

From War to Post-War. Reflections on the End of the Second World War

Veranstalter: Charlie Hall / Markus Wahl, School of History, University of Kent

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The conference „From War to Post-War: Reflections on the End of the Second World War“ was a very informative and stimulating event, generously funded by the School of History at the University of Kent, which marked the approaching 70th anniversary of the end of the war in Europe. It was organised by Charlie Hall and Markus Wahl (both Canterbury) and held on 6 May 2015 at the university campus overlooking the historic city of Canterbury. Although brief and rather intimate, the conference gathered both established scholars and young researchers from different national and international institutions and from various disciplines, including History, Town Planning and Literature – which was its true forte. It also provided ample opportunity for both formal and informal discussion.

The conference sought to reflect from the different disciplinary angles on the transition from war to post-war as well as on what the end of the war in Europe meant for Britain in particular, but also beyond, especially for Germany and Poland. While some delegates re-considered the end of the war and a more immediate post-war transition, most focused on a broader picture of the post-war coming to terms and moving on. The organisers underlined the different foci by separating the papers into three panels: „Practicalities, Policy and Pragmatism in Transition from War to Post-War“, „The Memory and Experience of the Second World War in the Former Eastern Bloc“ and „Politics of Remembrance: Using Memories of the Second World War for Political Ends“, the latter involving also a plenary discussion on „The Legacy and Commemoration of the End of the Second World War“.

PETER LARKHAM (Birmingham) opened the conference with an illuminating keynote address. First of all, he put the war destruction sustained by Britain into perspective by reminding the audience that it was far from

being one of the most affected countries. Still, the post-war reconstruction in Britain was a mammoth task that the authorities had to face and one which required an answer to the question: radical planning or more of the same? It is interesting that in the austere early post-war years local authorities, responsible for providing post-war development plans, were sometimes willing and able to commission expensive and far-fetched reconstruction plans by eminent planners. However, the disillusion, especially with the social housing provision, the oil crisis and the conservationist movement gaining strength tempered the early post-war drive for radical redevelopment towards the late 1960s. The subject of post-Second World War reconstruction was aptly complemented with the paper by DAVID ADAMS (Birmingham) who has worked on unearthing the multi-sensory memories of such reconstruction based on individual interactions with the built space in Birmingham and Coventry through tapping into the potential of „go-along“ interviews. As he could ascertain, playing on undeveloped bomb sites was still part and parcel of childhood memories for the post-war generation and while some post-war modernist „totems“ failed to meet the public’s expectations and needed some „coming to terms“ with, others provided „exciting hustle and bustle“.

Various delegates offered a comparative reflection on the end of the war in Britain and Germany. While in London the war destruction often gave way to a positive rhetoric of a chance for new re-planning and re-building, in Berlin, hit much heavier and immersed in chaos in the spring of 1945, it predominantly gave rise to acute feelings of collapse and devastation, as MARTINA METZGER (Ingolstadt) pointed out. Her exploration of the similarities and differences between the air raids in London and Berlin, including their impact, severity, timing and the coping strategies, was very educational. Different types of links between Britain and Germany were also discussed by CHARLIE HALL (Canterbury), and CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES (London). Charlie Hall’s interesting paper, based on the early outcomes of his research on the military and commercial exploitation of Ger-

man scientists at the outset of the Cold War arms race, expounded on the various strategic, security, ethical and PR issues this implied for their new „employers“: Britain, France, the USA and the USSR. Knowles, on the other hand, pondered on the contrasts and correspondences between the evolution of ideals and complicated trajectories of the German socialists Willi Eichler and Walde- mar von Knoeringen and their British peers Austen Albu and Allan Flanders before, during and after the war.

A conference on the war to post-war transition could certainly not overlook considering the Eastern Bloc, where the end of the war did not mean the end of foreign occupation. The paper by MARKUS WAHL (Canterbury) offered a fascinating insight into how the East German authorities perceived sexuality and sexual health. Remarkably, in order to curb the sensitive problem of sexually transmitted diseases, the state compiled lists of „persons with frequent promiscuous behaviour“ identifying them on the basis of rather questionably defined categories and not without gender and social status bias. In contrast, two other delegates focused on Poland, the country that endured the longest period of occupation, from the very beginning of the war until the fall of communism in Europe and the Russian Army’s withdrawal in 1993. The paper by KRYSZYNA WIESZCZEK (Southampton) departed from a British socialist point of view and examined how George Orwell responded to the Polish transition to post-war by looking at his texts concerning the pro-Soviet war-time propaganda in Britain and Stalin’s illegal, but inevitably accepted by the Western Allies, actions that led to the Soviet communist take-over of the country against its government’s will. Furthermore, PAULINA GULIŃSKA-JURGIEL (Halle) shed some thought-provoking light on transitional justice that this take-over entailed. Pondering over the continuity and change brought by 1945 in Poland, she highlighted that while the communists tried to insidiously eliminate the opposition, they needed, for example, to make use of pre-war judges and while communist institutions to investigate war crimes were set up, until 1989 they could focus on the Nazi, but not on the Soviet ones.

One way for the countries involved with the war to come to terms with the recent past afterwards seemed precisely to hold the Nazi perpetrators to account, and BETH A. HEALEY (Chicago) contemplated the case and the legal repercussions of an unprecedented trial in which a business, Tesch & Stabenow that had delivered Zyklon B gas to Auschwitz, was charged for war crimes and crimes against humanity rather than individuals, as was the approach in the Nuremberg trials.

The closing plenary discussion, led by STEFAN GOEBEL (Canterbury), systematised in conversation with Larkham, Knowles and LUCY NOAKES (Brighton), some of the ideas developed throughout the day and brought new ones, too, reflecting on such diverse issues as long lasting consequences of a war or the propitiousness of a new field of the „Second World War Studies“.

It is evident that the conference attracted most varied topics and approaches, which both contributed and prompted new insights into and perspectives on how we understand the Second World War and what happened afterwards. In many regards it became clear, that the discourse about historicising the end of the Second World War and especially the post-war era is far from finished yet. In contrast, this conference has also shown an example of how an emerging new generation of historians is questioning the caesura of 1945 and thereby exposing otherwise hidden trajectories.

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Keynote Address

Peter Larkham (Birmingham City University), The rebuilding of postwar Britain: radical future or more of the same?

PANEL ONE: Practicalities, Policy and Pragmatism in Transition from War to Post-War
Chair: Juliette Pattinson (University of Kent)

Martina Metzger (Ingolstadt), Bombing Impact and Transition Process in Berlin and London (1944-1949)

Charlie Hall (University of Kent), New Armouries and New Enemies: The Exploitation

of German Science and Technology and the Start of the Cold War Arms Race

Beth A. Healey (Northwestern University),
The Business of Murder: Tesch & Stabenow
and the Zyklon B Trial

*PANEL TWO: The Memory and Experience of
the Second World War in the former Eastern
Bloc*

Chair: Stefan Goebel (University of Kent)

Markus Wahl (University of Kent), 'Persons
with frequent promiscuous behaviour': Sex,
STIs and the Transition of the Youth in Post-
War East Germany

Paulina Gulińska-Jurgiel (Martin Luther Uni-
versity, Halle), Transitional Justice in Post War
Poland, Semantics, Law and Institutions

Krystyna Wieszczyk (University of
Southampton), The Dualities of Transition:
George Orwell and Poland

*PANEL THREE: Politics of Remembrance:
Using Memories of the Second World War for
Political Ends*

Chair: Lucy Noakes (University of Brighton)

Christopher Knowles (King's College, Lon-
don), From the desperate struggle against fas-
cism to post-war social democracy: links be-
tween British and German socialists before,
during and after the war

David Adams (Birmingham City University),
Unearthing the promising and unsettling
memories of the post-Second World War re-
construction

*Plenary Discussion: The Legacy and Com-
memoration of the End of the Second World
War* Chair: Stefan Goebel (University of Kent)

Participants: Peter Larkham (Birmingham
City University) / Lucy Noakes (University of
Brighton) / Christopher Knowles (King's Col-
lege, London)

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