



# RETURNING MEMORIES

*Former Prisoners of War  
in Divided and Reunited Germany*

CHRISTIANE WIENAND



## *Returning Memories*

*German History in Context*

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Christiane Wienand



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*In loving and grateful memory of  
my father Albrecht Winkler (1952–2013) and  
my grandfather Ernst Winkler (1915–2010)*



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## Preface

ERNST WINKLER, MY GRANDFATHER, was born in Esslingen (Southern Germany) in 1915. He grew up to become a primary-school teacher, then was drafted for military service in the German Wehrmacht in 1938, witnessed the Anschluss of Austria, marched into Poland and France, and subsequently fought the war as a Leutnant on the Eastern Front. In May 1945 he was captured by the Red Army and became a prisoner of war (POW). Not until the winter of 1949 did he return from captivity in Siberia and the Ural mountains to his home and family in Southwest Germany, where he worked and lived until his death in September 2010.

My grandfather lived an individual life, and yet his life was shaped by the experiences of war, captivity, and return that he shared with millions of other former soldiers of Nazi Germany. He had his individual ways of dealing with the past, drew his individual lessons, and developed his individual ways of commemoration—and yet he shared his fate, his memories, and his status as a former soldier and POW with a significant section of German postwar society. What happened to German veterans and returnees from war captivity continues to be an integral part of the family histories of many Germans, as it does in ours. Yet they are much more than just privately told stories of the past, as this book will endeavor to show.

I am deeply grateful for the support I have received from a wide range of individuals and institutions who have contributed to turning my personal concern for my grandfather's memories into an academic endeavor that explores the long-term history of the memory of German returnees from war captivity after the Second World War in divided and reunited Germany. First and foremost, I am greatly honored to have had the opportunity to work with my PhD supervisor, Mary Fulbrook (UCL), for almost ten years now. I have received from her not only huge support and motivation but also constant intellectual inspiration. I am also very fortunate to have met Birgit Schwelling (KWI Essen) one day in the archive of the Verband der Heimkehrer in Bonn Bad Godesberg. Birgit became something like my informal secondary PhD supervisor and a close friend. She and her husband, Peter Krause, very generously provided accommodation in their homes in Berlin, Leipzig, and Konstanz for both professional and private undertakings. My UCL colleague and friend Julia Wagner has not only read and commented upon various drafts of this book but also constantly provided friendship, support, and a second home

whenever I needed one. *Dankeschön!* Even if his influence in this project is only indirect, I wish to thank Lothar Burchardt (Konstanz) who was my academic mentor during my studies at the Universität Konstanz and who taught me what he used to call the “Handwerkszeug des Historikers.”

Furthermore, I am grateful for the financial support I received from the European Commission (Marie Curie Fellowship), the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (Fees-Only Award), the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Düsseldorf (Abschluss-Stipendium), and the German Historical Institute London (Archive Grant). The publication of this book was made possible through the generous support of the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Düsseldorf.

Several colleagues gave me the opportunity to discuss my project at conferences and in private talks, or to publish results of my research; some of them also supported my applications to secure funding. For this I wish to thank Frank Biess, Martin Dinges, Jörg Echternkamp, Svenja Goltermann, Christian Groh, Christina Morina, Klaus Naumann, Elke Scherstjanoi, and Dorothee Wierling. Two reviewers have commented upon the entire manuscript and made many constructive and helpful remarks. Phil Leask has helped greatly by navigating my manuscript through the pitfalls of English language and grammar. Furthermore, I have received huge support from Jim Walker and his Camden House team. In particular, I would like to thank Sue Martin for her thorough copyediting. I am grateful and honored that Bill Niven and his editorial board have included this book in their series German History in Context.

In the course of my research I have been to various archives throughout Germany, and I wish to thank all archivists who were of assistance in the Bundesarchiv Koblenz, in the Bundesarchiv Berlin, in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg, in the Stadtarchiv Pforzheim, in the Stadtarchiv Erfurt, in the Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv Babelsberg, in the Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar, in the Archiv der Akademie der Künste and in the Archiv des Verbands der Heimkehrer.

My project would have been incomplete without the interviews I conducted with various contemporary witnesses who had been German prisoners of war during or after the Second World War. Their life stories have made a deep impression on me, way beyond my professional interests, and I am very grateful that they shared some of their memories with me. I also thank all the family members of returnees who agreed to talk to me about their husbands and fathers, and who generously provided unpublished source material or granted access to archival material.

Various friends and family members have supported this project in many ways, and I would particularly like to thank Corinna and Christian Augustin, Edith and Siegfried Augustin, Julia Boos, Julie Deering-Kraft, Petra and Franz Gall, Steffi and Sven Jüngerkes, Tobias Meyer, and Monika and Franz Wienand.



My deepest thanks go to my family: my grandfather Ernst Winkler spent many hours telling me about his experiences during the war and in war captivity, starting when I was a little girl and continuing beyond the day when I went to him with my recording device to do a proper interview for this book. My parents, Rose and Albrecht Winkler, have always encouraged my interest in history and supported me in every way they could and with all their love. I know that my father would have been incredibly proud to see this book finally being published. With his love and patience, my husband Johannes has been a constant support and motivation, and above all a wonderful companion. Our son Florian has not necessarily facilitated the revision of the book's manuscript, but he fills my heart with gratitude and our life with so much joy.



# Abbreviations

AeO	Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere (Working Group of Former Officers)
ARD	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (First German Television)
<i>AZ</i>	<i>Allgemeine Zeitung Bad Kreuznach</i>
BA-B	Bundesarchiv Berlin
BA-K	Bundesarchiv Koblenz
BA-MA	Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg
<i>BamS</i>	<i>Bild am Sonntag</i>
BEG	Bundesentschädigungsgesetz (Federal Compensation Law)
BGBL	Bundesgesetzblatt (Federal Law Gazette)
BT printed paper	Drucksachen des Deutschen Bundestags
BT protocol	Plenarprotokolle des Deutschen Bundestags (protocols of the German Parliament)
DEFA	Deutsche Film-AG (German Film Company)
<i>DH</i>	<i>Der Heimkehrer</i>
DM	Deutsche Mark
DRA	Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv Babelsberg
DSF	Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft (Society for German-Soviet Friendship)
dta	Deutsches Tagebucharchiv Emmendingen
<i>FAZ</i>	<i>Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i>
<i>FR</i>	<i>Frankfurter Rundschau</i>
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany
GDR	German Democratic Republic
HHG	Häftlingshilfegesetz (Prisoners Assistance Act)

HIAG	Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen Waffen-SS (Mutual Aid Society of former Waffen-SS soldiers)
HKStAufhG	Heimkehrerstiftungsaufhebungsgesetz (Act for the Abolishment of the Returnee Foundation)
Kemp-BIO	Walter-Kempowski-Biographienarchiv in the Archiv der Akademie der Künste
KgfEG	Kriegsgefangenenentschädigungsgesetz (POW Compensation Law)
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
LHA Koblenz	Landeshauptarchiv Koblenz
MIA	Soldier Missing in Action
ND	<i>Neues Deutschland</i>
NDPD	Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (National Democratic Party of Germany)
NKFD	Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland (National Committee for a Free Germany)
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party)
NVA	Nationale Volksarmee (National People's Army)
PZ	<i>Pforzheimer Zeitung</i>
RTL	Radio Television Luxemburg
RNZ	<i>Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung</i>
SAPMO-BArch	Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv Berlin
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
StAPf	Stadtarchiv Pforzheim
SZ	<i>Süddeutsche Zeitung</i>
taz	<i>die tageszeitung</i>
ThHStAW	Thüringisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Weimar

VDAK	Verband Deutsches Afrikakorps (League of the German Africa Corps)
VdH	Verband der Heimkehrer, Kriegsgefangenen und Vermisstenangehörigen e.V. (Association of Returnees, POWs and Relatives of MIAs)
VdH-A	Archiv des Verbands der Heimkehrer
VdN	Verlag der Nation
ZDF	Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (Second German Television)



## Introduction: Writing the History of Returnees

APPROXIMATELY ELEVEN MILLION GERMAN SOLDIERS became prisoners of war (POWs) of the Allied forces in the course of the Second World War. The majority of German POWs were released by the Allies and subsequently returned to Germany by the end of 1949, but the last POWs in the Soviet Union were released as late as the winter of 1955/56. As so-called *Heimkehrer* (literally “homecomers,” which in this study I will call “returnees”), the former POWs constituted a large and heterogeneous social group in both German postwar states, and for several decades they formed a significant subsection of German society. Their history as returnees begins with the end of their war captivity and their return to postwar society. This history is still ongoing.

For many German returned prisoners of war, their experiences as POWs and later as returnees from war captivity remained salient in their memories and narratives as well as in their social activities at various stages of their postwar lives. Some returnees actively participated in veterans’ associations, others dealt with their past by producing autobiographical accounts or by engaging in individual memory projects. The fate of returnees also impacted upon the public arena, particularly upon the mass media and the political realm. This was the case for returnees from Soviet camps as well as for returnees from camps all around Eastern and Western Europe, Northern Africa, and Northern America where German soldiers had been kept as POWs during and after the war. However, as the intensity of the past’s impact on the returnees’ own lives changed, the ways in which the past was publicly commemorated, represented, and interpreted in Germany before and after unification varied.

Individual aspects of the history of returnees have been explored through the historiographical perspectives of social history, history of everyday life, discourse history, and more recently also the history of memory (*Erinnerungsgeschichte*).<sup>1</sup> Informed by these approaches, this study provides a comprehensive approach to the history of returnees as a history of memory in divided and reunited Germany. This history comprises memories of individuals and collective representations of war, war captivity, and the return to postwar Germany. Furthermore, the history of returnees is shaped by more recent experiences of former POWs as returnees. These experiences range from somatic and long-term mental



effects of war captivity to their quest for compensation for the time spent in war captivity, and to an ongoing search of many returnees for social recognition of their suffering in war captivity. The different political and ideological contexts of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) until 1990, and reunited Germany have crucially shaped this history.

When and why did representations of the past change? Why and under what circumstances do memories of individual agents intersect with, mutually influence, or even exclude collective representations? What impact do the memories of individual returnees have on other representations of the past? In what ways do collectively produced representations of the past contribute to shaping individual memory? Why are some returnees' experiences more "sayable" or "narratable" than those of others, and why are some groups of returnees more "visible" in public than others? Who has the power to determine which are the "right" interpretations of the past?

## Synopsis

In this book I investigate the history of returnees as a history of memory in the decades between the mid-1950s and the present. During this period the actual experience of war captivity and the return from the POW camps were already a part of the past. It was a time in which specific public and private interpretations of the experiences of war captivity and return had already emerged and were available as collective patterns of interpretation. Furthermore, during this period returnees were no longer a social group of major interest to the day-to-day business of politics or the media. Through this focus it is possible to analyze forms of memory that only emerged when time had already moved on. In addition, the long time-frame of this study allows for an exploration of the transformation of memory culture and of "individual" forms of memory that took place during the political and social transition from a divided to a reunited Germany.

In the history of memory explored in this study, the returnees themselves are one memory agent among various others, individuals and groups alike, who have also shaped this history, even if they did not experience the past themselves. In various public and private contexts these memory agents communicate, interact, and follow specific interests as individuals and as members of groups and institutions.

This study contributes to the existing research on postwar German history and on memory in several respects: first, a history of memory as explored in this study analyzes the historical, social, and political processes of negotiating memories, and the transformation of these processes throughout the postwar decades. It demonstrates that the history of

returnees is shaped through the mutual intersection and concurrence of the memory projects of individuals, of collective forms of remembrance, commemoration, and representation of the past, and of the German culture of memory. I argue that memory needs to be analyzed as a multi-layered memory complex. The existence of intersections between various levels and layers of memory is often claimed in theoretical texts,<sup>2</sup> but there is only a limited range of empirical studies that attempt to explore the memory formations using a multifaceted approach that takes into account the complexity of the phenomenon.

Second, this study extends and enriches the existing historical research, which has thus far explored the history of returnees in some but not all of its major aspects. Most works about returnees have hitherto focused on discourses and social conditions of the first postwar decade. Rightly so, as this period was the time in which returnees and their fates were most intensively discussed in East and West German politics and among families alike. Nevertheless, by concentrating on the first postwar decade, research misconceives the diversity and the long-term impact of the history of returnees, which reaches far beyond the immediate postwar time up to the present day.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, most studies concentrate on returned POWs from camps in the Soviet Union. However, the focus on returnees from the East ignores the wide and varied spectrum of the fates of returnees and of the forms and contents of memory. It implicitly postulates that returnees from Soviet war captivity held a specific significance, without questioning whether this was actually the case and, if so, why. So far only one study explores the history of returnees from a “gesamt-deutsche” (pan-German), comparative perspective, yet that study remains limited to the first postwar decade.<sup>4</sup> Historical research on returnees until now has not explored the relationship between political ideology and memory via a long-term comparison of the FRG prior to 1990, the GDR, and reunited Germany and has not yet looked at memory constructions from a *gesamtdeutsche* perspective.<sup>5</sup>

Third, in this study I explore the transition from divided to reunited Germany, focusing on the formation and development of memory discourses regarding returned German POWs. The study thus contributes to a comparatively new field of research, which focuses on the ways in which the FRG and the GDR impacted upon the memory cultures of unified Germany.<sup>6</sup> It shows what kind of impact both the GDR and the FRG up to 1990 had on the ways in which Germans in reunified Germany interpreted the past. By analyzing the political, social, and cultural conditions of memory construction in these three distinct political frameworks, I retrace the ways in which individual and collective, private and public preoccupations with the past were formed and transformed in the aftermath of 1989/90.

## Structure

Memory, be it produced by individuals or by collective memory agents, in the public sphere or in private settings, is manifested in media representations, cultural productions, political discourse, autobiographical narratives of the past, and various other memory projects.<sup>7</sup> The analysis of these manifestations and concrete actions of memory and their interdependence is at the center of this study. In its four chapters I approach these phenomena from four perspectives, each focusing on a communicative framework that shaped collective representations of returnees and their own memories in specific ways. The thematic organization of this book may at some points cause minor repetitions of events, fact, and developments that are crucial for understanding the history of returnees throughout the postwar decades.

In the first chapter I analyze mass-media representations of returnees as collectively produced memory formations.<sup>8</sup> I explore a wide range of primary mass-media sources, ranging from motion pictures and documentary films to articles in daily and weekly newspapers and popular magazines. The aim of this chapter is to examine these publicly available depictions of returnees in order to find out which narratives of returnees were salient and socially accepted in East and West Germany at various times. By exploring a range of mass-media accounts and genres, I demonstrate that there are recurring and culturally significant images and narratives of returnees, which are bundled into the three categories of returnees—victims, heroes, and perpetrators. I explore the ways in which and the extent to which these representations were shaped by political and ideological circumstances and narratives, by media strategies, and by the direct involvement of returnees. The tendency of the media to reduce the complexity of issues and fates is mirrored by the categorization of returnees as heroes, as perpetrators, and as victims. These representations of returnees were not static but changed over time and under the varying political and cultural circumstances. The results of this chapter also serve as a reference for the following chapters, and thus as a reference for representations of returnees that are produced in other public and private spheres of communication. I argue that throughout the postwar decades these representations were constantly contested by larger political developments, by changes in German memory culture, and by the contrasting narratives of returnees themselves. For the Federal Republic with its pluralistic media landscape it is difficult to determine a dominant representation of returnees, as all three categories (victims, heroes, perpetrators) have shaped public media discourse throughout the postwar decades until today. In contrast, media representation of returnees in the GDR was largely influenced by the antifascist founding narrative of the GDR regime.

In the second chapter I analyze sociopolitical debates about financial compensation for returnees in the Federal Republic before and after reunification as political arenas of memory. I explore the ways in which the victim status of returnees was negotiated in those debates between various political agents. The negotiation processes were shaped by the leitmotif of constructions of “the other,” specifically other victim groups. References to these other victim groups served as a means to distinguish, to compare, and to equate the suffering and the victimhood of returnees. In this way, such constructions of “the other” contributed to legitimize and to make plausible political claims for compensation. Memory was primarily adopted as a political argument in these debates, and as such it was essentially determined by the political interest of the involved agents. While the Federal Republic granted returned POWs compensation, the East German governments refused to do so. Consequently, there was hardly any political discourse about compensation in the GDR. It was only after German unification that East German returnees successfully started to raise claims for compensation, too. As I argue below, this second compensation discourse was triggered by the political debate on compensation for former Forced Laborers of the Nazi regime at the end of the 1990s and continued because of the persistence of the Verband der Heimkehrer, Kriegsgefangenen und Vermisstenangehörigen e.V. (VdH, Association of Returnees, POWs, and Relatives of MIAs) and of some German politicians. This discourse resulted in representations of returnees as threefold victims: victims of war, of war captivity, and of the postwar situation in which returnees had received, according to this discourse, inadequate compensation for their suffering (in the case of West Germany) or, as was the case in the GDR, no compensation at all. The representation of returnees as victims in and through these political debates profited from the fact that returnees (that is, former soldiers) were put into the same category as former civil deportees (*Zivildeportierte*, that is, German civilians who were forcibly displaced to the Soviet Union), which made it much easier to conceive of the former POWs as victims, too.

In the first two chapters I approach the history of returnees from the perspective of collective and public representations of the past and explore the interactions of various collective and individual memory agents in the realms of the mass media and political debate. Both chapters offer an overview of the entire period from the mid-1950s until the present. In this way, they identify tendencies, caesuras, and changes in the history of returnees over several decades. They furthermore demonstrate which versions and interpretations of the past and of the fates of those who have lived through this past were publicly “sayable” and “showable” in the two Germanys and in reunited Germany.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the first two chapters, chapters 3 and 4 examine specific aspects of the history of returnees through an analysis of individual memory formations in narrower

communicative contexts. The memory accounts analyzed in these chapters are much more fragmented than the stories created through mass-media accounts and in political discourse; they only partially follow the overall tendencies that were explored in chapters 1 and 2 and are determined by the personal interests, motives, and stage in life of the historical agents at the grassroots-level: the returnees themselves.

In chapter 3 I explore the ways in which individual returnees constructed their memories, how such individual memory formations relied on collective narratives, and how they in turn affected public forms of memory. Individuals created, narrated, and published memories in various private and public spheres, reaching from the intimate family realm to publicly accessible forums on the Internet. I focus on the topoi of conversion and transformation, which played a pivotal role for returnees and their interpretations of the past. Time and again, returnees interpreted the experience of war captivity in their autobiographical accounts as a biographically important transition period that altered their existing worldview and influenced their life thereafter. The narrative structure and the purpose and the function of these transformation narratives are partly interwoven with the political and ideological frameworks of divided and reunited Germany. I analyze the ways in which these narratives helped to interpret the past in a meaningful way and thus to make a contribution to establishing, substantiating, and affirming individual postwar identities. I use several in-depth case studies from both East and West German returnees, based on primary source material, in order to develop the argument. By doing so, I also contribute to an ongoing methodological discussion of how to make use of egodocuments, autobiographical accounts, and oral-history interviews for exploring representations and narratives of the past.<sup>10</sup>

In the fourth chapter I analyze memories that emerged from the active engagement of single returnees and groups of returnees with their past in the form of institutionalized and non-institutionalized memory projects or memory activities. This analysis reveals a fascinating variety and broad spectrum of projects with which returnees, alone or in groups, dealt with their past as former POWs. By analyzing several such activities in depth, I examine how returnees used available institutional frameworks or created new discursive arenas for their individual memory activities and how they shaped local and group-specific cultures of memory. Because of the nature of the memory activities under examination, this chapter does not offer a continuous historical narrative from the mid-1950s to the present day. Rather, it reflects the actual fragmentation in memory projects. Returnees were at times more and at other times less engaged with their past. Some returnees participated actively in actions by veterans' organizations, whereas others never extended their preoccupation with their past beyond telling their stories to relatives. Yet for all of them

the past was still alive in one way or another. The past had an impact on returnees' lives after their homecoming, and in this chapter I set out to explore why this was the case, what the consequences were for returnees, and what kind of actions resulted from this. My close examination of various case studies in this chapter reveals the many different ways in which individual returnees created their memory projects and how these also contributed—in interaction with various other memory agents—toward building collective forms of memory that had an impact on how the past was represented, interpreted, and narrated at local and regional levels of society and within specific communities, such as friendship circles, religious communities, or within veterans' organizations.

The epilogue extends the book's perspective by demonstrating the different ways in which memories of returnees were transmitted to the next generations. Children of returnees in particular have been affected by the past of their returned fathers, and they were also involved in acts and performances of memory in various ways.

Historiography and fiction (Belletristik) of returnees represent two further perspectives that exert an impact on the ways in which returnees remember and are remembered. They are not explored in separate chapters as distinct arenas of communication, but are taken into account and closely explored in their interdependence with other forms of memory construction whenever they play a role in the representations of the past exemplified above. Fictional literature in fact plays an important role in the first chapter on mass-media representations, as several novels—some of them had already developed into bestsellers—were then used as a basis for feature films that reached a mass audience via cinema and television. Fictional literature also inspired and influenced returnees when they wrote or narrated their life stories, as can be shown in chapters 3 and 4. However, the main literary forum in which the experiences of returnees were dealt with was not so much pure fiction, but rather autobiographically inspired fictional literature of returnees (such as books by German authors Wolfgang Kolbenhoff, Franz Fühmann, and Hermann Kant) or non-fictional autobiographical texts. The highly interesting role of this literature as a form of memory—one that somehow stands between a claim of authenticity based on the writer's own experiences and the incentive to provide the readership (and often the writer himself) with a good, coherent, and meaningful story—is examined in chapters 3 and 4.

The historiography of German returnees is laid out below in an overview reaching from the first historical studies in the 1980s to the increasing research on returnees in recent years. Historiography had an ambivalent impact on mass-media representations of returnees: the publication of the results of the large historiographical project *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkriegs* about Germans in war captivity, for instance, triggered reports in German newspapers and

magazines about war captivity and the return of the POWs in the mid- and late 1970s in West Germany; at that time, the weekly tabloid *Bild am Sonntag* could even rightly claim that it was the first to explore the history of returnees (albeit with the methods of a boulevard mass medium and not with historical methods).<sup>11</sup> Yet the first chapter also shows that despite existing historiographical research, popular myths such as the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” would flourish for several decades. Empirical examples in chapter 4 suggest that historiographical studies could also be part of the memory activities of returnees when they used their profession and their professional methods in order to explore their own past.

## Sources and Methodological Remarks

Returnees were important agents in the formation of not only their own individual memories but also collective discourses regarding returnees and their experiences in the past. They formed a heterogeneous group of various age cohorts,<sup>12</sup> who had had fought as combatants in various theaters of the Second World War,<sup>13</sup> who experienced various fates in war captivity,<sup>14</sup> who were released at different points in time,<sup>15</sup> and who returned into various social and political circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Returnees repeatedly organized and reorganized themselves as individual and collective memory agents for various occasions and in different situations. Only a minority of returnees became active members of veterans' associations, and only in West Germany and in reunited Germany did independent veterans' organizations exist at all.<sup>17</sup> Veterans' associations nevertheless acted and still act as important collective memory agents for the history of returnees. Among these associations, the VdH held an exceptional position. It was one of the largest West German veterans' associations and the main association that took care of the interests and needs of returned POWs, particularly those returning from the Soviet Union. It therefore constitutes the most powerful and effective collective memory agent on the intermediary level of institutionalized memory construction.

Apart from the returnees and their organizations, other agents and their specific interests are explored in this study: the media function as collective memory agents, which have actively configured the history of returnees as a history of memory through the local and nationwide daily press, magazines, documentaries, and feature films in cinema and on television. Political agents, such as individual politicians or political parties, publicly debated about returnees and therefore contributed to determining which fates of returnees and which returnee subgroups were present in memory discourses. Recipients of published memory accounts and representations of returnees, such as newspaper readers, TV viewers, and readers of autobiographical texts, as well as family members and friends of



returnees, can also be considered as memory agents if they actively commented on and discussed the memory accounts they received.

This study is based upon the analysis of a large spectrum of sources collected from archives and private collections.<sup>18</sup> In order to grasp the private level of memory and to analyze individual memory projects, I examined unpublished and published autobiographical texts, autobiographically motivated novels and novellas written by returnees, and correspondence and collections of private persons.<sup>19</sup> In addition to these written sources, I conducted oral-history interviews with twenty-seven returnees in East and West Germany.<sup>20</sup> In order to gain information about the scope of private memory beyond the perspective of the returnees themselves, I also interviewed family members of returnees (four wives/widows and six children). I examined the “meso-level” of memory constructions through archival sources, correspondence, internal reports, newspapers, and other publications of the VdH and the Verband Deutsches Afrikakorps (VDAK; League of the German Africa Corps). Both associations published regular newspapers, *Der Heimkehrer* and *Die Oase* respectively, which I analyzed as important memory platforms for the members of these associations.<sup>21</sup> The VdH also owned a substantial press clippings collection through which I was able to complement research of other media sources with articles in West German local and regional newspapers.

Political debates, primarily about compensation for returnees, were reconstructed on the basis of parliamentary records and the documentation of parliamentary boards. I was able to retrieve further material (correspondence, legislative drafts, public statements) from the archive of the VdH, parts of which are still unreleased by the state archives. To gain insight into the question to what extent and in which ways ministries and state institutions were still engaged with returnee matters beyond the mid-1950s, I examined archival holdings of the West German Innenministerium, the Justizministerium, and the Vertriebenenministerium at the Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BA-K). The same question was considered when researching the papers of the East German Innenministerium, the Arbeitsministerium, and the papers of GDR politicians at the Bundesarchiv Berlin (BA-B). Since there were no independent veterans’ associations in the GDR, the holdings of the East German mass organization Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft (DSF) provided further material.<sup>22</sup> In order to reconstruct the local measures enacted to deal with returnees, research in local and regional archives was conducted to uncover official correspondence, files, and local newspapers.<sup>23</sup>

For my research on media representations of returnees as well as my examination of the media reflection of returnee issues at both the national and local levels, I analyzed a wide range of various mass-media sources,

including cinema and TV films, articles and series published in local, regional, and nationwide newspapers and magazines, documentary films, and broadcasting scripts and data.<sup>24</sup>

My interpretation combines two main approaches in order to cope with the long time-frame and the extensive breadth and variety of sources. One approach is the exploration of single memory formations using in-depth case studies. This allows for an analysis of the mutual intersection of memory accounts of individual returnees, memory formations produced by collective agents, and broader memory cultures. The other approach embeds these case studies into a diachronic analysis of cyclical developments,<sup>25</sup> tendencies, and changes of diverging memory formations and communicative contexts in which memories are manifested and substantiated.

## Asymmetries

The history of returnees in its comparative German-German perspective is shaped and informed by characteristic asymmetries. These asymmetries are expressed in various ways, which I will mention only briefly here but explore in depth throughout this study. Asymmetries occur with respect to the objects of research, the returnees, since certain returnees and returnee groups are represented with a higher visibility than others in specific memory contexts. In both Germanys, returnees from war captivity in the Soviet Union appeared more prominently in nationwide media and political memory discourse than returnees from war captivity in the West, yet for reasons that differed between the FRG and the GDR. Asymmetries are also obvious with respect to the actual memory agents involved in the construction of memory in East and West Germany: While veterans' organizations played an important role in the Federal Republic and later in reunited Germany, the GDR did not permit the establishment of independent veterans' organizations, which could have played a comparable role. The intersection of private and public memories also results in asymmetries. Private accounts of memory intersect with publicly available and legitimated official narrations of the past. The degree and intensity with which these intersections became apparent vary according to individual cases. However, not all private memory accounts neatly fitted collective narrations. Private and public forms of remembering are also subject to friction and incongruities and result in the production of private counter-narratives that try to negotiate or even adjust the interpretations and representations that can be found in the mass media or in historical writing. Finally, significant temporal asymmetries can be observed: as this long-term study shows, the history of returnees as a history of memory is made up of periods during which the memory of returnees booms and periods where there

is not much interest in the fates of returned POWs. This observation applies equally to private memories of returnees and public commemoration practices and representations of the past. Among those groups of Germans referred to as victims in the recent and still ongoing public discourse on the “German victims,”<sup>26</sup> returnees only play a minor role in comparison to other victim groups, such as war children, victims of the allied air raids and—most prominently—refugees and expellees. Furthermore, characteristic temporal asymmetries also occurred with respect to the public thematization of the fates of returnees as part of the “German victims,” and the fate of the “victims of the Germans”—those who had been persecuted during the Third Reich. These asymmetries led toward feelings of neglect among some returnees, and to vehement confirmation of their own victim status. Furthermore, this book contradicts public discourse in Germany of the last ten to fifteen years, according to which there had been a taboo about speaking of the suffering and the victimhood of ordinary Germans in postwar West Germany for many decades.

These asymmetries were triggered by a combination of various factors. One factor was the caesuras and continuities provided by the political and ideological frameworks in divided and reunited Germany. Until 1989/90 the rhetoric of the Cold War and Germany’s division shaped the formation of memory and its contents in both German states. In West Germany, the rhetoric that shaped the discourse about returnees was anti-communist and anti-totalitarian. In the GDR, on the other hand, the rhetoric of German-Soviet friendship and the antifascist founding myth took center stage. This in turn influenced the ways in which both German states approached the National Socialist past and thus the history of returnees. In the GDR, the “liberation” by the Red Army and the establishment of German-Soviet friendship was the officially promoted route for overcoming the Nazi past. In the pluralist society of the FRG, various social groups were engaged in ongoing and conflictual negotiations of how to come to terms with the past (be it through thematization, confrontation, or appeals to “draw a line” under the past).

German reunification and the end of the Cold War era were a caesura for the history of returnees as a history of memory. Several developments, however, continued throughout this transformation period. An evaluation of this transformation largely depends on whether one is analyzing continuity and change from a West or East German perspective. From the perspective of East German history, the reunification was a caesura in various respects, specifically with regard to the publicly produced memories, yet East German traditions have not completely vanished but were largely shifted to a subculture. Continuities become more apparent if we consider the West German perspective. This is demonstrated by an overview of the long-term representations of returnees as victims. Such representations

serve as a reappearing and reemerging leitmotif of public (West) German discourse and also appear in more private forms of memory (for example, in autobiographical texts or interviews) throughout the postwar decades.

Another factor was the transformations in the broader memory cultures from the mid-1950s to the present. In the FRG, several developments had an impact on the ways in which public and private memories of returnees were narrated and evaluated by others. These developments included increasing public attention toward the victims of National Socialist persecution in the 1960s following the trials of Nazi perpetrators. The debate became more emotional in the late 1970s and 1980s following the broadcast of the *Holocaust* TV series. In the GDR, the concept of the antifascist returnee who returned from Soviet war captivity as a “pioneer of the new Germany” remained the most important narrative describing the status of returnees in postwar society. However, with the transformation of the political landscape from Walter Ulbricht to Erich Honecker, the returnees lost the role they had previously held in official memory constructions. After German reunification, two public memory debates influenced the ways in which ordinary Germans and their experiences during war and National Socialism were publicly seen: the exhibition and subsequent discussion in the 1990s about the war crimes of the German Wehrmacht; and the ongoing debate about categorizing the Germans as victims. To varying degrees, these shifts in broader memory culture also shaped the manner in which returnees were represented, and the way in which they represented themselves and their past.

A third factor was the private and political interests of the individual and collective memory agents. Personal interests of the involved memory agents as well as feelings of neglect, which repeatedly appear among returnees who feared that postwar society had ignored their fates, have largely influenced the vehemence and the emotions with which returnees expressed their memories. Political interests, on the other hand, shaped the ways in which memories of returnees could be produced and discussed in the public sphere. Both personal and political interests resulted in specific memories and specific fates of returnees being publicly emphasized while others remained neglected.

Last, but not least, the particulars and genre-specific characteristics of the communication media and of the discursive realms in which memory was formed need to be taken into account. In pluralist societies like the FRG, the mass media are not restricted by political censoring and can thus focus on sensation, emotion, tragedy, and sentimentality, which requires characteristic forms of simplification and reduction of complexity. To a certain extent this also applies to the media in the GDR, which additionally acted as the agency of an officially legitimized opinion. Furthermore, the nationwide media tend to follow specific strategies, while the local and regional newspapers often focus on what is relevant

to the corresponding region, which results in different framework conditions for memory formation than in the nationwide media. Asymmetries like these are reinforced by new developments and improvements in communication technology, in particular the introduction of the Internet. The interactive *web.2* has altered the way in which memory agents actively participate in public memory discourse. Even individual forms of dealing with the past, such as through autobiographical writing or in oral-history interviews, are subject to genre-specific characteristics. Autobiographical writings and oral-history interviews were produced at specific times, under specific personal and social conditions, and with specific intentions, all of which affected how returnees referred to their past through these means of communication and remembrance.

## The Concept of Memory

I understand “memory” as a communicative process and an active engagement with the past in which interpretations and representations of the past are used to create meaning in the present.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the concept of memory applied to this study is based on agent-centered and constructivist approaches.<sup>28</sup> They in turn refer to the social conditions of memory (*les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*), an approach developed by Maurice Halbwachs.<sup>29</sup> Halbwachs asserts that all individual memory is embedded within social frameworks. All memory is therefore “collective memory” in the sense that memory is formed only in the interaction with others and is jointly shaped by individuals and by the society and social groups in which these individuals act and interact. This conception of memory in turn allows individuals to influence the social framework and to form memories like patchwork by integrating various, and at times conflicting, cultural and collective narratives of the past into the accounts of their own experiences. Problems with the term “collective memory” arise from the fact that only individuals can remember, not collectives such as nations or the media. Recent scholarship has criticized and contested the notion of “collective memory,” trying to replace or circumvent it with terms such as “political memory,” “social memory,” “family memory,” or “generational memory.” As Bill Niven argues, these terms do not provide substantial ground for alternative concepts, since they can still be framed as forms of “collective memory.”<sup>30</sup> Arguing against the notion of “collective memory,” Jay Winter suggests to use “collective remembrance” instead, which he understands as a “process through which different collectives, from very small groups to groups in their thousands, engage in acts of remembrance together. When such people lose interest, or time, or for any other reason cease to act; when they move away, or die, then the collective dissolves, and so do collective acts of remembrance.”<sup>31</sup> However, “collective memory” does not mean that individuals can somehow share

the memories of others. As James E. Young claims, “they share instead the forms of memory, even the meanings in memory generated by these forms, but an individual’s memory remains hers alone.”<sup>32</sup>

Since in this study I am interested both in “collective memory” in the sense of collective agents of memory being engaged in “acts of remembrance,” as Winter calls it, and in memory projects and forms of memory performed by individuals, I employ the term “memory” in a broad sense to encompass both. Memory then encompasses memories and memory activities of contemporary witnesses, as they remember and interpret their own past. Memory in this sense also includes interpretations of the past that are formed by other individual and collective agents. Through their participation in discourses about the past, these agents contribute to the commemoration of the past and of the life stories of returnees evolving from this past. Therefore, memory in this study is widely understood as socially negotiated interpretations of the past. Memory can be formed on various public and private levels, ranging from a familial-centered memory to the intermediary or meso-level of (peer-) group memory and beyond to a broader local, regional, and nationwide “memory culture.” Memory is a multilayered and multifaceted set of actions that represents and provides meaning to the past. It is jointly constructed by individual and collective agents: that is, by returnees themselves and by others who do not share the experiences in question. This conception of memory emphasizes the concurrence and simultaneity of competing views over who is most successful and powerful at promoting one or the other interpretation of the past.<sup>33</sup> It therefore raises and provides answers to questions of agency and power. Furthermore, memory is closely related to identity and to the processes of identity formation.<sup>34</sup> This link of memory and identity forms the focus of chapter 3, where I explore narratives of the past by returnees and the ways in which these narratives contributed toward shaping acceptable postwar civic identities. Accordingly, memory has an impact on present and future actions of individuals and groups. Studies on the history of memory not only examine what is remembered, who is remembered, and how the object is remembered; they also explore what and who is not remembered and why this is the case.<sup>35</sup> The multifaceted approach applied in this study allows us to explore the correlation of “remembering” and “forgetting.” Exploring the history of returnees as a history of memory therefore means conducting an archaeology of discourses, representations, and interpretations of the past and the corresponding identity constructions.

Informed by the conceptions of “memory” laid out above, in this study I argue that the relationship between individual memory and collective representations of the past is shaped by the simultaneity of various, and at times competing, manifestations of interpretations of the past and their mutual intersection. Individual memory and collective

representations of the past cannot be understood independently of one another. The memory formations constituted through the “late” memories I analyze in this study are structured by the interplay of various motivations, interests, and intentions of individual and collective “memory producers” and “memory recipients.”<sup>36</sup>

## Returnees in Historiography—A Historical Outline

As early as the 1950s, historians in East and West Germany began to explore the phenomenon of German soldiers’ captivity in the Second World War. West German historiography on war captivity was dominated by the collaborative research project *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkriegs*.<sup>37</sup> This huge research project was officially initiated in 1957 by the West German Ministry for Expellees, and complemented additional projects on German expellees and on German war damages.<sup>38</sup> In order to explore the history of German POWs of the Second World War in its entirety, a commission was established under the direction of the historian Erich Maschke, who himself had spent eight years as a POW in the Soviet Union.<sup>39</sup> A major purpose of the commission was to investigate and record the German POWs’ stories of captivity by conducting interviews and collecting ego-documents.<sup>40</sup> The history of the Wissenschaftliche Kommission itself is remarkable, as it demonstrates the difficulties of writing contemporary history: after the publication of an article about war captivity in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in April 1969, a simmering debate between the historians of the Wissenschaftliche Kommission and the contemporary witnesses of the VdH about how to write the history of war captivity escalated.<sup>41</sup> The East German political rulers perceived this research project as a potential threat. In April 1964 the radio station Deutscher Freiheitssender 904, which was run by the governing East German state party, the SED, broadcast an appeal to all West German returnees not to provide the Wissenschaftliche Kommission with reports and information about their time in war captivity.<sup>42</sup>

In the GDR, there has been no comparable wide-ranging historical research project on the subject. In fact, as will be shown in this study, war captivity, particularly war captivity in the Soviet Union—the brother-state of the GDR, at least in terms of ideology—constituted a problematic issue. The living conditions and the everyday experiences of the majority of German POWs there had been very harsh and did not help to support the official idea of German-Soviet friendship. Historical research therefore mainly concentrated on the “positive” sides of war captivity in the Soviet Union, such as reeducation efforts and the establishment of the Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland (NKFD; National Committee for a Free Germany).<sup>43</sup> Historical research has since produced a large number



of studies focusing on various aspects of war captivity in various countries and continents.<sup>44</sup>

Not until the mid-1980s were the first historiographical studies about returnees, their return from war captivity, and their lives afterward undertaken.<sup>45</sup> These works mainly developed in the context of West German research, meaning that the history of returnees in historiography is mainly a West German history.<sup>46</sup> The studies *Kriegsgefangenschaft und Heimkehr* (1986) by Albrecht Lehmann and *Von Liebe sprach damals keiner* (1985) by Sabine Meyer and Eva Schulze were the expression of a contemporary trend in West German historiography in the early and mid-1980s to investigate the everyday history of ordinary people. No longer primarily interested in the structures and institutions, or in the great men who make history, these studies set out to look at the grassroots and explore the history of ordinary Germans. Together with Arthur L. Smith's study about the initial measures to reintegrate returnees after their war captivity and James M. Diehl's analysis of legal reintegration measures for German war veterans,<sup>47</sup> these empirical works provide important material for questions concerning political and social measures aimed at reintegrating returnees.

Another ten years passed before the collective volume *Heimkehr 1948* became the first historiographic work that extended the focus of research to the Soviet Occupied Zone and the early GDR by also investigating the social circumstances of return and reintegration.<sup>48</sup> While historical research has intensively examined the immediate political, social, and cultural aftereffects of the Second World War and the Nazi dictatorship, the mid- and long-term impacts of the experiences of war and war captivity have only recently grasped the attention of historians.<sup>49</sup> To date, the only comparative study about returnees from war captivity is Frank Biess's book *Homecomings* (2006). Biess explores the reintegration measures and the sociopolitical discourse concerning returnees during the first decade after the war in East and West Germany.<sup>50</sup> He explores the emergence of various East and West German narratives of the past that developed in the early postwar years. Traces of those narratives are also evident in the "late" memories that are at the center of this book. Biess's analysis of a wide range of sources, through which he was able to explore a fascinating spectrum of public and private discourses about returnees in the first postwar decade, has influenced the multifaceted approach of this study. Biess also expanded Robert Moeller's influential hypotheses about the "remasculinization" of West German society and the West German victimization discourse of the 1950s. Moeller developed these hypotheses in his study on discourse about returnees and expellees in West German society and the media.<sup>51</sup> Biess and Moeller convincingly rejected the idea of a taboo of thematizing "German victims" in contrast to the "victims of the Germans" in the first decade after the war.



Birgit Schwelling's study *Heimkehr—Erinnerung—Integration: Der Verband der Heimkehrer, die ehemaligen Kriegsgefangenen und die west-deutsche Gesellschaft*, relates the history of the West German VdH and is another crucial reference work for this study. Schwelling explores the political instrumentalization of memory formation by the VdH against the background of the contemporary historical context and the specific political aims of the association.<sup>52</sup> Her study has laid the groundwork for future research on memory formation at the meso-level of veterans' associations. Her work is extremely important for my book, since she explores a wide spectrum of activities of the VdH as one of the most influential collective memory agents for the history of returnees in the Federal Republic prior to 1990 and in reunited Germany.<sup>53</sup> Schwelling furthermore demonstrated that the work of the VdH was an important and hitherto underestimated factor in the democratization process of the Federal Republic.

Svenja Goltermann was the first to explore the psychological and long-term aftereffects of war and captivity in her book *Die Gesellschaft der Überlebenden: Deutsche Kriegsheimkehrer und ihre Gewalterfahrungen im Zweiten Weltkrieg*.<sup>54</sup> Goltermann combined an analysis of psychiatric medical records with academic works by psychiatrists and media accounts produced in West Germany from the immediate postwar time to the early 1970s. She thereby examines the relationship and the mutual intersection of individual memories and life descriptions of returnees with memory culture at various private and public levels. Thus her study is a major contribution to the analysis of the intersections and the interplay of memory formations. Furthermore, she demonstrates in a fascinating manner the ways in which psychiatric knowledge informed and shaped West German media representations of German veterans.

This book has furthermore profited from a study by Christina Morina, who has explored the long-term impact of the war of extermination at the Eastern Front on public debate and political culture in both Germanys.<sup>55</sup> With her comparison of political memory in East and West Germany throughout the postwar decades, Morina explores the interdependencies of public memory and political culture by investigating the ways in which German politicians, state officials, and war veterans made public use of the war against the Soviet Union. Her results provide the background and context for various memory formations analyzed in this book. While Morina looks at larger developments of political memory mainly at the level of the two German states, Neil Gregor explores local memory formation in the West German city of Nuremberg up to the 1960s.<sup>56</sup> Gregor's study offers a local perspective, analyzing the means by which various social groups, among them returned POWs, attempted to coming to terms with the past. Through his focus on one particular local political and social setting, Gregor is able to demonstrate how

memory activities of various local groups were conducted in parallel and often in competition against each other. Recently, a collective volume on *Russlandheimkehrer* (German returnees from the Soviet Union), edited by Elke Scherstjanoi, provided accounts of various social and cultural aspects of the history of returnees, including exhibitions, films, autobiographical reports, and oral-history interviews with returnees.<sup>57</sup>

The focus of existing research on returnees from Soviet war captivity, which also dominates the works by Biess, Moeller, Schwelling, Morina, and Gregor, as well as the volume edited by Scherstjanoi, is also apparent in several studies on subgroups of returnees. Focusing on a similar group of returnees, Daniel Niemetz analyzed the ways in which former officers of the Wehrmacht, returning from war captivity in the Soviet Union, where they had joined the resistance group NKFD, later shaped the configuration and the self-understanding of the Nationale Volksarmee (NVA, National People's Army) in the GDR.<sup>58</sup> Klaus Naumann and Alaric Searle also focused on the return of former professional officers of the Wehrmacht and their reintegration into the social and political system of the FRG and the newly established Bundeswehr during the 1950s. And, most recently, Jörg Echternkamp provided a detailed analysis of the transformation of the West German society until 1955 and the ways in which German veterans were perceived within this transformation period.<sup>59</sup>

Compared to the returnees from the POW camps in the Soviet Union, returnees from war captivity under the Western Allies have received far less attention in historiography. The experiences of former German POWs in the United States and the United Kingdom are at the center of articles by Peter Steinbach, in which he focuses on the potential of the experiences of war captivity for democratization.<sup>60</sup>

This study has been informed and inspired by the existing research on returnees, and with it I seek to contribute to this research also with respect to the methodological approach applied to various types of sources. To date, egodocuments and autobiographical accounts produced by returnees, as well as oral-history interviews with returnees, have not been used comprehensively as sources for memory construction—that is, for a long-term analysis of the history of returnees as a history of memory.<sup>61</sup> The oral-history interviews and autobiographical texts analyzed for this study are primarily used to reconstruct individual memory landscapes and individual forms of memory work and memory projects. Thus these sources are used as sources for subsequent reconstructions and interpretations of the past, but not for reconstructing the past itself.<sup>62</sup>

This book not only uses oral-history interviews and autobiographical texts as sources for memory construction but also brings attention to other sources for constituting the history of returnees as a history of memory. The construction and production of collective “Geschichtsbilder” (conceptions of history) and interpretations of the past through

the media, especially via documentary films, have not yet been analyzed in historical research with respect to the subject of war captivity and the return from war captivity.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, only a few studies analyzed feature films in cinema or on television as sources for the collective representations of returnees.<sup>64</sup>

All in all, research on returnees and their memories is on the rise, but beyond the studies discussed in this overview, no historiographical monograph has thus far explored the history of returnees as a history of memory beyond the first postwar decade as a *gesamtdeutsches* phenomenon. Furthermore, no study exists that investigates the characteristics of the social and political discourses and individual self-descriptions of returnees in divided and reunited Germany and at the same time analyzes their mutual interdependence. By taking up a diachronic and comparative perspective, this book uncovers hitherto disregarded fields of memory formation.

## **Heimkehrer: Preliminary Remarks on a Term and Its Meaning**

In 1958 an article in the West German newspaper *Westfalen-Zeitung* stated: “Heimkehrer—in diesem Wort schwingt der Pendelschlag großen Schicksals und weht der Atem menschlicher Katastrophe” (Homecomer: the word resonates to the beat of the pendulum of fate; it carries with it a sense of human catastrophe).<sup>65</sup> This quotation implies that the term Heimkehrer carried specific meanings, emotions, and associations. In the early postwar years the term Heimkehrer became established in everyday language, mainly to describe German soldiers who returned from Allied war captivity.<sup>66</sup> It literally means “homecomer.” In this study it is translated as “returnee” or “returned Prisoner of War.”<sup>67</sup> The term has its own history in postwar Germany, especially in West Germany. This history needs to be retraced to understand both the specific connotations and the specific usage of the term.

Apart from everyday language, the term Heimkehrer was entrenched through its use in legal definitions, in academic literature, in the media, and within the community of former POWs themselves. The legal definition of the term Heimkehrer in West Germany was laid out in the Heimkehrergesetz (Returnee Law) of 1950 and in the Kriegsgefangenenentschädigungsgesetz (KgfEG; Prisoner of War Compensation Law) of 1954. According to the Heimkehrergesetz §1 (1), Heimkehrer were “Deutsche, die wegen ihrer Zugehörigkeit zu einem militärischen oder militärähnlichen Verband kriegsgefangen waren und innerhalb von zwei Monaten nach der Entlassung aus fremdem Gewahrsam im Bundesgebiet Aufenthalt genommen haben”<sup>68</sup> (Germans who were captured as POWs

because they belonged to a military or military-like formation, and who took up residence in the federal territory within two months of their release from foreign custody). In a further definition the law also included those people who had not been former soldiers and POWs but had been interned as so-called *Zivilinternierte* (civil internees) or had been *Zivildeportierte*, civilians deported in the course of the war and its aftermath. Once they returned from foreign custody, they were also legally classified as Heimkehrer.<sup>69</sup> This legal definition was further amended through the administrative and legal execution of the Heimkehrergesetz and the KgfEG, according to which members of the Waffen-SS<sup>70</sup>—the military unit of the SS—would be regarded as returnees (or as former POWs, which was a necessary prerequisite to legally qualify as a returnee) if they had been deployed as soldiers for the purpose of warfare,<sup>71</sup> while other members of the SS, the Sicherheitsdienst, and the Gestapo were excluded from falling under the category of returnee.<sup>72</sup> Other legal ambiguities arose from the fact that not all former German POWs immediately returned to Germany after their release from captivity, as seen for instance with Germans who were interned by the French and had been released on the condition that they would sign a contract with the French Foreign Legion. In such cases, West German ministries applied differing classifications, some regarding them as returnees, others not.<sup>73</sup> During the 1950s, West German ministries also debated whether Germans who had been accused and sentenced as war criminals and were interned by the Western Allies could qualify as returnees.<sup>74</sup> The VdH in particular took sides with these so-called *Kriegsverurteilte* and actively campaigned for them; among other things, the VdH attempted to convince the political sphere to expand the notion Heimkehrer to include returning *Kriegsverurteilte*.<sup>75</sup> To solve this issue, officials put forward the argument that only those POWs who returned from POW camps outside Germany were “coming home” and could therefore count as Heimkehrer.<sup>76</sup>

In East Germany there was no specific returnee law defining the term Heimkehrer. From contemporary reports, however, it can be discerned that the East German usage of the term generally applied to former German POWs.<sup>77</sup> The category Heimkehrer was important in order to obtain benefits and grants that were specifically issued to returned POWs. At times, Germans who had been deported from special prisons in the Soviet Occupation Zone to the Soviet Union and then returned to Germany from there were also categorized as Heimkehrer. In both German states the (legal) category of Heimkehrer meant eligibility for financial aid from the state, which meant that it was important for people to be regarded as Heimkehrer. After the return of the last German POWs in 1955/56, however, the term Heimkehrer vanished from official rhetoric in the GDR.