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David Rousset: The Blind Spot in French Concentration Camp Discourse After 1945

Abstract: Until the turning point of the 1970s and 1980s, Buchenwald was at the centre of French concentration camp discourse. Between 1945 and 1948, more than two hundred books about the camp were published. Buchenwald became a metonym for the world of concentration camps in the same way that Auschwitz later became a metonym for all extermination camps. In 1947, David Rousset, a former prisoner, released *Les jours de notre mort* [*The Days of Our Death*], based on an extraordinary collection of witness statements from all of the deportees he could trace in France. It revealed in 750 pages the camp ‘from the inside’. It had never been translated in German nor in English. The author compares *Les jours de notre mort* with *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as these two works in many respects have contributed to objective knowledge about reality in the camps. Comparing the historiography on KZ camps in France and GDR/DDR, the issue of the article is to point out that today’s dominant narrative on Buchenwald with the theory of the ‘red capo’ ignored the complexity of the relationships between prisoners in the camp. The influential book *Der gesäuberte Antifaschismus* by historian Lutz Niethammer (1994) and the exhibition dedicated to GDR’s antifascist version at Buchenwald’s Memorial in Weimar are definitely lacking this important source of *Les jours de notre mort*.

Until the turning point of the 1970s and 1980s, Buchenwald was at the centre of French concentration camp discourse. There were two reasons for this: firstly, roughly 25,000 – 26,000 French citizens, i.e. the majority of the concentration camp prisoners returning to France, had been incarcerated at this camp; secondly, this group included many members of the French communist party (PCF), which directly after the war was working to improve its image as the resistance party.

Between 1945 and 1948, more than two hundred books and even more accounts and reports about the camp were published in the press, particularly in the communist press. Buchenwald quickly became the most well-known camp. *Les Temps modernes* was the preeminent intellectual journal in post-war France and had been founded by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The March 1946 issue of *Les Temps modernes* published prisoners’ experiences of the camps, including articles by Stéphane Hessel and David Rousset, both

of whom had been resistance fighters (Hessel 1946; Rousset 1946a). Stéphane Hessel had been a member of the resistance group Forces Françaises Libres and had survived Buchenwald by assuming the identity of a deceased French prisoner. David Rousset had been arrested in Paris in 1943 as a member of a non-communist resistance network and deported to Germany. Until his liberation in April 1945, he spent time in two main camps (Buchenwald and Neuengamme) and two subcamps (Porta Westfalica and Wöbbelin), where he learned all about the concentration camp system. Hessel's text was printed in *Les Temps modernes* together with a commentary written by David Rousset that provided context.

Buchenwald became a metonym for the world of concentration camps in the same way that Auschwitz later became a metonym for all extermination camps. At first, no clear difference was made between Buchenwald and Auschwitz, nor was the Jewish dimension of Nazi crimes taken into account – either because people did not want to continue the work of the Nazis by separating Jews from the others, or because they felt guilty about the fact that the Vichy government had collaborated in the deportation of 76,000 Jews. That would have to wait for the Jewish 'awakening of memory' in the 1970s and above all 1980s, in which Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985) played a major role.

Of the roughly one hundred witness statements written in the immediate post-war period that had a much smaller impact in the public sphere, two concentration camp masterpieces stood out, written by two political prisoners: David Rousset (already mentioned above) and Robert Antelme. In 1947, Antelme published *L'espèce humaine* [*The Human Race*], a magisterial work that could easily be compared with Primo Levi's *Se questo un uomo* [*If This is a Man*]. 1946 saw the previous publication of Rousset's *L'univers concentrationnaire*. A few years later, it was translated into English as *A World Apart* (1951) and finally, in 2019, into German as *Das KZ Universum*. A year later, in 1947, Rousset released *Les jours de notre mort* [*The Days of Our Death*]. Whereas *L'univers concentrationnaire* shortly described the camp from the outside as a more or less political and sociological essay, *Les jours de notre mort* revealed in 750 pages the camp 'from the inside'.

David Rousset wanted to tell people what deportees had seen and experienced first-hand. He compiled an extraordinary collection of witness statements from all of the deportees he could trace in France. It was on the basis of these memories, which he immediately wrote down,¹ that he created his masterful vol-

¹ David Rousset's papers and literary estate can be viewed in La Contemporaine, the former BDIC (Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine), at Paris Nanterre University.

ume about the camps, *Les jours de notre mort*, which has barely been translated into any other languages.² Rousset constructed his book about the everyday lives of deportees, as Maurice Nadeau emphasises in his preface to the latest edition, ‘like a novel’: a novel with documentary value whose protagonists are real, its dialogues and situations providing readers with elements that help them to understand the universe of the camps both ‘closely and intimately’ (Nadeau 1988, IV). He wanted to make readers acquainted ‘with the everyday reactions of normal people’ (Nadeau, *ibid.*). Rousset hated the SS butchers, but that was not reason enough for him to idealise their victims: ‘The victims and the executioners were equally abominable. The lesson of the camps is that there is common ground in abomination,’ he wrote (quoted in Nadeau 1988). A number of German deportees, to whom the SS had handed the internal administration of the camp, appeared under their own names, especially if they had understood what it meant to remain ‘righteous’ in abomination. According to Rousset, this applied, for example, to the *Revierältesten* [*Revier* elder], the communist Ernst Busse, of whom we will come to speak shortly.

We could compare *Les jours de notre mort* with *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. There are, of course, inaccuracies in both accounts. Neither of the authors had access to archives; both of them worked without ‘academic’ sources, with only oral accounts at their disposal; and both of them had been prisoners. Ultimately, they both created historic works that historians use to this day. It is possible to compare these two works in many respects, as each of them has contributed to objective knowledge about reality in the camps.

Rousset came from a bourgeois Protestant family, which in France meant from a milieu in the minority. As a student in Paris, he quickly became a socialist, before reading Trotsky and joining a small group led by Trotsky, who spent some time as an exile in France. Rousset was a journalist by trade. Under German occupation, the Trotskyists took a very different strategy to that of the communists. They were against the slogan of the Parti communiste français (PCF), ‘à chacun son Boche’ [to each his own Kraut], and they also opposed the assassinations of Wehrmacht soldiers, who they believed they needed to win over and turn against the war. Their main activity was distributing pamphlets, which is why they were described by the communists as ‘Hitlero-Trotskyists’. Rousset did not reveal that he was a Trotskyist in Buchenwald or any other camps for fear of the hatred of Trotsky harboured by the communists incarcerated there.

As a member of the PCF, Robert Antelme was on the other side of the political world to Rousset at the time. He was a writer and poet, and was married to

2 There has only been one Spanish translation, *Los días de nuestra muerte* (1953).

the writer and dramaturge Marguerite Duras. As she would later write in *La Douleur* [*War: A Memoir*], Antelme was brought back to France, half-dead, by François Mitterand (Duras 1985; 1986; 2015). The later president of France (1981–1995) had been instructed to retrieve deportees. Just like Rousset, Antelme wanted to bear witness straight away. However, as early as in 1945, he was protesting the conditions in which German Wehrmacht prisoner were being imprisoned in French camps. ‘The prisoner’, he said ‘is a sacred being, because he is a being at another’s mercy and has lost all his chances [...], one should not remain indifferent as numerous Frenchmen attempt to play the barbarian without gas chambers and crematoria.’ (Antelme *Les Vivants*, 1946)³

Rousset and Antelme both faced difficulties finding a publisher. They were told that too much had been written about the topic. Primo Levi faced similar difficulties with *Se questo un uomo* in Italy. Rousset’s and Antelme’s books were printed by small publishers, but they were still well received. Antelme’s *L’espèce humaine* was republished in 1957, ten years later, by Gallimard (France’s biggest publisher). However, Rousset’s *Les jours de notre mort* would have to wait another forty years, until 1988, before his friend Emil Copfermann, who was working for the Parisian publisher Ramsay, helped to get his book republished there. How can we explain the difference in the way that these two books were treated? Of these two masterpieces, one of them faded into obscurity while the other imprinted itself on memory in France and abroad for posterity.

The friendship between the two authors dissolved in the frictions of the Cold War. They parted ways four years after their release, when, in 1949, David Rousset founded an international commission that opposed the system of camps that also encompassed camps in the Soviet Union, China, Franco’s Spain and the French colonies. When French communists attacked him for it, he said that it was his experiences in the anti-fascist struggle that had led him to view camps all over the world as something interrelated that had to be condemned. Since then, Rousset has been constantly delegitimised and defamed. In 1950, a trial took place between Rousset and the communist journal *Les Lettres françaises*, which denounced him as a fraud. (They said that he had falsified a document about gulags.) Rousset won. For the PCF, it was only the testimony of communists and the work of Robert Antelme that counted, and Antelme quickly distanced himself from Rousset. Afterwards, France’s heroisation of *la Résistance* began.

³ Antelme’s text first appeared in the journal for former prisoners, *Les Vivants* 3 (1946), and was later republished in *Lignes* 21 (1994).

There was no more talk of the extreme complexity of the concentration camp system and the way it worked, which David Rousset had described so well. People spoke about the suffering of the deportees and the solidarity between them. They talked of heroic acts and the war of resistance in France more than they did about the camps. In the post-war period, the PCF presented itself as the resistance party, claiming that it was 'le parti des 75 000 fusillés' [the party of the 75,000 shot].⁴ And in fact, of the 4,520 people who were shot during the occupation of France, 80–90 per cent were communists (Besse and Pouty 2006). Most associations of former deportees were led by communists or their sympathisers. Gaullists and communists shared sites of memory and agreed that they were writing a glorious and heroic history of resistance.

From this vantage point, we can draw parallels between the discourse of memory in the GDR and the French national narrative. The hegemonic account of *la Résistance* in historiography suppressed information about the deportation of the Jews. The same accusation has also been levelled at the GDR. The East German historian Olaf Groehler analysed the historiographical deficit relating to the Holocaust in the GDR by looking at the conferences on recent history held in 1957 and 1958, where the particular fate of the Jews was not mentioned. It is also possible to draw parallels here with the first colloquium to address the Vichy government in France, which took place much later (in 1970!) at the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques and completely ignored the topic. Alain Resnais' famous film *Nuit et brouillard* [*Night and Fog*] (1956) is often described as a film about the Shoah, although the word 'Jew' is not uttered at any point in the film. At the other end of the spectrum, Konrad Wolf's 1959 film *Sterne* [*Stars*], produced by the DEFA, explicitly addressed the deportation of the Jews from Bulgaria. In 1963, the Jewish communist singer Jean Ferrat released the song 'Nuit et brouillard' ('Night and Fog'), which only alluded to the fate of the Jews:

Ils étaient vingt et cent, ils étaient des milliers,
Nus et maigres, tremblants, dans ces wagons plombés [...].
Ils s'appelaient Jean-Pierre, Natacha ou Samuel.
Certains priaient Jésus, Jehovah ou Vishnou.
[They were twenty and one hundred, they were a thousand,
Naked and emaciated, trembling in sealed wagons (...).
Their names were Jean-Pierre, Natacha, or Samuel.
Some prayed to Jesus, Jehovah or Vishnu.]

⁴ This number could be an exaggeration (Martelli, Vigreux and Wolikow 2020). Cf. Roger Martelli, Jean Vigreux et Serge Wolikow, *Le Parti rouge, 1920–2020*, Armand Colin, 2020.

We do not find the word 'Jew' here either, but everybody knew, or suspected, that this song was about the extermination of the Jews.

We could draw further parallels. While advocates of the Gaullist version of history received support from some of the most influential historians in their attempts to minimise the role played by the Vichy government in the deportation of the Jews, communist discourse was also discrete when it came to this topic. As previously mentioned, the communists did not want to, on the one hand, continue the work of the Nazis by dividing humanity up and declaring the Jews to be a separate category; but, on the other hand, like in the GDR, they took the same approach taken by Soviet historiography, which mentioned the extermination of Jews seldom if at all due to the semi-official antisemitism propagated by the USSR. There was no room for *Les jours de notre mort* between these two perspectives.

In particular, it was David Rousset's status as a left-wing Gaullist that made him lose his aura for the intellectuals who had supported him. When for political reasons the hegemonic discourse of resistance and deportation gave way to the discourse of the deportation of the Jews, influenced by the work carried out by scholars abroad (including Eberhard Jäckel and Robert Paxton) and the awakening of Jewish memory, Buchenwald faded into the background. Emphasis was placed on the uniqueness of the extermination camps. The difference between Auschwitz and Buchenwald clearly came to light. People had known a lot about Buchenwald but knew less about Auschwitz. Scholars would gradually conduct more and more research into the persecution of the Jews in France.

There were certainly Jews in Buchenwald, but in smaller numbers, and most of them had been arrested for their work as resistance fighters. Collaboration between the prisoners registering the new arrivals, often German communists, and those being deported from the *Revier* frequently meant that the 'survival rate of Jews who had been in 'normal' concentration camps like Buchenwald and Ravensbrück was very high. They constituted 95 per cent of Jewish survivors.' (Wieviorka 1992, 21) Under the instructions issued by the French deportation committee in Buchenwald which was led by the communist Marcel Paul, doctors had to give higher priority to rescuing Frenchmen, whether they were Jews or not. In this respect, we can say that the historiography of Buchenwald in both East and West Germany suffered from a lack of knowledge about Rousset's work. The main reason for his limited reception was the fact that *Les jours de notre mort* was not translated. I would also like to point out that the way that the history of Buchenwald was rewritten after reunification with the theory of the 'red capo' ignored the complexity of the relationships between prisoners in the camp. The theory that these 'red capos', who were communists and later received high-ranking roles in the GDR, had survived at the expense of non-communists

should be revised. Here are a couple of examples: I have already mentioned the *Revier* kapo Ernst Busser, who is frequently mentioned in *Les jours de notre mort*. In an exhibition about the Buchenwald memorial site (the leading motif of Buchenwald memory in the GDR) and in the influential book *Der gesäuberte Antifaschismus* by historian Lutz Niethammer (1994), Busse is portrayed quite differently to the way he is presented in Rousset – and in other witness accounts. Even more problematic is the way that the practice of what was referred to as ‘victim swapping’ has been dealt with, which David Rousset had already described as a ‘common’ practice and which saved the lives of survivors like Stephane Hessel, Jorge Semprún and Imre Kertész. Discussions of this practice have boiled over, and ‘victim swapping’ has been instrumentalized in the contemporary Buchenwald narrative. Reading Rousset’s book could have provided more differentiated insights in this regard (Combe 2017). Even so, he dedicated his book to a ‘kapo’, the German communist Emil Künder, who Rousset said had saved his life. It must be pointed out here that the post-communist historiography of anti-fascism had little influence on French concentration camp discourse.

Strangely, Buchenwald has remained a ‘French’ camp in collective French memory. The historians who have researched Buchenwald are generally still exclusively writing about Frenchmen in Buchenwald (Lalieu 2005). This takes place at expense of the camp’s international character, where we might pinpoint the origins of the European identity of the post-war period. Like in Germany, French historiography has suffered from a lack of comparative vision. If Buchenwald is preserved in French memory today, then it is above all in the oeuvre of Jorge Semprún, in works like *Le grand voyage* [*The Long Voyage*] (1963; 1964), *Le mort qu’il faut* [*The Right Death*] (2001) and *Quel beau dimanche!* [*What a Beautiful Sunday!*] (1980; 1984). However, these works are not witness accounts, but stories that have been fictionalised by a writer.

I have already mentioned the possibility of drawing parallels between concentration camp discourse in France and the GDR. The similarities in memory politics are more significant than we like to think, even in academic discourse. However, it should be pointed out that, in France, there was an option to nuance or even contradict dominant discourses (public or academic), even if it was rarely exercised. This option did not exist in the GDR, as we know.

It is important to note that, because Buchenwald was a camp for male prisoners, there are no records of female deportees. Most French political deportees were interned in the Ravensbrück camp (approx. 8,000) (*Website des mémorials AFMD*). Of the 1,038 deportees who have been awarded the title ‘Companions of

the Liberation',⁵ only six have been women. Strangely, the anthropologists Germaine Tillion and Genevière de Gaulle-Anthonioz, niece of General de Gaulle, are not among them. Their first objective was to organise the material and moral aid required by women returning from deportation. As Dr Susanne Mengin says in her witness account, which was never published but which is stored at La Contemporaine, the necessity of providing material and moral aid outweighed the desire to testify (Mengin). After the founding of the Association of Deportees and Prisoners of the Resistance (ADIR), the former Ravensbrück internees published a journal, *Voix et Visages*, whose first issue appeared in June 1946 and which printed their testimonies for more than fifty years (until 2005). Their accounts testify once more to the complexity of the relationships between deportees, but also to their solidarity – which was perhaps stronger than in Buchenwald – and less to the heroic acts of male accounts.

Translated by Lydia J. White

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⁵ The Ordre de la Libération is awarded to individuals, or military or civil groups that distinguished themselves in their work to liberate France and its empire. It was founded by General de Gaulle in 1940.

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