

THE POST-CONFLICT ODYSSEY OF THE GERMAN COMMUNIST  
VETERANS OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, 1939-1989

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ABSTRACT

In early February of 1939, hundreds of German communists counted among the international volunteers who suffered a crushing rout in what proved their final campaign on behalf of the Spanish Republic in the Spanish Civil War. In the wake of this defeat, which seemed to cast doubt on the viability of their politics, these German communists embarked on an odyssey that would test their political mettle not only in the immediate aftermath of their forced exodus from Spain but also for decades to come. Initially, they underwent a troubling change of context as they transitioned from political militancy in Spain to the disempowering context of internment in France. After their patron state, the Soviet Union, signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany on August 23, 1939, these longtime antifascists struggled in their everyday lives as internees to negotiate concomitant changes in their politics that stemmed from this unforeseen shift in global political constellations. For many veterans who settled in the German Democratic Republic in the postwar years, the difficulties associated with these troubled times came back to haunt them by providing persons who scrutinized their past political conduct with

grounds for questioning their allegiance to the very cause to which they long strived so desperately to remain unswervingly loyal.

Many scholars examining the German communist veterans during these periods have argued that their actions were driven primarily by dogmatic adherence to the politics of the Communist Party. Yet in so arguing, these scholars have failed to recognize the political difficulties the veterans faced and the means of ideological negotiation to which they resorted to preserve their Party loyalty at these critical historical junctures. Through a micro-historical investigation of ego documents emerging from various periods following their defeat in Spain, I argue that, rather than originating in blind obedience, the veterans' political conduct was driven by their efforts to grapple with the shortcomings they perceived in the politics they espoused.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “The Post-conflict Odyssey of German Communist Veterans of the Spanish Civil War, 1939-1989,” presented by Dustin Elliott Stalnaker, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## INTRODUCTION

As the Spanish Civil War approached an unfavorable end for the Spanish Republic, the German contingent of the International Brigades began a final retreat across Spain's northern border to France on February 9, 1939. After fighting for more than two years in what they saw as an antifascist struggle against the rising of Francisco Franco, these Spain fighters, or "Spanienkämpfer" as they called themselves, now embarked on a new odyssey through a series of French internment camps. For many among them, detention in France would last more than twenty-seven months. Major changes unfolded on the world stage between their initial internment in France and their general extradition to Nazi Germany in mid-May of 1941. Their captivity during this time prevented the Spanienkämpfer from playing an active role in developments on the world stage; yet due to the gravity of contemporary world affairs, these predominantly communist figures refused to allow their difficult circumstances to curb their political exuberance.

To combat the desolation engendered by their failure to prevent Franco's conquest of Spain, they dedicated the initial months of their internment in France to new cultural and political projects. They endeavored thereby to reclaim some form of positive agency in the global antifascist struggle from which their captivity sequestered them. Yet even these projects were interrupted on August 23, 1939, when they received unanticipated news of the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between their sworn enemy, Nazi Germany, and their patron state, the Soviet Union. Besides bringing them into disfavor with their French hosts when the Second World War erupted one week later, the Pact required the communist Spanienkämpfer to suspend their antifascist activities—a central feature of their politics. Amid such tribulations, they embarked on a

complex process of ideological negotiation that had repercussions for them in the postwar era, when questions arose regarding their political loyalties. This thesis reconstructs the history of the German communist volunteers in the wake of their exodus from Spain. Using ego sources from various stages in their post-conflict odyssey, it uses a micro-historical approach to dispute the prevailing historiographical view that the conduct of the communist Spanienkämpfer was in some cases reducible to political zealotry. Focusing on the conduct and political attitudes of the communist Spanienkämpfer in relation to their internment in France, this thesis shows that the steadfast political commitment attributed to them—both by themselves and by scholars—was an ideal strived for but rarely attained in practice. The thesis thus endeavors to move beyond the discourse of the Cold War and its residual assumptions, which have continued to inform much scholarship on the subject to date.

The story of the communist Spanienkämpfer as antifascist resistance fighters began on the streets, in the beer halls, and at the ballot boxes of interwar Germany. Amid the political polarization of the late Weimar years, the National Socialist Party and the Communist Party (KPD) rose from the political fringe to positions of prominence on the German political stage. After years of electioneering and paramilitary conflict between these parties, the Nazis attained power when President Paul von Hindenburg appointed Adolf Hitler to the German Chancellorship on January 30, 1933. Using the Reichstag Fire of the following month as a pretext, the Nazis quickly expelled or imprisoned many of their erstwhile communist political rivals. Though the Communists had long forecasted proletarian revolution in the event of such a contingency, no class insurrection

materialized; as a result, many German communists saw no realistic option but to go underground or retreat into exile.

Communist resistance efforts abated but never truly ceased in the wake of their domestic defeat. Upon the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, these resistance efforts intensified once more to a fever pitch. As a place where, by fighting for the Republican cause, communists could engage Hitler's intervening forces in armed combat, Spain came to serve not only as a metaphorical but also a literal battleground for what the Communists saw as a still unsettled score from 1933. Spain acquired symbolic status at this time as the ideological battleground of Europe and became the theater where the Communists could recommence open conflict with their fascist enemy. There, the Communists and other antifascists of Germany squared off against Hitler's Condor Legion as proponents of a brand of politics that refused to coexist with the fascism that reigned in their German homeland. To be sure, the Spanish Civil War was most immediately a confrontation between Spaniards favoring divergent paths for Spain and her people, and this contest attracted participants of many nationalities. Yet because it served as an outlet for the antifascists Ernest Hemingway dubbed "the true Germany"<sup>1</sup> to begin settling accounts with agents of the Nazi regime, it can also be understood as a proxy civil war waged by Germans fighting for two separate visions of the future of Germany and the world.

This late-1930s clash in Spain between coalitions of mutually antagonistic Germans became a controversial source of political capital during the Cold War years of

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<sup>1</sup> Horst Kühne et al., *Pasaremos: deutsche Antifaschisten im national-revolutionären Krieg des spanischen Volkes, Bilder, Dokumente, Erinnerungen* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1966), 257.

Germany's division. In the wake of the unparalleled crimes of the vanquished Third Reich, both the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD) and the German Democratic Republic (DDR) sought positive legacies upon which to found their respective German states. The largely communist orientation of the Spanienkämpfer made their story of resistance better suited to the politics of the Soviet-aligned DDR. The Spanienkämpfer thus achieved celebrity status in public memory in the DDR but received the opposite treatment in the BRD, where they were maligned as adventurers and pawns of Stalin. The ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the DDR fostered public discourse that construed its own state as the bearer of the antifascist tradition of the Spanienkämpfer; it sought to portray the BRD, by contrast, as a carrier of the spirit of Hitler's Condor Legion.<sup>2</sup>

The Cold War politicization of the Spanienkämpfer proved enduring. Though the German historical profession has accorded considerable attention since 1945 to studying various forms of resistance to Nazism, the stigmatization of the Spanienkämpfer by the Western historical tradition consigned these figures to practical anonymity in the lamentably anemic historiography of working-class resistance to Nazism. Yet these resisters' near absence from the record did not go unnoticed. Remarking on what he deemed one of many deficiencies in the historiography of German resistance, the late historian Leonidas Hill wrote,

The effort of the exiles who fought [Nazism] in Spain was particularly impressive. ... They were convinced that they thereby contributed to the defeat of Nazism and Fascism, *an argument many historians will find convincing. Surely both the argument and the actors deserve lengthier consideration than they are usually given in the histories of resistance.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Monteath, "German Historiography and the Spanish Civil War: A Critical Survey," *European History Quarterly* 20 (1990): 260.

<sup>3</sup> Leonidas Hill, "Towards a New History of German Resistance to Hitler," *Central European History* 14, no. 4 (1981): 379-380. My italics.

Writing three decades ago, Hill expressed his dissatisfaction that this compelling display of resistance by Germans to the Nazi regime remained largely unstudied. Apart from the American historian Arnold Krammer, who wrote a brief introductory article on the topic,<sup>4</sup> the East German historian Horst Kühne stood virtually alone in acknowledging this particular legacy.<sup>5</sup> Yet because the East German historical profession used the *Spanienkämpfer* didactically to legitimize the East German state,<sup>6</sup> even Kühne's monograph-length study of the *Spanienkämpfer* scarcely qualified as a critical engagement with their history.

In the very year that Hill called for increased scholarly attention to the *Spanienkämpfer*, Patrik von zur Mühlen published the first thoroughgoing scholarly investigation into their history. As a historian writing during the Cold War era in the BRD, Mühlen lacked access to many of the most crucial sources on the predominantly communist *Spanienkämpfer* that were housed in Soviet and East German archives. Nevertheless, he made the most of what sources were available to him to publish a penetrating exploration that to this day remains one of the most authoritative works on the subject. Yet Mühlen employed sources that related chiefly to those *Spanienkämpfer* who settled in the West; as a result, he tells this history of German resistance from the perspective of non-communists. Because the War itself was so fraught with infighting

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<sup>4</sup> Arnold Krammer, "Germans against Hitler: The Thaelmann Brigade," *Journal of Contemporary History* 4 (1969): 65-83.

<sup>5</sup> See Horst Kühne, *Revolutionäre Militärpolitik 1936-1939: Militärpolitische Aspekte des national-revolutionären Krieges in Spanien* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Krammer, "The Cult of the Spanish Civil War in East Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39 (2004): 541-560; Michael Uhl, *Mythos Spanien: Das Erbe der internationalen Brigaden in der DDR* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2004), 330-498.

among its antifascist participants that some commentators speak of civil wars within a civil war,<sup>7</sup> Mühlen generated a history that told almost as much of resistance to communist terror as it did of resistance to fascism. In this way, his study reflected the political concerns typical of West German scholarship during the Cold War era. Though this perspective scarcely compromised the scholarly integrity of his work, it offered far too narrow a glimpse into this multidimensional legacy of German resistance.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification of Germany assured the triumph of the Western tradition within the reunified German historical profession. In the wake of these developments, Mühlen's once seemingly idiosyncratic approach to the Spanienkämpfer became the standard interpretation. The perpetuation of Mühlen's approach manifests in several derivative strands of historical inquiry into the Spanienkämpfer that emphasize political conduct by communists that many scholars refer to as "Stalinism." Though Stalinism is blanket concept without any universally agreed-upon meaning,<sup>8</sup> in the context of the Spanish Civil War, it typically refers to various acts of terror directed by communists against nonaligned leftists due to the deviation of the latter from the Party line. For the purposes of this study, it shall therefore be understood this manner. Though not every scholar examining this aspect of communist conduct

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<sup>7</sup> Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 216-230; Klaus-Michael Mallmann, "'Kreuzritter des antifaschistischen Mysteriums'. Zur Ehrfahrungsperspektive des Spanischen Bürgerkriegs," in *Das "andere Deutschland" im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus: Beiträge zur politischen Überwindung der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur im Exil und im Dritten Reich*, ed. Helga Grebing and Christl Wickert (Essen: Klartext, 1994), 33.

<sup>8</sup> At an international scholarly conference on Stalinism, one participant proposed that when dealing with "such an extremely complex historico-socio-cultural-ideological-personal-political-and-economic phenomenon as Stalinism," definitions are counterproductive. See Robert C. Tucker, *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Norton, 1977), 320-321. More recent scholarship on the topic reveals that Stalinism has undergone little conceptual refinement. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism, Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-4.

labels it as such, this notion of Stalinism takes center stage in many histories of the Spanienkämpfer that build upon the scholarly trajectory first established by Mühlen. Michael Uhl and Peter Huber have taken this approach by examining the communist Spanienkämpfer not as figures of resistance to Nazism but rather as perpetrators of Stalinist purges who undermined the broader antifascist effort to combat the interests of Nazi Germany.<sup>9</sup> Dieter Nelles has adapted Mühlen's approach by studying only the noncommunist Spanienkämpfer as figures of resistance to Nazism, while stressing that they were dually victimized by the forces of both fascism and Stalinism.<sup>10</sup> These studies exemplify lingering Cold War concerns within the profession that unduly constrain the scope of what we can learn about this complicated moment in the transnational history of German resistance to Nazism.

The few studies in which scholars have examined the Spanienkämpfer as resisters rather than Stalinist thugs have demonstrated the possibility of avoiding such single-minded emphasis upon the blemishes on their records. In a study examining the motivations and experiences of women Spanienkämpfer, Anna Goppel has shed light on

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Michael Uhl, "Die internationalen Brigaden im Spiegel neuer Dokumente," *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der Deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 35, no. 4 (1997): 500-518; Peter Huber and Michael Uhl, Die internationalen Brigaden: politische Überwachung und Repression nach Sichtung der russischen und westlichen Archivakten, *Ebre* 38, 11-34 ; See also Patrik von zur Mühlen, Säuberungen unter deutschen Spanienkämpfern," in *Exilforschung: Ein internationales Jahrbuch*, edited by Thomas Koebner, Wulf Köpke und Joachim Radkau, 165-176. München: Text + Kritik, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> See Dieter Nelles, "Deutsche Anarchosyndicalisten und Freiwillige in anarchistischen Milizen im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg," *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 4 (1997): 500-518; and most relevant to this study, Dieter Nelles, "Die Unabhängige Antifaschistische Gruppe 9. Kompanie in Lager Gurs: Zur gruppenspezifischen Interaktion nach dem Spanischen Bürgerkrieg," in *Das "andere Deutschland" im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus: Beiträge zur politischen Überwindung der nationalsozialistischen Diktatur im Exil und im Dritten Reich*, ed. Helga Grebing and Christl Wickert (Essen: Klartext, 1994), 56-85; Patrik von zur Mühlen, "'Hitler kann in Spanien geschlagen werden!' - Die deutsche Linke im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg," in *Solidaridad! Deutsche im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg*, edited by Florian Legner (Berlin: Vorwärts Buch, 2006), 73-98.

the diversity of these German resistance figures.<sup>11</sup> Walther Bernecker has explored the meaning of Spain itself to the Germans whose acts of resistance found expression there.<sup>12</sup> Josie McLellan has even explored the interaction between the ideology and the military enthusiasm of the Spanienkämpfer—a topic that would seem to lend itself to thematic digression—without dwelling at length upon matters peripheral to resistance.<sup>13</sup> Klaus-Michael Mallmann has explored the social and political profiles of Spanienkämpfer from the Saarland in a study that acknowledges the political conflicts that unfolded in Spain without becoming focused them.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, studies such as these represent a decided minority in the aggregate historiography of the Spanienkämpfer.

The most noteworthy study of the Spanienkämpfer to emerge in recent years has foregrounded the communists' Stalinist criminality over their acts of resistance to Nazism. Fusing the Spanienkämpfer as history and the Spanienkämpfer as state-sponsored memory, McLellan has examined the Spanienkämpfer as objects of memory in the DDR.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, she attempts to illustrate the doctrinal continuity of German communism by highlighting problems raised by the communists' procrustean conception of antifascism. This approach leads rather predictably to a backwards reading of history that suggests the downfall, in 1989, of the East German regime that many communist

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<sup>11</sup> Anna Goppel, "Fighting fascism: German and Austrian women in the Spanish Civil War 1936-39," *International Journal of Iberian Studies* 16 (2003): 5-17.

<sup>12</sup> Walther L. Bernecker, "'Unsre Heimat ist heute vor Madrid': Der Spanische Bürgerkrieg und die deutschen Antifaschisten," in *Sehnsuchsorte. Festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag von Titus Heydenreich*, ed. Thomas Bremer und Jochen Heymann (Stauffenburg: Tübingen, 1999), 235-248.

<sup>13</sup> Josie McLellan, "'I Wanted to be a Little Lenin': Ideology and the German International Brigade Volunteers," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 287-304.

<sup>14</sup> Mallman, "'Kreuzritter des antifaschistischen Mysteriums,'" 32-55.

<sup>15</sup> Josie McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory: Remembering the International Brigades 1945-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Spanienkämpfer helped to found was already immanent in the dubious politics they espoused in Spain in the 1930s. McLellan ascribes this outcome to the pernicious effects of “Stalinism,” which she uses as shorthand for fanatical anti-factionalism, a ‘with us or against us’ political outlook and the view that the Party is always right.<sup>16</sup> For McLellan, the Spanish Civil War appears an ideal historical and situational nexus whereat the inextricability<sup>17</sup> of antifascism and Stalinism becomes apparent under the dual lenses of history and memory. By fusing antifascism and Stalinism in this way, McLellan portrays the resistance of the communist Spanienkämpfer as rooted in an intrinsically nefarious worldview. The noble act of resistance to Nazism is thereby negated through its subsumption under the heading of Stalinism—another form of criminality.

McLellan’s approach weds the debate over this legacy of resistance to a broader conceptual discussion among historians regarding the nature of antifascism, as conceived by the German communists, in its interwar, wartime and postwar manifestations. Some scholars argue that communists used antifascism as a rhetorical weapon that split the world into black-and-white categories.<sup>18</sup> These scholars stress that this Manichean worldview enabled communists to justify the persecution of non-communists on the grounds that they supported fascism, by default, through their opposition to communism. Though this position is implied by many of the aforementioned studies of the Spanienkämpfer, McLellan is the first scholar writing on the topic to adopt it explicitly. Yet underlying this argument are assumptions about the totalitarian qualities of the

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<sup>16</sup> McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Josie McLellan, “The Politics of Communist Biography: Alfred Kantorowicz and the Spanish Civil War,” *German History* 22, no. 4 (2004): 551-554; McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 177-198.

<sup>18</sup> Antonia Grunenberg, “Dichotomous Political Thought in Germany before 1933,” *New German Critique* 67 (1996): 111-122.

communist resistance movement that are, themselves, too totalizing. This interpretation imagines a degree of coherence and homogeneity within this movement that did not exist in practice. Moreover, it imposes Cold War-style polarization over the multipolar context of the interwar period.

In an effort to extricate a laudable legacy of resistance to Nazism from concurrent and latter-day conflicts among representatives of the political Left, this study disputes the notion that Stalinist conduct emerged innately from the antifascist politics espoused by the communist Spanienkämpfer. Though scholars contest both its meaning and significance, they do acknowledge antifascism to have been a central motivation for the German Communists' involvement in the Spanish Civil War. To ascertain the relationship between the antifascist politics of these communist Spanienkämpfer and the allegedly Stalinist manner in which they conducted themselves, I employ a micro-historical approach in this master's thesis to capture the interaction between these two strands of the politics they practiced "on the ground" as historical subjects.

The period of their post-conflict internment in France lends itself to such an approach.<sup>19</sup> To a greater extent than was possible on the battlefields of Spain, the interned Spanienkämpfer themselves systematically documented their experiences during the French phase of their odyssey. During this time, the communist Spanienkämpfer worked diligently to maintain records of what a later chronicler termed their "self-made history"<sup>20</sup>—a designation eminently appropriate to their contemporary self-understandings. For all

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<sup>19</sup> Polymeris Voglis has argued that experiences such as internment were "constitutive of the communist identity" during this period. See Polymeris Voglis, "Political Prisoners in the Greek Civil War, 1945-50: Greece in Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 4 (2002): 525.

<sup>20</sup> Klaus Hermsdorf, Hugo Fetting and Silvia Schlenstedt, eds. *Exil in den Niederlanden und in Spanien* (Frankfurt am Main: Röderberg, 1981), 277.

its downsides from the standpoint of the internees, captivity offered these self-appointed historians copious time with which to record their views on both developments in camp life and major events on the world stage as they unfolded. Though some scholars have already examined this portion of their odyssey, existing scholarship tends either to emphasize institutional aspects of the French internment camps<sup>21</sup> or to treat issues such as communist political organization and factionalism in camp life in a manner that only reinforces the biases typical of the broader literature on the Spanienkämpfer.<sup>22</sup> Instead, I seek to explore the subjective experiences of the communist Spanienkämpfer as militant antifascist resistance fighters turned political prisoners.

Using the French-internment phase of their odyssey as a case study, this thesis explores the interaction between the ideology and conduct of the communist Spanienkämpfer in a way that both accounts for historical process and allows for a theory of the subject. To tap into the subjective aspect of their internment experience, the thesis uses letters, handwritten newspapers, and literary representations that emerged from the French camps as well as latter-day memoirs reflecting on the period. Rather than beginning at the end of their story,<sup>23</sup> I treat the Spanienkämpfer as figures operating amid a still unfinished historical moment. To do so, I employ a historicist approach that regards process as essential to understanding the communist Spanienkämpfer as historical subjects. Reaping new insight from such considerations, this thesis argues that, as regards

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<sup>21</sup> Claude Laharie, *Le camp de Gurs: 1939-1945: un aspect meconnu de l'histoire du Bearn* (Pau: Infocompo, 1985), 75-120. On the Spanienkämpfer in particular, see especially 107-11.

<sup>22</sup> Nelles, "Die Unabhängige Antifaschistische Gruppe," 56-86; Gilbert Badia, ed., *Les Barbelés de l'exil : études sur l'émigration allemande et autrichienne (1938-1940)* (Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble, 1979): 221-257 and 310-332.

<sup>23</sup> McLellan opens her study with a speech given by a former Spanienkämpfer four days before the fall of the Berlin Wall. See McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 1.

France, the conduct of the communist Spanienkämpfer was not solely or even primarily driven by dogmatic adherence to Party doctrine; instead, it was a social mechanism for reconstituting a basis upon which to preserve the possibility of faith in that doctrine.

The retreat to France posed a dire threat to the group morale of the communist Spanienkämpfer. The defeat flew in the face of the forward motion of world affairs prophesied by their materialist conception of history. Furthermore, it led indirectly to their incarceration, which relegated them to a marginal political existence, utterly sequestered from the class war they then understood to be leading the world toward general war. In Chapter One, I examine the communist Spanienkämpfer as figures transitioning from the context of a war in which they had placed all their hope to the disheartening context of internment in France. To this end, I analyze accounts of the communist Spanienkämpfer from both contemporary writings and latter-day reflections on camp life between their arrival in France and the outbreak of the Second World War. Using these sources, I demonstrate that they responded to the traumatic new challenges posed by captivity by reinterpreting their circumstances in a way that restored their sense of agency in the world around them. Specifically, they forged new and meaningful relationships by engaging in performative and narrative representations of the internment experience; these relationships allayed pessimism and helped to reinvigorate their faith in the ultimate victory of their cause. In this context, I revisit a political schism that unfolded in camp life, which other scholars have attributed to Stalinist conduct on the part of the communists. Examining records the communists' own discussions regarding the dissidents, I show that—defying the simple logic of Party politics—the stance of the

communists toward these figures originated in their sense of the experiential commonalities rather than the ideological differences between them.

The signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and subsequent outbreak of the Second World War marked the beginning of a new stage of internment for the communist Spanienkämpfer. This agreement between their patron state, the Soviet Union, and their sworn enemy, Nazi Germany, raised serious political difficulties for them. From a theoretical standpoint, they had to curb their hard line antifascist orientation as a show of respect for the Soviet Union's new treaty partner. From a practical standpoint, their endorsement of the Pact undermined their previous standing as potential friends in the eyes of their French hosts—a transgression to which the French responded by placing the Spanienkämpfer under conditions of penal internment. In Chapter Two, I examine contemporary literary and memoir representations of life in the French penal camps to demonstrate how the communist Spanienkämpfer coped with the double challenge posed by this realignment of global political constellations. With their macro-political projects thrown into question, they developed affirmative forms of micro-politics unique to the context of the French camps that offered them the means of upholding faith in the ultimate victory of their increasingly nebulous cause. I show that, due to the political validation they derived from such politics, the communist Spanienkämpfer neither felt threatened nor exhibited particular animosity toward the Party renegades they encountered during this phase of their internment.

Between their extradition to Nazi Germany in mid-May of 1941 and their liberation from various German concentration camps in the spring of 1945, many communist Spanienkämpfer suffered years of highly repressive incarceration at the hands

of the Nazi regime. For those among them who survived the Second World War to become the founding cadre of the East German state, the political activities in which they had engaged during the French phase of their internment proved enduringly consequential. Amid an environment of Cold War paranoia surrounding Party members who lived in Western exile during the Nazi era, many Spanienkämpfer—especially those who underwent internment in France—came under suspicion of espionage and fell victim to Party purges in the DDR. As the French-internment era conduct of veteran Spanienkämpfer came under scrutiny, former internees found themselves revisiting this episode from their past to prove that they had always remained faithful Party adherents. In Chapter Three, I examine records of efforts by certain veteran Spanienkämpfer to reinvent the history of the French internment experience in a manner aimed at achieving political rehabilitation. In view of the extradoctrinal quality of the politics they practiced in France, this task demanded a degree of biographical fabrication. Importantly, the experience of life in the DDR differed from that of the French internment camps in that victory was already proclaimed through the achievement of “really existing socialism.” Former internees for whom victory had proven bittersweet had little choice but to engage in memoir writing as a means of imposing an order over the past that might render their own histories of struggle meaningful to the present. In the ex post facto tampering involved in such memoir writing, veteran internees strived to lend to the French internment experience an ideal “Stalinized” quality that would prove the constancy of their loyalty to the Party. Only in such latter-day portrayals did the politics of camp life in France become adequately divorced from the real historical complexities once

experienced by the Spanienkämpfer to permit them to appear the uncompromising dogmatists as which many historians have since sought to portray them.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTERNMENT DURING THE PREWAR ERA

*The whole course of historical development, comrades, favors the cause of the working class. In vain are the efforts of the reactionaries, the fascists of every hue, the entire world bourgeoisie, to turn back the wheel of history. No, that wheel is turning forward and will continue to turn forward towards a worldwide Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, until the final victory of socialism throughout the world.*

-Georgi Dimitrov, Closing at the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern (1935)

On February 9, 1939, the Spanienkämpfer began a disorderly retreat across Spain's northern border to France. This withdrawal followed the failure of their last ditch effort to defend Catalonia from the approaching forces of Francisco Franco. The short-lived campaign was made possible by an emergency reactivation of the International Brigades, which had been demobilized since September of 1938. Known by the Spanienkämpfer as "the second deployment," this holding action crumbled in less than two weeks under the unrelenting pressure of Franco's drive to capture Barcelona. Amid the chaos of this desperate and final military operation, the Spanienkämpfer were scattered into several groups that crossed into France at varying times and locations. Due in large part to their haphazard arrival at the border, French authorities initially divided the Spanienkämpfer, whom they grouped in with thousands of other refugees, between two open air internment camps situated on the sands of the Mediterranean coast.

At the French camps of Argelès-sur-Mer and St. Cyprien, where they spent the first months of their internment, the Spanienkämpfer suffered immense hardships and had to fear for their very survival; they received little food and had no shelter from the frigid mistral winds of late winter. In the latter half of April, the French authorities reunited the

Spanienkämpfer within the common confines of the newly-constructed Camp de Gurs in the Pyrenees-Atlantiques region of France. The improved infrastructure and increased provisions at Gurs ameliorated living conditions for the Spanienkämpfer drastically.

Only shortly after reuniting at Gurs, the Spanienkämpfer experienced a schism within their ranks. The groundwork for this conflict had been laid already amid the infighting that plagued pro-Republican forces from an early stage in the Spanish Civil War. The potential for formal political rupture that the antimonies of wartime foreshadowed was greatly enhanced by the original demobilization of the International Brigades in the autumn of 1938. Upon arriving in demobilization camps in Spain, the communists, socialists and other Spanienkämpfer who fought in the International Brigades declared their mutual intent to set aside political differences for the sake of unity.<sup>1</sup> Yet those Germans who fought in the ranks of Spanish combat units—chiefly anarchists and others who sought to distance themselves from the communists—remained actively deployed, and were thereby excluded from partaking in this covenant. Tensions quickly came to a head at Gurs, when the Spanienkämpfer from St. Cyprien, who organized under communist hegemony, came together with those from Argeles-sur-Mer, who were less successful in their organizational efforts due to the higher representation of anarchists in their ranks. Many who suffered political repression in Spain refused to submit to what they called the “Party dictatorship” of the communists.<sup>2</sup> Not long after the transfer to Gurs, a group of more than 100 Spanienkämpfer received authorization from French authorities to break away from the communist-aligned

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<sup>1</sup> SAPMO-BArch RY 1/I2/3/292, 316-326.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriele Mittag, *Es gibt Verdammte nur in Gurs: Literatur, Kultur und Alltag in einem südfranzösischen Internierungslager, 1940-1942* (Tübingen: Attempo, 1996), 246.

majority to form an autonomous Ninth Company.<sup>3</sup> This company of dissidents, which became embroiled in ongoing disputes with the communist-aligned majority of Spanienkämpfer, continued to swell from periodic defections over the course of the ensuing months of internment.

The schism that unfolded at Gurs only compounded a more significant source of anxiety for the communist Spanienkämpfer: their forceful expulsion from Spain. For utopian revolutionaries like the communist Spanienkämpfer, prospects for the future were tested in the present,<sup>4</sup> and their sudden state of embattled captivity resulting from military defeat in Spain hardly seemed auspicious. The retreat to France thus posed a dire threat to their morale. Most immediately, withdrawal in itself constituted a symbolic admission of defeat that seemed to contradict the Marxist telos.<sup>5</sup> More significantly, it consigned them to the uncharted waters of incarceration in a neutral country, where their many years of active involvement in the class struggle fell into sudden and indefinite abeyance. Under such circumstances, they struggled to make sense of their place in the rapidly changing world around them.

The political self-conceptions<sup>6</sup> of the communist Spanienkämpfer had been shaped by their many years at the front lines of the class conflict in Germany. For these

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<sup>3</sup> Before the schism unfolded, the subsection of Gurs inhabited by the Spanienkämpfer was organized into eight companies.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1996), 221.

<sup>5</sup> The victory of reactionary powers in Spain seemed a case for transposing key terms in Stalin's quite recent reiteration of Marx's famous dictum: "Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one." See Josef Stalin, *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1940), 44.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term "self-conception" in place of identity due to compelling critiques of the latter term in recent years. See, for example, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'," *Theory and Society*

stalwarts who made the pilgrimage to fight in Spain, taking up arms against Franco marked the culmination of a political career based on class politics and opposition to fascism. Most who volunteered in Spain had much in common both before and after Hitler's rise to power in Germany.<sup>7</sup> They belonged to a political milieu in which they acquired deeply rooted self-conceptions as members of the dispossessed German proletariat. For them, every day served as a lurid reaffirmation of their thralldom to a class enemy who continuously held the upper hand. Yet as these proletarian militants actively participated in the Spanish Civil War, they suddenly experienced their humble roots as a source of empowerment. Especially in the more propitious days of the War, Republican Spain became for them a beloved second home. There, they enjoyed the enthusiastic backing of a politically conscious populace whose ardent support stoked their resolve to fight and gave them reason to believe victory was not only possible but necessary. As combatants, the Spanienkämpfer enjoyed validation of their political self-conceptions on a daily basis as they exchanged fire on the field of battle with class enemies who seemed poised to extinguish the incipiently progressive political culture of Spain. So militarized, the Spanienkämpfer embodied the "continuation of politics by other means" to a degree that Clausewitz himself likely never envisioned. Well-acquainted by 1939 with the progressive fusion of force and politics throughout the world, the Spanienkämpfer bemoaned the specifically political dimension of their

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29 (2000): 1-47. By self-conception, I mean the subjective, auto-referential, cognitive awareness to which Brubaker and Cooper assign the term "self-understanding." I opt instead for the term self-conception for its expression of an always-latent form of awareness that functions as a guiding principle. Self-understanding, contrarily, seems to suggest a mastery over awareness that I do not consider to be operative in this scenario.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Koestler, *Scum of the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 129-130.

disempowerment when French authorities disarmed them as they crossed out of Spain.<sup>8</sup>

The considerable loss of agency that accompanied their consignment to the French internment camps thus robbed them of any means of reconciling their situation with their conceptions of themselves as the vanguard of the German proletariat.

If their defeat in Spain alone caused the Spanienkämpfer serious concern, the French authorities' reception of them at the border only exacerbated their bewilderment. After taking them into custody, the French interned them as mostly undistinguished figures among a massive host of refugees. Though the Spanienkämpfer continued to identify with their prior political aims, they now suffered captivity in France only as an indirect result of the cause for which they had fought. For unlike the Nazis, who had imprisoned many of the Spanienkämpfer in years past for their political convictions, the French interned them only because, like hundreds of thousands of others who fled Spain, they were refugees.<sup>9</sup> As victims of circumstance rather than persecution in this instance, the communist Spanienkämpfer could predicate their political self-conceptions neither on the palpable class antagonisms of everyday civilian life nor on the black-and-white context of Spanish battlefields.

Despite their precarious position, the communist Spanienkämpfer did not succumb resignedly to a state of despondency. With the Spanish Civil War now behind them, they embarked on a new campaign aimed at combating the anxieties arising from their destabilizing change of context. This chapter explores the means by which the

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<sup>8</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/0230, 10. See also Josie McLellan, "'I Wanted to be a Little Lenin': Ideology and the German International Brigade Volunteers," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 304.

<sup>9</sup> This point is made explicitly in a letter sent by the former French volunteers to the international internees. See *Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes et al., ed. Für Spaniens Freiheit: Österreicher an der Seite der Spanischen Republik 1936-1939: eine Dokumentation* (Wien, Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1986), 305.

communist Spanienkämpfer began to remoor<sup>10</sup> within the new and unfamiliar context of the French internment camps to reclaim an affirmative sense of agency in world affairs. By remoor, I mean the process by which these figures developed new social anchors specific to the social terrain of camp life that served to bolster their political self-conceptions. To manage this reconfiguration of self, they had not only to contend with the sudden absence of social actors who fit neatly into their vocabulary of class struggle but also with the troubling presence of the dissident Ninth Company, whose hostility toward them threatened to undermine their own views of themselves. To overcome these threats, the communist Spanienkämpfer had to carve out a niche for themselves in camp life that would enable them to reconcile their circumstances with their political self-conceptions. In this chapter, I show that they achieved this through acts of performance and narration. Both, arguably, are ontologically constitutive of social life in that they enable actors to locate themselves in time, space, and a network of social relations to interpret and respond to empirical stimuli within a coherently “storied” existence.<sup>11</sup> These two categories of action were intimately related for the historically and politically minded Spanienkämpfer; they narrated their performances and performed their narrations to lend renewed coherence and stability to their political self-conceptions within the new social context of camp life. The everyday acts of posturing, interacting, and recording their experiences in the internment camp setting thus served as a means of palliating their

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<sup>10</sup> See Kathleen A. Ethier and Kay Deaux, “Negotiating Social Identity When Contexts Change: Maintaining Identification and Responding to Threat”, in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 67, no. 2 (1994): 243-250. Ethier and Deaux employ this term in a study in which they examine the pressures that threats posed by a change of social context exert upon ethnic identity (here extrapolated onto my notion of self-conception) of Hispanic students entering a university setting.

<sup>11</sup> For such a take on narrative in particular, see Margaret R. Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach,” *Theory and Society* 23 (1994) 605-649.

destabilized self-conceptions through willful, if unconscious, acts of self-representation. By making new sense of their own roles in this way to reclaim a sense of agency, they reconstituted a crucial ingredient for restoring their faith in the ultimate victory of their political cause.

In this chapter, I examine accounts of the Spanienkämpfer from both contemporary writings and latter-day reflections<sup>12</sup> on camp life. The first section explores how the communist Spanienkämpfer tried to remoor their political self-conceptions by using narrative and performance to forge affirmative relationships with both the French populace living in the environs of their camp and the French guards within it. With this dynamic in mind, the second section reconsiders political conflict at Gurs in light of previously unexplored evidence that communist hostility toward the Ninth Company dissidents was by no means categorical. I contend that, rather than being rooted in dogmatic adherence to Party doctrine, the stance of the communist Spanienkämpfer toward the Ninth Company can be best understood as originating in the fabric of the narrative through which they made sense of their own predicament.

### **Adrift in Gurs**

Dismayed as they were upon their arrival in France, the communist Spanienkämpfer were not prepared to admit defeat. As a means of reclaiming positive agency in the world from which their captivity sequestered them, leaders among the

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<sup>12</sup> See McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 145-176. As McLellan makes clear, to accept memoir accounts from the DDR at face value is to risk parroting officialized versions of the past. This study limits its use of these sources to the outwardly apolitical details of everyday life in the camps. To the extent that they only corroborate or elaborate upon sources that emerged from the camps themselves, the contents of such sources cannot be dismissed out of hand.

communist Spanienkämpfer attempted to present the internment experience in France as an organic continuation of the struggles they waged while in Spain:

Under the conditions [of nervousness, despondency and to some extent demoralization] the Party began to gather its powers and retool. The political tasks of the Party had to be oriented towards convincing all Spanienkämpfer that, with the termination of our battle on Spanish soil, we do not retire from the struggle against fascism and war. Rather, we carry out only a change of front and must deploy our powers in that struggle in another sector of the world theater.<sup>13</sup>

They encouraged this view by fostering a vibrant antifascist political culture in camp life.

To this end, the communists convened to compose a manifesto directed at their Nazi nemeses of the Condor Legion,<sup>14</sup> held celebrations in honor of Republican Spain,<sup>15</sup> commemorated comrades who fell or continued to suffer persecution at the hands of the Nazis,<sup>16</sup> and honored the May 1 celebration of International Workers' Day.<sup>17</sup> According to the report that the communist camp leadership sent to the Central Committee of the KPD in Paris, these and other cultural activities constituted the foundation of political life at Gurs.

Yet the private writings and reflections of individual Spanienkämpfer indicate that life in the camps consisted of much more than the pageantry of communist politics. Many internees of the communist-aligned majority accorded greater attention in their writings to the quotidian aspects of camp life. Rather than focusing on events sponsored by the Party, they described performances of bands and choirs or competitions between

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<sup>13</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/6, 6.

<sup>14</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/7, 31-35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 84-87.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 78-80.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 81-83.

volleyball teams and dance groups that they and their fellow internees established to occupy their time. More than mere pastimes, these exuberant activities began to facilitate the expansion of their social horizons. When reflecting on these less formal activities, internees frequently recorded the details of their everyday interactions with other social actors who operated in and around the internment camp setting. For although the barbed wire walls of the camp precluded the possibility of direct contact with the outside world, these walls could not prevent them from attracting the attention of French passers-by who traversed the road adjacent to the camp.<sup>18</sup> The writings of many internees display an overriding preoccupation with making sense of the new relationships they began to forge with these and other entities specific to camp life. Over time, interaction between the Spanienkämpfer and French locals became a routine occurrence that factored prominently into the efforts of the former to remoor their political self-conceptions within the new context of camp life. Everyday social interaction became for them a new basis for politics within the camps that was meaningful because it was relevant to their immediate experience.

In the efforts of the communist-aligned Spanienkämpfer to arrive at an affirmative definition of their situation, the French people suited their needs particularly well. The people of France were held in high regard by German communists, to whose minds they were bearers of an advanced degree of historical progressivism epitomized by the French Revolution and the Paris Commune; for communists, these episodes from French history became the stuff of legend. Despite their unfortunate circumstances in France, the Spanienkämpfer engaged in active commemoration of these much-celebrated events of

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<sup>18</sup> See diagram in Claude Laharie, *Gurs: L'Art derriere les Barbeles (1939-1944) Les activites artistiques (sculpture, peinture, musique, artisanat) des internes au camp de Gurs* (Biarritz Atlantica, 2008), 14.

French history. On March 18, 1939, while the Spanienkämpfer were still interned at St. Cyprien, they dedicated a wall newspaper to the memory of the Paris Commune to mark the day traditionally ascribed to the Commune's founding.<sup>19</sup> On July 14, 1939, the Spanienkämpfer published a special edition of the wall newspaper, *Unity*, to commemorate Bastille Day. In addition to adorning the newspaper's cover with an ornate illustration of the besieged fortress, the editors printed copies of La Marseillaise, Declaration of the Rights of Man, a brief history of the French Revolution, and quotations from renowned German intellectuals that commented on the significance of the event.<sup>20</sup> Such efforts to commemorate the progressive traditions of France enabled the communist-aligned Spanienkämpfer to regard as ideological kinsmen the common Frenchmen visible through the barbed wire walls of the camp.

These positive feelings that the Spanienkämpfer harbored for the French people not only made them eager to cultivate a friendship with the locals but also enabled them to interpret this friendship in a manner consistent with their political self-conceptions. The communist-aligned Spanienkämpfer desired to represent the proletariat of all lands. In their state of distress deriving from their internment, they desperately wanted the Frenchmen to affirm this notion. This double wish found expression in a narrative that featured in the July 2, 1939 issue of the wall newspaper, *The Camp Voice*:

The barbs of the wire stick out densely and sharply. But outside, without hindrance, we see the country road, a completely normal country road. The comrades stand behind wire like children in anticipation of Christmas; only the wishes are different. Without wire cutters we've demolished the barbed wire. Our songs, our band show to those outside how we live and

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<sup>19</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/V237/ 1/ 17, 71-72.

<sup>20</sup> AAM, Dossier sur l'Espagne et les Brigades Internationales: correspondances diverses sur l'Espagne, "Einheit" L.Z. der Sudetendeutschen, 1-7.

think. The people listen, often clapping and waving. That is the true France—the concentration camp is not. And we know that no barbed wire can separate us from our friends!<sup>21</sup>

This narrative exemplifies the general tone found in many similar writings. In it, the Spanienkämpfer put a positive spin on their woeful circumstances. In view of the distance between the internees and their audience on the road, it mattered little whether, in reality, their spectators gestured in praise of their production, in a show solidarity, or even as a sign of relief that the noise emanating from the camp had stopped; to the distant signaling of these onlookers, the internees could assign meanings that suited their purpose of fortifying their political self-conceptions. Hardly rendered impotent by their internment—according to their narrative—they pressed on with the political struggle that they undertook in Spain in the previous years, but now by embodying the proletarian ideal and setting a strong example for the supportive proletariat of “the true France.” Precisely because it was not a realistic assessment of the actual state of affairs surrounding their internment, this alleged bond with the Frenchmen in the distance required active narrativization.

Narratives prepared the way for action, and these actions were in turn narrativized toward the end of endowing the political self-conceptions of the Spanienkämpfer with greater solidity and coherence. In a letter to an aid organization, one internee wrote,

I'll tell you of a practical joke [that] happened today. ... In our press service ... a notice appeared: “Volley ball match between us and a team of French girls.” Many thought they were going to see some beautiful French girls, and went through their cases for their best clothes. At 2 o'clock the “beautiful girls” arrived. Some of our boys had dressed up as girls. As you can imagine everybody laughed a lot.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 11/V237/ 1/ 17, 39.

<sup>22</sup> SAPMO-BArch, NY 4024/11, 45. For a nearly identical account, see SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/7, 127-128.

Beyond attesting to a surprisingly high state of morale at Gurs, the letter provides some clue as to why high spirits became possible under such bleak circumstances. As the Spanienkämpfer internalized the narrativized view of their relationship with the French locals, they began to perform these roles in terms of friendship and solidarity. Yet it would be a mistake to believe that such reassuring narratives were directed primarily at the French. They played a much more significant role within their own collective by helping them to remoor their political self-conceptions within the social context of camp life. It would be more accurate to say that they engaged in a performance for which they were their own audience—in order to be taken in by their own act.<sup>23</sup>

The case of the letter suggests the combination of narrated performance and performed narrative proved sufficiently potent to convince many of the Spanienkämpfer not only that such an unlikely sporting match with local French women was truly possible but also that they should don the appropriate attire for the courtship that it might entail. Along similar lines, one internee even claimed that through their routinized Sunday choral productions, certain Spanienkämpfer developed personal relationships with specific French girls from three hundred meters distance.<sup>24</sup> What this recurring emphasis on romantic aspirations might suggest about the masculine drives that pervaded camp life would make for an interesting investigation in itself. In the context of this particular study, the social framework within which these aspirations found expression suggests a

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<sup>23</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: First Anchor Books, 1959), 80-81. See also Andrew Stuart Bergerson et al., *The Happy Burden of History: From Sovereign Impunity to Responsible Selfhood*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 68-77.

<sup>24</sup> Hermann Langbein, *Die Stärkeren: ein Bericht aus Auschwitz und anderen Konzentrationslagern* (Köln: Bund-Verlag GmbH, 1982), 27.

desire by the Spanienkämpfer to reestablish relations like those that they enjoyed with the Spanish populace years earlier.

The very core of their sense of self was at play. To salvage their political self-conceptions, the interned Spanienkämpfer mapped onto the French locals the role of proletarian support network. The role that they assigned the locals corresponded to that played by both the German proletariat prior to their lives in exile and the supportive Spanish populace before Franco's victory. Available sources offer no indication of whether the French locals experienced these interactions in the same terms, but they clearly suggest that the Spanienkämpfer used these interactions to create the conditions for a sense of continuity rather than rupture in their political self-conceptions.

More than purely physical obstacles stood in the way of their efforts to remoor within the social context of the French camps. According to one internee's journal entry from August 6, 1939, camp authorities sometimes dispatched guards to disband locals who gathered in the street to watch performances.<sup>25</sup> Here, the very French authorities who insisted upon interning the Spanienkämpfer as refugees, rather than offering them political asylum, also interfered with their ability to cultivate the solidarity that—the internees firmly believed—existed between them and their French support network. By framing the story in this way, the Spanienkämpfer not only evoked the support of the French locals but also took advantage of their captors' obstruction of that support as a means to validate their political self-conceptions.

The task of enforcing the policy of the French state on a day-to-day basis fell to the guards of the camps. Like the locals outside the barbed-wire walls, the guards were

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<sup>25</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 9/V231/ 12/ 63, 17.

proximate representatives of “the French.” Yet unlike the locals, the guards assumed an ambiguous position on the margins of everyday life in the camps. The uniquely immediate power that they wielded could be experienced as positive, negative, or both. Particularly as they developed relationships with the internees over time, the guards did not always behave in strict accordance with their instructions; nor could instructions offer them a comprehensive code of conduct for every situation that might arise in the course of executing their duties. When operating within this gray zone or upon personal initiative, the guards could assume the guise of either allies or enemies of the interned Spanienkämpfer. This high degree of fluidity in their relationship with the guards provided the Spanienkämpfer with room for maneuver, and the internees seized upon it in a way that enabled them to fortify their political self-conceptions.

In accounts of their earliest encounters with the camp guards, the Spanienkämpfer painted an unequivocally negative picture. Initially, they expressed resentment toward the guards for disarming them as they crossed the French border and for lying to them regarding the distance that remained to their destination over the course of the ensuing march.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the accounts of the Spanienkämpfer leave little doubt that many guards took advantage of the power that they possessed over their new charges in the immediate aftermath of their exodus from Spain. They describe instances of deliberate provocation, physical abuse, and intent to inflict psychological trauma.<sup>27</sup> Recalling an occasion when a delivery of their most precious belongings from Spain arrived at the

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<sup>26</sup> AAM, Dossier sur l’Espagne et les Brigades Internationales: correspondances diverses sur l’Espagne, Brief der ehemaligen deutschen Spanienkämpfer an André Marty, 15-16 and 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 26 ; Hans Maaßen, ed. *Brigada Internacional ist unser Ehrenname... Erlebnisse ehemaliger deutscher Spanienkämpfer*, Volume 2 ( Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, 1976), 403; SAPMO-BArch, NY 4024/ 11, 39; Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes et al., *Für Spaniens Freiheit*, 304.

internment camp, one Spanienkämpfer described the psychological torment that the guards wrought upon the internees when, “before our horror-stricken eyes, they began a genuine orgy of destruction.”<sup>28</sup> Such incidents seemed to lay the groundwork for antagonistic relations between the Spanienkämpfer and the guards.

In accounts that offer explicit interpretations of these initial encounters, the Spanienkämpfer attributed their wrongful treatment by the guards to a sort of callowness or naïveté on the part of the latter that is reminiscent of the Marxist concept of false consciousness. Some chroniclers among the Spanienkämpfer expressed suspicions that certain French guards had encouraged hostile behavior toward them by sewing seeds of hatred through misinformation among the colonial troops who formed part of their guard contingent.<sup>29</sup> According to the reflections of one internee, the Spanienkämpfer warned the guards that the French would soon share their fate: “Today us—tomorrow you!”<sup>30</sup> The chronicler diagnosed as “blindness” the guards’ failure to see that the defeat of the Spanish Republic foreshadowed the future of world affairs—namely the incitement of general war by the forces of fascism.

In analogous accounts from later months, the internees offered far more positive assessments of their relationship with the guards. Writing to an aid organization while at Gurs, one internee claimed that the guards began to act as willing intermediaries in the solidary relationships that the internees claimed to have established with local populace; the guards did so by carrying gifts from friendly French locals at the roadside to their

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<sup>28</sup> SAPMO-BArch, NY 4072/158, 50-51.

<sup>29</sup> SAPMO-BArch, NY 4072/158, 44-45; AAM, Dossier sur l’Espagne et les Brigades Internationales: correspondances diverses sur l’Espagne, Brief der ehemaligen deutschen Spanienkämpfer an André Marty, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Maaßen, *Brigada Internacional ist unser Ehrenname*, 382.

intended recipients behind the barbed wire.<sup>31</sup> By some accounts, the guards became involved in the cultural activities of the Spanienkämpfer. In another letter to an aid organization, one internee reported, “In the afternoon we had the performance, which lasted for several hours. At the request of the French authorities it was repeated next day, and twenty officers were our guests.”<sup>32</sup> In other accounts, numerous internees claimed that the cordiality of their relationship with the guards had grown so apparent that French authorities felt obliged to respond by implementing regular rotations of the guard units assigned to Gurs. “Besides the French soldiers are really fine fellows,” an internee wrote on August 6, 1939. “They have already changed the troops several times but it lasts only a short time until we have established very good relations with them.”<sup>33</sup>

The Spanienkämpfer attributed these positive changes in the guards’ behavior to their everyday interaction with them.<sup>34</sup> For the changes to affirm their political self-conceptions, it was crucial for the internees to assign meaning to them through active narration. The Spanienkämpfer used stories of close collaboration with the guards to remoor within the social setting of camp life. As was the case with their interaction with the local Frenchman, the performances targeted not only or primarily the guards with whom they interacted but especially their own social circle. The Spanienkämpfer invited the guards to see their cultural productions,<sup>35</sup> and in doing so, created a stage upon which they could perform their most ideal selves. Writing of the guards’ attendance at a

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<sup>31</sup> SAPMO-BArch, NY 4024/11, 43.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 9/ V231/ 12/ 63, 17. Original in English.

<sup>34</sup> SAPMO-BArch, NY 4072/158, 48.

<sup>35</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/2148, 48.

particular musical production, one chronicler noted, “Afterwards the commandant thanked us and expressed his admiration of our discipline and talent for organization.”<sup>36</sup> One internee, whose memoir stresses the callousness of the guards upon his arrival in France, recalled that the guard commander attended a performance of this sort in later days, and “*Now he applauded.*”<sup>37</sup> Here it is the tension between these two accounts that matters: the narrative implies that the internees “turned” this French commandant and others from unthinking lackeys of world finance capital into figures capable of sympathizing with them.

Here again, the interned Spanienkämpfer took steps toward reconstituting their political self-conceptions by narrating their performances and performing their narrations. Following his account telling of the logic behind the rotation of guard units, an internee concluded with a telling observation: “Presently the soldiers who are themselves only poor devils and haven’t very much, made to our youth a present of 50 packets of tobacco. That is certainly a good thing and proves their feeling of solidarity toward us.”<sup>38</sup> By formulating narratives that spoke of “solidarity” and describing the guards as dispossessed proletarian figures, the chronicler implied that the Spanienkämpfer not only befriended the guards but perhaps even instilled them with a measure of class consciousness. Along such lines, another internee recalled the effects of their performance upon the guards in an unpublished memoir: “As our choir began the song

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<sup>36</sup> SAPMO-BArch, NY 4024/11, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Langbein, *Die Stärkeren*, 34. My italics. Compare to *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 9/V231/ 12/ 63, 17. For another description of the camp guards based commenting on their socioeconomic status, see Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstandes et al., *Für Spaniens Freiheit*, 303.

*Peat Bog Soldiers*,<sup>39</sup> we all fell into melody and sang with loud voices. Some of the French officers were quite clearly affected and some of them became teary-eyed. Did a premonition of the threat that hovered over their fatherland perhaps creep over them in this moment?<sup>40</sup>

According to these accounts, camp guards learned a number of important lessons through their interaction with the internees. No longer the ignorant brutes that the Spanienkämpfer encountered months earlier, they gained an appreciation for organization and discipline, acted in solidarity with the internees, and became increasingly conscious of the perilous state of world affairs. And yet the real victory lies in what this story reveals about the internment experience for the Spanienkämpfer: when reinforced by narration, acts such as singing validated the political self-conceptions of the internees within the new web of social relations that characterized life in the French camps. Like the relationship that they claimed to have established with the French locals, the proselytizing quality of the relationship that the Spanienkämpfer narrated and performed through interactions with the camp guards reaffirmed their faith in the forward movement of history and thus served their purposes of reemerging within the French internment camp setting.

As narrative and performance enabled the communists to establish affirmative social anchors in the form of the local French populace and the camp guards, the trauma associated with transition to life in the French camps grew less acute. Hardly rendered impotent in the class struggle as a result of their internment, they continued to embody

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<sup>39</sup> A concentration camp song.

<sup>40</sup> SAPMO-BArch, SgY 30/ 2148, 48.

the revolutionary ideal in their own way by inspiring the local French populace and winning over the French guards with whom they interacted in the course of everyday life. By instilling in themselves the narrativized notion that they were missionaries of class consciousness, they brought their circumstances in France into accord with their prior political self-conceptions. Myopic though this new campaign appeared by comparison to the ambitious enterprise they had undertaken in Spain, it nevertheless functioned to validate the communists' essential claim: the internment camp was merely a "change of front" in the political struggle they had waged previously in Spain. This narrative of restored agency was but a component in a narrative of greater significance to the Spanienkämpfer: defeat in Spain was but a momentary setback along the path to the ultimate victory of their cause. Both narratives thus restored faith in the Party line—for those who gave credence to it.

### **"Stalinism" at Gurs**

A sizable minority of the Spanienkämpfer who crossed into France that February of 1939 felt neither a need nor a desire to have their faith restored in the politics of the KPD. Many anarchists, moderate social democrats, nonaligned Marxists and others who had fought in Spain had made a conscious decision not to affiliate with the Communists. Many of these non-communists had suffered persecution of various forms and degrees at the hands of Party functionaries over the course of their struggle on behalf of the Spanish Republic. Some of them opted, for this or other reasons, to serve in the Spanish Republican military proper rather than fighting in the ranks of the International Brigades, which were subject to much stricter political oversight. Whatever their circumstances had

been in Spain, many of them balked at the thought of involuntary reunification with the communists upon their retreat to France, and made no secret of their sentiments following their arrival at Gurs.

This situation was no less disagreeable to the communist Spanienkämpfer. If the gradual regeneration of their faith in the ultimate victory of their cause helped to alleviate the trauma associated with both their defeat in Spain and their captivity in France, the pronounced schism that unfolded upon their arrival at Gurs exerted the opposite effect over their minds. On April 27, 1939, more than 100 Spanienkämpfer broke away from the communist-aligned collective to form the dissident Ninth Company. Their departure likely weakened the authority of the class-based narratives through which the communist Spanienkämpfer began to make sense of the new relationships they forged with the French locals and guards. The political validation that the Spanienkämpfer achieved by winning the hearts and minds of Frenchmen likely paled in comparison to the harm caused by this departure of so many comrades from their own collective. The negative response of the communists to the schism was undoubtedly informed by the friction between this entropic development and the nascent narrative of political convergence that the communists sought to impose over the social context of camp life.

In their own investigations into the schism that unfolded at Gurs, Patrik von zur Mühlen and Dieter Nelles have written at length on the abuses that the communists heaped upon the Ninth Company dissidents.<sup>41</sup> Both Mühlen and Nelles depict a scenario in which the communists—as if driven mad by the Stalinism that allegedly reigned at this

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<sup>41</sup> Patrik von zur Mühlen, *Spanien war ihre Hoffnung: die deutsche Linke im Spanischen Bürgerkrieg 1936 bis 1939* (Berlin, Dietz, 1985), 286-299; Dieter Nelles, “Die Unabhängige Antifaschistische Gruppe,” 56-85.

time in the KPD—unleashed a campaign of terror on the invariably benevolent members of the Ninth Company. Yet the precise nature of the Ninth Company as a dissident organization is more difficult to ascertain than scholars have acknowledged. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the Ninth Company was composed of a many antifascists. Documentary evidence indicates that the antifascist credentials of many in the company were, indeed, above reproach. On the other hand, scholars have shown themselves eager to accept the largely antifascist composition of the Ninth Company as evidence of its ideological purity. No firsthand evidence has emerged from a known fascist acknowledging either membership in or infiltration of the Ninth Company; yet if such persons did exist, they might have sought with good reason to separate themselves from the communist collective and preferred to associate with antifascists of the noncommunist kind.

Evidence supports such a view of the Ninth Company. One communist chronicler who openly acknowledged that people were often groundlessly denounced as fascists during this period recorded an account of interaction with a specific member of the Ninth Company whom he claimed openly admitted to duplicity.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, scholars have made much of a declaration drawn up by the Ninth Company containing an antifascist pledge: “I avouch that I am antifascist, and therefore do not have the intention of returning to Hitler Germany, and also that I stand in neither direct or indirect contact with the German authorities. I am cognizant that it would be a betrayal of the Ninth Company if I conduct myself in a manner contrary to this declaration.”<sup>43</sup> As if the declaration could

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<sup>42</sup> Aleksander Szurek, *The Shattered Dream*, (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1989), 288-290.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Nelles, “Die Unabhängige Antifaschistische Gruppe,” 64.

have been intended only to prove their antifascist credentials to the communists rather than to address a legitimate organizational concern, scholars present it as irrefutable evidence that the Ninth Company was uniformly antifascist. Yet seen from another perspective, such a document could just as reasonably attest to a real problem of fascist infiltration that leaders within the dissident company sought to rectify.

Through their categorically positive portrayals of the Ninth Company, scholars have tended to make claims about these dissidents and the communists' stance toward them that are even more sweeping than those made by the communists themselves. It is certainly true that, when faced with the unfavorable recalcitrance of the Ninth Company, the communist Spanienkämpfer initially responded by denouncing the Ninth Company in its entirety as agents of the Fifth Column. Dieter Nelles has proposed that this confrontational attitude assumed by the communists towards the dissidents met with the criticism from the highest ranks of the KPD in the form of a rebuke from Central Committee member Franz Dahlem.<sup>44</sup> Yet no one has acknowledged the extent to which the communist Spanienkämpfer— whether incentivized by Dahlem or not—did in fact come around to questioning their own conduct toward the Ninth Company.

Though in the immediate wake of the schism, the communist Spanienkämpfer took a hard line against the Ninth Company dissidents, they later came to regret the overgeneralized nature of the campaign that they waged against them. Because the political conflict with these dissident Spanienkämpfer constituted an important aspect of camp life for the communist Spanienkämpfer, they articulated regrets associated with their policy toward the Ninth Company quite clearly in the Activity Report they sent to

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

the Central Committee of the KPD in Paris. In the report, the communists acknowledge "serious weaknesses" in their approach to dealing with the Ninth Company: "In a review of the characteristics of members of the Ninth Company, we come across 38 comrades who simply do not belong in this company; we have transformed far worse elements into useful members in our collective."<sup>45</sup> They went on to cite the specifics of their error:

There occurred a temporary leveling and unsound vulgarization in assessing the role of the Ninth Company. It expressed itself in superficial agitation that labeled every member of the company a Gestapo agent and member of the Fifth Column. The still wholesome elements were thereby prodded deeper yet into the fascist mire. That was a malapropism in the resolutions of the Party Committee. This stupid generalization only exasperated the disgruntled persons to an even greater extent.<sup>46</sup>

More than just accepting the blame for this policy failure, the leaders of the communist Spanienkämpfer thus made clear that meaningful distinctions should be made among the Ninth Company dissidents. They clarified these distinctions yet further: "Besides the aforementioned 38 comrades who simply do not belong in the Ninth Company, there is yet another one-third who, despite their weaknesses and malfeasance, can be absorbed into our collective without further ado, and only the remaining one-third are openly Fascist-Trotskyite contaminated elements."<sup>47</sup> According to the communist system of classification, then, the Ninth Company was composed of three different categories: those whom they regretted not to have in their collective, those whose offenses they deemed forgivable, and those whom they recognized as true enemies of their cause.

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<sup>45</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/5, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

<sup>47</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/5, 21.

In making their distinctions, the communist Spanienkämpfer paid little attention to party affiliation. Indeed, they openly expressed a desire to improve relations with those who did not subscribe to their politics: "The correct political approach and close political contact to our Social Democratic comrades is especially important. A better relationship must be established with the anarchist comrades, in order to better consolidate and develop unity—the most precious good."<sup>48</sup> Such pronouncements cannot be dismissed as empty talk: the communists backed them up by accommodating anarchists in communist-sanctioned cultural activities in camp life. The communists reported that in July, for example, they held a commemorative event that honored both the martyred Communist politician, Edgar Andre, and the renowned anarchist poet, Erich Mühsam, whom the Nazis murdered in 1934.<sup>49</sup> By acknowledging the contributions of political figures from outside the Party, the communists demonstrated a willingness to place group cohesion in the immediate context of camp life before concerns of obedience to the Party.

In addition to their references to the Ninth Company in the Activity Report itself, the communist Spanienkämpfer furnished the Central Committee in Paris with a detailed supplement, entitled "Annex to the Report of the German Group: Material on the Ninth Company." In it, they compiled a list of 106 names of members of the Ninth Company that included synoptic character inventories relating what was known about each dissident. Though some synopses verged on outright character assassination, others reflect the perceived heterogeneity expressed in the Activity Report by offering neutral or even positive characterizations of individual members of the Ninth Company. The

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 28. For other commentary on anarchism, see Ibid., 31; SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/6, 36.

<sup>49</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/7, 22.

supplement attributes five cases of defection to "irritation" and two cases to the influence of bad company at Argeles-sur-Mer, while offering generally positive descriptions of at least eleven persons, including one anarchist. Its author declared, "Every comrade has the duty to tirelessly and companionably enlighten those misled or simply disgruntled but honest comrades of the Ninth Company who have not yet recognized their corrosive, fascist-enemy-helping work, in order to lead those like-minded antifascist comrades back to our collective."<sup>50</sup> Though the exacting verbiage couched in this and other statements certainly implied that a return to the communist collective entailed conforming to certain standards, it would nevertheless be difficult to dismiss such overtures as insincere: the intended audience of the reports was not the dissidents whose favor the communists sought to court, but rather the Central Committee of the KPD in exile.

Of numerous rationales they offered to explain cases of dissidence, the communist Spanienkämpfer cited "demoralization"<sup>51</sup> as one of the chief problems they faced in the context of camp life. They thus ascribed the troubling phenomenon of dissidence to dynamics familiar to their own experiences. They contrasted the demoralized on the one hand with criminals, Gestapo agents and Trotskyites on the other.<sup>52</sup> They thus appear to have classified as demoralized those among the dissidents who posed no threat to the political culture of camp life beyond their negative attitude. It seems that the communists deemed the Ninth Company to be comprised of many Spanienkämpfer who simply failed to recognize the grounds for continued faith in victory that they themselves saw so

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<sup>50</sup> SAPMO-BArch RY 1/I 2/3/85, 158.

<sup>51</sup> Though in the communist vocabulary, "demoralization" can potentially connote either a loss of hope or a the more literal loss of morals, the case for its use in the former sense is supported by SAPMO-BArch SgY/9 V231/1/7, 18, where the author clearly contrasts it with "optimism."

<sup>52</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/7, 27.

clearly. The communists variously attributed such demoralization to the difficulty of suffering defeat in Spain,<sup>53</sup> the physical privations of life in the French camps,<sup>54</sup> or dissatisfaction with the Party in addressing these and other issues. The communists saw those who suffered demoralization for such reasons as particularly susceptible to the negative influences of the nefarious elements of Ninth Company.<sup>55</sup> For such reasons, they emphasized the importance of making a concerted effort to combat low morale.<sup>56</sup>

Testimony by members of the Ninth Company suggests the communists' assessment of affairs in camp life was something less than perspicacious. In a June letter to Emma Goldman, anarchist and Ninth Company member Helmut Klose reported that many former communists who dissociated themselves from the Party had joined the ranks of the Ninth Company, and observed, "the morale of the comrades is superb."<sup>57</sup> If Klose's view of the situation is any indication, those who defected to Ninth Company from the communist-led majority likely acted on more than an emotionally driven whim. In any case, the truth or falsity of the communist narrative was no obstacle to its effectiveness. Much as the communist narrative of proselytizing the French gave the them a basis for ongoing faith in the coming victory of their cause, the mere plausibility of this narrative about dissidence sufficed to weaken the threat dissidence posed to their faith.

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<sup>53</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/5, 39.

<sup>54</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/6, 6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>56</sup> SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/5, 31; SAPMO-BArch SgY 9/V231/1/6, 7.

<sup>57</sup> IISG, Flechine/Steimer 90, Helmut Klose to Emma Goldman, 2-3.

In the wake of their defeat in Spain, the communist Spanienkämpfer entered the French internment camps in a highly precarious state. Upon their arrival at Gurs, these disheartened antifascist resistance fighters came face to face with many fellow antifascists who rejected not only their particular brand of politics but also their camaraderie. With time, they came to conceive of many among these dissidents as comrades afflicted by the same inner turmoil that they themselves suffered—if to a greater degree. Though they were not immediately forthcoming in their efforts to reconcile differences with the Ninth Company dissidents, they demonstrated a desire to reestablish unity that transcended party politics; in so doing, they breached a hallmark of Stalinist political conduct. To say this is not to deny that the communist Spanienkämpfer maligned many sincere antifascists both before and after they reassessed their approach to dealing with the Ninth Company dissidents. As both Mühlen and Nelles have demonstrated, they did. By reinterpreting what many scholars have termed Stalinism through this micro-historical exploration into the subjective experiences of the communist Spanienkämpfer, the concept is revealed to be susceptible of demystification. That Stalinism was neither essential to nor inextricable from the politics of antifascism as practiced by the communist Spanienkämpfer became increasingly evident upon the late-August signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

## CHAPTER 2

### INTERNMENT DURING THE WARTIME ERA

*Together is how we shall proceed,  
a flag will fly over the earth,  
and that flag is red!*

- "Future," composed by Rudolf Leonhard in Le Vernet d'Ariege (1940-1)

When news of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact broke on August 23, 1939, the standing of communists in France rapidly spiraled downward from that of opposition within the government to one of putative enemies of the state. This ebbing of the communists' status within French society crystalized with the outbreak of the Second World War on September 1. Even for French communists, the situation was grim. After the French Communist Party refused to denounce the conclusion of the Pact, French authorities banned communist news organs, arrested communist officials, and soon banned the Party altogether.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the measures they implemented against domestic Party members, French authorities enacted even more draconian policies against the German exile community then living in France. Perceived as agents of the Fifth Column, due to their German origins and widespread support for the Soviet Union, the German exiles became an easy target for the ire of French society amid the atmosphere of unease that accompanied declarations of war.

The Spanienkämpfer soon felt the effects of this rising anticommunist sentiment. They were known to be largely communist in their composition and their presence had

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<sup>1</sup> Regina M. Delacor, "From Potential Friends to Potential Enemies: The Internment of 'Hostile Foreigners' in France at the Beginning of the Second World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 35, no. 3 (2000): 366.

long been viewed as an unwelcome burden on the French state. Molotov-Ribbentrop and its associated fallout marked a new phase in the French internment odyssey of those interned at Camp de Gurs. For members of the Ninth Company whose anticommunist credentials were deemed above reproach, the Pact brought unanticipated opportunity: many were shown leniency or given their freedom in exchange for implicating those among their onetime brothers-in-arms known to be most committed in their loyalty to the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> For the majority of communist Spanienkämpfer, however, the signing of the Pact occasioned an intensification in the nature of their captivity as French authorities transformed what were once simple internment camps into a hellish system of penal camps. The authorities initially responded to developments by increasing security around the Spanienkämpfer at Gurs and opted to transfer only a small minority of those interned there to the penal camp of Le Vernet d'Ariege. Those transferred to Vernet were soon joined by many of the most suspect among the German exile community. Among many others, this group included the KPD Central Committee members Franz Dahlem, Paul Merker, and Siegfried Räder, who were taken into custody after deciding to register with authorities in accordance with emergency statutes. The authorities eventually transferred a large portion of those interned at Gurs to Vernet in the spring of 1940. This transfer brought most of the captive Spanienkämpfer and many of their leading Party comrades within the environment of a single camp. There, for yet another year, these “undesirables” shared the hardships of penal internment: inadequate rations and housing, physical abuse, deficient medical care, and near complete isolation from the outside world.

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<sup>2</sup> Nelles, “Die Unabhängige Antifaschistische Gruppe,” 77.

It was in this context that the communist Spanienkämpfer embarked on an era of unprecedented ideological ferment. With their patron state, the Soviet Union, now effectively cooperating with their sworn enemy, the notion of antifascism, which was once so crucial to their self-conceptions, effectively vanished from their political vocabulary. Amid the political volte-face effected by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Comintern encouraged communists to think of the conflicts unfolding around them not as indications of the onset of the great antifascist war they had long anticipated but rather as the first spasms of an imperialist war instigated by the bourgeoisie of Britain and France. They justified this change of direction by arguing that the British and French negotiators displayed a lack of sincerity in their treaty talks with the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> The communist conception of antifascism, which regarded imperialism as a precursor of fascism, enabled most to rationalize this stance towards France and Britain; yet it did little to allay their misgivings over closer cooperation with Nazi Germany.<sup>4</sup> In response to the uncertainty to which these disorienting changes gave rise, the Spanienkämpfer narrowed the focus of their politics. In place of their former political agenda, which had engaged with developments on the world stage, this new politics emphasized matters of immediate concern to camp life. Though this brand of politics amounted to little more than a campaign to outmaneuver their camp administrators, the shift that it entailed distracted them from the unsettling new allegiances that emerged on the world stage. Furthermore,

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<sup>3</sup> In their explanations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Soviet leaders made much of the fact that the British and French diplomats sent to Moscow were not vested with the necessary authority to conclude a treaty. See Vyacheslav Molotov, *The Meaning of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact* (New York: Workers library publishers, 1940), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Janka, *Spuren eines Lebens* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991), 176.

it enabled them to uphold faith in the ultimate victory of their cause, which had been crucial to sustaining them during the prewar period.

In this chapter, I explore the conduct of the communist Spanienkämpfer between the outbreak of the Second World War and their extradition to Nazi Germany in mid-May of 1941. Due to the more repressive nature of this penal phase of their internment odyssey, contemporary ego documents emerged in far fewer numbers during this period by comparison to the prewar months of their captivity. In the first and second sections of this chapter, respectively, I look instead to a unique trove of literary portrayals and memoir representations of life in the penal camps. Through them, I show that the communist Spanienkämpfer developed yet another form of micro-politics during this period that enabled them to negotiate the unsettling demands of the Molotov-Ribbentrop era. In the third section, I show that the validation the communists derived from their camp politics steeled them for interactions with the Party renegades they encountered in the context of camp life.

### **Literature**

Convict life in the French penal camps during the Molotov-Ribbentrop era differed from the simpler refugee life of the prewar period in that it proved a source of inspiration for literary representation by two Spanienkämpfer. Whether the more noteworthy literary legacy of the French camp Le Vernet d'Ariege reflects the greater hardship of life the internees faced there is impossible to determine; neither of the authors of the Vernet literature were subject to the initial round of internment and therefore never experienced life at Gurs, St. Cyprien or Argeles-sur-Mer. The authors, Rudolf Leonhard

and Friedrich Wolf, counted among the Spanienkämpfer who took leave of the war in Spain before the imminence of defeat had grown manifest. While their fellow Spanienkämpfer strove to establish a vibrant political life within the confines of internment at Gurs, Leonhard and Wolf acted as party functionaries in Paris. They were arrested and interned along with other Party members in the first days of September, 1939, following the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Nonetheless, Leonhard and Wolf had also participated in Spain, and that experience, along with their fellow Spanienkämpfer, played a central role in their literary works on internment life.

The compositions of Leonhard and Wolf bore fewer similarities than differences. Formally, Leonhard was a prolific poet. Over the course of his eighteen-month internment at Vernet, he composed more than 500 poems,<sup>5</sup> which he occasionally recited for his comrades.<sup>6</sup> These poems were preserved thanks to the careful calligraphy of a fellow internee who transcribed them onto cigarette paper so that they could be smuggled out of the camp. The subject matter of Leonhard's poetry ranges broadly, providing penetrating explorations of seemingly mundane aspects of camp life in one instance, while attempting to synthesize the internment experience to the grandest happenings on the world stage in another. Much of the political commentary in Leonhard's poetry testifies to the state of political privation that came to characterize camp life amid the Molotov-Ribbentrop moratorium on antifascism.

Friedrich Wolf's literary legacy is no less valuable for understanding the politics of the period. His exploration of life at Vernet consists the two short stories, "Kiki" and

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<sup>5</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4036/560, 198.

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Julius Goldstein, *Wir sind die Letzten, fragt uns: Kurt Julius Goldstein, Spanienkämpfer, Auschwitz-un Buchenwaldhäftling, Reden und Schriften 1974-2004* (Bonn: Pahl-Rugenstein, 2005), 34.

“Jules,” and an unfinished screenplay entitled “The Invisible Brigade.”<sup>7</sup> Much as Leonhard did through his poetry, Wolf treated political themes in his writings on camp life. Yet Wolf's fictional portrayals of life at Vernet show that new forms of political action emerged to fill the void that Leonhard's poetry lays bare.

For all the dedication the Spanienkämpfer showed to the cause of antifascism prior to the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, it is striking that Leonhard made no reference to antifascism even in the most political verse he composed at Vernet. His poem, “We,” for example, which landed him in a mess of trouble upon its discovery by a camp guard, evidences a glaring void in political life among those interned at Vernet. In the poem, Leonhard chronicles the hardships that the internees faced in this penal camp. He employs repetition, concluding each of the poem's eight stanzas with the refrain, “We know why” in the sense of “We know the reasons for which we suffer.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Leonhard alludes to the existence a commonly understood political rationale for the many hardships that he and his fellow internees faced; yet he conspicuously declines to state that rationale explicitly. By employing such convenient ambiguity, Leonhard enabled himself not only to posit some unity of political consciousness operating among the internees but also to defer to the reader to answer the “why” for himself.

The reaction of a camp guard who discovered “We” illustrates the extent to which Leonhard's tactic succeeded: the guard interpreted the refrain to mean “Because we are

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<sup>7</sup> Because “The Invisible Brigade” seemingly constitutes an effort by Wolf to synthesize his two short stories into a single plotline, I limit my analysis here to the stories themselves. See Friedrich Wolf, “Die unsichtbare Brigade,” in *Filmerzählungen*, ed. Else Wolf and Walther Pollatschek (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1963), 179-220.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Leonhard, *Le Vernet: Gedichte* (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1961), 29.

loyal to Russia."<sup>9</sup> While the guard's reading was a plausible one, he misread the true reasons why Leonhard danced around this point. Several of Leonhard's poems made explicit and favorable references to the Soviet Union;<sup>10</sup> the ongoing if strained loyalty that the Spanienkämpfer felt for the Soviet Union was thus no matter of secrecy. Leonhard used ambiguous language not to conceal his enduring pro-Soviet sympathies from French authorities but rather to spare the communist internees the trauma of potentially disagreeing on the now debatable reason for which they suffered. The guard's overly simplistic interpretation misunderstood the political complexity of the period. Amid the troubled political context of the Molotov-Ribbentrop era, Leonhard's silence in "We" must be interpreted as a thinly veiled strategy to obscure the fact that no collective political consciousness then existed at Vernet. Through its ambiguity, however, Leonhard's "We" could both allege and foster unity of mind where none existed.

The Spanienkämpfer lacked a clear sense of the political role they were meant to play in view of the new political constellations created by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Prior to the conclusion of the Pact, communists understood France as a potential friend and Nazi Germany as a categorical enemy. On paper, at least, the Pact reversed this former logic. Though the notion of Nazi Germany as a friend was likely hard for them to digest, the Spanienkämpfer could be certain that they did not want for enemies in the world. Capturing the confusion inherent in this situation, Leonhard constructed a faceless enemy in his poem, "Anonymous Letter":

Today in my luggage

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<sup>9</sup> Maximilian Scheer, Introduction to *Le Vernet: Gedichte*, by Rudolf Leonhard (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1961), 9.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Leonhard, *Le Vernet*, 146-147, 254-255, and 309-310.

an anonymous letter lay  
it caused me no alarm  
such a thing has commonly reeked in my path.

It teemed with foulness,  
with threats, that subside<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, Leonhard made clear in his poem "Party" that the uncertain identity of the enemy was no obstacle to taking sides:

In every struggle  
I stand on one side.  
I am Party.  
I stand firmly upon the earth.<sup>12</sup>

Yet it is worth noting that this poem did not articulate any particular political stance toward the current situation. "Party" alleges an unswerving partisanship among the communists at Vernet; for or against what or whom, however, Leonhard leaves for the reader to decide.

Such equivocal articulations of the prevailing state of affairs were particularly well-suited to the uncertain political environment that then reigned in camp life. Perhaps Leonhard's most forthright commentary on the political torpor that beset the Spanienkämpfer at Vernet comes from his poem, "Culture":

We want always to interrogate ourselves seriously  
and always to say the exact truth.  
What are we palpably lacking in these days?  
For many, first and foremost: politics.<sup>13</sup>

Antifascism had informed the political and cultural lives of the communist Spanienkämpfer for as long as most could remember, but it now dissipated amid the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.

formalized policy of nonaggression between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Set adrift for a time by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the interned Spanienkämpfer had no choice but to seek continuities capable of bridging this fresh rupture between past and present.

Whereas the poetry of Rudolf Leonhard conveyed anxieties surrounding the loss of a familiar politics, the short stories of Friedrich Wolf speak to the rise of a new politics peculiar to camp life. Unlike Leonhard, Wolf composed his short stories of life at Vernet in the immediate aftermath of his repatriation to the Soviet Union in early 1941.<sup>14</sup>

Though the stories were published in the year of his release, the precise date of their composition is difficult to determine. The absence of references to antifascism from their text suggests that they were completed before June 22, 1941, when the confusion wrought by the Pact gave way to the renewed clarity of Operation Barbarossa.<sup>15</sup> Wolf's stories therefore postdate Leonhard's poetry, and thus benefit from fresh hindsight. Rather than capturing the relative void in political life that initially plagued the communist Spanienkämpfer amid their lived experience of Vernet, Wolf's stories reflect back on camp life to depict those forms of politics that arose organically within camp life to fill that void.

"Kiki," the shorter of Wolf's two stories, is the fictional tale of a stray English Pointer who wanders into Vernet. The dog soon befriends the internees, forming a particularly strong bond with a former Spanienkämpfer named Berthel. Kiki's characteristic smile, dog laugh and all-around playful behavior bring the interned

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<sup>14</sup> Though a native of Germany, Wolf had obtained Soviet citizenship.

<sup>15</sup> Peaceable relations continued between the Soviet Union and Germany until Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa on June 22, 1941, at which time the concept of antifascism was quickly resurrected.

Spanienkämpfer great joy, but he quickly develops a foreboding aversion for the camp's guards upon witnessing them abuse one of his newfound friends. After growing aggressive toward an offending guard on one occasion, Kiki becomes a target of the guards' ire and soon suffers a grievous bayonet wound from which the internees must fight to revive him. In the course of their efforts to nurture Kiki back to life, Berthel and the Spanienkämpfer befriend Peppa, a young female refugee from Spain who works in the camp mess hall. Acting in solidarity with the Spanienkämpfer in their attempt to save Kiki, Peppa sneaks extra rations to them in an effort to help the dog regain its strength. Though she informs Berthel that she can arrange for his escape from the Vernet, he declines her offer, objecting that he "can and may not leave [his] comrades."<sup>16</sup> Despite the collective efforts of Peppa and the Spanienkämpfer, Kiki's health declines and, to the dismay of all, he succumbs to his wounds. The Spanienkämpfer take a vow to avenge Kiki. Peppa buries the dog in freedom, beyond the confines of the camp, promising "One day she will show [them] Kiki's grave."<sup>17</sup>

"Kiki" befits the situation of the Spanienkämpfer during the Molotov-Ribbentrop era precisely because it delineates protagonist from antagonist in camp life without risking an explicit articulation of ideological positions. Wolf pitted the Spanienkämpfer, in coalition with Spanish refugees, against seemingly unreasoned malice as personified by the camp guards. In so doing, he resurrected the old allegiances from the more clear-cut days of Spain without elaborating upon the motives or nature of their ill-defined adversary of the present. At the same time, his story foregrounds social relationships

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<sup>16</sup> Wolf, "Kiki: Die Geschichte eines Hundes," 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

within the camp as the site where political values are properly expressed. Wolf portrays the Spanienkämpfer as figures who act selflessly by sharing precious morsels of meat and condensed milk with their loyal canine companion. The telling exchange wherein Berthel declines Peppa's offer to help him escape speaks to both Peppa's solidarity with the internees and Berthel's solidarity with his comrades; it thus illustrates the eminently solidary culture that came to characterize life in Vernet. These elements in Wolf's story suggest that the environment of camp life had become pervaded by the spirit of prison communism<sup>18</sup>— a micro-social system within which the Spanienkämpfer could thrive and in which they might begin to taste the fruits of the collectivized world that they still hoped to create on the outside. At the same time, Wolf maintained hope for victory on a grander scale: both the oath of the Spanienkämpfer to avenge Kiki, and Peppa's solemn promise to take them to the dog's remote gravesite, foreshadow a favorable outcome to the internment camp predicament in which the internees vanquish their oppressors and walk in freedom once more. Wolf's optimistic outlook suggests that neither his faith in victory nor that of his comrades had been shaken by their trying internment experience. In contrast to the way they had previously understood their role in a global antifascist war, however, this more proximate focus to their efforts marks a clear shift in favor of the micro-political concerns specific to camp life.

“Jules,” the second of Wolf's fictional tales set at Vernet, centers around a debate between the interned Spanienkämpfer Ernst and Friedrich—the latter based on Wolf himself—over the extent to which a man is capable of changing his stripes. The plot develops through their ongoing encounters with a Polish internee, Aron Litere, whom

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<sup>18</sup> Voglis, “Political Prisoners,” 535.

they christen Jules after a misunderstood reference to his Jewish heritage. In what ensues, Friedrich oversees Jules' progressive transformation from an unhygienic, asocial, apolitical black marketeer to a staunch and admirable comrade. Jules learns the immense virtue of solidarity and becomes committed to spreading Truth, which he discovers by participating in festivities organized by the communist Spanienkämpfer in defiance of camp authorities on May 1. Not unlike the dog, Kiki, Jules becomes a source of pride to his newfound friends until his untimely death—here stemming from tuberculosis that went untreated amid the unforgiving environment of camp life. As they transport Jules' body to the camp cemetery, "Over four thousand internees stand pressed to the barbed wire and for the last time greet their dead comrade, who may never again experience freedom. ... Many stand stalwartly, saluting with fist raised."<sup>19</sup> Though Friedrich takes Jules' passing hard, he recognizes that those gathered in Jules' honor have grown in consciousness and resolve during their internment at Vernet in the same way that Jules did. He tells himself, "One must stay alive! That is the most important skill for today: stay alive for later!"<sup>20</sup> Though Wolf concludes the story of Friedrich and his fellow Spanienkämpfer still unresolved, his tale of a contagious class consciousness suggests that victory and the age of the proletariat rapidly approach, if only the internees can persevere.

Though greater in both length and thematic complexity, "Jules" touches on aspects of camp life similar to those Wolf treated in "Kiki." The story avoids engagement with political topics like antifascism, which were taboo in the Molotov-Ribbentrop era,

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<sup>19</sup> Wolf, "Jules," in *Gesammelte Werke* 13, ed. Else Wolf and Walther Pollatschek (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1963), 218.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

instead foregrounding virtues such as solidarity and discipline in the fashion of an educational novel. Not only in life, through his selfless conduct, but also in death, the coming-to-consciousness character, Jules, functions as a vehicle through which Wolf conveys the spirit of prison communism that reigned among Spanienkämpfer at Vernet. Through its dramatic depiction of the mass gathering in the funeral scene, Wolf's "Jules" illustrates the unique ability of death, which became a common occurrence at Vernet, to instill intense feelings of unity among members of a diverse collective.<sup>21</sup> Here, that unity expressed itself as proletarian solidarity in the symbolism of the raised fist salute. More forward-looking than "Kiki," however, "Jules" depicts this solidarity in camp life as but a prelude to something much grander—a "great and final struggle"<sup>22</sup> through which victory of an undefined nature remained possible.

These literary examples illustrate a trend in the political culture among the Spanienkämpfer interned at Vernet. Though the loss of their erstwhile guiding principle of antifascism gave rise to uncertainty at the onset of this phase of their internment, the harsh conditions to which those administering Vernet subjected the internees ensured that this suspension of politics could not endure. With the object of macro-political projects now in question, the micro-political concerns of camp life came to the fore. At Vernet, this new politics derived chiefly from the confrontational atmosphere that emerged between the internees and the antagonistic Frenchmen who oversaw their confinement. Amid the violence and hardship of the penal camp, the ultimate triumph of communism

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<sup>21</sup> According to Katherine Verdery, "what gives a dead body symbolic effectiveness in politics is precisely its ambiguity, its capacity to evoke a variety of understandings" and identifications. See Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 27-33.

<sup>22</sup> Wolf, "Jules," 220

on the world stage appeared to them inextricably bound up with achieving victory in their struggle against the conditions of camp life. Yet this diminution in the scope of their politics was also convenient in that it enabled them to avoid taking a position in an international situation that no longer corresponded to their antifascist traditions.

It is likely in the spirit of this political recalibration that Rudolf Leonhard penned the poem "Symbols":

The men shout, and the names are in force.  
Bastille was a symbol, and it fell.  
Those who think of Hitler's Germany say Dachau;  
Those who think of the regime here say Vernet.<sup>23</sup>

No longer simply a cruel enclosure that confined them, Vernet took on a meaning for the communist Spanienkämpfer that placed it symbolically on par with the Bastille. Scarcely a year earlier, the Spanienkämpfer had commemorated this *cause célèbre* of French history in a ceremony intended to honor their hosts; now they referenced it, without any sense of irony, as an allegory for their own state of oppression by those very same hosts. Associating their own eventual triumph with the downfall of the camp, the Spanienkämpfer made this local issue into the new object of their politics in the Molotov-Ribbentrop era. Myopic as this outlook appears, it offered them a way to construct a new collective narrative that was both consistent with the story of the past and adapted to the new political situation of the present: victory in the immediate endeavor was a stepping stone on the path to victory in general.

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<sup>23</sup> Leonhard, *Le Vernet*, 122.

## Memory

The reclassification of the Spanienkämpfer from refugees to undesirables during the Molotov-Ribbentrop era was a highly unfavorable development for the production and preservation of ego documents from this stage in their internment odyssey. Some contemporary correspondence has survived, but most examples reflect the considerable constraints that French authorities placed on internee mail during this period by comparison to the prewar period of internment. Because letters were subject to diligent censorship by camp authorities, those who composed them usually avoided overtly political themes. Often pleading for food or other forms of support from friends and loved ones living in freedom, these letters mostly tended to reflect the dire material deprivation from which their writers suffered as internees of Vernet or Gurs during the wartime years.

Contemporary source difficulties are offset to some degree by the abundance of memoir accounts relating to the internment experience of this period. In addition to published memoirs written by former internees of the French camps, a trove of unpublished accounts has been preserved among the personal papers of Franz Dahlem in the former archives of the DDR. During the 1970s, Dahlem made a concerted effort to gather materials relating to the internment of former Spanienkämpfer at Vernet in particular for the sake of a postwar book project.<sup>24</sup> Both Dahlem and his book project are examined in greater depth in Chapter 3. The collection of memories amassed by Dahlem

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<sup>24</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4246/61, 38.

constitutes the most comprehensive source of information regarding the experiences of the interned Spanienkämpfer during the Molotov-Ribbentrop era.<sup>25</sup>

For use as windows into the realtime politics of the interned Spanienkämpfer, memoir accounts of the Molotov-Ribbentrop era are especially problematic. Because they were written decades after this fleeting period of cooperation between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the memoirs often attribute motives behind certain actions to an antifascism that was not in effect during the period. To reconcile problems raised by the retroactive imposition of antifascism where none existed historically, this study discards all such references as anachronism and looks instead to other elements of the narratives reclaimed from recorded memory. Additionally, in the case of published sources, memories had to contend with the rigorous censorship of publishing houses operating in the DDR.<sup>26</sup> Rather than accepting sanitized memories at face value, therefore, this study scrutinizes published accounts by weighing their contents against unpublished memoirs, which typically remained much truer to lived experiences.<sup>27</sup> Finally, in the case of memories collected by Dahlem, the authenticity of recollections was likely susceptible to degradation resulting from the officialization of memory: in the letters Dahlem sent soliciting fellow Spanienkämpfer for their memories, he not only influenced their responses by furnishing them with a questionnaire<sup>28</sup> filled with leading questions but also

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<sup>25</sup> Sibylle Hinze, *Antifaschisten im Camp Le Vernet: Abriß der Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Le Vernet 1939 bis 1944* (Berlin: Militärverlag der DDR, 1988), 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 149-166; Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, 209-210.

<sup>27</sup> McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 166-175.

<sup>28</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4246/61, 39-47.

encouraged them to refresh their minds by reading published accounts.<sup>29</sup> To overcome some of the obstacles to authenticity posed by the officialization of memory, this section forgoes mainstream recollections in favor of recurring memories that digress from accounts most likely to have been encouraged into being. Though it is impossible to reconstruct the history of the camp precisely as it was experienced by the Spanienkämpfer who lived it, such measures effect a degree of refinement.

The majority of Spanienkämpfer whose internment commenced upon departure from Spain remained at Gurs for the first nine months of the Molotov-Ribbentrop era. To account for the effect that the Pact exerted on the Spanienkämpfer in aggregate, it is therefore crucial to consider also the experiences of those who initially remained interned at Gurs before joining their comrades at Vernet. In a memoir reflecting on the animosity that reigned between internees and camp guards at Gurs during this period, Ernst Buschmann recounted a particular instance of conflict that unfolded between them. On the occasion he describes, the camp commandant ordered the internees to engage in a quite humiliating act: they were to erect a fourth ring of barbed wire around their camp to deter any lingering thoughts of flight.<sup>30</sup> When the internees flatly refused to submit to such degrading work, the commandant gave the impression of conceding defeat in his intentions—instead soliciting the help of a smaller group of internees for assignment to a different task. Upon reporting for duty, however, the volunteers were detained and taken into an empty barrack, where the guards shaved their heads as a retributive measure for

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>30</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1962), 44.

their insolence.<sup>31</sup> Yet the commandant's punishment of head-shaving quickly backfired. According to Buschmann and another witness,<sup>32</sup> the rest of the internees retaliated that evening by shaving their heads in an act of solidarity with the victims of the commandant's deception. When the commandant returned to the camp on the following morning, Buschmann recalled, his face turned bright red with rage upon realizing what had happened, and he quickly stormed off to his headquarters. Buschmann noted, "For us a sign of victory. We had won the little dance," and added "It strengthened our trust in our own power and closed our ranks more fixedly yet."<sup>33</sup>

In a manner consistent with the literary portrayals of camp life by Leonhard and Wolf, Buschmann's recollection evidences the primacy of an affirmative micro-politics in camp life. Rooted in prison communism, this specialized brand of politics functioned to reassure the interned Spanienkämpfer of the ongoing potential for victory. The incident described by Buschmann involves two manifestations of what Erving Goffman terms "mortification of the self." In the first case, the camp commandant asserted his authority over the internees by the mortifying act of shaving their scalps to demonstrate their loss of self-determination. The recalcitrant internees effectively parried this measure, however, by declaring the bald head—now symbolic of their universal oppression—a mark of pride rather than shame;<sup>34</sup> by self-mortifying in this way, they undermined the authority to which the camp commandant laid claim. By willfully employing the very

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 47. For a firsthand account of psychological effects of such practices, see Koestler, *Scum*, 102-108.

<sup>32</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/159, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Hanna Schramm and Barbara Vormeier, *Menschen in Gurs: Erinnerungen an ein französisches Internierungslager, 1940-1941* (Worms: Heintz, 1977), 319-320. See also SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 54-55.

<sup>34</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, 47.

means of punishment to render that punishment ineffective, the interned Spanienkämpfer succeeded in reinstating their own version of the status quo,<sup>35</sup> wherein they rather than the camp authorities stood firmly in control of the situation. That this incident remained present enough in the minds of former internees for them to recall it decades later suggests the immense impression that this encounter, which rekindled their faith in victory, made on them at the time of its occurrence.

Of the many hardships that characterized life at Vernet, accounts suggest that none occupied the minds of the Spanienkämpfer more than hunger. Internees who were unfortunate enough to have Dachau as a reference point found life at Vernet preferable in every respect but in that of food.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the pangs of hunger that they experienced at this penal camp impressed them so deeply that reminiscences of hunger peppered their recollections of the camp as they reflected some thirty years later. A particular story of hunger at Vernet to appear in the memoirs of at least four former internees<sup>37</sup> of the camp relates an occasion on which the malnourished Spanienkämpfer conspired to make a meal of the camp commandant's dog. Various accounts coalesce to indicate that a cabal of Spanienkämpfer hatched a scheme that involved luring and capturing the commandant's dog before garroting it under the auditory cover of a harmonica rendition of Johan Strauss' "The Beautiful Blue Danube." With culinary skill and a frying pan that had made

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<sup>35</sup> Through the dialectics of symbolic inversion, "the antithetical position is reduced to the status of an aberration that surfaces when the once-and-future thesis temporarily flags, and is effectively contained between the initial and final presentation of the thesis, where it is rendered harmless, deprived of whatever persuasive power it might otherwise have had." See Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 142-159.

<sup>36</sup> Koestler, *Scum*, 107.

<sup>37</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/161, 51; SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 4-6; SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 306; SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/159, 10.

the long journey with them from Spain, they rendered the unfortunate sheepdog into "succulent meatballs" that the Spanienkämpfer shared among themselves—each receiving two. Fritz Kahmann and Hans Winkelmann recalled that the furious commandant offered a massive reward for information regarding the whereabouts of his missing dog, and that the internees paid for their unwillingness to cooperate with the loss of the following day's rations. Fritz Baumgaertel, who recounted the story with the greatest enthusiasm and detail, accorded greater significance to the fact that Franz Dahlem, acting head of the central committee of the KPD in exile, not only was a guest of honor at the feast but also that he had remarked, "It tasted superb."

The tale of the dog feast has been preserved among the many unpublished recollections Dahlem received from various Spanienkämpfer in the course of his postwar project on the history of Vernet. Respondents were well-aware that Dahlem sought memories he could use to paint the resistance efforts the internees at Vernet in a heroic light. Yet the tale of the dog feast, which was for Dahlem's intents and purposes utterly unusable, somehow took center stage in the recollections of multiple internees. Without question, hunger played an essential role in the downfall of the commandant's dog. Yet the significance of the dog feast to the to history of Vernet has little to do with the momentary satisfaction of nutritional requirements; the Spanienkämpfer ate numerous stray dogs over the course of their internment at Vernet. By butchering and consuming the dog of such a high-level camp administrator, the Spanienkämpfer reasserted their dominion within the space of the camp. Though this incident was of little actual consequence, by bringing the dog from the right hand of the penal camp's oppressor-in-chief to the satisfied lips and stomach of the internees' own leader, it served to reaffirm

their control of the situation. Thus, what at first glance seems a cheap prank that made collateral damage of an innocent animal in fact constituted a practical coup brimming with victory-affirming symbolism when examined within the micro-political context of camp life.<sup>38</sup> Here again, the internees acted in solidarity to achieve a victory that they experienced as eminently political despite the outward irrelevance of that victory to the politics they espoused.

Like Ernst Buschmann's story of the head-shaving incident at Gurs, the tale of the dog feast remained accessible to memories of the interned Spanienkämpfer because it was a much-celebrated victory over those who brutalized them at Vernet. Though the story's omission from the official historical record suggests that Dahlem might have been less than thrilled by the emphatic reminder he received of it those many years later, the dog feast nevertheless stood as an eminently meaningful event at the time and in the context in which it occurred. The sense of triumph that the interned Spanienkämpfer experienced in those moments, and that they still maintained some thirty years later as they recorded their memories, had been founded, and thus depended, upon the ideological affirmation that those events engendered.

### **“Stalinism” at Vernet**

As in the internment camps of the prewar months, Vernet housed many persons who did not sympathize with or share the political aspirations of the communist Spanienkämpfer. There, unlike Gurs, the communist Spanienkämpfer constituted but a small minority of the total camp population: out of what swelled at times to roughly four

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<sup>38</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Tales* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 75-104.

thousand internees, roughly 20 Spanienkämpfer lived in the B-Quarter and slightly more than 200 populated the C-Quarter following the arrival of the final train of Spanienkämpfer from Gurs in May of 1940.<sup>39</sup> Though Vernet housed a nationally and politically diverse population, the Spanienkämpfer led a mostly self-contained social existence aside from their regular associations with fellow communist internees and Interbrigadiers of other nationalities who accompanied them on their odyssey through the French camp system. On the whole, therefore, the communist Spanienkämpfer suffered the presence of far fewer actual detractors among the internee population than they once had during the prewar period at Gurs.

Though some Party renegades were interned along with the Spanienkämpfer at Vernet, they received little direct attention in either the memoir accounts or literary representations that emerged from the camp. The most detailed accounts of interaction between the communists and their critics at Vernet come from memoirs published by Party renegades themselves. Gustav Regler and Arthur Koestler, whom scholars often describe as victims of Stalinist exclusion,<sup>40</sup> published memoirs recounting their experiences of internment at Vernet. Taken together, their reflections offer a telling inverse perspective on controversies surrounding communist politics in camp life during the Molotov-Ribbentrop era.

Gustav Regler had served as a commissar in the Fourteenth International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War, and remained involved in war-related matters until the end of

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<sup>39</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4246/32, 16-17. French authorities divided the remaining Spanienkämpfer between other camps for which little documentation exists.

<sup>40</sup> McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 195-196; Michael Rohrwasser, "Der Spanische Bürgerkrieg," in *Mythen des Spanischen Bürgerkriegs*, ed. Thomas Kleinspehn and Gottfried Mergner (Grafenau: Trozdem, 1989), 90.

German participation in the conflict. Regler began to dissociate himself from the Party only upon the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. His memoir account of life at Vernet thus documents the process of his gradual distancing from the communists and his fellow Spanienkämpfer. Arthur Koestler had been a member of the KPD for seven years before leaving in 1938 due to the serious misgivings he harbored regarding the purges then unfolding in the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> Koestler's experience in Spain was purely journalistic. Though this did not qualify him as an actual Spanienkämpfer, he could nevertheless speak with a near-insider's perspective on matters relating to both communism and the Spanienkämpfer. Because the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact only heightened his preexisting aversion to the Party, his memoir account of life at Vernet exudes cynicism regarding not only the communists he encountered in camp life but also the communist project as a whole.

The accounts of Regler and Koestler show that, while faith in victory endured for many in spite of the trying conditions of camp life, such optimism was the exclusive province of the communists. The generally buoyant attitude of the communists seemed a bizarre spectacle to observers who did not share it or had lost it. Gustav Regler contrasted his own pessimism with the optimism of the Communists:

But the Communists went about the camp at Vernet with the assurance they had always shown, and in the evenings they discussed leading-articles which would never be printed. Perhaps their attitude in reality concealed a deep dismay, and they were nearer to despair than we knew. Perhaps they stuck to their old habits so as not to have to admit to themselves that they had lost their imaginary supporters. ... It was impossible not to admire the fantasy which sustained them in the depths of defeat.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Koestler, *Scum*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Gustav Regler, *Owl of Minerva*, trans. Norman Denny (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1959), 334.

Pointing to the factor that he deemed essential to the communist reading of the situation, Regler added, "Still less could I have anything to do with the routine protests of the Communists. They advocated protest for its own sake, making of every injustice a 'revolutionary action;' they lived on resistance and proved their theories with it."<sup>43</sup> As a former Party member, Regler recognized that the communist subnarrative in camp life, which encouraged readings of victory at every turn, fed a sort of release binge fantasy<sup>44</sup> upon which the metanarrative of their politics came to be predicated.

It is in this context that Arthur Koestler's own interaction with communists at Vernet becomes most comprehensible. In his memoir, Koestler reports that he once confronted a member of Central Committee of the KPD with his objections to the new spirit of the Molotov-Ribbentrop era. Recalling the unnamed communists' reaction to his efforts to point out the contradictions inherent in this change in the Party line, Koestler wrote, "We had the usual argument. Everything he said sounded utterly convincing. One could almost see the well-oiled cogwheels turn in his brain, grind the words out of their meaning, turn them round and round, until it became self-evident that real [antifascism] meant support for the Fascists."<sup>45</sup> Koestler's reflection on this incident—though riddled with sarcasm—captures an essential truth about his communist interlocutor: he and his comrades were sincere in their ongoing adherence to the Party. The matter with which Koestler challenged the communists was certainly an unpleasant one, and not one upon which they could proudly base the entirety of their politics; yet for the assured

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>44</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, 50; Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 74-75.

<sup>45</sup> Koestler, *Scum*, 134.

communists at Vernet who continued to experience validation of their politics from the depths of captivity, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact seemed but a peripheral arrangement made by a Party that remained uncowed in the face of adversity, and thus still seemed capable of delivering on the vision for which they had fought in Spain. The disagreement was not reducible to the simple question of support for or opposition to the Party line; it stemmed from the divergent understandings on which those political positions were founded. For the interned communist Spanienkämpfer, this understanding owed to their demonstrated indomitability as a collective.

The opposing outlooks of the communists and Party renegades emerged out of irreconcilable narratives that determined the very substance of their respective realities. This circumstance is evidenced by two conflicting versions of an anecdote from Vernet as reported by Gustav Regler, the renegade, and Rudolf Leonhard, the loyal Party adherent. In his poem, "Fate," Leonhard mourned the plight of a solitary Finnish internee who lacked the language skills to communicate with his comrades. According to Leonhard, the Finn sustained massive trauma to his hands from a shrapnel wound suffered in his contribution to their heroic struggle in Spain.<sup>46</sup> Regler also mentioned the presence of a Finn with wounded hands in his own memoir, but attributed the Finn's injuries to an entirely different source. According to him, on the day the internees learned of the Soviet assault on Finland in what became the Winter War, the Finn, who was a communist, "went and beat his fists against the barbed wire until he had torn his hands to shreds."<sup>47</sup> Though Regler notes the Finn never explained his outburst, he deemed the

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<sup>46</sup> Leonhard, *Le Vernet*, 133-134.

<sup>47</sup> Regler, *Owl of Minerva*, 335.

incident a reaction to the news of Soviet treachery. For this reason, Regler sympathized with the Finn. Both Leonhard's and Regler's versions of the story describe the Finn as existing outside of society; whereas Leonhard attributed this circumstance to his inability to communicate, Regler ascribed it to a willful silence deriving from his political disaffection. Whichever factor was truly its cause, the asocial behavior they ascribed to the wounded Finn made him an ideal figure upon whom Leonhard and Regler could project meanings that validated their respective viewpoints amid the political tensions that pervaded camp life at Vernet. These meanings exerted an adequately powerful influence over their minds to determine perceptions of empirical phenomena so seemingly straightforward as a hand injury. Among the communist Spanienkämpfer, Leonhard's version of reality undoubtedly prevailed.

The memoirs of Koestler and Regler leave no doubt that these two men fell into disrepute with the communists after making their opposition known. Yet even by their own accounts, which were rife with anticommunist sentiment, neither man was flatly dismissed as an unambiguous enemy; instead, their accounts suggest that the communists were simply unable to comprehend their viewpoints as renegades. Regler recalled that the Spanienkämpfer to whom he expressed his disaffection with the Party received the news with incredulity.<sup>48</sup> Koestler, too, reported that his communist interlocutor seemed unsure of what to make of his political orientation after their encounter.<sup>49</sup> This divide owed much to their immersion in separate communities at Vernet. Whereas the communists interacted and made sense of their circumstances in camp life through their affirmative

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 353-354.

<sup>49</sup> Koestler, *Scum*, 134-135.

brand of micro-politics, Regler and Koestler led a more marginal existence among apolitical elements who forwent organizational activities.<sup>50</sup>

After struggling to negotiate a jarring change of context the previous February, the communist Spanienkämpfer were forced to contend with an alarming change of politics upon the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939. Deprived of their once clearly defined platform, they largely withdrew from the untidy macro-political realm of the Molotov-Ribbentrop era to focus on concerns specific to camp life. Narrowing their purview in this way enabled them to maintain cohesion within their collective by offering them a clear enemy in the form of their camp administrators, and permitting them to avoid internal disputes that might arise from engaging with developments beyond the confines of their barbed-wired enclosure. This diminution of their agenda spawned a form of micro-politics from which they regularly elicited an otherwise improbable sense of validation. When political opponents confronted them regarding the seeming contradictions in the politics of the Communist Party, with which they remained aligned, this validation coalesced with their own constancy of mind to render such criticism harmless—if inconvenient. Even the “Stalinist” persecution with which the Spanienkämpfer allegedly responded to such threats amounted to something more like bewilderment. Only in the postwar era would the political differences of the French internment experience be recalled in the language of dichotomy.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 110 and 120-121.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MEANING OF INTERNMENT DURING THE POSTWAR ERA

*We should not forget the past, for it provides us sharp weapons in our struggle for a peaceful and happy future.*

-Franz Dahlem to Bruno Frei (1960)

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, Hans Beimler, the first political commissar of the International Brigades, famously remarked, “The only way we can get back to Germany is through Madrid.”<sup>1</sup> With these words, Beimler expressed the role he anticipated the Spanish Civil War to play in the political strategy of the Communist Party of Germany. Put simply, the ability of the Spanienkämpfer to return to their homeland depended on action—such their as armed resistance against Hitler’s interests in Spain—that could turn the tide in the Party’s struggle against the Nazi regime. The losses of Madrid, of Spain, and of the War in 1939 suggested to the Spanienkämpfer that a triumphant return to Germany was unlikely. When Nazi Germany invaded the French state that held them captive in the early summer of 1940, they were forced to consider the possibility that their long-awaited return to Germany might not come on their own terms.

One June 22, 1940, the French and the Germans signed the Second Armistice at Compiègne, which established German victory in the Battle of France. Fortunately for the interned Spanienkämpfer, Vernet was situated in the unoccupied zone of France established by the terms of the Armistice. It thus seemed that they would be spared from the perilous fate of an involuntary return to Nazi Germany. On August 17, 1940, a

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<sup>1</sup> Regler, *Owl of Minerva*, 285.

delegation of Germans known as the Kundt Commission<sup>2</sup> arrived at Vernet to inquire whether the Germans interned there desired to be repatriated. The communist Spanienkämpfer were fully cognizant of what horrors might await opposition figures like themselves if they chose to return home; they therefore declined the commission's offer.<sup>3</sup>

In the year that followed, leading figures among the communists at Vernet changed their stance on the issue of repatriation. In the Spring of 1941 they decided that those Spanienkämpfer who were not particularly endangered by either Jewish heritage or a prior criminal record in Germany should apply for return. In their memoirs, the Spanienkämpfer offered varying rationales for this decision. Some accounts suggest the Party felt German communists could better carry out political work as captives in German camps rather than French ones.<sup>4</sup> Other accounts indicate that conditions had become so desperate at Vernet that they believed repatriation could only bring relief.<sup>5</sup> Others claimed they hoped that, as communist Spanienkämpfer, they would not be received as enemies because of the peaceful relations that still reigned between Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> The various rationales remembered by involved persons are probably those that seemed most compelling to each, respectively, at the time when the decision was made.

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Eggers, "Die Reise der Kundt-Kommission durch die südfranzösischen Lager," in *Zone der Ungewißheit: Exil und Internierung in Südfrankreich 1933-1944*, ed. Jacques Grandjonc and Theresia Grundtner (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993), 240.

<sup>3</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 64-65.

<sup>4</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/158, 66.

<sup>5</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 235; Janka, *Spuren eines Lebens*, 179.

<sup>6</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 327.

The fates of the communist Spanienkämpfer during the remainder of the Second World War varied considerably. A minority were fortunate enough to be released from Vernet at an early stage, and weathered the War years in countries such as Mexico, Britain, or the Soviet Union. Most of the endangered internees, including Jews, who remained at Vernet were later transported to the North African labor camp of Djelfa, where they were later liberated by British forces. The majority who returned to Germany were divided between concentration camps such as Sachsenhausen<sup>7</sup> and Mauthausen. In every case, the social circles of these veteran Spanienkämpfer became diluted after leaving Vernet as they were joined by and interacted with persecuted figures who came to those locations by routes other than the Spanish Civil War and the French internment camps. Whether in freedom or in captivity, many continued to engage in various activities inimical to the interests of the Nazi regime. Nevertheless, because they were dispersed around the globe after leaving the French camps, it was no longer possible to speak of a Spanienkämpfer-specific experience between the time of their departure from Vernet and the end of the Second World War.

After 1945, the commonality that previously characterized the experiences of the Spanienkämpfer was in many ways restored through their shared status as veterans of the Spanish Civil War. After the defeat of the Nazi regime, liberated and returning Spanienkämpfer alike were eager to play a role in the creation of a new Germany that aligned with the political ideals for which they fought in Spain. Most settled in the Soviet occupation zone of Germany. There, they worked diligently to build an antifascist state upon the rubble of a vanquished fascist one. Most joined the SED after its formation in

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<sup>7</sup> See Barbara Kühle and Monika Knop, *Kommunisten, Antifaschisten, Aktivisten der ersten Stunde*, (Oranienburg: Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen, 1988).

1946 and many played important roles in both the founding the DDR in 1949 and later in its administration. Many veterans rose to positions of political prominence in the DDR, where the ruling SED promoted antifascism and the legacy of the Spanienkämpfer in particular as a founding myth.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1950s, many leading figures among the Spanienkämpfer suffered a precipitous fall from grace in the DDR. Amid an environment of paranoia that reigned in the Eastern Bloc states at this time, these veterans came under suspicion in the wake of the Noel Field Affair and Slansky show trials. The Field Affair gave rise to fears that the Party had been infiltrated by Western intelligence operatives, and the Slansky trials bred concerns over deviation from the Party line; both matters raised suspicions regarding the past activities of Party members who emigrated to the West during the Nazi era. Though the fallout from these events affected the Western emigre population in general, the Spanienkämpfer were particularly hard hit due to the higher political status to which their involvement in Spain elevated them within the DDR. Thus, what initially constituted their greatest source of political capital during the postwar years proved the political downfall for some veteran Spanienkämpfer. These mostly baseless purges subsided after Stalin's death in 1953. Though many of the victims were ostensibly rehabilitated in 1956 upon the state's recognition of their antifascist resistance efforts,<sup>9</sup> few ever regained their former prestige in terms of either political station or public esteem. Because these purge victims were often unsatisfied with such nominal rehabilitation, some sought to regain favor in the public eye by writing and publishing memoirs that might rectify lingering

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<sup>8</sup> Uhl, *Mythos Spanien*, 330-334.

<sup>9</sup> McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 66-67.

misapprehensions regarding their pasts. For purged veterans who had undergone internment, this process was intimately bound up with revisiting the French internment experience in particular.

In this chapter, I examine previously unexplored efforts of Spanish Civil War veterans to recast the French internment experience in a favorable light as a means of achieving personal and collective rehabilitation in the DDR. As suggested by Chapters 1 and 2, succeeding in this task demanded that they generate accounts of the internment experience that exaggerated the influence of communist politics in the French camps. In the first section, I explore efforts by a particular veteran to reconstruct the most ideal version of this episode from the past. This attempt to rework the past was hindered by political constraints of the present. In the second section, I examine the evolution of this project in the wake of its initial failure. Both sections show that, to construct a past useful to the present in the DDR, a premium was placed on constructing overly generalized representations that placed the Party and its political concerns at the center of all things. This ex post facto “Stalinization” of the past misrepresented the real uncertainties that beset the Spanienkämpfer at the time of their internment in France.

### **The Case of Franz Dahlem**

No veteran so encapsulated the postwar adversity faced by Spanienkämpfer who underwent internment in France as did Franz Dahlem. To a greater degree than most, Dahlem wielded considerable influence in the early years of the DDR. Dahlem was a founding member of the Central Sekretariat of the SED.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he enjoyed

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 47.

unparalleled influence and popularity among his fellow antifascist resistance fighters, making him arguably the greatest internal rival to General Secretary Walter Ulbricht.<sup>11</sup> By the mid-1950s, however, he had been relegated to the token roll of Deputy Minister for Higher Education—an office that he filled from the virtual exile of the Berlin suburb of Biesdorf.<sup>12</sup>

Prior to his fall from grace, Dahlem's influence in the DDR was exceeded only by the prestige he held among his fellow Spanienkämpfer. He had played a key role among the Spanienkämpfer both during the Spanish Civil War itself and throughout the internment experience that followed. Having been a member of the Socialist Party of Germany before its more radical members broke away to form the KPD, Dahlem was widely regarded as a senior figure both within the Party and among the Spanienkämpfer in particular. In Spain, he acted as the leading representative of the KPD following the death of Hans Beimler, and later served there as a representative of the Comintern.<sup>13</sup> During the prewar phase of the French internment odyssey, Dahlem served as head of the Central Committee of the KPD in exile from Paris. As such, he both worked with the Communist Party of France and published articles in the *Deutsche Volkszeitung* on behalf of the interned Spanienkämpfer. After reestablishing direct contact with the internees in May of 1939, he also stayed apprised of their activities in camp life. After the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the outbreak of the Second World War, Dahlem was among those Central Committee members whom French authorities interned at Vernet.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 26.

After arriving at the camp, he continued to fill a leadership role among the Spanienkämpfer.

Dahlem's influence with the Spanienkämpfer helped him little after his name emerged in connection with both the Noel Field Affair and the Slansky show trials in Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s.<sup>14</sup> Noel Field was a New York Quaker and prominent antifascist aid figure who was subsequently arrested in Czechoslovakia in 1949 on suspicion of being an American spy engaged in recruitment efforts among the Western emigre population. Dahlem was one of a number of communists whom Field contacted in the early postwar years in hopes of obtaining assistance in securing a university position in Eastern Europe. After Field's arrest, Dahlem bore the stigma of this former association. The Czech show trials surrounding Rudolf Slansky in 1952 heightened suspicions surrounding Western emigres such as Dahlem and other former internees of the French camps. Though the trials, which concerned alleged Titoists, had little to do with Dahlem or the Spanienkämpfer directly, it inspired greater scrutiny within the ranks of communist parties in the Eastern Bloc, and exacerbated suspicions raised by the Field Affair.

In the wake of the trials, the Central Committee of the SED passed a devastating condemnation of Dahlem for his conduct as head of the Central Committee of the KPD in Paris.<sup>15</sup> The resolution alleged that Dahlem's decision to register with French authorities in 1939 was tantamount to a willful internment of German communists in France; in this way, he had both aided the interests of the Western imperialists and weakened the

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<sup>14</sup> Catherine Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries: German Communists and their Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 138-147; McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 59-60.

<sup>15</sup> Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, 144.

possibility for meaningful resistance efforts after the German invasion of France. In March of 1953, the Central Party Control Commission concluded, “voluntary internment was a capitulation for which Comrade Dahlem had full responsibility and that resulted from a totally false attitude towards the government of [French premier] Daladier and its reactionary and Soviet-hostile role.” On this basis, it determined Dahlem intentionally “liquidated the party leadership, and voluntarily went into internment.”<sup>16</sup> Complicating matters further yet for Dahlem as a representative of the Spanienkämpfer, the Slansky trials also led Czech president Klement Gottwald to claim that, amid to the “very difficult conditions” under which the Spanish volunteers had lived in the French internment camps, they had been subject to “pressure and black-mail at first by the French and American secret services and afterwards by the German. Taking advantage of the difficult physical and moral state of the International-Brigade men, these espionage services succeeded in recruiting some of them as agents.”<sup>17</sup> Due to the leading role Dahlem played among the Spanienkämpfer throughout all phases of their internment in France, these allegations combined to present not only Dahlem but the also the interned Spanienkämpfer in general as politically dubious figures. Such allegations placed experience of internment in France—and at Vernet in particular—squarely in the crosshairs of Cold War scrutiny.

Though the misconduct attributed to Dahlem did not diminish support for him among his fellow Spanienkämpfer, it thoroughly undermined his former status within the Party and the DDR. For this reason, Catherine Epstein has referred to Dahlem as the

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 150.

“quintessential victim of the SED’s biography-based purges.”<sup>18</sup> Employing a Foucauldian reading of the established communist practice of maintaining biographical records on Party members, both Epstein and McLellan have argued that the Party used biography as a means of control.<sup>19</sup> Yet by the same token, insofar as biographical data assumed an autobiographical form, biography writing entailed a process of negotiation between the author of a biography and those tasked with scrutinizing it. To persons unfamiliar with the perilous drift of the Party line over time, biography could indeed prove burdensome.<sup>20</sup> Yet for a person such as Dahlem, who was acutely aware of how best to frame the past to make it work to his advantage, it could also serve as an indispensable tool in achieving vindication.

For Dahlem, biographical negotiation played out in the process of publishing his memoirs, which he composed during the 1970s with the hope of achieving full rehabilitation.<sup>21</sup> Epstein has described Dahlem as unique among purge victims because he tried to rehabilitate not only himself but also others who fell victim to the purges in the early 1950s.<sup>22</sup> Many of Dahlem’s efforts to help fellow purge victims were conscious, but they were also inherent to efforts he made on his own behalf: many Spanienkämpfer saw improvements in Dahlem’s political status as indicative of the rehabilitation of the Spanienkämpfer more generally.<sup>23</sup> A large portion of those who stood to benefit from

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>19</sup> See Ibid., 134; McLellan, “The Politics of Communist Biography,” 540.

<sup>20</sup> McLellan, “The Politics of Communist Biography,” 540.

<sup>21</sup> Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, 207; Uhl, *Mythos Spanien*, 298.

<sup>22</sup> Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, 205.

<sup>23</sup> McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 67.

Dahlem's rehabilitation were fellow Spanienkämpfer whom Dahlem had seen through the internment experience in France.

Dahlem's published memoirs<sup>24</sup> conclude with the outbreak of the Second World War, when the especially controversial period surrounding him and his fellow Spanienkämpfer at Vernet had not yet begun; they thus fell short of allaying suspicions relating to the French internment experience. Yet while still in the process of publishing the second volume of his memoirs, Dahlem wrote to other veteran internees regarding his preparations to publish a third volume in which he expected the internment experience at Vernet to play a central role.<sup>25</sup> Because scholars have largely limited their analyses to the issues Dahlem addressed in his published memoirs, they have not appreciated the extent to which Dahlem appears to have believed setting the record straight on the French internment experience was central to achieving rehabilitation for himself and others.

The task Dahlem set for himself was not a simple one. As a person who both monitored the internment experience in France during the prewar period and suffered internment personally at Vernet thereafter, Dahlem recognized the early-1950s paranoia over infiltration by foreign spies in the camps to be unfounded. By the same token, however, he probably realized that the real stories of the internment camp experience—as evidenced by Chapters 1 and 2—would nevertheless fall short of Party standards. Though most communist Spanienkämpfer who settled in the DDR likely remained loyal to the Party during their sojourn in France, their stories were far from the shining examples of

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<sup>24</sup> See Franz Dahlem, *Am Vorabend des zweiten Weltkrieges* (2 vols, Berlin: Dietz, 1980).

<sup>25</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 30-31.

devotion that would be capable of allaying suspicions relating to ideological wavering and weakness during this time of hardship.

Further complicating Dahlem's work was the fact that, when he first undertook his memoir project on the internment experiences of the Spanienkämpfer, the best known accounts of the topic were of Western origin. Arthur Koestler first published his account, *Scum of the Earth*, already in 1941. In it, Koestler portrayed the Spanienkämpfer of Vernet as despairing figures suffering from political disillusionment that he ascribed to the betrayal they felt at the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. He described them as men who "lingered about the camp, picking up cigarette ends out of the mud and from the concrete floors of the latrines" because "a cigarette end in the gutter was a reality, while political ideas had lost all meaning."<sup>26</sup> In 1958, Gustav Regler had published *Owl of Minerva*, which he likewise dedicated in part to his memories of internment at Vernet. Regler, too, portrayed the Party at Vernet in a very negative light.<sup>27</sup> As reports that only seemed to confirm rumors of disaffection among communists at Vernet, the accounts offered by Koestler and Regler were in many ways the very versions of the French internment experience that Dahlem saw a need to disprove if he was reingratiate himself and his fellow internees with the SED-state.

Eastern commentators had done little to neutralize negative portrayals of the French internment experience. The only firsthand account of camp life published by a communist Spanienkämpfer was a short contribution by veteran Walter Steffens to a collaborative book published in the DDR on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of

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<sup>26</sup> Koestler, *Scum*, 127-130.

<sup>27</sup> Regler, *Owl of Minerva*, 331-354.

the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>28</sup> In 1964, Edith Zorn of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism published an essay touting the strict adherence of the Spanienkämpfer interned at Camp de Gurs to resolutions passed at the Bern Conference of the Communist Party of Germany.<sup>29</sup> Though both accounts emphasized the role of the Party in camp life, neither was adequately exhaustive to allay Party suspicions of dubious political conduct among the internees during this period. The only published account to dedicate sustained attention to Vernet had been written by Austrian communist Bruno Frei. Frei adapted his memoir account from a journal he kept while interned at the camp, and had it published in the DDR in 1950 as *The Men of Vernet*. Frei was not a Spanienkämpfer; nevertheless, he coexisted and frequently interacted with the minority of Spanienkämpfer housed in the B-Quarter of the camp. Spanienkämpfer such as Friedrich Wolf, Rudolf Leonhard, and Franz Dahlem play a recurring and especially prominent role in his account.

In his efforts to set the record straight on the internment experience, Dahlem had no intention of starting from scratch. His personal papers reveal that he maintained regular correspondence with Bruno Frei throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Their exchanges were at all times cordial and suggest that the two fostered a very cooperative working relationship in their efforts to sort out their common past. Still it seems very likely that Dahlem held Frei's book to be at least partially responsible for negative perceptions of the internment experience. This view is supported by Dahlem's regular

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Steffens, "Deutsche Interbrigadisten in französischen Konzentrationslagern," in *Interbrigadisten: Protokoll einer wissenschaftlichen Konferenz an der Militärakademie 'Friedrich Engels,'* ed. Horst Kühne et al. (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1966), 466-471.

<sup>29</sup> Edith Zorn, "Wie die Frankreich internierten deutscher Spanienkämpfer die Berner Beschlüsse studierten und anwandten," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 6 (1964): 298-306.

correspondence to Frei regarding Rudolf Leonhard,<sup>30</sup> whose case Dahlem seems to have used as a vehicle for pushing Frei to assist him in his efforts to elaborate on the internment experience at Vernet. In Frei's memoir, which had been published before political paranoia in the DDR brought the Spanienkämpfer into disfavor, Frei noted that he and Rudolf Leonhard had co-founded the Society of Friends of the French Republic during their time in French exile.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere in the book, Frei mentions a conversation in which Leonhard allegedly remarked to Frei that he could not bear to see France fall to the Nazis.<sup>32</sup> Both revelations seemed to incriminate Leonhard for harboring French sympathies during the Molotov-Ribbentrop era, when peaceful relations reigned between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. In his correspondence with Frei, Dahlem mentioned that, during the purges of 1953, Rudolf Leonhard's name had been dragged through the mud as a man of French President Édouard Daladier, and that this perception of him had "distressed [Leonhard] deeply before his death" in the same year.<sup>33</sup>

It was important to Dahlem to remedy what he saw as misconceptions about Vernet. Over the course of their decades-long correspondence, Dahlem wrote to Frei on numerous occasions asking him to emend, append, or alter his work on the internment experience at the camp.<sup>34</sup> In 1960, he wrote to tell Frei of Vernet-related documents he had obtained from Rudolf Leonhard, who hoped the documents might clarify certain misunderstandings regarding the internment experience. Dahlem besought Frei, for the

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<sup>30</sup> SAPMO-BArch, NY 4072/161, 73, 91, and 102.

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Frei, *Die Männer von Vernet: ein Tatsachenbericht* (Berlin: Dietz, 1950), 31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>33</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/161, 73.

<sup>34</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 2; SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/161, 80 and 104.

sake of both Leonhard and himself, to consider incorporating them into the foreword or epilogue to a future edition of his book.<sup>35</sup> In letter to Dahlem in 1969, Frei responded to an unseen letter in which Dahlem both informed Frei that a French professor<sup>36</sup> had undertaken research efforts relating to Vernet and renewed his request that Frei consider extending his own book. The combination of this news and Dahlem's request prompted Frei himself to ask, "Wouldn't that be a little too much Vernet?"<sup>37</sup> Dahlem thus appears to have pursued his research efforts even more zealously than the most prolific author on the camp.

Dahlem came to realize that his efforts to persuade Frei to revisit Vernet were unlikely to succeed, so he took matters into his own hands. According Vernet a crucial place in his broader memoir-writing efforts, Dahlem began a massive letter-writing campaign to veteran Spanienkämpfer who were former internees of Vernet. In his letters, he solicited them to record and provide him with their own memories of the internment experience. Here again, his letters reveal his personal ambivalence toward Frei's book. When contacting fellow veterans to solicit their recollections for his project, he often suggested that they read Frei's book to refresh their minds.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, Dahlem made no secret of the fact that his own feelings toward Frei's book were less than enthusiastic. He frequently qualified his recommendation with clarifications such as "the weakness of the book is that little is said regarding the role of the Party and the structure of

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<sup>35</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/161, 72-73.

<sup>36</sup> Most likely, Dahlem refers to Gilbert Badia, who oversaw the publication of the first French study of the camps. See Badia, *Les Barbelés de l'exil*, 221-257 and 310-332.

<sup>37</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/161, 98.

<sup>38</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 2, 10, and 20; SAPMO-BArch NY 4246/61, 38.

organization of the internees.”<sup>39</sup> In a letter to veteran Spanienkämpfer Götz Berger, Dahlem wrote,

As an emendation of Frei’s book, *The Men of Vernet*, it occurs to me that we must expound upon precisely that which within is only scantily depicted: namely the work of the Party organization in the camp, that is to say, in particular the political stance toward all great developments that unfolded in world politics and on the fronts.<sup>40</sup>

In place of incriminating personal anecdotes such as those Frei had written in reference to Rudolf Leonhard, Dahlem hoped to retell the story of Vernet in a manner that would cast the internees in a light capable of restoring their political credentials in the eyes of the Party.

Dahlem’s critique of Frei’s text reflected his chief concern: insofar as ideology, organization and Party-related action were absent from existing accounts, they could be read by skeptical Party members as evidence that he and his fellows were not sufficiently committed to communist politics. Any account capable of effecting rehabilitation for veteran internees would have to remedy this glaring absence. In writing to those from whom he sought to gather recollections, Dahlem therefore requested specifics: “In my recollections of Vernet, which are currently underway, I wish to depict the ideological, political and organizational matters in relation to contemporary events.”<sup>41</sup> Because their internment at Vernet fell within the temporal boundaries of the Nazi-Soviet rapprochement, he also recognized that it was especially important to document hostility toward the French; to show that internment era politics conformed to the Party line, he

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<sup>39</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 20-21. For other critiques, see NY 4072/156, 2; NY 4246/61, 38; and for an annotated critique of Frei’s book by Erich Jungmann, a fellow internee and collaborator of Dahlem, see SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/159, 172-176.

<sup>40</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 36.

<sup>41</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 10.

requested such accounts explicitly.<sup>42</sup> In addition to “Episodes of political and cultural work,” he therefore solicited evidence of the struggle of the internees against the French guards.<sup>43</sup>

Dahlem did not take any chances in his efforts to muster the versions of the past he required. To ensure that incoming materials would meet the demands of his project, he designed an elaborate questionnaire that he regarded to be “developed on the foundation of a historical-concrete analysis”<sup>44</sup>—language that could leave no doubt to the reader that it was intended to serve the needs of the Party. According to a letter he wrote to veteran Spanienkämpfer Georg Stibi, he distributed the questionnaire to “such former internees of Vernet who can be assumed capable of providing objective and vivid details relating to one or more of the of the named problems and issues in the form of episodes and dialogues from the internment period.”<sup>45</sup> Dahlem likely expected that such persons would be well aware of the stakes behind his efforts.

Among the numerous matters Dahlem sought to reconstruct from the memories of others, he expressed particular interest in the issue of anti-communist elements who populated the French camps. By showing that he and his fellow Spanienkämpfer were particularly ruthless in their dealings with such enemies of the Party, Dahlem could lend credence to the desirable notion that they had conducted themselves in a manner that reflected strict commitment to the Party. In this matter, his interest extended even into the periods of internment at the prewar camps of Argeles-sur-Mer, St. Cyprien and Gurs. In

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<sup>42</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 20.

<sup>43</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 2.

<sup>44</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 1.

<sup>45</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4246/61, 38. See also SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/156, 10.

his questionnaire, Dahlem explicitly asks for information regarding “the struggle against the informers” and the “struggle against the so-called Ninth Company.”<sup>46</sup> When Ernst Buschmann sent him an especially scathing and partisan report on these dissidents,<sup>47</sup> Dahlem eagerly followed up with him to ask that he elaborate on this aspect of his account.<sup>48</sup> Utterly absent from Dahlem’s inquiries is any acknowledgment of the thaw that eventually set in among the communist Spanienkämpfer toward dissidents—a fact of which Dahlem had firsthand knowledge. By attempting to simplify matters in this way, Dahlem encouraged his respondents to impose a type of Stalinism over the past: he invited far more pronounced generalizations regarding political conflicts in camp life than the Spanienkämpfer made at the time of their internment. Both Dahlem’s deep interest in and eager condemnation of dissidents supports McLellan’s claim that those seeking rehabilitation in the DDR benefited from construing non-communists as categorical enemies, as doing so showed their own commitment to Party politics.<sup>49</sup>

One figure whose dissidence Dahlem sought to investigate in greater depth was Arthur Koestler. Koestler’s memoir was particularly detrimental to the political images of both Dahlem personally and the Spanienkämpfer collectively due to its allegation that the Spanienkämpfer at Vernet had grown disillusioned with the Party after the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>50</sup> Because of the harm Koestler had done, Dahlem was

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<sup>46</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4246/61, 45.

<sup>47</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 53-54.

<sup>48</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 68.

<sup>49</sup> McLellan, *Antifascism and Memory*, 195.

<sup>50</sup> Koestler, *Scum*, 128-130.

especially interested to learn what others knew of him.<sup>51</sup> Dahlem's correspondence with veteran Spanienkämpfer Götz Berger regarding Koestler's claims suggests that he was anxious to believe Koestler had fabricated the entire story merely to defame the International Brigades.<sup>52</sup> Later notes among Dahlem's papers indicate that he regarded both Koestler and Gustav Regler as interneees "who worked as agents of the Second Bureau"<sup>53</sup>— a French military intelligence agency. Presenting these anticommunist figures as agents of France served the dual purpose of undermining the credibility of their claims about communist interneees of Vernet and emphasizing the opposition of the Spanienkämpfer to France at this time.

The notes Dahlem kept on his collection of memoirs from Vernet reveal him to have been a quite selective historian. When he received reports from veteran interneees that did not provide him with versions of the past suitable to his purposes, he prefaced them with comments such as "so unclear and uncertain that it is absolutely worthless."<sup>54</sup> By contrast, he welcomed reports containing valuable accounts of events in camp life with enthusiastic praise. Along these lines, he deemed the report of Ernst Buschmann "an objective portrayal"<sup>55</sup> in comparison to which all other accounts of events should be regarded as "either subjectively tinged or plainly erroneous." After receiving a report from Willi Jagow, Dahlem wrote Jagow to commend him for "illustrating that

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<sup>51</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 7 and 37.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/154, 71. See also SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 37, where Dahlem describes Koestler as an agent of the Sûreté Nationale, or the National Police.

<sup>54</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 322.

<sup>55</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 51.

experienced as it was in reality.”<sup>56</sup> When confronted with accounts of a middling quality in which he saw certain “concrete descriptions”<sup>57</sup> tarnished by “misunderstood formulations,” he noted, for instance, that “the good parts of the report can be used” or that “the usable facts must be focused upon individually.”<sup>58</sup> Given his dependency on others to reconstruct a history that he himself had experienced, Dahlem possessed no greater mastery over their shared past than the next man. Nevertheless, he claimed the authority to distinguish fact from fiction, and thereby granted himself the authority to reengineer the past from its most ideal component parts.

Ultimately, Dahlem’s personal efforts to achieve rehabilitation through Vernet proved unsuccessful. The evidence simply refused to meet his needs. Though a minority of the reports he received lived up to his standards, he also received conflicting reports on issues of immense political importance as well as grossly unflattering accounts of Spanienkämpfer consuming dog meat. For these reasons, it is unsurprising that he was forced to conclude that his task “could not be carried out in the intended form” because “few reports corresponded to the high standard of the questionnaire.”<sup>59</sup> More significantly, Dahlem ran into difficulties with the publication of the second volume of his memoirs when censors insisted that he abridge the section dealing with the Party’s response to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>60</sup> Because Dahlem intended the third volume to deal with the equally controversial—if lower profile—topic of Vernet, it seems very

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<sup>56</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/157, 225-226.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, 209.

likely that no third volume of his memoirs ever appeared because he recognized that his story would never make it to the press.

A letter written by Bruno Frei to Dahlem in 1975 suggests that Dahlem turned back to Frei after recognizing the futility of his own efforts.<sup>61</sup> By this time, Frei had grown more receptive to the idea of additional writing on Vernet. He proposed to Dahlem that they resolve their past differences on matters of further publication by treating the internment experience at Vernet in two separate volumes: a reissued edition of Frei's book as the first volume,<sup>62</sup> and a technical documentation of the history of the camp as the second. Frei removed himself from consideration as a possible author of the second volume due to his inexperience with such writing. Yet in view of both the sensitive nature of such work, he emphasized, "Only someone who is trusted with the matter can do it." Just as the solution that Dahlem had long awaited appeared within reach, therefore, it lacked an author to bring it to fruition. Frei concluded his letter by articulating precisely the new challenge they now faced: "I am in agreement with your proposal, but who will do it?"

### **Vernet Revisited**

On November 17, 1978, a handful of surviving Spanienkämpfer gathered at Humboldt University to attend a dissertation defense. That day, a young historian named Sibylle Hinze defended her dissertation, entitled "The Struggle of Communists and

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<sup>61</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4072/161, 104.

<sup>62</sup> Frei later published an edition of his book containing a new foreword by the author. In it, he made additional references to both Franz Dahlem and Rudolf Leonhard that cast the men in a positive light from a political standpoint. See Bruno Frei, *Die Männer von Vernet: ein Tatsachenbericht* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1980).

Antifascists in the Camp of Vernet in the years 1939-1944: Survey of the History of the Camp of Vernet (France).”<sup>63</sup> Due to a lack of evidence, the story behind Hinze’s involvement in reconstructing the history of camp life in France is unknown. Nevertheless, the record leaves no question that Hinze was granted unrestricted access to the personal papers of Franz Dahlem in researching the topic,<sup>64</sup> and that the study that emerged from her research was received with enthusiasm by veterans who were former internees of the camp.

Much of what is known about the circumstances of Hinze’s defense comes from a series of reviews that have survived among the personal papers of Erich Jungmann. Jungmann was a former Vernet internee who, like Franz Dahlem, had fallen victim to the purges in the DDR in the wake of the Slansky trial;<sup>65</sup> the common plight of these two men seemingly led to political collaboration between them.<sup>66</sup> Though it cannot be determined precisely to whom Jungmann composed his reviews of Hinze’s dissertation, the survival of three separate versions among his personal papers, complete with extensive handwritten editing notes, suggests he placed extraordinary importance on drafting an ideal review.

In his reviews, Jungmann stressed that Hinze broke new ground in her depiction of the French internment experience: “What is new is that [Hinze] has succeeded brilliantly in explicating the close relationship between our lives and struggle in the camp and the class struggle in France, the collapse of the ‘Third Republic,’ the Vichy regime

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<sup>63</sup> SAPMO-BArch NY 4236/15, 102.

<sup>64</sup> Hinze, *Antifaschisten*, 9-10.

<sup>65</sup> Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*, 140.

<sup>66</sup> SAPMO-BArch 4072/157, 247-258.

and also with international events.”<sup>67</sup> To Jungmann, more important than the connections Hinze drew between the local, the national and the international was emphasizing the politics that facilitated the internees’ involvement in these different realms of activity. He reported with pride that Hinze’s dissertation offered a “detailed portrayal of the struggle of communists under the most difficult conditions, their loyalty to the Party, their firm belief in the victory of the Soviet Union, proletarian internationalism and international solidarity.”<sup>68</sup> Hinze thus depicted those aspects of camp life that Franz Dahlem tried in vain to bring to light years earlier.

There can be little doubt that both Hinze’s dissertation and the glowing review Jungmann gave it derived from previously unsuccessful efforts by the study’s subjects to achieve political rehabilitation in the DDR. In one of his drafts, Jungmann praises Hinze’s work in terms that evoked the internees’ unswerving allegiance to the Party throughout the internment experience: “It is shown what decisive power is produced by political-ideological constancy, conscious discipline, unshakeable loyalty to our communist ideals and above all a firm communion with the Soviet Union and its Communist Party.”<sup>69</sup> He reasoned that, because the subjects of Hinze’s study were “above all ... soldiers of the International Brigades,” who were “excellent functionaries—tested in the international class struggle,” the centrality of politics to the struggle at Vernet was “not astonishing.”<sup>70</sup> In another draft of his review, Jungmann even accords equal significance to the internees’ ultimate survival of the internment experience

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<sup>67</sup> SAPMO-BArch 4236/15, 102. See also *Ibid.*, 104 and 109.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 106. See also *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-110.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

at Vernet on the one hand and “the preservation of valuable cadre for the Party” resulting therefrom on the other.<sup>71</sup>

As might be expected of writing intended to exert a political impact, Jungmann’s reviews made instrumental use of the names of persons who had an interest in Hinze’s project. In one draft, Jungmann acknowledges that Hinze’s study of Vernet was relevant to him personally as a former internee of the camp.<sup>72</sup> In another draft, he not only mentions fellow purge victims and prominent Party figures Franz Dahlem and Gerhart Eisler as former internees of the camp but also informs the audience of the review that a number of veteran internees attended Hinze’s defense: “Also the comrades, despite their in part unsound states of health, have not refrained from taking part in the defense of the dissertation and sharing their judgments thereof: the comrades Heinz Prieß, Walter Beling, Edgar Linick, Hans Marum, Nortbert Kugler and—coming all the way from Magdeburg—Hans Kukowich.”<sup>73</sup>

Whether Franz Dahlem himself attended the defense is unknown. His exclusion from the list of those in attendance nevertheless suggests either that Dahlem decided his absence was politically expedient, or that Jungmann thought it best not to overemphasize what was almost certainly intimate involvement on the part of Dahlem in the project that became Hinze’s dissertation. Equally telling as regards the political implications of Jungmann’s review are the name edits he made in one of his drafts. In it, Jungmann appears to have removed not only the portion of his review that referenced his personal

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 111.

interest in the project<sup>74</sup> but also any reference to the fact that veteran internees attended Hinze's defense.<sup>75</sup> Though his edits indicate that he initially chose to eliminate a reference to another series of personages who were once interned at Vernet, including SED Central Committee members Hermann Axen and Alfred Neumann, Neumann and Axen alone were subsequently restored to the text of the review.

The extraordinary lengths to which involved persons went in reconstructing the story of Vernet leave little doubt that the veteran internees had much to gain from a positive reception of Hinze's study. Dahlem and Jungmann likely realized that, if the scholarly community of the DDR could be made to see the merits of this history, Hinze's ideal portrayal of the internment experience would secure their final vindication in the affair. Therefore, after singing the praises of Hinze's study, Jungmann concluded by commenting, "I am in favor of publishing the work of comrade Hinze as quickly as possible,"<sup>76</sup> and expressing hope that it would "soon be available as a book in the bookstore."<sup>77</sup>

Remaining true to the purposes for which it was designed, the book that emerged from Hinze's dissertation grossly exaggerated the centrality of the Party within camp life.<sup>78</sup> Yet by the time it finally hit the press ten years later, few had anything to gain from its contents: most of the veteran internees were no longer alive. In the end, the Party was

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>78</sup> Winfried Scharlau, *Who is Alexander Grothendieck? Anarchy, Mathematics, Spirituality, Solitude, a Biography*, ed. Melissa Schneps (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2011), 123.

very likely the sole beneficiary of the study. Through its fabricated oversimplifications of the true history of the French internment experience, the book might have served as a didactic example for a limited audience until the German Democratic Republic collapsed one year after its publication.

For many among the Spanienkämpfer who suffered internment in France, the long-awaited “victory” of 1945 proved short-lived. After what was, for some, as many as nine ceaseless years of hard struggle relating directly to their decision to fight in defense of the Spanish Republic, the Spanienkämpfer likely wished to look at the past only as a source of motivation for applying themselves fully to the creation of a more prosperous political future. Amid the toxic political culture that reigned in the DDR during Stalin’s final years, however, veteran internees such as Franz Dahlem saw a once proud past turned against them. Simply to restore the dignity to which he felt his sacrifices entitled him, Dahlem was forced to revisit a past for which he felt no actual remorse and reformulate it in accordance with Party standards. Riding on the success of this task was not only his own rehabilitation but that of many of his fellow Spanienkämpfer. As Dahlem and his collaborators discovered the hard way, the politics of the past was no less captive to that of the present than that of the present was captive to the past. The Stalinist spirit of the Cold War years demanded that a highly complex history be simplified to accommodate the dichotomizing worldviews that then prevailed. The carefully constructed story of camp life in France, which deprived the past of its authenticity, was rendered into fodder for a Party that had exchanged its once emancipatory substance for a bankrupt tyranny upon attaining power. Such a version of the story was likely more useful to the state’s Western detractors after its collapse than it had been to the SED-state

during its existence. It functioned to discredit the DDR as well as its entire historical legacy and historical profession after the state's collapse in 1989.

## CONCLUSION

In the wake of 1989, the West German historians oversaw a veritable purge of former East German historians from the historical profession within the reunified Germany. Historians like Sibylle Hinze, who had portrayed the communist Spanienkämpfer at Vernet as paragons of Party discipline, were mostly cast out.<sup>1</sup> Once under the hegemony of the Western historians, the reunified German historical profession retained a purely Western historical tradition that had no need for “Stalinist” antifascists like the Spanienkämpfer. To construe them as such, historians of the Western tradition needed only look to the stories constructed by their former colleagues: the strict Party discipline of which heroes were made in the DDR smacked of villainy once that state had collapsed. At the same time that they evicted their Eastern counterparts from university positions and marginalized most of their scholarship, Western historians seemed surprisingly inclined to accept their claims about figures like the Spanienkämpfer; what had made them praiseworthy in the DDR now made them prime targets for ridicule in the new BRD.

Had the communist Spanienkämpfer truly conducted themselves in the manner that both their backers and they themselves professed in later years? Insofar as they were claimed to have supported the Communist Party and to have practiced a militant form of antifascism through acts of armed opposition to the Nazi regime, there seems little reason for doubt. As this study has shown, however, claims that the Spanienkämpfer subscribed to the notion of an omniscient and infallible Party that they could look to for answers in every circumstance are not borne out by the evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> Catherine Epstein, “East Germany and its History since 1989,” *Journal of Modern History* 75, no. 3 (2003): 636.

Throughout the period of their internment in France, the communist Spanienkämpfer found solace in the extradoctrinal realm of everyday life. Having crossed into France empty-handed after years of hard-fought struggle in Spain, they bore only their antifascist politics, which seemed to have foundered strategically, into the unfamiliar context of the internment camps. While leaders among the communists tried to stave off demoralization with hackneyed Party platforms and phrases, the writings of individual Spanienkämpfer suggest that many found greater validation of their politics through the performed and narrated relationships they forged with social actors in and around the camp setting. Furthermore, they began to conceive of many of their political opponents within camp life as figures who shared their initial demoralization but whose difficulties were exacerbated through their willful dissociation from the communist collective. While within this same context, the Spanienkämpfer were thrown for an ideological loop upon learning of the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. To accommodate this official change in their politics, the Spanienkämpfer narrowed their political purview to the micro-political realm of camp life. Limiting their concerns in this way enabled them not only to escape the seeming contradictions between the Pact and their creed but also to experience validation through a common, camp-specific project.

When suspicions emerged during the postwar years in relation to the French internment odyssey of the Spanienkämpfer, the ability of veteran internees to show proof of their loyalty to the Party suddenly mattered more than it had at the time of the internment experience itself. The extradoctrinal practices that had truly sustained them in the past no longer sufficed to meet the political demands of the present. Franz Dahlem's complaint that Bruno Frei's memoir on camp life failed to depict the internees' political

stance on major developments in world affairs thus reflected the fact that the Spanienkämpfer had struggled to formulate such a stance amid the immense political uncertainty they faced throughout their internment. To remedy the political deficiencies of the past, Dahlem spent more than a decade during the late years of his life trying to fit the square peg of a complex lived experience into the round hole of Party expectations. To the benefit of the Party—and most recently its critics—that peg was shaved down to fit, and its current shape continues to distort present-day conceptions of the original.

The wounds of German history run deep both within German society at large and within the historical profession in particular. The study of the Spanienkämpfer has been complicated by the fact of their historical embeddedness precisely where the most grievous of these wounds intersect. The historiographical deformity to which this circumstance has given rise is evidenced by the fact that Austrian historians have succeeded in telling largely parallel histories of Austrian Spanienkämpfer with a degree of objectivity that continues to evade their German counterparts.<sup>2</sup> The absence in Austria of Party-mandated distortions of history during the Cold War era and the consequent need to expose them thereafter fostered an environment wherein veterans could even play a central and generally uncontroversial role in the writing of their own history of their struggles in the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath.<sup>3</sup> This striking contrast suggests that the ambivalence verging on hostility with which the predominantly communist Spanienkämpfer are perceived in Germany owes much to the lingering effects of

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<sup>2</sup> See Friedrich Stepanek, *“Ich bekämpfte jeden Faschismus”*: Lebenswege Tiroler Spanienkämpfer (Innsbruck: Studien-Verlag, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hans Landauer and Erich Hackl, *Lexikon der österreichischen Spanienkämpfer 1936-1939* (Wien: Theodor Kramer, 2003); Hans Landauer and Erich Hackl, *Album Gurs: ein Fundstück aus dem österreichischen Widerstand* (Wien: Deuticke, 2000).

Germany's division during the Cold War. To be sure, the scars left by the toppled communist regime, which justified its rule under the banner of antifascism, are fresher than those left by the toppled fascist regime it opposed. Troublingly, the scholarly nearsightedness engendered by this sequence has given rise to a sort of anti-antifascism—a dangerous negation that inadvertently trivializes a very real threat that perpetually lurks about the social order.

Though this micro-historical investigation has enabled me to explore the subjective experiences of the Spanienkämpfer as subgroup in a broader history of German resistance, the Spanienkämpfer—even the communist Spanienkämpfer in particular—were by no means a homogeneous mass. I have to some extent treated them as such for the purposes of this study, but there can be no question that this group consisted of many different individuals for whom the appositeness of my findings varies considerably. Insofar as information is available on individuals, variation in matters such as contributions to the public media of camp life, course and duration of internment, and organizational role within the Party can lead to more precise conclusions regarding the nature of the internment experience. By teasing out the various influences of such factors, I could better assess social and political dynamics that prevailed among these figures during this highly complex episode in their history.

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## VITA

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