating within the cultural field of war memory, mechanisms that could encourage or hinder migrants from publicly articulating their war memories.

## 5. Arrival and Settlement

The First Polish Armoured Division was established in Poland in the 1930s and numbered at its peak about 16,000 soldiers. After the invasion of the Soviet Union in September 1939, the Division fled the country and marched through Southern Europe and France. The Division helped to liberate Northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands in 1944. In sixteen days it passed through Flanders.<sup>32</sup> During their stay, many soldiers met young Flemish women. After the Division had passed through the Netherlands, it hoped to march on and liberate Poland, but the country fell under Soviet influence. After the war, the Division was set up as an occupying force in Germany for two years. By the time it was dissolved, about 350 soldiers had married Flemish women.<sup>33</sup> Most of them settled in the Flemish cities they had helped to liberate.

Second, there were young women who were deported to Nazi Germany to do forced labour after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. These Ostarbeiterinnen were mainly from what we today call Ukraine, although some were from the territory of the current Russian Federation or from what is now Belarus. They were the largest group amongst the total of 2.5 million Soviet workers and stood on nearly the bottom rung of the Nazi racial ladder.<sup>34</sup> While at work, the young women met Western European deported workers, volunteers and Prisoners of War. Any off duty contact between the groups was forbidden, but at work numerous love affairs flourished. After the end of the war, all Ostarbeiterinnen were considered Displaced Persons and, following the Agreement of Yalta, were supposed to be repatriated to the Soviet Union. About 4,000 Ostarbeiterinnen, however, chose to travel with their Belgian partners to Belgium rather than be repatriated to the Soviet Union, where they

32 Guido Van Poucke, *La première division blindée polonaise en Belgique, septembre 1944*, Union des fraternelles de l'Armée secrète, Pygmalion, Brussels, 1990.

33 Goddeeris, *op.cit.*, pp. 43-50.

34 Herbert Ulrich, 'Zwangsarbeiter in der Deutschen Kriegswirtschaft 1939-1945. Ein Überblick', in: *De Verplichte tewerkstelling in Duitsland. Le Travail Obligatoire en Allemagne, 1942-1945*, Navorsings- en Studiecentrum voor de Geschiedenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog (CEGES-SOMA), Brussels, pp. 168-171.

feared to be suspected of collaboration.<sup>35</sup> A few couples married in Germany, but most married in Belgium, and all settled there.<sup>36</sup>

Although both migration streams consisted of Displaced Persons, they ended up in a very different refugee world. What Daniel Cohen overlooked when he researched the remembering of DPs, is how what he called 'the same refugee world' takes on a vastly different shape for migrant men and migrant women. Factors like concepts of gendered citizenship and the type of marriage contract available formed different possibilities for arrival and during settlement, and these possibilities often turned out to be better for the former division soldiers.

When these migrants intermarried with Belgian citizens, the Belgian citizenship law required the women to exchange their original citizenship for that of their husbands. The Ostarbeiterinnen thus became Belgian, the former division soldiers remained Displaced Persons (and, much later, received Belgian citizenship through naturalization). Marriage was the criterion to stay for the women, although there were initially temporarily exceptions for women who were at least five months pregnant, women whose children were under eighteen months or were in a poor state of health upon arrival. Marriage guaranteed former Ostarbeiterinnen, but not former division soldiers, the right to stay in Belgium. Only when a Belgian employer could provide employment for at least two years, could a former division soldier receive a temporary work and residence permit.<sup>37</sup> The criterion for staying was his usefulness to the Belgian economy, which corresponds with the wide-

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35 Roger Tavenier, 'Russen in België na 1945', in: E. Waegemans (ed.), *Russische beer en de Belgische leeuw: drie eeuwen Russische aanwezigheid in België*, Davidsfonds, Leuven, p. 129.

36 Lieselotte Luyckx, *De gedwongen repatriëring van Sovjetburgers aan de vooravond van de Koude Oorlog (1944-1949)*, Unpublished Master thesis, University of Ghent, Ghent, 2005, pp. 153-169; Machteld Venken and Idesbald Goddeeris, 'The Nationalization of Identities: Ukrainians in Belgium, 1920-1950', in: *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, p. 98.

37 Caestecker, *Vluchtelingenbeleid in de naoorlogse periode*, VUB Press, Brussels, 1992, p. 109.

spread idea of a male being economically responsible for his family.<sup>38</sup> However, this policy was not always to the advantage of the former Ostarbeiterinnen, since both former division soldiers and former Ostarbeiterinnen had been free to consent to marriage, but marriage limited the opportunities of former Ostarbeiterinnen. The latter signed a contract in which their rights were subordinate to those of their husbands, whereas former division soldiers, as heads of the family, became more visible in the public sphere.<sup>39</sup>

The consequences of the idea of one citizenship in the family and patriarchal marriage contracts for the guarantee to settle on Belgian territory were also different. As Belgian marriage contracts by that time prescribed women to follow their husbands, an expulsion of married male Displaced Persons would also force their women - in the case of division soldiers all these spouses were Belgian citizens - to leave the country. Since the Belgian state would not expel its own citizens, the mixed marriage granted former division soldiers an advantage other non-citizens did not have. The former Ostarbeiterinnen, on the contrary, were Belgian citizens because of marriage, but the Soviet Union did not permit Soviet citizens to change their citizenship when they intermarried. As a result, the Ostarbeiterinnen wives in Belgium were still considered Soviet citizens by Soviet diplomats in Belgium and in order to ensure good diplomatic relations, the Belgian state did not intervene when these diplomats became involved in the repatriation of former Ostarbeiterinnen.<sup>40</sup>

38 Colin Creighton, 'The Rise of the Male Breadwinner Family: A Reappraisal', in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 38, No. 2, p. 310.

39 Carole Pateman showed how the marriage contract limited the opportunities of women. In Belgium for example, the Civil Code considered men responsible for their wives, whom they had to 'protect', whereas the wives had to 'obey' their husbands, and were obliged to 'live with their husbands and to follow them'. The husbands were also supposed to take the lead economically. For instance, the marital law of property assigned responsibility to the husbands, and not the wives, for administering the family's goods (Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1988, p. 155).

40 For a detailed analysis of the arrival and settlement process of former Division soldiers and former Ostarbeiterinnen: Machteld Venken, 'Polish Liberators and Ostarbeiterinnen in Belgium During the Cold War: Mixed Marriages and the Differences for Immigrant Men and Women', in: M. Schrover and E. Yeo (eds.), *Gender, Migration and the Public Sphere, 1850-2005*, Routledge, London, 2010, pp. 54-75.



## 6. Former Division Soldiers and War Memory during the Cold War Era

As newcomers in Belgian society, former division soldiers and former Ostarbeiterinnen initially held a position at the fringe. In what follows, I describe how their war memory building evolved during the Cold War era, and later, after the eclipse of communism. Former division soldiers gradually but successfully lobbied for their place within the cultural field of war memory in Belgium. With the help of subsidies from city councils in liberated cities, they established formal immigrant organisations and focused on the visibilisation of their war contribution in the public sphere. Over the years, the commemoration plaques, statues and streets referring to the liberation march of the First Polish Armoured Division grew in number and the former division soldiers dressed in ex-combatant uniforms paid these objects a visit during annual commemoration parades organised by the liberated cities.<sup>41</sup> In this way, an own arena arose in which the division soldiers could articulate their narrative on war memory without having to compete with other war survivors. The best known commemoration service took place on the Polish war cemetery in Lommel, where the bodies of 257 division soldiers killed in action were buried. Through various rituals, former division soldiers articulated their narrative on war memory in words, gestures and symbols.<sup>42</sup> From the 1980s, with the help of Flemish parliamentarians from the liberated cities, they successfully campaigned for the same ex-combatant rights as Belgians, such as a discount on public transportation and cheaper health care. Two Royal Decrees issued in 1983 and 2002 ensure these rights.<sup>43</sup>

41 Zbigniew Mieczkowski, *Pomniki Pierwszej Dywizji Pancernej. Monuments of the Polish Armoured Division*, Veritas Foundation, London, 1989.

42 For an analysis of the commemoration practices at the Polish war cemetery see: Venken, 'Konstrukcja i recepcja pamięci zbiorowej wśród polskich dywizjonistów w Belgii. Zimna wojna w praktyce', in: *Przegląd Polonijny*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 41-62 (in Dutch: Venken, 'Constructie en receptie van het collectieve geheugen bij enkele gewezen divisiesoldaten in België. De Koude Oorlog in praktijken', in: *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis / Reveu belge d'histoire contemporaine*, Vol. 37, No. 3-4, pp. 387-417).

43 These Royal Decrees are published in *Belgian Monitor* 11.8.1983 and 31.12.2002.

Their narrative saw the experiences of the First Polish Armoured Division through the eyes of the ongoing Cold War. The focus was on 'Catholic Poles' liberating Flanders. It was the installation of the communist Polish People's Republic that had 'forced' them (i.e. those who were concerned about the 'freedom of Poland') to stay in exile. Such a narrative was similar to those of other Polish Displaced Persons in exile, especially the ones of the ex-combatants settled in Great-Britain and who were closely cooperating with the still operating Polish government in exile. It also legitimised their settlement in Belgium as 'victims of communism', and, as a consequence, they did well out of it in their host society. Over the years, they became remembered within Belgium as brave Catholic division soldiers who had liberated Flanders but unfortunately had lost World War II and been betrayed by communism. A successful cult was developed which combined heroism and political victimisation.

With the help of Belgian elites in power and mainly local city politicians (but surprisingly without the help of Belgian war survivors' organisations), their narrative gradually gained strength and finally could stand beside other narratives of people gathered around similar war experiences, for instance, Prisoners of War and Belgian resistance fighters. In this way, they grew from being a marginalised group, to becoming a dominant agency themselves. The way World War II was remembered in Belgium certainly facilitated this process. Various people with similar war experiences, such as resistance fighters, labour conscripts and victims of Nazi persecution, each formed their own group narratives on war memory and independently searched for their path of integration in a constructed and often contradictory Belgian national narrative on war memory.<sup>44</sup>

Belgian patriotic organisations had initially enjoyed support for their narratives on war memory in Belgian political circles, since liberated Belgium redefined itself through an imagined national identification of collective resistance and a deliberate forgetting of whatever did not fit

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44 Lagrou, *op.cit.*, pp. 299-301.

into that narrative. By the end of the 1950s, however, the biggest Flemish political party, the Christian People's Party, started to question some aspects of the repression. This rather implicit extenuation of war collaboration was used as a strategy for the greater autonomy of Flanders within Belgium.<sup>45</sup> Also, other important civil society agencies of war memory articulation opposed the national narrative on war memory. As a result, the cultural field of war memory in Belgium became a patchwork of narratives on war memory uttered by the nation state and several civil society agencies. Various agencies with similar war experiences each lobbied separately for their own case.

The Polish People's Republic, the home society of the former division soldiers, glorified communist wartime successes. This was, however, problematic since the communist government had only been installed in Poland towards the end of World War II and struggled to receive legitimisation from Polish citizens. The official narrative on war memory thus focused on the role of the Soviet army and Polish forces fighting together with it.<sup>46</sup> Polish soldiers, who had fought in the West with the Allies during World War II, as well as Home Army members (*Armia Krajowa*), who had fought for example in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, were for many years considered a threat to that picture.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the state was never capable of overruling civil society agencies which articulated oppositional war memory narratives stressing anti-Nazi but also anticommunist resistance. Silencing Poles living abroad turned out to be even more difficult, since the heavily redrawn borders had generated a huge amount of Displaced Persons and the Polish government in exile refused to recognise the Polish People's Republic.

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45 Ibid.

46 Marcin Zaremba, *Komunizm, legitymizacja, nacjonalizm. Nacjonalistyczna legitymizacja władzy komunistycznej w Polsce*, Wydawnictwo TRIO, Warsaw, 2001, p. 214.

47 Joanna Wawrzyniak, *ZBoWiD i pamięć drugiej wojny światowej 1949-1969*, Wydawnictwo TRIO, Warsaw, 2009, p. 12.

In sum, the opportunities offered by local Belgian political agencies led to a growth of division soldiers' organisations which contributed to the emergence of a local and prestigious former division agency within the cultural field of war memory in Belgium. The narrative of these ex-combatants borrowed from other exile agencies in Great Britain, and in addition highlighted the liberation of Flemish cities. As a result, it experienced no problems finding approval among Belgians. Former division soldiers did not only have an own agency and narrative, but were also offered the opportunity to operate in a specifically designed arena on war memory articulation by means of commemoration services.

## 7. Former Ostarbeiterinnen and War Memory during the Cold War Era

The marginalised position of former Ostarbeiterinnen within the cultural field of war memory in Belgium, on the contrary, did not change dramatically over the years. They had grown up in the Soviet Union and many were ideological communists. Belgians with similar political convictions were small in number. The role of the communist party in Belgian politics was played out in 1947, when a continuous electoral decline set in. Later, the communist party was merely an innocuous onlooker in politics. Therefore, the ‘communists’ in Belgium no longer needed to be combated, unlike, for instance, in France, where the Communist Party played an important role in politics for a considerable period of time.<sup>48</sup> Those inspired by communism became marginalised and gathered in what I would call a partially developed ‘fourth’ pillar of the pillarised Belgian society, functioning largely beyond the three large (Catholic, Socialist and Liberal) pillars’ field of action.<sup>49</sup> Within that pillar, several organisations were developed, such as the Belgian-Soviet Friendship Association and the Association for Soviet Citizens (Soiuz Sovetskikh Grazhdan, or SSG), organisations that were perceived by Belgians as small and harmless fringe phenomena.

Initially, contacts between former Ostarbeiterinnen and the Soviet Union were limited. The official Soviet narrative on war memory presented communist wartime activities as exemplary for the virtuous patriotic nature of Soviet citizens and war experiences deviating from this image were marginalised. One kept silent about the deaths of Soviet citizens caused by

48 Lagrou, ‘Een oorlog achter de rug, een oorlog voor de boeg 1944-1965’, in: M. Van den Wijngaert & L. Beullens (eds.), *Oost West West Best. België onder de Koude Oorlog (1947-1989)*, Lannoo, Tielt, 1997, p. 125.

49 Pillarisation refers to the vertical segregation of Belgian society into three large pillars according to political conviction. The pillars consisted not only of political parties, but also of various social institutions such as trade unions, universities, sport clubs, in this way making themselves self-sustainable. Once part of a pillar, contact with people from ‘outside’ was often limited.

Stalin's rule and gagged the people who had experienced atrocities from within the Third Reich, such as Ostarbeiterinnen.<sup>50</sup> Khrushchëv's openness to the war experiences of some other war survivors than Red Army soldiers also enabled contact to be established with former Ostarbeiterinnen living abroad. The Soviet administration even set up a special organisation to get in touch with (former) Soviet citizens in the Atlantic World and to persuade them to move back: The Committee for Return to the Motherland – later the 'Motherland' Association.

Given the lack of support from Belgian agencies and the popular communist ideology among former Ostarbeiterinnen, the successful mobilization of agencies from the Soviet Union does not come as a surprise. A close cooperation arose between the Soviet Consulate, the SSG and the 'Motherland' Association. The 'Motherland' Association provided the SSG with educational propaganda materials, such as leaflets, Soviet songs and movies. The Soviet Consulate made active participation in SSG the only way of securing a visa to travel to their families in the Soviet Union, thanks to which most former Ostarbeiterinnen joined the organisation. It also engaged the SSG choir on various occasions in the Soviet Consulate's working and always firmly decided which songs needed to be sung. This, of course, created a situation in which the formation of a democratic organisational landscape as well as the construction of an own group narrative on war memory among former Ostarbeiterinnen seemed to have been nipped in the bud. The narrative which SSP/SSG articulated in the public sphere therefore aligned with the official Soviet narrative on war memory, although the own war experiences of former Ostarbeiterinnen were completely absent from it. SSG choir members articulated that narrative above all for fellow members, and only occasionally in the mainstream Belgian public sphere.

Surprisingly, however, the members used the podium set up for them by the SSG in cooperation with the 'Motherland' Association and the

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50 Nina Tumarkin, *The Living & The Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*, Basic Books, New York, 1994, p. 50.

Soviet Consulate to articulate their own war memories. Precisely through performing, they managed to transform the podium designed to facilitate the proliferation of Soviet propaganda into their own arena of war memory articulation. Performing enabled the singers to transcend the linguistic and cultural barriers of the lyrics that impeded them from articulating their own narrative on war memory. In wartime Germany, some Soviet propaganda songs had received alternative lyrics expressing hunger, homesickness and resistance. In the post-war, the choir sang the original version of such propaganda songs, thereby silencing but not forgetting the accompanying second layers of meaning. When at concerts, choir members entered a dialogue with Belgian non-communist audiences, they performed certain songs on stage in an order that would gain the approval of the audience, for example by letting their husbands wear concentration camp garments on stage, in this way visually presenting their war experiences through a recognisable male Holocaust lens.<sup>51</sup>

Transnational links would intensify during the rule of Leonid Brezhnev, who took charge of the Soviet Union in 1964 and made the commemoration of World War II omnipresent. From 1985 onwards, Mikhaïl Gorbachëv, with his policy of openness and transparency (*glasnost*), allowed citizens to form civil society movements which openly started to criticise Soviet historiography.<sup>52</sup> Movements like Memorial first concentrated on Stalin's victims in the post-war period, and only after the collapse of communism on the war experiences of forgotten war survivors, such as Ostarbeiterinnen.

In conclusion, unlike the former division soldiers, former Ostarbeiterinnen did not seem to have articulated an own narrative on war memory in the

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51 For a detailed analysis of their singing practices during the Cold War era, see: Venken, 'Wie Singen Kriegererlebnissen Sinn verleihen kann. Ostarbeiterinnen im Belgien der Nachkriegszeit', in: E. Boesen and F. Lentz (eds.), *op.cit.*, pp. 155-186.

52 Thomas D. Sherlock, *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia. Destroying the Settled Past, Creating an Uncertain Future*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, pp. 2, 47.

public sphere either in Soviet Union, nor in Belgium. The domination of official Soviet agencies seemed to have prevented them from formulating a narrative, articulating it in an arena on war memory articulation, as well as from becoming an agency in the cultural field of war memory themselves. Since communist ideology was not popular in Belgium, Belgian society was not particularly supportive either. Despite the high level of control from Soviet authorities, however, the former Ostarbeiterinnen were able to use the arena set up for them to silently perform their own narrative on war memory. Through silent performative techniques, the literal meaning of song lyrics was turned upside down.

## 8. Former Division Soldiers and War Memory in the Post-Cold War Era

After the collapse of communism, the narratives on war memory and their articulation in the two migration streams at study underwent a serious re-shuffling.<sup>53</sup> The organisations of former division soldiers and Ostarbeiterinnen feared to face a dead end now that their members were growing older. As a consequence, the members searched for ways to preserve their tradition. In Poland, their tradition was very much welcomed. In the new geopolitical context, East and Central European countries that regained independence are constructing new nation-state oriented narratives on war memory. A dialogue arose between the post-communist independent Third Polish Republic and representatives of Polish ex-combatants living abroad, which generated a radical upheaval of the former national narrative on war memory and resulted in a profound reversion of World War II heroism. Communist partisans who had opposed Nazi dominance in the People's Army fell into discredit and commemorations started to centre around members of the Armia Krajowa, those who had participated in the Warsaw Uprising, and those who had fought on battlefields in the West.

The new national narrative constructs victimhood during World War II and aligns it to martyrdom. The Polish historian Annamaria Orla-Bukowska indicates four concepts underpinning that construction: Poland was attacked on 1 September 1939 and was therefore the first war victim, the country had to fight against totalitarian regimes from both sides, the country was morally superior to all others on the European continent because it never collaborated or 'formally surrendered', and, at the cost of its own defeat, saved Europe from Nazism.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, the war experiences of the former

53 More on dominant narratives on war memory and their changes after the collapse of communism: Judt, 'The Past is another country: myth and memory in post-war Europe', in: J.-W. Müller (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe. Studies in the Presence of the Past*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 157-183.

54 Orla-Bukowska, *op.cit.*, p. 179.

division soldiers are placed in a constructed Polish army, which was the fourth biggest among the Allies, after the British, American and Soviet armies. All Poles who served in Allied army units are grouped to fit into a Europeanised narrative on war memory that however, at least until now, solely serves a Polish nationalistic purpose.<sup>55</sup>

New arenas for remembering the war experiences of these Poles were developed in the public sphere. The amount of streets named after Polish forces serving in the West and their generals, is still rising and big statues commemorating, for example, the battlefield of Monte Cassino in 1944 or the liberation march through France, Belgium and the Netherlands were erected.<sup>56</sup> Former division soldiers settled in Belgium did not have to lobby for these developments to take place, and are happy to take part in commemoration services.

In Belgium, the former soldiers wanted to merge with another organisation in order to safeguard their tradition. The members came up with two possible solutions. They could either join a Belgian patriotic organisation or an organisation mainly gathering Polish migrants who had been arriving in Belgium on a continuous basis since the 1980s. The latter option was selected during a vote that stirred up so much emotion, that people, who had gotten along for more than 60 years, suddenly could not find a common language any longer.<sup>57</sup> What had happened?

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55 See for instance: Bogusław Brodecki, Zbigniew Wawer and Tadeusz Kondracki, *Polacy na frontach II Wojny Światowej. The Poles on the Battlefields of the Second World War*, Bellona, Warsaw, 2005.

56 Mieczkowski, *Pomnik Pierwszej Dywizji Pancерnej w Warszawie/Monument of the 1st Polish Armoured Division in Warsaw*, Fundacja Upamiętnienia Pierwszej Dywizji Generała Stanisława Maczka, Warsaw, 1995.

57 See the periodical of their immigrant organisation: *Komunikat* of the Belgische Vereniging van Poolse Oud-Strijders (the Belgian Association for Polish Ex-Combatants) nr 96, 'Sprawozdanie z walnego zebrania 3.3.2003', p. 3. Private archive of the organisation, Scheidreef 15, Kapellen, Belgium; Interview with Waldek on 25.11.2005; interview with Robert on 13.02.2006. Respondents have been given fictitious names. All the interviews are in the possession of the author and can be consulted upon request.

Whereas during the Cold War, history had simply started with 'Catholic Poles' liberating Flanders, now the recruitment element in the First Armoured Polish Division during World War II became of crucial importance. During the Cold War that past remained irrelevant, but on the eve of a merger with a Belgian patriotic organisation, it needed to be clarified. It turned out that the Division consisted not only of soldiers who had left Poland in 1939, but also of people who had found their way to Great Britain between 1940 and 1944, having flown from various Prisoner of War and concentration camps in Europe, Siberia and Africa, or having managed to switch the German front for the French or Belgian one. The latter were mostly people from Silesia who had voluntarily or forcibly been enrolled in the German Wehrmacht and had managed to escape. The ones who had arrived in Great Britain could join the Division after going through a collaboration investigation and taking on a pseudonym, whereas the ones who had only met the Division in Belgium, simply shipped in somewhere on its liberation march.<sup>58</sup> Before a merger could take place, the Belgian patriotic organisation wanted to check the curriculum vitae of every single former division soldier. The ones who did not join the Division in 1939 would have to justify their possible engagement with the German Wehrmacht. Former division soldiers were unable to reach an agreement as to whether they could allow a Belgian patriotic organisation to check all their individual war experiences. Therefore, they decided to ally with the newly arrived Polish migrants.

The tradition of the former division soldiers provided the new Polish migrant-members with an extremely good argument to justify their stay in Belgium. Many new Polish migrants felt inferior to Belgians and other EU citizens because they were not granted the same rights on the Belgian

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<sup>58</sup> Stanisław Maczek, *Od podwody do czołga*, Orbis Books Ltd. - Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, London-Lublin, 1990, p. 25; Zbigniew Mieczkowski, with the collaboration of Stanisław Wyganowski and Władysław Zakowski, *Żołnierze Generała Maczka*, Fundacja Upamiętnienia Pierwszej Polskiej Dywizji Pancерnej Generała Stanisława Maczka/Foundation for the Commemoration of General Maczek First Polish Armoured Division, Warsaw, London, 2003, p. 14.

labour market.<sup>59</sup> Defensively, these migrants portray the former division soldiers as forerunners of peace in Europe and invented for themselves the role to continue to build a unified and peaceful European Union, in which Belgians and Poles would be equal. Such a narrative is now supported by the majority of Polish migrants in Belgium, who at this point count approximately 100,000 souls, and articulated in various contacts with Belgian citizens. In this way, their war memory is proliferated beyond the arena of local commemorative occasions from before.

Reaching the end of their days, former division soldiers in Belgium want to be assured their narrative will live on. As long as they had operated as a dominant, independent agency in the cultural field of war memory in Belgium, their integration seemed to have been an accomplished fact. When trying to enter the arena of Belgian patriotic organisations, however, this needed to be renegotiated. The new geopolitical context made their status as 'victims of communism' irrelevant, and brought other war experiences to light. Their downfall in prestige might have been compensated by the proliferation of their war memory by Polish migrants, who use the war experiences of the former division soldiers as an historical argument to defend their stay in Belgium as ethnic fellows. The chances that the tradition of former division soldiers will live on are quite high, given the new narrative, agency and arena on war memory articulation they found both in their home and host societies.

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59 Elżbieta Kuźma, 'Pięć lat w Unii', in: *Gazetka*, No. 81, p. 8 (consulted on [www.gazetka.be](http://www.gazetka.be)).

## 9. Former Ostarbeiterinnen and War Memory in the Post-Cold War Era

After the eclipse of communism, the group formation of former Ostarbeiterinnen stayed intact. To this day, there is still an Association for Soviet Citizens in Belgium, despite Soviet citizenship having ceased to exist almost 20 years ago. However, as with the former division soldiers, their narrative on war memory and its articulation changed under the influence of the geopolitical upheaval. At the end of the 1990s, an international gathering of war survivors having done forced labour during World War II, won an American court settlement, which resulted in the German government and various German industries paying a war pension to, among others, Soviet prisoners of war and Ostarbeiterinnen. Soon after, the German Heinrich Böll Foundation started cooperation with Memorial to search for and inform potential candidates. Over the following years, information about application procedures circulated in the Soviet Union's successor states which facilitated an increase in the number of disbursements. Disbursement issues also entailed academic interest in the war experiences of these formerly 'forgotten' people. Major German industrial companies asked historians to research the labour contributions of Soviet workers so as to ensure correct disbursement, and cities enrolled historians to map the presence of Soviet workers on their territory during World War II.<sup>60</sup> Although the same kind of studies appeared in Austria, they were usually undertaken a few years later than in Germany.<sup>61</sup> In these studies, all foreign labourers are collectively referred to as 'Zwangarbeiter', a concept often translated into English as 'forced' or even 'slave' labourers. Such

60 Herbert Ulrich, 'Zwangarbeit im 'Dritten Reich'. Kenntnisstand, offene Fragen, Forschungsprobleme', in: W. Reininghaus and N. Reimann (eds.), *Zwangarbeit in Deutschland 1939-1945. Archiv- und Sammlungsgut, Topographie und Erschließungsstrategien*, Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, Bielefeld, 2001, p 21-30.

61 Ludwig Steiner, 'Der lange Weg zur Anerkennung ehemaliger Zwangarbeiter als Opfer des Nationalsozialismus', in: G. Knat'ko and S. Karner (eds.), *Ostarbeiter. Weißrussische Zwangarbeiter in Österreich / Ostarbaitery. Prinuditel'nyĭ trud belorusskogo naseleniia v Avstrii*, Ludwig Boltzmann Institut für Kriegsfolgen-Forschung, Belorusskii respublikanskiĭ fond 'Vzaimoponimanie i primirenie', Graz-Minsk, 2003, p. 325.

a categorisation created the impression that a homogeneous group of foreign labourers with similar war experiences existed which could claim to enter the arenas of victimhood within the cultural field of war memory, until then solely inhabited by Holocaust survivors. In addition, touching on slavery, this narrative makes a decontextualised link with people of a totally different time period that lived in a very different place. Despite the inaccuracy with which various people treated differently by the Nazi regime are nowadays grouped together, 'Zwangarbeiter' became an officially institutionalised concept in German and Austrian politics and the term proliferated among the population to refer to all foreign workers in the Third Reich.<sup>62</sup>

In the former Soviet Union, the uncovering of formerly silenced war memories stimulated research and was used to push for a higher visibility and recognition of Soviet workers who 'suffered' during the Nazi and Soviet regime and therefore 'deserve' to be called 'victims of two dictatorships'.<sup>63</sup> However, since Putin came to power, such a liberal narrative has experienced a fall in proliferation.<sup>64</sup> Ostarbeiterinnen, their war experiences and memories, are also still absent in the *Museum for the Great Patriotic War* in Moscow. The situation in contemporary Belarus is comparable to the one in the Russian Federation, whereas the Ukrainian state keeps on heavily investing in the gathering of oral testimonies of former Ostarbeiterinnen on its territory.<sup>65</sup>

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62 Ulrich, *op.cit.*, pp. 16-18; For information on various mobilisations on the issue of resentments, see: Georges Mink, 'Between Reconciliation and the Reactivation of Past Conflicts in Europe: Rethinking Social Memory Paradigms', in: *Sociologický časopis/Czech Sociological Review*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 2008, pp. 469 and further.

63 Pavel Polian, *Zhertyy dvukh diktatur. Zhizn', trud, unizhenie i smert' sovetskikh voennoplennnykh i ostarbaïterov na chuzhbine i na rodine*. Rosspeñ, Institut Geografii Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, Moscow, 2002; 'Internationales Sklaven- und Zwangarbeiter Befragungsprojekt', project paper in: Archive Memorial Moscow. The results of the project were, among others, published in: Natalia Timofeyeva, 'Erfahrungen aus der sowjetischen Provinz. Bürger der ehemaligen USSR als Zwangarbeiter in Nazi-Deutschland', in: Von Plato, Leh and Thonfeld (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 222-263.

64 Sherlock, *op.cit.*, p. 184.

65 *Ukraina Moderna*, Vol. 11, 2007; Gelinada Grinchenko, *Nevygadane. Usni istorii*

Also, the former Ostarbeiterinnen in Belgium received a war pension, which seems to have influenced their self confidence to speak up. In the footprints of the remembering of the omnipresent Holocaust experience, the silenced war experiences of former Ostarbeiterinnen in Belgium are now beginning to be heard. Only very recently have their war experiences been recorded in writing. The organisational activities of former Ostarbeiterinnen in Belgium have become a topic of interest for the Belgian local press, which narrates them as victims of the Nazi system.<sup>66</sup> Also the choir of the SSG is still performing. The performances at the Embassy of the Russian Federation are diminishing, but they receive more and more invitations from organizers of ethnic multi-cultural festivals in big cities like Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent. In Antwerp, for instance, they became known as the 'Russian Buena Vista Social Club'.<sup>67</sup> The SSG choir's repertoire of folklore songs, without the propaganda songs from before, now impresses ethnic multi-cultural audiences in Belgium.<sup>68</sup> It shows how, in the post-communist era, former politically inspired narratives are transformed into narratives which place ethnicity at their centre.<sup>69</sup>

Cuban musicians, when presented as transnational ethnics, appear to fit in a strange way into that picture: they are increasingly offered a note, but not

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*ostarbaïteriv*, Instytut Istorii Ukraïny Natsional'noi Akademii Nauk Ukraïny, Kharkiv, 2004.

66 *Gazet van Zurenborg* 2 (3.2006) 4-5, 'Elke week een stukje Rusland in Zurenborg'; *Gazet van Zurenborg* 3 (7-8.2006) 6, 'Russische vrouwen bedanken met kaviaar en vodka'. See also: *Gazet van Antwerpen* 3.4.2006 (Metropool 13), 'Atlasgebouw feestelijk geopend'; *De Zondag, Regionaal Nieuws Antwerpen* 2.4.2006 (7), 'Massa volk en veel sfeer voor multicultureel feest bij opening'.

67 The Buena Vista Social Club was formed at the end of the 1990s, consisting of a group of old Cuban musicians and two younger American musicians, and performed Cuban folk music that soon gained enormous success thanks to frequent international concert tours.

68 More about the 'Russian Buena Vista Social Club' in: Venken, 'Van onzichtbaar naar zichtbaar: van communistes tot slachtoffers en baboesjka's. Gewezen Ostarbeiterinnen in België', in: *Historica*, Vol. 3, pp. 15-20.

69 Pamela Ballinger, *History in Exile. Memory and Identity at the borders of the Balkans*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2002, pp. 166-167.

a voice in global media forums. The melodies of a Cuban clarinetist appeal to spectators' imagination of a globalised world, but the discrimination which Cuban populations experience is of little concern to the audience.<sup>70</sup> The proliferation of world music is therefore more a top-down media industry construction than a bottom-up street phenomenon.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, by switching the repertoire to Russian and Ukrainian folk music from pre-communist times and referring to media-popular Cuban folk music, the choir enjoys its biggest success ever. Belgians embrace the charming vodka-drinking babushkas ('grandmothers'), exoticise them and no longer focus on their communist background. By placing Russian and Ukrainian folk music at the centre of their repertoire, the choir has become easily integrated into a post-cold war narrative of ethnic transnationalism. Choir members themselves do not understand why 'all of a sudden' they are receiving so many invitations to perform. However, they are eager to continue, despite their advanced years. Being offered a podium to sing certainly leads to a higher visibility of the former Ostarbeiterinnen in the public sphere, although their war experiences are seldom brought up for discussion. Whether these experiences will continue to be remembered once the women have died remains an open question.

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70 Anikó Imre, 'Play in the Ghetto. Global Entertainment and the European ,Roma Problem', in: *Third Text*, Vol. 20, No. 6, pp. 659-670.

71 Jonathan Friedman, 'Transnationalization, Socio-political Disorder, and Ethnification as Expressions of Declining Global Hegemony', in: *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 19, No. 3, p. 246.

## 10. Conclusion

This study is not primarily about forgetfulness, about giving the marginalised a voice and bringing them from the shadow into the light, which is the purpose of many oral history projects on forgotten war survivors. What I would like to offer in the first place is an understanding of the various processes of inclusion and exclusion in the way World War II was remembered over the years during and after the Cold War, both in the home and host societies of the Displaced Persons at issue, i.e. former division soldiers and former Ostarbeiterinnen. I therefore question how power dynamics over time shaped narratives on war memory among these migrants and influenced the arenas in which their narratives found articulation.

The geopolitical situation of the Cold War appeared to be a decisive element for the construction and performance of their war memories. The war experiences and the characteristics of the migrant men and women were already very different, but the Cold War context often enlarged these differences by shaping the articulation of war memories through the way the migrants were treated by their home and host societies. Former division soldiers undoubtedly enjoyed more favourable conditions than Ostarbeiterinnen to develop and articulate their war memories. The results of this research offer interesting new insights for the academic fields of memory of World War II, East-West relations and migration history.

First, memory research on World War II mainly focuses on specific arenas of war memory articulation, such as commemorations or interview settings, and less investigates the power dynamics that steer certain war memories to articulation or silencing in a specific arena. It turns out that only the war memories of former division soldiers found their way to commemoration services thanks to the support of Belgian elites in power. In addition, spaces one would never have imagined appear to have functioned as arenas of war memory articulation. Here I refer for instance to a podium set up for the proliferation of Soviet propaganda by the help of the Soviet

Consulate, where former Ostarbeiterinnen silently performed their own narrative on war memory. Second, this article widens the frontiers of that geographical space scholars assume to have been affected by the reshuffling of Soviet war memory. As it shows, migrants' war memories were constructed and performed in constant negotiation with agencies of war memory articulation on both sides of the former Iron Curtain and so can only be researched as such. Finally, former division soldiers only recently became ethnified by 'fellow ethnic' migrants and former Ostarbeiterinnen only recently made the switch to ethnic transnationals. Ethnic categorisation 'from above' is nowadays widespread in migration research, and if empirical evidence exists for such a categorisation, it sometimes goes unquestioned.

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