Hope Sneddon, University of Newcastle, Australia - Jesper Gulddal, University of Newcastle, Australia

War Stories: Narrative Sense-Making in German Eastern Front Soldier Memoirs

Abstract

While historians have long acknowledged the textual and rhetorical aspects of their sources, the genre of the soldier memoir is still discussed mainly in terms of its psychological or factual veracity, and there is lack of understanding of how memories are reconfigured when passed through the interpretive medium of narrative. In this paper we present a discussion of the structure and functions of narrative in three German World War II soldier memoirs: Willy Peter Reese´s Mir selber seltsam fremd (1944/2004), Gottlob Herbert Biedermann´s Krim-Kurland mit der 132. Infanterie-Division 1941-45 (1964), and Edgar Klaus´s Durch die Hölle des Krieges (1991). Written at various distances from the war, these memoirs represent successive stages of coming to terms with the horrors and crimes of the Eastern Front. However, as we argue, this work of memory is mediated by narrative, and the plotting and narrative sequencing of the soldier memoir often tell a story that runs counter to the author´s stated views. A narrative approach is therefore indispensable for understanding the specific way in which soldier memoirs capture and communicate the experience of war.

Keywords: War, memoirs, Eastern Front, narrative approach

Introduction

The disciplinary location of the war memoir as a genre is an ambiguous and contentious issue. On the one hand, Literary Studies has developed an extensive range of methodologies for understanding the rhetorical and narrative structures of autobiographical writing (Renza; Butler),

but has normally disregarded the war memoir due to this genre's alleged lack of aesthetic and literary merit. On the other hand, historians have long taken a strong interest in war memoirs as a means of exploring what John Keegan refers to as the "face of battle" – the experience of armed conflict from the perspective of individual combatants (Keegan; Harari; Hewitson; Winter). Yet, even though historians today rarely regard the war memoir simply as a transparent medium for historical facts, there is still a lack of understanding of how wartime experiences are reconfigured when sifted through the interpretive lens of memory and memoir writing. In this sense, and in the specific context of the war memoir, the two disciplines have a real need for one another, with the former providing the textual understanding, the latter the historical horizon.

In this paper we propose to look at the war memoir as a narrative interpretation of experience. With a distinction prevalent in German post-Kantian philosophy, the war memoir uses narrative to transform lived experience (Erlebnis) into symbolically mediated experience (Erfahrung). This is a complex process that involves a number of operations: establishing stable and psychologically understandable characters; imposing a temporal structure that sets apart singular 'events' from the everyday routines; creating causal sequences and plots; and crafting affective economy governing the emotional response of individuals to the potentially traumatising experience of war. Moreover, this process of narrative interpretation has a distinct political dimension, perhaps particularly evident in German war memoirs, which involves interconnected representations of friends and enemies as well as specific strategies for managing questions of guilt and responsibility. However, it is important to note that the war memoir is not simply a matter of manipulation and deflection of responsibility (even though it is sometimes exactly that), but it involves a narrative attempt to understand, represent, and communicate the experience of war.

In this paper, we discuss three war memoirs by German soldiers in World War II: Willy Peter Reese's Mir selber seltsam Fremd (2000), Gottlob Herbert Bidermann's Krim Kurland mit der 132. Infanterie-Division 1941-1945 (1964), and Edgar Klaus's Durch die Hölle des Krieges (1991). Each of these memoirs is set on the Eastern Front and gives voice to a similar ambivalence towards this monstrously violent campaign. However, the three writers differ markedly in terms of the narrative strategies they employ to make sense of their experiences and communicate them to an audience consisting mostly of uncomprehending civilians. The focal point of our analyses is war as a social

experience. As we argue, each of the three memoirists struggle with these social interactions and use narrative as a means of reinstating order and meaningfulness in a social world fraught with complexity.

Lost in the Russian Snow

In the context of German war memoirs, the time of the writing is crucial, and not just for the purpose of assessing whether the author is recording events more or less as they happen, or rather, at a distance and with the benefit of historical and moral hindsight. The time of writing is also of importance because soldier memoirs tend to reflect in a very precise manner the current way in which German society as a whole handled the trauma of the war, with apologetic accounts dominating the immediate Postwar period and only gradually being replaced by more ambivalent and often guilt-ridden narratives. This relationship to society's dominant modes of remembering will become apparent in our later examples.

However, the example with which we begin, Willy Peter Reese's Mir selber seltsam Fremd, stands out from the vast memoir literature in more ways than one. This memoir was written during the war and was left unfinished when its author, a private, was killed in action in early 1944. Reese's memoir has pronounced literary ambitions; closely following the author's diary entries (Schmitz 17), it transforms the factual orientation of these entries into a dramatic narrative with strong lyrical overtones. Reese's writing particularly resonates with echoes of German literature and philosophy of the Interwar period, from Oswald Spengler's theory of the decline of the West to Ernst Jünger's critique of technology and mass society. Before being drafted, Reese seemed to have lived the life of a Thomas Mann character split between bourgeois respectability and artistic impulses: working as a bank clerk by day, he pursued his genuine, literary aspirations at night. However, in a manner typical of the German Bildungsbürger (Lepenies 40-48), Reese is almost completely apolitical and tends to regard the war, not as a horrific geopolitical struggle, but as an existential challenge facing the individual – that is, himself.

As one would imagine, this sensitive bourgeois poet did not thrive on the Eastern Front and seems to have stood apart from his comrades. It is revealing that Reese throughout his memoir evokes a fellowship of soldiers sharing the hardships and traumas of war, yet never singles out an individual

person who somehow touches him in a meaningful way. In fact, Reese's insistent use of the pronoun "we", which anchors the narrative in an imagined brotherhood or community of fate, seems to conceal a deep sense of loneliness where other soldiers are fellow travellers rather than genuine friends – a stark contrast, not only to the countless memoirs that extol frontline comradeship, but also to the official Wehrmacht emphasis on camaraderie as essential to troop cohesion (Fritz 157). In fact, when discussing this topic explicitly, Reese represents the interaction between soldiers as characterised by indifference, competition, and bullying: "Comrades – I had none […]. This disappointed me deeply, but I too became hard" (Reese 63).

An event occurring in the region of Rzhev in late 1942 brings out this sense of alienation with great clarity. Reese's company is transferred to a threatened sector of the front, yet Reese himself is left behind to guard the bunker. Thus, the author spends several weeks alone in the midst of the Russian winter, living the life of a "hermit". This in itself is described as an existential experience where the noise of war is replaced with an "inner quietude" as the author occupies himself with the "images and dreams" of his own mind (Reese 121). However, this existential dimension is further heightened when one day the routine is broken and Reese ventures out into a snowstorm, seemingly with the intention of finding the nearby field kitchen. The author quickly loses his bearings in the snowy landscape and is forced to seek refuge in a shot-up tank, severely beset, not just by the cold and the darkness, but also by exhaustion and anxiety. Only when the snowstorm eases is he able to find his way back to the bunker by following a telephone line on the ground. The next morning he finds himself snowed in and has to be dug out by his – as always in this memoir, nameless and de-individualised – comrades who coincidentally have come to visit.

This paraphrase does not do justice to Reese's detailed and highly poeticised descriptions of the landscape. Our point, however, is that his encounter with the featureless wintry landscape does not simply serve a descriptive interest, but that it is singled out as an individual dramatic episode because it supports a higher-level narrative of personal development and growth. In Reese's memoir, the Russian landscape is generally recast as a phantasmagorical setting where the individual is faced with existential threats that will either kill him or lead to greater personal maturity. The outside world is seen throughout this memoir as deeply unreal, at the same time uncanny and appealing – as when Reese aestheticises the area where his company is entrenched

as a “fairy-tale forest” where paths lead “into the secret of the Russian soil” (Reese 116). Moreover, Reese has little to say about the war or the Nazi ideology of conquest, and even the most appalling atrocities are related dispassionately and without passing judgment (74). What is important to the author is the individual, and the experience of war is interpreted throughout as an existential drama of disillusionment and growth. Thus, being lost in the Russian winter changes Reese, removing him further from his pre-war life while making him more adapted to the hardships and agonies of the Eastern Front:

The Fairy-tale forest stood there peacefully, the hill was white, the firs disguised in white overcoats, the bunkers and trenches white, and no footprints in the virgin snow. Still, the demons of this landscape haunted me, filling the soul with an icy silence and a fatalism that allowed me to suffer everything like the grass and the trees. But perhaps these demons did theirs to adjust inner life to fate so that humans would bear the inhumanity of it all (Reese 124).

The Ukrainian Betrayal

Gottlob Herbert Bidermann, a Second Lieutenant, spent four years on the Eastern Front and saw ample fighting first in the Crimea, then in the Leningrad area, and finally the Baltic where his division surrendered in May 1945. Bidermann’s memoir, Krim-Kurland mit der 132. Infanterie-Division 1941-1945, was written at some distance from the events and was first published in 1964 – that is, during a period of German Postwar history where wartime atrocities of the Wehrmacht were not widely recognised. As it happens, Bidermann openly discusses his initial attraction to Hitler and National Socialism and provides graphic detail of the horrors of the Russian campaign with the stated aim of making apparent the senselessness of war. However, as we endeavour to show, his narrative style is less convincing in this regard and makes use of episodic writing to introduce and even legitimise a set of highly problematic conclusions.

True to the author’s historical interests, Bidermann’s memoir is written in a semi-documentary mode that combines regimental histories, enemy propaganda, divisional reports, photos, drawings, letters, songs, and reflective prose, ostensibly in an attempt to convey his wartime experiences in a vivid and neutral way. It is easy to debunk this approach as a fiction of authenticity, yet the analysis we are proposing does not simply aim at catching Bidermann in an act of “bad faith”. Rather, we

endeavour to show how this memoir narrativises the author's wartime experiences, not only as a means of creating interest and heightening suspense, but also as a means of understanding – as an interpretive framework that overlays the chaos of lived experience with casual and normative patterns.

Like autobiographical writing in general, war memoirs typically adopt a dynamic temporal structure alternating between recurring events and routines and singular occurrences. These two tempi, which structuralist narratology refers to as the iterative and the singular mode, are interrelated: The iterative mode conveys the generalities of life at the front, offering opportunities for detailed description, explanations and reflection. Conversely, the singular mode ruptures the flow of everyday existence and often epitomises experiences and value judgments that are fundamental to the memoirs as a whole (Genette 116-33). In spite of its would-be documentary character, Bidermann's work is a case in point, moving back and forth between operational-level accounts of the war and individual, dramatised events featuring himself and his comrades as protagonists. These short interpolated narratives are crucial, not simply because they create suspense, but above all because they are used to impose a specific narrative interpretation upon events and thereby validate a particular understanding of the war and Bidermann's own role in it.

The scene chosen for the purpose of this discussion is an example of failed interaction between German soldiers and enemy civilians; it centres on a perceived betrayal of Bidermann's regiment by a group of Ukrainian peasants. Shortly after the beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in August 1941, Bidermann and his comrades experience an evening of peaceful and even joyous fraternisation with local villagers close to the Dnieper River. The author himself contributes to the pleasantry by playing a song that highlights the soldier's longing for home: "[I]n the evening we sit with more civilians near a hut and I play folk songs on the harmonica. Then I came to think of a song Unshaven and Far from Home […]" (Bidermann 38). By sharing this song, the German soldiers appear to come closer to the Ukrainians who, spurred on by a schoolteacher, respond with a folksong of their own entitled "Stenka-Rasin". As the villagers sing and tap their feet to the music, a feeling of joy spreads among both groups: "[h]ow peaceful the world can be!" (38). According to the author, this moment of peaceful singing and fraternisation has brought the two groups together and seemingly offers confirmation of the well-established fact that many Ukrainians, having

suffered severely under Stalin, welcomed the Germans in the opening stages of the campaign. For Bidermann, however, the important point is that the singing fosters a symbolic bond between soldiers and civilians that makes any presumption of hostilities seem a breach of trust.

Yet, the trust is in fact broken the same night – and this is clearly the point of the story. When the merriment has died down and the soldiers have gone to sleep, the importance of the schoolteacher is revealed. As Bidermann claims to have learned later from Russian captives, she is in fact a communist and a partisan. Under the cover of darkness, she swims across the Dnieper and provides the Red Army with details about the Germans' position. Later that night a Russian battalion moves in to attack. The author at this point proceeds, in a manner more typical of soldier memoirs, to offer a detailed account of the fighting that ensues. The divisional report that Bidermann includes after his dramatised account very matter-of-factly summarises the fight by stating that the Germans were successful in throwing the Russians back across the Dnieper (Bidermann 43).

Bidermann's account of fraternisation and betrayal may well be based on actual events, and it might even be accurate, even though this would be hard to verify. However, our point is that this narrative episode serves within the context of the memoir to preface and support a wide-ranging interpretation of the Russian campaign on a whole. According to Bidermann, the Soviet civilians originally harboured no enmity against the Germans, but were gradually turned against them by Stalinist propaganda (Bidermann 42). The author admits that there were instances of what he, using an extreme euphemism, calls "unsuitable actions" against the Jews from the German side, and that this further alienated the civilian population (Bidermann 43). However, in a manner characteristic of Germany's selective memory in the first Postwar decades, these "unsuitable actions" are not attributed to the soldiers of the Wehrmacht, who are seen as essentially free of blame, but to the "Goldfasanen", that is, the Nazi leadership whose occupation policies were "entirely inappropriate for a permanent pacification of the conquered territories to the rear" (Bidermann 43). Here, Bidermann seems to assume that a German victory on the Eastern Front was in itself a desirable outcome. More to the point, he portrays the German soldiers as honourable and fair, while the Ukrainian civilians are seen as dupes of the Soviet propaganda machine.

The disturbing way in which Bidermann explains the German defeat in the war was perhaps not an uncommon sentiment at the time of writing. However, what gives the interpretation its power within the memoir is precisely the narrativised episode that precedes it. Bidermann's narrative evokes sympathy for the German soldiers who mean no harm to the civilians, yet are suffering hardships far away from their homes. At the same time, the Ukrainian schoolteacher and her associates are represented as devious, full of misplaced hatred, and corrupted by communist ideology. Thus, contrary to all historical evidence, the dramatised scene of the Ukrainian betrayal represents the Germans as victims and in this way provides legitimacy and narrative "proof" of Bidermann's interpretation of the Russian campaign.

Prisoner of War

Our final example is Edgar Klaus's 1991 memoir Durch die Hölle des Krieges. Unlike Reese and Bidermann, and in spite of the title, this memoir is not dedicated exclusively to the author's ordeals during the war, but essentially covers the whole of his life from his childhood during the First World War to his career as a successful businessman during the Postwar reconstruction. Yet, for Klaus, the key formative experience is the time spent in Russia. As a young officer, Klaus was sent to the Eastern Front and participated in the 1942 summer offensive and its climax, the Battle of Stalingrad. Following the surrender of the Sixth Army in early 1943, Klaus was interned as a prisoner of war and only released for repatriation in November 1947.

What distinguishes Klaus's memoir in comparison with our previous examples is the unusually forthright and unembellished way in which the author addresses some of the topics that had typically been avoided in the memoir literature of the early Postwar period: the Holocaust, the atrocities committed by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, and the senseless wastefulness of Hitler's total war. In this way, Klaus's memoir epitomises a distinctive third mode of remembering following the apolitical simultaneity of Reese and the self-exculpation of Bidermann. This corresponds closely to the contemporary stage of Germany's gradual coming to terms with the past (Vergangenheitsbewältigung). Dagmar Barnouw overstates her case somewhat when claiming that "all public and private German memory discourses of WWII could only mean one thing, namely guilty attempts to avoid the responsibilities of an overwhelming German collective

guilt" (Barnouw 3). However, as Alon Confino has pointed out, the end of the Cold War did usher in a new phase in German memoir writing. Before 1990, "Germans focused on stories of their suffering and ignored their crimes: they represented a Germany doubly victimised, first by a Nazi regime run amok, then by communists, and they allowed all West Germans to order the past in mutually exclusive categories in which perpetrators and victims were never the same people" (Confino 402).

Klaus's memoir goes beyond these polarities. Writing after the Historikerstreit of the late 1980s, which made the question of German guilt a matter of open public debate (Baldwin), he is able to acknowledge the suffering of the Germans without hiding or playing down their crimes. However, this is not the full story. As we endeavour to show, an analysis of this memoir's narrative logic will allow for a more complex account of Klaus's attempts at managing the past.

The episode we are using from Klaus's memoir begins with an altercation between Klaus and a Russian woman employed in the prisoner of war camp. Working in a relatively privileged role in the kitchen, Klaus observes this woman stealing from the Russian officers; when bringing them their meals she quietly hides something for herself in her blouse. Klaus on several occasions berates the woman for this, yet all he achieves is to ruin their relationship: "[S]he began to slowly hate me. I was a nuisance to her and I got on her nerves" (139). Filled with moral outrage, Klaus finally snaps and harshly scolds the woman. As a result, he is punished with four weeks in detention – an injustice that Klaus sees as the end of order in the camp, heralding the corruption that would follow (140). While serving this punishment, the Russians offer to pardon Klaus and return him to kitchen duty provided he joins the anti-fascist movement. However, even though the author is sorely disillusioned with Hitler and the war, he declines this offer, clearly regarding any cooperation with the Russians as a betrayal of his duty as a German and an officer.

While in detention, Klaus is overcome by depression and spends his time thinking about his home and family. In the memoir this is conveyed via an interruption of the prison camp narrative with a chapter entitled "Memories of my Childhood". This long flashback is essentially a narrative of morals and in this sense thematically, if not chronologically, linked to the story of the Russian woman. Klaus begins by describing his solidly bourgeois parents whose mission in life is summed up as "[w]ork and care for the family" (141). The father in particular, a successful dentist, is

described with evident filial admiration as a decent and morally upright man who always saw the good in other people and never prejudiced anyone on account of social position. Klaus's mother and father instilled a strong sense of morality in their children, carefully instructing them on the difference between "right and wrong", "duties and prohibitions", "the straight and the crooked path" as well as "good and bad". The constant aim was to raise them to be "upright and uninhibited persons who were able to deal with all the difficulties of life" (141).

This resilience turns out to be much needed in the Interwar period when the family is repeatedly met with adversity. Experiencing at first hand the chaos and revolutionary upheavals in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, Klaus later has to contend with national homelessness and discrimination when his native Sudetenland is ceded to Czechoslovakia under the terms of the Versailles Treaty. As a second blow, Klaus's father dies as a result of medical malpractice. His mother first entrusts the dentist clinic to his young assistant, who soon after betrays the family's trust by setting up an independent, competing practice nearby. When trying to find a replacement for him, she is defrauded of a small fortune by a con-man.

While this autobiographical narrative no doubt offers an accurate account of the Klaus family's misfortunes, it is at the same time emblematic of a certain self-image of the German bourgeoisie. Traceable back to the rise of the Bürgertum in the seventeenth century, this representation casts the bourgeois as an island of decency and duty in a world of corruption and threatening chaos. Strict abidance by universal moral precepts is seen here as key, not simply to personal happiness and righteousness, but also to social order. Read in this light, Klaus's childhood memories go a long way towards explaining his otherwise enigmatic behaviour in the camp. Thus, his aggression against the Russian woman seems rooted in a principled, almost Kantian aversion to theft regardless of the circumstances. Similarly, his refusal to join the anti-fascist movement is motivated by a sense of duty and loyalty rather than any residual support for Hitler's ideological crusade. Needless to say, this moral intransigence comes at a great personal cost.

Writing after the shift in the German recollection of the war, Klaus is indeed able, as the cover text states, to offer an "unsparing" account of the Russian campaign and the fate of the German army captured at Stalingrad. There is little in this memoir that would offend modern historiographical sensibilities, whether due to political naivety (like Reese) or insistence on the blamelessness of the

Wehrmacht (like Bidermann). However, the episode with the Russian woman reveals that Klaus is unable to come to terms with some of the deeper cultural dispositions that supported Hitler's rise to power. While Nazism cannot be described as a bourgeois ideology, the Nazis did claim for themselves the very same set of values that Klaus extols in the flashback to his childhood. To offer just one example, Himmler in his notorious address to SS officers in October 1943 insists that he and his henchmen have remained "decent", that they have retained a strong sense of loyalty and duty, and, with breathtaking disingenuousness, that they have abstained from stealing the property of the Jews they have murdered (Himmler). In a more general sense, it was not least a carefully perverted version of the bourgeois code of conduct that allowed the Nazis to sustain the war effort long after the war had effectively been lost. Key in this regard was a sense of beleaguered decency, an authoritarian emphasis on duty and obedience, and the injunction to "endure" (durchhalten) in the face of extreme adversity (Mitscherlich 21; von Krockow 209-15).

In reading the memoir in this way, our aim is not to smear the author or discredit his serious attempt to deal with Germany's guilt. Rather, we want to highlight a layer in the text that supplements and puts into perspective Klaus's stated interpretations of his wartime experiences. This layer is a function of the memoir's narrative structure, exemplified in the present context by the sequence leading from the thieving of the Russian woman via an extended flashback to the weeks spent in detention. All the while Klaus explicitly denounces Hitler and the war, this sequence testifies to a moral and cultural outlook that was easily exploitable by the Nazis, and hence implicated in their crimes, yet remains untouched by the author's self-scrutiny. Here, as in the previous examples, a narrative perspective is needed to access the full story of the author's memoir.

Conclusion

The three examples we have discussed in this article ultimately concern different social encounters and interactions in the context of the Eastern Front. Thus, Reese focuses on existential experiences of isolation and solitary exposure while reducing the idea of a fellowship of soldiers to an empty pronoun, the constantly evoked "we". Bidermann tells a more conventional story of frontline camaraderie and failed fraternisation with enemy civilians. Finally, Klaus's memoir

analyses the prison camp as a social milieu, highlighting both the solidarity among the German prisoners and their conflicts with the Russian guards. By representing the Russian campaign from a subjective viewpoint, these memoirs are of significant historical interest and are able to further our understanding of this conflict in several ways. Thus, among other things, they offer crucial insights into how views on Hitler and Nazism changed in the course of the war, how soldiers developed strategies for coping with trauma and stress, and how the style of remembering varies markedly with the authors' distance to the events. Leaving politics and grand strategy aside, these memoirs bear witness to the experience of war from the limited, yet irreducible viewpoint of the individual combatant – and have been read as such (see e.g. Fritzsche 274). However, as we have shown, the war memoir is not a transparent medium for the communication of memories and experiences, and in many cases it is necessary to go beyond the layer of explicit commentary to come to grips with the exact nature of the author's account of the war. For this reason, we have argued for the historiographical relevance of narrative analysis. Only by examining the narrative structure of the text are we able to see how Reese, in the manner of the apolitical German bourgeois, transforms the war into an existential experience at the level of the individual; how Bidermann uses an interpolated scene of peaceful fraternisation to shore up and legitimise his whitewashing of the Wehrmacht; and how Klaus uses flashbacks to his childhood and youth as a means of asserting his moral superiority in a setting perceived as anarchic and corrupt. In each case, narrative analysis brings out an otherwise concealed dimension of the text, which complicates or even contradicts the author's stated views on the war.

Far from being synonymous with fiction, a narrative should be seen as a general mode of information processing and interpretation at work both in fictional literature and in a range of other contexts. The fact that soldier memoirs are narrative constructs does not lessen their claim to subjective truth or reduce their validity as historical sources; in the absence of an absolutely neutral medium of communication, the dichotomy of "stories" and "facts" falls apart. However, insisting on the historical pertinence of narrative does impact our perception of the soldier memoir as a genre. Rather than seeing this type of memoir in terms of its factual accuracy, we should see it as a representation resulting not simply from manipulations and ideological distortions, but from narrative strategies of sense-making. Reading war memoirs narratively means disentangling a

process of interpretation whereby the chaos of lived experience is transformed into orderly storylines.

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