CHAPTER 7

A Grass Roots View of Prisoner of War Re-education: Paul Bondy’s Contribution to the Lecture Programme

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Abstract

In September 1944, as Germany's defeat was becoming increasingly apparent, the POW division of the Foreign Office had assumed responsibility for re-educating POWs in order to encourage the dissemination of democratic values in post-war Germany. Paul Bondy, a former factory manager, was one of the German-speaking refugees engaged in this task. This paper, based on his official reports to the Control Office for Germany and Austria and complemented by letters to his wife, traces his participation in the lecture programme as, from the autumn of 1946 until the summer of 1947, Bondy travelled extensively in Britain to lecture to the POWs. The paper looks beyond the lofty ideals of official rhetoric to consider the political and logistical difficulties experienced by those involved in the implementation of this important programme, and explores the morale and the worries which preoccupied the prisoners who attended his lectures.

In the immediate post-war period there were approximately 1500 Prisoner of War (POW) camps in Great Britain containing over four hundred thousand German Prisoners of War. The repatriation of their Axis allies, the Italians, had been completed by the end of 1946. In contrast that of the German prisoners was a comparatively slow process, not begun until late September of that year and was not completed until the summer of 1948. The majority of these POWs were in work, engaged in agriculture, forestry, mining, road building, clearing war damage and similar manual tasks. Their labour was needed to replace that of the Italians and the British soldiers as yet not demobilised, but it was considered vital that they should also be offered a programme of re-education to counter the Nazi ideology to which they had previously been exposed – many were very young and had received most or all of their education under National Socialism. This re-education programme under the aegis of the Prisoner of War Division of the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office was very ambitious and was delivered via various media which included film, radio, theatre as well as providing camp libraries with appropriate literature, producing camp newspapers, establishing discussion circles among the prisoners and
arranging for outside lecturers to visit the camps. It is on the last component of the programme that this paper will focus.

The lecture programme began just before VE day and by the end of 1945 100 camps a month were being visited; the numbers gradually increased until the summer of 1947 when, in June, over one thousand lectures were delivered by over 200 lecturers. After that as repatriation progressed there was a commensurate decrease in the scale of the operation. As for the content of the lectures themselves, the concept of a course was not foreign to the official mind: prospective lecturers received suggestions for a course consisting of sixty lectures divided into the following sections, “The Development of Modern Germany” (including “Nazi Internal Policy, comprising Nazi Theory and Practice of Law, Nazi Economics and Finance, Nazi Attitude to the Churches and Nazi Social Policy”), “The Building of the British Commonwealth,” “Aspects of English Life” and “The International Scene.” However, such an extensive programme was no doubt intended for those camps where specially selected prisoners spent a large proportion of their time in educational activities such as Camp 300, Wilton Park, Beaconsfield, which trained such men who would then return to their original camps and act as a leaven to encourage democratic practices, or Camp 180, near Saffron Walden, a special youth camp which ran three-month courses for young prisoners who were released from work for two days a week to engage in classroom activities directed towards a similar end. However, the lecture project described in this paper is somewhat different. At first sight it seems like something drawn up on a quiet afternoon in the office by a Whitehall mandarin with an over-generous budget. Lecturers would offer not a course but only one or two lectures, delivered to several different camps. Despite the extensive travelling involved, this method of doing things demonstrated economy of scale in one respect. The practice of accommodating prisoners near their work resulted in a proliferation of hostels and satellite camps attached to a main camp, so that by 1947 a visit to one camp could involve repeating the lecture in several different venues: for example in January 1947 Paul Bondy (whose work will be described in detail below) gave his lecture at Camp 137 fourteen times. Additionally, if the lecturer’s availability was good, a tour of

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2 See Faulk, p. 355.
4 A list of POW camps in Britain with their numbers and locations can be found in: Sophie Jackson: Churchill’s Unexpected Guests: Prisoners of War in Britain in World War II. Stroud: History Press 2010, pp. 174–185.