ELSA BRÄNDSTRÖM AND THE REINTEGRATION OF RETURNING PRISONERS OF WAR AND THEIR FAMILIES IN POST-WAR GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

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When the First World War formally came to an end on 11 November 1918, some seven million soldiers from all sides were still in enemy captivity, many of them trapped by the outbreak of fresh conflicts on the eastern borders of Europe.¹ Most Allied prisoners of war were released fairly quickly, but hundreds of thousands of German and Austrian POWs in France and Russia had to wait until 1920 or even longer before they were allowed to go home. Furthermore, when they were finally repatriated, they returned to defeated, demoralised countries which struggled to reintegrate them or to understand their plight. One woman activist who sought to highlight the suffering of former POWs and their families was the Swedish Red Cross nurse Elsa Brändström. Her fund-raising and publicity campaigns also touched upon the supposed injustices committed against German and Austrian women under the Versailles settlement, and on the quest for international peace and reconciliation in the post-war world.

It is up to us women to heel [sic!] what the war has broken, to mother the suffering and help them to get back their belief in humanity. We must give the victims of the war back their desire to live and to become again useful human beings.²

So argued Elsa Brändström in a speech to groups of women activists in the United States in 1923, during a six-month speaking tour to raise funds for a new home for German and Austrian POW orphans at Schloß Neusorge in Saxony. The timing of this trip is of course significant: 1923 was the year of hyperinflation in Germany, when the col-

² Elsa Brändström, handwritten notes in English on a speech to a group of American women, no date [1923], in Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (BA-MA) Freiburg, MŞg 200/1060, Bl. 9-21 (here Bl. 19). Emphasis in the original.

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lapse of the currency created extremely harsh economic conditions, especially for women and children. It was also the year in which international women’s campaigns against the injustices of the Versailles peace settlement reached their climax in the context of the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr.3

By this stage Elsa Brändström herself was already famous throughout the world as the “Angel of Siberia”, the Swedish Red Cross worker who had organised the distribution of food, clothing and medical supplies to up to 700,000 German and Austrian POWs interned in European Russia, Turkestan and Siberia between 1914 and 1920. Indeed, it is largely in her wartime role, and her subsequent angelic image – often compared with that of Florence Nightingale – that Brändström has been written about in history books too, from Hans Weiland to Alon Rachamimov.4 Far less, though, is known about her contribution to the reintegration of returning POWs and their families in post-war German and Austrian society, and to the concomitant reconstruction of gender roles.

This paper therefore seeks to fill a significant gap in the historical record. The first part will examine Brändström’s activities during the Russian civil war from 1918 to 1920, and in particular her efforts to secure the repatriation of former German and Austrian prisoners trapped by the fighting in the Caucasus, Siberia and Russian Central Asia. Subsequent sections will then look at her work with returnees and their families in Germany after 1922, and at her role in the movement for international reconciliation and peace, especially at the time of the 1923 Ruhr crisis. Finally, the paper will end with some broader comments on the significance of Elsa Brändström’s work for the question of women’s activism in the aftermath of the First World War more generally.

The Russian Civil War

Elsa Brändström was born in St. Petersburg on 26 March 1888. Her father, Lieutenant General Edvard Brändström, to whom she was

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3 On the Ruhr crisis and its relevance to the international women’s movement in particular see Kuhlman (2007), p. 239.
4 See Weiland (1931) and Rachamimov (2002). There are also numerous biographies of Brändström; the best ones are Juhl, Klante and Epstein (1962); Padberg (1968); Björkman-Goldschmidt (1969); and Kohlhagen (1991).